



SHINY THINGS

A RAVENDEN NOVEL

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Ravenden Shifters

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Shiny Things

Ravenden Shifters: Book Two

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Thanks and Acknowledgments

Jumping from wolves to ravens isn't an easy move. Wolves are way more popular and in general sell better. So if you're reading this, THANK YOU for sticking with me. I promise they aren't so very different and I think you are going to love my ravens of Ravenden. And I promise there are plenty more wolves in the works too.

Thank you to each of you who has journeyed into my Westin World with me, for those of you that have grown to love my characters as much as I do, and are willing to continue down this path to see where this newest adventure leads. I promise, you won't be disappointed. Welcome to Ravenden.

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Kim

Chapter 1

I groaned and grabbed for my phone to turn off my alarm before my eyes even opened. I didn't want to go to work today. I didn't want to do anything today.

Last night I'd been forced to work a party where I had to stand by and watch Felicity Dean drape herself all over Elias. It still boiled my blood to think about it. She was his cousin, for crying out loud.

Felicity hadn't let him out of her sight for even a second. The only positive part about the evening had been how completely miserable he'd looked the whole time.

I shouldn't think like that. I wanted him to be happy, I really did.

Elias Davenport was the greatest man I knew next to my own father and brother. I'd had a crush on him for years, and I knew that in his own way it was reciprocated. The problem was that he was a Davenport from the most influential family in the entire raven Congress and I was nothing but a Grimes. My Flock was at the bottom of the hierarchy for raven shifters.

To take me as a mate would mean a complete disruption to the class system that his family so carefully protected. It would be absurd, the biggest scandal of our lifetime. Even if he were my true mate, it still wouldn't sit well with a lot of people around here.

I'd been careful to protect myself as best as I could. While there was an obvious mutual attraction between us, I'd never actually let it go anywhere.

That had taken a lot of stubborn determination on my part since he was a very tough man to say no too. My rejections just seemed to make him even more brooding, and there was something so sexy, dark, and mysterious about him already.

The other major problem was that he was my best friend's oldest brother. All around it was a disaster in the making.

I had to stop thinking about Elias. I couldn't let myself care who he spent time with or if Felicity draped herself all over him again.

My second alarm went off, and I frowned as I grabbed a pillow and held it over my face.

I hated the breakfast shift. It always seemed like the busiest part of the day, but I needed the money, and the tips were good.

Begrudgingly, I forced myself to get out of bed and into the shower.

Twenty minutes later, my long black hair was up in a messy bun, and I was dressed in all black, grabbing my apron, and running out the door.

The Diner was within walking distance of my small house which saved a ton on gas. Sure, I could have shifted and flown there faster, but that was mostly frowned upon in Ravenden. There was too much risk of being seen by humans driving through town.

I wasn't going to start my day sweaty, so I refused to run. Being a minute or two late wasn't going to hurt anything, though I had no doubt Darin would have plenty to say about it anyway.

Reaching the back door of the kitchen, I stopped and took a deep breath before opening it with a forced smile on my face.

"You're late," an odd deep voice said, making me jump.

I looked around and saw Gia standing there giggling.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"That sounded nothing like Darin."

"Still made you jump."

"Yeah, because some weirdo was in the kitchen calling me out."

She hugged me, still grinning proudly at herself.

"I'm your kind of weirdo though."

I rolled my eyes and grinned. She was right.

For a Davenport, Gia was amazing and accepting of nearly everyone across all the Flocks, well, except Novaleigh Caldwell. But there was a history there that just couldn't be forgiven. That was her story to tell though.

For several years Gia and I had worked side by side as equals. She'd always said she was just the black sheep of the Davenport Flock, but I should have known better.

Her grandmother had owned the diner for years. I'd tried to pull enough money together to buy it myself after she'd passed, but I didn't have enough collateral for the bank to sign off on my loan. Or at least that's what they told me at the time. In truth, the diner had been put in a trust that eventually went solely to Gia.

I couldn't even complain about it, because now I had the best boss in the entire world.

"Is this why I got bumped to the first shift for today? Are you staying

or just opening?”

“I’m working today,” she told me.

“Really?”

Lately, she hadn’t pulled a lot of shifts because she was dealing with some personal stuff going on with her mate.

“Is David here too?”

“Yup. He’s going to be bussing tables today. Darin’s actually out all week, so if you want to pick up extra shifts, let me know.”

“He’s out? But he never takes off. What’s wrong?”

She grinned. “He’s actually taking Roberta on a real vacation to visit her sister.”

“I’ve met Roberta’s family. That is not a vacation.”

We were both laughing when David walked in, grinning and shaking his head at us.

I still didn’t completely understand the story of how they met. I supposed it didn’t really matter. What I did know was that they had met somewhere, somehow and snuck off to mate in secret. They were clearly already bonded when he stumbled into town with amnesia and found Gia again.

As far as I knew, he never regained his memories, but their bond was strong enough to see them through it all. He fell back in love with her, and they were as happy as could be and practically inseparable.

Her mother hadn’t exactly been thrilled about it, but with time even she’d welcomed David to the family.

We knew nothing about his past or what Flock he belonged to, but somehow that didn’t seem to matter to them now. It should have given me a bit of hope, but not knowing where David came from meant there was a fifty-fifty chance that he came from a respectable Flock. They all knew where I came from though. So it would never be the same for me.

“What are you two laughing about?” David asked.

“Nothing important. How’s it looking out there?”

“Already a line at the door. We open in five.” Louder, he addressed the kitchen. “Everyone ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

The whole kitchen loved David. He’d pretty much won over everyone in Ravenden.

“The kitchen’s prepped and ready if you want to open a bit early,”

Argus told him. He was the head chef at The Diner, and it wasn't uncommon for him to work from open to close. Somedays, I did too, though Darin hated me pulling a lot of overtime.

"Okay, let's get this day started then," Gia announced. "Ready?" she asked me.

"As ready as I'm gonna be."

"Go ahead and open. I'll be out there in a minute."

"We have a lot of pickups today," David told us. "Want me to take those, boss?"

Gia always looked amused when he called her that. "Sounds good."

"Let's get cooking," Argus told his staff as I walked back out to the main dining room.

I'd pretty much grown up here. It was as much home to me as my dad's place. When I was little, before she died, my mother worked here too. In a way it made me feel closer to her to be here.

I wasn't paying attention as I walked to the door and unlocked it to welcome our first customers of the day. So, when Elias was the first person through the door it caught me off guard. Normally I would brace myself for the impact of seeing him.

"Good morning, Kim."

I sighed. "Good morning. Take a seat anywhere you'd like."

"Which section is yours?" he whispered.

I pointed to the left without even thinking and then groaned to myself for making such a rookie mistake with him.

Turning back to the line, I greeted our other guests with a smile that I knew didn't reach my eyes. My whole body was trembling from Elias's momentary closeness.

Damn him.

This was not how I needed my day to start.

Only three tables were taken in my section. The remainder chose seats in Gia's section or headed straight to the register for pickups with David.

Since Elias had sat down first, I started with him. At least I'd have the other tables to distract me from lingering too long.

"What can I get you today, or do you need a few more minutes to look over the menu?" I asked like a robot about to be stuck on repeat for the day.

He scowled. "The usual."

Just to annoy him I almost asked what that was, but we both knew I knew it, and I wasn't in the mood to play games with him or delay so I could linger at his table.

"You got it," I said.

As he started to reach for my hand, I turned and smiled at my next customer taking all their drink orders on my way to the kitchen.

I gave Elias's order to the kitchen and prepped all the drinks at once.

"Hey, are you okay?" Gia asked as she started filling her own drink orders.

"Fine, why?"

"Because Eli looks like sparks are about to fly out his ears or something. Are you two fighting?"

She was the only one that ever got away with calling him Eli. It was like a baby sister privilege or something.

I sighed. "No. I'm just busy and don't have time to stand around chatting with him."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, you and Eli are always flirting with each other. So what gives?"

"We do not," I argued, even knowing it was true.

She shot me a look. "We're seriously going to do this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lately, I have kind of gotten the feeling that Gia would be happy to see me settle down with her brother. She had been adamantly against it in the past, so I had no idea what changed. Honestly, I was a little terrified to ask. Some things I just didn't want to know.

Staying in order, I dropped Elias's coffee off first. One sugar and a splash of milk just the way he loved it. I kept moving and delivered drinks to the next table, taking their order before moving to the one after that.

By the time I called out my other two tables' orders, Elias's food was up.

Great, I thought. The faster he gets out of here the better.

"Here you go. Your usual. Enjoy."

This time he grabbed my hand before I could walk away. It shot tingles up my arm in a way that only his touch ever did.

I looked into his big green eyes and gulped.

"Did you need something else?"

"Yeah, I need to know what's wrong with you."

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, Kim. I can explain about last night.”

“There’s nothing to explain,” I told him as pain shot through my chest.

Just then another couple walked in and sat in my section.

“I have other customers and need to get back to work. If you need anything else, just let me know.”

I forced myself to walk away from him, while everything inside of me just wanted to yell and scream at him. I had no right, but it didn’t change how I felt.

Elias

Chapter 2

I hated how Kim was looking at me. She was cold and stiff. I wasn't used to it, and I didn't like it.

Logically I understood all her reasons for steering clear of me. I got it. My mother wasn't exactly quiet in her praise of the class system amongst ravens. My family sat at the top of that list and Kim's at the very bottom.

It was a ridiculous archaic system that had no room in modern society. The division it caused within my immediate family alone should have been enough for her to get a clue, but that was Helena Dean Davenport for you. She was stubborn and stuck in the past.

I didn't care about any of that. Still, it didn't seem to matter how I felt because Kim was making it clear today that she didn't want anything to do with me. I didn't like it one bit.

I didn't really have anywhere to be today. I could oversee my part in the family business from here, so I pulled out my briefcase and took out my laptop to check my emails.

If Kim was too busy to talk to me now, then I'd just sit here and wait for the breakfast crowd to pass.

Normally she was happy to see me. But today it was like she was upset about something. I tried wracking my brain, trying to put the pieces together, and couldn't fathom why she was upset, yet I knew in my soul she was.

It was times like this that made me certain she was my true mate. I was drawn to Kim in a way that I had never been with anyone else. There was a connection there no matter how many times she tried to deny it.

Unfortunately, there was no way for me to confirm my suspicion without letting my raven meet hers. It was a raven thing. I spent a lot of time in my feathers, even more so lately in hopes of catching Kim in hers. I think she was onto me though. She refused to shift in front of me and had been walking everywhere since I had asked her to.

"What difference does it make when we can never be together anyway?" she'd insisted.

It infuriated me, but even then she hadn't distanced herself from me, not like today.

Two hours passed by quickly as I watched her flit around the room, only stopping by my table long enough for the occasional drink refill with not a word or glance in my direction.

I hated this distance between us and just wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless. To hell with them all. I didn't give a damn who saw us or if we were the talk of the whole Flock.

Didn't she know that I only cared about her?

I hadn't meant for it to happen. For years she'd just been a face in the crowd. I hadn't given her a second glance, especially knowing she was below my station according to my parents. But then Gia started working with her.

Gia was my baby sister, and as the oldest in the family it was my responsibility to look after her. She'd always been my baby. So I'd taken it upon myself to get to know everyone she was spending time with. I still had no idea how David had slid under my radar, but he made Gia so happy that I couldn't even argue it.

When Gia starting working at the diner, I was led to Kim. I had honestly just wanted to make sure she wasn't going to be a bad influence on Gia, but the more I got to know about her, the more I liked her. It hadn't taken long because the beautiful raven-haired girl had captured my heart and become my very best friend.

I had always been a bit of a loner, but it was sad that I literally had no one to even ask for advice when it came to Kim. I'd even tried talking to Gia once, but she'd begged me not to act on my feelings, noting how our mother would just make Kim's life a living hell. Of course she was right, yet I just couldn't seem to stay away.

Gia swung by my table.

"Are you planning to work here all day?"

"Yup, or at least until Kim gets a break and has time to actually talk to me. She's been acting weird all day. I'm worried about her."

Gia blanched.

"You know something, don't you?"

"It's none of my business."

"Tell me. I'm your brother. You're supposed to have my back."

"And she's my best friend and tells me stuff in confidence, though honestly, Eli, are you really that thick in the head?"

“Wait. Did I do something to upset her?”

I wracked my brain trying to think back through to the last time I saw her. I came in yesterday morning for breakfast. We talked and laughed. Everything seemed normal. I had a couple of meetings in the afternoon and then that stupid gala last night that Aunt Ginny had hosted.

I spent pretty much all evening watching Kim from afar. She'd been working the event since The Diner had been contracted to cater it. Apparently, I was obvious enough that Dad even noticed and warned me not to let my mother catch me “ogling the staff,” which had pissed me off. Ryan had also made at least three comments about my distraction, though as my brother, he was much more polite and teasing about it.

“Seriously, Eli, I'm not used to you having feathers for brains. Dean, sure, but not you. You're smarter than that.”

I scowled. She was comparing me to our video game obsessed little brother? What the hell!

“Gia, tell me now. What did I do to upset her?”

She just grimaced at me and started to walk away.

I grabbed her arm. “Please G. Just tell me.”

“Weren't you at Aunt Ginny's party last night?”

“Yeah. I was there because our mother pitched a fit when I tried to bail on it. You know that.”

“Right, but you were there . . .”

“Yes, watching Kim all night. She was avoiding me even then. Why, damn it?”

She closed her eyes and sighed, but when she opened them, she glared down at me. My sister wasn't born with the usual sleek black hair of a raven shifter. Nope, she had a mass of fiery red hair to match her temper that occasionally got away from her. I squirmed under her fierce frustrated look now.

“Because you let Felicity drape herself all over you last night. Look, this isn't the time or place to get into this, but I told you not to lead her on.”

“Felicity? I've never led Felicity on. Besides, she's our cousin, remember?”

“You are such a bird brain, Eli. And I know Felicity is our cousin and you don't think of her as anything more, but that's not how it looked last night. And you know Felicity doesn't think there's anything at all wrong with mating your cousin. Hell, *all* the Davenports and Deans are our cousins.

Maybe Mom and Dad inbred a little too closely and that's what's wrong with you."

I snorted. "You're from the same gene pool, G."

"Yeah, but I didn't get feathers for brains."

Groaning, I shook my head. "She can't possibly think I'd be interested in Felicity," I said in a hushed voice.

"This isn't the place to have this discussion. You wanted to know why she's displeased with you, well, that's why. So fix it, but not while she's on the clock."

I grinned. "Are you encouraging me to see her off the clock now?"

"That's not what I meant. And you're going to anyway."

"I have a feeling that at this moment she'd slam the door in my face."

"Then find a way to fix it, dumbass."

"Wait, you're okay with that? I mean, with us?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I don't even think I have a choice. She won't let our birds meet."

Gia's eyes widened. "What?" she shrieked, drawing attention from others in the room.

Then she grabbed my arm and pulled me to stand before dragging me to the kitchen and right out the back door.

"Elias, are you telling me that you want to meet her bird because you think she might actually be your true mate?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "I really want her to be the one, Gia. I love her."

She sighed. "Dammit E. It's Kim."

"I know. She's your best friend, but she's mine too, G. I tried not to get attached, but how could I not?"

Gia sighed. "She is pretty amazing. But you don't just get to choose who your true mate is, Eli. And until your ravens meet there's really no way for you to know that for sure. What if you're wrong?"

"Then I'm wrong. At least we'd know for sure, right?"

Maybe getting my sister on my side wouldn't be a bad thing after all. For the most part, I've tried to avoid discussing all things Kim with her.

"Is she ready to face the wrath of the Flock if you're right?"

"Probably not. I suspect that's a big part of the reason she is refusing to let mine meet hers."

"I'll talk to her and feel her out," she finally conceded.

"Really?"

“Really. But she has a right to be angry with you over the way you acted last night.”

“What did I do? I stared at her most of the night and kept to my usual brooding self.”

“With Felicity hanging all over you,” she reminded me.

I groaned. “I completely ignored her. Most of the time I didn’t even notice she was there.”

“Well, maybe you should try telling Kim that.”

“If she’d actually talk to me, I would.”

“Well, I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll see what I can do, but no promises.”

“Can I ask one quick question?”

“Sure, but make it fast. This place doesn’t run itself.”

“When you met David, did you know? Like before your birds connected?”

She shook her head, and I frowned.

“So maybe I really am just imagining it then,” I grumbled.

“Maybe, but maybe not. Who knows? At least if your birds meet then you’ll know for sure either way.”

“You’re actually not a terrible sister. Did you know that?”

She grinned. “I do have my moments.”

Kim

Chapter 3

“Why is he still here?” I practically yelled at Gia after the breakfast crowd finally dispersed. Everyone but Elias.

“He’s not going to leave until you talk to him.”

“What? Are you serious? I don’t want to talk to him right now. I think I made that pretty clear by avoiding him.

She shrugged. “Men. They’re clueless most of the time, or he may just see it as a challenge. Regardless, he’s planning on camping out all day if necessary until you talk to him.”

“You act like that’s just no big deal. Aren’t you the one that told me to stay away from him?”

She frowned. “You didn’t tell me it was serious between the two of you.”

I blushed. “He told you that?”

Gia nodded and my heart did a sort of flip in my chest.

“It’s nothing. I swear. I’ve never even kissed him. We’re strictly, one hundred percent, just friends. You know it could never work out for us. So why encourage it? You told me yourself that your mother would freak out if there was even a rumor of the two of us together.”

She sighed. “Is that why you won’t let his raven meet yours?”

My cheeks were burning now.

“You can’t be talking to him anymore. I don’t talk to you about him, and he shouldn’t be talking to you about me.”

I was furious and embarrassed that he’d said anything to Gia. She was my friend, but she was also my boss. It wasn’t right, and he was going to get an earful about it when I stopped wallowing over the sight of Felicity Dean draped all over him.

“He wouldn’t have to come to me if you’d just talk to him.”

“You’re encouraging this now?”

“Kim, he truly believes you’re his true mate.”

“Shh! Would you keep your voice down?”

“Well, it’s clearly not news to you. Why don’t you just let your birds

meet and get it over with then?”

“Because then what? So we’re true mates. We still can’t act on it without becoming the biggest scandal in the whole Congress. Both of our Flocks would freak out and you know it. You’ve even said it yourself.”

She hugged me. “I’m sorry for that. It wasn’t fair to either of you. For the record, I don’t think he’s good enough for you.”

I snorted. “Yeah, sure, that’s it.”

She pulled back and glared at me. “I’m serious, Kim. You’re too good for any of my brothers, though it’s a well-known fact Eli is my favorite. So if it has to be one of them, then I’m glad it’s him.”

“You act like this is a done deal. Nothing’s happened and nothing is going to happen.”

“You’re not even going to see if he’s right?”

“No. I do not want to know. I’ve made that very clear to him.”

Gia scowled at me. “Having found my perfect mate, I can assure you that you do not want to settle for anyone else. If he’s your true mate, then that’s it. That trumps all other social norms as far as I’m concerned, so figure it out already.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I assured her.

“Are you even the least bit curious?”

“No,” I lied.

I knew exactly what Elias said when he told me it felt as though we had an unbreakable connection. That was why it hurt so damn much seeing another woman on his arm. But I knew my place in this world of ours, and it was never going to be as Elias Davenport’s mate. The mere idea of it was absurd.

I was a grown-ass woman now. I couldn’t afford schoolgirl crushes like this.

“Why would he want to know anyway?” I blurted out.

“Because he loves you and he wants it to be true.”

I started coughing, choking on my own spit, and then I laughed in her face.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Whatever, will you at least talk to him? He looks pathetic out there, and I think he’s about ready to start groveling. I love him, but he can be a bit thick in the head at times. His reality of last night was that he spent the entire evening watching you and paid no attention to her whatsoever. He didn’t

even remember her hanging on him half the night.”

I wanted to growl in frustration, but the bell chimed over the front door, alerting us to a new customer.

“I’ve got it,” I said before walking out to the dining room.

Our latest customers walked over and sat in Gia’s section. I frowned. They were regulars of mine and even had “their table” on the other side of the room. I looked in that direction and saw the “Section Closed” sign was up.

“Someone will be right with you,” I told them, and gave a smile I wasn’t feeling.

I stomped back into the kitchen.

“What the hell, Gia? You closed my section just so I’d talk to your idiot brother?”

“What are you talking about? I’d never do that.”

I stared at her as we both processed this change of events.

“Elias,” we said in unison.

“I’m going to murder him. I swear he’s trying to drive me insane on purpose.”

“I’m sorry. I can boot him out, and I’ll take the sign down immediately.”

“No, go handle your customers. I’ll take care of him.”

“Okay, but try not to actually murder him. Please?”

“Is everything okay?” David asked.

“No,” I said at the same time Gia said, “Yes.”

He looked back and forth between us and threw up his hands. “I don’t want to know.”

We both started laughing in spite of the situation as he retreated.

“I make no promises, but I will try,” I conceded before stomping out to the dining room.

I left the sign up for the moment.

“We need to talk,” Elias and I said at the same time.

“Not here.”

“It’s quiet. Tell Gia you’re taking a break.”

“Oh, you’ve already seen to that, haven’t you?”

He grimaced. I think he was finally catching on to the fact that I was pissed.

I headed back into the kitchen. He left his things on the table and followed me. This was Ravenden. There was no danger of anyone messing

with it.

“Taking a break,” I told Gia and David as I walked by them.

“Good,” she muttered.

I didn’t say another word until we were outside and walking away from the diner towards my house.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he finally said. “It meant nothing. I didn’t even notice her because I was too busy looking at you. Gia had to explain to me why you were even upset with me. And I shouldn’t have just closed your section like that today, but I was getting desperate. You wouldn’t even make eye contact with me. What was I supposed to do?”

“I was at work, Elias. You can’t just barge in there and expect me to drop everything for you. I live on those tips, and you’re costing me customers right now.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you, but please, just talk to me.”

I stomped up the stairs of my house and he followed. The last thing we needed was some nosey bird flying by and seeing us fighting out in the open.

But when I turned to face him, ready to give him the business, he was surprisingly closer than I thought. I walked right into his solid chest.

His arms flew around my shoulders to steady me. I gulped hard at the thrill of being in his arms and so close to him.

Alarms were going off in my head, but I ignored them as he pulled me even closer to him.

My body was buzzing, and I couldn’t think straight as his head started lowering towards mine.

I sighed as my eyes started to drift shut and his lips lightly brushed mine, and then I froze.

My eyes flew back open, and I pushed him away from me.

“No,” I yelled. “We can’t. This is a terrible idea. I told you, Elias, we cannot cross that friendship line.”

“We aren’t just friends, Kim. You’re lying to yourself and to me by denying there isn’t something more here between us.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re just feelings. It’s all chemistry. It’ll pass.”

But that was the problem. It wasn’t just going away, no matter how much I lied to myself and said I wished it would.

The truth was, I was in love with Elias. I wanted him more than I’d ever wanted anything in my entire life. But I couldn’t have him, or at least

that was what I kept trying to remind myself.

At times like this, when he was so close and willing, it took every ounce of restraint within me to walk away.

“I think you need to leave. This was a bad idea.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said, closing the gap between us once more.

This time he didn’t hesitate as he pulled me into his arms and kissed me. His lips were soft but also demanding and unrelenting, like they were begging and pleading for me to kiss him back. I threw caution to the wind and did just that.

Just this once.

What could one little kiss hurt?

Maybe, just maybe, this would finally get him out of my system once and for all.

Elias

Chapter 4

I couldn't believe Kim was actually kissing me back. After years of keeping that hard friendship line, I felt as if I was finally breaking through to her.

She sighed against my lips, and I took full advantage and dipped my tongue in for a better taste. Her tongue swirled with mine eliciting a moan from her that made me instantly grow hard.

Without thinking, I pressed against her seeking some form of relief. The woman was positively intoxicating, and I wanted—no, I needed her—more than I needed air to breath.

I heard her gasp and felt her pulling away from me as reality came crashing in on both of us.

I was kissing my best friend, who just so happened to be the woman I loved.

But there was no denying that she had kissed me back too.

“We can't,” she whispered before giving me one last quick peck on the lips and stepping away from me.

I wanted to scream in frustration, but sadly, I just stood there watching her shrink away from me. The look of passion in her eyes told me she wanted me too, but the stubborn resolve in the set of her shoulders let me know that she wasn't going to budge on this. Not now at least.

“You should go. We'll talk later, okay?”

Staring at her a moment longer and understanding this was what she needed right now, I nodded and turned to let myself out.

“I'm going to hold you to that, Kim,” I said before forcing my legs to keep moving forward, away from her. The exact opposite direction I desperately wanted to run.

The second I was outside, I shifted. For a moment I was stuck in my clothes, and it took me a second to get my bearings straight. Once I was freed, I left them there and flew home.

When I reached the rooftop patio of my upper floor apartment in the most prestigious complex in all of Ravenden, not that that was saying much, I

shifted back into to my skin and let myself inside.

My body was still thrumming from the excitement of kissing Kim, and I knew I was going to be worthless until I took care of the situation. Since making love to her was currently out of the question, I headed straight for the shower.

Not even waiting for the water to heat up, I stepped inside. At first, I thought the shock of cold would be enough to tame me, but when steam started setting in around me and I was still uncomfortably hard, I knew I had to take matters into my own hands.

When I reached to fist myself, all I could think of was her.

I closed my eyes and imagined it was her hand on me, pumping me harder and harder as she kissed me just as she'd done only moments ago.

I'd been fantasizing about kissing her for far longer than I cared to admit. Maybe I was just a creep, no better than that stalker who had gone after my sister years back.

Shaking my head, I couldn't let those thoughts invade this moment. No, here it was just me and Kim, or my vision of her at least.

I could see her big blue eyes staring up at me as I envisioned her dropping to her knees before me as the water dripped through her hair.

"Yes," I said aloud as it echoed off the stone tile.

In my mind she gave me a shy little smile that made my heart race before taking me into her mouth, and I couldn't look away as she sucked me into her mouth.

My fist pumped harder and harder as I imagined her sucking me until my balls exploded.

I cried out her name as I came hard with a shudder racking my body.

But when I opened my eyes again, it was just me alone in my shower. The disappointment of reality was real as I grabbed a bar of soap and cleaned myself up before turning off the shower and reaching for a towel to dry off before hunting up something fresh to wear since my clothes were now at Kim's place.

I checked the time and knew I needed to make a mad dash back to The Diner to get my things. I had a meeting with the Congress Council that I couldn't afford to miss.

I hated Flock politics. That was best left with my brother Ryan, who was mayor of Ravenden. But as the heir to the head of house of Davenport there were some things even I couldn't just dismiss without consequence.

My apartment wasn't as close to The Diner as Kim's house, but it was just an easy couple miles walk away. My bike was already there too. I could have just flown and gathered up the clothes I'd left, but instead, I decided to walk.

The fresh air was good and gave me time to clear my head.

I waved to the men and women on shift at the fire station as I passed by but didn't stop to chat. I was going to be late as it was.

When I got to the Diner and walked in, the "Closed Section" sign was still up, and my things were still strewn out on the table I'd abandoned.

I walked over and packed up my stuff.

"Where's Kim?" Gia asked.

"She's not back yet?"

"No. I thought she was with you."

"She was, but she kicked me out and said we'd talk later. I have a Council meeting in ten minutes. You're telling me she didn't return yet?"

I was starting to panic as I imagined the worst possible scenarios.

"Go. I'll check on her. Did you guys have a fight?"

"Not exactly," I said vaguely.

"I don't even want to know what that's supposed to mean."

"I'll swing by and make sure she's okay first."

"No, you're late. Let me do it. You'll never hear the end of it if you're late to yet another meeting."

"Then Mom and Dad should have had Ryan first."

She laughed. "You're ridiculous. David will hold the fort down here while I run and check on her. I'll text you and let you know she's alright."

I nodded, still feeling hesitant about it all, but knowing she was right.

"Okay, but text me."

"I said I will. Now, go."

It took a lot for me to walk out, get on my bike, and drive across town instead of straight towards her. But I forced myself to do it.

As I was walking in to take my seat, my phone buzzed. No one was ready and the meeting hadn't been called to order yet, so I pulled it out to check.

GIA: She's fine. Now pay attention to your meeting.

That was easier said than done. I wanted more than just a "she's fine," but there would be no time for that.

"Gentleman, I call this meeting to order."

Kim would have to wait.

The afternoon had dragged on and slid into early evening before the meeting was adjourned. Aside from noting a raven disappearance out of the Southern Flock, there wasn't much to interest me. We'd been getting reports lately of mysterious disappearances from around the world. No one was stopping to connect the dots because they seemed sporadic and unrelated. I feared it was a Collector at work, but no one wanted to talk about that.

Collectors were these horrible humans who collected witch shifters. All ravens were witches, so over generations the Collector had come to be the bogeyman for ravens, a myth. But in the human world, shifters were myths too.

We'd always assumed the Collector was just one man. That was the legend at least. One man who passed his collection down from generation to generation. To an extent that wasn't wrong, but we knew so much more now thanks to a budding relationship with a wolf shifter faction out in California. From them we now knew there were a lot more than just one and they weren't just after ravens, but all witches. This group called themselves Westin Force and made it a point to monitor all shifter activities across the globe, so they knew what they were talking about.

This didn't sit well with everyone, but the open communication I'd been able to set up with them had more than proven beneficial. It also opened our eyes and helped to restore interactions with other Flocks.

Ravens tend to live in family groups called Flocks. Several Flocks coming together make up a Congress. We also call our governing body the Congress. In the past, each Congress sort of kept to themselves and monitored themselves. We'd even lost track of just how many of us were out there still.

With the help of Westin Force, we'd been able to confirm and reach out to five other Congresses around the world. Our closest was the Southern Flock out of Mississippi. We had no idea there was another Congress so close to us. It often made me wonder if that was where David came from, but we really didn't have much information about him aside from some strange memories Gia had from the brief time she knew him before the accident that gave him amnesia. And honestly, most of the stories she shared sounded psychedelic, like she'd been high as a kite during that period of her life. It

was odd because my sister didn't do drugs as far as I knew, but her story was simply insane and unbelievable. If it hadn't been for her obvious mating mark, followed by his sudden appearance, I would have thought she'd made David up.

At this point, I didn't see how any of it mattered. They were happily mated and in love. Also, they were thriving together working The Diner.

All I'd ever really wanted was to see my siblings happy, but especially my baby sister. She deserved it.

I hadn't bothered trying to convince the Congress that we should be concerned about possible Collector activities. Instead, as I was leaving, I picked up my phone and called Patrick O'Connell. He was the head of Westin Force and my biggest ally.

"Elias? What's up?" he asked when he answered his phone.

"Nothing much. Just wanted to drop another name your way to be on the lookout. It's probably nothing, but you never know these days."

"What happened?"

"A man in the Southern Flock, his name's Isaac Coleman, went missing two days ago. That's about all I know."

"Everyone got their feathers in a bunch over this?"

"Not at all. He tends to be a bit of a loner, and the assumption is that he just wandered off and forgot to tell anyone."

"But you're not buying it."

"After three others between the European Flock and the Canadian Flock in the last two weeks, I'm just not sure. Better to put the word out just in case you guys cross paths with him than to just ignore it and pretend like nothing's happening. Four missing ravens in three weeks now. It just doesn't sit well with me."

"I'll have Archie add him to the list. If we stumble upon him, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks, Patrick. I really do appreciate it. I know others in my Congress aren't so open to help from you. They can be stubborn and slow to change, but it really means a lot to me and my family that you're willing to work with us."

"Anytime. Look, I've got to run. I'm meeting with a travel planner for a surprise vacation for Elise next year. She's always wanted to go to Paris, and we've never really taken a trip like that before."

"Good luck man. Sounds great. She's a lucky woman."

“She fucking knows it too,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye.”

With that sorted I could relax a bit. It wasn’t much, but at least I felt like it was something. Most around here seemed to believe I didn’t really care about much aside from myself. It was true I preferred to keep to myself, but that didn’t mean I didn’t care. Though I certainly cared about some more than others.

My mind drifted back to Kim, and I grinned to myself as I jumped on my motorcycle and drove over to The Diner.

I expected to see her when I walked in, but she was nowhere in sight. I walked right back into the kitchen but still didn’t see her.

“Gia, where’s Kim?”

She groaned. “We’re not even going to pretend that’s not why you’re here now?”

“Why bother? Where is she?”

“She worked the morning shift. I’m not making her work dinner too. She’s probably at home. I don’t know. But I do know that she’s really frustrated with you right now, so maybe give her a break. Okay?”

David walked over and wrapped his arms around her, pulling my sister back against his chest and kissing her neck.

“They do say distance makes the heart grow fonder, right?”

“How the hell would you know? You don’t even remember being apart from Gia.”

“Ouch. That hurts, Elias.”

“You’re full of shit. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Eli, I’m serious. Let her simmer.”

“That sounds like a horrible idea.”

“Trust me.”

“Yeah, whatever. I won’t bother her tonight.”

I did honor that request too, but it didn’t stop me from flying over under the cover of darkness and leaving a golden chain with a charm on it on her front door.

Kim

Chapter 5

I groaned when the alarm went off. It was too early. I hated morning shifts, but lately they were providing me with good tips so I couldn't turn them down.

I still felt bad for bailing on Gia for the dinner shift last night, but I needed a break. That kiss was still plaguing my every thought, and I hadn't slept well because of it.

"What are you doing to me, Elias?" I groaned.

It didn't take long for me to shower and dress for the day. I skipped breakfast, planning to grab something during my shift. Gia let us eat one meal per shift for free, which was a nice perk of the job. If I managed to work all three shifts—which several days I did, despite her protests—I didn't have to worry about buying food at all. Of course, that just meant there was rarely more than leftovers in my fridge.

Being early for once wasn't a bad thing, but as I walked out of my front door, I tripped over something and cursed under my breath.

Sitting down on the top step I looked back and saw something shiny.

"What is this?" I muttered to myself.

I picked it up to examine it more closely. My heart stuttered as I looked at the gold necklace in my hands.

"Elias," I whispered wiping a tear from eye.

It was a beautiful necklace with a heart-shaped charm with two ravens flying together as one carved into one side.

I sighed. He was relentless, but this was certainly a new step in his pursuit of me.

When Gia came over to check on me after he apparently freaked out that I hadn't immediately returned to work, she had tried to reason with me and suggested we just let our birds meet and see what happens.

I wished it could be that simple, but in my experience, nothing in life was that easy. Because, what if he was right? Then what? I didn't want to know without a doubt that he was my one true mate when I still couldn't have him.

He had expectations weighing him down. They were important to the Flocks and to the entire Congress. Taking me for a mate would be a disaster and possibly hurt his future. I loved him enough to think of him and not just myself.

Of course that wasn't something Elias wanted to hear. He was a man used to getting his way. A girl like me should be thrilled he even paid attention to me. But when we were together, status didn't matter. I didn't see him as a Davenport and me as a Grimes. None of that mattered to me, and it didn't seem to matter to him either. But I knew there were plenty of others that would have lots of things to say about it.

Openly being with Elias as more than just the diner girl he occasionally flirted with would put a target on my back. People would talk. His own mother would be furious. And I knew that a few people that I respected would disappoint me with their reactions. I wasn't ready for any of that.

My dad had always told me to hold my head high and be proud of my heritage. But right now, when I knew that the biggest obstacle between me and what could truly be unbelievable happiness with him was my stupid name, my heritage, it was hard.

Pushing all my thoughts and worries away, I put on the necklace and forced my legs to start walking before I chickened out.

I knew that wearing the necklace would send a message to him . . . the wrong message. But I couldn't stop myself from putting it on anyway. Carefully, I tucked it beneath my shirt and picked up my pace seeing as I was late for my shift.

When I rounded the last corner, I saw flashing lights in the parking lot. I gasped and took off at a run. I could see smoke bellowing from the kitchen windows. Sensibility should have told me to stop and not go inside, but I wasn't thinking as I ran into the burning building.

From the front I could hear someone ordering an evacuation of the building. Everything was in chaos.

David was there desperately trying to put out a fire. It looked as though someone had caught a rag on fire and it had spread, sending everything in its path up in flames.

"Turn on the sink!" I yelled at him.

"It won't help. The sprayer is worthless. I already tried."

"Just do it."

The smoke was growing thicker, making my eyes burn. I could hear the sirens in the distance. Fire trucks were coming, but at this rate everything could burn first. There was no way I was letting that happen.

“Turn on the water, now!” I yelled.

This time, David listened, though I was pretty sure he was muttering something under his breath the whole time.

The cop in the front room must have heard me and came running in.

“I need you both to evacuate this instant. Help is on the way. There’s nothing we can do.”

“Like hell we can’t,” I said.

I closed my eyes and held out my left hand, calling the water from the faucet to me. When I felt the familiar ripple of awareness as it reached my fingers, I pulled the water through my body and concentrated it out my right hand in a solid, forceful stream aimed right at the fire.

It wasn’t enough.

More, I told myself, concentrating harder than ever.

Water shot out of me, dousing the fire and smoldering the flames.

“It’s working!” David cheered. “Kim, you’re doing it.”

My body started to shake, and my head pounded. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold on. It had been a long time since I last used my powers. I wasn’t conditioned for this and didn’t know how much longer I could sustain it.

Just when I thought I couldn’t hold on even a second longer, the door burst open and firemen entered. One nodded to me as he doused the remainder of the fire.

I let go of my powers, grabbing the edge of the counter to steady myself.

David ran to my side to check on me.

“You can turn off the water now,” I told him.

I was numb, sort of like going into shock. Some things I was vividly aware of around me and others I couldn’t comprehend at all.

The room started to spin, but strong arms caught me.

“Relax, cuz. I got you. It’s over now. You did good. Barely saved any of the fun for us.”

My eyes fluttered open as I looked up into warm brown eyes as he pulled off his headgear.

“Dan,” I mumbled in a voice that sounded far away.

“Well, I see the smoke didn’t get you too bad if you can remember your favorite cousin.” He grinned down at me. “But I’ve still got to require you get checked out.”

I groaned. “That isn’t necessary. I’m fine.”

“You nearly passed out.”

“That’s because I overused my powers, not from the smoke and stuff.”

“When are you going to give up your job here and finally come and join us at the fire department?”

It had been a long-standing argument amongst my family. Grimes witches had the power of water. Each of us manipulated it in different ways. Mine happened to be a bit more powerful than most and my family had been encouraging me, more like bullying me, into joining the fire department since I was a kid. I stubbornly refused.

I wasn’t going to sit there and let the diner I loved burn to the ground. In general, I chose not to use my powers, at least not regularly. It scared me to use them. So, more often than not, I blocked that side of me.

Once, when we were little and everyone was discovering their water abilities, I unleashed mine. The force of which water flowed through me had knocked Dan on his ass with a force so hard that it sent him flying into a brick wall. He’d battled a severe concussion that summer from it, and it had left me scarred for life, fearing that if I used my power, people I cared about would get hurt, or worse.

Through my teen years, I’d gone through a phase where I was determined to conquer my powers. I would only ever practice alone. But the more I tried and the more I used them, the stronger they seemed to be. Then one day I left a dent in the car I’d saved my whole life up to buy, my baby. After that I gave up on them.

Just because I was a witch with a water power didn’t mean I had to use it.

And until today, I rarely had.

As for Dan’s question, well, I wasn’t even going to dignify that with an answer. I would never work for the fire department. There were plenty of other Grimes and Montgomery witches for that.

Once outside, Dan finally set me down just outside an ambulance. Two others grabbed me and practically pushed me down on a gurney.

“Lie back while we check your vitals,” one of them said.

“I’m fine,” I argued.

“He’ll restrain you if he has to,” the woman threatened. “But you will be checked out.”

I huffed.

“Kim? Kim!” Gia yelled as she ran to my side.

“I’m fine. Go check on your mate.”

“David’s fine. He said you saved the diner.”

I frowned. “There’s a lot of damage, Gia.”

Probably more than was necessary since I used my powers. Good things never happened when I did that.

“If it had spread any further there would have been massive structural damage,” Dan said. “You did good little cuz.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not joining your stupid fire department,” I spat back at him.

“She’s fine guys. That’s the Kim we all know and love right there,” he teased.

“Vitals look good,” the woman said.

“Still, you were in there for a while. I’d prefer you and David both come down to the clinic for at least a few hours of observation,” the man argued.

“Seriously? I have work to do.”

“No you don’t. Until we get the kitchen repaired and are cleared by the fire marshal we’re shut down. So please go and take care of yourself,” Gia said. “David and I will be right behind you.”

“Does he have to ride in the ambulance?”

“No,” the paramedic told me.

“But I do?”

“Yes.”

“How’s that fair? He was in there longer than I was.”

“Gia’s driving him over. They’ll be right behind us.”

My jaw stubbornly locked. The last thing I wanted to do was waste a day in the clinic doing absolutely nothing. If the diner was really going to be closed indefinitely, I needed to find at least a part-time job to help supplement my income. I didn’t have time to waste.

“Go,” Gia said. “That’s an order.”

“You’re not my boss right now.”

“Yes I am. Your shift started twenty-five minutes ago.”

I glared at her as they secured me to the gurney and pushed me inside the ambulance.

Feeling helpless and stuck in this nightmare, I closed my eyes.

Why was this happening to me right now?

Without realizing what I was doing, I reached up and rubbed the heart charm on the necklace Elias gave me.

Elias

Chapter 6

I had been in an early morning meeting when I got word that my sister's diner was on fire. There was no word on injuries or what happened.

The second I could get away, I excused myself, practically ran out of the building, jumped on my motorcycle and rode as fast as I could. My heart was racing even faster as I saw the emergency vehicles in the parking lot.

An ambulance was loading someone inside and pulling out as I rolled up.

I immediately spotted Gia and David at their car.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"We have to get over to the clinic. I'll fill you in later," Gia said.

"What happened?" I asked again.

"It was just an accident. One of the cooks left a dish towel too close to the burner. It caught on fire and things escalated quickly. I cleared the kitchen and tried to put it out myself, but it was just too fast."

I looked around at the crowd that had gathered, but I didn't see Kim anywhere.

"Where's Kim? Her shift should have started already. Was she here?"

The two of them shared a look I didn't like.

"Where is she?" I yelled.

"She saved the diner," Gia said.

"She really did. She was amazing. I've never seen anything like it before. She made me turn on the sink then used her powers to concentrate the water at the fire. She just about had it out on her own before the fire trucks arrived."

"But?"

I knew there was a but coming. I could feel it lingering between us.

"But she doesn't use her powers often, Eli. She just got a little dizzy, so they took her back to the clinic. But she's fine. I swear. It's just precautionary for observation. I'm taking David over there right now for the same reason, and look at him, he's totally fine."

My whole body was shaking with fear as I jumped back on my bike

and sped to the clinic.

That had been Kim I'd seen them load up in the ambulance.

Something was wrong.

Why had I let them schedule me for an early meeting this morning?

I should have been there instead.

I wanted to take her as my mate and yet I'd failed her today by not being there to protect her from this.

Some mate I'd make.

Even knowing it would be best if I just left her be, I couldn't stop myself from parking and walking inside. I had to know for myself and see with my own eyes that she was okay.

"Elias, can I help you with something?" Chelsea Dean asked as I approached.

She was a cousin on my mother's side somewhere down the line. Sweet girl around my age. We'd gone to school together. We were both a bit of outsiders, though she'd grown up and gotten a respectable job in nursing while, as my mother constantly reminded me, I had not.

What would she think if she knew the truth about why I suddenly agreed to fall in line and take a "respectable" job?

The only reason I'd agreed to start working with the Council was for Kim. If I was going to give her the kind of life she truly deserved, then I needed to start acting the part. At a certain level within the Congress, a person could get away with nearly anything, even turning a Grimes into a lady of power within our kind—and that was exactly what I intended to do.

"An ambulance came in a few minutes ago."

"Oh, the diner fire? Don't worry. It wasn't Gia. Just some waitress."

I snarled at her causing her eyes to widen.

"Down the hall, third door on the left."

Even a sweet girl like Chelsea had her prejudices. It was ridiculous and infuriated me. She was right to hold her tongue and tell me where Kim was because I felt like a ticking time bomb ready to explode at any second.

Just give me an excuse, any excuse.

My fists balled up at my thighs, and I took a deep breath and forced them open before barging into the exam room they'd put her in.

The doctor was already there checking her over.

"Wrong room, Elias. Gia and David haven't arrived yet."

I ignored him and looked down at Kim, certain she could see the full

range of my emotions swirling within my green eyes.

Kim huffed. "I'm fine, Elias. Really. I just overused my powers."

"But she saved your sister's diner in the process. A real hero, this one," the doctor praised.

Her lips pursed as she shook her head. "It really wasn't a big deal, and I'm fine," she repeated.

I went to her bedside as some commotion in the hallway alerted us all to my sister's arrival.

"I need to check on that. Kim you're going to be just fine. Take it easy today, let the IV finish its course, and then you're good to go. Keep pushing those fluids today. If you have any more dizziness, come back in and we'll run a few tests. But I think you'll be alright."

"Thanks," she muttered.

He left the door open behind him, but I immediately closed it.

"E . . ."

I cut her off.

"Stop. You could have been seriously hurt today. Why didn't you just get out?"

I knew I was just upset and being irrational, but I couldn't stand the thought of her getting hurt. The "what ifs" of what could have happened would haunt me for quite some time.

She bit her lip and looked like she'd just been busted with her hand in the cookie jar. It was cute, and I would have appreciated it had it not given me a sick feeling in my gut.

"What?" I demanded.

She huffed. "I didn't get out. I got in, okay? The diner was burning to the ground when I got there. I had to do something."

I could hear my teeth grinding together and my brow furrowed as I stared down at her in disbelief.

"It's just a building. It wasn't important," I told her.

"It's your sister's diner. It's my livelihood."

"It can be rebuilt. You cannot," I said through clenched teeth.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but then again, yeah, I could. It was Kim logic, always putting others above herself. Couldn't she just see how special she was? How important she was to this community? To me?

"When you're done here, I'm taking you home where I can keep an eye on you myself."

She scoffed. “Yeah, cause that won’t cause a stir amongst all the Flocks.”

“I don’t give a shit about anyone else. Only you.”

She sighed. “Elias, you have to stop this.”

“No, I don’t.”

“We can’t be together, and you know why. I’m sure you’re going to get a mass of shit from your mother for even coming in here to talk to me. People will talk.”

“Let them.”

She was starting to get upset and I almost backed off knowing I was just going crazy with all the thoughts of everything bad that could have happened to her today. But then I saw it. The golden heart necklace I’d left for her. She was wearing my necklace.

I grinned.

Immediately noticing my change of temper, she eyes me suspiciously.

“What?”

“You’re wearing my necklace.”

Kim blushed and started tucking it back under her shirt.

I leaned over her, framing her with my arms as I stared at her intently.

“You’re mine,” I whispered, and then leaned down and kissed her before she could stop me.

I caught the sigh on her lips. It was like a whisper. I couldn’t help the grin that grew across my face.

Sensing it, her eyes flew open, and she pushed me away.

“Stop kissing me.”

I chuckled. “I promise you, I will never stop kissing you, or wanting to kiss you. Wanting to touch you and make you come in my arms. You can keep denying it for now, but you are mine, and it’s only a matter of time before everyone knows it.”

She groaned and grabbed a spare pillow to cover her face and screamed in frustration.

The thing was, I knew she wasn’t frustrated over my words. The look in her eyes told me she liked them. She was just struggling to accept them.

We’d been conditioned our whole lives to think differently of each other. It was ingrained in us practically from birth. But I was going to change that.

Sure, my mother would complain at first, but if there was one thing I

learned when Gia took David as her mate it was that my mother, Helena Dean Davenport, could get over a hell of a lot when it came to the happiness of her children. And Kim was the one person in this world that truly made me happy.

I gave her one last peck.

“I need to check in on David. I’ll be back to take you home in a bit.”

Before she could protest, I left the room.

It wasn’t hard to find my family. I could hear my mother’s screeching from down the hall.

Anger filled me when I walked into the room. It was bigger and almost luxurious compared to the back exam room Kim had been given. Yet she was the one that had required the ambulance. It was ridiculous.

There were so many things that needed to be fixed within the Raven hierarchy. Just maybe my father’s insistence that I work with the Congress wasn’t a bad thing. There was a glimpse of hope that I could make some changes around here for the better.

“How is he?” I asked my brother Ryan when I walked into the room.

“Oh, he’s fine. Mom’s still going to fuss over him anyway. She’s insisting the doctor runs all sorts of unnecessary tests.”

“Have you guys seen the place yet? How bad is it?” Dean asked.

“The diner is fine. Just needs a bit of repair in the kitchen. They’ll have it back up soon. Kim really saved the day,” I said proudly.

Ryan frowned. He didn’t approve. But Dean grinned and gave me a thumbs up.

At least I had one of my siblings on my side.

I honestly expected Gia to be happy for us, but I also knew she was worried for Kim’s sake. Our mother could be a force to be reckoned with, but I had to believe she’d come around.

“Well, David, you’re fine, right?”

“Yes. But can you do us a favor and make sure Kim gets home okay? She refused to let us call her family,” he said.

Mom huffed. “It’s not like her Flock doesn’t already know.”

“I’ll handle it,” I said and left the room.

I was in no shape to handle her sarcastic bullshit right now.

Back down the hall, I caught Kim trying to sneak out of the clinic without me.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Kim

Chapter 7

I froze at the sound of his voice and slowly turned.

Dammit. I thought for sure I could sneak out while he was distracted. “Come on,” he insisted.

Before I knew it, I was donning a helmet and riding on the back of Elias Davenport’s motorcycle, holding on for dear life—or maybe just because I could.

It felt so right with my arms around him, and my body pressed to his in such an intimate way.

Today had been rough. I was temporarily out of a job, and I had no idea what I was going to do now or even how I’d make rent. Okay, things weren’t that bad. I was good at saving up money and could ride out this storm, but it was really going to tank my savings.

After my initial fear of riding with him waned, I started to relax and enjoy the moment. I didn’t know if I’d ever get a chance to just let go like this again.

I loosened my grip around his waist and held my arms out to the sides just feeling the wind. It was almost like flying. Not exactly, but the sensation of it was there.

Closing my eyes, I could let myself believe that for just a moment nothing else in the world mattered.

Distracted and not paying attention to everything around me, I didn’t realize we had passed by my street until Elias was parking in front of a tall building that I knew he lived in. It was the biggest building in all of Ravenden, and he shared the top floor of it with his brother Ryan. Two separate apartments, each taking up half of the floor. It was unfathomable.

He’d been to my house dozens of times, but I’d never been to his place. I didn’t even allow myself to think about it or wonder what it was like. It was just a stark reminder of the different places we came from.

Killing the engine, he waited for me to dismount the bike first, but I just sat there, frozen.

When I didn’t budge, he removed his helmet and looked back over his

shoulder at me.

“Come on. I’m taking you home.”

When I still didn’t move, he growled a bit.

“Kim, I could have lost you today. You’re going to have to just deal with me being a little overbearing right now.”

With a huff, I got off the bike. I could tell by the fierce look in his eyes that this wasn’t going to be a fight I was going to win. Maybe if I left the helmet on no one would know it was me.

“This is a very bad idea,” I told him.

“No, it’s not.”

He took the helmet off my head and carried it and his with one arm while pressing his hand into the small of my back and guiding me inside.

We didn’t pass anyone on our way to the elevator.

I started to relax a bit as we got inside and the doors closed behind us, positive no one had seen me come with him.

All of the sudden it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the elevator and all I could do was breathe in Elias’s scent.

I shivered.

“Cold?” he asked, setting down the helmets and taking off his jacket to wrap around me.

I groaned softly. Now I was literally covered in his scent, but I didn’t know how to explain to him that I wasn’t cold, just very turned on at the moment.

He always had that effect on me, and being locked up in this confined space with him was making it even harder to say no to him. I knew that if I let on even a little bit he’d have me pressed up against the wall of this elevator faster than I could blink.

The thought was so tempting.

Before I threw caution to the wind and acted on it, the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened.

There was only a small area with a door to the right and one to the left. Elias unlocked the one on the right and held it open for me to enter.

I’d be lying to myself if I said I wasn’t the slightest bit curious.

Trying to be discreet about it, I looked around as we walked inside. He had a big open floor plan with designated sections for the kitchen, dining area, and living space. A large black sectional took up the bulk of the room, but the place was so large that it didn’t look oversized or anything. A short

hallway was on the opposite side of the room with three doors visible.

The dark colors throughout the room made me smile. It was so Elias. He smirked. “Go ahead, look around all you want. I have nothing to hide from you.”

As tempting as that offer was and as badly as I wanted to open the doors and see what was beyond them, I refrained. Instead, I went to the large French doors that led to an expansive terrace. Looking out, it felt like I could see nearly all of Ravenden below.

I had never spent time that high up in human form before. It was awesome.

Feeling like I’d composed myself a bit better, I reluctantly went back inside.

“It’s a great view, right?” he asked me.

“Yeah, it really is.”

“Bathroom’s down the hall if you need it. I know they pumped a lot of fluids into you, but I heard the doctor say to keep pushing fluids today. So take a seat and relax.”

On the large coffee table there now sat an entire case of water.

“You don’t actually expect me to drink all of that.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how much you need. David said you pulled water through your body or something like that.”

“I’m a water manipulator. That’s what I do.”

“That’s really cool.”

“I guess. It’s not something I really embrace.”

“Why not?”

I was not about to explain how my cousin had tormented me over my lame powers from the second they surfaced, and I really couldn’t remember ever not having them. That is, until the incident occurred that left him with a concussion and me in need of a car repair. I’d mostly stopped using my powers after that for fear I’d hurt someone, which brought its own form of torment. Plus I’d been bullied plenty as a kid just for being a Grimes. I’d been so proud of my powers up until about third grade. I had rarely used them since, well, until today.

Since I wasn’t willing to let him in by telling him all of that, I just shrugged instead.

He looked dark and frustrated, but he didn’t press me for more.

Instead, he picked up a remote and turned on the television. It was the

biggest one I'd ever seen in real life, taking up a whole wall of his apartment. It made it feel like we were at a movie theater or something.

Elias moved to the corner of the sectional just behind me and then he carefully pulled me back against his chest.

"What kind of movies do you like?" he surprised me by asking.

"I don't know, how about an action movie?"

Anything but romance. There was no way I could handle watching some cheesy chick flick while lying there with him wrapped around me.

He put on a movie and then reached over and handed me a water bottle.

I groaned, but begrudgingly drank it.

Using my powers the way I did today really did drain me of fluids in a way that I couldn't really explain to him, but I also didn't want to make a big deal about it and just worry him more.

For all the tough exterior, Elias was just a big, sweet teddy bear. And while he may purposefully push others away, all he seemed to want to do was hold me close.

As the adrenaline from the day began to wane, I didn't have the strength to tell him no this time. I'd regret it later and remind myself just how stupid I'd been. But right here, right now, I was just going to lay back and enjoy it.

Exhaustion started to set in about halfway through the movie, and I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. I curled into Elias's side, using his chest as my personal pillow. I would have been mortified if it didn't feel so good.

There were a million reasons I shouldn't be here. It was just setting me up for heartbreak. But I couldn't help it. Not today. I knew he was reacting to the fear that something bad could have happened. This wasn't real. It would never work, no matter how badly we both wanted it.

Today, I could have died. It wasn't very likely. Being a water witch certainly gave me some protection over fire, but it could have happened. I could have lost him today too. And the thought of never seeing Elias again wasn't sitting well with me.

I squeezed him a little harder and breathed in his fresh scent. He smelled like the wind after a soft summer rain. And I knew that after today it would be engrained in my memories forever. Every time it rained I would think of him.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

The deep rumble of his voice vibrated through my body when he spoke.

“Just how nice this is.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“You know this could be our life every day.”

I sat up and gave him a stern look.

“You know that will never happen.”

“If you just let my raven meet yours then you’ll see that everything will be okay. You were made for me, Kim, and I was always meant to be yours. There will never be another.”

I sighed. “There is no way you can possibly know that.”

“Maybe it’s part of my powers.”

I elbowed him. “That’s not funny.”

“I wasn’t kidding.”

The sad thing was, I knew he was being serious. He really did believe we were meant to be together and all that shit.

And with that, reality came crashing back in on me. If I tried to argue, he would only plead his case and make me feel bad about it. It wasn’t like I was trying to hurt him. In truth, all I wanted to do was protect him. Despite what he thought, that was all this was. If I didn’t care, I would have caved and introduced our ravens a while ago because I could feel the pull towards him too.

It could just be wishful thinking. To the best of my knowledge our ravens had never crossed paths before. Maybe there was just a human draw to him, but it sure felt like something more.

“I need to use your bathroom,” I told him, forcing myself to get up.

If I didn’t get moving, I just might do something I’d regret later, or worse, something irrevocable.

“Just down the hall,” he told me.

There were three doors to choose from, but he didn’t tell me which one was the bathroom. I started with the door on the left and walked right into his bedroom.

The overbearing scent of Elias was everywhere. My mouth went dry, and I fought back a moan. Why did the mere smell of him fill me with desire?

Across the room I could see his bathroom, so I walked towards it.

He chuckled, and I turned to look back at him.

“There’s a bathroom across the hall for guests, but you chose right.”

I glared at him, understanding his insinuation. He quietly closed the door and gave me some privacy.

Elias was serious. He was an intense man by nature, often misunderstood by others. He had a bad boy image, dark and moody. But once you got past that he was funny and sweet, at least with me, and I was certain with his sister too.

Being the oldest of the Davenport children, he was often seen as defiant towards the way of his clan, obstinate with the rules and directives from the Congress, and a loner in life. But that recently seemed to be changing.

He was working for the Congress now and stepping up as a leader among our kind. I wasn’t sure why this sudden change was occurring, but it was just a stark reminder of why we couldn’t be together. He had big, important things in his future, and I was just a diner girl destined for a boring, average life.

It made me sad to think about it. I would love nothing more than to be his mate and spend a lifetime together, but he deserved better than me. I couldn’t bring him down to my station in life. Eventually he would grow to resent me for it.

I took my time finishing up in the bathroom and then wandered back out to his bedroom to snoop around. There were large French doors leading out to the terrace. I opened them and walked outside to breathe in the fresh air.

Tears pricked my eyes.

It had been nice in the moment, but I knew I had to get back to real life before I got too comfortable here.

Checking around to ensure no one was watching—mainly that he wasn’t watching—I took off my clothes and shifted, leaving them behind. I had no doubt he would find a way to return them later. But for now, I just had to get away.

The wind in my feathers eased some of my tension. I hadn’t flown in a long time. I’d become paranoid of Elias’s bird finding me and confirming what we both suspected.

That confirmation would change the course of our lives forever. It was better this way.

Elias

Chapter 8

My phone alerted me to the door off my bedroom opening. I smiled down at it.

Kim was making herself at home. This was a good thing.

She could be rummaging through all my things, and it wouldn't bother me in the least. Normally, I was a private man who despised others in my space, but not when it came to Kim.

Today was a good day.

But when she didn't return after a few minutes, I couldn't help but check the video feed to see what she was doing.

There was no sign of Kim on the terrace. As I panned the camera from side to side, I saw the pile of her clothes on the ground.

"No!" I screamed as I jumped up from the couch and ran out the door.

I scanned the area and could barely make out a tiny black dot on the horizon.

Without bothering to strip, I shifted. It took me a moment to untangle from my shirt, but as soon as I did, I flew as fast and hard as my wings would allow. Like a bullet through the wind, I was determined to catch up to her.

This was my chance. Once and for all I was going to prove to her that we were meant to be together.

My heart pounded with excitement as I pushed my raven harder than I'd ever flown before.

Her house was just ahead as I watched her shift back into her skin.

I was too late. And at this rate she may never give me another opportunity.

Maybe I should have just licked my wounds and turned back, but anger fueled me on.

Just before I landed, I shifted and glided onto her porch with ease.

She yelped at the sound of my footsteps as she fumbled around for her spare key. I already knew she kept it under her doormat. Not the safest place, but I supposed at a time like this it was a good thing. It wasn't like crime was high in our quiet little sleepy town of Ravenden.

“Shift,” I demanded.

“No.”

“Kim,” I warned.

Defiantly she turned to face me, and in that moment, everything changed.

I’d never seen her naked before. I instantly grew hard, as if my dick had a mind of its own. My mouth watered, and all I could see was her.

She was stunningly beautiful. I let my eyes wash over her body, and I shuddered with desire.

Her mouth fell open in surprise as she stared back at me, only she wasn’t looking at my face.

A smirk quirked one side of my lips upwards.

She wanted me as badly as I wanted her. I was certain of it. Finally, it felt like we were on equal ground.

In three long strides, I closed the gap between us and pulled her into my arms. My mouth crushed against hers, silencing her protest, if there even was one.

I was hungry for her and excited to memorize every inch of her body.

With ease, I lifted her into my arms, and she naturally wrapped her legs around my waist, putting her core exactly where I wanted it.

She moaned against my lips as our tongues danced.

I reached for the doorknob, but she hadn’t yet unlocked the damn thing. Kicking out hard, I heard the wood crack as the door swung open.

She pulled back in shock, but there was still a haze of lust over her eyes.

“I’ll fix it later.”

Walking her across the threshold, I kicked it back into place and then carried her straight to her bed. Her place was small, and I had long since memorized it. I had spent countless nights in feathers watching her through her windows.

Sometimes it made me feel like a creep. My sister had been stalked by an obsessive asshole. How was I really any different?

Because she was meant to be mine, I told myself.

Pushing all thoughts from my mind, I focused on Kim. She’d never let me get this close before. I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity.

Trailing light kisses down her neck, I reached her breast. Her little moans and mews spurred me on as I savored her until her hips were bucking

beneath me.

“Elias,” she moaned, practically begging me for more.

“What do you need, beautiful?”

“You,” she said with perfect clarity.

I kissed her hard as my fingers toyed at the apex of her womanhood. She was so tight, but hot and wet for me. I couldn't wait to sink myself inside her. More than that though, I desperately needed to watch her come for me.

My fingers dipped into her heat as she squirmed and then started to relax and enjoy herself. I watched as the emotions played out across her face until she could no longer lay still.

She grabbed my shoulders and held on as she cried out her orgasm saying my name over and over.

I growled as I positioned myself over her and pressed inside with one swift thrust. I felt the barrier within her burst, and I froze.

A virgin? Kim was a virgin? But I'd heard the rumors of her teen years. And as much as I hated it, I knew there had been others. They'd bragged about it even. Yet there was no way I had mistaken what just happened.

I'd just taken her virginity. There was no turning back now, and if this was truly her first time, I wanted to make damn sure it was good for her.

Holding back my own desires, I slowed our pace and helped her find a groove that seemed to feel good for her.

In that moment, my own needs meant nothing to me as I focused solely on her.

When she didn't seem to know what she wanted or needed as she slowly rose to another climax, I picked up the pace of our lovemaking.

I'd never felt so connected to another person before. She was my everything. I knew I already had an addiction problem when it came to her, but that was never going to change after this.

When she started to reach her peak, she clawed at my back and lost all sense of rhythm. Seeing her wild and uninhibited like this did something to me, and I had to bite down the urge to unload. I was so close, but so was she.

I reached down between us and touched her while at the same time sucking one pert nipple hard into my mouth, letting my teeth scrap against her sensitive nerves.

Her head was thrown back as she cried out. Her body tensed around me until I couldn't take even a second longer. Together we came, together we

rocked and rode out the storm of ecstasy, and together we collapsed in a sweaty, panting heap on her bed.

She still clung tightly to me as emotions rolled through us.

I was speechless. I had no idea that sex could be that intimate and all-consuming.

Looking deeply into her eyes, I knew this was different. This was love.

I was pretty sure I'd spent the last few years of my life falling in love with Kim, despite all her fears and protests. With the uncertainty of a future together, I hadn't dared let myself truly think about it before. But there was no denying it now.

I loved Kim with a desperation that terrified me.

Instead of running away from it, I clung to her, never wanting to let her go again.

Neither of us spoke, and I wondered if it had been as monumental of a moment for her as it had been for me.

Fearing I would crush her, I rolled to my back and pulled her onto my chest.

Smiling, I kissed the top of her head and took a moment to breathe in her sweet scent. She smelled like cherries and jasmine. It would forever be my favorite scent.

She looked up at me, watching me closely.

When I saw her brain starting to function again, I silenced her with another kiss. I could stay right here in bed with her all day, hell, every day for the rest of my life, and be perfectly happy.

She playfully pushed me away.

"We shouldn't have done that."

"No regrets," I insisted, hating hearing her say that.

That thought crept into my mind like a dark cloud.

She reached up and touched my cheek. "I didn't say I regretted it, just that we probably shouldn't have done it."

"I disagree. We should have done it a long time ago, and we should keep doing it."

"You don't know how badly I wish I could," she said sadly.

"Hey, don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't kick me out and pretend like this wasn't a big deal."

She snorted. “Elias, you have a reputation around town, you know. I know this wasn’t a big deal for you.”

She bit her lower lip in an uncharacteristically vulnerable moment.

“That was a long time ago. I was just a kid. There’s been no one else, Kim. Not since the first time I kissed you in Aunt Ginny’s garden during one of her parties.”

It had been several years earlier, even before Gia and David had met. And it was the truth. There’d been no other woman in my life since I first set my eyes on Kim.

“No one?” she asked.

“Only you, babe.”

“I’ve, um, never . . .”

“I know.”

She blushed. “Was it noticeable?”

“Not in the way I suspect you think, but yeah, I noticed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

She shrugged. “Being so inexperienced and all.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. There were rumors.”

She grinned. “I didn’t want anyone to know, so I bribed a few guy friends to spread those rumors. We were still young, and I thought maybe it would make me more desirable or something. It was stupid.”

“I’m glad.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m the only that will ever have you.”

“Elias, no.”

“Yes, Kim. You’re it for me.”

“You’d throw it all away for me? I mean, your mother could seriously lose her shit. You could be disowned.”

I snorted. “That will never happen, but I’ll play along. If it came to that, then it’s their loss. I’d still be the happiest man alive because I’d have you.”

“You can’t say stuff like that.”

“I can and I did, and I mean it.”

“I’m not ready.”

My patience was wearing thin. I’d just taken her virginity. I loved her. She was mine.

But I held all of that back for her sake.

Kim was like a spooked baby bird terrified to fly for the first time. Today had been huge progress in the right direction. I needed to just hold onto that for now. Baby steps.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” she admitted.

I snuggled down into her bed and just held her.

“This doesn’t change anything,” she insisted.

“Keep telling yourself that, babe.”

Because for me, this changed everything, and I would stop at nothing to have her as my mate.

Kim

Chapter 9

Things were inevitably changing between me and Elias. I didn't know how to stop it, and if I were being honest with myself, I didn't really want to.

With the kitchen remodel still going on in the diner, Gia and David had to get creative in order to keep us employees active and paid.

I was one of the rare few who knew that they were paying us out of their personal finances. They had the money, but they shouldn't have to do that.

It had been two weeks since the fire, and Elias and I were secretly seeing each other every day. I'd never been happier. I still refused to spend much time at his place, so he mostly just stayed with me, but it was rare that a night went by that we weren't together.

I was lost in a daydream when Gia cleared her throat.

"Earth to Kim. We have work to do."

"We do?"

"We do. I just contracted a luncheon for Felicity Dean, a garden party for my Aunt Ginny, and I just landed the reception for the future Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery."

"Scott and Terry's wedding?"

"Exactly."

"That's great, G."

"I know. I still have no clue why they insist on getting married when they're already happily mated, but whatever. I'll take it. This will really help to keep us afloat until the diner is back up and operational."

"I really hate to be a downer and all, but in order to cater, we still need a kitchen. And as much as I love offering up my house, it may be a bit small for this big of an undertaking."

"I know. My mom has offered to let us use hers."

Helena Dean Davenport? I was going to be spending time at Elias's mother's house? The place he grew up and still calls home?

"Relax, Kim. It'll be fine. Trust me."

She had no idea why I was freaking out because I hadn't shared with

my best friend the fact that I was sleeping with her brother.

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine?” I asked like a psycho.

“Good, because if you grab those pans, we’re heading over there now.”

I gulped. “Right now?”

“Right now. Come on.”

There was no way for me to get out of this short of a life and death scenario or quitting my job. I couldn’t fathom either, so I packed up the things she requested and loaded up Gia’s car.

I was quiet on the drive over and she was unusually so too.

“This is going to work,” she said aloud.

I sighed. It was perfectly normal for Gia to be stressed out with everything going on.

I patted her shoulder. “It’s all going to be fine. You’ll see.”

I just wished I could be as certain in that with my own life.

The Davenport estate was the largest in all of Ravenden. We turned just as the large looming iron gates opened as if by magic, or maybe because Gia had the remote and had tapped it while I was gawking over the place.

She drove down the long drive and stopped in front of the house. It was enormous. And I stared up at it in wonder.

It wasn’t like this was the first time I’d ever been to the house, but somehow it just felt different this time. I tried desperately to imagine myself here, not as the help, but as a legitimate guest walking in on Elias’s arm.

I was still daydreaming as we walked inside, and it all came to a screeching halt as the perfectly dressed, poignant Helena Davenport stood three steps up on the ornate staircase looking down her nose at me.

As her gaze brushed over me to her daughter, she softened and didn’t look quite so intimidating, though she still terrified me.

“Darling!”

Closing the gap between us, she swept Gia up into her arms and kissed one cheek and then the next. My brother, Andrew, would be holding his gut laughing at the sight. He called that a rich person welcome.

I grinned thinking about it.

Helena tilted her head towards me.

“It’s Kim, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You were the one who saved the diner, aren’t you?”

I blushed and nodded. "I suppose. It was really a group effort."

That was a lie, but I wasn't going to show my pride. Besides I couldn't talk about that day without blushing over the memories of all that had happened afterwards . . . with her son.

"Let's get started."

"You're volunteering to help?" Gia asked her with a snort.

"I can cook, Gia."

"I remember. Though you must admit you're probably out of practice."

Humph. "I'm perfectly capable of helping."

"Okay. Let's see what you've got then," Gia teased her.

Much to my surprise, the woman really did know her way around a kitchen. And she turned out to be a lot of help to us.

It took me a while to relax, but once I did, it turned out to be a fun day.

Elias's mom was just a woman like any other. The more time I spent with her, the less intimidated I felt. By the end of the day, I found I was even enjoying myself around her.

"Same place, same time tomorrow?" she asked after we'd cleaned up for the day.

"Yes. Thanks, mom."

Gia hugged her while I hung back.

Much to my surprise, Helena pulled me into an embrace next.

"Great work today, girls."

My head was spinning in confusion as we left.

"She can come across as tough sometimes, especially to those outside her comfort zone, but she means well," Gia explained on the drive back to my place.

Because she had plans with David, she didn't stick around. It was probably a good thing seeing as how Elias was waiting for me, naked in my bed.

I shook my head and scowled at him.

"What if your sister hadn't had plans this evening? She would have come in and hung out for a bit. You can't just show up in my house naked like this."

"Why? Does it bother you seeing me naked?"

My cheeks warmed as I looked him over. Coming home to this man

naked in my bed was the best part of my day. But he was getting cocky, and there was no way I was going to fuel his ego by admitting it.

Instead, I undressed and joined him.

“Better,” he teased before making me forget that anything else existed in this world besides me, him, and this bed.

After we were both fully satisfied, we cuddled and talked. As much as I loved sex with Elias, this was the intimacy I craved with him the most. He was open and honest with me. I knew I could tell him absolutely anything and it would be okay.

“I spent the day with your mother and sister,” I blurted out.

“And lived to talk about it?”

I snorted. “She really isn’t that bad.”

“I know. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. So maybe this is a good thing. What were you doing over there?”

“Working. Gia picked up a few larger gigs and we needed a bigger kitchen. Mine just wouldn’t cut it.”

“You could have used mine.”

“Maybe, but then we wouldn’t have had an extra set of hands.”

“You mean Mom actually helped?”

“Yeah, she did.”

“Damn. You got to see a side of her she rarely shows anyone, even us.” He laughed. “When we were kids she cooked all the time, but as we got older, and there were more of us, she hired a cook to do all of that. For a while, none of us could even remember those days well. They seemed like a dream. Then she started cooking again and it was super weird but brought back so many memories, especially for me and Ryan. Whereas Gia and Dean could hardly remember her like that.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to remember my mom,” I admitted. “She died when I was thirteen. Andrew and Dad raised me after that.”

“They both work for the fire department, right?”

“Yup, and I catch shit regularly for not joining them.”

“Why don’t you then?”

I shrugged. “Probably because it’s so expected of me. Besides, I love working with your sister.”

He laughed. “Well, if anyone can understand that, it’s me. Until lately, I’ve rebuked everything my family has ever suggested for me. Though understand, I used the term suggested loosely. More like demanded, which

only made me stubbornly refuse all the more.”

“So why now? Why did you finally agree to take your place among proper society and live up to the Davenport name?”

“For you.”

“Wh-what?” I stuttered.

“For you. I realized if you were going to take me seriously, then I needed to step up and make myself deserving of that. So I agreed and ended up not entirely hating it. I have no regrets.”

“But why would you think you’d need to do that for me?”

“Most people see me as a screwup, a playboy, the Peter Pan of the Congress, unwilling to fully grow up. Which is a lie. I’ve always worked hard, and I’ve supported myself since I was eighteen years old. I only ever touched my trust fund to buy the apartment, and I’ll get that money back if you’d rather live in a house, especially once we start having kids.”

“You want kids?”

For some reason that surprised me.

“Sure. A whole flock of them. I love kids. How about you?”

I shrugged. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m the youngest and haven’t had a mother figure in my life in a long time. Dad always worked crazy hours at the station, so a lot of the time it was just me and Andrew growing up. I’ve never been around kids much.”

“We’re going to have to fix that. Maybe Gia and David will hurry up and give us a niece or nephew for you to practice with.”

Us?

Babies?

What the hell was happening?

“You do know I still haven’t changed my mind about anything. Just because I said your mother wasn’t a complete tyrant doesn’t mean she’d ever agree to us being together.”

He huffed. “Then just let our ravens meet, babe. Once it’s confirmed that you are my true mate no one will stop us from bonding, and we won’t have to sneak around or keep us a secret.”

I really did want to give in and let him have his way. It would be so easy, like falling in love.

I gulped hard.

Love?

Was I really falling in love with Elias Davenport?

I stopped and really thought about it.

Yup, I was in love with Elias.

I started to hyperventilate. Of course, he completely misread why.

“Hey, calm down. It’s okay. I will wait a lifetime for you to be ready.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “What if I’m never ready?” Or what if I already was and just too stubborn and scared to admit it?

“As long as we’re together, it’s fine. I’ll take whatever you feel you can give. Because . . .”

My phone rang, interrupting him. I checked it and saw it was Gia.

Holding up a finger, I answered.

“Hey girl, what’s up?”

“Can you either fly over or drive to Mom’s tomorrow? And will you murder me if I say be there by seven even if I won’t be in until later?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine. Send me a list of everything you need done.”

“You are the best. I’ll make it up to you, I swear.”

“Just part of the job, boss.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’m texting you now. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

I tapped the end button and looked back at Elias.

“Sorry about that. What were you saying?”

“Nothing.”

Elias

Chapter 10

I'd almost confessed my love to Kim. Life these days was pretty perfect, even if we were the only two who knew it. I wanted to shout to the stars and to anyone who'd listen, "This girl is mine!" Yet, with one little interruption, I chickened out and couldn't even tell her.

The next day I was moodier than usual and short tempered with everyone I encountered.

Sitting in meetings all morning was not helping the situation.

Malachai Dean, Castor Thornton, Preston Montgomery, and Reese Caldwell, along with my father made up the Raven Congress Council that oversaw ravens here in Ravenden and all over the world. While Ravenden was the largest group of raven shifters, there were others scattered around the world.

My parents would preach on the purity of the Flocks here in Ravenden, and I would remind them that it just meant we were a bunch of inbred freaks, or I'd mention the fact that David wasn't from Ravenden so Gia, their own daughter, screwed up the purity line.

I just didn't understand it. Mating first and even second cousins was greatly frowned upon, but outside of that anything went. When I attended a Davenport or Dean Flock function, I would look around and see family. And I sure as hell wasn't interested in mating any of them.

As I looked around the room at the prestigious men who represented our people, it angered me to realize, perhaps for the first time, that only five of the seven Flocks were represented. There were no Grimes or Pierces and likely never had been.

"Why are there only five of the seven Flocks sitting on the Congress Council?" I asked.

"Excuse me?" Castor asked.

"I'm serious. There are seven prominent families in Ravenden. Why are only five of them represented here?"

"Well son, that's just the way it is," Dad said.

"But aren't these elected seats?"

“Yes, they are, and each of us take our position very seriously, looking out for the whole Congress,” Preston insisted.

“I’m sure you are, but while you are elected to this position, you’re only elected by your Flock, not the whole Congress. Which means the Grimes and Pierce Flocks are without representation entirely. How is that fair?”

“Fair?” Malachai scoffed. “They’re Pierce and Grimes. What do they know about governing? This is the way it’s always been.”

“Actually, it’s not,” Reese spoke up. “It wasn’t that long ago that the Caldwell Flock fought for representation. My grandfather was a big activist in the movement. I happen to agree with Elias on this one, seven Flocks means seven councilmen.”

“Or women,” I added.

He smiled and nodded in agreement.

Malachai laughed. “You cannot possibly be serious with this. Allow a Grimes and a Pierce to sit amongst us? It’s absurd. Edward, explain things to your son and keep him in line. This is ridiculous and unheard of.”

Dad looked at me as my chin lifted in defiance, just waiting for the reprimand that didn’t come.

“Actually, Malachai, I think I agree with him. I’ve never fully understood why we allow some Flocks to sit on the Council and not others. This is the twenty-first century and I fear some of our traditions have grown quite archaic. Maybe it’s time for a change.”

Reese’s jaw dropped open in surprise. I had to admit I was more than a little shocked by it too.

Under the table I kicked Reese in the shin and tried to silently communicate my thoughts to him. I wasn’t in the position to make a motion since I didn’t officially sit on the board, but he was. I nodded encouragingly.

“I move to fix this immediately,” Reese finally said.

Malachai was still protesting it in disbelief when Castor spoke up.

“I second the motion.”

“Seems we have a call for a vote,” Dad said. “All those opposed to adding two additional Council seats to represent the Grimes and Pierce Flocks say nay.”

“Nay,” Malachai bellowed, but he was the only one.

“All those in favor.”

“Yay,” the rest of the room admitted.

I sat there in shocked silence.

“Elections don’t take place for another eight months. I think we should consider appointing people in the interim. It will still give us a bit of control and establish things the way we want them before the Flocks get to vote for themselves,” Castor said.

“Let it be known that I think this is a horrible idea, but if we’re doing this, then we should get a say in who,” Malachai insisted.

“We certainly didn’t get a say in you,” my father said snidely. It was no secret that the two men did not get along, family or not. “They can speak for themselves. But if as a group we wish to elect interim representatives, then I would like to nominate Clarence Grimes and Diddy Pierce.”

“I have no objections of either,” Reese agreed.

“I’m fine with them,” Preston agreed.

Castor nodded.

Malachai reluctantly agreed.

“Why don’t Elias and I talk to them? It was his idea after all, and my motion called,” Reese said.

“Well I’m sure as hell not going to,” Malachai mumbled. “I suppose today’s agenda can wait a few days. Make it happen quickly. This meeting is adjourned.”

Dad clapped me on the back and nodded. He was proud of me. It was a rare and odd acknowledgement, but I was certain of it. I’d seen that look on his face beamed at Ryan enough times to recognize it.

Reese hung back as the others left.

“Okay, together or divide and conquer?”

“Whichever you prefer.”

“I know Diddy pretty well. Why don’t I talk to him while you hit up Clarence?”

I was embarrassed to admit that I didn’t know Clarence Grimes.

“Just ask around the fire station. They’ll point you in the right direction.”

“Okay,” I said.

This was my doing. I could man up and see it through.

At the station, I recognized only a couple of faces and couldn’t recall any of their names.

“Hey, I’m looking for Clarence Grimes. Is he in today? I was told I could probably find him here,” I said to the first man I saw.

Ravenden was a small town, so it seemed ridiculous that I didn't know these people. I lived here my entire life, yet there was a class system in place that had shielded me from too much. Aside from the few that attended school with me, I really didn't know many of the Grimes or Pierces. Being with Kim was opening my eyes up to so much more and so much wrong within Ravenden.

"What's this about Davenport?" the man asked.

"That's between me and Clarence."

He scowled at me. "Come on," he finally said. "He already left for the day. I'm headed over to his place now."

"Great."

I had my bike, but he insisted I ride along with him.

"Give me a heads-up here. Is this bad? Did he do something wrong?"

"No."

"I know you're working for the Congress now. Is it official?"

"It is. I'm on official orders of the Council."

His jaw locked and for a moment I feared he was going to stop the car and kick me out.

We pulled up in front of a small two-story house with a big front porch. It was nice and well kept. As I followed the guy, whose name I still didn't know, inside, a strange calm came over me. The place was homey and comfortable.

"Pops! Elias Davenport is here to talk to you. Something from the Council."

An older man walked into the room. He was tall with broad shoulders and just a touch of gray at the temples in his otherwise black hair.

"Mr. Davenport. To what do I owe this honor?"

I instantly felt at ease with Clarence Grimes, and I liked the man immensely.

"Mr. Grimes, I have an offer for you."

"An offer from the Council? Take a seat. I'll admit, I'm intrigued."

"I've been working with the Congress Council for several months now. Recently I've raised some concerns."

"On what?"

"The fact that there are seven prominent families in Ravenden yet only five are represented on the Council."

Clarence had a twinkle in his eyes as he chuckled. "Give 'em hell,

son, but I doubt I'll live to see the day the Grimes family is represented there."

"You never know, Pops. With younger, more open, and idealistic members, maybe someday."

"Andrew, don't be ridiculous."

"Sir, that day is today. Reese Caldwell pushed the motion and while it wasn't unanimous, it was close. Both the Pierce and Grimes Flocks will have representation on the Congress Council going forward. There are more forward thinkers than you know. And that's why I'm here."

"We're in mid council right now. Instead of opening up for elections, it was agreed to appoint a representative for the interim. You were unanimously voted by the Council as the first choice for interim representation of the Grimes Flock. All you have to do is accept, sir."

"You're serious?" Andrew asked.

"Completely serious. This is happening, and I hope you'll agree to be a part of it."

"Me? They want me? Why?"

"I assure you, I don't know." I chuckled. "I wish I had some great story or reason for you. But I'm just the messenger on this. I don't actually sit on the Council, my father does. I'm just working for them."

"I know your father, Edward Davenport. He's a very generous man. Without him we wouldn't have the funding for half the things we need at the fire station."

"I didn't know that, yet it doesn't entirely surprise me either. So, will you do it?"

"Dad, you have to. This is huge."

"Okay," he said, standing and offering me his hand.

I rose and took it.

We were shaking on it when the door opened, and Kim walked in.

I couldn't help but smile, although I had no idea what she was doing there.

Unfortunately she didn't look as happy to see me.

"Seriously? I told you I wasn't ready, and you what? Show up at my father's house to make some deal for me? What's the asking rate for a mate these days?" she yelled.

"What the hell are you talking about? Ignore her, please. Clearly she's high on something," Andrew said as he tried to block Kim from my view.

“I didn’t. I . . . Clarence is your father?”

Kim stepped around her brother and crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at me.

“What are you doing here, Elias?”

“Kim. Shut up. Mr. Davenport is here to offer Pops an interim seat on the Congress Council to represent the Grimes Flock until elections when we get to vote in a representative. Don’t blow this for him.”

While Andrew scolded his sister and completely dismissed her outburst, their father eyed me cautiously.

“The going price of a mate, aye?”

“This offer has nothing to do with that, sir. I had no idea Kim was your daughter.”

I sure as hell would have been kissing more of his ass if I had.

“Take a seat, son.”

I gulped and did as I was told. I felt like a small boy about to be reprimanded.

“Are we done with Council business?”

“Yes, sir. I have some paperwork here for you.” I handed him a folder. “But they can be signed at your leisure. Time, date, and address of the next meeting is in there. They’ll be expecting you.”

“Okay.” Without looking at it, he set it on the table and turned back to me. “Now, explain your intentions with my daughter.”

“Pops! Stop it,” Kim screeched.

But he held up a hand to silence her.

“Look me in the eye.”

I did and lifted my chin in defiance. “I have every intention of taking your daughter as my mate, sir. Just as soon as she stops being embarrassed by it and finally agrees.”

“What the hell?” Andrew blurted out. “You’re seeing Elias Davenport?”

Kim groaned as she glared at me.

“This is not keeping it to ourselves. I can’t believe you told my father that.”

“He’s your father. I’m not going to lie to him.”

“You should have just kept your mouth shut.”

“I would have had you not blurted it out when you walked in.”

She opened her mouth and then shut it again as she scowled at me.

“But he’s a Davenport,” Andrew said.

“Tonight’s a family dinner and game night. I have pizza on the way. Would you care to join us?” Clarence asked.

“Nope. He has somewhere to be,” Kim insisted.

“I do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Where?” I whispered.

“Anywhere but here,” she whispered back.

“Kimberly, that’s enough. Elias?”

“I’m gonna have hell to pay for this, but I would love to stay.”

Kim

Chapter 11

What was happening?

How?

Why?

I was stuck at my dad's house with my secret boyfriend? Lover? Whatever the hell he was to me. It wasn't like we'd talked about it or defined what we were doing.

He sat across from me with my dad on my right and my brother on my left. It was like something out of one of my nightmares. I was too embarrassed to look any of them in the eyes at this point.

My family wasn't exactly known for playing fair. Game night often led to high tempers and screaming. It wasn't something I was proud of and wasn't a side of me that I wanted Elias to see. So I sat there and bit my tongue.

Elias easily won the first game of Risk because all of us were on our best behavior.

"Yes!" he said when he won.

My jaw dropped as he jumped up and did a victory dance.

"Oh hell no," Andrew said. "We let you win because you're a guest, but if that's how it's going to be, then all bets are off. Reset the board, Kimmy."

I sighed. No good was going to come out of this.

"Well, listen to your brother, girl," Dad said.

I sighed and readied the game.

"You asked for it," I warned him.

"Bring it on," he taunted.

"You're going to be sorry."

"Yeah, because he's going down," Andrew said.

"We let you win the first round," Dad confessed.

"No way. I won that fair and square," Elias argued.

An hour later, Dad was out of the game and offering an alliance to Andrew who was struggling not to fold. His army was too low to be of much

concern, but Elias and I were battling it out hardcore.

When Eli took the last influential country that Andrew had, my brother lost it.

“This is bullshit!”

He hit the board causing all the pieces to topple over.

“No!” Elias yelled. “I had her.”

“You weren’t even close.”

“I was two moves away from taking you down.”

“No you weren’t.”

“Yes, I was.”

Through all the madness and chaos, my father sat back and laughed. It was a deep, full belly sort of laugh that was rarely heard in this house.

“Looks like you’ve met your match, Kimberly. He’s a good man, and he’s good for you. Don’t go easy on her, son. She’ll win at all costs and rarely plays fair. She likes to get her way. Stubborn to her very core.”

“Oh trust me, I already knew that much.”

We finished up the pizza that had arrived early in the first game, and then I started to clean up.

“Go on. Your brother and I will take care of this,” Dad said, shooing me from the kitchen.

“Andrew’s going to clean? Now this I need to stick around for and see.”

“I clean,” my brother protested.

“Elias, it was a pleasure to meet you. I do hope we’ll see more of you around here.”

I groaned. “Don’t encourage him.”

Andrew pulled me to the side while Dad asked Elias a few more questions about his new role on the Congress Council. I still couldn’t believe it and had the urge to pinch myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

“He said he wants you for a mate. Why haven’t you sealed that?” Andrew asked me.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s a Davenport.”

“I know. And he wants you, Kim. Do you have any idea how much that would elevate you in status around here? You’d never have to work in that diner again.”

I glared at him and crossed my arms over my chest.

“What’s wrong with working in the diner? I happen to love it there.”

“I’m just saying. You’d be respectable and shit.”

“He’s just a person like any other,” I argued.

“Then why haven’t you mated him already?”

I sighed. “You know why.”

“I really don’t.”

“I can handle the whispers and stares of being with him, but he has no clue what he’d be getting himself into if anyone finds out about us.”

“Is that really it? Because I think a guy like that can handle anything thrown his way.”

I looked over at Elias. He didn’t look so dark and dangerous while laughing with my father. Not that he ever did to me. That was a persona he reserved for others. But I knew him. He was a good man, and any woman would be lucky to have him.

In my mind, I was worried that if he ever met my family that he would look down on them. It was stupid, and that hadn’t happened at all. Quite the opposite did. He fit right in like he’d always been a part of us, like he belonged here with me.

I sighed. What the hell was I going to do now?

“Hey babe, are you ready to head home?”

Dad’s head whipped around to him with a scowl on his face.

“Her home. I’m just going to take her home and then I’m going home.”

“Damn right you are,” Andrew said. Playing the overprotective big brother role while he’d basically called me an idiot for not mating Elias was pretty hypocritical, if I say so myself.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed Elias’s arm. “Come on. The testosterone is getting too high in this room for me.”

He chuckled then shook hands with the other two most important men in my life and said good night.

I was certain the possessive way he put his hand on my lower back and guided me out the door had not gone unnoticed.

“That was fun,” he said. “Too bad Andrew messed up the game. I had you.”

“In your dreams.”

“Nah. My dreams always involve you, but there are never any games involved.”

He trapped me with my back against my car. His large body framing

me in a way that always thrilled me. But when he lowered his head to kiss me, I turned away so that he just grazed my cheek.

“Not here. It’s too out in the open. People will see and will talk.”

He shrugged. “I don’t care. When are you going to start realizing that?”

I was starting to catch on, but I wasn’t quite ready for him to know that.

“I have to be up early for work tomorrow.”

“Okay. I get it. See you at home.”

“I’m not going to your apartment this late.”

“I wasn’t talking about my place.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I got in my car and drove Elias back to his bike before heading home. He followed me. He didn’t even bother to park his motorcycle around back away from the view of the road when we arrived either.

It was then that I realized something had changed between us tonight, and I had no idea what to do about it.

He didn’t give me much time to even think about it before he opened my car door, pulled me out, and tossed me over his shoulder to carry me inside.

When we got to the door, I feared he may just kick it in again as he’d done before, though, true to his word, he had replaced the door and fixed the latch.

Instead, he fished out his keys and unlocked my front door.

“Hold up. You have a key to my house?”

“Your house, my door.”

“That’s not how this works.”

My words fell on deaf ears as he closed the door behind us and carried me to my bedroom.

I smacked his ass, but he still didn’t put me down. Instead, he smacked me back, and the sting from it shot straight to my core.

I gasped in surprise.

Elias slowly lowered me to my feet. He had a lazy, cocky smirk on his face.

“You liked that, didn’t you.”

I crossed my arms over my chest in righteous indignation. There was no way I was going to admit that to him.

His eyes trailed down to my breasts on full display now.

I groaned. "Go home Elias."

"You don't really mean that."

I didn't, but I was still trying to sort out my emotions about everything.

Slowly, he started taking off my clothes and tossing them into a heap on the floor.

I didn't stop him. I actually encouraged it by reaching out and unbuttoning his shirt.

"I want you," he said.

"I noticed," I responded with a giggle.

"You didn't let me finish. I want you to show me your raven."

My hands froze on one of his buttons as I looked up into his eyes.

"Don't freak out. I know how you feel, and I'm telling you, it's going to be okay. We came out to your family tonight and the world didn't end, Kim."

"It's not my family I'm worried about."

"Gia's not an idiot. I promise you she knows about us, or at least that something's going on."

I shook my head.

"My family will love you, all of them, because they love me and want me to be happy. And I love you. You are what makes me happy."

I looked up into his eyes with my heart racing. A tear slipped down my cheek.

"You love me?"

"More than anything else in this entire world."

His lips crashed down on mine as he kissed me with an intensity that should have terrified me, but it didn't. It excited me.

I smiled against his lips and pulled back to look at him. When he tried to kiss me again, I held his face in my hands so he would stop and look at me.

"I love you too, Elias."

He appeared to stop breathing for a moment.

"Does that mean you'll do it? Let our ravens meet?"

"Yes," I said in barely a whisper.

He picked me up and twirled me around as I laughed and smacked him to put me down.

Eventually, he set me down and frantically started ripping off my

clothes as well as his own.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a laugh.

“Stripping and shifting.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, before you start overthinking it and freaking out on me. I’ve waited a long time for this.”

Nerves made me shiver.

“What if we’re wrong and we aren’t true mates?”

“Then we’ll deal with it and start the compatibility mating process. You are mine, Kim. I don’t want anyone else.”

I was starting to freak out. This was happening too fast. I needed to think about it some more. I was acting emotionally after seeing him accept my family.

“Babe. Shift,” he ordered.

Without waiting for me, he shifted right there in my bedroom.

I’d seen his bird a dozen times. He never hid him from me. I was the chicken in this relationship.

He squawked at me impatiently.

I took a deep breath and let the familiar shiver roll over me as I transitioned into my bird.

Staring at Elias’s raven, I started to freak out. I had no idea what to expect, but I had expected something magnificent to happen like the Earth quaking, or the sky opening up with a choir of angels, or something to tell me for certain if he was meant to be mine or not.

But none of that happened.

His bird slowly and curiously approached mine.

I overreacted and started flapping my wings. It brushed against one of his and a sudden calm came over me.

Mine, I heard my raven whisper.

Excitedly, I jumped back and started flapping my wings. He flew in a circle above me and then wrapped his wings around me and lifted us into the air as one. In my freak out, I knocked us off balance, and we fell down on to the bed.

I bounced once and shifted back into my skin. Tears streamed down my face.

Elias shifted and pulled me into his arms as he wiped my tears with the pad of his thumb.

“I heard her,” I told him.

“I told you, babe. You are mine.”

He kissed me hard. I could taste my salty tears as I continued to cry.

Mine, my raven said once more.

I pulled away to stare at him in awe.

“You’re really my true mate.”

“I knew it all along.”

I smacked him playfully and laughed. “You did not.”

“I did.”

“There’s no way you could know that for sure. Our ravens had to meet first.”

“I know. But somehow, I just knew.”

He kissed me again, and then slowly, beautifully, he made love to me.

We didn’t seal our bond right away. I think we were both too emotionally overwhelmed for that. But it was real. He was mine and I was his. Suddenly, nothing else mattered.

Elias stayed the night with me, and I was too happy to even care. As I headed to work there was a perma-grin on my face.

Everything was going to work out for us. I was so sure of that right up until I walked into his mother’s kitchen and found her glaring at me then looking down at her watch.

“You’re late.”

I checked my watch, trying to remember what time Gia had told me to arrive.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was fifteen minutes early based on what Gia had told me.”

“I was ready to begin fifteen minutes ago.”

“My apologies ma’am.”

I grabbed my apron and a knife and immediately started chopping veggies and prepping as Gia had instructed me to do.

We worked in uncomfortable silence, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she knew.

Had the rumors already begun?

Was she angry with me for being her son’s mate?

Mine, my bird protested, making me smile once more.

Helena started to relax some.

“I’m sorry. I was frustrated about other things and had no right to take them out on you.”

“It’s okay. Is everything okay?”

She shrugged. “Times are changing, or so my mate tells me. I need to wake up and join the twenty-first century.”

I smiled. “It can’t be all that bad.”

“The Council actually voted to allow seats on the Congress Council for the Pierce and Grimes Flocks. Can you even believe it? It’s absurd. What do they know about leadership? Why I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

My hand started to shake, and I set the knife down.

“I know. My father was chosen to represent the Grimes Flock until elections,” I said softly.

She gasped. “You’re a Grimes?”

I lifted my chin proudly. “I am.”

She paled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any disrespect. It’s just, well, it’s not how things are done around here.”

“Maybe your mate is right, and you should catch up with the twenty-first century. Excuse me.”

I took off my apron and tossed it onto the stool I vacated then proudly marched right out of the house leaving Helena Dean Davenport standing there in stunned silence.

In my car, I called Gia, my hands shaking with anger.

“Hey girl. I won’t be as long as I thought. I’m heading that way soon.”

“I left,” I confessed. “I just couldn’t.”

She groaned. “What did my mother do this time?”

“I couldn’t sit there and listen to her putting down my Flock, my own father, Gia.”

“She didn’t!”

“Oh, she did. And she can make it up to you by doing all of my work too, because I am not setting foot back in that house.” Back in Elias’s childhood home.

I nearly threw up at the thought. I’d just walked out on his mother.

It was just as I’d feared all along. That woman would never accept me into her family. My chest hurt at the thought. Elias loved his family. So where did that leave us now?

Elias

Chapter 12

I didn't think anything could wipe the smile from my face, and then my mother called.

"Hi Mom, what's up?"

"I can't get in touch with your father."

"He's in a meeting. Can I help you with something?"

"Not unless you want to come over here and chop some vegetables for your sister. I swear, good help is hard to come by these days."

I knew Kim was supposed to be helping Gia today. Had something happened? Was she okay? Where was my mate?

I started to violently shake at the thoughts of Kim being in danger or laying on the side of the road injured. What if she hit her head and forgot me? It could happen. It had happened to David. He still had no memory of anything before his accident, not even Gia.

I wanted to throw up.

"Where's Kim?" I barked a lot harsher than I intended.

Mom sighed. "I said something about how ridiculous it was that the Grimes Flock was getting a seat on the Council, and she got butt hurt about it. I completely forgot that girl is a Grimes."

My jaw locked. I was furious with her. I knew my mother could be an elitist, but I'd promised Kim that she would be okay. We hadn't even mated yet, and I'd already failed her.

"Her father is the chosen representative, Mother."

"I know. I know. She told me before stomping out and leaving me to do her job."

"Why are you like this?"

"What? What did I do?"

"I have to go and make this right."

"You're going to take her side in this?"

"Wake up mother. Your precious class system is an archaic, dying absurdity that I will see an end to if it's the last thing I do."

I hung up on her and grabbed my helmet.

“Elias? Where are you going?” Dad asked when I passed him in the hallway.

“To clean up the mess your mate made.”

He sighed. “What did your mother do this time?”

“Ask her.”

I left, got on my bike, and rode to Kim’s house. I pulled in just behind her.

When I saw the tears streaking her cheeks, my heart sank.

I opened her door and pulled her out to hold her. My raven had been on edge all morning and finally relaxed at her touch.

“My mother’s a bitch. She doesn’t always think before she speaks.”

“No, she says exactly what’s on her mind. She left no doubt to me how she’d feel about her son taking a Grimes as a mate. This is why I didn’t want our birds to meet. I knew this would happen.”

“Don’t do that, Kim.”

“Do what?”

“Use her prejudices as an excuse. That’s her problem. And if she can’t handle it, then screw her. You are my mate, my responsibility, my family, and the love of my life. I’m not going to let her drive a wedge between us.”

“She’s your mother, Elias.”

“I know, and I can’t change that. But you are my number one priority. Not her.”

Kim’s phone rang, and she huffed when she looked at the screen.

“It’s Gia. I have to take this.”

She stepped out of my arms and into her house. I followed like a lost puppy, unsure what else to do.

“I don’t know, G. I hear you, but I don’t trust her not to say something more. I know I shouldn’t let it get to me. She’s a Davenport. I expected it. I just wasn’t prepared for it.”

She sighed heavily.

“I know. I don’t want to leave you in a pinch. I’ll be back in a bit, but not until I know you’re there to run interference. Do not leave me alone with her again.”

“Fine. You can stop the guilt trip now. I said I’d be there. Text me when you get there, and I’ll head over. But you owe me big time for this.”

She hung up the phone and pouted.

“I really hate your sister right now.”

“I thought it was my mother you hated. What’s Gia done now?”

“She’s guilted me into agreeing to come back for more insults.”

A guttural noise erupted from me, startling us both.

“Let me talk to mom first.”

“You will do no such thing. I don’t think she knows anything about us yet. I’d like to keep it that way at least until I get through this weekend. Gia has a lot riding on these events, and I’m going to be working them for her. That means putting up with your mother. I don’t need her freaking out over us and your family’s reputation on top of it all. Please, just save that for another day. One crisis at a time.”

I hated it. She was my mate, and I wanted the entire Congress to know it. But because I knew she was upset and I would do anything she asked of me, I found myself nodding in acquiescence.

She wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my shoulder.

“Thank you.”

I hugged her tightly, letting her touch soothe my worries away.

“But if either of them upset you one more time, I’m going to go off on them. I won’t stand by and just allow them to hurt you. I don’t care if it’s my family.”

She smiled. “I know. And I’m sorry you got dragged into this. I’m a big girl. I was just so happy this morning, and then it was like all the worst of my fears came crashing down. Maybe I’m overreacting some.”

“I highly doubt that,” I muttered.

Her phone buzzed, and we both knew it was time to get back to work. I had a lot to handle preparing for the announcement of the new additions to the Council, and she had a party or two to prepare for.

I walked her back to her car and kissed her goodbye. A car or two went by, but I didn’t give a shit. I wouldn’t say anything because I promised Kim that, but I was done hiding my feelings for her. If rumors started, it might be a blessing in disguise because she’d have no excuse not to go public about us.

Standing there, I watched her leave first and gave her a little wave. Just after she drove out of sight and I was about to mount my bike and head back to the office, a car pulled into her drive. I frowned before I realized it was my brother.

Ryan got out of his car and stood there staring at me.

“Hello to you too. What’s crawled up your ass this morning?”

“Tell me I did not just see you standing here out in the open kissing Kim Grimes.”

“So what if I was?”

“Elias, have you lost your mind? Mom will lose her shit when she hears about this.”

“I’m a grown ass man. I haven’t lived under our mother’s roof in over a decade and even then, I was never good at living by her rules, so why the hell do you think I’d start now?”

“What’s going on, E?”

“What are you talking about? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Dean called to tell me he drove passed Kim’s house and saw the two of you making out right here in the driveway. I had just left the office and came straight over to see for myself.”

“Yeah, well, Dean can screw himself. And Kim’s not here. Sorry you missed the show.”

“What are you doing? People are going to talk.”

“I don’t give a damn if people talk.”

But I knew Kim cared. It was one of the things she was most worried about.

“You better be serious about this girl because all hell is going to break loose when Mom finds out about this.”

“And I’m sure you’ll happily be the one to tell her.”

“Don’t be an ass. I’m just worried about you.”

“You don’t need to worry about me. I know what I’m doing.”

“Is it serious or just a fling?”

“She’s my true mate, Ryan. This is as serious as it gets. And she’s nervous enough about what people will say, so please, don’t be a part of it.”

He stared at me for a moment and then shook his head.

“I would never do that to you, brother. But a true mate? You’re sure?”

I couldn’t stop the grin that spread across my face.

“I’m sure. She finally let our ravens meet today, but I’ve been in love with her for a long time before that happened. I couldn’t be happier.”

Ryan started to relax. “Then I’m really happy for you, the both of you. Have you sealed your bond already?”

“No. She’s still a bit freaked out by it all and worried what people will think. Plus she got a taste of our mother this morning. That’s what Dean

witnessed, me calming her down.”

I shook my head, still unable to believe the mess my mother was making for me.

“Mom knows?”

“No, but Gia’s using her kitchen for some upcoming events she has lined up and sent Kim there to get started this morning. Mom was going on about the addition of Grimes and Pierce representatives on the Council.”

“I heard about that. Whose idea was it? I’m honestly shocked it got passed. Happy about it but surprised. They’re good people and deserve equal representation.”

“Thanks. And it was my idea. Reese officially put it to vote though.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. The Caldwells fought to get on there and were always vocal that the seven families should all be represented. And Kim’s a Grimes. What was Mom thinking?”

“I doubt she was. She was probably just off on one of her elitist rants without thinking at all. To make matters worse, they voted Kim’s dad as the interim rep for the Grimes Flock. So that hit a little too close to home.”

“I can imagine. Poor Kim. Is she okay?”

I shrugged. “Gia guilted her to come back over with a promise that she wouldn’t be left alone with our mother.”

“Maybe we should go over and run interference for her.”

I grinned. “For Mom or for Kim.”

“Kim of course.”

“Are you trying to defend my mate now?”

He rolled his eyes. “Well she’s going to be part of the family, isn’t she?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then the way I see it, I have another sister to look after. And I sure as hell wouldn’t let Gia be subject to our mother in a situation like that.”

“Kim will freak out if I show up. And honestly, I’m not sure I can keep my mouth shut, and she made me promise to lay low for a bit. Who knows how long that will last. My raven is already losing his shit just knowing she’s over there.”

He snorted. “Thank God it’s you and not me. I have no desire to take a mate.”

“Right up until the second you meet her. And then, everything changes.”

“If you say so.”

“I do, little brother. Trust me on this.”

He snorted again. “Whatever. I’m going to head over and check on things. Want me to keep you updated on how she’s doing?”

“Yes. But don’t tell her you know or that I sent you there to spy on things. Because I didn’t.”

“Right. Sure. You got it.”

“Asshole,” I muttered as he jumped back into his car and drove off.

As much as Ryan annoyed me at times, he really was a great brother. I was going to owe him for this.

Growing up, being the oldest wasn’t always easy. There were expectations that came with being a Davenport and they were instilled in each of us from the moment we were born. Ryan took it to heart and rarely ever did anything wrong. Maybe that should have been me as the oldest and all, but why bother when he was always the perfect child?

I knew at a young age that I would never fully live up to my parents’ expectations, so I didn’t bother trying. Everyone doted over Ryan anyway. The few times that he had truly screwed up, I’d taken the fall for him and no one had ever been the wiser. That was just the kind of brother I was. I didn’t care if I disappointed people. For years, I thrived on doing just that. But he did care. He cared a lot.

No one was surprised when he won the title of mayor at a young age. Hell, he was still young to be our mayor, but everyone loved him and supported him. And as long as he was happy, I was proud as hell of him.

There were times when the two of us didn’t get along and couldn’t see eye to eye. I was the dark to his light, the bad to his good. I was the black sheep while he was the perfect sacrificial lamb, and it worked for us.

We had an odd relationship, but sometimes that was just how it worked with family. And when push came to shove, there was nothing I wouldn’t do for him, including standing there smiling on stage, waving to the crowd, as he accepted another election won. Because that’s what we do for those we love, for family. Which meant Ryan’s willingness to watch out for my mate meant the world to me.

Kim

Chapter 13

I sat in my car with the Davenport house looming over me. Why the hell had I let Gia talk me into coming back here?

Her car wasn't in the drive, so I just sat there waiting. There was no way in hell I was going back in there without her, and I'd made that pretty damn clear when she called again on my drive back to tell me she would be a little longer than expected. Unfortunately, I was already pulling into the drive at the time.

I could see Helena pacing in the grand entryway. Every now and then she'd stop and look out at me, but she didn't make a move to approach, and I was not getting out of the car until Gia arrived.

It felt like hours passed, even though it was mere minutes, before a car pulled up behind me. I started to get out until I realized it wasn't her.

I settled back into my seat and sulked a bit longer.

A tap on my window had me nearly jumping out of my skin.

I looked up to find Mayor Ryan Davenport standing there motioning for me to roll down the window.

"Hi Kim."

"Uh, hello Mayor."

"Ryan, please."

"Um, okay, Ryan."

I didn't know him well. Actually, I knew him the least of all of Elias's family. Ryan Davenport was somewhat of a big deal around Ravenden, and that made him plenty intimidating.

"Heard Mom was being a bitch today and thought you could use some backup."

I snorted. "Did Gia send you?"

"Nope. Elias did."

I groaned. "He told you?"

"I sort of bullied it out of him."

I eye him skeptically.

He laughed. "What can I say? Knowing the guy my entire life gives

me some advantages. I know how to get him to talk even when he doesn't want to."

"So are you here to tell me how I'm not good enough for him and should walk away now before things get any more serious?"

"No. You're his true mate, right? That makes you family. And we take care of each other around here."

My jaw dropped and then closed again. I had no idea how to respond to that.

"I always wanted another sister. Truthfully, I thought Dean would fall first. But I can see it. Elias is loyal to a fault. And he instilled that in each of us. I've got your back. Mom has her issues for sure, but she too loves her family above all else. That's going to include you too."

I laughed. "Yeah, I doubt that will ever happen. You didn't hear her putting down my Flock this morning."

"I'm well aware of her elitist nature. But I also know my mother. Initially, she won't be thrilled one of her boys is stooping so low as to mate a Grimes. But when she sees how happy you make my brother, she will love you beyond common sense. Wait for it, it's coming. Because I've never seen Elias as happy as when he told me about you. I barely recognized the guy. He is literally head over heels in love with you, if you weren't aware of that."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm aware."

"And what about you? Do you love him too?"

I had no idea what look crossed my face, but it made him grin. I didn't even have to say the words.

"That's what I thought. Welcome to the family, sis. Now, if you want to just hang out here until G arrives, that's fine, but if you'd like to get back to work in there, I promise to stick around and run interference. If she steps out of line, I'll handle it. But really, I'm impressed you walked out on her like that."

"You are?"

"Hell yeah. No one walks away from Helena Dean Davenport like that. You've got some balls on you, girl. I love it. Anyone else would have just sat there and awkwardly taken it. And I guarantee she's in there pacing the floor trying to figure out how to make things right with you. Insider's tip: my mother hates to think anyone thinks poorly of her. She's big on images."

"Really?" I feigned surprise.

"Smartass. So what's it going to be? Are we going to hang out here or

go inside?”

I huffed. “I’m going to murder Gia for this.”

“Spoken like a true sister.”

“You’ve got to stop that.”

“Fine. Come on.”

He helped me from the car and begrudgingly, I let him lead me back inside.

Inside, Helena gave me a forced smile.

“Kim,” she started, but then saw Ryan walk in with me.

Her face lit up with a genuine smile as she saw her son.

“Honey, what are you doing here? I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“I heard you weren’t being very nice this morning.”

Her jaw dropped and she scowled at him before turning to me.

“Don’t look at me, I didn’t say a word to him.”

“Mom,” he said sternly, like he was talking to an impressionable child.

Her shoulders drooped in defeat.

“I’m sorry, Kim. I genuinely forgot you were a Grimes, and I had no idea about your father. Trust me, I’ve already heard about it from my daughter and from my mate. Now you too?”

“Pretty sure Elias will have plenty to say on it too.”

“Elias? Why?”

My cheeks started to turn an awkward shade of red.

“Oh, didn’t Dad tell you? The addition of the other Flocks was all his idea.”

Ryan winked at me when I dared to look his way.

“Well, damn. I’m sorry.” She dramatically waved her hands in the air. “Kim, you’ve been such a support and good friend to Gia and David, I never intentionally meant to hurt you. Please accept my apology. My children will gladly remind me that I am an outdated dinosaur who needs to get with the times. It’s hard, but I do promise I’ll try.” She looked at Ryan suspiciously. “Satisfied?”

“Yes, but I’ve promised not to leave Kim alone with you, so you’re stuck with me until one of my siblings arrive.”

I felt my face blanch this time. Elias wouldn’t dare come by while I was here, would he?

Helena snorted in the most unladylike manner.

“You make me sound like a monster.”

“Well, if the shoe fits. And maybe not a monster, more like an outdated dinosaur,” Ryan told her.

She laughed and smacked his arm good-naturedly.

It dawned on me that I was seeing an entirely different side of Helena Davenport. One I never dreamed could exist. One where she didn't seem quite so otherworldly or unreachable. It was very confusing, but also sparked a little hope that just maybe she really could accept me into her family someday.

As we walked into the kitchen, donned our aprons, and got back to work, just a bit of the stress had melted from my shoulders. I was even able to relax and focus on the list of things Gia needed done.

True to his word, Ryan never left my side. We also didn't speak of what happened again. I had made my point, and she had aired the only apology I was going to get, and that was the end of it. I could live with that.

By the time Gia arrived, we had everything completed and Helena had excused herself to freshen up.

“What are you doing here?” she asked Ryan suspiciously.

“You are just in time, little sister. I have a meeting in an hour and need to grab some lunch. So I am officially relinquishing my guard duty over to you, though I must say, Mom has been impressively behaving. I think she genuinely feels bad about this morning.”

“Good. But how did you know about that?”

“Eli sent me.”

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head as Gia looked at me with questions written all over her face.

Oh boy.

Ryan kissed me on the cheek and then ruffled Gia's hair, knowing it would rile her up, as he ran out the back door.

“Okay, spill it. What the hell was that all about?”

“Gia, darling, is that you?” her mother yelled from the other room.

I shook my head, not wanting to have this conversation in Elias's mother's house.

“Fine, but we will be talking later,” she whispered. “I'm here, Mom. Looks like you and Kim didn't leave me much to do today.”

She breezed back into the room looking like she just stepped out of Cosmopolitan magazine.

“What else can I do to help?” she asked.

“Kim?”

“Actually, I think we’re good. I probably should have called and told you that before you came over. Could’ve saved you a trip. Everything’s ready for tonight and prepped for tomorrow.”

She hugged me. “You really do spoil me.”

We said goodbye to her mom. I was genuinely okay now despite her need to apologize once more.

“What time do you need me today?”

“Around three should be good. And since you made my life so easy today, I’m treating you to lunch at my place.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I’m just going to head home and rest up a bit.”

“My house now or I will follow you home.”

“That sounds like an ominous threat.”

“No, it’s a promise.”

I groaned, but I knew I wasn’t getting out of this talk.

On my way to Gia’s house, I called Elias.

“Hey babe. Is Mom behaving herself with the golden boy there?”

I snorted. “Yeah, she did. But you didn’t need to send Ryan over to babysit me.”

“Yes I did. I was stuck in a meeting, or I’d have come myself.”

“I thought we weren’t telling people.”

“Had to. Dean busted us kissing in front of your house and ratted us out to Ryan, who tried to give me an intervention.”

“Really? He didn’t seem upset about it. He was sweet even,” I confessed.

“True mates are important to my family. It’s why I know that once my mother gets through her inevitable shock and maybe even a bit of mourning, she’ll be fine.”

I sighed. “Maybe. Look, Ryan told Gia you sent him to babysit me and now she’s demanding I follow her home for a talk.”

“It’s cool.”

“No, it’s not.”

He laughed, and it warmed my soul and eased my nerves.

“She’s going to figure it out. She already knew I was pestering you to let our ravens meet because I thought we were true mates. Really, she can’t

be all that surprised to hear it. So just tell her. It'll be fine."

"I don't think she's going to give me a choice," I admitted as I pulled in behind her in front of the large two-story home with a full walkout basement she and David had bought. It wasn't nearly as big as her parents' house, but it was enormous compared to my humble, tiny home.

We didn't talk until we walked inside, and I plopped down on her couch. I'd been here dozens of times and was completely comfortable at her place, even though my anxiety was spiking in preparation for the talk we were about to have.

David walked in and leaned down to kiss his mate.

"Done already?"

"Yup. Mom and Kim had it all handled by the time I got there."

"Great. I have the smokers going and everything's on target here too."

"Perfect. Now, Kim was just about to tell me why Elias sent Ryan to babysit and run interference with our mother."

"Be nice," he warned her.

"I am being nice. I just want to know what's going on."

"He's crazy about her. You already know this."

"Yeah, but did things escalate? She was still fighting him and refusing to let their birds meet the last time I talked to either of them about it."

"Maybe she finally caved. And maybe you should just ask her."

"Yeah, because it's not like I'm sitting right here while you two are gossiping about me."

I grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it to my chest as they both looked over and laughed.

"Kim, has your raven met Eli's yet?"

"Yes."

"And . . ."

"And what?"

"Don't be a bitch. Is he your true mate or not?"

A smile tipped the corner of my lips without my permission.

"Oh my God. Oh my God! He was right all this time?"

"Ugh. I'm never going to live that one down."

"Stop messing with me. Girl, I need to hear it from your own lips. Is Elias your true mate or not?"

I rolled my eyes. "He is, but can we please not make a big deal out of this. I'm not ready for the whole Congress to know."

I really didn't know how Gia would react to our news, and part of me feared she would be disgusted on account of me being a Grimes.

Instead, she squealed at the top of her lungs and tackled me in the biggest hug ever.

"You're happy about this?" I asked, confused since I had been bracing for a negative reaction.

"Are you kidding me? My brother lights up the second you walk in the room. No one could make him happier. Plus, I'm getting a sister I already love. I am so happy for you guys. Wait." She pulled back to really look at me. "Are you happy about this? Are you going to accept him? Because if you're going to reject him and break his heart, I'm going to be forced to kick your ass."

"I'm a bit nervous about how others will react to us, but I'm not going to reject him. I'm not even sure I could, if I'm being honest."

David grinned. "True mates definitely produce a bond like no other. I'm going to check on the meat and leave you two to your girl talk. But Kim, seriously, congratulations and welcome to the family. If they can accept a literal nobody with no known past like me, then you're going to do just fine in this family."

"Thanks David. I really appreciate hearing that right now. Because of what happened this morning, I wasn't sure that would ever be the case. Now, I'm not sure."

Gia snorted. "She's always different when Ryan's around. He is the favorite after all."

Elias

Chapter 14

“Ryan, how did it go at Mom’s?”

“All good. Hard to believe, but she even apologized to your girl.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. I’d never really talked to Kim much before and don’t really know her, but she seems really great, E. I’m happy for the both of you.”

He shook my hand and clapped my arm as he left to go to a meeting.

I had a bit of paperwork to do, but after finishing that up I had the rest of the day off. I considered my options with a grin then grabbed my helmet and left, riding my motorcycle straight to Gia’s place.

The two women were laughing on the couch when I let myself in.

“Hard at work, I see.”

I wasn’t sure if she’d told Gia or not, so I didn’t know what to say or how to explain my sudden appearance. I certainly hadn’t thought things through when I decided to come here. I just knew I had to see my mate.

As if reading my mind, Kim patted the cushion next to her, inviting me to join them.

“She knows,” she confessed.

“I just can’t believe you told Ryan first.”

“I didn’t exactly have a choice in that. Blame Dean.”

“Dean knows too?” Gia asked with a pout.

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. I didn’t tell him, but he did sic Ryan on me for making out in the driveway.”

“We weren’t making out,” Kim insisted, blushing.

I leaned in and kissed her.

“You mean like you’re not making out right now?” my sister commented.

Kim pushed me away.

“It was just a kiss.”

“I’m not sure the two of you are ready for just a kiss. Sure looked like more to me. And gross, Kim. He’s still my big brother. I do not need to see all that, and certainly don’t need details.”

“What did I do? I’m just an innocent bystander here. He’s the one you should be fussing at. And honestly, Gia, if that’s the way it’s going to be, then I’m going to remind you of this conversation the next time you get all gooey about your mate. Fair’s fair.”

I couldn’t stop grinning. Seeing the two of them bicker like good friends and maybe even a little something more, like sisters, did something to me. It made me feel genuinely happy in a way I never had before. This was exactly how life was supposed to be.

“Are you guys done here?” I finally asked, seeing as how they weren’t working at all.

“Why? Would you prefer to be alone with her? Because you can’t just cut me out of her life. I love her too,” Gia insisted. “And I loved her first.”

I wasn’t sure if that was true or not. To be honest, it was hard for me to remember not loving Kim even if I hadn’t admitted it to myself for a long time, but I didn’t say that.

“Okay, and your point?” I asked instead.

Gia rolled her eyes. “Whatever, take her. She’s yours, but only for a few hours, because I need her to work tonight.”

“I’ll be there,” Kim insisted.

She seemed lighter and happier, like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. And she didn’t complain when I had her ride with me and took her back to my place, or fuss when several curious onlookers gawked at us.

I waited until we were alone at my apartment before asking her about it.

“We’re good?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me. “Never better.”

I loved the new confidence I was seeing in her. Like something had changed between us and she was no longer freaking out about the idea of being my mate. Maybe it was just because she knew without a doubt now that she was. And honestly, that really did change everything for me too.

I was just about to carry her to my bed and have my way with her when my phone rang.

I groaned and glanced over to see it was just Ryan, so I ignored it. But as soon as it rolled to voicemail, he called again. I got a bad feeling in my gut.

“You have to see what he wants,” Kim insisted.

“Yeah, I know,” I grumbled. “What?” I barked into the phone.

“I’m going to assume you have company with that attitude. I swear I’m not trying to cock block you, but the Council has called an emergency meeting, and they want you to sit in on it. Sorry, man.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m on my way. Let me just drop Kim back off at her car.”

“Okay, but make it fast. They’re waiting.”

“Something’s come up. I have to run.”

“I heard. It’s fine. Go. I’ll call Gia to pick me up or have them drop my car off. I’m going to be busy tonight, so I don’t know if I’ll see you again today.”

She bit her lower lip looking disappointed, taking away a bit of my momentary anger towards Ryan.

“You’ll see me. My place or yours, but there is no way you’re sleeping alone tonight. You’re kind of stuck with me. My raven barely survived being apart this morning knowing you were dealing with my mother. I need you, babe.”

“Thank God. I don’t even care whose place we stay at tonight.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“Okay, after your party, come back here then.”

Her eyes widened, and I was expecting her to chicken out. Her car would be parked here overnight and other residents of the complex would notice. But for me, that wasn’t a bad thing because I wanted the entire world to know she was mine.

Let the gossip begin.

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay.”

I kissed her, knowing I was going to look like a lovesick loon for the rest of the day. It was very uncharacteristic of me, but I didn’t see how I could help it. She made me the happiest man alive, which meant it was impossible for me to hold the gruff façade of my usual demeanor.

Leaving her in my apartment was hard, but it was satisfying knowing she was there. Before I left, I ran to my room and grabbed the small box tied up with a shiny red ribbon and handed it to her.

I kissed her again and told her I loved her.

“Love you too,” she said as she eyed the box.

I turned and left before she opened it, hoping she would love the thin gold bracelet that matched the necklace I’d given her, but knowing I didn’t

have time to wait and find out.

Ryan had made it seem like this meeting was an emergency, but I arrived before some of the others. The smile on my face was long gone, replaced by a scowl of frustration. I felt cheated out of a few more minutes alone with Kim.

“Thought you’d be a lot happier,” Ryan said as he nudged me with his elbow.

“I would have been if someone hadn’t interrupted me. I thought you said this was an emergency.”

“I was just the messenger. Don’t get mad at me.”

“Tech is just finishing up the livestream connection. We’ll only be a few minutes longer,” Castor informed us.

“A livestream? What’s this all about Ry?”

“Hell if I know. Seriously. I’d tell you if I did. They’ve kept me in the dark too.”

Once the computer tech had everything sorted and left the room, Malachai rose to address us. It was more than just the Council present, but still a very select group. I was happy to see Kim’s dad and Diddy Pierce had been included in whatever this is.

“Thanks for assembling so quickly. I have a feeling this may take a while. So settle in. Westin Force has reached out about a possible threat to Ravenden. I think it’s prudent that we take this serious. We’ve heard rumors of other Congresses being attacked by the Collectors at a more alarming frequency. They are getting bold and seem to be on to us. We’ve been lucky so far, but if there is any possible viability of threat, we will all need to be diligent without scaring our Flocks.”

“Let’s hear what they have to say and then I’ll determine what level of public warning is necessary,” Ryan said with full authority.

Nobody argued with him. That made me proud.

I gave my brother a lot of shit, but in truth, he was an important man in Ravenden and carried the weight of that with grace. He was one of the good guys. I joked that I hadn’t voted for him, but I hoped he knew that was a lie. I’d proudly checked the box next to his name in the last two elections for mayor.

The room was quiet as Castor fumbled around with some buttons and

got the meeting on the large television screen.

I knew of Westin Force more than actually knowing them. Though when the screen came to life, I immediately recognized Patrick O'Connell. I knew he was in charge of the program overseen by the wolf Alpha Kyle Westin. My dad always spoke fondly of the man.

Feeling a bit out of place, I leaned back in my chair and just listened to what they had to say.

"Hello," the redhead said with a deep Irish accent. "I wish this meeting were under better circumstances. As you all know, we've been heavily monitoring Collector activities. There's been a noticeable increase in disappearances lately, especially amongst the ravens. That's really not all that surprising given you all are highly sought after witches."

"How many this week?" my dad asked.

"Twenty, I'm afraid. And that's just what we've confirmed."

"All ravens?" Reese inquired.

"Aye. All ravens. Much of the British Congress has been wiped out, and I have a team deployed to investigate."

"The British?" Malachai asked. "So that's not really a threat to us at all then."

"I wish it were that simple. I have it under good authority that Ravenden has been compromised in a plea bargain with one of the captives."

Murmurs broke out around the room as everyone started talking at once. I felt sick to my stomach. I had a mate to protect now, and hearing that she could be in danger was sending my raven into psychotic mode. After this meeting, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to let Kim out of my sight for a while, and I had no doubt that would go over poorly.

She didn't seem to really appreciate it when I started getting overbearing with her. Maybe that would change some now. But in the past, if I even showed interest in her in public, she'd scold me for it.

None of that mattered now. She was mine. And there was no way in hell these assholes were taking her.

"How much time do we have?" my father finally asked.

"Honestly sir, we don't know," Silas Granger said.

I had first met Silas in California, in San Marco where the Westin Pack wolves were under attack and begging for help. At the time the ravens weren't exactly allies with them and felt it necessary to keep to ourselves. Under Gia's persistence, my brothers and I followed her and David there to

ensure they were safe. We'd come out victorious that day, and upon our return we were able to begin cultivating a relationship with the wolves and Westin Force, the special ops unit assigned to protect shifters around the globe.

I'd gotten to know several of the men on the teams. It was ultimately what started me down the path towards my job today. Well, that and my need to prove myself worthy for my mate. As much as I hated it, my parents constant harping on living up to the Davenport name and being a respectable member of the Congress had finally won with the culmination of all these factors.

"Silas, what's the plan?" I asked him.

"We have a team on standby at your request. I know in the past you've opted to handle things on your own, in which case we'll simply advise and pass along any information we have on Ravenden. But should you want more assistance with this matter, we're at the ready."

"Like Silas has said, I do have a team on standby. No pressure. Just say the word day or night and we'll move them into position to patrol your borders," Patrick explained.

Clarence and Diddy sat quietly as they took in everything that was being said. I hated that this was their first meeting with the Congress Council. Way to throw them to the wolves.

I snorted at my own joke.

From the looks on the faces of some of the others, I was certain they would turn down the offer and say we'd handle it ourselves.

"Malachai, before you make a hasty decision, I think we should break to give time for everyone to consider our options then reconvene to discuss. This is a lot to absorb," Dad surprised me by saying.

"Like I said, we're here in whatever capacity you'd like."

Clarence cleared his throat. "What would you do if we accepted the offer? I'm sorry. I'm new to this group, so coming in cold with little idea of what we're talking about."

"Patrick, Silas, this is Clarence Grimes and Diddy Pierce is next to him, our newest Council members," Dad explained. "I'm afraid we didn't have any time to brief them ahead of this meeting."

"No worries," Patrick said. "I'm sure you're familiar with the Collector. As I understand it, he's been a bit of a myth in raven legends, but I assure you, he's very real. Or rather, they are. There is more than one

Collector. In fact, there's an entire worldwide network of Collectors that like to trade and collect shifter witches. As you know, that puts a target on all raven shifters. A Congress the size of yours with at least seven Flocks is like hitting the jackpot for these guys."

"Lately it was discovered that not all the Collectors are just trading and acquiring new witches to brag about. We recently rescued a group from the Collection of Xavier Fortin out of Napa Valley here in California. He doesn't collect witches the way others do. This one is pure evil on a righteous mission to rid the earth of witches," Silas explained. "We've cleaned out his latest acquisitions and have spread the word about his lack of respect to his collection. That's seriously frowned upon by the other Collectors. It hasn't entirely blacklisted him but has slowed his ability to restock his collection and kill more witches."

Clarence slowly let out the breath he was holding. "Okay. So if they know our location, what should we expect?"

"Be cautious of any new people traveling through your little town. They are humans. They are rich. And they will stop at nothing to get what they want," Patrick warned.

"No offense, but Ravenden right now looks like an easy target ripe for the picking. With the skills you guys have, it's sure to excite and attract plenty too," Silas added.

"Like a kid in a fecking candy store," Patrick growled, shaking his head. "They will try to be discreet about it, so make sure each of your Flocks know not to be wandering around alone for the unforeseeable future. As all ravens know, you are stronger in numbers. They have no idea how powerful the Congress is when you come together as one."

"And if you'd like us to assist, we would send in our best unit, Bravo team, which is run under my command," Silas confessed. "My men would run perimeter checks multiple times throughout the day and set up surveillance to monitor traffic through the town and keep an eye on any outsiders that lurk in the area. I honestly don't know if you have the resources and manpower for that, but we would be happy to set things up and teach a team of your choosing what to look out for. This is something we're looking to tie us up long term. We're more of a train and get out unit when it comes to things like this."

"Should you require longer term protection, we would likely reassign Charlie team for that. Like I said, you have options, and the ball is in your

court. We're only here to help," Patrick assured them. "Are there any further questions?" He paused a minute, waiting and finding no one else spoke up. "Okay, well, in that case, we're going to end this call. Most of you have my personal number and know how to reach out. We'll await your decision for our next move."

"Thanks, Patrick, Silas," Castor said as he disconnected the call.

"What the hell? It's like my childhood nightmares coming to life," Preston said, causing the others to chuckle uncomfortably because we were all feeling the same thing.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I have a strong need to get home to my mate. I vote that we consider the options that have been presented to us and write down any further questions you may have, then we will reconvene in the morning to vote on how we will react," Dad said.

"Yeah, that sounds good. I'm going to have to put an alert out for this," Ryan said.

"Hold that until tomorrow," Malachai said. "Give us time to let this sink in."

I could see my brother was about to protest, and I couldn't blame him for that, but Preston cut him off first.

"A good majority will be at the Montgomery wedding this evening. Safety in numbers, right?"

"And what of the rest?" Diddy asked.

"It's one night. I think we all need to digest what we heard before making any rash decisions. It's not even twenty-four hours. It'll be fine," Malachai insisted.

I had a bad feeling deep in the pit of my stomach. I just prayed he was right, because I knew that if anything happened to any bird amongst us, each of us in this room would feel the heavy burden of this decision for the rest of our lives.

Kim

Chapter 15

Knowing Gia, David, and Ryan were being supportive of us made me relax. Maybe times really have changed, and maybe I was overreacting for nothing. Just maybe everything would work out okay for us.

Realizing I was alone in Elias's apartment for the first time, I couldn't help but get up and snoop around. I was dying to know what was on the other side of the doors in the hallway. With a happy squeal, I jumped up and went to see for myself.

I knew the door on the left was his bedroom. I opened it and peeked around a bit. When I was here last I'd used the bathroom and then fled like a chicken without really taking the time to check out his space.

The room was large and dark because he had black out curtains drawn. I flipped on the switch. The bed was a big king-sized one with a black comforter. I pulled it down a little to confirm there were black sheets too. It made me grin since black was about all my man wore.

I laid down on the bed and rolled face down inhaling his scent. It made me moan and wish he were there.

Soon, I thought.

It took a lot for me to get back off his bed. It smelled like him and that brought me more comfort than I realized. I already knew what his bathroom looked like with the huge walk-in shower and the jacuzzi tub big enough for the both of us. So I opened the other two doors in the room instead. Both were closets. The first was stuffed with Elias's things, his clothes, his shoes, everything. But the second was largely empty. I couldn't help but wonder why.

Leaving his bedroom, I checked out the door directly across from it. He'd told me that it was a bathroom. Sure enough, inside was a large guest bath. It was just a toilet and sink, yet when I opened the door inside the room, there was a shower and shelves with towels neatly rolled and stored there.

"Guest bathroom?" I guessed.

The opposite wall from the door I'd come through was yet another door. I opened it and walked into the next room.

My jaw dropped.

“What in the world is this?”

I’d had expected to walk into a second guest bedroom and assumed the third hallway door also went into it, but instead, all I found was a massive unfinished room. It was huge. Two of my houses could easily have fit inside it. It was like half the top level was just left to rafters and plywood floor.

Elias had lived here for several years. I couldn’t imagine why he’d never finished this part of his apartment before. I would have to ask him when I saw him later. I needed answers. This was just too weird. Sure, it would mean admitting I’d been snooping, but if he was going to take me as a mate, he’d just have to get used to that.

I was almost giddy with excitement as I headed back to the living room and called Gia.

“You are not going to bail on me,” she said instead of a simple hello.

“Of course I’m not. What are you even talking about?”

“Okay. Sorry. It’s just knowing that you and Elias are together and mating and all. I was just worried you were going to try to ditch me for my brother tonight.”

I laughed. “Sorry to disappoint, but he already ditched me.”

“What?” she shrieked.

“Are you okay, Gia? You seem very on edge.”

She sighed. “I’m fine. Just nervous about this wedding tonight. I need this to go smoothly.”

“It will. I promise. We’re ready for this.”

She took a deep breath. “You’re right. It’s all going to be fine. So why are you calling me?”

“Because your brother really did ditch me. I’m over at his place and he got called into work.”

“But your car is here.”

“Exactly. Any chance you can pick me up? Otherwise, I’ll be flying over.”

“At least you don’t have to avoid flying now for fear his bird will find yours,” she teased.

“Well, yeah, there’s that.”

We both erupted into giggles.

“Seriously though, can you come and get me?”

“Already in the car and on my way.”

“Great. See you in a bit.”

I sat there a few more minutes before leaving. On the elevator ride down, it stopped on the very next floor and Felicity Dean stepped on. She gave me a weird look, clearly confused. She kept looking up and then down at the lighted numbers, but she didn't say anything.

I was certain she knew that there was only one floor above hers and I had clearly come from there.

Several floors later, the elevator stopped again, and Novaleigh Caldwell stepped on. She smiled at Felicity, seeming to not notice me at all, which was fine with me.

“What are you doing here?” she asked me after a few moments.

“Excuse me?” I responded, already feeling my feathers getting ruffled.

“Friend of yours?” she asked Felicity.

The woman shook her head. “She was on when I got here.”

Novaleigh's face morphed. “There's only one floor above yours. Were you visiting the Davenport brothers?”

I just rolled my eyes, but my hands were sweaty and I felt like I was going to be sick.

“I don't really see as that's any of your business,” I said sweetly just before the doors opened and I scrambled out as fast as I could.

There were others in the lobby just hanging out. They all stopped and stared at me.

I froze, and then forced my chin to raise as I walked out of the building acting as if they weren't even important enough for me to stop and speak to.

It was all a façade, and the second I heard my name being whispered, I wanted to run and hide, or cry or something.

“Why is she here?”

“I don't know. Isn't she the diner girl?”

“She's a Grimes.”

“Someone's getting a booty call.”

That caused snickers throughout the room, and my face burned with embarrassment.

“Be nice, you guys,” Felicity said. “She was probably just dropping something off for Elias or Ryan for Gia.”

“She was on the top floor?” Novaleigh demanded.

“I guess, she was on the elevator when I got on.”

“I know for a fact they both left about an hour ago,” someone replied. I cringed. I was an imposter. I knew it, and they all knew it too. My pace picked up fearing they would actually stop and question me.

As soon as I stepped outside, a horn blared, startling me. I looked up to see Gia waving. Hurrying, I got in her car and sunk down, fighting back tears.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“Nothing. Just go.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing, just get me away from here. Please.”

She did as I asked, but I knew she wouldn’t let it go that easily. And sure enough, a few minutes later, she started up again.

“Tell me what happened.”

“It was nothing. I probably just overreacted. I just don’t like hearing people talking about me.”

“Who was talking about you?”

“Novaleigh, Felicity, and a group of other residents. They know I was on the top floor and that Elias and Ryan weren’t home.”

“So?”

“So, it didn’t look good, G.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I love you, but just let it be. I was just embarrassed, that’s all. And the thing is, I told him this would happen, but he doesn’t understand. You guys are Davenports. People look up to you. It’s not the same for me. They’ll never accept me.”

“They will. Just give it time.”

I didn’t want to be upset about it, but I couldn’t help it. Gia could never understand, and neither could Elias.

Fortunately, she didn’t press it any further, and we remained quiet for the remainder of the drive back to her house.

It had felt like the longest drive of my life. But the second we stepped out of the car things resumed at warp speed.

David was waiting on us to tell Gia that there was an issue with the cake. And that began a run of last-minute things to do and possible complications to try and avoid.

There was no time for talking or even thinking about what had

happened. We were fully thrown into go time.

Despite all our fears, the wedding went off without a hitch. It was a small ceremony with only their closest friends and family in attendance. I didn't understand the need for a wedding when mating was so much more permanent and important to our kind. But I had to admit, I could understand the appeal, the dresses, the music, the cake, all of it. It was beautiful.

"Hey, it's Kim, right?" a man grabbed my arm and asked.

He gave me the creeps, but I smiled because it was my job.

Joe Montgomery was a slick, arrogant asshole who thought the world of himself. He was as sleazy as they come. The fact that he was a used car salesman made it even more comical. I supposed there was always at least some truth behind every stereotype.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Yeah, how about a blowjob? I heard you were putting out these days."

My jaw dropped, and my instinct was to smack him.

"Come on. What do you say?"

I could smell the liquor on his breath and his words were slightly slurred, but something in his eyes told me he was dead serious.

"No thanks."

"That's how it's going to be? You only put out for the high and mighty Davenports? I guess you prefer men you can never have. Commitment issues perhaps?"

My entire body was shaking in anger, and I wanted to puke.

"Is everything okay here?" David asked.

"Yeah, great. She's doing a fantastic job, right Kim?"

"Kim?"

"It's fine, David. I think he's just had a bit too much to drink."

"So it's gonna be like that, you little Grimes trash? I'm a Montgomery. You should be grateful I even look in your direction."

I sucked in a sharp breath, willing my temper not to flare.

"It's going to be like that," I told him.

"Walk away and take a break," David told me.

I did as I was told as David made a phone call. Within minutes, while I was still on break, a cop car rolled up and Vance Thornton found David for a conversation. As discreetly as possible, the two men removed Joe from the party and helped him into the back of Vance's car.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Gia asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. David handled it. The joys of an open bar.”

I tried to make light of it, but the whole scenario made me sick. I just wanted this night to end so I could go home, curl up under my blanket, and cry myself to sleep.

Gia looked worried, but she didn’t say anything more.

I forced myself to get back to work and was grateful when there were no further issues.

Overall, the party had been a big success. The bride and groom were thrilled with everything we’d done, and I went home that night with a big fat tip.

“Go on, we’ll finish up here,” David insisted.

“No, I can’t do that to you guys.”

“Of course you can. There’s barely anything left,” Gia said, giving me a hug and thanking me for everything. “Go home and get some sleep. Because we have to get up and do it all over again tomorrow for my Aunt Ginny’s garden party.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

I hated those parties, but the money was too good to turn it down. Remembering how I’d stood on the sidelines watching Felicity Dean hang all over Elias at the last one made me sick to my stomach. It was just going to be another sharp reminder of how I didn’t belong in his world.

Forgetting my promise to stay at his apartment tonight, I got in my car and drove straight home. I needed a hot shower, comfortable pajamas, and maybe a gallon of ice cream.

So that’s exactly what I did.

While standing there letting the hot water soothe my aching body and hide my tears, I heard a strange sound. Unsure what exactly I’d heard, I turned off the water and listened.

The creak of a floorboard was the next sound I heard. My pulse raced and my heart pounded as I looked around for something to protect myself. I was naked and vulnerable. There was no way I hadn’t locked the door behind me . . . right?

I tried to think through my steps, but it didn’t matter because the next creak was just on the other side of the door.

Quickly, I shifted and flew up to perch on the top shelf of the stand I

had over the toilet. I tried to shrink as low and inconspicuous as possible. I'd rather not be seen at all, but if I had to fight my way out of this, I knew that my bird was better than my naked human form.

I gulped hard. *What if it was Joe?*

The knob turned like it was in slow motion, and then suddenly, the door flew open. My raven freaked out, no doubt feeding off my own emotions. She flapped her wings and dove towards the entry, only to check up at the last minute, flying up and around the man before perching on his shoulder.

Mate.

Even physically touching Elias, it took me a few minutes to calm back down. Gratefully, he gave me that time before reaching up and gently taking me in his hands.

“You are the most beautiful raven I’ve ever seen.”

My bird chirped and cooed happily before I broke free of his grasp and shifted.

He watched me cautiously. “Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“You said you were coming over to my place tonight.”

His words were tense, but I didn’t quite sense anger from him.

“I forgot. I’m sorry.” And there was no way in hell I was going back there tonight after everything that had happened. But I didn’t tell him that part.

Elias

Chapter 16

Something was wrong. I wasn't sure what, but I could feel it in my bones.

When Kim hadn't shown up after work, I started to worry. I had tried calling her, but there was no answer. I'd seen her phone on the couch when I walked into her home, so I knew now that she had been in the shower and didn't have it on her, but at the time I was about to lose my shit.

Before I'd run off like a madman to Kim's, I had called Gia and was told she had left a few hours earlier. She also mentioned something about an altercation with Joe Montgomery but said she didn't know all the details, just that she gathered he'd gotten drunk and said some inappropriate things.

Without thinking of anything but my mate, I'd immediately jumped on my bike and raced over to her house. Her car was out front, but the house was dark. My whole body shook with fear, thinking the worse.

I had just spent much of my day hearing about the Collectors and how they were coming to Ravenden, and my mate was missing. Combine that with the asshole Gia had mentioned, and I was about to lose my shit.

Wanting to yell and scream at the universe, and at her for not letting me know where she'd gone, wasn't going to help anything.

She stood there quietly watching me. Something was wrong.

"What is it, babe?"

She shook her head, but then she grabbed a towel and walked around me to go into her bedroom.

I cautiously followed.

"I'm sorry if I overreacted," I tried.

Her shoulders slumped and she hugged herself. I hated seeing her like that.

When she looked back up at me I could see unshed tears in her eyes.

"Talk to me," I begged, hating seeing her like this.

"I don't even know what to say."

"What did I do?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't you. Not exactly at least."

“So what is it then? Because I have to be honest, my raven nearly lost it when I thought you were missing.”

She looked at me curiously. “Why would you assume I was missing?”

“Because I couldn’t get in touch with you, Kim. Do you have any idea how scared I was? I heard about your encounter with Joe, and I’ve been sitting in meetings all day hearing about an impending Collector raid.”

She gasped. “What?”

“Shit. I wasn’t supposed to say that yet. You have to keep it to yourself. But you see why I started freaking out? You have to promise me you won’t go anywhere alone, babe. I won’t survive it if anything happens to you.”

She wrapped her arms around my waist and held me. My body shuddered as the tension fled me.

“I’m right here. I’m fine,” she assured me.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?”

She scoffed. “Which part?”

I frowned. “There was more than one incident?”

“Basically it was just one giant nightmare of a day today.”

“Tell me.”

She sighed. “I guess you’re going to hear about it eventually anyway. After you left I called Gia to come pick me up. When I got in the elevator to leave, Felicity got on.”

“She lives one floor below me.”

“Yup, and she was pretty quick to put two and two together but didn’t say anything. That is until Novaleigh got on a few stories later. She made some comments, but I really did keep my cool. I didn’t react to anything any of them said.”

“There were others?” I asked, feeling the tension starting to lock up my jaw.

“I don’t know why that comes as a shock to you. I warned you this would happen.”

“Rumors, yes, but being disrespectful? No. That’s unacceptable. So which was it?”

She scrunched up her nose, and I knew things had gotten ugly.

“Nothing happened,” she assured me. “I left and Gia picked me up. I’m not an idiot, Elias. I knew to expect this part. Joe just caught me off guard.”

“What the hell did Joe have to do with any of this? He doesn’t even live in my apartment complex.”

“I know. But people talk.”

I growled in frustration. The only thing keeping me grounded and not going after all of them for hurting my mate was her arms wrapped around me and her touch centering me.

“What did he say?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“You don’t want to know. Just forget it.”

“I can’t. What the hell did he say, Kim?”

“He asked me for a blowjob. Said he heard I was putting out above my station these days. And when I told him no, he said something about how I should be lucky a Montgomery like him would even look my way.”

“He did what?” I roared.

“See, this is why I didn’t want to tell you. Elias, nothing happened. It was just words.”

“Words that made you cry.”

She shrugged. “It’s been an emotional week.”

I knew what she meant about that, but it didn’t make me feel any better.

“Where do they get off thinking they’re better than you just because you’re a Grimes?”

She laughed. “Oh, you’re serious? Your mother is like the reigning queen of the social classes. How do you not understand this? You and I, we aren’t meant to be together. It’s like Romeo and Juliet. And it doesn’t matter how much we love each other or that we’re true mates. This will never work, because they will ensure it won’t. It’s going to end badly.”

I held her tighter. “You listen to me. I don’t give a shit what anyone else thinks about us. They will learn to keep their damn mouths shut and their opinions to themselves. I have never cared what others thought of me and I’m not about to start now, but I can see it bothers you, so now it’s going to be their problem. No one disrespects my mate. No one makes you cry and gets away with it. No one gets to say anything about us, because what we have is special and untouchable unless we let them. Do you understand me? I am not losing you because some assholes think they’re entitled to an opinion on who I love and choose to spend the rest of my life with.”

I kissed her hard before she could respond. And I needed her with a desperation that terrified me.

“You are mine,” I told her.

Mine, my raven echoed in my mind.

I feared I had scared her, but then she smiled against my lips and her arms left my waist and wrapped around my neck as her hands fisted in my hair.

A frenzy started within me, and my beak began to surface.

She pulled back and looked at me but shook her head. “Not tonight. Not like this. Not when we’re both too emotional to think straight.”

I pulled my raven back and nodded. Then I kissed her again.

She was already naked from her shower, and I couldn’t stop my hands from roaming over her body. She asked me not to permanently mark her tonight, but I would find other ways to leave my mark on her body and soul.

“Mine,” I whispered kissing her cheek.

“Mine.” I lowered my head and captured her breast.

She moaned softly as I lifted her and carefully laid her on the bed. She leaned back on her elbows waiting for me to join her, but instead, I dropped to my knees and spread her legs for full exposure to her.

“Mine,” I hummed appreciatively at my view.

She shivered, and I knew it was from the emotions and not because she was cold.

“Mine,” I growled as I tasted her and began to toy with her.

I was already learning what she liked and what she didn’t. She didn’t have to tell me. I paid attention to everything when it came to Kim. I would happily spend the rest of eternity doing nothing more than pleasing my mate in every way possible.

I didn’t need others, or food, or anything. I could feast on her for the rest of my life and die a happy man.

As she began to climax, I smiled and hummed appreciatively, sending her over the edge as her hands tightened in my hair to hold me exactly where she needed me until she let herself go.

I kissed my way up her body and then pulled her close to hold her through her orgasm.

She expected me to undress and make love to her. There would be time for that later. Right now, I just needed to be close to her, to hold her, and to assure myself and my bird that she was safe and that we were going to be okay.

“Are we okay?” I asked her.

“Right here, right now, we’re fine. Perfect even. It’s when the rest of the world comes knocking that the trouble begins.”

“Then they can knock all they want. We just won’t let them in.”

I made love to her twice before we finally fell asleep. I woke her up early the next morning to make love to her again before she left for work. I knew she was heading over to my mother’s again to prep for Aunt Ginny’s party.

I cringed realizing I was going to have to attend this one. There would be no emergency meeting about the Collectors to save me from this, either. No one on the Council would dare cross my Aunt Ginny by disrupting one of her garden parties.

And at these parties, my mother and aunt never failed to force some poor girl into batting her eyes my way telling her she had a chance. There was no chance. There never really had been, but definitely not after confirming Kim as my one true mate.

In the past it’s caused some jealousy issues, and Kim has been known to ghost me after one of these parties. I made a mental note to remind myself not to engage and stay even more aloof than usual.

Even after Kim left for work, I laid around her house wishing she were still there.

I hated the idea that people in my building were gossiping about her like that. It was ridiculous, and I knew I was going to have to set the record straight soon. I just didn’t want any additional drama to surface at the party. So instead of going to talk to my family and explain my situation, I chose to ignore it and pray for the best.

Ten minutes after I arrived at the party, I knew that had been a mistake.

“Elias, over here,” my mother called with Felicity by her side.

I hadn’t even found Kim yet and already the attacks were beginning. Growling under my breath, I walked over to say hello to my mom.

“Mother.” I kissed her cheeks.

She frowned when I pulled away. “Don’t you have anything in your wardrobe that isn’t black?”

“You did say black tie, Mother.”

“But would it hurt you to wear a white shirt for once?”

I shrugged. If my black dress shirt, matching my black slacks, black jacket, and black tie were her only complaints of the evening, then I would

call that a successful night.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to Felicity?”

“Hello Felicity.”

Normally I would at least say something polite, comment on how nice she looked or something to appease my mother, but this time I knew I had to keep a distance and not encourage either of them.

“Why don’t you ask her to dance? I think that would be a lovely idea,” Mom said.

Felicity smiled and stepped towards me holding out her hand expecting me to take it.

I took a step back.

“No thank you,” I said. “I won’t be dancing this evening. If you’ll both excuse me, I need to discuss something with Ryan.”

I left the two of them gawking in my wake. I knew I’d be hearing all about how rude I was later, but right now, I was just trying to survive the night and remain respectful to my mate.

Where the hell was she anyway?

“Relax. You’re scowling. What did Mom always say? Keep making that face and it’ll stick that way.”

I frowned harder.

“Have you seen Kim?”

“She made her rounds shortly before you arrived. Probably restocking in the kitchen.”

I started to walk that way, but he stopped me.

“Not here.”

If looks could kill, my brother would be a dead man.

“I’m serious, Eli. From the way Mom was already pushing Felicity on you, I know you haven’t told her about you and Kim yet. I have no doubt she’s already heard the rumors. Just lie low until this party is over, and then we’ll talk to her. Plus, you need to let Kim do her job. If I didn’t trust that Aunt Ginny and Mom would freak out and consider it disrespect on the family or some bullshit like that, I’d tell you to go home. But since that isn’t really a possibility, just stay by me and get through the night. Okay?”

I knew Ryan meant well, but nothing sounded worse or more boring than a night schmoozing his campaign benefactors as he prepared for his latest run for mayor. It wasn’t like anyone else wanted the job. Plus all of Ravenden adored him. Still, he wasn’t one to leave anything to chance. He

was as methodical as a person could be.

I knew he was right though, so begrudgingly, I stuck to him like glue trying not to make it obvious that I was watching my mate like a hawk as she flitted around the garden in the background serving trays of little finger foods and drinks to all the ungrateful elite of Ravenden.

As she made her way through the small wrought iron tables in the center of the garden to serve those sitting there, Joe Montgomery reached out and smacked her on the ass.

A deep throaty kraal escaped from me, immediately drawing my brother's attention. He excused himself and followed my line of sight just as the idiot did it again.

Kim stopped, took a deep breath, then said something to him before walking away and disappearing into the house with her empty tray.

I homed in on Joe.

"Eli, no," Ryan warned, but I was seeing red now as I stalked towards my prey.

By nature we were more scavengers than fighters, but I'd be damned if I was going to let him get away with touching my mate.

"Shit!" I heard Ryan say as he scrambled to keep up with me.

I calmly sat down next to Joe.

He flashed a toothy grin that didn't reach his eyes. His salesman mask was on.

"The Davenport brothers. To what do I owe this honor? Did you finally decide you need that BMW, Ryan?"

"No," he said flatly.

"How about you, Eli? Did you finally wise up and realize real men drive cars? Ready to turn in that motorcycle of yours?"

"It's Elias," I said in a flat voice.

"My bad, Elias," he said, drawing out my name sarcastically. "So, what can I do for you boys."

I lowered my voice, never dropping eye contact, making him squirm uncomfortably in his seat.

"I'm only going to say this once, so you better listen closely. You touch her ass again and I will peck your eyes out. I will cut off your arm. And then I will slit you from navel to nose and leave you in a remote place for the vultures to dispose of all evidence. Am I clear?"

He gulped hard.

“Am I clear?” I asked a little louder, feeling my blood boiling beneath my skin.

“Y-es,” he stammered.

“Yes what?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I heard you loud and clear.”

Ryan sighed. “It would probably be best if you left now. He’s feeling rather nice at the moment, but if you so much as look in her direction, I suspect that will change.”

His eyes widened as he started putting the pieces together. He quickly got up and ran away, stumbling over his own two feet and falling flat on his face just as Kim walked out.

I watched as the man’s face paled, and he jumped up, shielding his eyes from even looking in her direction as he ran away from the party.

“I’m pretty sure he left a trail of piss in his wake. Jesus, Eli, remind me never to piss you off.”

I shrugged, reached over and grabbed the glass of whiskey Joe left behind, and swallowed it down in one gulp. The burning trail felt good and soothed my nerves.

Kim walked over and started clearing the table.

“Joe seemed to leave in a hurry,” she commented while she worked without really looking my way. “Is there a reason for that, Elias?”

I cringed at the tone of her voice.

“It’s all under control,” Ryan assured her. “As long as that asshole has the good sense not to come back here tonight.”

She sighed. “You can’t run off everyone that comes on to me while I work,” she said under her breath.

“He touched you, twice. I think all things considered, I handled it well. I could have just pecked his eyes out instead of warning him.”

She gasped. “Are you kidding?”

“After what he said to you last night, he’s lucky to still be alive.”

“Wait, last night? What happened last night?” Ryan asked.

“Joe said some inappropriate things to me and made me upset. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of a big deal,” Ryan agreed with me.

I shot her a knowing look, happy to see she was actually watching me this time.

“And I’ll see to it he never does or says anything like that again.”

Kim

Chapter 17

Overall the evening hadn't been that bad, at least not after Elias had scared off Joe. But there had been whispers and despite him keeping his distance and not drawing too much attention to me, people had still noticed the way Joe had left in such a hurry and the way Elias had watched me like a hawk the rest of the night.

For those that had been at his apartment complex and were speculating on which of the Davenport brothers I had been visiting, the answer was now clear.

Still, no one had made a scene or anything to anger Ginny or Helena throughout the evening. And despite a few early attempts in the beginning, his mother hadn't pushed any women his way like she had been known to do at past parties. I couldn't help but wonder if Ryan had been running interference for him as the two of them had remained suspiciously close all night.

If that was the case, I was going to have remember to thank Ryan for it. It had certainly made the night a lot easier to get through.

Long after the guests had left, I stayed behind cleaning up. Gia and David were there too, though they'd let the others go already. Things were lighthearted and fun until Ginny and Helena came out to join us.

Maybe it was just my nerves, but it felt as though they sucked out all the air around me and my chest burned in discomfort. I was pretty sure it was just a panic attack.

"Happy?" Gia asked them.

"Everything was wonderful, as usual. Thank you Gia," Ginny said. "Except there was one little incident. That Grimes girl that works for you, I don't want her coming back here again. I got some complaints from my guests."

"About Kim?" David blurted out. "That's not even possible. She's the best there is."

My heart swelled hearing him come to my defense, but I still had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. They were talking about me as if I

wasn't standing right there in front of them.

"Well, I'm just saying there were complaints. You know how I pride myself on my garden parties. I cannot have such rumors floating around."

"This complaint didn't happen to come from Joe Montgomery did it?" Gia asked.

"As a matter of fact he did mention it. Why?"

She sighed. "This is the second night in a row that he's hit on Kim. He got particularly inappropriate tonight. We tried to handle the situation as discreetly as possible."

"Do you really think having her threaten him and running him off scared for his life is handling things discreetly?" her mother asked.

"Kim was nowhere near him when that occurred," David argued, but I reached for his arm and silenced him.

"Don't bother. She doesn't want me working her parties, then fine. She can do it herself. Starting now." I gave a sweet little smile and dropped my cleaning rag into her hand as I took off my apron and handed it to her. Then I turned and walked away. A few steps later, I turned back to see her and Helena both looking like fish out of water as they stared at me in shock. "Oh, and Ginny, just a piece of advice, you might want to warn your mate, Atticus, that Joe likes to touch what isn't his. I don't really appreciate being groped just for doing my job. But hey, maybe that's your thing because clearly, it's okay by you."

Before they could even process what was happening, I left.

By the time I got to the driveway, I was shaking all over. I pulled out my phone and shot off a text to Gia.

ME: I'm so sorry, G. I just couldn't stand there and take it.

GIA: I have never been prouder. David and I will finish up here. Go home and relax.

ME: I'll start looking for another job tomorrow.

GIA: Don't you dare. I need you too much. I will not accept your resignation.

I snorted reading her response.

ME: Resignation? I assumed I was fired.

GIA: Not a chance. We'll talk tomorrow.

GIA: This was the greatest night ever! I love you.

I smiled through the tears now freely falling down my cheek. But when strong arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me back, I started to

scream.

Mate! my raven alerted, and I instantly relaxed.

“It’s just me,” Elias whispered in my ear.

“Sorry. I wasn’t paying attention and didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I’m here. What’s wrong?”

I sighed. “Trust me when I say you don’t even want to know.”

“Are you done with work?”

I laughed. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Want to get out of here?”

“Yes, please.”

He took my hand and walked me over to his bike. Ensuring I was wearing a helmet properly first, we rode off into the night.

With my arms wrapped around his waist and my head resting on his back, all the fears and worries of the night melted away.

His family would never understand or accept me, but when we were alone, just the two of us, none of that seemed to matter. It was almost like I could forget the pain of hearing I wasn’t even good enough to work at their party.

I sighed, remembering it all as he pulled into his parking spot in the garage beneath his apartment and killed the engine.

“I can’t be here, Elias. I need you to take me home.”

“Your house, my apartment, it doesn’t matter babe, because wherever we are together, that’s home.”

He kissed me just as a car drove up. It was Felicity. My cheeks burned as she got out and stared at us with her mouth open in surprise. And then she smiled.

“I knew it wasn’t Ryan. You aren’t his type.”

“Felicity.”

“Eli. You guys heading up?”

“Kim?” he asked me.

I huffed. “Whatever. It’s definitely been a night. I just want to go to bed.”

I gasped, and my head whipped towards Felicity who was holding the door open for us.

Eli chuckled, and I elbowed him in the ribcage.

She giggled. “It’s okay. We’re cool. Anyone who can get Elias

Davenport to laugh and relax is okay by me.”

I awkwardly let him take my hand and followed her onto the elevator.

“For the record, our mothers have been pushing us together for years. We both tolerate it, but I’ve never been interested in him like that.”

“Ditto.”

“Um, thanks for telling me that.”

“You’d never have stood a chance against this one anyway,” he surprised me by telling her.

“True mates then?”

“Yeah.”

“I suspected when I saw her in the elevator the other day. Elias would never truly fall for anyone less, and he never brings women up to his apartment. I’ve never even seen Gia there.”

“Rarely, but she’s come by a few times. Always flies in though,” he admitted.

“That makes sense. The whole Congress is going to be talking about this soon. I’m guessing you haven’t told your mother yet.”

We both cringed.

“I’ve been avoiding the drama.”

I glared at him. “You said she’d be okay.”

“She’ll come around,” he assured me. “But it’ll be a shock at first, and she doesn’t handle surprises well. I didn’t want any drama at Aunt Ginny’s party tonight.”

“Like you threatening Joe Montgomery?” Felicity teased.

“You saw that?”

“A lot of people saw that. Saw him smack Kim on the butt just before that too.”

I groaned.

“It’s okay,” she told me.

I was surprised by how nice she was being.

“Some people hold on to the old ways and cling to the class system, but there’s a lot of us that think it’s complete bullshit. I know your brother. He’s a really great guy and a good friend.”

“You’re friends with Andrew?”

“Yeah. We grew up together. I’ve known him for years and he’s definitely one of the good guys. I’m just saying. Not all of us believe in all that crap, Kim. I’m really rooting for you two and hope you find a way to

make it work.”

“Uh, thanks.”

The elevator doors opened, and she stepped out then turned around and gave us a little wave. “See you guys around.”

“That was super weird,” I told him after the doors closed.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him so he could kiss me.

“Not all of us Deans and Davenports are bad, babe.”

“I don’t know, rumor has it that Elias Davenport is a notorious bad boy,” I teased.

“Asshole is more like it.”

I frowned. “Bad boy I can get behind, but never really been attracted to assholes before.”

He chuckled. “You sure about that.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Well then, I suppose it’s time to live up to my reputation and be very, very bad.”

The elevator doors opened, and we stumbled out kissing and laughing as he tried to hastily unlock his door. The commotion we made must have drawn Ryan’s attention because when he cleared his throat behind us, I yelped, and Elias let me go quickly.

“Sorry,” I muttered, knowing I was blushing.

“Gia’s looking for you. Apparently you haven’t been checking your phone.”

I sighed. “I thought she said we’d deal with this tomorrow.”

“Deal with what?”

“My job. I sort of quit on her tonight. Not that she’d accept my resignation.”

“You quit? Why?”

I cringed. “Well, it started with your aunt asking that I never work there again because she got complaints. Turns out Joe complained. Needless to say, I didn’t handle it well. I don’t think she realized I was there when she was discussing it with Gia, and David did try to come to my defense.”

“What did you do?” Ryan asked.

“I told them I quit, then I handed Ginny my dirty rag and advised she helped clean up, and I also told her I really hoped she enjoyed being groped since she was so okay with it happening to me, or something like that. I don’t

know. The adrenaline had kicked in by then.”

Ryan burst out laughing, but Elias didn't find it so funny.

“I'll talk to her in the morning.”

“Don't bother,” I tried to say.

“No, she's family and she needs to hear how inappropriate that was. Family takes care of one another, and they are going to just have to realize that you are family now.”

I didn't bother to argue with him. I doubted some in his family would ever come to accept me, but with Gia, David, and Ryan on my side, I held out hope that things would mostly be okay.

We said goodnight to Ryan and walked into Elias's apartment. I wasn't sure I could ever consider it mine, but who knew, a week ago I would have sworn there was no way I'd ever show him my bird for fear that everything that was happening would happen.

In general, I liked being right but not about this.

“Hey are you okay?” Gia asked causing me to jump.

“Jesus! You guys are determined to give me a heart attack tonight, aren't you?”

“What are you doing here, G?” her brother asked.

“Sorry. I just needed to see for myself that she's okay. You left your car there, Kim. Scared the shit out of us. David drove it over to your place and then we flew here. I guessed this is where you'd be.”

She flopped down on the couch and made herself at home. David joined her. So much for me getting to sleep anytime soon.

“Are you okay?” she asked me again.

I went to the fridge and grabbed a handful of beers, offering them each one.

Elias went and changed into black sweatpants and a black T-shirt before joining us. He looked hot and cozy. I loved Gia and David, but I desperately wanted them to leave.

“She's fine,” he insisted on my behalf.

“I really am. But what happened after I left?”

“They actually helped us clean up and then we sat down for a real conversation. Gia told them that she wouldn't tolerate her employees being sexually harassed on the job, not even for them.”

“Honestly, I think they felt bad about it,” Gia said.

“Good,” Elias growled. “I wasn't kidding when I said I'd peck his

eyes out if he laid another hand on her.”

“You did what?” I asked.

“Why do you think he tore out of there so fast he nearly pissed himself?”

I groaned. “Elias, you cannot go around threatening every single person who treats me poorly. Trust me, that would be a full-time job and waste of your time.”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t let someone act that way towards my sister, so why would you think I’d just sit by and let it happen to you? Babe, come on. You’re my everything. No one touches you and gets away with it.”

“Aw, see, he can be sweet when he wants to be,” Gia teased.

Elias picked up a pillow and threw it at her face.

“Dude, that goes for me too. It’s been a long day, don’t make me kick your ass. You already know you don’t stand a chance.”

“Because you cheat. No powers and I’d win hands down.”

David shrugged. “What’s the point of having powers if you can’t use them?”

It dawned on me that I really didn’t know what Elias’s powers were and made a mental note to ask him later.

“Not all witchy powers are as cool as yours though. Eli’s right. It’s not fair. Last time they went at it, Eli pulled back to throw a punch, and David shifted into our mother. Needless to say, E pulled back and my man punched and won.”

“He cheated,” my mate insisted.

“You didn’t say no powers,” David taunted him.

“It was a little disconcerting,” Gia agreed.

“I swore I wouldn’t do it again, so you’re safe for now. Can’t promise I won’t duplicate Kim next time though.”

Unlike most ravens who fell into specific categories based on family line, for instance, all Grimes witches could yield some form of water, David was a mimic. He could duplicate just about anything or anyone. It’s a little creepy at times.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Elias said.

“Oh but wouldn’t I?”

One second he was himself sitting next to Gia and the next, I was watching myself sit there instead.

“No, not me. Fix it,” I cried, making them all laugh as he shifted back.

“That’s just too weird.”

“And he’s a cheater,” Elias added.

They stayed late into the wee hours of morning. It was a nice and normal couple-y thing to do. I could actually relax and enjoy it without feeling judged by everyone watching, even when cuddled up next to my mate and letting him wrap his arm around my shoulders.

It made me feel safe and confident to just be me. No pretenses were necessary. I could even let my guard down and just enjoy the evening with my mate and our friends.

This is how it should always feel, I thought.

Elias

Chapter 18

Waking up with Kim in my arms in my bed brought me more joy than I knew was possible. I loved waking up with her in my arms anytime, anywhere, but this morning felt extra special having her in my space for the first time.

Her house was nice, but it was also right off the road where cars drove by at all hours, day and night. Up here on the top floor of my complex, there was a peace and quiet I'd not found elsewhere. It was a place I wanted to share with her. And if we were blessed with chicks, I still had more than half of the apartment ready to be converted however we needed. There was plenty of room to grow here.

But I also knew that if Kim insisted on staying at her place or if she wanted to sell both places and buy or build something that was just ours, then I'd do it.

Hell, I'd do absolutely anything to make this woman happy.

This morning, she was making me very happy.

I'd forgotten to turn my alarm clock off when we finally went to bed. It was probably a good thing too because as I reached to shut it off, I saw I had a new message.

RYAN: 9AM meeting. Collectors update.

My chest tightened. I hated to leave her here, but I also didn't want to wake her. She looked so peaceful, small, and vulnerable in my big bed. The thought of a Collector coming here was killing me. I knew I was going to have to seal our bond soon or my bird was going to do a lot worse than threaten a sleezy scumbag. And if one of the Collector's touched even one hair on her head, I wasn't sure I'd be able to control my powers.

I could feel pure energy coursing through my veins at the thought.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into a cold stream of water in the shower. I had to curb my temper before my powers got loose.

There were some that called me the bad boy of the family, the black sheep, and a hot head. They had no idea just how right they were on that last one. I was far more powerful than people realized. My parents had done well

at hiding that fact. But when it came to Kim, I would do anything to ensure her safety, even letting my powers loose.

Energy could be a dangerous thing in the wrong hands, or simply in concentrated form. I'd learned that the hard way when I accidentally fried my pet hamster as a kid. It was part of why I kept to myself and rarely let others get close.

Kim was the ultimate exception.

I knew I could never really lose control with her. I couldn't live with myself if anything bad happened to her.

Pushing those thoughts away, I finished my cold shower, got out, and dried off, before dressing for the day. Black pants and a black turtleneck. My wardrobe consisted of little else. All black pants. All black shoes. All black shirts, though I did vary the styles. All black socks. I even bought and wore all black boxers.

I'd learned at a young age that black made me stand out, but in a way that made everyone take a step back and approach with caution.

Kim didn't really know that side of me, and I hoped to God she never did.

With her, I could be myself, the truest version of me reserved for only my immediate family. It had always been that way with her though. From the first moment I'd laid eyes on her, I'd trusted her like no other. And I'd been comfortable enough with her to just be myself, to turn my stoic frown into a smile. It was one of the reasons I was convinced from the start that she was made to be mine. And I'd been right all along.

Mine, my raven growled.

I smiled and leaned down to kiss the top of her head before leaving for work.

I was late, but who could really blame me? A mating male keeping to a normal work schedule was practically unheard of. But they didn't know I was a mating male. And for the immediate future, I suspected Kim would want to keep it that way.

Each day it was growing harder to keep it a secret and to fight the urge to seal our bond. I wanted desperately to mark her as mine forever.

Dad looked at me disapprovingly as I apologized while walking into the morning meeting a few minutes behind schedule.

Sorry, I mouthed.

The first half of the day passed quickly in a blur of warnings and

plans. At the rate we were moving, the Collectors would be here before we warned anyone or took any action to stop it. It was difficult not to become frustrated with the whole bureaucratic process in place, and not for the first time, I wondered what the hell I was doing here. What had I gotten myself into?

Kim didn't care if I was some upstanding pillar of the community, so why did I feel like this was the path I needed to take to ensure our future? I was an idiot.

The only good thing about this job was that it kept me in the loop of what was happening in Ravenden. I didn't really give a shit about most of it, but something like this was important to me being able to keep my mate safe.

"Thanks everyone for coming in this morning," Dad told the group. "I think we have a solid plan to get the word out and lock down the flocks without sending everyone into a full-blown panic. Clarence, you'll alert the fire station. Castor, you'll talk to the Chief of Police to start preparing."

They both agreed and the meeting was dismissed.

"I really need to get home and check on some things. Do you need me for anything?"

"No. Take the rest of the day, just be discreet about who you talk to. We don't want a full panic to arise. I can't entirely downplay this, but as of now, we don't really have any reason for panic. There have been no signs of a Collector in the area, and I'm not sure just how reliable Westin Force intel is."

"Dad, don't play dumb. You know damn well they are the best of the best. If Patrick said a Collector is going to target Ravenden, then it's going to happen. Maybe not today, but soon. It's coming, and we have to brace for the worst."

Reluctantly he nodded. "I need to talk to your mother."

"You haven't told her yet?"

"I didn't want to spoil her fun at Ginny's party last night."

I rolled my eyes and nearly let out a guttural kraal remembering the shit show that was Aunt Ginny's garden party.

"What is it?"

I sighed. I couldn't keep putting off telling them. "I need to talk to you and Mom."

"Both of us? That sounds serious."

"It is."

“What’s this about, son?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s about Kim. There was an incident last night.”

“Ah, yes. The Joe Montgomery complaint. Don’t worry. Your aunt and mother already handled it. She won’t be working for them anymore. In fact, I believe she quit, so you won’t have to worry about her anymore.”

This time I really did kraal, which stopped my father in mid step as his head whipped back towards me. His shocked expression faded into pity.

“I know you’ve always been soft for her, but a waitress? A Grimes? You can do better than that.”

I scoffed. “Your daughter is a waitress.”

“No, she’s a strong business owner.”

“Then perhaps you’d like me to call Clarence back in here so you can explain how he’s welcome to sit on your beloved Council but his daughter isn’t good enough for your son.”

All color drained from his face. “She’s Clarence’s girl?”

“Yeah, Dad, she is.”

“Why are you bringing this up now? I know you’ve been seeing her in secret for years. So why now?”

“Actually I wasn’t. Sure we were friends and would hang out, but that was it.”

“And now? What changed then?”

I softened and smiled despite how angry I was at my father.

“She finally let our ravens meet. I’m pretty sure I’ve known all along.”

“Ah shit. She’s your mate, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

He ran a hand through his thick graying hair. “Your mother is going to freak out when she finds out. She’ll likely forbid it.”

“I’m a grown man. I don’t live my life by her rules, Dad.”

With a sigh, he nodded resolutely. “I’m not sure you ever did. Well, go get Kim and bring her to the house. Let’s get this over with quickly. If nothing else, it’ll ease the news of the Collectors when I tell her about them. She’ll have something she considers bigger to worry about. You.”

I groaned. This was not the way I wanted to do this, but I knew it was necessary.

All I had to do now was go home and convince Kim that it was time

to share our news with the rest of my family. Because really, what could possibly go wrong with that?

“You want to do what?” she yelled back at me.

“Would you calm down. I promise it’s going to be fine. My dad already knows. And we can ask Gia and Ryan to join us for backup.”

“Why would we need backup if everything’s going to be fine?”

I huffed in frustration.

“We already told your family, and rumors are starting to spread. This is important, babe. I don’t want my mother to find out through the local gossips. We need to be the ones to tell her.”

“So tell her. You had no problem telling your dad on your own, or Ryan. Why do I have to be there this time?”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to stop pacing holding her until she finally looked me in the eyes. I could see she was upset and freaked out. I knew I had to tread lightly.

“She’s my mother, Kim. I may not always agree with her, and I might not even like her sometimes, but she’s still my mother, and I do love her. This is important to me.”

Her fight started to wane.

“And it has to be now?”

“Yeah. I think it does.”

“Okay,” she finally conceded. “Just give me a minute to change and get ready.”

I nodded as she left my arms and went to my bedroom.

“We can swing by your place if you need to pick up some things,” I yelled, remembering she didn’t have anything of hers here, though I really wished she did.

“It’s okay. Gia brought me over a few things this morning while you were in your meeting.”

I grinned happily. It was a start.

Kim stepped out of my bedroom wearing black pants and a sexy V-neck blouse that buttoned up to just above the crest of her breasts. Her long dark hair was brushed straight to a shine, and she was wearing black Vans. She looked hot.

My jaw dropped as I stared at her, reconsidering my decision to go to

my parents' house now as my eyes drank in the sight of her.

“Ready?” she asked with a new silent confidence.

“To throw you over my shoulder and take you to bed? Yes.”

She rolled her eyes. “To do the parent thing.”

I scrunched up my nose, wishing we could do anything but that. With a sigh of disappointment, I nodded. “Yeah. We should probably do that thing first. But let's make it fast because I have other ideas for today after seeing you dressed like that.”

She chuckled.

On the ride down in the elevator, I said, “You know, my mother hates it when I wear all black. Always has.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yup. Why do you think I dressed to match you? A united front, right?”

I shook my head and grinned. “Right.”

Kim

Chapter 19

I couldn't believe I let him talk me into doing this. I needed time to prepare what I was going to say, how I was going to act, all the damn things. But no, he just sprung it on me.

It wasn't like I didn't know this day was going to come, but when I woke up this morning surrounded by the scent of my mate and feeling happier than ever, this was not how I thought my day would go.

As we made our way down to the garage, Novaleigh was there taking a picture of my car in the drive.

"What are you doing?" Elias asked.

"Reporting an unauthorized vehicle. We can't be too careful these days."

I started to protest, but he stopped me and walked to his bike to pull something out of the locker he had on it. Then walked over to my car, opened the door, and hung a tag from the rearview mirror.

"I don't see any unauthorized vehicles here. Do you?"

Her jaw dropped and she looked pissed. But I couldn't stop grinning.

He walked back to the bike and pulled out our helmets, handing me mine. I still wasn't sure where or when he'd gotten one for me, but it was those little touches that made me feel truly loved.

I tried desperately not to look in her direction as I climbed on the back after he mounted the bike. Riding with Elias felt natural and comfortable now. With the wind in my hair it felt a bit like flying in my skin, and I understood the appeal for him.

All too quickly we were riding through the big iron gate up to his childhood home. I was suddenly a ball of nerves.

When he parked the bike, I just sat there not ready to get off. I'd been to this house dozens of times but always as the help. That may not mean much to my mate, but it sure as hell meant something to his mother.

"It's going to be okay," he told me.

"I trust you."

Slowly, and with shaky legs, I forced myself to get off the bike.

He followed, placing the palm of his hand across my lower back and guiding me towards the door, up the stairs, and then inside.

“Hello?” Helena called out.

“It’s me, Mom. Is Dad home yet?”

“Elias? What a nice surprise. He just got home and is upstairs changing into something comfortable. Who’s this?” she asked noticing me for the first time.

As she realized who I was and then looked down to see his arm possessively around me, her entire demeanor changed.

“Elias, what is this about? What is she doing here?”

“Mom, this is Kim.”

“I know who she is. What is she doing here with you?”

“My mate,” he continued as if she hadn’t even spoken.

Helena looked from him to me and then back again, no doubt trying to discern if he was joking or not. She must have settled on not, because her shoulders stiffened, and her chin rose in defiance.

“She can wait outside while we discuss this.”

I sighed. It was just as I expected.

But when I started to leave, his grip around my waist tightened.

“That’s not how this is going to go. We can wait for Dad if you want, but Kim’s not going anywhere, Mom. She is my mate, my one true mate.”

She gasped and her hands covered her mouth as she stared at me in horror.

Unshed tears burned my eyes, but I refused to cry or show weakness. I owed that to him. This was his mother, his Flock, his flesh and blood. And yet, through it all, his assurance that I belonged there by his side never once wavered.

His father came down, interrupting the awkward quiet showdown between mother and son. I’d been told of my proper place my entire life and on occasion I even rebuked it in defiance, but never had I felt so uncomfortable.

Elias eased up a bit and started to rub my back, likely sensing my unease. His touch soothed me, and I started to relax a bit.

The surprised look on Helena’s face told me the gesture had not gone unnoticed.

“Ah. You’re here faster than I expected. Thought I’d have time to prepare her.”

Her head whipped towards her mate. “You knew about this?” she demanded.

He cringed just a bit under her scrutiny.

“Sweetheart, hear them out. I know this comes as a shock, and I only just found out about it this morning. It’s important, Helena.”

She burst into tears. “This cannot be happening. It has to be a joke.”

“It’s not a joke,” Elias assured her.

“Well, I forbid it. Get her out of my house right now. This will never happen.”

“Dear, be reasonable,” his father said.

“Reasonable,” she yelled close to hysterics now. “She’s a *Grimes*, Edward.”

I cringed at the animosity in her voice.

“She’s a raven,” he corrected.

“A Grimes raven.” She turned on Elias again. “Would you bring this family down by diluting our bloodline in this way? Would you bring down our Flock? Be reasonable, Elias.”

“Mother, let me be perfectly clear. I would bring down this entire planet, scorch the whole Earth, if it meant protecting my mate. But the last person I expected to have to protect her from was you. You’re my mother. All the pretenses in the world shouldn’t matter. Why can’t you just be happy for me for once? I found my mate. I am crazy in love with her. Kim Grimes is mine. You can either accept it or leave us alone. That’s your choice.”

I gasped. He was ready to walk away from his family for me? I wasn’t sure I could let that happen. I knew how much family meant to him. It was one thing we had in common.

“I’m going to just step outside and let you guys talk,” I said, but inside I was cold and empty. I knew what I was going to have to do because there was no way I could allow him to destroy his family for me.

“No, we’ll both go,” he stubbornly said.

I shook my head and turned to him. “She’s your mother. You need to talk to her. I’m just a distraction right now.”

“Kim . . .”

I shook my head once more. And then I squeezed his arm for encouragement. “Talk to her.”

As I turned, a single tear slid down my cheek. He didn’t move to stop me this time.

The second the door shut behind me, I stripped, leaving my clothes in a pile on the front porch, and then I shifted and flew away.

The wind in my feathers usually brought me peace, but all I felt was sorrow. I was glad we hadn't sealed our bond because then there would be no turning back. Since we hadn't, I could do what needed to be done to protect my mate. Because I knew in my heart that he would give up his family and everything else that mattered to him just for me. I wasn't deserving of that, and I could never let it happen. He would only grow resentful of me in the future.

It was best to cut ties now.

Who was I kidding? I'd known it would come to this all along. I'd been living a fairytale and nothing more. The world we lived in would never allow us to be together, no matter how much we wished for it.

I flew over my house and noticed two strange vehicles parked in my driveway. I landed on my roof, but they'd seen me.

Joe stepped out of one and pointed up to where I was perched.

The other car door opened, and someone got out.

"That's her. It has to be. She's the one you want," he told the stranger.

"It's Kim, right?" the man asked. "I won't harm you. I just want to talk."

Who the hell was this guy?

I started to fly away, but Joe distracted me.

"Don't do it, Kim. Don't run away from this. Because they will find you."

"She's definitely the water witch?" the man asked.

I nearly toppled over in shock.

What the hell was Joe doing?

When the back door of the mysterious car opened, my blood turned cold. It was him, the Collector. Just like the picture my father painted of him to warn me and Andrew. This was the bogeyman of all raven witches and Joe was leading him straight for me.

I knew I had to get away.

Lifting off, I took to the air as fast as my wings could flap, afraid my little raven heart was going to explode in my chest as my heartbeat raced.

The Collector was real. I'd seen him with my own eyes.

I was only about fifty yards out when I heard the crack of a gun.

Swerving to the right, I didn't dare look back.

I felt and heard the bullet soar past me. It was close, too close.

The crack cut through the air once more. This time I dove to the left thinking he'd go to the right. But I was wrong. The impact of the bullet to my wing sent searing pain through me.

I looked and saw a tranquilizer lodged in my left wing. I couldn't shake it off and knew it was only a matter of time before I would fall to my death.

I flapped my uninjured wing harder, trying to put as much space between us as possible. A nearby crop of trees seemed like a good place to start. It took great effort, but I managed to safely land on a large branch.

Scared and alone, I didn't know if I should shift into my human form and try to remove the tranq or if that would somehow do permanent damage to my wing.

Why did I have to run away from Elias? He would have pecked their eyes out for this by now. But I'd left my phone with my clothes. There was no way I could get in touch with him, but I knew I had to try.

I could feel the meds starting to kick in. It was making me drowsy.

Think, Kim, think!

Before the world around me started to blur, I concentrated hard to figure out where I was. In the distance I could see Elias's apartment. I gauged the distance, trying to determine if I could make it there or if it would be best to just lay low and ride it out here.

Searching around I saw a hollowed-out hole in the tree I was already in. I may piss off a squirrel or two, but it would be a safe place to hide until the tranquilizer wore off.

I started moving towards the hole, but stopped as screeching tires alerted me to company.

Shit! There must be a tracking device.

"She's here somewhere."

"Kim, come out, come out wherever you are," Joe mocked.

How could he do this to me? How could he do this to any raven?

Didn't they know what he was?

"We're right under her," the guy tracking me said.

I closed my eyes trying my best not to succumb to the darkness threatening to pull me under.

Breathe, Kimmy. What do you do if you find yourself in trouble?

Call for help.

Good. What kind of call?

A loud shrill alarm call.

Good girl. Now what's our motto?

We're safer in numbers. Search out other ravens and get to safety.

So what are you waiting for?

My father's voice of a long-forgotten memory rang fresh in my mind.

We're safer in numbers. I need to get to Elias's apartment.

Even knowing I was in no condition to fly, I reached out and bit down on the tranquilizer and yanked it out. My wing burned and I wasn't positive I could fly with it, but I knew I had to try.

I dropped the device and watched it fall to the ground with a thud.

"What's that?" the Collector asked bending over to look at it.

While they were distracted, I took off flying like my life depended on it, because I was pretty sure it did.

When I was several yards away, I started to cry out for help in the loudest shrill call I could muster.

"Damn it. You're both just screwing this up. Give me the gun," I heard the man yell, but I kept flying and shrieking out my warning, hoping to draw the attention of any raven in the area.

My flight was sporadic, and I was growing more weary by the second. Every few feet I felt myself drop a little lower.

I called out again, and again as I kept flight in a fight for my life.

At last, I heard a response. Help was on the way.

My heart lightened and I pushed myself even harder.

I could clearly see Eli's apartment just ahead. I was going to make it.

A small flock of ravens took to the air heading in my direction.

Relief filled me. I was going to be okay.

The crack of gunfire pierced the air but by the time it registered to my ears, it was too late. The bullet pierced my right wing this time and I found myself falling towards the ground.

This was it. My life was over, but at least I'd died fighting and I'd been able to warn the others. I could go in peace knowing that I likely saved another. I couldn't let myself think of Elias though. I knew how devastated he would be, but maybe it was for the best. Now he wouldn't have to choose between me and his family.

The ground grew closer and closer, but at the last second, a net snatched me from the air.

“Got her, boss. No thanks to you, asshole,” the man said to Joe.
“Just make sure that little bitch doesn’t ever come back here again.”
Those were the last words I heard before everything went black.

Elias

Chapter 20

I hated watching Kim walk away. I should have followed her, but I also understood why she was choosing to leave. I'd been wrong to bring her here.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at my mother.

"I never thought I'd say it, but I'm really disappointed in you right now. She's my mate, Mother. Would it kill you to put your ridiculous prejudices aside for five seconds and, I don't know, actually be happy for me?"

"You're disappointed in me? Elias, she's a Grimes."

"And I love her, Mom. That's not going to change just because you don't like it. So the ball's in your court because I choose her. She makes me happier than I ever dreamed possible. So you can either get on board with it or you're going to lose me, because I will not have my mate disrespected like that. Dad taught me better than that. Nothing's more important than family."

"Family, yes. Blood, Elias."

"No Mom, family. Kim's my family, just like when Dad took you as a mate you because you're his family, not blood, *family*."

Her jaw dropped open and then closed again.

"He's not wrong, dear. You were extremely rude and disrespectful to our son's mate."

"But she's a Grimes," she whined, though I could already feel the fight fleeing her.

"She's his true mate and she makes him happy. Isn't that what you said you wished for each of our children?"

She sighed. "Don't throw my words back in my face. I never dreamed she'd be a Grimes."

"At least you know where she comes from. She comes from a highly respected family, Mom. Give her a chance."

"She's a Grimes, sweetie. There's no such thing as a highly respected Grimes."

"Actually, her father is on the Congress Council now, just like Dad," I

argued.

“I know.”

Dad nodded. “And it was my idea even though I didn’t know about their connection at the time. He’s been chief of the fire department for over a decade.”

“Clarence Grimes is her father?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Well why is she working at the diner then? Why isn’t she at the fire station?”

“Because she loves working at the diner. I’ve already told her she doesn’t have to, but she would miss Gia too much.”

Mom huffed. “No matter how much I tried to discourage it, those two still became friends. And now this. It’s just a lot to take in. Though technically she quit her job last night. I guess now I know the real reason why.”

“Helena,” Dad chastised.

“Who quit their job?” Gia asked as she walked in through the kitchen.

“Kim.”

“Oh please. She didn’t really quit. She loves me too much. She just refuses to work for you and Aunt Ginny again, and quite frankly, I don’t blame her, because you were both way out of line and owe her an apology for that.”

“She’s your brother’s mate.”

Gia didn’t react, and Mom’s face scrunched up in frustration.

“You knew? Am I the last person in this family to know about this?”

“Know about what?” Dean asked as he walked down the stairs. He looked around noting both me and Gia were there and then pulled out his phone and shot off a text. “No one told me we were having a family meeting. I sent a text to Ryan to get over here. So what’s going on?”

“Elias found his true mate,” Dad said.

“Cool. Congrats.” Dean hugged me, but then noticed the tension in the room as he turned slowly to look around. “No good? Oh, let me guess. Kim Grimes?”

“Why would you guess that?” Mom huffed.

“Well, he’s been pining after her for years and I saw them making out in front of her house the other day. Plus, that vein in your forehead looks like it’s about to pop, and I figure a Grimes mated to one of your beloved children

would do that.”

Mom glared at him, but she couldn't deny it.

“Why don't we take this out of the foyer and into the living room,” dad suggested.

By the time we got settled, Ryan had arrived.

“What's going on?” he asked.

“Your brother found his mate,” Mom said flatly.

Ryan looked around. “Where is Kim?”

Our mother glared at him. “You knew too?”

“You act like they've been trying to keep it a secret. I do live next door to them.”

Mom's jaw dropped as she glared at me this time. I was starting to get a headache and just wanted this all to end so I could go and check on Kim. My raven had been on edge since she left, and I didn't know if she was still waiting outside or if she flew home.

“You moved her in with you?”

“Not yet. But she does stay over there sometimes.” Once, last night, but I didn't admit that.

“Oh Elias. People are going to talk.”

“So let them talk.”

“What will Felicity think? That poor girl.”

I scoffed. “Felicity isn't any more interested in me than I am in her. We only hang out at parties when you or her mother try to push us together. There is nothing going on there. Plus, she already knows and unlike you, she's happy for me.”

“Elias, that's enough,” Dad warned. “Give your mother time to adjust to the idea.”

“There's no idea. It's a fact. I have a mate. Her name is Kim Grimes. Soon to be Kimberly Grimes Davenport. If I had it my way we'd already have sealed our bond.”

“Like she'd turn that down,” Mom said under her breath.

“Yeah, Mom, she did, numerous times.”

“But why?”

“Why?” I yelled. “Because of this. Because of you. I told her everything would be fine, that you may be shocked and even a little disappointed at first, but that you loved your children and just wanted to see us happy, so you'd come around. She won't let me mark her because family

is just as important to her as it is to us. She won't let me mark her because she's been terrified of you."

That shut her up this time as the truth of my words began to sink in.

"It's true," Gia said. "She didn't even want their birds to meet because she was afraid he was right and they were true mates. She doesn't think you'll ever accept her."

"Yeah, that's basically what she told me too," Ryan admitted.

"Well now you're all just making me out to be the villain."

"If the evil shoe fits," Dean told her with a shrug.

"Look, I'm sorry you're so disappointed. And I'm sorry I cornered you like this. But I'm not going to apologize for loving her. She is the most important thing in the world to me. My job is to protect her, and I basically held her hand and walked her right into the lioness's den. That isn't sitting well with me or my raven. So we can talk about this later, if you want. But right now, I need to find Kim and apologize to her. And hope to God she'll forgive me."

Mom huffed. "Give me until tomorrow to let it all sink in, and then bring her by for dinner. I hear you, and I'll try, but that's all I can promise."

When I rose, I leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Thanks."

Walking out the front door, I saw Kim's clothes in a neat pile. I scooped them up and stored them in the locker on my bike, then I jumped on and rode to her house.

Before I got there, I rode into a mass of people standing in the road. I honked, but they didn't even seem to notice. In the midst of it all I saw Felicity and waved her over.

"What's going on?"

"There was an attack. Someone was giving a warning call and then was shot out of the sky. They're saying it was the Collector. Tell me it's all just a big joke, Elias."

"Have you seen Kim?"

"No."

I quickly called her phone, but it rang from the back of my bike.

"Shit!"

I started honking and screaming at people to get out of my way. I was losing it and could feel my feathers starting to pop off my arms. I wasn't going to settle until I knew she was safe.

As soon as I was clear of the crowd, I called Dad.

“Elias?”

“The Collector’s here. There was a sighting. He attacked one of us, but no one knows who. I’m heading to Kim’s. I have to find her. Dad, I’m afraid I’m losing it. It can’t have been her, right? It just can’t.”

“Calm down. We’re on our way.”

“They said the bird was shot out of the sky, so be careful.”

“You too. We’re coming.”

I shoved the phone back into my pocket and drove as fast as I could.

Please let her be there. Safe and sound. Completely oblivious to what’s happening.

But I had a sick feeling in my gut.

As I rounded the corner, I saw two cars in front of her house and I slowed. Grateful it was daylight, I channeled my inner raven’s eyesight and homed in on the men there. Three of them. When I realized one of them was Joe Montgomery, I thought I was going to be sick.

Trying to act rational, I called Dad back with the update then snapped a picture as best as I could and texted it along with her address to the remaining Council.

One of the strangers held up a net with a raven ensnared in it. I leaned over and threw up. That was Kim. It had to be. She was likely the one that had sounded the alarm as well as the one shot from the sky. If she got into that car, there was a chance I’d never see her again.

I was about to make my move when the car door opened and a young woman stepped out. That’s when I saw the Collector. There was no mistaking him. He reached in and pulled Kim’s bird out and then shook her until she woke.

I was gutted with relief. She was alive.

Dad and my brothers pulled up and stopped when they saw me. I filled them in on what was happening.

Suddenly Kim shifted back into her skin.

A guttural kraal escaped me as she stood before them naked and vulnerable.

I shifted and took off, but in midair froze as I saw the girl hold up her hand as Kim screamed. Water poured through her like she was unable to control her powers. Kim never used her powers unless it was an absolute emergency. That girl had to somehow be forcing her.

How?

Why?

“We’re right behind you, brother,” Dean said as he ran by, leapt into the air and shifted.

He and Ryan flew faster than I’d ever seen them right into the tires of the Collector’s car. One into the back and one into the front. While I headed straight for my mate.

Joe screamed when he saw us and tried to hide behind the front of his car. I circled in the air and took a shit.

Bullseye!

It landed right on his head, the ultimate sign of disrespect amongst raven shifters.

I was going to perch on Kim’s shoulder but heard the girl yell “Shift” and suddenly, I was human again and falling to the ground. I rolled on the concrete, tearing up my skin, but luckily it didn’t seem to be anything too serious.

“Elias,” Kim cried. “Run!”

I did, but not away from her. Instead, I ran right to her.

The girl held up both hands in the air and yelled, “Powers!”

“Oh no,” Kim cried as water shot from her once more.

I could feel my own powers surface, pulling electricity from all around me.

“Powers!” the girl yelled again holding her hand up towards me.

“You said all ravens were witches. Why isn’t it working?” the Collector demanded.

“I don’t know. This has never happened before,” she said as she looked at her hand and then held it back to me.

“Why isn’t it working?” Kim whispered.

“Oh, it is. Can you fix your aim?”

“Just a little.”

“Direct your spray towards the guy closest to us.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure because my powers about to unleash and it’ll be all the more powerful combined with yours.”

“Tell me when and I’ll try.”

“Powers!” the girl yelled once more.

I closed my eyes fighting the energy coursing through my veins.

“Now.”

Kim turned slightly, drenching the man closest to us, just as I held out my hands and released the energy built up there. Like a lightning rod, it hit her water and exploded.

The impact shook the ground, and I threw my body on hers before the energy came back through the water.

The girl shrieked and stopped the hold she had on us.

“Don’t look,” I told Kim as I picked her up and ran for the house.

I could smell burnt flesh and I knew it was bad.

Safely inside, I set her down and turned back to the scene unfolding on her front lawn.

Joe was crying as he cowered next to his car. The Collector’s hat was on fire, but he otherwise looked unharmed. The girl was shaking all over. I couldn’t tell if it was from anger or shock. And the man with them was dead, little more than ash in the yard. I couldn’t even feel badly for it.

Ryan and Dean had laid low after taking out the tires on the Collector’s car, and headed at full speed to join the action was the bulk of the Raven Congress. They nearly blacked out the sky and the ear-piercing calls had the human covering his ears and running for his car. But with no driver and two tires down, he wasn’t leaving.

In a last-second getaway, he held a gun to Joe’s head and forced him into his own vehicle before jumping into the backseat and pulling the girl along with him.

The last thing I saw was Joe speeding away from town with a black cloud of ravens on his tail.

To them, it probably looked like a scene from a horror movie. But for me, it was the most beautiful sight in the world. Well, almost.

I looked down at Kim curled up in a ball on her couch, and I smiled despite the horrible things that had just happened.

Kim

Chapter 21

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

“That asshole tranqed me. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“They’re gone. It’s over. You can rest now. I’ll be watching over you.”

“Joe brought them to me. Why?”

“I don’t know. But it will be addressed.”

“Where is he?”

“They took him.”

I shuddered. “I can’t say I’m glad even though I want to.”

“I know, babe. But I can. I hope that asshole rots in hell.”

“Maybe I should be asking you if you’re okay,” I teased while I yawned.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to protect you. I never should have let you go.”

“No, don’t blame yourself. I took off, and I’d do it again. This was Joe’s fault. No one else’s. He’s a coward.”

“I know, but it’s my job to protect you and I failed.”

“I was going to run away and leave Ravenden so you didn’t have to decide between me and your family. But you came when I needed you. How am I supposed to walk away from that?”

My voice sounded far off in the distance even to my own ears as sleep pulled me in.

“I think I want to keep you. It’s selfish, but I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. And if you try, I’ll just follow you anywhere, anytime.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Everything around me faded to black once more. I had no idea how long I slept, but when I started to regain consciousness, I heard people talking.

“You don’t have to stay,” Elias told someone.

“But I do,” a woman said. “You could have lost her today, and it would have been all my fault.”

“Mom, no. You can’t put that on yourself. This is my fault. I should have left with her.”

“She looks pale, doesn’t she? I should call the doctor back to have him check on her again.”

He chuckled. “You did that an hour ago. She’s a little pale but no different than the last time he was here.”

“What is taking her so long to wake up? It’s been hours.”

“They drugged her. You know that. She took two tranquilizer bullets, one to each wing. She just needs to sleep it off. You should go home and get some sleep or at least lie down in the bed.”

“I will do neither. And you should have moved her to the bed hours ago.”

“I know, but she looks so peaceful.”

“She really is a beautiful woman.”

“Yes she is.”

“Well, if I had any doubts on you really being true mates, that was laid to rest watching you protect her today. You acted like a mating male.”

He chuckled. I loved that sound.

“I am a mating male.”

“When she wakes, we should move her up to the house. It’s protected and safer there.”

“I think she’d rather go home.”

“Isn’t this her home?”

“Yes, but I meant my apartment. I can’t stand the idea of her being alone here for even a second after this.”

“It’s a cute place, but I fully agree. After today, she needs to be situated more in town or at the house where security and protection are already in place.”

I groaned and stretched. “What time is it?”

“A little after midnight.”

“That’s it?”

“Afraid so. How are you feeling?”

“My head aches, like I have a hangover.”

“Pretty sure that’s accurate.”

“I’ll get some water.”

Slowly I opened my eyes to find Elias standing over me. I scooted back so he could sit. He did then reached over and brushed my hair away from my face.

“The doctor’s been by three times to check on you. Pretty sure he’ll insist on giving Mom a sedative if she calls him again tonight. He said you might sleep off and on for the next few days.”

“Days?” I frowned.

“Whatever it takes to fully recover,” he insisted then leaned down to kiss me.

“Wait, is your mother here or did I dream that?”

“She’s here.”

“Why? She hates me. I think she’d have been thrilled if they’d taken me.”

“Ridiculous,” she said walking in from the kitchen with a big cup of water. “I’d have definitely been the wicked witch in that story. At least now I get a chance at redemption.”

I scoffed. “Is that really what you want? I rather thought you enjoyed being a witch. Witch, bitch, whatever. You know what I mean.” I gasped. “Did I just say that out loud?”

“It’s fine, dear. I deserved it. But yes, that is what I want. I didn’t exactly handle things well the last time.”

“*I forbid it.* I believe those were your exact words.”

She shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

“Yes, well, things have changed.”

“So soon?”

I didn’t know what was wrong with me. My tongue was loose as a goose, and I couldn’t seem to stop saying things before engaging my brain to discern if I should say them.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re absolutely right. I was horrible to you, Kim, and I’m sorry. There I said it. We shall speak of this no more.”

“No, I think I need to hear it once more first.”

Helena groaned. “Fine. I’m sorry, Kim. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me. We are family after all.”

“We are? Did I pass out and hit my head or something?”

Elias chuckled again. “We’ve had lots of time to talk things out while you were sleeping.”

“I don’t always deal well with things sprung on me like that and really don’t handle change well. So I reacted when I should have just shut my mouth and listened. All Edward and I have ever wanted was for the kids to be happy in life. And only a fool would miss the way he looks at you. I mean, I haven’t seen my son smile this much in, well, ever. I swear he was born with a scowl on his face. And while I may be a bitch, I am no fool.”

I had no words in which to respond to that confession.

“What happened after I passed out? Is everyone okay? Did they take anyone else?” I had a dozen questions running through my head.

“Thanks to you, dear, the Congress is safe, and all Flocks have accounted for everyone, with the exception of Joe who we all saw drive away with the Collector and that horrid witch.”

“That’s hardly thanks to me. He did it to get back at me. Otherwise, he might not have gotten involved with them at all. They were coming after me.”

“And for now, we don’t know why, but don’t think for a second any of this was your fault. I’ve heard all the details of what occurred at the party, and I am truly sorry for not listening sooner. In no way did you deserve that. What you did today was brave.”

This time I laughed, but neither of them joined me.

“Oh, you’re serious?”

“I am. Your warning call may have saved countless ravens today. You had already been shot once, and instead of hiding and letting it pass, you alerted all the Flocks.”

I grimaced. “I did try to hide at first. I was so out of it but managed to land in a tree. There was a hollow, and I was trying to get to it so I could sleep off the first tranq. But they found me, and that’s when I realized it had a tracking device. I could have stayed, but they would have found me, and I would have woken up who knows where. But in the midst of it all, I remembered the lessons on safety my father used to preach to my brother and I. ‘We’re safer in numbers.’ I could see the apartment in the distance, and I just took off flying as hard as I could. I knew I couldn’t sustain it, but I cried out in warning as loud as I could and that’s when they shot me again. It was too much, and I fell out of the sky. And that’s all I really remember.”

“Well, you’re safe now,” Helena insisted.

“We knew there was a threat with possible Collector attacks, but none of us really imagined it would happen. Not here in Ravenden. I’m so sorry. I

should have pushed harder for them to act the second we found out.”

“Elias, none of this was your fault. Maybe we should all stop laying blame on ourselves and just move forward.”

“Does that include me too?” Helena asked.

I wasn’t sure I could trust her, but I knew that if Elias and I were going to have a future together, then I had to try.

“Yes. If you can overlook the whole ‘she’s an unworthy Grimes’ thing, then I can try and let it go too.”

“How about a do-over?” Elias suggested. “Mom, this is my mate, Kim Grimes.”

She rolled her eyes but played along anyway. “Hello Kim, I’m Helena Dean Davenport, Elias’s mother, and I’ve been looking forward to this day since the moment he was born. It is so nice to meet you.”

“A little overkill but better,” he teased.

I knew that the words that had been said and the archaic system behind them weren’t going to just disappear overnight, but just maybe this was a step in the right direction.

We stayed up a bit longer talking, and it was nice. His mother and I had more in common than either of us had ever imagined. But eventually, I wore out once more.

With a big yawn, I apologized. “I’m so sorry. I just can’t seem to stop.”

“You take this girl to bed, but let her actually sleep,” she warned him.

“Do you think you could make it back to the apartment first? Honestly, I don’t think I’m going to be able to sleep here. Too much happened today.”

“I agree, but my car’s already there. We both flew here.”

“Dean brought his bike over hours ago. Do you think you’re up to ride on it though? My car is also here. I could drop you off.”

“Um okay. The car would probably be best.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I’m sure.”

It had been the longest, craziest day of my life. Why shouldn’t it end with Helena Davenport chauffeuring me to her son’s apartment to spend the night?

A hysterical laugh threatened to bubble out of me, and I knew at some point soon I was going to have an all-out ugly cry to set these emotions free.

It was strange sliding into the passenger seat next to his mother. It was only a short drive over to the apartment, and I didn't really expect us to talk, but tonight, she seemed determined to destroy any expectations I may have had.

"I'm glad you and Elias found each other," she told me, surprising me further when she reached over and squeezed my hand.

"You are?"

"I am. I was surprised and caught off guard, I know. But a true mate is something to be celebrated. It's supposed to be a happy time. I hope I didn't ruin it entirely for you. I promise to try and do better in the future."

"So you're saying he's not forbidden to see me now?"

She groaned. "That son of mine does whatever the hell he wants anyway, always has. So it really doesn't matter what I say about it."

"It matters to me."

She smiled as we pulled into the parking garage under his building.

"I appreciate that, Kim. I don't think I deserve it, but I do appreciate it. It's not going to be easy for you."

"I'm a Grimes, remember? When has life ever been easy for me. But I think he's worth it."

"I know he is. I'll check on you tomorrow, or today, whatever, later. Go on in and get some sleep."

"Thank you," I whispered.

Elias opened the door for me and held out his hand. I took it and let him lead me inside and upstairs. As we walked through the door, I had an uncanny revelation. Home. I was truly home.

"I'm not sure I can ever truly be comfortable or feel safe in my house again after today."

"Good. I was really hoping I could convince you to move in here instead."

"I don't think we're supposed to make decisions after a traumatic incident like that."

"In this case it's fine. I'll get my brothers to meet me over there and start moving your things over this afternoon. I'm just sorry I didn't think to pack a bag for you tonight."

I blushed furiously.

"What's that look for?"

"I sort of already moved a bag in. It's in the empty closet. I know I

should have asked first, but . . .”

He kissed me silent.

“That was always meant to be your closet anyway.”

I sighed. “Okay. Then take me to bed. I’m exhausted. And just so we’re clear, that’s not a code word for sex. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

Elias

Chapter 22

Leaving Kim asleep in my bed was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I was already counting down the seconds until I could go home to her. And I'd only been able to leave because Gia had agreed to come over and stay with her. David had a meeting with the builder who was fixing the kitchen at the diner anyway, so she was free.

"What's this all about?" I asked impatiently.

"First, how's my daughter?" Clarence asked.

I cringed under his scrutiny.

"She'd been asleep when Andrew and I stopped by to check on her last night, and she wasn't home when we stopped by first thing this morning."

"Sorry. She woke up in the middle of the night and stayed up for a while. We both agreed there was no way we could sleep there. Too much happened yesterday. She said she didn't feel safe there, so we stayed at my place instead. I guess you should know, she's officially moving in this afternoon."

His jaw locked, and he glared at me as I would imagine any father would do.

"Can we call this meeting to order already?" Castor said. "Or would we like to waste the entire morning discussing Elias's love life?"

I glared back at him, but when the door opened and Silas Granger walked in with nearly a dozen others, they had my full attention.

"We called Westin Force in?"

"Given the attack yesterday, we all took a late-night vote and called Patrick O'Connell to get things moving," Castor explained.

"To be clear, we're only here to assess security and train those you appoint to protect the Congress," Silas said. "Let me take a moment and introduce the teams. I head up Bravo and in order around the room this is Painter, Jake, Taylor, Grant, Ben, Tarron, and Baine. Next, we have Michael who heads up Delta team."

"Hello. My unit is in charge of Pack security. We'll be testing your

perimeters and identifying all areas of weakness. These are my men: Lachlan, Walker, Linc, Colin, and Tucker.”

“You asked for the best and we’re here to deliver just that. I understand you lost only one raven to the Collector.”

“He was working with the Collector and left driving him and an unknown powerful female witch out of town. So we really don’t know if he was captured or voluntarily left.”

“Of course he was captured. Joe is an upstanding young man,” Castor protested. “He’s the victim here.”

“Perhaps if it had been your mate he’d sent the Collector for, then you’d have a different opinion.”

“Elias, calm down. You’ll have to excuse my son. Emotions are running high all over town.”

“It’s okay, and to be expected,” Lachlan said. “It wasn’t that long ago that our own territory was breached by a Collector. We understand what you’re going through.”

It was nice to hear, but no one could possibly understand what I had gone through—what I was still going through. I’d barely managed an hour of sleep all night as I laid awake watching Kim to assure myself she was truly okay.

“Tell me more about this powerful witch. You’re all witches, so what made her stand out?” Silas asked.

The others all looked to me for answers since none of them had actually been there to see her for themselves.

“Well, first she forced me to shift with a single command. I was in midflight, too, and suddenly I was crashing to the ground in my skin.”

There were murmurs throughout the room.

“Go on, please,” Michael instructed.

“That was bad enough, but then she commanded us to use our powers. I witnessed her do it twice with Kim and then she turned on me.”

“What happened?” Tarron asked.

“It was unreal really. I could feel the surge building the second she said the word. My powers aren’t as quick to display as my mate’s. That caused enough of a distraction for me to formulate a plan. Using my energy to strike my mate’s water, we were able to direct it into one massive explosion that killed the Collector’s driver. I thought that would leave him stranded, but then Joe jumped in his car and drove them away.”

“Where is the Collector’s car now?” Michael asked.

“Still parked in front of Kim’s house as far as I know.”

“Linc, take Colin and go check it out for any evidence left behind,” he ordered.

“Take Tarron and Taylor with you. They’re particularly good with security and electronics,” Silas said.

Michael nodded his consent as the four of them left without even asking for Kim’s address. I figured they either already had it in their intel, or they’d be back.

“I have it noted here that Kimberly Grimes was the intended victim. Is that your mate, Elias?” Silas asked.

“She is,” I confirmed proudly.

This caused a bit of a stir throughout the Council. Even though I’d mentioned my mate several times throughout the morning, they only seemed to connect the dots once Silas pointed it out, family excluded of course.

“I’d like to speak with her. Is that something you could arrange?”

I nodded. I hated dragging her back into it all, but I knew it was important.

“I’ll take you to her once we adjourn here.”

“Why don’t you take Lachlan along as well?” Michael offered.

“And before I leave, can I see your powers, Elias? You mentioned something about blowing stuff up?” Baine inquired, making a few of the others groan.

“I’d really love to see that too,” Tucker confessed.

“Fine, but I want to be there with Kim during the interrogation first.”

“It’s not an interrogation,” Lachlan assured me.

“We can go ahead and adjourn for now,” Dad told the room. “I’m sure Elias is anxious to put this behind him.”

“Follow me,” I told Silas.

We left and they piled into a vehicle and followed me back to my apartment. No one really spoke, and while I had called Gia to give her a quick heads up, Kim had been in the shower with no way for me to warn her.

When we got to the apartment, Gia smiled and welcomed them like old friends. She and David had kept in touch with some of the wolves over the years, but I hadn’t realized to what extent until she was asking Ben how his kids were doing. It made me think that maybe I needed to keep a closer eye out on my little sister.

“I’ll go get her. Just make yourselves at home.”

I let myself into the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

“You’re back. I missed you this morning. It’s a big bed to wake up alone in.”

“I’m sorry. I promise I won’t make a habit of it.”

She was wrapped in a towel with her hair still dripping from her shower. I wanted nothing more than to forget about the Collector and Westin Force and Joe Montgomery and everything else in the world and just focus on my mate.

But the sounds of male voices in the next room started to freak her out.

I sighed. “Do you know who Westin Force is?”

“Yes. Gia’s told me about them.”

“Good. Because they sent two units in to investigate and help us secure Ravenden to ensure nothing like what happened to you happens to any other ravens here. They need to talk to you though.”

“Will you be there?” she asked, a little calmer than I expected.

“The whole time.”

“Okay. Let me get dressed and then we’ll get this over with. The sooner it’s done, the faster I can put this nightmare behind me.”

I nodded and pulled her into my arms. I didn’t even care that she was making my shirt wet. It was just another reason of many why I wore black all the time. It doesn’t show when I get wet.

She squirmed to get away.

“Just let me hold you for a minute. Leaving you for that stupid meeting was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I need you so badly, Kim.”

Her eyes widened. “Not now. We have a house full of people. Are you crazy?”

“I’ll be fast. You just have to stay quiet.”

“Me? What about you?”

I frowned. “What are you trying to say, mate?”

I knew she’d never go for it, but if I thought she would, I would have kept pushing her.

“Get dressed, or I’m going to lock the door and devour you.”

She shivered with desire.

“I think you meant that as a threat, but it sounded more like a

promise.”

God, I loved this woman.

Much too quickly, she was dressed, and her long black hair was brushed and pulled back into a bun. I preferred it when she wore it down but was in no place to complain when I was literally about to throw her to the wolves.

“You must be Kim,” Silas greeted her when we finally left the bedroom. “I’m Silas, and I’m so sorry to hear about what happened yesterday. I was hoping maybe you could walk me through everything you remember. It’s just a formality. Helps us to get a better picture of what the Collectors are up to.”

“Collectors? As in more than one?”

“I’m afraid so. We’ve encountered dozens of them and are doing the best we can to shut down their trading operation.”

“Trading operation?”

Lachlan stepped in and helped her to the couch. He sat next to her, and I took the space on her other side. I didn’t know if I fully trusted the wolves or not. The verdict was out. But more importantly, I’d made a promise to my mate not to leave her side, and I had no intention of breaking it.

“How about you tell us what you can remember about your encounter with one of the Collectors? Then I’ll be happy to fill you in on everything we know about them and answer any questions you may have.”

“Okay. Where to even begin?”

“Just start from the beginning. Where did you first see them?” Silas prompted.

“Well, I was upset and flying home.”

“Why were you upset?”

“That’s not pertinent to your case,” I explained in a tone that let them know that was not up for negotiation.

“Go on then.”

“When I flew by my house, I noticed two cars I didn’t recognize . . .”

I sat there listening to her retell her story and was filled with pride. She’d been so brave through it all.

Time passed by but eventually they started wrapping things up. I could tell by the look on Kim’s face that she was exhausted.

“Okay, I think that’s enough for today,” I finally said.

“It’s okay. I can keep going.”

Silas chuckled. “I think we’re good for now. Most of us are mated too. He’s just trying to protect you. Let him.”

I shook the man’s hand and ushered them out of my house.

“Are you kicking me out too?” Gia teased.

“Yes. Kim needs a nap.”

“I’m fine,” she tried to argue.

“Thanks for keeping her company this morning, Gia. You’re a good sister, but it’s time to go. Ryan’s probably home. Go annoy him for a while and give her a break.”

“Like you’re going to let her sleep.” She snorted.

“Actually, I am.”

I shooed her out the door and turned my full focus on my mate.

“If you could have anything right now, what would it be?”

“A grilled cheese sandwich,” she said without hesitation.

I had been prepared to order out, not that there were many choices with The Diner closed. Fortunately, she chose one of the few things I could actually make.

“Coming right up.”

As I stood there cooking, caring for my mate, I was surprised by how good it felt.

Once I was done and had it plated, I walked it over to her with a fresh bottle of water.

“Mmm. That’s smells wonderful.”

Her moan of pleasure while she ate made my body react in a strange way.

It’s just food, I kept reminding myself, but I wasn’t sure all my extremities were onboard with that logic.

I tried to discreetly adjust myself, but in the process, I caught Kim staring at me.

“Eat,” I ordered.

She did, but the air around us was supercharged, and I was pretty sure that it was me doing it.

When she was done eating, I grabbed her plate and put some distance between us. She’d been through a traumatic experience and the last she needed was me acting like a horny teenager ready to hump her without even taking my clothes off.

I gave myself a moment to cool down under the pretense of washing the plate. When I thought I'd finally gotten a grip on myself, I turned back to her with a smile.

"I know you're tired and probably ready for a nap, but if you need anything at all, just let me know."

"Okay," she said, sounding a little disappointed, though she got up and walked into the bedroom closing the door behind her.

I grabbed a pillow and screamed into it in frustration, feeling horrible for wanting her so badly when I should be concentrating on her needs right now, not mine.

Kim

Chapter 23

This was not the way I thought my afternoon would be going by the way Elias was watching me eat the sandwich. I'm sure he was right, and I needed a nap. Reliving everything had taken its toll, but I didn't want to sleep.

My body was overheated and uncomfortable with desire that my mate effectively cock-blocked himself from fixing. I tossed and turned. But I really did try to close my eyes. Instead of sleep, dirty thoughts involving Elias flashed through my mind, making the situation all the worse.

With a huff, I groaned into my pillow.

Then an idea came to mind. I grinned wickedly. He did say to let him know if I needed anything. I definitely needed something. I needed him.

Jumping out of bed, I took off my clothes then climbed back in. The cool air made my breasts tighten, and I squeezed my thighs together as I shivered in anticipation.

Trying to look sexy, I laid out in one position and then another. I opened my legs wide, and then closed them. Truth was, I had no idea how to look desirable. Maybe desperate and needy was a better route for me to take.

I laughed to myself. This was ridiculous. But I also knew I wasn't going to sleep without him.

"Elias."

I could hear him getting up and walking towards me. He slowly opened the door and peeked inside.

"Did you need something?"

"Yes."

He immediately noticed my nakedness as his eyes washed over me and he gulped hard.

"Uh, what do you need?"

"You," I boldly told him.

He stood there for a moment and then a grin broke out across his face.

"Oh, thank God!"

He started removing his clothes as he closed the gap between us. By

the time he crawled into bed with me, he was already gloriously naked.

As he kissed me, he took my breath away. I knew without a doubt or hesitation that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man.

I sighed happily, reaching for him, desperate to touch him. He was already hard, and I knew I hadn't imagined the sexual tension between us before he banished me to the bedroom for a nap.

"Tell me what you need, baby," he whispered in my ear.

"All I need is you. All I'm ever going to need is you. I don't trust that your mom is completely okay with us, and just yesterday I was ready to leave Ravenden just so you didn't have to decide between us. But Elias, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And maybe it won't be perfect all the time and maybe we'll have really bad days like yesterday, but even through that, you were there for me. And I want to be there for you too. I love you so much, and right now I need you so badly it hurts."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Slowly, I nodded.

"If you still want me, mark me as yours."

He let out a series of chirps that melted my heart.

"What about not making any major decisions during times of high stress?"

"Screw that. I know this isn't something I'm ever going to regret."

He gave me a wicked smirk. "How about I screw you instead?"

Before I could respond, he kissed me again, deeply and passionately. It took my breath away, and I clung to him in response.

He pulled back, leaving me breathless as he trailed light kisses down the long column of my neck. I nuzzled into the crook of his, taking a moment to just breathe in his scent.

I felt the sting of his bite before I even realized what was happening and my beak immediately appeared as I bit down on him. We were still stuck like that as I rolled on top of him, needing him inside of me like I needed air to breathe.

He understood the assignment as he helped to guide himself to my entrance. Slowly, I lowered myself onto him and froze. The connection surging between us was unreal and not what I was prepared for.

Mine! my raven called in my mind.

A guttural sound erupted from my throat as I started to move up and down, feeling everything as if we were in perfect sync with each other. This

was it, our moment. It was a bond that would intertwine our lives forever.

He was mine and I was his. Nothing else mattered.

I was the first to let go as a sort of frenzy inside made me feel like I was about to combust. I threw back my head and cried out his name as he let go of the grip he had on me.

When I saw the V-shaped mark I'd left on him, I wanted to cheer and cry all at the same time. My body was building in pressure, and I rode him harder and faster, seeking a climax I couldn't even imagine.

"Yes!" I cried out, feeling the tension grow almost uncomfortable but knowing what awaited on the other side.

"Wait for me," he begged.

I stared into his eyes and nodded.

Together we rose and together we fell.

Hot and sweaty. Our breathing ragged. Our hearts pounding as one in perfect sync with each other.

I collapsed down on top of him, unable to stop smiling.

He kissed me all over.

"I love you so much, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life reminding you of why you chose me."

I think he expected me to curl up and go to sleep at last, but I was too excited, and I had to see the mark he'd given me for myself.

When I jumped out of bed, he looked confused.

"Where are you going?"

"To see it."

"See what?"

"Your mark."

He beamed proudly and got up to follow me. When he caught up, I was already staring at it in the bathroom mirror admiringly.

Taking a moment, he checked out mine on his shoulder.

"It's perfect," I whispered.

He wrapped his arms around me and just held me.

"You're perfect," he insisted.

I laughed. "Far from it. But that's your problem now. No taking this back."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

He kissed the spot on my neck, and I didn't want to admit that it did things to me. I would have acted on it too if the last twenty-four hours didn't

suddenly hit me like a brick wall.

I yawned, suddenly exhausted as the adrenaline started to wane.

“Come on. I think it’s nap time for real this time.”

He picked me up, cradling me like I was something precious to him as he carried me to bed.

“Will you stay?”

“Only if you promise to sleep and not ravish me again,” he teased.

“I can’t promise that.”

“Again already?”

I chuckled. “Maybe after a quick nap.”

“Deal.”

So that’s what we did. Only just as I was starting to stir, the doorbell sounded.

I groaned. “Who could that be?”

“I don’t know. Stay here and I’ll get rid of them.”

He threw on a pair of black sweatpants that hung low on his hips.

Damn he looked good.

I admired the view until he was out of sight, and then snuggled back down, pulling the blanket around me.

I didn’t think anything could possibly wipe the smile from my face, but then I heard him.

“We figured she might not be up to coming out, so we brought game night to you.”

“Dad?” I practically yelled.

Much to my horror, he walked right into the bedroom.

Grabbing at the sheets, I covered myself up even more.

“Jesus, Kimmy, it’s still daylight out. Put some clothes on and get out here. I brought pizza and Monopoly.”

“Shut the damn door, Dad,” I yelled at his retreating back.

Instead, Elias ran back in.

“I panicked,” he confessed. “And they pretty much bulldozed right over me.”

“They? Andrew’s here too.”

“Yes, he is. Now get your ass out here. And I’m not going easy on you just because you almost died yesterday,” my brother yelled from the next room. “Ow.”

I giggled knowing our father likely just smacked him across the back

of the head.

“Put some clothes on first. No one wants to see all that. Well, maybe Elias, but I assure you, even he doesn’t want to see you naked as long as we’re here,” Andrew teased.

Dad must have smacked him again.

“Stop hitting me or you’re going down, old man.”

“He’s right, you know.”

“Damn straight I am.”

“Shut up, Andrew.”

Begrudgingly, I got up and dressed.

Elias threw on a shirt and left me to finish.

“Traitor,” I whispered at his back.

“Do you want me to ask them to leave?”

“Ask all you want. I’m not leaving until I see for myself that you’re okay,” Dad insisted.

I sighed and headed for the living room to find them set up at the dining room table ready to play board games.

“Could you please just pretend there’s such a thing as privacy?” I complained.

“No such thing when it comes to family,” my dad insisted.

“How did you guys even get in here?”

“It wasn’t easy,” Andrew admitted. “You have this place locked down like Fort Knox. Had to flash my badge and threaten to come back for a fire compliance check to get anyone to even open the door for us. It’s rather impressive.”

“Safest in all of Ravenden, which is why we’re staying here and not at Kim’s house.”

“I can’t even complain about that now that you’ve gone and made an honest woman of her and all.”

“Dad!”

“Don’t bother denying it. Romeo here answered the door shirtless. We already saw it,” Andrew explained.

“It’s not a secret or anything,” Elias insisted. “But it is new.”

“Oh shit! Is that what we interrupted? No wonder you’re so grumpy, Kimmy,” Andrew said.

He knew I hated that childhood name. Only Dad ever got away with calling me that.

“We were just sleeping when you barged in,” I told him.

“In the middle of the day? Are you sick? What’s the matter? Is it from yesterday?”

“Dad, I’m fine. Stop fussing. It’s called a nap.”

“They got tired after sex and bonding and all, pops. No big deal.”

My face turned all shades of red, and I wanted to kill my brother. He wasn’t wrong, but that wasn’t the point.

“Actually, due to the tranquilizers she got hit with, the doctor said to make sure she gets plenty of rest and fluids for the next seventy-two hours. So naps are important right now,” Elias explained.

“Is that what you were doing? Napping?”

Dad reached out and punched Andrew in the arm. “Don’t be disrespectful to your sister.”

“Sorry, Kim. Can we just play already?”

Elias

Chapter 24

Clarence had just rolled the dice to start the game when there was another knock at the door.

I groaned. “Who could that be now?”

Before I could answer it, I heard the key turn over and my mother walked right in.

“Oh good, you’re awake. We brought pizza. I figured you were hungry.”

She kissed my cheek and made herself at home.

But that wasn’t all. Coming in behind her was my entire family: Dad, Ryan, Gia, David, and even Dean.

“What the hell are you all doing here?”

“We came to check on Kim,” Dean informed me.

“She’s supposed to be resting.”

“Really? Because she looks like she’s about to buy Baltic Avenue,” Gia pointed out.

Kim got up to stand by my side.

“I’m fine you guys. Everyone can stop fussing over me.”

After the fiasco yesterday, I was happy to see my family making an effort at least.

“Everyone, this is Clarence and Andrew, Kim’s father and brother. And this is everyone.”

“Clarence? Is that really you? My, time has flown by.”

“Lena? Wow. How long has it been?”

My mother giggled. “Gosh, it’s been far too long, old friend.”

“Wait, you two know each other?” Kim asked.

“Well sure. Ravenden isn’t that big, kiddo. We lived down the street from each other. She was my first friend.”

“Gosh, that was a long time ago.”

The dreamy yet sad look in my mother’s eyes made me think there was a lot more to their story, but I couldn’t let myself think about Mom and Clarence together in any sort of romantic way. I mean, she was the most

outspoken person in favor of the class system that I knew.

“So how have you been, Lena?”

“I’ve been good, Clary. How are you?”

“Clary?” Kim and Andrew said at the same time.

“Lena?” Dad asked.

Clarence chuckled. “She was the only one that ever got to call me that without getting their teeth knocked out.”

Mom chuckled. “Same. I had forgotten about that old nickname.

Clarence was the only one that ever called me that.”

“Do I need to be worried about anything here?” Dad teased.

My parents were madly in love and happily mated. Nothing and no one could ever come between that.

I looked over at Kim and smiled. Just like the two of us now.

“Who would have thought all those years ago that you and I would someday be family.”

Mom side eyed me. I knew she still wasn’t happy about it, but she was trying. And I had full faith that in time she would grow to love Kim as much as I did.

“I guess we’re not going to be playing games tonight after all,” Andrew said.

“Why not? Lena here used to love Monopoly. How about it?”

“Why not?” Mom shocked us all by saying.

“You play board games?” Gia asked.

“I’ve been known to play a time or two.”

“Seriously?” Ryan said.

“This I’ve got to see,” Dean teased.

“Don’t let her fool you, and whatever you do, don’t underestimate her. Your mother and I used to play before you kids came along. And there’s a reason you’ve never seen it. Let’s just say it was a lot safer for our relationship to ban games from the house, especially this one,” Dad teased.

“Now that’s the Lena I remember,” Clarence said with a chuckle.

It was agreed that Clarence, Andrew, Ryan, David, Mom, and Dad would play the first round while Gia, Dean, Kim, and I would watch.

“I’ll order more pizza,” Andrew offered as Ryan and Clarence set the board.

I sat down on the couch and tucked Kim into my side with a possessive arm around her.

“This is crazy,” she said, watching the madness as Andrew and Mom loudly argued over a property.

I just shook my head.

“This definitely wasn’t how I imagined this evening going.”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of nice. We don’t all get together like this except for holidays now. We should do this more often.”

“Really? Dad insists on game night being a weekly thing. So much so that they just showed up ready to play shortly before the rest of you arrived.”

“Probably thought you’d get peace and quiet, maybe finally get around to sealing your bond. Am I right?” she teased.

Kim looked up at me guiltily as her cheeks blossomed into a deep red. I reached my hand up and stroked her cheek, giving her a quick kiss before she could protest.

“No way! You already sealed your bond?” Gia shrieked.

“Oh yeah, we can confirm that. Lover boy there answered the door shirtless,” Andrew informed them.

“You’re not messing with me, right? You really did it?” Gia squealed, practically ripping the neckline of Kim’s shirt down to see for herself before tackling her in a big hug.

I didn’t miss the shared look of concern that passed between my parents, but I counted it as progress when they didn’t say anything negative or cause some sort of hysterical outburst like had happened yesterday.

“I guess we have a lot to celebrate tonight then,” Mom said, lifting up a red solo cup of soda and waiting for the rest of the room to join in.

They toasted to us, and it felt really good. I knew with the support of my family, the nay sayers didn’t stand a chance against us.

Thank you, I mouthed when I caught my mother’s eye.

She nodded, and I could have sworn her eyes glistened with unshed tears. Whether they were happy or sad tears I’d never know, but she was here and she was giving her blessing. It was far more than I’d hoped for.

It was really nice spending time with our families too. Despite being divided as Davenports and Grimes, everyone got along, and it was fun.

Ryan was the first to go bankrupt. Otherwise, the first game was going well into the night. I didn’t mind because it was great just hanging out with my siblings.

Meanwhile, Mom and Andrew were at a standstill. Between the two of them they now owned all the properties having bankrupted the dads.

“I can’t believe it’s so late,” Dad commented.

Clarence chuckled. “Neither will concede, and they’ll go all night until there’s a clear winner.”

“I fear you may be right. Thank you for letting us join you tonight. This was fun. I think we all needed it.”

I knew exactly what he meant.

“Let’s do it again next week. My place. The kids and I get together to play games every week. I suppose we’re family now, so all of you are welcome to join us anytime.”

“We’re never getting out of game night, are we?” I whispered to Kim.

“Never.”

She beamed up at me looking more beautiful than ever. From the outside, people may not think we’d be a good match because she’s a Grimes and I’m a Davenport, but really, it was the little things that matter to the both of us: family, quality time with those we care about, and each other. With those priorities in place, I knew we were going to be just fine.

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes!” my mother yelled before jumping up and doing a victory dance. “Oh whatever, count it up all you want, you just landed on my Park Place. Pay up, Andrew, or sell me Boardwalk.”

“If I sell you Boardwalk, this game is over.”

“You don’t have the cash to afford to stay here.”

He counted and then recounted. I could see the shock on his face as he realized she was right. He threw down the last of his money and cursed under his breath.

“Woohoo! Victory tastes good!”

“Mom?” Gia said. “I’ve never seen her act like this.”

Dean shrugged. “I always suspected she would have a mental break someday. Who knew a kids’ game would be her undoing.”

Ryan and I laughed.

Dad grinned watching her. Even after all their years together, he still looked at her like she was the greatest, most beautiful thing in the world, because despite her flaws, to him she was.

“I think we might just take you up on your offer, Clarence,” he said.

I looked down at Kim and squeezed her a little tighter as my heart swelled.

My siblings used to tease me that I had the heart of the Grinch. I was dark and moody. I wore a shell of armor that ensured people didn’t get too

close, but really, I didn't want them looking too closely and seeing all my own flaws. That persona had become the perception people had of me. And I was okay with that. I enjoyed it even.

I wasn't sure when Kim had first seen past the façade, and I had no idea why I'd instantly dropped my guard wanting her to see me—the real me—but I had to believe that things happen for a reason. Or maybe it was just because she was mine all along. Whatever it was and however we got to this point, I was just grateful for it.

With Mom's victory confirmed, we all said goodnight as they filed out, leaving Kim and I alone.

She wrapped her arms around me and sighed happily.

"Tonight was good, right? We're going to be okay?"

"Babe, we're going to be a lot better than okay."

Then I kissed her and took her to bed—our bed.

"The bad news is, we have no idea why the Collector targeted Kim specifically, and from all accounts that's what it appears to be," Silas explained, as we reconvened the Council meeting.

"It's possible Joe sold her out to get back at me," I confessed.

That thought had been weighing heavily on my mind. In my need to protect her, had I put her in even bigger harm?

"Why would Joe want revenge on you?" Clarence asked.

"There was an incident at a function the night before. He physically assaulted my mate, and I had words with him. Fine, I threatened him. He left in a hurry, embarrassing himself in the process."

"He touched my daughter?"

"He did. Smacked her on the ass, twice, grabbed her arm, demanded her attention, and said a lot of highly inappropriate things to her. It wasn't a single incident either. He did it at two different events she was working in as many days."

"He can rot in hell as far as I'm concerned," Clarence announced.

"Clarence!"

"Don't you admonish me, Castor. Imagine if it were your little girl he'd done this to."

A guttural kraal erupted from Castor. He cleared his throat and forced his fisted hands to open.

“Perhaps the safe return of Joe Montgomery is not quite as high on our list of priorities as we originally thought.”

I tried hard to keep the mask on my face in place and show no emotions, but I took a bit of sick pleasure in hearing this.

“That may not be a bad thing because there is strong evidence that he willingly left with them.”

I knew that wasn't entirely the case. He'd been scared, probably because of the witch after seeing what she did to me and Kim. But I also liked to believe that it was because he saw a glimpse of how strong my powers were and the lengths I would go to ensuring my mate's safety. My words to him hadn't been empty threats.

“At this time, we've found no sign of Joe, the Collector, or the witch helping him within Ravenden territory,” Michael explained. “It is likely they fled the area feeling the pressure of a full Congress after them. I understand it was quite the scene.”

“Like something out of a horror movie,” Baine added, causing everyone to chuckle and the mood in the room to lighten.

“We're working with Vance Thornton and Dan Grimes to begin properly training your first responders. If you wish to establish a specific team to focus on Ravenden security, now would be a good time to begin that process as well.”

“My youngest son, Dean, has expressed an interest in overseeing something like this. If no one has any objections, I would like to see what he can do,” Dad surprised me by saying.

I had no idea Dean was interested in doing anything with his life and truly hoped this wasn't something he was being pressured into, like how Dad had tried to force me into working for the Council from the second I graduated high school. But I didn't say that in front of everyone.

The Council readily agreed as they almost always did when my father suggested something.

“Great. We'll get started right away. I assume he'll be picking his own team?”

Dad picked up his phone without answering and seconds later Dean walked in. He was sporting a suit and fresh haircut. I almost didn't recognize him. When had my baby brother grown up? I'd just seen him last night, and he still had his shaggy hair and boyish gait. It was as if he had transitioned overnight, but when he saw me and grinned, it was clear the kid was still in

there.

Introductions were made.

“I was just asking if you’ll be choosing your own team or if that is something that will be assigned by the Council or require additional help from us,” Michael said.

“That responsibility will be mine. I’d like to hear more about how you guys work and what needs you cover for your Pack. I’m here to learn all I can to discern what needs we may have here and what talents I should be looking for.”

Michael looked impressed by his answer. “Smart move. We’ll help however we can.”

Dean was still young, but he was smart. He’d graduated college in just three years and seemed to be struggling to find his place in the Congress. Maybe this was it.

Once the meeting was over, Ryan and I jumped and ran to talk to Dean.

“Looking good, bro,” Ryan said approvingly.

I groaned. “He looks like a little stuffy clone of you.”

Ryan laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with looking nice. You could take some pointers from the kid.”

Dean chuckled and that cocky grin of his spread across his face, lighting up his eyes.

“I can give you the name of my stylist if you’d like. She works all hours.” He winked at me.

I scowled back at him. It wasn’t that I didn’t know my youngest brother had turned into a bit of a Casa Nova on his return home, but he still spent a great majority of his life playing video games and was still living at home with our parents, so it was a bit hard for me to believe the rumors.

“How’s Kim doing this morning? Did we completely freak her out by all showing up like that?”

“She loved it. We both did, but thanks for asking, kid.”

“Guys, could we maybe drop the kid thing at work?”

Ryan and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

“Nah. You gotta earn that step, kid.”

“Assholes,” he muttered under his breath.

Colin stepped up and rescued him.

“Dean, if you have a few minutes, I’d like to go over some things and

answer any questions you have before Dan and Andrew arrive. We have about twenty minutes.”

He stood a little taller and nodded. “We can use my office.”

“His office? I don’t even have an office yet,” I complained. I had a desk but no door that actually shut. Not that it mattered. I never actually worked there. I checked in, got my assignments, and then went home to work.

It suddenly dawned on me that I was going to need to build an office. With Kim moving in and The Diner still closed, I was going to need some space to work.

“Do you think he’s going to screw this up?” Ryan asked.

“The kid? Nah. He’s a Davenport. He was born to be in charge. We all were.”

Ryan snorted. “You aren’t in charge of shit.”

“Not yet, but it’s coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dad’s retiring next year. I’m being groomed to take his seat. Shocking, I know.”

“Why are you doing this now?”

I shrugged. I didn’t really know how to explain that.

“Guess I just figure I need to support my own family now and this was a solid route to do that.”

His jaw dropped. “Kim’s pregnant?”

“What? No. Keep your voice down. Damn it, Ryan, that is not a rumor I want going around. She’s not pregnant. I meant her. She’s my family.”

“Oh, bummer.”

I laughed. “Bummer? Seriously?”

“Well, yeah. I’d love a little niece or nephew. Work on that for me.”

“I’m not having a kid for you, asshole. Besides, I want time with my mate before we jump into parenthood.”

“Fine, but don’t keep me waiting too long. You aren’t getting any younger. And with any luck they’ll all look just like me, their favorite uncle.”

“Would you stop talking about my nonexistent kids already? And really? You want my daughters to look just like you? Don’t you dare put that out into the universe. They’d be the ugliest girls in all of Ravenden.”

He snorted. “Okay, just the boys then.”

“And not until after I’ve secured my spot on the Council.”

“Smart because it’s going to take a hell of a lot to convince the Flock to vote you in. It is an elected position now. You can thank Dad for that one.”

I groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t even vote for you.”

“That’s okay. I never voted for you either, Mr. Mayor.”

Kim

Chapter 25

For the last week, I'd barely left the apartment. Andrew had helped Elias and his brothers pack up and move my house. Most of it was still in the empty storage room, but each day I tried to go through at least one box. The thing was, I loved Eli's taste in stuff. Most of my things were secondhand. I had a few things that had special meaning to me, but the majority of it was just practical stuff.

I didn't need it anymore. So I picked through the things I wanted to keep and asked Andrew to pick up the rest to take to the donation center. It was rare that furniture and nice things showed up there to pass along to someone else. I knew I could get a decent amount for a lot of it. I had a knack for restorations. But I felt called to just donate everything.

When Elias came home and noticed one day, I explained to him why. I hated that people would inevitably think of me as a gold digger. But I knew the truth and so did he. That had to be enough.

"It's more than enough, baby."

I sighed. I loved him, but he didn't really get it either.

"So you're okay if I donate most of my things?"

"Absolutely. And whatever you don't like of the things already here, donate those too and we'll pick out something that works for both of us."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Good, because I hate the dining table. I liked having our family over, and it's just too small for that. And mine is definitely too small."

His brow furrowed but not like he was mad, just like he was thinking really hard about it.

"I like the size. It doesn't take up too much space for everyday use. But I get what you're saying. What do you think of something with expansion panels so we can keep it smaller most of the time, but when we entertain, we can make it big enough for everyone."

"I love that idea."

"See, we've got this. It'll be fun even. And that brings up something

else. I think I want to add an office. I know I've been at the office a lot this week with Westin Force in town, but in general, I prefer to work from here. A lot of time that means online meetings, so having a private space so I'm not always disturbing you will be a good thing."

"You could never disturb me," I said, but I didn't really believe it. Things were great now, and we were still in that honeymoon phase, wanting to spend every second we could together, I wasn't naïve enough to believe that would last forever. I was used to having my space too, and eventually, that need for some me time would resurface. "But maybe that's a good idea," I finally agreed.

"Is there a space you'd like for yourself?"

I considered that for a moment.

"I've always wanted a sitting room. There's just something so cozy and elegant about it. Gia and I could hang out there, and when I want to read or just have some space, I could hide away there."

"That's fair, as long as you don't make it a habit to try and hide from me."

He wrapped me in his arms and kissed me.

I sighed, finding it hard to believe that this will ever get old or that a time will come that my heart won't race when he pulls me in close.

"I'll put that on the list and sit down with my contractor to sketch out a few more things, like a guest room and maybe a nursery."

"A what?" I asked in shock.

He laughed at me. "Kim, there is no way you don't want kids. You love family."

"Of course I want kids, eventually. Not right away. I selfishly just want you right now."

"I am more than fine with that, but you should know that Ryan is already starting a campaign for a niece or nephew."

I groaned. "We're barely mated."

"I know. I told him we're still in the practice phase. We need a lot of practice first."

I smacked him. "You did not!"

He chuckled. "I should have though. Your reaction is priceless." He gave me a quick peck on the lips. "So, no nursery right now then?"

Shrugging I conceded. "I guess if we're planning for the long-term, it's not a terrible idea. As long as you know we aren't filling it anytime

soon.”

“Deal.”

He grinned back at me like I’d just made him the happiest man alive. It was in such contrast to his normal brooding look he gives everyone else that it warmed my heart. It was like this version of my mate was all for me. I was pretty sure it was.

“I have to run. I have another meeting. I know Westin Force is helping us out, but I’ll also be happy when they leave and can actually take some time to just focus on us.”

I smiled, trying to be encouraging, but I too was looking forward to that moment. I gave him a quick kiss goodbye, tempted to deepen it just to see if he’d stay, although I knew that was a terrible thing to do. But a knock at the door interrupted us.

He groaned like he didn’t really want to leave either.

“I’ll see you tonight for dinner.”

“You better.”

He opened the door to find his sister impatiently standing there.

“Hey G. You here for me or Kim?”

“Kim. When do I ever visit you?”

He snorted. “That’s what I figured.”

Gia walked in and sat down, making herself at home.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Aunt Ginny and Uncle Atticus decided to throw another party this weekend and just sprung it on me.”

“This weekend like tomorrow?”

“Yup. Help me?”

“No. Sorry Gia. I love you, but she made it very painfully clear that I was not welcome to work her parties ever again.”

Gia laughed and shook her head. “Not with that. I’ll have it covered. I just want your help on the menu. Besides, you’ll be attending this one as a guest, not working at it silly.”

“Come again?”

My heart started pounding at the thought. As a guest? Surely, I heard her wrong. The woman didn’t even want me working a party. I wasn’t going to be welcome as a guest.

“You heard me. Mom doesn’t give any of us much choice in the matter. Family’s important, and you’re family now. You’ll be expected to

attend with Elias, of course.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. I know it sucks, but he’s going to be running for Dad’s seat representing the Davenport Flock on the Council after his term’s up. So you might as well start getting used to dressing up and smiling at these things.”

“He’s what?”

She frowned. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No! He’s never mentioned that. Your aunt will freak out if I show up to one of her parties. You heard her.”

“And circumstances have changed. She’s going to have to get over it. And you are going to rise above it all.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell me he was going to run for a Council seat?”

It hurt to find out something so huge and potentially lifechanging for the both of us from his sister.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him. But knowing him and knowing you, it’s probably because if he had before completing your bond then you would have run away and told him you couldn’t do it or bring him down and ruin his chances or some other bullshit like that. Am I right?”

“Of course you’re right. And it’s not bullshit.”

“Well, what’s done is done now. If you really don’t want him running for council, then talk to him and work it out. Because that’s what couples do.”

I huffed. I knew she was right. I just hated the thought that I could ruin Elias’s plans just for being me.

“Deal with that later, because I’ve been given orders to take you shopping today.”

“What? I don’t need anything.”

“I beg to differ. For starters, you could use some clothes that aren’t work clothes.”

I frowned and looked down at the jeans and T-shirt I was wearing. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“There’s nothing wrong with them, but you’re going to need a little nicer for some occasions, and so I am taking it upon myself to update your wardrobe. And no complaints. I would have done it years ago, but I knew you wouldn’t let me.”

“What makes you think that’s changed?”

“Because my big brother loves me. And something you might not know about me, but I always get my way. Being the only girl in the family, until now of course, has had its perks, and I would like to share those perks with you. Right now, so get moving.”

“What exactly are those perks?”

She whipped out a black credit card and waved it in the air. “Today, it’s Elias’s unlimited credit card.”

“Gia! We can’t just spend his money like that. Unlimited doesn’t mean he doesn’t have to pay it back.”

“It’s fine. I promise you he can afford it.”

“No, I’m not comfortable with this.”

She pulled out her phone and put it on speaker as she called my mate.

“Gia, what’s up?”

“She’s being stubborn. Tell her she needs to relax and let me spoil her a little.”

“Kim?”

“Of course, Kim.”

“Put me on speaker.”

“She already did,” I told him.

“Babe, go, enjoy yourself. It’s fine. Trust me, we can afford it. I told you, what’s mine is yours.”

“Gah! You’re an idiot. She’d never spend her money.”

I could hear him chuckling as Gia hung up on him. Then she looked at me with determination in her eyes.

“Even if I have to kidnap you, we are doing this. So get your ass in the elevator, Kimberly.”

I groaned. I knew that when Gia set her mind to something, there was no changing it. Begrudgingly I did as she asked.

We weren’t even out of the building yet when we ran into Novaleigh. She crossed her arms over her chest and smirked at the two of us.

“Isn’t this cute finding you two around here. So, who’s throwing the next big soiree and having Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber catering it?”

“That would be my Aunt Ginny,” Gia said sweetly.

She started to sputter. “What? I hadn’t heard. And she doesn’t live here, so what are you doing here?”

“You do know the Davenports own this building, right?”

“I know.”

“You do?” I said.

“We do,” Gia emphasized.

“I’d think your family would want to keep the trash out of here then,” she said, looking down her nose at me.

I sighed, used to the abuse and knowing better than to speak up because it just made things worse.

“Come on Gia. Let’s go.”

“Yes, please do,” Novaleigh said mockingly. “Oh, but Gia, do me a favor and put a good word in for me with your brother.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because he’s becoming quite the popular man around town and needs a good strong mate on his arms.”

She snorted. “So why would I recommend you then? And seriously, Ryan’s no more popular now than he was before.”

“I’m not talking about Ryan.”

“Well Dean’s a little young for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Elias, you moron. I’m talking about Elias.”

I could feel a guttural sound stirring within me.

“Trust me when I say you don’t stand a chance there.”

“Whatever. I’ll just swing up and bring him dinner myself then. Trust me I know what a man like him wants.”

My anger subsided and all I could do was laugh.

“Come on Gia. I think we have some shopping to do.”

She gave me a confused look but then shrugged.

“Yeah, come on.”

“Good luck, Novaleigh,” I said sweetly.

When we were out of ear’s reach, Gia grabbed my arm and turned on me.

“What are you up to? Why didn’t you put her in her place?”

I shrugged. “She’d never believe me anyway. Let her figure it out on her own. Besides, if I’m lucky, I might get out of cooking tonight.”

The two of us burst out laughing.

We talked and joked until she pulled up in front of my biggest nightmare.

I groaned in misery remembering the last time I’d set foot in there.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t shop here.”

“Why not?”

“Because they literally won’t sell to me.”

I went on to tell her about how I had seen this dress in the window for prom and it was perfect. I’d saved up for a year for the perfect dress, and that was it. I didn’t have a date, but I was determined to go to my senior prom.

“But when I went to try it on, they laughed at me and told me my money wasn’t any good there, that a Grimes could never do justice to one of their dresses. I was completely humiliated and ended up skipping the prom entirely.”

“That’s bullshit. Come on.”

“Gia, I’m not kidding. I can’t go back in there. It may have been a long time ago, but the people haven’t changed any.”

“Would you please trust me.”

She had no clue how bad things could get, but against my better judgement, I followed.

“Gia!” the girl behind the counter greeted. “It’s been far too long since you stopped in. What can I do for you?”

Then she did a second take, looking at me.

“I know you must be in a rush, but do you think you could ask your diner girl to wait outside. We don’t really serve to her kind.”

“Excuse me? Since when?”

“Since always.”

“Oh, my mistake, and here I always felt so welcome here, but if you don’t serve to ravens, then I suppose we’ll move on.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know I didn’t mean it like that. It’s her Flock. We cater to a higher clientele.”

Gia looked back at me, and I shrugged giving her an ‘I told you so’ look, but she just winked at me.

“Well, thanks for letting me know. I’ll be certain to let my mother and Aunt Ginny know that Davenports aren’t welcome here anymore.”

“Wait, what? That’s not what I meant. You misunderstood. She’s a Grimes.”

“Not that it should matter to you or any of your customers, because seriously, it’s really bad business to discriminate against anyone, but this is Kim Grimes Davenport, my sister-in-law.”

“Your wh-what?” Her jaw was practically touching the floor.

“You heard me. Come along Kim. We’ll have to look elsewhere for

our dresses for Aunt Ginny's party tomorrow."

And with that she turned and walked away. I shrugged at the saleswoman.

"Your loss," I told her and turned to hurry and catch up with Gia. "That actually felt really good."

"I guess. They actually had a dress that would have looked stunning on you. And I really didn't want it to be true. I'm sorry that ever happened to you."

"It's not a big deal, Gia. Comes with the name. People aren't treated equally around here. I know you and Elias don't fully comprehend that, but it's true. The class system is alive and well."

"Yeah, but that's not okay with me. And I did like that store, and now I have to shun it until they seriously kiss your ass or close down."

"What? Why? You don't have to do that."

"Yes, I do. We're family, and you're a really good person and don't deserve any of that bullshit, Kim."

"I love you, but you can't fight my battles for me. Did you really have another place to go?"

"Maybe. There's a new little shop around the corner that I've been wanting to try. Let's see what she's got."

We walked two streets over, and I was a bit confused because we were heading to what most would consider the ghetto of Ravenden, not that it looked any different than where we'd just come from. Everything was just as clean and nice here.

She surprised me when she stopped in front of Frieda's Custom Designs.

"This is Frieda Pierce's shop. Why would you want to go in here?"

"I passed by it the other day and saw a beautiful gown that I really wanted. Want to check it out?"

"Sure. I guess."

The place was new, and Frieda was struggling to find clients for what she really wanted to do. I knew she was frustrated because she was great at what she did and could design and make absolutely anything, but since she was a Pierce, no one above a Grimes would give it a second glance.

Gia walked inside with her head held high just as she had in the last store. Frieda was in the back room and yelled out, "Be with you in just a second."

When she stepped into the room and saw Gia, she nearly did a double take and then quickly tried to cover her shock. Gia's red hair, which was uncharacteristic of most raven shifters, made her stand out everywhere she went.

"Gia. Hello. Welcome. What can I do for you today?" It was the sort of greeting she was used to getting anywhere she went. Then Frieda looked at me and instead of the disdain I'd witnessed at the last place, her face lit up. "Kim! It's so good to see you. What brings you ladies in today?"

Gia relaxed and genuinely smiled. "Much better."

"I need a dress because I'm being dragged to a Ginny Davenport party tomorrow."

Frieda's face lit up with excitement. "Okay. What did you have in mind?"

"Since we're on crunch time, can we see what you have in stock?" Gia asked. "I know there was a dark green dress in the window last week that I adored."

"You did?" she asked. "I mean, I have it right back here. The neckline wasn't quite working for me, so I tweaked it some."

"Wait, you made it yourself?"

"Of course, Frieda's Custom Designs. I make all the clothes I sell here."

She retrieved the dress and started to hand it to me.

"No, that one's for me. Sorry Kim. But I really love this dress."

"It's fine. I was thinking of something blue because it always brings out the color of my eyes."

"Oh, I have something that may work perfectly. I'll be right back."

I had to admit, trying on dresses and doing the whole girly thing with Gia had been a lot more fun than I would ever admit. Frieda had the perfect dresses for the both of us. Afterward, we went to the salon to get haircuts, manicures, and pedicures.

Word must have been traveling quickly after the little incident in my most hated shop because every salesperson we came in contact with for the rest of the day kissed my ass and went out of their way to be accommodating to me.

"Today was actually sorta fun. Thanks."

She squealed and threw an arm around my shoulders, giving me a squeeze.

“I’m so glad, because we’re going to be doing a lot more of this in the future.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“If you know this was the dress you wanted, why did you drag me to the first store at all?”

“Well, I hoped their showing prejudices wasn’t going to happen there, but I feared it might. I’m sorry because I didn’t know about your history with the place. But, I do know that they are the biggest gossips in all of Ravenden, and if you were shunned there and I walked out because of it, word would spread quickly in hopes that it will never happen again.”

I groaned. “I suspected as much. People were going out of their way to be nice after that.”

“Which they should because they’re doing their job and want a good tip, but they should have always done that regardless, Kim. And I plan to go out of my way to reeducate people about that going forward. Plus, with these dresses Frieda designed, we are going to be the envy of the party, and everyone will know exactly where we got them. I just hope she doesn’t get too overwhelmed. Davenports have a way of making big statements.”

I smiled. “Well that sounds like a great one to make.”

She dropped me off at the apartment and I let myself in, earning me quite a few stares and whispers. I hadn’t left the place much since I’d moved in and when I did it was by the garage, not the lobby.

You’re a Davenport now, Kim. Act like it.

So I held my head high and ignored the whispers. No one said anything directly to me or tried to stop me. Still, I didn’t relax until I was safely inside.

“Babe, is that you?” Elias called out from the bedroom.

“Yes.”

He came out in just a pair of sweats and beamed when he saw me.

“You look gorgeous as usual. Did you and my sister have a good time?”

“Too good, I’m afraid.”

“No issues?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle.”

“Good. Your hair looks perfect.”

“Salon day,” I confessed.

“Then I should apologize now.”

“For what?”

“I’m about to mess it up.”

He ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me hard.

“You aren’t even curious how much we spent?” I asked.

“Whatever it was, it was worth it.”

He silenced me with another kiss. His hand ran up my thigh and under the new sundress Gia had convinced me to buy.

I was more than ready for him to rip the thing off me when the doorbell rang. I groaned in frustration.

“Don’t answer it,” I begged him.

But after another impatient knock, he reluctantly pulled away.

“I’ll get rid of them quickly.”

I blew out a breath of frustration as he went to answer the door.

“Hello, Elias,” came the sultry voice of Novaleigh. “I brought you dinner. I hope you like chili.”

“Uh, thanks,” he said cluelessly. “Hey babe, how do you feel about chili for dinner?”

I bit back a giggle as I walked over and wrapped my arms around his waist, staking my claim on him.

“You? Wow. Talk about downgrading, Elias.”

“Excuse me? Are you seriously putting down my mate in front of me in our home?”

“Your . . . mate?”

“I didn’t stutter.”

Her eyes slowly ran up his body stopping on his mating mark and her jaw dropped.

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

She glared at me, but I just shrugged.

“You wouldn’t have believed me if I’d told you.”

It was the truth, and we both knew it.

She grabbed the bowl of chili from his hand and stomped off.

“I guess we aren’t having chili tonight after all,” I said.

“What was all that about?”

“You do not want to know.”

“Kim come on, we’re going to be late,” Elias yelled.

I checked myself in the mirror one last time, barely recognizing myself.

You can do this, Kim.

My nerves were at an all-time high. It would be the first time we would step out into public together, and I was certain gossip had spread like wildfire overnight.

With a deep breath, I stepped out of the bedroom and walked towards my mate.

“Shit. We aren’t going to make it out of this apartment with you looking like that. Babe you are stunning. You’re always gorgeous, but wow.”

I blushed but was thrilled by his compliments.

“You clean up pretty well yourself,” I teased. I’d seen him in tailor-cut suits a ton of times at these events, but always from a distance. Up close he was even more potent, and if I wasn’t careful, we really wouldn’t make it out of this apartment. I cleared my throat. “I dressed up, so we are leaving this apartment, and soon, before I chicken out.” *Or change my mind and decide to keep you all to myself*, I thought.

“You have nothing to worry about tonight. I will be by your side the entire evening. Where you go, I go. Got it?”

“Yes, but I’m still nervous. Has anyone even told your Aunt Ginny? Because I’m pretty sure she will lose her shit. I was forbidden to return to one of her parties even as a worker.”

“I know, but this is different. It’s going to be okay.”

We headed down the elevator and over to my car, but he detoured me away from it to a black Mercedes.

“What’s this?”

“My car.”

“Wait, you have a car?”

“Of course I do, and an SUV in case of snow.”

“But I’ve only ever seen you ride your motorcycle. Even in the rain.”

He shrugged as he opened the door for me and took my hand, helping me inside. It made me feel even more special than the dress did.

Once I was settled, he walked around and let himself into the driver’s seat.

“Ready?”

“As ready as I’m ever going to be.”

He fired up the car and backed out. As he shifted to drive, he reached for my hand, linking our fingers together.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course. Ask me anything.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you planned to run for a seat on the Council?”

He cringed. “Who told you that?”

“Gia. But I should have heard it from you first.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to stress about it right now. We’ve had enough going on. Plus, it’s still a while before that could happen, and I could change my mind still.”

“You won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because when you set your mind on something nothing can stop you. I’m pretty sure I’m a testament to that.”

He grinned and pulled our conjoined hands to him so he could kiss the back of my hand.

“You were worth the wait. I love you so much, and I’m sorry you heard it from Gia first. We should have talked about it. There’s a lot we still need to talk about.”

“I know. But I’m just worried that I’m going to drag you down when you go to run. You should have taken a more prominent mate if that was your ambition.”

As I said the words, a wave of nausea struck me hard, and my bird was squawking in my head in protest.

“Do you believe in true mates, Kim?”

“I do. Of course I do.”

“Then you know we were created for each other. Two halves of one whole. Yes, I chose you. Yes, I love you. Yes, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And my life wouldn’t have been better or easier with someone more prominent because they wouldn’t be you. I would have spent my whole life with a part of my soul missing without you. You make me whole. And if running for the Council isn’t what’s best for the both of us and our family, then I’ll pivot. Nothing is set in stone, and you will always be my number one priority. Okay?”

“How can I argue with that?”

My body was warm all over, and I realized he made me whole too.

Much too soon we were pulling up in front of the house. There was a valet there waiting for us. Elias got out and tossed him the keys then personally opened my door and helped me out.

Nerves surfaced once more, and my hand started to shake. He reached out and pressed his hand against my lower back possessively.

“Just breathe and smile. You’re a Davenport now. Hold your head high and stay by my side until you start to relax.”

“What if I never relax?”

“Even better because that means you’ll be with me all night long.”

“That was the plan, right?”

“Right.”

“Elias,” Ginny beamed. “Don’t you look ravishing tonight. You’re even wearing a white shirt. Your mother will be so thrilled.”

With all my nerves, I hadn’t even noticed, but she was right. He wasn’t in all black tonight.

“And you brought a date. This is certainly different. Hello, I’m Ginny Davenport.”

As our eyes met, I saw recognition flash in hers.

“Kim?”

“Hello Mrs. Davenport. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Mom really didn’t talk to you?”

“Now what fun would that be?” Helena said as she walked over and hugged me.

“What’s going on?”

“Elias has taken a mate at last, and I have a new daughter.”

I tried not to act surprised and just smile, but tears sprung to my eyes as I realized she was claiming me into the family.

“A new Davenport, huh?” Ginny asked suspiciously.

“Yes ma’am,” I responded proudly.

“Already bonded?”

“Last week,” Elias confirmed.

“A little warning next time, Helena.”

“Of course. We’ve all just been so busy this week it must have slipped my mind.”

“Well, come along. Introductions need to be made, and I do not want it to appear that I just learned about this. Are we clear? But we will approach this like anything else, in full unity. There’s no taking back a bond, so what’s

done is done. No looking back, just straight ahead. Let's do this."

"Yes ma'am," Elias said with a grin, giving me a quick wink.

True to his word, he never left my side. And that night I learned exactly why the Davenports always reign above the other Flocks—because no matter what was thrown their way, they faced it together with their heads held high. They were loyal to a fault and would go down on a sinking ship together before breaking that. And by mating, I was officially a Davenport now.

There had been no mention of my birth Flock. No one dared to put me down or even look down their noses at me. If they tried, Ginny and Helena shot them down quickly, putting up a false pretense that they were thrilled with having the little Grimes witch in the family.

I had been paraded around like a trophy they were proud of, and after a while, I let myself imagine they were. But more importantly, Elias truly was. He smiled more. He laughed a lot. And he didn't hide away on the fringes of high society.

For the first time, I could see it. Elias running for a Council seat. Elias as the head of the Davenport Flock. And me by his side.

I stepped away to get a drink while he talked with a few of the men from Westin Force and was cornered by Ginny.

"I should have been warned about this."

"I'm sorry. I assumed you knew."

"Helena did that on purpose. She knew I'd have no choice this way."

"Would you have if you'd known sooner?"

"No, but I would have had time to prepare myself at least. And you . . ."

I cringed and braced for her judgements and reminders of how she banned me from her parties, but that didn't happen.

"You surprise me. You handled yourself well tonight, and you made my nephew more likable. He's lighter when you're around. It will serve him well when he runs for Council. And any whispers of scandal should be long gone by then too."

"Scandal?"

"Sure, there's always talk of scandal when people of his breeding marry beneath their station, but you'll learn to take it with grace. We'll help you."

"Why are you being nice to me?"

“You’re my niece, and for better or worse, family is everything to me. And I protect those I care about. By association, that now includes you. Don’t give me reason to regret this.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said as she walked away.

Elias found me standing there alone.

“Hey, is everything okay? I saw you talking with Aunt Ginny.”

“I’m fine,” I told him. “Better than fine. I’m a Davenport.”

Kim

Epilogue

6 weeks later.

“Elias, come on. We’re going to be late!”

“Relax, I’m ready.”

I shook my head and reached up to straighten his tie.

“What would you do without me?”

“I never want to find out,” he said, giving me a quick kiss.

“Better.” I let my hands rest on his chest as I looked up into his bright green eyes.

As his head dipped closer to mine, I gently pushed him away.

“We’re late.”

“No worries. I’ll drive.”

When we finally made it to the garage, he hopped on the bike and passed me my helmet.

“There will be pictures.”

“And you’ll still look gorgeous. Do you want to get there fast or not?”

With a huff I conceded and jumped on behind him, wrapping my arms around my mate. I loved riding with him. There was something sexy about it, and after a long ride, it always led to hot sex.

I was amazed that after more than two months we still couldn’t seem to get enough of each other. Alone time with him was always the best part of every single day.

My mind was already drifting to later when the bike stopped, and I realized we were already here.

A crowd was forming out front, so we snuck in through the back. I stopped to look around in awe at the sparkling new kitchen. With the renovations necessary anyway, Gia and David took the time to make some upgrades to The Diner.

“It looks amazing,” I gushed when Gia ran over to hug me. v c

“She’s nervous,” David said.

“Why? What do you have to be nervous about?”

“I don’t know. What if people don’t come. What if we were closed for

too long and they've moved on?"

"It's only been a few months. They'll come. Hell, they're already here."

"What?"

"You haven't opened the blinds yet, have you?" Elias said, even knowing the answer already.

"No. I don't want to jinx it."

"Well, we are fully staffed, all hands on board, right?"

"Yes."

"Good, because we're going to need it."

"We?" Gia asked excitedly.

Everyone assumed that I wouldn't want to return to work just because I didn't need the money now. But the truth was, I loved working here and was just as excited about the reopening.

Elias nodded, encouraging me to talk to her.

"I need something to do," I blurted out. "This isn't some big secret. I love my life. And I love your brother. But he works most days, and I need something to do. And I'm good at waitressing, and I love taking care of the customers. Please take me back."

"You're okay with this?" she asked him.

He wrapped a supportive arm around me and kissed my temple.

"I'm a hundred percent okay with this. Whatever makes my mate happy. You already showed this stuffy town that there's more to us Davenports and that we're just normal people too. Might as well keep reinforcing that. If it's what Kim wants, I have no complaints. I may start working here more often though."

Gia and I both looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Big brother, you were doing that long before you two mated. You've been fawning over this girl for a long time."

"I wasn't that bad."

I grinned. "As long as you continue tipping me as well as you did before."

"Oh, I'll be *tipping* you far better than that."

"Gross. Why do you have to make it sound so pervy?"

I laughed and threw my arms around his neck to kiss him.

"You two are disgustingly cute," David commented.

"Like you have any room to talk. Those flowers out there on the bar

from you?” I teased.

He shrugged, but the smile on his face said enough.

“You’re really serious about this?” Gia asked.

“Yes. Put me in, coach. I am so ready to get back to work.”

She hugged me with a squeal.

“Best sister ever!”

“So what are we waiting for? Let’s do this.”

I grabbed an apron and put it on. It felt good, and it felt right. So much of my life felt like a dream. There were occasional events to attend and expectations on everything from my hair and clothes, to what I should drive, and when I should start pushing out Elias’s babies. But this, here, this was my world and I felt in control and confident here.

I knew I’d learn and do what was needed to support my mate and his family too, but this right here was for me.

David gave some poignant speech to the staff, and everyone got into position as the blinds were raised and the door opened once more.

Gia cried when she saw the line that now circled the parking lot twice. People would be waiting for hours just for the chance to support The Diner. This is what it meant to be a community, and I was so damn proud to be a part of it.

Much to my surprise, Dad and Andrew were the first two in line.

“Pay up, old man. I told you she’d be back. This place is rooted in her soul, just like it was for Mom. They may try to turn her into a pampered princess, but at her core, she’s still our girl.”

I rolled my eyes, but he was right. The Diner may have a shiny new look, but it also didn’t change at all. It’s still the place I would sit and do my homework while Mom worked. It was the place that gave me a job when no one else would hire me. It gave me my freedom and supported me as I moved from a teenager into an independent woman. It helped me find the money to buy my own house. And in some ways, it was the place where I slowly fell in love with my mate as he stubbornly came every shift I worked to sit in my section.

The Diner was my second home, and I wasn’t ready to give that comfort up yet.

“Take a seat wherever you’d like. I’ll be right over,” I told them as I helped greet others.

People continued to pile in, and I couldn’t stop smiling. There was

excitement in the air. The thing about The Diner was that it didn't care if you were a Grimes or a Davenport. We treated everyone the same. It was a place for the entire Congress to come together. It was special. I hoped no matter where life led me that I'd remember that always.

I was both Grimes and Davenport and I was damn proud of it. I would stand by Elias and support him however I could, just as he was here today proudly supporting me. And to me, that was what true love looked like.

Once the dining room was filled with the first round of customers, I grabbed my pen and notepad to get to work as Elias joined my dad and brother.

“So, what can I get you boys to drink?”

If you enjoyed my ravens, check out Gia & David's story Alice in Wonderland retelling in [Ravenden](#).

Want more on Westin Force?

Check out their stories in [Westin Force](#) and [Westin Force Delta](#).

If you are new to my PNR world, go back to the book that started it all with Kyle & Kelsey's story in [One True Mate](#).

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With love and thanks,
Julie Trettel

Special Announcement & Teaser

Wild Fires

Ryan Davenport is Mayor of Ravenden. He's a type A personality who likes things neat and orderly. He runs a tight ship and will do whatever it takes to keep Ravenden and those he cares about safe.

But Gracie Montgomery doesn't make that easy. She's a carefree spirit with a death wish because she knows she can't die, at least not by fire. A rare fire witch known as the phoenix means fire can never really hurt her. This makes her reckless and wild, a danger to those around her.

But with an arsonist loose in Ravenden set on destroying their home, the two must set aside their differences and work together to stop him and save the town from the devastating fires while butting heads every step of the way in this opposites attract true mates romance.

"I can't work with her," I argued.

"I don't think you have a choice," my brother said. "Clarence says she's the best."

"She's reckless, Elias. And she's going to get herself killed. I don't think I can just standby and watch that happen."

I shivered remembering in horror how I'd stood there and watched her burn. She should already be dead, but her fire powers wouldn't allow it. I'd shifted to fly away from the carnage, but then she rose from the ashes, and her raven took one look at me and I knew she was made to be mine.

I'd flown away like a coward, angry with myself, angry at life, and unable to face her.

She was my ultimate weakness and I wasn't sure I'd survive watching her die like that again.

Ryan's world is about to change in Wild Fires coming June 13, 2024

Pre-order your copy today! <https://mybook.to/Ravenden3>

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About the Author



Julie Trettel is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Paranormal Romance. She comes from a long line of story tellers. Writing has always been a stress reliever and escape for her to manage the crazy demands of juggling time and schedules between work and an active family of six. In her “free time,” she enjoys traveling, reading, outdoor activities, and spending time with family and friends.

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