



JAIME RENE SOARES

Cover Art by Amanda Cotten

*Jane*  
WOLF COUNTY,  
USA

# **Wolf County, USA**

Jane

Jaime Rene Soares

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ISBN: 979-8-3882648-5-5

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## DEDICATION

To Neechie Belle, the most amazingly awesome grandmother there ever was. Without her pouring of love, care, and encouragement into my life, this book wouldn't exist, and neither would I. You're a rock star, Grandma. RIP.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Amanda Cotten, for your never-ceasing friendship, complete honesty, and straight-up talents. You never fail to amaze me.

Thank you to my husband, Jay. You make my whole life possible, and I love you more than I can ever express.

And to my Readers - thank you, most of all, to you and for your encouragement when I first posted my story online. The excitement with which you embraced my work gave me the courage to take this step.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Jane's POV (Point of View)

An hour ago. I think that was the last time I could feel my fingers and toes. I was trying to stay alive. Dear goddess, I was fighting to keep my promise.

It was the only thing I had left to live for, and there was nothing else, so I was huddled here alone in the cold.

I vaguely recall reading somewhere that freezing to death is only painful for a while. The sharp needling pains subside into numbness, and you begin to feel sleepy.

Falling asleep would be nice. If I let myself fall asleep, I would be warm and cozy again. Somewhere in the depths of my childhood memories, I could remember feeling that once when it was just Dad and me. It seems like another lifetime now.

I was seated on a pile of rotting black winter leaves. My torn shirt rustled stiffly with dried blood each time my lacerated back touched the trunk of the tree I sat beneath. Curled up with my arms around my legs, I rocked back and forth. But now, I needed to stop rocking. I was too tired to move. I closed my eyes and laid my head down on my knees. So tired.

One thought remained before I welcomed my oblivion, and I whispered groggily, "I'm so sorry, Tristan."

I slept.

Something was touching me. Groaning in protest, I thought, "*Leave me alone, I'm sleeping!*"

I wanted to say it aloud, but I couldn't speak. I was too exhausted to speak.

A masculine voice cursed in a language I didn't understand, but its emphatic utterance left me no doubt as to its content.

Something wet was being rubbed on my lips now.

“Open your mouth!” the voice commanded in a sharp hiss.

I obeyed because I wanted to go back to sleep. When I did, there was a rush of liquid across my tongue that tasted faintly like iron. I couldn’t taste it well because my tongue was frozen.

“Swallow!” The voice commanded again.

I focused on my throat muscles and clenched them, as much as I was able, in a reasonable approximation of a swallow. I felt warmth trickling down my throat, though most of the liquid spilled over my lips and down my chin. I couldn’t open my eyes. They felt frozen shut.

*“It’s ok,”* I thought to myself. *“I won’t need them anymore; I’ll be dead soon.”*

Suddenly, the world was spinning. No. Someone was carrying me.

The darkness overtook me, and everything faded to black.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Jane's POV

I dreamt. Not good dreams or horrible ones, just memories. Ok, maybe they were a little bit horrible.

“Mousy Brown Mutt, that’s what you are!” The boys called to me on the playground at school.

Tristan, the Alpha’s son, joined in the fray.

“You’re just a plain, useless orphan. You’re gonna be my servant, so you better learn to listen to me now!”

All the kids laughed.

I saw my eight-year-old self huddled down there, too. Come to think of it, I spent a lot of my life huddled down, hugging my legs to my chest.

My mom died when I was born. Like me, she didn’t have a wolf. My dad had loved her, even if they weren’t true mates.

Dad was a good dad when I was small. He was a pack warrior who mostly worked border patrol. He wasn’t top of the pack nor the bottom - just a regular old wolf working his job, protecting the borders.

When Dad was out on shifts, the neighbor lady would come and sit in the house and watch TV to keep an eye on me. She kept me clean and safe and fed, but not much else.

Dad was thirty years old when I was five. That’s when the Alpha’s niece, Jessica, turned eighteen, and they learned they were true mates. We moved to the pack house where all the Alpha’s relatives lived.

My new stepmom didn’t like that dad had mated before and produced me. I know my dad loved me once - I remember it - but after finding his true mate, he seemed to love me a little less each day.

To stop Jessica from being jealous, before we moved to the pack house, he burned every single family photo we had,



including every image of my mother. All of her possessions were boxed up and donated to a charity in the village, even her jewelry.

We moved to the pack house with nothing more than our clothes and the one toy I was allowed to keep because Dad forgot that Mom had made it for me when she was pregnant. It was a stuffed baby doll she'd sewn and hand-stitched the face on. Even the little dress it wore, she'd sewn by hand.

After we moved to the pack house, Jessica and Dad spent most of their time in their room making love. When they weren't in there, they were socializing with the pack or carrying out their duties.

It got to where I only saw Dad at breakfast. I was expected to get ready for school on my own and eat breakfast in a corner of the dining hall with Dad and Jessica. I wasn't permitted to speak. I found out it was because my voice caused Jessica *anxiety*.

Following breakfast, I'd get on the bus, complete the school day, and come straight home. After my homework was done, I had to go to the kitchen to work until everyone else had finished dinner. Next, I helped with the dishes and cleaned the dining hall. Then finally, I was allowed to eat some bread and cheese with water and be sent to bed.

That went on for three years.

No one in the pack house took much interest in me other than the housekeeper and the cook, and only when I did something wrong. As long as I completed my jobs well, they ignored me. If I did something poorly, they would slap me on the back of the head, correct me verbally, and move on.

A few weeks after my eighth birthday, there was a rogue attack at the border where my dad was patrolling. Everyone immediately knew he had been killed because Jessica fell to the floor and began to wail, clutching her chest right in the middle of dinner.

I knew what it meant as well. I was an orphan.

From eight until eighteen, I lived in the pack house like before, attending school and working in the kitchen. Only I wasn't allowed in the dining hall anymore unless I was cleaning it.

I was told to stay away from Jessica. Every time she saw me enter a room - or in passing - she would fly into a rage and begin to throw objects at my head. I didn't have many talents, but my reflexes got pretty quick.

No one else paid me any attention.

True to Tristan's childhood taunting, they did make me his servant. He didn't like to wake up in the mornings, and no one wanted to deal with his temper, so I was assigned the unwanted duty of taking him breakfast in bed every day at seven o'clock. I had to wake him, endure his wrath, and then serve him food. I waited quietly while he ate and then took the tray away.

After school, I was told to do most of his homework with mine. Everyone knew I did it, and it was just for show.

"See?" The teachers would say, "Even the Alpha's son could turn in his homework; why can't you?"

No kid could excuse themselves in light of this shining example.

I also had to do Tristan's laundry and clean his bathroom every night after he had gone to sleep. My teenage years were quite disgusting in more ways than one.

Eventually, Tristan turned eighteen, and the whole pack was waiting to see if he would recognize his mate, but nothing happened. It was only the day of my eighteenth birthday when the trouble began.

I woke up early, as usual. After brushing my teeth, dressing, and combing my tangle of curls, I went down to the kitchen to start my work.

I prepared Tristan's tray, and as I came down the hallway to his room, I smelled something divine, and my stomach rumbled. It smelled like hickory smoke barbecue and brown sugar, and it made me feel hungry and satisfied all at once in a way that felt like home. Like a cozy home where I was

loved and welcomed and free. I hadn't been allowed meat in years - or sweets, for that matter - so this was just about the most delicious scent I could have smelled. There was something else, too. There was cedar, pine, and warm, rich chocolate. So many lovely aromas stacked layer upon layer and released in an order that best complemented themselves.

As I neared the doorway to Tristan's room, it flew open, startling me. Tristan stood there, breathing heavily in nothing but his boxers. He looked at me in surprise and then pulled me into his massive suite and shut the door. When he dragged me inside, the realization dawned that those tantalizing aromas were coming from Tristan himself. My adrenaline spiked.

I had a fight-or-flight moment when I gaped at him like never before. An awakening thwarted my anticipated retreat. The realization hit me like a truck; Tristan had grown quite tall and handsome. Why hadn't I noticed his defined abs and broad shoulders before? Those mesmerizing blue eyes and chestnut brown hair streaked with blond highlights always looked sexy, even when it was messy from sleep.

*"Oh shit,"* I thought. *"This couldn't be happening. Why, goddess, why?!"*

How cruel. How hilarious. What a tragedy!

After staring at each other for what seemed like forever, but it was probably only a minute, Tristan took the tray from my hands and set it aside on his bed.

When he stepped towards me, I took a quick step backward. A look of pain flashed in his eyes, and it made my heart ache a little.

"Please, Jane, just...stand still," he rasped in his rugged morning voice.

As his hand came towards my face, I stepped back again, and he winced in pain.

"Please, I beg you," his voice implored me with so much passion and sincerity.

He made no move to come closer. He was waiting for my reply.

“A-alright,” I finally stuttered my answer.

I fought my survival instincts the best I could and planted my feet firmly on the ground in an act of bravery so extraordinary to me that I almost thought myself a warrior. It turned out to be easier than I initially expected since I wasn't eager to see that look of pain on his face again.

It was true he'd bullied me when we were kids, but since we'd been in high school - and for the past four years - he largely ignored me aside from a muttered “Thanks” after he finished his breakfast each day.

There wasn't any reason for him to pay more attention to me than that. I wasn't brilliant, talented, or pretty. I was invisible.

I stood an average height, around five feet and six inches. I wasn't too skinny or too fat. My skin was plain, cream-colored, neither tan nor too pale.

My hair was an ordinary medium brown color that was completely uninteresting. It had just enough curl to constantly be tangled but not enough to be beautiful. I kept it barely past shoulder length and no longer because I didn't have time to detangle it incessantly every day.

Even my eyes were just a drab brown color. My appearance was average and unremarkable in every way.

But there, in Tristan's bedroom, with the mate bond drawing us to one another, he looked at me like I was the most beautiful person he'd ever seen. It was as if I were his whole world. The longing in his eyes made my heart beat way too rapidly.

He stepped towards me, and that longing made me determined to stand my ground and wait even though I wanted to flee the territory and never look back.

He reached out his hand. Lightly wrapping one of my curls around his finger, he moved even closer, placing his fingers gently but firmly beneath my chin and tilting my face up to make me look him in the eye.

“Jane, you are mine,” he whispered in awe.

“And you are mine,” I whispered back as I searched his eyes. I felt light-headed and overwhelmed with things I had never, ever felt before.

My declaration caused him to growl deep in his chest as he slid his arm around my waist and pulled me against his muscular and shirtless body.

Our breaths warm on one another’s skin, we gazed into each other’s eyes, and there was nothing but us in that moment.

He bent his head down, coming ever closer. He was going to kiss me, and goddess help me, I was going to let him.

At that very unfortunate moment, his bedroom door was flung open, followed by a loud scream erupting from the new arrival.

We both turned towards the door to see the Luna, Tristan’s mother, screeching and yelling with a look of horror on her face.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Gabriel's POV

I stood over her sleeping form, listening to her thoughts. As she dreamed, her memories played out like a drama for me to witness.

She was a plain girl, innocent, and barely eighteen - a child.

She had swallowed just enough of my blood to keep her from dying or losing any of her limbs to frostbite, but not enough to fully heal her exhaustion quickly.

I built a fire in one of my many guest rooms and placed her in the bed after Emma had made it with fresh sheets and blankets.

Emma had also heated some stones and wrapped them in a blanket to place under the girl's feet. Some of the old ways were still useful from time to time.

Presently, the girl was remembering the boy Tristan wrapping his arms around her and holding her close while shouting at his mother to stop screaming.

I knew this family. The Martins' pack lands touched my property's southern border. I'd lived peacefully near this pack without incident for decades. Primarily, this was because the Alpha, as his father before him, was proud to share a border with a vampire of my caliber and frequently name-dropped me in social situations despite having only met me in person a handful of times.

The world of vampire and wolf relations became increasingly political over time. Currently, we, as species, were accustomed to using one another in mutually beneficial ways, although this hadn't always been the case. Historically, vampires and wolves had many states of co-existence; the past was fraught with enmity, alliances, wars, and general turmoil.

I continued to watch Jane's memories. I wanted to know why she was freezing to death more than fifty miles outside her pack territory, on my land, with dried blood caked to her back.

In her memory, the Luna had stopped screaming but remained furious. She told her son that he would mate *that thing* over her dead body, then ordered them both to the Alpha's study.

I entered her dream mind more fully so I could become her. I'd feel what she felt and hear what she thought.

Jane followed Tristan into the study and hid behind him, but he wouldn't let go of her hand.

The study was dark and dreary; the windows covered in dark shades barely cracked open at the bottom. The furniture was dark wood tones and arranged on top of a deep brown rug that smelled faintly like mud and dust. It wasn't particularly clean, and adding the scent of the Alpha's tar and smoke aroma made Jane struggle to suppress a cough.

"Son," the Alpha began sternly.

"Your mother says that you've found your mate, and it's that Jane Brown girl hiding behind you - the one without a wolf - Jessica's stepdaughter. Is this true?"

"It's true," Tristan answered without hesitation.

Jane's heart soared at the confidence in his answer.

"Reject her quickly and let her get back to her duties," he ordered.

Jane's stomach felt as though a rock was forming inside it.

"I won't," Tristan replied bravely. To defy the Alpha was a death sentence.

Jane squeezed his hand tighter, and he squeezed back reassuringly.

The Luna spat out the words in a high-pitched voice, "She can never be Luna, Tristan! Think rationally! She can't even stand in front of her Alpha properly!"

"She'll learn," he replied, still sure of himself.

Jane stepped out from behind him to stand beside him, keeping her eyes lowered to the ground.

“Good girl,” he said to her and smiled, wrapping his arm around her waist.

The Alpha shook his head, “This won’t do, son. You know you need to choose a mate to help you lead the pack. Alpha Norman MacKenzie’s daughter is of age now. It would be a powerful match, and he’s been hinting at wanting to mate you to each other since your birthday. We were only waiting to see if you found your true mate. Now that we know she isn’t suitable, you can reject her, and the alliance can proceed.”

“Never,” Tristan replied simply.

Jane couldn’t believe he wanted her as his mate so much that he would refuse the Alpha’s orders.

The Alpha’s eyes glinted with barely controlled fury, “Never say never, son.”

“Dad,” Tristan took a deep breath, let it out, then continued calmly.

“You always tell the young pack members about the sacred nature of the mating bond. That the goddess possesses divine wisdom and knows exactly what each of us needs. You’ve taught that true mates are two halves of one soul and need each other to be complete. I will not go against the goddess even if it means I must defy you.”

“That’s just something we tell the children to encourage them,” the Luna snapped in frustration.

“My true mate was a whore in a strip club, son,” the Alpha said simply, and the Luna visibly winced. “The goddess doesn’t care or have any direct involvement in who our true mate is; it’s just an evolutionary relic that has overstayed its welcome.”

“I disagree,” Tristan sounded resolute and unmoving.

The Alpha’s eyes blazed silently over his desk, then the door opened, and six pack warriors entered the room. Two of them yanked Jane away from Tristan and carried her out of the study and down the hall.



Tristan roared in anger.

As Jane was dragged away, she twisted her head around to look back at him. She saw him break free and take several strides towards her, but four guards quickly overpowered Tristan, forcing him to the ground.

His teeth sharpened, and his eyes glinted the color of his wolf's eyes as he snapped and bit at them, trying to free himself to get to her.

It was a horrifying and heartbreaking sight.

Tristan's desperate gaze found her eyes, and he spoke to her over mind-link, "*You are mine, Jane.*"

Their circumstances were grim, but Jane's heart was light. Her mate wanted her. He stood up to the Alpha because Tristan wanted *her*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Jane's POV

I thought they would take me to the dungeon, but they didn't. They locked me in a closet I had never noticed before. I could hear something being sprayed on the door outside, and then a powerful scent slipped under the door. It was wolfsbane. The door and walls outside this tiny dark closet were being saturated with it.

The wolfsbane wouldn't hurt me; I had no wolf. But it would keep Tristan or anyone else from letting me out of the closet for fear of being burned and poisoned. It might even prevent us from mind-linking through it, but I wasn't sure.

I considered everything I knew about Tristan. We were born a few months apart and grew up mainly in the same house after my father mated Jessica.

He was much kinder than his parents after he outgrew his childhood bully phase in elementary school.

Tristan also worked hard at his warrior training and was physically capable in a fight. The fact that he proved a challenge for four full-fledged warriors to restrain was proof.

I also knew him to be strong in his convictions. When he believed something was right, he would not waiver. I'd never seen him go up against the Alpha as he'd done this day, but no one else had ever won against him in a fair fight, of body or mind, since he'd reached puberty and gotten his wolf.

I knew Tristan was intelligent and competent, and I wanted to believe he would find a way, but it felt like we were at the mercy of the Alpha.

Feeling my way around the walls, I sucked in a sudden breath as my palm landed flat across a hot pipe. The painful burn on my flesh caused tears to pour down my cheeks. I

took several deep breaths to calm my racing heart and cradled my hand against my stomach. Without any water or way to bandage it, the heat was going to continue to pulse painfully across my skin. I focused on my breathing. Slowly, over and over, in and out.

Ok, this wasn't going to work. I needed light.

I moved back to the door and gingerly started feeling around the wall nearby. There was a light switch, but when I flipped it, nothing happened.

My hand throbbed and burned from contact with the pipe, but I knew if I waited a bit, I might be able to see a little better when my eyes adjusted to the dark.

In times like these, I lamented being only human.

Because I had no wolf, I healed at human speed and couldn't see well in the dark like a wolf could.

I crouched down and leaned against the wall, hugging my knees to my chest. My bare feet felt cold against the polished concrete floors. The realization had me lowering my burned palm to the floor, allowing it to cool the stinging flesh just a little.

I wondered what time it was. I imagined it could be nearing lunchtime at this point. I had no idea how long I'd been here or would be here. My stomach grumbled painfully. I'd eaten nothing since my bread and cheese the previous night.

I considered Selene. The Moon Goddess was said to deliberately mate those together who would complete each other. Two halves of a soul, they said. Up until now, I didn't have a lot of faith in that. After all, Selene had mated my dad to an awful she-wolf like Jessica, and I had lost him to her completely, even before he died. I hated the stray thought that came to me that Dad couldn't have been a very good wolf if she was the other half of his soul.

What did that say about me? Being a true mate to an Alpha heir in a pack like this...well, did that make me a bad person? I couldn't deny that Tristan was different from his parents, in a good way, so I had that going for me, at least.

But what could Selene have been thinking? Didn't she realize the position this would put us in?

I swallowed against my thirst. My dry throat began to feel scratchy.

I tilted my head back to rest against the wall I was leaning on and closed my eyes against the darkness.

*"Moon Goddess, if you really mean for us to be together, you've got to help us. There is nothing I can do to help myself."*

A gentle breeze blew across my face like a caress.

I thought I heard a faint whisper saying, "Don't give up."

I don't know if it was a dream or not because I dozed off for a while out of pure exhaustion. When I opened my eyes, there was no longer any light coming from under the door. It had to be evening.

My body ached, especially my butt, from bearing my weight as I slept sitting up while leaning against the wall and door.

I groaned as I turned my ear to the door and pressed against it. I was met with only silence.

I wondered where Tristan was and if he was unable to mind-link me for some reason. He said I was his, and I believed he wouldn't let me go. Was I wrong?

For several more hours, I shifted my weight around and attempted to rest, trying to find a comfortable position on the hard floor. There was none to be found, and I continued to drift in and out of sleep. The hunger was getting more urgent, and I was starting to feel dehydrated.

I lay with my cheek against the cold floor as I watched a slight glow began to re-illuminate the crack at the bottom of the door. It could be someone turning lights on in the hallway, or it could be morning. There was no way for me to know. I'd lost my sense of time.

Soon after the light appeared, I heard sounds of activity on the other side of the door. I might have been locked in the closet for nearly twenty-four hours.

My hand still throbbed, and I was both thirsty and hungry.

I tried to mind-link Tristan.

*"Tristan?"* I pressed out, *"Are you ok?"*

Still nothing.

I knew that I'd been able to mind-link people when they spoke to me in the past, but I had never tried initiating such a link on my own. I wasn't even sure it could work.

After a few more miserable hours, the door finally opened. The sudden light caused me to clamp my eyes shut for a moment.

Squinting against the sudden assault of brightness, I tried to see who was opening the door. When my eyes finally adjusted, I was being roughly dragged down the hall toward the dungeon stairs. I tried to dig my feet in, but it was no use. I wasn't strong enough to resist anyone, especially after more than a day without nourishment of any kind.

The two pack warriors carried me between them as we descended into the cold, darkened basement with stone walls. After a short hallway, they turned left into a large room with four cells.

Immediately upon entering, I knew Tristan was here. I could smell him and sense his closeness.

My eyes darted around, taking in the stone floor and walls and the silver bars that lined the outside of the cells. The stale aromas of mold and mildew were strong, but it wasn't enough to overpower the delicious scent of my mate.

Past the cells was a large open area with a number of frightening apparatuses on display. A brief glance at them revealed they were most certainly instruments of torture, but all I could focus on was Tristan lying on the floor, facing the wall.

I was tossed into the last cell on the right, directly across from Tristan's cell. The door clanged shut behind me before the guard locked it.

My mate was now wearing only his boxers, and his back and legs were covered in dried blood. At the sight of his injuries, I felt as if I would either explode in rage or collapse in despair.

“Tristan!” I whispered in a hoarse and heartbroken voice.

He stirred and turned his head to me.

“Jane, I’m so sorry. Are you ok?” He spoke in a hoarse voice laden with exhaustion.

“Oh, my goddess, Tristan, what have they done to you? How could they!” I nearly wailed.

He rolled onto his hands and knees and then pulled himself to his feet. Stumbling over to the bars closest to me with great difficulty, he stopped himself short of touching them.

“Have you been hurt, my love?” He asked with concern on his face. His eyes took all of me in, searching for any sign of injury.

“Have *I* been hurt?! Look at yourself!” I cried.

Tristan gave me a flippant grin, “I’m already healing, don’t worry. It’s just a bit slow with the silver and wolfsbane. Since they started bringing you down the steps and closer to me, the wounds are closing more quickly.”

Tears began to stream down my face as I shook under the weight of my emotions.

“You should reject me, Tristan. Please don’t suffer like this. I’m not worth it,” I begged him.

Through the mate bond, I felt his anger spike for a moment before he declared, “I will never reject you!”

I whimpered miserably even as I felt his need to protect and defend me.

“Look at me, Jane,” he said in a gentler tone.

I obeyed.

“I will do everything in my power to complete the mating bond with you. I will not reject you. You. Are. Mine. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whispered submissively.

“Do you want to reject me, little one?” He asked after a slight pause.

“Of course not!” I nearly shouted at him with a raspy voice.

His face broke into his charming, handsome smile as he comforted me, saying, “Good girl.”

After a moment in which the sounds of us breathing heavily into the dank space were the only noises in the dungeon, I began to pace around the small cell in frustration and anxiety.

“What are we going to do, Tristan? What will they do to us?”

He grinned, “I love when you say my name, Jane Marie Brown.”

“Tristan!” I hissed in frustration, even as my insides erupted in butterflies.

His chest rumbled, and then his expression suddenly turned serious as he stared into my eyes, “It’s going to get a lot worse, but we have to hold on and trust each other, ok?”

“Ok,” I agreed wholeheartedly.

If he could hold on, then so could I.

No sooner had we finished our conversation than the door to the top of the stairs opened, and footsteps echoed down the steps.

I pressed my face against the bars to see who was coming. It was the Alpha, Luna, Beta, and four warriors I recognized from the dining hall.

They all walked past the cells to the torture chamber area, save one warrior, who unlocked my cell door and roughly dragged me into the room.

I was terrified. I didn’t have a wolf to help me heal quickly. And whatever they were going to do to me would hurt Tristan a lot, too. He was nearby, and we were strongly linked again.

The Alpha motioned to the area above my head, and the warrior dragging me along clamped a pair of silver cuffs on my wrists and lifted my arms into the air. He attached them to some sort of hook-and-chain contraption then I heard the chains rattle and clink as someone pulled them. My body stretched straight up until I was barely standing on my toes.

“Father, no!” Tristan roared angrily, gripping the silver bars roughly even as they burned his skin.

“She has no wolf! You’ll kill her!”

The Alpha turned to look his son in the eye, “Reject her, and we have no need to do this. It is up to you, son.”

“I won’t reject her, Father,” he said quietly. “If you kill her, you will be dead by sunset.”

The Luna gasped. I glanced over at her and saw fear and regret in her eyes. It was clear that she had no idea her mate would take things this far when she made a big to-do about our mate bond.

Tristan’s quiet threat to his father and alpha was said so calmly and coldly that a shiver ran down my spine.

I was terrified but I also felt pity for the Luna and intense anger for our alpha.

I made up my mind in that moment that if Tristan wasn’t going to give up on me, I wouldn’t give up on him either. I looked up, searching for his eyes. I found them.

Our gazes locked, and he mind-linked me, “*Can you bear me, Jane?*”

I held his gaze and tipped my chin down slightly.

“*Keep your eyes on me, love. This is going to hurt a lot, but I’m right here. Just focus on me, ok?*” He said into my mind.

“Ok,” I answered back via mind-link.

I heard rustling behind me, and my shirt was torn open at the back. I flinched at both the sound of the rip and the way it yanked my body back, swinging me from the hook as I lost my precarious footing. Even so, I kept my eyes fixed on Tristan’s.

I’m sure my terror was evident, but Tristan didn’t look away. We stared into each other’s eyes, our gazes communicating all the love, encouragement, sorrow, and pain we were experiencing in that moment.

The air stirred behind me a split second before the crack of the whip lashed the bare skin of my back.

I grunted in pain, biting my lip. The leather must have been laced with some kind of metal. It was probably silver,



which was toxic to wolves. It felt like I'd been sliced open with a blade. I could feel the blood running down my body, but I kept my eyes on Tristan's.

The whip cracked again, creating another stream of blood from a second wound as I bit down harder on my lip. I refused to scream out even as my breathing became heavy and unsteady. There was a third lash and a fourth and a fifth. Still, I kept my eyes fixed on my mate's.

They were full of rage and sorrow but also held his love for me. That was worth enduring anything to see. Ten lashes later, blood streamed down and off my toes like a fountain, pooling on the floor. Nevertheless, I kept my eyes locked on Tristan's until my humanity overcame me, and I passed out from the pain, exhaustion, and blood loss.

My last thought as the darkness took me was that I wasn't sure if I would ever wake up again. But I did.

I was lying on the floor of my dungeon cell in a fetal position. Pain and discomfort permeated my senses. The floor was cold and hard.

My eyes focused on my wrist, where there was an IV line taped down there. The IV definitely did not have any pain medication. I carefully pushed myself up into a seated position with a groan of agony, then peered up at the bag's label and saw it was only saline. They were hydrating me to keep me alive.

Everyone was gone, Tristan no longer in his cell. I was alone.

My body shivered from either the pain or the cold, but probably both.

Taking inventory, I could see that someone had toweled off my legs and feet, and most probably in a hurry since my skin was still streaked with smears of dried blood.

Oddly enough, my feet were now encased in my gym shoes. However, my shirt, barely hanging from my shoulders, was stained a rusty brown.

I didn't move from my seated position for a while after checking the IV. My back was on fire from the wounds that

still gaped open but somehow were no longer bleeding. It was excruciating, but even so, I was desperate to see Tristan.

What happened after I passed out? Where did they take him? How much time had passed?

I didn't have long to wait.

Two burly wolf warriors came barreling down the stairs and opened my cell.

They each grabbed an arm, ripping the IV from the back of my hand, and carried me up the stairs, through the large pack house, and outside onto the front lawn.

It was nighttime again, and the moon was bright.

I blinked a few times at the sight that awaited me. It couldn't be real, could it? My brain was confused, and I shook my head to clear the mental fog.

The shimmer of the moonlight on the tops of the trees beyond the pack house front lawn distracted me only momentarily as my eyes adjusted to the dark and my ears registered the panicked whispers surrounding me.

Most of the pack stood on the manicured grass, and the crowd parted as the guards carried me forward. They stopped about five feet in front of a wooden platform hastily erected with fresh lumber.

The smell of newly-cut wood mixed with the smoked meat and forest smells of my mate. The pleasant aroma was a deep contrast to the horrifying sight before me.

I looked up onto the platform in absolute shock as I saw, standing on a stool with a noose around his neck, my beloved Tristan. His hands were shackled behind his back, and his feet were shackled together in silver.

It presented like a scene straight from an Old West TV show: the criminal strung up on some gallows, the Alpha on one side of him like the sheriff, and the Beta on the other, like the executioner.

Tristan was visibly weak with the combination of exhaustion and the silver shackles that were burning his skin and preventing it from healing. He raised his head and

looked me in the eyes. In spite of the circumstances, his gaze held his relief that I was alive and standing.

The crowd of pack members murmured but silenced when the Alpha raised his hand.

He spoke fiercely, “No one defies me. I am your Alpha! When I give an order, you obey. If you do not obey, there will be consequences. Even my own son will not escape them.”

Tristan locked eyes with me and mind-linked, “*Jane, don’t worry. He won’t do it.*”

My mind couldn’t process what I was seeing and hearing as reality. I was beaten, exhausted, malnourished, and dehydrated. My mind reeled from what my senses were showing me. Nothing was keeping my mate alive save that small wooden stool beneath his feet.

The Alpha turned his focus to me, “I will give you a chance to save his life. Reject him, or I will kick the stool out from under him myself.”

I swallowed and opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

The Alpha stared at me briefly as I tried to find my voice. A strangled sound left my lips, but I couldn’t form the words.

When I didn’t utter the words he demanded, he did the unthinkable. He kicked the stool out from under his own son’s feet, and Tristan dropped abruptly down and forward, swinging from his neck. His face began to turn red while he made choking sounds, his lungs trying desperately to access air.

“NO!” I screamed as I tried to yank my arms away from the guards that held me fast.

Tristan wouldn’t last much longer in this position. His face began to turn a horrifying shade of purple.

I forced my voice into submission, and, through a sudden rush of sobs, I cried out, “I, Jane Marie Brown, reject you, Tristan Bellamy Martin, as my mate!”

The pain in my chest forced me to my knees as the Alpha's face twisted into an evil and satisfied smile. He had won.

“Cut him down,” he ordered his Beta before walking down off the sinister stage and into the pack house without looking back.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Gabriel's POV

I observed this fragile sleeping child and frowned. An old feeling I hadn't experienced in one hundred years or more stirred in my chest.

It was pity.

The most unbelievable thing about the ordeal was that Jane had survived. I guess the pack hadn't seen the need to kill her in the end. They probably assumed throwing her out into this wretched frozen winter would finish her off.

It almost had.

Her mind had gone quiet for now, so I settled in the armchair at her bedside and watched her sleep.

Color was coming back to her cheeks in the form of little circles of pink in addition to her reddened nose.

Maybe I would have her drink more of my blood when she woke up so she could recover completely.

I wasn't yet sure what I wanted to do with her. I was currently without a living source of blood, and I didn't enjoy drinking from bags in the least.

Perhaps we could come to some agreement if she was amenable to the idea. It's not like she had anywhere else to go, and I always treated my feeders very well, but she had to decide this on her own. I wouldn't force her.

My last feeder had been a man called Elijah, whom I similarly rescued as a child of twenty years old. He was with me for sixty years until he died of cancer in my home, with me by his side, holding his hand.

I could have healed him with my blood, but he said he was happy to move on, and it was time. By Elijah's estimation, eighty years of life was a good long time. Two hundred years ago, it was certainly longer than most. I disagreed, but I respected his wishes.

There had been no romantic attachment between Elijah and me, but I had loved him. He lived a good and full life with me, and we became close friends, like family, over the years. We'd had a certain measure of friendly affection and companionship between us, and his final thoughts were for my well-being. May the powers that be bless his kind soul.

The night I found Jane, I had been considering finding a new feeder to alleviate myself from the unpleasantness of bag and animal feeding.

I'd stepped out into the snow to gaze up at the night sky when I caught the scent of this girl's blood about thirty miles west of my house.

Now, I felt that bringing her back was the right decision. Perhaps it was even crucial to both our fates. Yes, this would likely turn out very well.

She would be safe with me and live a luxurious life if she desired. By the time her memory-filled dreams started up again, I had already decided to make her the offer.

Settling comfortably into the armchair by her bedside, I refocused my attention on her mind.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Jane's POV

Tristan crashed onto the rough surface of the gallows platform with a thud. Beta Edward Douglas bent down and loosened the noose around his neck and removed it, tossing it aside.

Tristan lay on his side, gasping for air as the shackles were removed from his wrists and ankles.

His eyes frantically searched for mine as I sat on the ground near the gallows, sobbing. My body violently shook in pain and heartbreak.

He mind-linked me again, "*Jane, look at me.*"

I looked up at him with tear-filled eyes.

Through the link, he said clearly, "*I don't accept your rejection. You are my true mate.*"

My eyes widened in fear, but he cut into my thoughts again, and his words were quick but clear.

*"Listen to me, Jane. They are going to take you far away from here. They might even force me to mark someone else. They will sever your connection to the pack, and I won't be able to mind-link you again. You will be a rogue. But I will find you when it's safe.*

*"You'll be safer away from here. Live with other humans; you'll be ok. I need you to survive, alright? Do whatever you have to and survive. I will forgive you anything. Just survive until my father dies, Jane. Then I will come for you. I promise. You are my true mate now and always."*

I stared at him with red eyes and a tear-streaked face. The aching pain in my entire torso was almost rendered insignificant by the shock of what he was saying.

He still wanted me as his mate. He wanted me to be safe. I had to survive.

"*Will you do that, Jane?*" He pressed desperately into my mind, "*Will you survive for me?*"

"*I will,*" I linked back with all my heart.

“Good girl,” he said out loud.

Beta Edward scowled at him and then shouted at the warriors standing beside me.

“Take her out of here. Dump her in the forest at the north border. She’ll be severed from the pack shortly.”

I was yanked roughly up by my armpits and carried around the pack house to the driveway. The men threw me into the back of a pickup truck and started driving. My body was inflamed with pain, and my heart ached with both sorrow and a glimmer of hope.

Halfway down the drive, I heard Tristan’s voice for the last time through the link, “*I love you, Jane Marie Brown.*”

As the pack link severed, I felt my connection to my people snapped in two, like the cable of an elevator, and I was the car that would crash to the ground.

All went silent on the two-hour drive to the edge of pack territory. Because no one spoke much to me through the link, I’d assumed its absence wouldn’t affect me much. I was wrong. Though I wasn’t often spoken to, the push and pull of the thrumming emotions and the presence of the pack had been there like the breath I breathe. It existed my entire life, and I’d taken it for granted. Now, I was utterly, wretchedly alone.

Clinging to the side of the truck bed, my aching back offered to the falling snow; I felt the intense cold numbing the pain a bit.

We were driving through the forest, and I was being jostled, bounced, and battered for the entire trip before the truck finally came to a halt.

One of the warriors exited the truck cab, reached over the side to pick me up like a sack of potatoes, and ruthlessly tossed me into the snow.

“Run,” snarled the warrior who had thrown me on the ground.

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I got to my feet and started running. It wasn’t long before my body screamed at me, and my lungs burned, but I ran without stopping



anyway. I silently thanked whoever had put my sneakers on me in that cell when I was unconscious. Goddess bless that person.

I ran as my shirt was trying to fall off my body, and my shorts were crackling and stiff from the dried blood that saturated them. I ran anyway.

I ran as long as I possibly could before collapsing into a pile of leaves at the foot of the giant oak tree.

As my lungs heaved and pumped, begging for more air, the adrenaline began to fade. The precarious and hopeless situation in which I found myself overtook me as my body was racked with shivers from the cold and gasped for deeper breaths. The fear, the loneliness, and the heartbreak began to diminish as the cold consumed me, embraced me, and pulled me down into the loving arms of oblivion.

I tried to keep my promise to Tristan. I tried to survive, but I was miles from any shelter and didn't have enough warmth to make it through this cold winter night.

Not having eaten for at least two days, my body was weak to its human flesh. Seduced into the belief that death was a welcome and beloved relief, I had finally surrendered.

I must be dead now. I felt warm and comfortable. There was no more pain in my back, and my limbs were no longer numb. I felt like I could open my eyes and be awake. This must be the afterlife.

I needed to check. I turned a little and opened my eyes to the warm glow of a fire burning in a hearth a few feet away.

It took me several blinks to focus on the man sitting still and quietly in the chair beside the bed. He didn't seem like an ordinary man or even a wolf.

He appeared to be approximately thirty years old and very tall. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about him was how incredibly beautiful he was, which I observed dispassionately. With black hair and eyes so dark brown they were almost black, he watched me without moving. At all.

Maybe this was the afterlife. I didn't think a normal person could sit that still. His statuesque lack of motion indicated he wasn't even breathing. Was he an angel? No...he seemed more dangerous than that. A devil, perhaps?

An amused smile appeared at the corners of his perfectly sculpted mouth, and then he spoke.

"I am neither angel nor devil, Jane Marie Brown. Welcome to my home. You are not dead."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Tristan's POV

When they severed Jane's link to the pack, I felt like they cut off a piece of my flesh. They didn't know I had refused to accept her rejection. Most probably, the pack didn't know that I could.

Normally, a refusal to a rejection wouldn't matter, but because I had Alpha blood, my refusal could force the true mate bond to remain intact. Inversely, an Alpha blood's rejection was final regardless of the mate's wishes.

This wasn't common pack knowledge anymore. With the freedoms gained by she-wolves over decades of reform, the councils who rule our kind didn't want this to be common knowledge. No woman should be forced to remain mated to an Alpha against her wishes. I'm sure my father didn't think I knew about this. It was well-hidden information.

It didn't happen often since most wolves would never dare refuse an Alpha's heir. It was usually the Alpha or Alpha heir who abandoned an unsuitable mate. My father had been trying to force me to do the rejection. A final rejection. But when I wouldn't, he took Jane's, assuming incorrectly that I didn't realize the power my bloodline held.

I stood at my window, which happened to face north, and stared out over the endless treetops. They had dumped her in the frozen forest to the north. There wasn't anything for miles past our territory except for the vampire.

They believed she was dead by now, but she wasn't. I would feel it if she died. Her pain and misery seemed less to me now than when she had been taken away.

Jane didn't know I'd loved her for years. The morning I realized this was the first day I began to thank her for serving me breakfast every day.

By all appearances, she was always so quiet and compliant. Sometimes, at school, I would catch her mumbling a sarcastic remark under her breath or talking to herself in an encouraging way. She'd tell herself that she was strong and she would be ok.

I heard and felt her and found myself rooting for her, too. She made me smile, laugh, and occasionally roll my eyes. No one knew why, but I did, and that was enough for me.

She tried to stay invisible as much as possible around others, but over the years, I realized she was smart and had a quick wit. Even though she never disobeyed or stood up for herself to others, she carried herself with humble dignity that I'd never seen in anyone else.

I started to pay more attention to her in the mornings and watch how she moved. She mesmerized me.

I would eat my breakfast as slowly as I dared to spend more time alone with her.

I knew she never noticed me in that way. She wouldn't dare. My position in the pack would seem impossible to her, so it would never cross her mind.

However, I knew when her eighteenth birthday was, and I was waiting that morning. I hoped.

It took all my self-control that day to wait in my room until she reached the second floor of the house.

I could smell her down the hall, and I knew, but I hardly believed this amazing miracle until I laid my eyes on her.

Regarding the events of the past few days, a lot of the pack would understand my reluctance to give up the true mate bond. They would also understand that my father had to punish me for disobedience. The Alpha's orders were law. Treason was punishable by death.

I was only spared death in the end because I was his only son, and my mother couldn't have any more pups. He announced his pardon of my treason for the Luna's sake.

The pack now believed the Alpha would not even spare his own family if they did not yield to his law. They were

terrified and unlikely to disobey any command going forward after this display of power.

It wasn't that they hated me. If they did, I would surely be dead. It was a confusing situation because I refused an Alpha order, something incomprehensible to them, even if the reason was understandable. But I couldn't do it.

On that morning, her eighteenth birthday, I discovered that which I had longed for was to be; my true mate was Jane Marie Brown. I felt like the luckiest bastard on earth.

Most wolves who fell in love before discovering their true mates were unlucky because it was almost never with whoever ended up being their mate. When the true mate appeared, due to the sacred bond, the one they loved before would immediately feel insignificant to them. They may even believe the love hadn't been real in the first place.

I felt truly blessed by the goddess that the girl I had loved for four years turned out to be my mate. She was made for me, and I, for her.

I reckoned that the road ahead would be difficult for both of us. In two days' time, the neighboring pack would send their Alpha's daughter to me. Our fathers signed an alliance that included our mating. It was their hope that we would have a son who could become the Alpha of both packs after me and unite them as one. If that were to happen, we would become the largest and strongest pack in North America.

Avery MacKenzie was her name. We had met a handful of times over the years. She was a kind and even beautiful girl but utterly uninterested in me. I would need to speak to her alone before the ceremony. Hopefully, she would understand what I wanted to say.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Jane's POV

Sitting up in the strange bed suddenly, I continued to observe the man in the chair next to the bed.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Gabriel. I found you freezing to death in the woods not far from my home.”

“You live near pack lands?” I decided not to mince words. This man was obviously not an ordinary human.

Gabriel shrugged, “My estate is large. It borders two packs. To be precise, the packs settled near my estate centuries ago. I found you in the forest on my estate. We’re generally north of your former pack.”

“How do you know which pack I come from?” I squinted at him, partially from my headache and partially out of suspicion.

“You were dreaming about your past,” he answered honestly.

“Was I talking in my sleep?” I was curious.

“No, I was watching your dreams,” he shrugged.

I’m sure the shock was plain on my face.

He smiled, and I saw two of his teeth elongate into fangs.

“I’m ancient and powerful.” His eyes sparkled as if amused, and then his fangs retracted into normal teeth again.

The transition was so smooth that I could’ve been easily convinced I’d imagined it. Staring at his perfect smile, I was mesmerized that such a creature existed.

Reaching behind my back, I touched the skin there. The flesh had been torn open when I was thrown into the woods, but now it was smooth and healed. Shouldn’t there be bumpy sores or scars? There was no pain, either.

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“You’ve been asleep for a day and a half. It would have been less if you could have swallowed more of my blood, but your throat was nearly frozen shut.”

“Your blood?” I gaped.

“Vampire blood heals many creatures, especially humans,” he answered, observing me intently.

“I’m a wolf,” I insisted.

“You have no wolf,” he replied.

I didn’t know if he could really read my mind, but he knew my full name and that I had no wolf. He also knew where I came from. Considering I had never been off pack lands before yesterday and was invisible to most of my pack, I didn’t see how this was possible any other way.

A slight tremor of fear bloomed deep within my chest, but I took a deep breath and forced it to retreat.

Gabriel spoke softly, “I assure you you’re in no danger here. I don’t believe in harming the innocent.”

“Well, Gabe the vampire,” I boldly stared straight into his eyes, “What now?”

He grinned in the way a doting father might grin at his kid when he had surprises in store.

“For now, you eat,” he replied.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Avery's POV

My driver had been advancing up the long, formal driveway path through the trees for at least twenty minutes since we entered the pack lands of the Moon Blood Pack.

The Martins were always so ostentatious, wanting to present themselves as a warped sort of royalty. It kinda disgusted me how my father fed into that and tried to elevate our pack in the same way. It was always an attempt to keep up with the Martins.

Using the drive as a time to rest wasn't happening. I was exhausted from everything that had happened recently. That goal was too much to hope for, honestly. I wanted to forget how the last few days had been like my own personal hell.

Finding my mate in the past few days had been a hurricane that had wrecked me completely. The extreme emotions of joy at finding her, followed by the experience of losing her so soon after, had me feeling like I'd been in a fistfight where I couldn't fight back. The aches and pains still pulsed through my body without relief. The very thought of Angelica made me want to smile as my pulse rose, even amid my misery.

She was perfect for me: friendly, smart, wise, kind, beautiful, joyful, and genuinely loves caring for others and being helpful to those around her. I loved her at once. She was better than me in every way, but I didn't feel that was a bad thing. I felt inspired, challenged, and proud.

My parents couldn't accept that their only child was *that way* and assured me the pack wouldn't either. Nevertheless, I fought them for a while. There had never been a successful female Alpha with a female mate, but that didn't mean it wasn't possible. Other female matings were successful in pack history, so this shouldn't be any different.



My father was too obsessed with carrying on a genetic legacy and growing the pack through his bloodline. This whole plan to force Tristan and me to mate was to get an ultimate Alpha child from his bloodline to merge our packs into some super-powerful wolf empire.

He had been alluding to something big and mysterious on the horizon, and he had to get ready, mumbling about being the strongest pack to lead the coming times in the right way forward. It was a little unnerving to me, and I was beginning to seriously worry about him until I found my mate and realized he was just crazy.

He threatened to exile and turn rogue Angelica's entire family from within our pack, hundreds of wolves, if I didn't reject her. He seemed crazy enough to do it, and I recognized the seriousness of his intention. It would have been a vastly irresponsible and dangerous thing to do.

Angelica's extended family made up at least a third, or maybe even half of our pack's numbers. To rogue that many wolves and expel them from the territory would not only weaken our pack significantly but also give them a limited amount of time to find a pack before the rogue nature began to corrupt their minds.

In the end, I couldn't bear to see all of that unnecessary suffering. I told her she had to let me go. It wasn't much of a choice for either of us. Angelica had to choose her family; it was the right thing to do. She sobbed so much that she could barely get the words out. I wanted her to be the one to reject me because I didn't want her to live with the feeling that she was unwanted. I wanted her. I just couldn't stand to see her in so much pain.

Rejection is brutal, even when you know the other person doesn't want to do it. The fire burned in my chest, and the heat increased over and over, radiating pain in my bones and out into the rest of my body, even to the tips of my fingers and toes.

It seemed like my bones were cracking and fracturing to shift into my wolf but with so much more intensity and no

actual movement or progress toward relief. Physically, the pain was beyond anything I'd ever felt before, but the emotional pain was just as bad.

Like anxious butterflies in my belly and heartache on steroids, my inner turmoil caused an emotional pain so intense that my head exploded in the worst migraine of my life. As if pieces of my brain were being carved out of my head while I was awake without pain medication, I passed out just after it occurred to me that I could actually die.

When I woke up, I was in my bed feeling empty and alone. After a couple more excruciating days, my mother came in to inform me Alpha Martin's son was of age now, and they had agreed to mate us under an alliance agreement.

It didn't matter now who I was forcibly bred to; it would never be her, so I no longer cared. The only thing I could do for her now was submit to my father's will to keep her safe.

Tristan and I had met a few times over the years, and he and I got along fine. We just didn't know each other that well.

I wondered why he was available to make this match. Was it because he was being forced, too? Maybe he hadn't been able to find his mate or didn't care about such things. Perhaps he'd been through something like my own experience.

My life-long driver, David, who was also, by a cruel twist of fate, my beloved Angelica's father, stopped out of view of the pack house. In addition to my driver, David was my bodyguard from birth. He knew more about me than anyone else who ever knew me. In truth, the man was more of a father to me than the Alpha ever was.

"Avery," he began without looking back at me, a catch of emotion in his voice, "I asked for permission to transfer packs and stay with you, but the Alpha denied the request. I'm sure you understand the reasons."

Tears formed in his eyes.

“I tried, Avery. I’m allowed to stay for two nights to get you settled, and then I must go back. I’m sorry I couldn’t do better by you.”

“It’s ok, David. Thank you for trying. At least I have you for a couple more days, right?” I smiled at him in the rearview mirror with more calm in my voice than I felt.

His expression remained grim.

“Are you ready?” He asked.

“I’m ready,” I confirmed in a firm and determined tone.

It wasn’t like it mattered to me. If I couldn’t have Angelica, then the rest was inconsequential.

He turned back to the wheel and continued the drive to the pack house. We arrived quickly and he exited the car to open my door.

When I stepped out, I saw Alpha Martin and Luna Beverly standing with Tristan, waiting to greet me.

Taking in the crisp finished appearance of the Alpha in his suit and the designer dress of the Luna, I internally cringed. Tristan was wearing an ordinary T-shirt and jeans combo and looked handsome enough for most women, I supposed.

The Luna and Alpha were smiling, and Tristan was making intense eye contact with a serious expression. He wanted to talk.

The Luna spoke first, in an overly simpering tone, “Avery, welcome! We’re so excited to have you with us at last.”

The Alpha smiled down at me and took my hand, patting me on the back of it like a doting father, “It’s good to see you, my dear. I look forward to the joining of our families. Please make yourself at home.”

He gently released my hand and said, “I’ve got to get back to my Alpha duties now. My Luna will make you comfortable.” Then he strutted away without waiting for a reply.

Luna Beverly took up the conversation without me having said a word to anyone yet, “You must be tired,

Avery. Would you like to rest in your room before your tour?"

I tried to smile at her, "To be honest, I'm a little sore from sitting in the car so long."

Tristan, sharp as always, knew his cue right away. He stepped forward and reached out his hand, "Let me take you for a little walk to stretch your legs," he said casually.

I accepted his hand, smiling amicably, "Thanks, Tristan, I'd like that."

The Luna sighed in relief and called after us, "We'll see you both at dinner!"

Tristan didn't reply as he pulled me towards the trees.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Gabriel's POV

It's a strange thing to know the inner workings of someone's mind. Inside their head, you see not only their thoughts but also who they perceive themselves to be. Often, reality is different.

Here lies plain, mousy, and unremarkable Jane Marie Brown. That's who she believes herself to be. But to me, the truth is very different.

Perhaps living an orphan servant's life had given her the idea that she didn't have anything to recommend her to anyone. However, I had lived more than ten centuries reading minds. It made me something of an expert on people, supernatural or otherwise.

In her memories, I saw what she could not. She was brave, hopeful, and willing to surrender herself to love completely. Something which she had, until now, not fully experienced or known.

With a broken heart and body, she still ran miles and miles, almost nude, through the frozen forest. After more than 24 hours without food or water and having lost much blood, she still fought to stay alive until her body overcame her.

The survival instinct in most people isn't that persistent. I'd seen stronger people lie down and give in to death much sooner and under much less pressure.

She did it because she promised her mate that she would do her best to live.

In my eyes, Jane Marie Brown was one of the purest persons I'd ever had the privilege to meet. She expected nothing and gave everything.

"What now?" She had asked me after flippantly calling me Gabe.

She wasn't scared or reverent with me. She was truthful and matter-of-fact. She didn't hide anything or feel I had invaded her privacy after watching her life play out in her dreams. She just accepted that reality.

"Can you drive, Jane?" I already knew the answer.

She scoffed, "Of course not, and you know it."

"Why do you assume so?"

"Because I know what I dreamed, and it was practically my entire life flashing before my eyes."

I chuckled again.

I finally stood and pointed to a door on the other side of the room.

"Emma placed some clothing in the bathroom through that door. Please feel free to shower and dress so we can get you fed. Once the effects of my blood wear off, you could still die if you don't eat."

She nodded curtly, and without worrying about her modesty in the least, she stepped out of the bed and steadied herself before walking through the bathroom door and closing it softly behind her.

A few minutes later, I heard the shower running. When she stepped under the warm water, she moaned out loud as if she'd never had a hot shower in her life. Maybe she hadn't. She sounded as if it was the height of her experiences to date.

I walked out of the room and down to the kitchen. I didn't use the kitchen myself. I had a butler's pantry that I had retrofitted as a walk-in refrigerator in which I stored my blood bags.

Currently, my lovely housekeeper was cooking a veritable feast there, her smile as wide as the sky.

When she noticed my presence, her mouth was off and running. Talking up a storm was one of Miss Emma Jones's specialties. One that I didn't mind in the least.

"Master Gabriel, isn't it thrilling to have a human in the house! And such a lovely girl. Poor dearie. I can't imagine why anyone would whip such a small thing half to death and

throw her out in the snow! What an awful world this is, as we both know full well. Just when I think these modern times are more civilized than ever, we see more and more atrocities still exist in this cruel world. Well, you just leave it to me, Master Gabriel. I'll make sure she's fed, pampered, and spoiled to bits. Only figuratively, of course."

I grinned at her and didn't bother to reply. She didn't need me to say anything. She'd been with me for more than one hundred years, ever since I'd rescued her from a run-in with Jack the Ripper.

She wasn't even his typical choice of victim. She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. She had been a charitable matron of forty years of age serving at Christ Church, Spitalfields. She was trying to lead the little prostitute girls of London to salvation when she came upon a gruesome murder just completed.

When I'd seen her earlier in the evening, I'd been enchanted by her loveliness and had been following her for a while. When Jack turned his instruments of death toward her, I'd torn his head from his body and whisked the lovely Miss Emma Jones to my home in London, depositing the former Ripper in some hole or other along the way.

She blessed the Lord and her own soul many times before she finally thanked me and asked much the same thing as Jane had earlier, "What happens now?"

It was a common question people and supernaturals alike would ask one of the most powerful vampires in the world. A question that was born of curiosity and an admission that they were at my mercy.

I'd given her the choice to continue her work in East London or come to work for me as my housekeeper. She said she could hardly go back to normal life after knowing that someone like me existed, and she might as well serve me since she owed me a debt for saving her life.

Three years after coming to be my housekeeper, she nearly died of a vicious virus that was going around. So, I turned her, with her consent, so that she could remain by

my side. The idea of losing her had been unthinkable. It still is.

We both appeared to be in our thirties now, even though she was more like 170 and I was closer to 1,170.

The vampire nature had, of course, made her look her best self. Emma was short and curvy with a flawless complexion. Her long golden-brown hair, which she wore in a bun whenever she carried out her housekeeping duties, was breathtaking to me. So many nights, I'd dreamt of running my fingers through her beautiful locks and kissing the top of her head.

Her sparkling green eyes always drew my attention, causing me to stare at her for longer than necessary. I quite adored her, and if truth be told, I loved her more than any being I'd ever known.

We were something like a strange middle-aged married couple - where the wife had no idea she was in a couple - and it was on my list of goals to someday stop her from calling me Master and persuade her to love me back. I hadn't been able to do it yet since she seemed so happy being my housekeeper, and I didn't want to spoil it for her.

I rarely peered into her mind, giving her privacy out of respect for the kind attention and care she gave me over the years.

Emma continued cooking Jane's feast, softly humming a song to herself while moving around the kitchen. I sat on a stool at the kitchen island and watched her contentedly.

This is how Jane Marie Brown found us when she finished cleaning up and getting dressed. She must have followed her nose to the food.

She stopped in the doorway as her stomach let out an enormous rumble of hunger, but she was paused there, observing us and thinking, "*Are they a married couple? Should I go in?*"

"I wish," I said to her and winked.

"Come. Eat," I encouraged her.



Emma looked up at me and said, “You wish what?” Then, she noticed Jane standing in the doorway.

She immediately rushed to the girl and gently took Jane by the hands, guiding her onto a stool near me.

“Jane, please come eat! You’re nothing but skin and bones!” She cooed like a mother hen.

Jane obediently sat on the stool in bewilderment as Emma piled a plate full of fruit, quiche, bacon, and croissants glistening with butter and jam.

Emma then placed a large glass of water and another of juice beside Jane’s plate.

Jane stared at it in awe.

“What’s wrong? Is it not good?” Emma asked worriedly.

“Not good?!” Jane nearly yelled, then quietly said, “I’ve never been given such a feast in my life!”

She dug into the food with the gusto of a starving animal. Emma refilled her plate twice, and Jane continued eating while making sounds of pleasure and satisfaction.

Emma watched her with delight and great affection. I suddenly felt we’d adopted a daughter.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Jane's POV

I filled my belly near bursting. I can't remember ever having food so delicious. I sighed and smiled with utter satisfaction.

Finally, I looked up at the pair watching me eat and said to the woman, "Hello, I'm Jane Brown."

Emma's dimpled smile was gorgeous, and her green eyes sparkled as she came around the island to hug me, "And I'm Emma Jones. You can call me Emma."

She squeezed me a bit too tightly until I yelped.

"I'm so sorry, Jane. It's been a while since we had a human in the house and, you know, vampires sometimes don't know their own strength. I must remember that you're softer and more fragile than me. Please don't be afraid. I wouldn't ever hurt you."

I giggled at her chatter, and she stopped, looking a bit sheepish.

"It's nice to meet you, Emma," I responded sincerely and with a smile, "Thank you for the food. You're an amazing chef."

Emma dimpled at me again, pleased as she could be, "Chef! My goodness, what a little flatterer you are. I'm just the housekeeper."

I looked over at Gabriel in wonder. How did she not know he constantly gazed at her with those adoring eyes? Before Tristan, if such a gorgeous man had ever looked at me like that, I'd be pregnant.

Gabriel laughed heartily, obviously hearing my thoughts.

I grinned at him, not minding that he was listening to them. It was comforting, in a way, and made me feel less lonely. I imagined this must be what it felt like to have a wolf you could converse with secretly without others knowing. And somehow, too, I trusted Gabriel. I didn't understand why - there had been enough reasons in my life

never to trust anyone again - but something about him made me feel safe and at home. Moreover, he seemed to understand my thoughts weren't seriously lusty since no true desire lay behind them.

Emma looked back and forth between us for a moment, then rolled her eyes good naturedly and began cleaning the kitchen. She put all the leftover food into glass bowls and containers, covered them, and placed them in the refrigerator.

"Help yourself whenever you're hungry, Jane. I've stocked all the cabinets and the fridge with food. I don't know what you like, but we'll just learn about each other together over time, hmmm?"

I cleared my throat and began, "Thank you, Emma...but...I should tell you that I don't really have any place to go, and I don't expect to be a charity case."

Emma smiled, "And neither will you be one. You and Gabriel head off to his study now that you've eaten, and he can discuss this all with you there."

She shooed us out of the kitchen as she started washing dishes. I caught a glimpse of the miraculous speed with which she was scrubbing them before being pulled by the hand down the hall.

Gabriel led me like a small child until we came to a spectacular heavy wooden door with ornate carvings from top to bottom.

He swung the door open and brought me to one of two armchairs arranged before a glowing fireplace. After gesturing for me to sit and placing a warm blanket over my legs, he took the other chair facing me.

"We can agree to a mutually beneficial arrangement if you are amenable," he began.

"You want to drink my blood?" I joked in my best Dracula accent.

He responded with playful sarcasm, "I've never heard that one before."

“I vaguely remember hearing some of the older ladies in the kitchens talking about vampires once and calling someone a feeder. Is that what you’re referring to?”

Gabriel nodded at me, “That’s right. It’s typically a lifetime contract between a vampire and a human. But since I know your situation, I could provide a clause making it possible to cancel the contract upon bonding with your true mate, if you prefer.”

“Do you know the Martins?” I asked curiously.

His clear gaze carried more than his reply, “Yes, I do.”

I stared at him for a while, thinking it through. I didn’t bother trying to put up a wall since I knew he could hear me.

*There is nowhere else for me to go. I have no money or even clothing. This house is comfortable and able to meet my needs. I’d probably be safe here since Gabriel wouldn’t be likely to put his feeder in any danger. I wonder if it hurts.*

“I can trick your brain into thinking that it doesn’t, so in the end, it won’t,” he answered aloud.

Thinking of the supernatural romance novels I’d been reading since I was thirteen, another question popped into my head. I really wish I had controlled the imagery better as my mind produced a picture of us embracing in a sensual situation with him biting down on my neck like a wolf lover.

His eyes widened only a tiny fraction at the picture, but he said nothing as my cheeks burned scarlet red with my embarrassment.

“I’ve read a lot of novels,” I finally admitted shyly.

He replied to ease my mind, “You aren’t wrong in that it happens that way sometimes, but to me, you are a lost child who could use my care and provide a needed benefit. I wouldn’t inject you with my aphrodisiac venom, but instead, use a mild form of mind control to lead your brain away from the pain response. This method is easily done for me because of my particular abilities involving the mind.”

“Where would you...how would you?” I cleared my throat nervously.

In the blink of an eye, he was on one knee beside my chair raising my wrist to his lips. His fangs gently touched my flesh just below the palm of my hand, and he made eye contact with me a moment before dropping my arm and returning to his chair.

My eyelids fluttered open and shut a few times, as my brain caught up to the sudden movements.

“Are there any side effects?” I inquired curiously.

“I would only take a pint at a time, the equivalent of a blood bank donation. You would feel a little tired afterward. You will have to drink my blood, as well, if I need you to recuperate faster to feed often.”

I nodded, and he continued, “Additionally, there will be some side effects to the mind control. You will feel attached to me after repeated exposure to my tampering with your pain responses. Something equivalent to a caffeine addiction. It’s mild in some and stronger in others. There’s often an emotional attachment, too.”

Gabriel continued, “It would be helpful for you to consider me an uncle or a father figure to direct your affections in a wholesome and platonic way. I don’t have any concerns that you’ll develop a serious attraction since you’ve already found your true mate and will be able to tell the difference between a real connection and an artificial one.”

I nodded as I pondered the information. Finally, I asked, “We wouldn’t be able to have a real connection? Like a friendship? Do you get attached to your feeders?”

“I’m capable of that, yes. Not every vampire is, but I don’t live much in the company of others because I prefer to practice and honor many human ways. I was born human, after all.

“A dedicated feeder is not essential to survival in an age of blood bags, but most vampires prefer to drink directly from the vein. It is a pleasant experience for us to do so. It’s like the difference between a warm drink on a cold day and a cold drink on a cold day; a matter of personal preference.”

He continued, “My last feeder was with me for sixty years, and I loved him like a son. I would have kept him longer if he hadn’t decided it was time for him to leave this world. He passed due to an illness.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

He acknowledged my words with a nod.

I asked the final question floating around in my mind, “Won’t I become a vampire if we feed from each other?”

“That’s a common belief, but vampires have several kinds of venom that they can choose to release in a controlled fashion. Venoms such as aphrodisiac, poison, turning, and even no venom at all.”

I felt satisfied with his answers and asked, “How do we form the contract?”

“We can do a verbal or a written contract if you prefer. I have a safe where I can store it,” He gestured to the wall behind his desk.

“Alright, I agree. It seems like the best option for me to keep my promise to Tristan. But I want to get a message to him to let him know that I’m safe,” I bargained.

“That’s easily done. I’m well known to the Martins,” he assured.

“Thank you. Let’s do a written contract so that I can be clear on what your expectations are of me,” I knew he would be able to feel my sincerity and good intentions.

“Let’s move to my desk, and we’ll write it up at once.”

I followed him there, and we spent the next couple of hours sharing our expectations and wishes.

We agreed to take some time to read what we had drawn up and think over the details and if we would like to add any further requirements or stipulations. We would revisit in five days.

For now, Gabriel encouraged me to explore his estate and rest to recover from my experience more fully. He offered me the use of his enormous library, music room, and art studio, and I couldn’t wait to start my adventures in the arts.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Tristan's POV

I walked through the woods together with Avery until I was sure we were far enough from anyone else that no one could hear us.

I stopped in a small clearing and turned to her, finally letting go of her hand.

“I need to have a very open conversation with you, and I hope you will be equally open and honest with me,” I began.

She sighed in relief, “I’d like that very much.”

I got right to the point, “Have you found your true mate?”

“I have,” she answered and then, “Have you?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly.

“Is she part of your pack? Will you see her regularly?” She asked with absolutely zero indication of jealousy or concern.

I felt encouraged to continue.

“It’s not possible. When my parents found out an orphan pack servant was my true mate, they asked me to reject her. I would not. They...beat us both...and forced her to reject me...while I swung from some gallows,” I finished, my voice full of emotion.

Avery’s face displayed a range of emotions from sorrow to anger and, finally, shock as her voice trembled her response, “What?!”

She was at a loss for further words, and I continued, “My father hanged me to force her. He only cut me down when she rejected me, and they dragged her to the north border and threw her into the forest in the snow. I know she’s alive, or I would feel it, but I have no idea where she is or how she’s surviving,” I finished.

A look of compassion washed over her face, "I'm so sorry, Tristan," she said sincerely.

Then her brows furrowed, and her expression turned serious, "But how could you feel it if she rejected you? Isn't the mate bond severed?" Her expression steeped in confusion and curiosity.

"Someone with Alpha blood can refuse a rejection and leave the bond intact or even restore it," I revealed.

Hope shone in her eyes, "That's possible?"

"It is," I answered, "it worked. I can still feel the bond. I know she's safe...for now."

She stayed silent for a few minutes, her eyes staring hard in thought. I could see her jaw clenching and unclenching as she worked through the emotions.

Finally, she voiced her most pressing concern, "I wonder if it's too late for me."

"Why would you wonder that?" I asked her.

She only hesitated a minute before choosing honesty.

"My parents also told me to reject my mate, and I would not. She was a girl from school whom I had little interaction with previously because she was my driver's daughter. I knew so much about her from his stories, and I knew I loved her as soon as the mate bond clicked into place. But my father tries to enforce antiquated things like class boundaries in our pack and this event was unacceptable to him."

"In the end, I told her to reject me since my parents were threatening to exile her entire bloodline from the pack and make them rogues," she finished sadly.

"She rejected you then," I stated.

"Yes. I didn't want her to feel that pain or that I didn't want her because I did want her. I still do. I want to refuse her rejection, but it might be too late. Also, we didn't know each other well. Maybe it's better for her to move on and forget me. It would be less painful for her in the long run."

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

"Hell no," she answered without hesitation.



“In that case,” I said, pulling my cell phone from my pocket, “why don’t we ask her?”

She looked at my phone for a few seconds and finally decided to take it and dial a number. After a beat, I could hear the line being answered.

I took a few steps away and turned my back to her, although I could still hear both sides of the conversation thanks to my wolf hearing.

“Angelica?” she said softly.

“Avery! Are you ok?” The voice from the phone trembled.

“It’s ok, Angel. I’m ok,” she soothed affectionately.

“Are...are you mated now?” Angelica tried to steady her voice, but it continued to tremble.

“No!” Avery practically shouted.

Stopping to take a couple of deep breaths, she continued, “There’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“Hmm?” she hummed softly.

Avery’s face cracked into a smile. Despite our circumstances, Angelica’s voice was soothing her. It made me long for the sound of Jane’s voice.

“It’s something Tristan told me. This is his phone. Save the number, ok?”

“O-ok,” Angelica said, not sounding pleased.

Avery noticed but continued, “He told me something important, baby. He said that someone with Alpha blood can refuse a rejection and preserve the mate bond.”

Angelica didn’t make a sound, and Avery continued, “I want to know what your wish is regarding this possibility. It would be easier for you to move on, I know. So, I will respect your answer, whatever it is.”

“Easier?!” Angelica began to raise her voice, “This isn’t easy now, Avery!” she nearly screamed.

“I know, Angel,” Avery tried to soothe her, even as she smiled to herself, her beloved’s reaction filling her with hope.

Angelica sighed, "I'm sorry. I know you're the one who had to bear the rejection pain, but I didn't want to do it. I don't want to move on. If there's a possibility that we can still be together, that's what I want. No matter what it costs," her voice had stopped trembling and was sure and steady.

"I'm so happy to hear that, Angel. I'm going to put you on speaker, ok? Let's hear what Tristan has to say," Avery replied with tears of joy in her eyes.

"Ok," she agreed, then Avery pulled the phone away from her ear and put it on speaker.

"Hi, Angelica, this is Tristan," I began.

"Hello," she replied shortly.

I continued, "It's a long story, but I think that you know how desperately our fathers want Avery and me to mate."

"Did she tell you what they did?" Angelica asked angrily.

"I told him," Avery answered, "but what Alpha Martin did to Tristan and Jane was much worse."

That startled Angelica into a more friendly tone, "I'm sorry, Tristan. I should have guessed they were probably forcing you, too."

"Don't worry about it, Angelica," I continued, "I have some ideas about this situation that may be difficult to put into practice. In the end, it would benefit us all, but it's not without risk."

"I'm listening," Angelica replied simply.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Emma's POV

I stared down at the mating ceremony invitation in my hand. By now, Master Gabriel and Jane had shared her story with me. This card was beautiful yet disgusting for the information it contained.

Master Gabriel was invited to the mating ritual of Tristan Martin and Avery MacKenzie. I had no doubt it would be an enormous affair if he was including his vampire acquaintances.

I examined the offensive piece of stationery, turning the envelope over to see it included a plus one. Master Gabriel hadn't been to Martin's pack yet to inform Tristan that Jane was safe in our care.

We expected he was going to be forced to mate. He'd told Jane as much before their link was severed, but less than one week after we found Jane freezing to death in the woods was a bit fast.

Jane had been with us for four days, two of which she slept when she arrived. The event was in three days' time.

I was outraged on her behalf. I knew this wasn't Tristan's doing, but I was offended, nonetheless.

Jane had become dear to me, and it was my great pleasure to feed and care for her. I already couldn't fathom what we would do without her in our home and lives.

I took some time to simmer down before walking down the hall to Master Gabriel's study, where he and Jane were perfecting their Feeder contract.

I could hear them arguing over how much money she could access. He wanted to give her his limitless black card with ATM cash capabilities, and she merely wanted an allowance of a few thousand dollars a month.

"That's barely above minimum wage, Jane!" he practically shouted in frustration.

“You don’t have to yell. I’m standing right here!” she growled back, “You’re already giving me shelter, food, and clothing. What would I do with so much money?”

“I have more money than I could ever spend in a thousand human lifetimes! You might as well help me spend it; you’ll be feeding me, for goodness sake, you stubborn girl!”

I walked into this scene. Master Gabriel took one look at my face, and his frustration turned to concern, “Emma, what’s wrong?”

He rushed to my side and gently placed his hands on my shoulders, “Are you ok?”

My angry frown did not dissipate. I simply handed him the invitation.

Master Gabriel took the card and read it swiftly, then passed it to Jane.

We watched her closely as she took the invite from him and read over the details for several minutes. Her heart rate increased, but otherwise, she didn’t move or show any expression or emotion.

“Jane?” I asked as I finally stepped towards her.

She looked up at me and smiled, “I’m ok, Emma. We knew this would happen. He will still come for me in the end. We just need to let him know I’m alright. Alpha Martin is forcing him; it’s not like he wants to go through with this.”

“Jane,” I began slowly, “if he marks her, it will cause great physical pain to you. It will be even worse if they...” I paused, “...are intimate.”

Jane’s eyes flickered with fear for an instant, and then she purposefully took slow, deep breaths to calm herself.

“It is what it is,” she finally said after a while.

Gabriel frowned, then placed his hands on her shoulders in the same manner he had to me earlier.

“I need to visit Tristan. Let’s finish the contract in a couple of days,” he decided.

Jane nodded, and I took her hand, leading her out of the study and down the hall to her bedroom. She was wearing a

T-shirt and leggings and was already barefoot, so I led her to the bed, and she let me tuck her in. I climbed into bed next to her and pulled her into my arms. She put her head on my shoulder and began to weep.

She cried for over an hour before eventually falling asleep. Jane was utterly and completely emotionally spent.

My shirt and her hair were drenched in tears.

I stayed as still as the dead as her breathing became deep and even, holding her in a comforting embrace.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Gabriel's POV

I had made several plans in advance for how to connect with Tristan. One of the plans included the eventuality of receiving an invitation to his mating ceremony.

Once Jane and Emma had closeted themselves in Jane's bedroom, I picked up the antique home phone receiver and dialed Alpha Martin's personal cell number. He answered quickly.

"Gabriel! You've heard the news," he exclaimed jovially.

"Alpha Martin, I have heard. I want to thank you for your kind invitation. Unfortunately, I have business elsewhere and won't be in the state this weekend."

"That's a shame. You will be missed," his slick voice held a note of insincerity.

"I appreciate that. I wish it were possible to attend what I'm sure will be a grand event."

"Indeed, it will be! We are sparing no expense for my only son's mating ceremony," Alpha Martin sounded happy - the snake.

"I'd like to give the lovely couple a special gift, if I may," I began.

Even from here, I could almost see the greed in his eyes as his heart rate picked up speed.

"It's not necessary, Gabriel. We've been peaceful neighbors for generations, and I'm sure our continued friendship is gift enough," he paused expectantly.

"I insist," I said in a firm tone.

"Please send Tristan and Miss MacKenzie to meet me at the Benz dealership in Cooleyville tomorrow. I want to gift them a car."

I could tell Alpha Martin was practically rubbing his hands together; he was so pleased, "Oh no, we couldn't accept, it's too generous..."

“I do insist, Alpha,” I replied with a smile. The old wolf had no idea that I could read his thoughts, even over the phone.

“Of course, I’d never want to offend such a kind neighbor. How does 3 pm sound? I’m in meetings until 1 pm myself, so I can’t make it before that,” he explained.

Got him.

“I’m afraid I must make a flight at noon, so it’s a little inconvenient for me. Why don’t you send the two of them along at 9 am, and I’ll take good care of them and guide them to a sensible choice,” I offered.

He was unhappy to miss the chance to suck up to a one-thousand-plus-year-old vampire neighbor, but he didn’t want to miss out on the chance for a luxury car either - a gift he fully intended to take from his son and use for himself. I could hear it loud and clear in his mind, even across so many miles.

“Fine, fine. Thank you, my friend,” he answered, “I am sorry you can’t make the event, but this is a wonderful gift that I’m sure the kids will be pleased with.”

“That is my hope. I’ve got to run and prepare for my trip tomorrow. I’ll see the kids at 9 am. Goodbye, Alpha Martin,” I replied and clicked the receiver down in its cradle.

Now, to prepare for what would be a colossal upset to the packs of North America. If it succeeded, the kids could be together with their mates. If it didn’t, they could all end up dead.

I sent a quick prayer up to the moon goddess, asking her to be on our side for the children’s sake. We’d need all the help we could get.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Tristan's POV

David, Avery's driver, took us to the Cooleyville Benz dealership. It was his last day with Avery, and she wasn't looking forward to losing his supportive presence.

I wasn't thrilled with the whole trip for many reasons. I had no desire to receive a car from an ancient vampire I'd only met twice, but my father had insisted on accepting the gift to avoid offense. Personally, I think my father just wanted a new luxury vehicle for himself.

As we made our way through town to the car's showroom, I looked over at Avery, who was sitting on the other side of the back seat.

She was fiddling nervously with her bag. She was generally a laid-back kind of person, and I sensed she was uncomfortable.

"Are you afraid?" I asked her.

She smiled at me sheepishly, "A little bit. I've never met a real vampire before."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"I can remember being intimidated my first time, too. Most of the time, when I meet a vampire, they have business with my father. Gabriel is different. He only makes a neighborly visit to our pack every few years."

Avery turned her head to gaze out the window, "What do you know about him?"

"He has property to the north of our pack and has lived there for several generations of my family's Alphas. He's over a thousand years old."

Avery turned to look at me, her eyes widening at the surprising information.

"How is that possible? I didn't think anyone on earth was that old," she proclaimed.



I shrugged, “I’ve heard rumors that there are two vampires even older than him, but he is considered an ancient one. He comes to visit the pack every decade. His purpose is to renew his acquaintance with the sitting Alpha. I’ve met him twice. He’s polite but reserved. To my father, the most important thing is that he’s very wealthy.”

“Both of our families are wealthy, so it’s not surprising that an ancient vampire would be, too,” she answered.

I shook my head, explaining, “He’s not wealthy like our packs are wealthy. He’s wealthy like he probably has more money than anyone on this side of the world.”

“That explains the extravagant gift,” she chuckled.

The driver turned to speak back to us, “We’ve arrived,” he stated as he pulled into the parking lot of the dealership.

I knew this place didn’t usually open until 10 am, but I guess a guy like Gabriel could have it to himself any time he pleased - open or not.

Gabriel waited for us in front of the heavy glass doors. His regal posture was visible, and his powerful aura could be felt, even from inside the car. He was standing perfectly still in that eerie way only vampires could accomplish, and I felt a slight shiver up my spine.

I’d never considered much about Gabriel in terms of his power or lethality before, but seeing him from Avery’s perspective, I understood why she might be afraid.

David pulled up directly in front of the doors and got out to open Avery’s door for her. I let myself out.

As I stepped out of the car, a familiar and delicious aroma reached my nose. I took a deep breath and had to stop myself from moaning.

I met Gabriel’s eyes, and then mine widened in surprise at the kind smile he was flashing me. Of course. Jane had been thrown into the northern forest - Gabriel’s forest.

Jane was here.

He nodded to me and gestured towards the doors.

Racing inside, I followed my nose to a back office where her scent was the strongest, and I flung open the door. Jane was sitting on the edge of a desk.

She was smiling at me as tears spilled over her lashes and ran down her cheeks.

I strode across the room in two steps to wrap my arms around her, kissing the tears from her face. Unable to restrain myself anymore, I captured her lips with my own. Placing my hand behind her head, I held her still as I crushed my mouth against hers in a salty, passionate, desperate kiss - our first.

Sucking her lower lip into my mouth, I moved my hands underneath her thighs and pulled her legs around my waist. Her arms slid up around my neck as she kissed me back, parting her lips to allow my demanding tongue entry.

Emotions magnified by our forced separation, we kissed with all the love, passion, and longing we'd suffered alone these past days. Her fingers weaved into the back of my hair, igniting a delicious fire in every place our bodies touched. I moaned into her mouth as her tongue pushed back against mine, sating the void of starvation.

Finally unable to breathe, we reluctantly pulled away from our kiss but kept our bodies pressed together. My arms wrapped around her waist tightly, crushing her against my chest. She didn't seem to mind.

Her enormous smile likely mirrored my own.

I spoke with great affection, "Jane, you're ok. I've been driven crazy not knowing where you were. What happened? You haven't suffered too much?"

Gabriel cleared his throat from the doorway behind me, "While I'd love to let you both catch up, we don't have much time. Your father expects you and Avery to return by noon, and you have some choices to make."

Gabriel entered the room, followed by Avery and a blonde woman whom I didn't know. She looked to be in her thirties. I looked at Jane, raising my eyebrow in question, and she smiled up at me with a shrug.

I released Jane, and she unwrapped her legs from my waist, placing her feet on the floor. She stayed pressed against me, shifting her arms to circle my waist.

I wasn't letting go of her. When Gabriel gestured for us all to be seated, I sat in the nearest chair, pulling Jane onto my lap. I buried my nose in the curve of her neck and breathed in deeply. It was heaven holding her so close, pulling her against my chest. We hadn't been able to experience this amount of closeness until now, and my wolf was practically howling with joy inside my head.

Finally, I turned my attention back to Gabriel and inquired, "What choices?"

The golden-haired woman who followed Gabriel into the room, closed the door, and leaned against it. David didn't enter the room, but I could still scent him in the hallway outside the door.

Avery sat next to Jane and me, and Gabriel leaned against the desk Jane had previously sat on.

Jane stiffened slightly as she observed Avery from under her lashes. I rubbed my hand up and down her leg to soothe her.

Gabriel made the introduction, "Jane, this is Avery, who Alpha Martin intended for Tristan."

Jane frowned at Avery then, but I stroked her hair gently while Avery spoke first in a friendly manner.

"Hi Jane, I've heard a lot about you. You don't have to worry about me. I have a mate, too; she's back at my pack, waiting for us to figure out a plan," Avery explained patiently.

Jane visibly relaxed in my arms again and smiled apologetically, "It's nice to meet you, Avery."

Gabriel continued introductions, gesturing towards the woman leaning against the door, "This is Emma, my right-hand person."

Emma nodded at me and Avery but kept silent.

Gabriel continued, "It's best if you just listen and don't reply out loud as it will save time. I can read your minds, so

I'll answer any questions you have aloud for everyone to hear."

He looked around the room until all of us had nodded our agreement.

"I've devised an outrageous plan that will work for everyone to be with their own mates if you choose it. It will be difficult, and there may be a small war, but everyone will have their mates."

Gabriel paused momentarily to smile at me, having read my eager response, "*Yep. I'm in.*"

He held up a hand to gain our attention before proceeding, "The alternative is to continue with whatever plan Tristan had to carry on a mating relationship with Avery until your father dies, and you can come to get Jane. If you choose the second one, Jane will be safe with me as my contracted feeder until you come for her."

He continued, "But if you mate with Avery, I will have to take Jane far away, or it could kill her. She will feel every touch you and Avery share between you, and it will be physically painful for her and Avery's true mate, as well."

He paused to listen to our comments and questions telepathically, then nodded, "Option one, it is."

Gabriel explained, "My plan involves everyone leaving with us now. We'll get on my plane and fly to my one-million-acre ranch in Montana. Avery can also notify her mate to meet us at the airstrip."

He turned to face Avery, "It will be your driver's job to get back to your pack and notify your mate's bloodline to head to Montana so they don't face the retribution of your father."

Filling us in on the details, he informed us, "There are no wolf packs in Montana, and your fathers don't have allies in that part of the country. I will gift the entire ranch to Tristan and Jane. Tristan can form his own pack with himself as Alpha.

"In exchange for a lifetime feeder contract with Jane, you may take ownership of the land and the financial trust

accounts that fund the care and operations of the ranch. She will provide me blood for feeding, and I will provide my blood to her and her family to keep you all healthy for life. I will remain living on the ranch while Tristan and Jane live, and then Emma and I will leave once you are gone.”

Gabriel fell silent briefly, then turned his head to Avery and gestured for her to speak.

Avery nodded and explained her conditions to me: “I agree to the plan if I can be your Beta. Since the pack will start out consisting primarily of my mate’s family, I think you will need that to establish your authority initially. Her family won’t accept me as Alpha because my mate is also a woman, and we won’t be able to produce pups. However, having their family member and her mate as betas will make the transition smoother for everyone.”

“How many in your mate’s bloodline will have to flee in order to escape your father’s wrath?” I asked her curiously.

“Angelica’s family is approximately five hundred in total and makes up nearly half of my father’s entire pack,” she answered.

My eyes widened in surprise, “Can your driver notify them all? Will he be willing?”

Gabriel turned his face towards the wall that separated them from David, then smiled, “He is loyal to Avery. And apparently, he is her mate’s father. He agrees.”

Everyone fell silent briefly, and then Gabriel looked me in the eyes, responding to my chief concern, “The war, yes. It’s not likely that your fathers will let this kind of betrayal go. They’ll probably come to find you to discipline you harshly. If you want to defend your pack and land, you’ll have to fight them.”

I let this sink in. The burden shifted down heavily onto my shoulders. Could I really ask all these wolves, new to our pack, to stand with us and fight two powerful alphas?

Many lives would likely be lost so that we could be with our mates. It was difficult to weigh the cost of something

the four of us desperately needed and wanted against the lives of so many.

Looking up into Gabriel's eyes, I found him staring back at me with a new expression. It was respect.

His tone was reassuring, "Emma and I will assist as much as we can, and it could potentially lower the risk to your pack, but we will likely be sanctioned by the vampire council. The only excuse that will be acceptable to them is that we gave you the land and funds in exchange for the feeder contract, and when your fathers come, we will say we were protecting my feeder. Vampires don't tolerate threats to their feeders in the same manner that wolves don't tolerate threats to their pups."

The feeder contract worried me, and all sorts of horrifying images flashed in my mind as I squeezed Jane tighter against me.

Gabriel looked me in the eye and said, "Wrist, no aphrodisiac."

Jane giggled, and I glanced over at her sheepishly.

Gabriel grinned, "Any other questions? Do we agree to my plan, then? Will Avery's mate's family be willing to relocate and fight?"

David answered aloud through the door, "I think the majority of them will be willing. There have been a lot of unfair and extreme punishments dealt out by the current Alpha that were completely unnecessary. As he ages, he's struggling to assert his authority to hang onto his position. If Avery had been a man, he would already be dead, and she would be the Alpha. The threats he made against our family because of Avery and Angelica's mate connection has left many of us feeling angry and dissatisfied and even offended, to be honest."

"Tristan?" Gabriel waited for my final answer.

I knew what needed to be done.

"I am very grateful for your offer, and as long as Jane is ok with what you are asking of her, I am ready to go whenever you are," I answered resolutely.

Jane smiled up at me, and the beauty of it took my breath away.

“I already signed the contract this morning before you arrived,” she said.

I kissed her with all my heart.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Jane's POV

The plan settled, we parted ways to play our roles. There was nothing that any of us needed to take from our old lives, and Gabriel assured us that the trust account had enough money to supply all our needs. We needed to move quickly.

Gabriel said we needed to be wheels up before noon because Alpha Martin would expect Tristan and Avery back home. Once they didn't return, he'd send someone to look for them and to Gabriel's estate to search for him.

The most important thing was that Tristan and I could now be together. Currently seated on the large private plane with Gabriel and Emma, we waited for Angelica and her mother to arrive. Avery paced outside the plane anxiously.

Tristan held me in his lap again, unwilling to be parted from me. I didn't blame or complain. I wanted to be near him, too.

After being separated so soon after discovering we were true mates, I couldn't get close enough. I leaned into him, my legs across his lap sideways and my head resting on his shoulder. He had one arm around my waist, which I was stroking with one hand, enjoying the feel of his warm skin under my fingertips. His other hand gently stroked the top of my leg. He was breathing deeply, enjoying the scent of me. His head rested on the top of mine, and our joy was palpable.

"Jane, let's mark each other tonight before we sleep," he said softly.

My heart fluttered, and the warmth in my belly increased, but then I realized something.

"Tristan, how will I mark you? I have no wolf," I suddenly met his gaze, worry in mine.

"I'll show you later," he grinned, a delightful secret gleaming in his eyes.



Before I could question him, we heard footsteps stomping up the stairs to the plane's open door. We turned our eyes to see who had arrived and found Avery entering, looking agitated.

"It's almost eleven, where are they?" she anxiously voiced.

Gabriel closed his eyes briefly and then responded, "David just arrived back at MacKenzie's pack. He's headed home to send Angelica and her mom this way. Tonight, he'll alert his family regarding the exodus to Montana."

No one said anything, but we all knew how dangerous this could become. He would be suspected when we disappeared, but Gabriel's plan accounted for this possibility.

Avery stood in the doorway, looking out over the runway towards the small terminal building, watching and waiting.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### David's POV

I made it home around 11 am and walked in through the back door. Angelica was sitting at the kitchen table, staring off into space past a bowl of fruit her mom had cut up for her.

My mate, Diane, looked up from the kitchen sink in surprise, "You're home early, honey."

I got straight to the point, the seriousness of my tone indicating there was no time for pleasantries.

"My love, pack a small suitcase each for you and Angelica and take the old Honda to Cooleyville Private Airport as fast as you can."

Angelica looked up with alarm, her eyes finally focusing on me, "There's a plan...Tristan made a plan. I have to wait..."

I walked around the table to put my hands on Angelica's arms, "Listen to me. There's a new plan. Tristan and Avery approved it. You aren't going to wait any longer."

The hope in my daughter's eyes made the risk one hundred percent worth it.

"Hurry and go pack. You have five minutes to get on the road. Only essentials, no cell phones," I urged.

Angelica ran up the stairs to her room, and my wife approached me with worry in her eyes, "What's happening?"

"We're leaving. You'll take a private plane with Tristan, Avery, and a few others to a new home. I'll stay here for a day or two to get messages to our family. They'll soon follow," I explained, "There's no time, please hurry."

Diane and our daughter made quick work of throwing a few things in a couple of suitcases and headed out to the garage to put them in the trunk.

I kissed them both and helped load their luggage into the car. As they backed out of the drive and turned onto the road, I watched as they drove away, carrying my heart with them.

Once the car disappeared, I headed inside to fulfill my piece of the plan.

I drew in a few deep breaths to slow my heart rate. Once I was certain of the slow, steady beat, I called Alpha MacKenzie on my phone.

His office phone number rang twice before he picked up, "Alpha, I'm back early, and I thought I should let you know. Tristan and Avery were gifted a car as a mating gift and no longer needed my services."

The Alpha's silence stretched for a few seconds before he asked, suspicion coating his tone, "David, I'm told your wife and daughter are headed into town. Why?"

I had an answer ready, "Angie's been down since the incident. Her mom's going to take her on a girl's trip until after Avery's mating ceremony. The farther away she is, the better; I'm sure you understand, Alpha."

That satisfied him, and he adopted a more relaxed tone, "I'm sorry about all of this, David. You've served our family for a long time. It's nothing personal against your lovely girl; we just need the bloodline to continue."

"Yes, Alpha," I answered.

MacKenzie didn't bother to respond, and I heard the phone click as he hung up.

I plopped down into my favorite leather armchair and rested my head back against the cushion. It was time to get to work.

I mind-linked my uncles and brothers, all 21 of them, inviting them to poker night tonight at my place. I told them the girls had gone on a trip until after the mating ceremony, and the house was too quiet without them.

My oldest brother Jesse responded, "*What time?*"

"*Six pm sharp,*" I replied.

*"I'll bring the beer,"* answered my eldest uncle, Walter, the current head of our bloodline.

Next, I went to the game closet in the hallway and pulled out the large poker top that fit snugly over my dining room table. Carrying it to the dining room, I quickly placed it over the surface and secured it to the table legs.

Back at the game closet, I pulled out my large set of poker chips and several decks of cards. I carried them down the hall to the dining room and arranged them on the poker top.

Lastly, I headed to the kitchen and started assembling trays of snacks to set along the buffet table in the dining room. They might not get eaten, but I needed to make it look like a real poker game among family.

I had only to get my brothers and uncles here and explain things. Should any outsiders happen by, like the Alpha, we would appear to just be having poker night while the girls are away. Our family poker nights were legendary, and I didn't think this would alert anyone else in the pack that anything was amiss.

Gabriel had prepared me in case MacKenzie brought his witch with him to probe my memories.

At the dealership, he always kept Jane out of my line of sight and had entered my mind to explain my part in his plan.

Before I drove away from the car lot that morning, I watched as Gabriel shook hands with Tristan and wished him a hearty congratulations on his mating ceremony. Tristan and Avery then got into a red Mercedes and drove out of the parking lot.

Gabriel shook my hand and said, "Nice to see you, David. Please excuse me; I've got a plane to catch."

It truly was the last memory I had of seeing Avery and Tristan, even though it was staged. I'd driven directly home from there. Avery and Tristan wouldn't return to Alpha Martin's pack today.

I also knew more about MacKenzie's witch than the average pack member because, biologically speaking, she was my niece. Her magical giftings were from our grandmother.

My job as Avery's driver and bodyguard also gave me a deep knowledge of the Alpha's family. MacKenzie had stolen my niece, Abigail, from my brother and raised her in the pack house from the age of four, when her magical giftings were discovered.

Because of all these things, I knew that her ability to sift through people's minds was limited to the visual aspect of the memory and rarely included sound. She could read lips, so anything people said while you were looking at them could be interpreted, but she couldn't hear it.

She also didn't have access to people's thoughts that were not visual. These limitations left me confident that Gabriel's plan would work if my acting was convincing enough.

Staying here was still a risk. I had to inform the leaders of our bloodline of the plan, all while escaping the Alpha's suspicions. I'd been able to rebuff them so far, and I hoped I would continue to do so.

Shortly before six that evening, my brothers and uncles began to filter into the house through the back door. Most had taken routes through the woods that faded into our back lawn. Family rarely used the street-facing entrance to our home.

While half of them were settling in around the poker table, we all turned our heads toward the front of the house. We could scent our Alpha's presence on the front porch.

His knuckles rapped twice, and I opened the door immediately, "Alpha! What a welcome surprise. Would you like to join our poker night?" I smiled pleasantly.

"I need to speak with you, David. Come out," the Alpha replied.

"Of course, Alpha," I answered, stepping over the threshold onto the sturdy covered porch. I reached behind

me to pull the door closed. As the door latched shut, I looked past the Alpha at the curly-haired figure behind him.

Just as we predicted, MacKenzie had brought Abigail, the witch, with him on this visit. She walked up the steps and into the porch light, coming to a stop by the Alpha's side.

"David, how long have you served my family?" the Alpha asked coldly.

"Thirty years, my Alpha. Is something wrong?" I asked innocently.

"Avery and Tristan did not return to the Martins' today, and we can't reach them by phone. Do you know anything about this?"

Shock appeared on my face in what I hoped was a convincing expression of concern, "How could they not return? I saw them drive their new car away towards Alpha Martin's pack territory!"

I tried my best to imagine how I would feel if Avery were actually missing and responded, "Oh goddess, please, if anything happened to Avery..." I let a tear roll down my cheek.

The Alpha's tone immediately softened although it was still firm, "Perhaps you wouldn't mind allowing Abigail to probe your last memory of them? It may give us some clues as to where they went," he ordered in the form of a question.

"Anything to help find her!" I replied fervently.

The Alpha nodded at the witch, and Abigail stepped forward, placing her hand on my bowed head.

She closed her eyes for a time, and I focused on the memory of watching Gabriel wish the kids well and seeing them drive out of the parking lot in the red sports car.

She opened her eyes again and faced the Alpha, "He's telling the truth. The vampire congratulated them. Next, they drove away. Afterward, Gabriel shook David's hand and said he had a flight to catch. David came straight home, and it doesn't appear he made any phone calls."

The Alpha put his hand on my shoulder, “Thank you, old friend. We’ll let you know as soon as we find them.”

“Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, Alpha,” I replied earnestly.

He patted me on the back, then turned around. He headed down the steps and drove away in his black SUV with Abigail beside him.

I watched them disappear down the street and around the corner before I headed back into the house.

Stepping back into the kitchen, I raised my voice to get everyone’s attention, “Gentlemen, we need to talk.”

Twenty-one pairs of eyes turned my way, and there was nothing but silence.

“It’s time to make a move,” I began.

My Uncle Walter stood up and approached me, clasping my shoulder, “We’re with you, David. After what the Alpha did to Angelica...let’s just say there’s been a lot of restlessness in the ranks.”

A chorus of agreement flooded my ears from all the men in my family. I bowed my head in gratitude, “Thank you all.”

Jesse came to stand beside us, “That’s what families are about. So, what’s the plan?”

“We’ll have to make our move right after midnight. This is the only night for the next six days that border patrol consists entirely of our family,” I began.

“Where are we headed then?” Walter asked.

“Montana,” I answered, “that’s where our new Alpha Tristan Martin and Beta Avery MacKenzie await our arrival.”

Walter called out, “You heard him, boys! Gather your families, and head out at midnight. Keep it fast; keep it quiet.”

And everyone did.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Avery's POV

Three minutes before noon, Angelica and her mother came running out of the terminal and across the tarmac. As they rushed towards the plane, a massive sense of relief flooded me.

When they ran up the boarding stairs and entered, I wrapped my arms around Angelica and pulled her into the plane. Gabriel came to help her mother, closed the door from the inside, and told us to take a seat. We had to get off the ground before the alphas figured out what was happening.

Once the aircraft was sealed shut, Gabriel rapped on the door to the cockpit with his fist. Almost immediately, the plane began rolling down the runway.

The jerk of the sudden motion didn't even tilt him, and he walked steadily back to his seat beside Emma.

After I sat Angelica down, I buckled us both into our seats. My seatbelt fastened, I took her hand, and looking into her eyes, I said, "I refuse your rejection. You are mine!"

She leaned over to put her hands on my face and kissed me hard for a long time until she needed to breathe. It was like a dam burst. The link previously cut between us came together again, snapping back into place with all the passion, love, and strength of its former glory.

We cuddled together the best we could with our seatbelts in separate seats.

The smile on Angelica's face made her seem like she was a real angel. I sent up a prayer to the goddess that we would live to a very old age and always be together.

After a few sweet murmurings to one another, Angelica turned her gaze to her mom, and my eyes followed hers.

Diane had taken the seat across from Gabriel and Emma and was quietly listening to Gabriel relay the plan. If all went



well, David and their other relatives would arrive in Montana to reunite with us within a few days.

Emma watched Diane closely and said, “Are you going to be alright?”

Diane sighed heavily. Her shoulders seemed to relax as she glanced over at Angelica and me, and then she smiled softly, “As long as they can be together, then everything’s good.”

A comfortable silence fell over us all, and some of us took naps as the plane hummed through the sky. The seats were slightly wider and plushier than a regular first-class seat. They also had a reclining feature that raised a footrest while the backrest tilted backward.

The flight took about three hours, and then we were touching down on Montana soil. Because we were on Gabriel’s private jet and traveling to his private ranch, we were able to fly directly into the ranch’s small airstrip.

As we taxied to the hangar, I peered out of the window to take in the Montana landscape. I could see mountains in the distance, still capped with blankets of white at the tops. I was surprised to see so much green, even though it was the end of winter.

From the sky, I had seen many forests surrounding the main areas of the ranch. The land around the airstrip was cleared of trees. The ground surrounding the landing strip and hangar was plush with grass that seemed damp. The snow must have recently melted. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, making the mountains even more prominent in the landscape. What a beautiful place.

When the aircraft tucked into the hangar, everyone - except the vampires - stood and stretched their limbs. We waited as the aircraft steps were wheeled into place, and the door was unsealed.

As we waited, Gabriel and Emma suited up in long black trench coats, black gloves, and wide-brimmed hats. As a final touch, Emma reached into a nearby compartment and

pulled out two black umbrellas, handing one to Gabriel, who took it with a smile.

We all filtered out of the jet and the hangar to climb into a long SUV limo. Somehow, we all managed to squeeze in together, with Tristan and I pulling our mates onto our laps.

Angelica wrapped her arms around my neck and rested her cheek on the top of my head with a sigh. I could feel her satisfaction and serenity through our bond. My happiness was evident in the sudden purr that rumbled through my chest.

The drive to the main house didn't take long. The hangar was only a few miles away. Before I knew it, we were climbing out of the vehicle onto a large circle driveway in front of an enormous three-story house.

Gabriel and Emma exited last, whipping open their umbrellas to position the large black canopies between their skin and the sun.

The gorgeous modern structure before us had two sleek wings that angled back from the central structure of the home. The third floor was smaller than the other two. It appeared to be surrounded by a rooftop deck that covered the top of the second floor. Several sets of modern plate glass doors stood open to the patio, probably airing out the space with the gentle, crisp Montana breeze.

It was a beautiful mansion composed of all natural woods and many large floor-to-ceiling black framed plate glass windows. The views into and through the house were breathtaking.

We all stared up at it in awe as Gabriel stood next to Tristan. He smiled, placed a gloved hand on Tristan's shoulder, and said, "Welcome to your new home, Alpha Tristan."

Once the phrase was uttered, I gasped at the change in Tristan. There was an actual, physical, and magical response to Gabriel declaring Tristan an Alpha of this land.

Because of his preoccupation with the new place, Tristan didn't notice the change until all of us made noises in

varying degrees of disbelief. He suddenly looked down at Jane, then over at the rest of us, and asked, "What is it?"

I began to laugh, "You really didn't notice?"

"Notice what?"

Jane was staring up at him in total and complete adoration. I couldn't blame her because something appealing and astonishing had occurred.

No one else was answering him, so as his Beta, I did.

"When Gabriel called you Alpha Tristan, you literally grew," I informed him.

"I grew?" he asked in confusion.

"You grew a lot," I replied with a grin.

He tilted his head to consider this for a minute, then ran to the door of the lodge, flinging it open. He rushed through the house, opening the interior doors, looking for something. I assumed it was a mirror.

I followed him and watched as he finally found a gym with an entire wall mirror on one wall, and he turned to examine himself.

He had grown at least two inches in height, and his shoulders had broadened significantly. His muscles had toned more and bulked up a bit, and instead of looking like a fit eighteen-year-old as he had earlier, he now looked like a body-building man of twenty-five.

Gabriel walked into the gym behind us with Jane and explained, "It's the Alpha mantle. When an Alpha comes to power, he is enhanced with the mantle of authority. When I welcomed you to your new pack territory and addressed you as Alpha, the goddess anointed you with the Alpha mantle. This also endows your voice with the ability to force wolves in your pack to obey."

"Ooooh, try it out!" I said.

Gabriel chuckled, "You have to pledge allegiance to him first and accept the Beta position."

"No time like the present," I said.

I knelt before him and recited the pledge all wolves learn from childhood.

“I, Avery MacKenzie, pledge my allegiance to you, Tristan Martin, as my Alpha. This pack shall be my family, and where you go shall be my home as long as I shall live.”

Tristan responded to me with his Alpha pledge.

“I, Tristan Martin, pledge to you, Avery MacKenzie, to be a strong and just Alpha. Protecting and leading this pack as my family as long as I shall live. Stand to your feet, Beta Avery of the First Montana Pack.”

He clasped my forearm, and I clasped his as he pulled me up. I bowed my head as a sign of my submission to him as our pack’s authority. There was something washing over us, binding us together as a pack. I felt the severing of my link to my father’s pack like a pinprick, and a refreshing new light bathed me with a sense of belonging and home.

I sighed in contentment and looked up at Tristan.

“Now try it,” I smirked with glee.

Tristan tilted his head to one side, his fingers stroking his chin as his mind chewed on the idea. I could feel a bit of his amusement through the newly established pack link.

“Do ten jumping jacks,” he ordered in his alpha tone.

“Really?” I laughed as my body moved of its own accord and began to work through the exercise.

“Hey, I could have told you to do one hundred...or burpees,” he grinned wickedly.

“Ok, ok,” I held my hands up in surrender as I completed my tenth jack.

I stepped back and turned to Jane as she stepped up to Tristan with a smile, kneeling at his feet.

“I, Jane Marie Brown, pledge my allegiance to you, Tristan Martin, as my Alpha. This pack shall be my family, and where you go shall be my home as long as I shall live.”

Tristan’s eyes were full of love and pride as he replied, “I, Tristan Martin, pledge to you, Jane Marie Brown, to be a strong and just Alpha. Protecting and leading this pack as my family as long as I shall live. I accept and honor you as my mate and the Luna of our pack. Stand to your feet, Luna Jane of the First Montana Pack.”

He took both of her hands and pulled her into a giant bear hug as I felt Jane's presence enter the pack link. It was warm and loving, adding depth and wisdom to our pack's presence.

Each time a new person entered our pack and made their pledge, we'd all feel a sense of who they were. It wouldn't be a complete understanding but a general note of their essence and being.

Jane's presence was extraordinary. I'd certainly never felt such an incredible, beautiful, and homey addition to my father's pack. I wondered what Tristan had felt when he received me. Perhaps later, I would ask him.

The feel of the pack bonds being established and the mind-link forming was perfect. I had no doubt that our pack would be something new and amazing.

Angelica came forward and made her pledge to Tristan and the pack. Then Diane followed after her.

We were only a small pack of five tonight, but for now, it was enough. In the coming days, there would be more.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Jane's POV

I couldn't remember ever being this happy. Sitting on the rooftop patio outside the third-floor living area, looking out at the ranch under the moonlight, my heart soared.

This was our pack territory. Our pack. Tristan's and mine. We'd been through so much in such a short time.

While I waited for Tristan to finish signing all the legal documents with Gabriel's lawyer, I toured the house and settled into our apartment at the top of the manor.

We didn't have many belongings, so it didn't take long. There would be a major shopping spree in our future to obtain everything we all needed in clothing and toiletries.

Gabriel decided to officially turn the property and trust accounts over to us on our first night here. He said it was symbolic of the establishment of the pack and should happen today. Fortunately, he had several attorneys at his beck and call in each city in which he owned property.

One million acres! This would be the second-largest pack territory in North America. What a responsibility it would be for an Alpha and Luna as young as us.

In a few days' time, our pack would grow to nearly five hundred wolves when Angelica's blood relatives arrived from the eastern United States.

Tristan and I had a few minutes to talk after being shown the master's suite, which comprised the entire third floor of the massive home. Avery had already taken to calling it the pack house or the lodge.

This floor was akin to a penthouse suite. It had its own kitchen, dining and living area, an office/study/library room, and four bedrooms, each with its own bathroom.

Just outside the living room was one of many doors leading out onto the rooftop wrap-around patio, where I was currently seated. So far, I had noticed additional doors

leading out to the deck from the Master Bedroom and Dining Room.

Upon realizing its size, we quickly discussed and decided to offer Avery, Angelica, and her parents the other spare bedrooms in our suite while we were short on living quarters. Once the pack arrived, we'd have to cram people into every sleeping space available on the ranch until new homes could be built. Tonight, however, everyone was leaving us to get acquainted with our new home...alone.

During our conversation, Tristan and I spoke honestly and frankly about our concerns and fears.

He was worried there wouldn't be enough housing and wanted everyone to have a place as soon as possible. I pointed out that everyone is family and wouldn't mind doubling up on accommodations for a while. I also reminded him that more wolves meant more hands to help build the ranch into a functioning pack. It was already a prosperous ranch, after all.

He smiled and hugged me tight, then asked if I was worried about anything.

I confessed I didn't know if I could be a good Luna. I had only known how to serve people and remain unseen.

He reminded me that Alphas and Lunas do lead the pack, but good leaders, unlike his father, also know how to serve. That service protects and provides for the needs of every wolf in the pack.

I was inspired to share that I hoped for us to create a pack where no one was ever treated like I was under Tristan's father. Where even orphans would have a place, and no one should ever be invisible.

Tristan smiled and held me close, whispering into my neck as the sparks ignited our skin everywhere it touched, "That sounds like the heart of a Luna to me."

Through our connection, I could feel his pride in me, and I would have purred if I'd had a wolf to do so.

He sighed, breathing me in deeply, then reluctantly said, “It’s time to sign the paperwork. Be ready for me when I come back, Mate.”

I blushed, and then Tristan growled sexily into my ear as he sucked my earlobe into his mouth momentarily and then released me. He moved quickly before he could change his mind and stay with me for hours and hours. I admired his new, larger physique as he walked toward the door. When he disappeared behind it, I sighed again like a little lovesick pup, which I suppose is what I was.

I got cozy on the rooftop deck and sat looking up at the moon. I found myself sending up a sweet prayer of thanks and gratitude to the moon goddess for her divine blessing and intervention in our lives. I hope she continued to help us weather the coming storm with strength and courage.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Tristan's POV

Gabriel and his attorney, Mr. Edward Larson, met with me in the ground floor study. The paperwork was straightforward and to the point.

The whole of Gabriel's one-million-acre ranch in Montana was being turned over to Jane and me, along with a trust fund that maintained the ranch containing more than fifteen billion dollars.

In return, the contract listed compensation as "life-giving services provided by Jane Marie Brown, ref. contract between Jane Marie Brown and Gabriel Michael Francisco."

I wanted to be upstairs marking Jane, but I knew this was an important step that had to be done before Angelica's family arrived in the next few days. Pack business before pleasure, as it were.

Two hours later, the paperwork was signed, witnessed, and legal. We all shook hands, and Mr. Larson took his leave.

Gabriel turned to me then, "I need to press upon you the urgency of marking Jane tonight. There is only enough fresh blood here for Emma, and it will be a couple of days before my buyer can arrange some. I will need to feed from her tomorrow, and I won't be able to do so within 12-18 hours of you marking her."

This surprised me. I had no knowledge of such a complication.

"What would happen if you did?"

"Wolf bites can kill a vampire, and an Alpha bite is stronger than most. The venom that is used to mark a mate is stronger still. I am more than one thousand years old, so it wouldn't kill me since a vampire gains strength with age, but it could make me ill for several days. I must remain fit

and alert should your father or Avery's discover our whereabouts more quickly than we anticipate."

I nodded, "Jane and I agreed to mark and mate tonight, anyway. I'll mark her before midnight, then you should be able to feed safely tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you," Gabriel replied.

"No need to thank me. After everything you've done for us, we're grateful. You gave us a way to be together, and that's more valuable than anything else," I assured him.

"It wasn't much. I have more wealth and property than I will be able to use in my own lifetime, which is indefinite."

Gabriel looked hesitant and then continued, "Tristan, I need to warn you. Your wolf. He isn't going to like the feeding process."

I searched his anxious expression, considering carefully before saying, "It's true that wolves don't like other men touching their mates, but this is a unique situation in which my wolf has given no signs of protest."

"That may be true, but it will be different when I go to feed. Seeing me bite into her vein and her losing blood, even though it won't be painful to her, and I won't take more than a pint, instinctually, your wolf might feel that I'm a threat to her. He may react strongly. Over time, when we've all been together much longer, your wolf will recognize that I'm not a threat. But in the early days, you may find it difficult to control if he doesn't trust me."

I let my eyes glaze over and went to my wolf while speaking aloud so Gabriel could hear, "Onan? Do you understand what Gabriel's concern is?"

Instead of answering me, my Alpha wolf came forth, changing my eyes into embers of gold, to speak to Gabriel.

"You're no threat to my mate. You saved her life. She would be dead without you," Onan spoke out in his intense, gravelly voice to Gabriel, staring him in the eye.

Gabriel appeared surprised when he heard the name of Tristan's wolf.

"Onan? That's a unique name," he stated curiously.

Onan grinned at Gabriel as if he held a secret and Gabriel was fishing for the answer, but there was no reply.

I internally prompted Onan to tell me what he was hiding, but he wouldn't explain.

Upon realizing that the information was not forthcoming, Gabriel bowed his head slightly to my wolf, "Forgive me for underestimating you, Onan. I thank you for your understanding."

My wolf was satisfied by Gabriel's respectful reply and faded back into his comfortable den.

"Are we good?" I asked him, eager to get back to Jane.

Gabriel chuckled and gestured towards the door, "Enjoy your evening."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Jane's POV

The night breeze was cool and soft on my skin as I waited for Tristan on the balcony. I couldn't believe I would wholly and finally be his, just as he would be mine.

After all we'd been through in such a short time, I didn't think this would happen so soon. I'd braced myself for years of suffering before Alpha Martin died, and instead, I received my mate and a new home in what felt like an instant.

Gabriel made it all possible for us. I hoped my feeding him would be worth it. Even though he seemed not to care much about money, having more of it than I could imagine, he was paying a lot for me to be his feeder.

In truth, I'd have done it for nothing but a roof over my head. Gabriel had been put off by this response and emphasized that my worth was far greater than I knew. I was more than a feeder, more than just a convenience. I was a precious life that had value and purpose. Other than Tristan, no one had ever treated me as someone to be cherished.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I turned my head and called, "Come in."

Anyone knocking on the door in this house had supernatural hearing and would hear any soft call.

Emma peeked her head around the entrance to the apartment and then gingerly stepped in, spotting me on the balcony. She smiled her blindingly beautiful, dimpled smile and came out to sit next to me. She had a gift bag in her hand.

"How are you feeling, sweetie?" she asked.

I smiled back at her, then continued looking up at the stars.

“I feel...really happy. I’m grateful. I’m excited and a little bit nervous,” I answered honestly.

She laughed softly, “Oh my, I remember my first time. I was a young girl of seventeen, and I’d just been married to Oliver Jones. He was twenty-five and had inherited a little tobacco shop in London.”

I turned, folding my legs up into the chair as I got cozy. I was eager to hear her story.

“I was a virgin, of course, as any respectable girl of seventeen would be in London unless she were already married. Mr. Jones was kind and generous. He went slowly and tenderly. He really did love me, you know.”

“What happened to Mr. Jones?” I wondered aloud.

Emma smiled a warm but sad smile as she replied, “We had twenty good years together before he passed away of pneumonia in the winter of his forty-fifth year. He left me a comfortable widow of thirty-seven years old. I was grateful, too, to be the wife of such a kind person. After he died, I spent four years serving the church in East London until I met Gabriel.”

“You love him, don’t you?” I grinned cheekily.

“Is it obvious?” she smiled back.

“Just as obvious as the fact that he loves you, too,” I blurted.

“Not at all,” Emma shook her head solemnly, “As you know, he can read minds, so I’m sure he knows how I feel. I’ve been with him for over one hundred years. If he felt the same way, he would have said so by now.”

“Maybe he isn’t reading your mind. You know, out of respect for your privacy,” I shared my suspicions.

“For one hundred and thirty years?” she questioned with an expression of utter disbelief.

“In my short life, I’ve seen men do some interesting and even terrible things for women they love,” my certainty was evident in my tone.

“I just can’t imagine that’s the case,” Emma said, but now with a glimmer of doubt.

“Do you remember when I came to the kitchen that first day I met you?”

“Of course! What a pleasure to cook for someone again. And you ate with so much enthusiasm,” she laughed.

“When I came into the kitchen, you looked up because Gabriel said, ‘I wish’ and you asked, ‘You wish what?’ before you noticed me standing there,” I explained.

“I forgot to find out what he wished.”

“I know what he wished because he was replying to my thoughts,” I grinned.

Emma’s eyes narrowed as she stared at me, waiting for me to tell her.

I giggled, enjoying teasing her before letting her in on something special for her.

It was right at that moment that Tristan walked into the room. Our conversation would have to wait.

Emma looked over her shoulder, then leaned over to put her mouth near my ear.

In a low voice, she whispered, “We’ll finish this conversation later. Here’s something you might want to open in the bathroom.”

She handed me the gift bag. I took it, confused and curious.

She flounced out of the room, smiling over her shoulder, “Have fun, kids.”

Tristan looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I shrugged at him while holding up the bag.

It did not escape my notice that he was removing his shirt. I stared at him for several seconds, taking in his broadened shoulders and rippling ab muscles. I noticed the grin he was shooting me and cleared my throat, gesturing to the bag.

“I’m supposed to go open it in the bathroom,” I answered the unspoken question.

“Go open it then,” he smiled.

I was nervous, so I was thankful for a few minutes alone to gather myself after Tristan suddenly came into the

apartment. His new larger size and enhanced good looks caused warmth to pool in my belly and my heartbeat to quicken. Honestly, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by him.

I went to the bathroom and closed the door. Placing the bag on the counter, I opened it wide. It contained something white and silky.

I reached into the bag and pulled out a beautiful piece of lingerie unlike anything I had ever seen. It had spaghetti strap shoulders and a gathered and fitted bodice that covered the bust.

The skirt part of the dress hung to the floor from the seam under the breasts. I quickly removed my clothes and put on the gown.

I stared at myself in total shock as I realized the entire skirt was a flowing, white sheer fabric. It was completely see-through. It also had a slit up one side from floor to waist so that when I walked, my entire leg and hip peeked out from behind the skirt.

When I first saw the gown was white, I expected a lovely, chaste piece. What I got was a very sexy, very revealing piece of lingerie. I looked back down in the bag to find a matching white thong inside. It wouldn't cover much, but I put it on so I wouldn't feel as exposed.

I knew Tristan and I were mating tonight, and he was going to see whatever he wanted to see, but I was still nervous about showing him everything right away.

Tristan knocked gently on the door, "Are you ok, Jane?"

"Why do you ask?" I questioned nervously.

"You've been in there for twenty minutes, baby. Come out and let me see you," his smile was evident in his tone.

"I'm a bit nervous."

"It's ok. Let me make you feel better. Come out," his rich, deep voice commanded.

I decided there was no point delaying. I wanted to mate with him, and it was going to happen. Standing around nervously in the bathroom wasn't going to change anything, nor did I want it to.

I opened the door slowly, and Tristan stepped back. The look in his eyes when he saw me gave me confidence. It was a look of utter adoration with a glint of desire. I took a step out, and he let out a low and pleasant growl of satisfaction.

He came to me, reaching out and pulling me against him. Burying his face in my neck, he breathed my scent in deeply and sighed with contentment.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I leaned into him.

After a minute of just holding one another, he pulled his head up and lifted my chin so our eyes could meet.

“You are the most beautiful being I have ever seen in my entire life,” he whispered in awe.

I could feel my face blushing and warming, but I wanted to tell him, “You’re beautiful, too.”

He had his hands on my face and chuckled before he bent to kiss me on the mouth, gently at first.

He quickly deepened the kiss, infusing it with all the love and passion in his heart.

Sometime later, he pulled away again to search my eyes.

“I love you, Jane. I want to mark you now. It will ease your worries, and you won’t have any pain with the first mating. Are you ready for me to do that?”

“Yes, Tristan. Make me yours, please,” I whispered shakily.

He growled his approval again, his chest rumbling against me. Then he carefully gathered my hair on one side to place it behind my shoulder. His lips came down to explore the skin of my neck until he settled on that soft, tender spot right at the curve betwixt neck and shoulder. After touching his lips softly to the sweet spot, he licked it, making me shiver.

He took his time with his mouth against the sensitive skin of my neck and shoulder, kissing me tenderly over and over. Slowly the kissing turned to sucking at the soft flesh until a soft moan escaped my lips. The sound made his chest



rumble again, and then I could feel his teeth elongating into points and scraping against that magical place.

His teasing was building a deliciously delightful ache inside of me, coiling up tighter and tighter.

I strengthened my grip around him and shuddered as very slowly he sank his sharp canines into that sensitive curve. The slight pain felt like a pinprick at first and then gradually burst into flames. They seeped into my veins, spreading throughout, warming me with a feeling of safety before fanning up into an all-consuming fire.

The thick mating venom worked deeper and deeper into my being, and I suddenly became aware of several spots on my body that desperately longed for Tristan's touch, his kiss, and his entering.

The place between my legs burned with longing. The center of my back was desperate to be kissed, and my neck - my neck wanted to be entirely consumed.

Sensual moans filled the room before I realized it was my voice creating them. Surprisingly, I didn't feel embarrassed anymore. I just felt desire. I was consumed by a longing for completion and oneness with the man I love.

Tristan picked me up, and I wrapped my legs around him. His mouth was on mine again, his tongue begging for entry, so I opened my lips to receive it. They danced together, tasting one another as we both moaned into our mate's mouth. His arms encircled my waist, with mine around his neck as we tried desperately to draw closer.

He carried me to the bed as his mouth worked its magic against my skin. The sparks weren't just on the surface anymore but flowing through me like molten lava that I embraced with great pleasure. He gently laid me on the bed, following closely without breaking our connection.

That night, he loved me for hours. I put every single feeling of longing, love, and passion I felt for him into loving him back.

We touched, kissed, tasted, and explored one another's bodies with fascination and adoration until we totally,

completely, and without a single doubt belonged to one another for all eternity as full and perfect mates.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### Avery's POV

Angelica and I were assigned to a temporary suite until tomorrow night. We wanted to allow Tristan and Jane a chance to mate, with fewer of us having to hear it. We didn't hear it at all, in fact, because Angel and I were a little busy ourselves. Truth be told, we needed the same kind of privacy.

When we were finally alone, we held each other tight for a long while. The only movement between us was our breathing and beating hearts. We spoke through our new pack's mind-link; just the two of us, our voices inside each other.

*"We're safe and together, Angel. Forever."*

"Avi, you're finally mine," she said before I felt her lips curve into a smile against my neck.

There was no ceremony, no foreplay, no questioning. She called me hers, then smiled and promptly bit down into my neck, marking me to prove it.

I moaned at the intense pleasure this brought me, my body tingling into a raging inferno.

I pushed her against the bed onto her back and pressed my chest against hers. Her eyes were as on fire as my body felt, and I gripped her hair to pull her head to the side, then sank my teeth into her neck and shoulder.

She cried out in passionate hunger. I licked the spot I had marked and sucked on it hard.

"AVERY!" She moaned in desperation.

"Mmmmm," I hummed, "are you ready, Angel?"

"Please," she begged, drawing out the word desperately.

Then, I proceeded to show her every single ounce of desire and love my body could inflict upon hers until we were exhausted and out of breath. It took all night.

## EMMA'S POV

The night air was cool but not cold. My mind was busy analyzing what Jane said earlier. Gabriel wished for something, something Jane thought about. Tristan's appearance prevented me from finding out.

What could it be?

I sat on the large back porch, looking out across the ranch. It was dark, and I had the lights off, but I could still see everything. My vampire vision was more exceptional than most, and so was my hearing.

Two hundred yards away, I could hear two mice mating just as clearly as I could hear the two on the third floor and the other two on the first floor.

Something primal and natural, yet profound; this was the mating of higher beings. The mice were simply reproducing. We should get some traps.

I heard Gabriel step out onto the porch behind me, and shortly after, his hand popped into view, holding out an ice-cold bottle of beer to me.

I love his hands. They're so masculine and yet beautiful all at once. I smiled and took the beer. He sat down in a nearby chair.

"Thank you, Master Gabriel."

He knew how to make a woman feel comfortable. I never had to want for anything practical. Knowing I was thirsty for a beer before I did, he presented it. Suddenly, I would realize it was what I was craving.

It was always this way from the start. It's why I assumed he read my mind regularly. Which would have meant he knew how I felt.

Jane said he couldn't know because of what he wished.

Tipping the beer up to my mouth, I gulped down half the bottle and placed it on the nearby table, perhaps a little too roughly.

Here goes nothing.

“Master Gabriel?”

“Hmmm?” he answered, staring out over the ranch.

“Do you listen to my thoughts?”

“Not for a long time, Emma. Why?” he replied as he turned his eyes to examine me.

“When was the last time?” I tried to ask lightly as if the answer didn’t matter.

He sat still as stone, presumably thinking of the answer. After a solid ten minutes, he finally gave one.

“I read your mind for the first week you were with me. Then I stopped.”

I met his eyes, refusing to look away.

“Why did you stop?”

“Why are you asking me this?” He asked instead of answering.

“I’m curious,” I answered vaguely.

“Why are you suddenly curious?” he pressed.

“Why aren’t you answering?” I pressed back.

“I’m not ready to talk about it,” he replied firmly.

“It’s been over one hundred years, Master Gabriel. Why don’t you give it a go?” I teased, giving him one of my bright, dimpled smiles.

“Let’s get settled in here first, Emma. This place will be busy, and the kids will need our guidance.”

My eyes widened as I suddenly realized he was afraid.

“Master Gabriell!” I exclaimed. “What could you possibly have to be afraid of?”

He leaned towards me, our faces no more than twelve inches apart. His eyes met mine with intensity.

“There is only one thing in this world that I’m afraid of, Emma, and that’s losing you.”

“Gabriel,” I whispered with a voice fuller of emotion than I intended.

He broke our gaze and stood, stepping off the porch and into the yard.

With his back to me, he softly said, “I’m off to hunt,” and then he was gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Tristan's POV

I felt when Jane got out of bed. The sun was shining into our bedroom, and we'd slept two or three hours. I heard her go to the bathroom and wash her hands.

She walked back towards the bed and then past it to open the patio door. I could already tell it was one of her favorite places. Because the portion of the patio from our bedroom faced the morning sun, it would be shaded in the warmer afternoons and evenings.

I rolled over to face the balcony and watched her. She stood in the doorway, with the doors wide open, leaning against the door frame.

Her soft curves were backed by the sunlight, giving me a perfect silhouette view of her feminine form. She was still naked, and the breeze was blowing her hair back away from her face and lifting it slightly. I could see my mark on her neck, and my chest filled with love and pride.

"Good morning, my Luna," I said in my raspy morning voice.

"Good morning, my Alpha," she whispered back softly, her smile evident in her voice.

"You're not shy anymore?" I asked as I got out of bed and walked up behind her.

I was naked, too, and I pressed my body against her, wrapping my arms around her waist. Sparks tingled up my skin in a deliciously satisfying trail.

"You mind-linked to me how you were looking at me. I could feel how you felt about it," she said.

I was shocked and looked down at her, "I didn't mind-link that."

"You didn't?" she asked surprised.

Turning in my arms, she stared into my eyes. She concentrated, and then her eyes widened even further.

“Tristan, I can see through your eyes and feel your feelings,” she answered in awe.

“Can you see through mine?” she asked.

I focused on her eyes and reached out, but I didn’t know how to see anything. I could feel her presence in my mind, her love and satisfaction. When she was surprised that her ability to see my vision wasn’t something I could do, I felt the surprise in my own chest.

I only knew how to mind-link. I knew our feelings would be experienced by one another once we marked and mated. Typically, for wolves, this was a vague impression and not anything so clear and vivid. I didn’t expect to feel her in such a deep and prevalent way.

“I can’t see through your eyes. What does it mean?” I wondered out loud.

“Let’s get dressed and go ask Gabriel,” she spoke quickly.

She took my hand and dragged me into the closet to choose from the handful of meager clothing pieces Emma had delivered from town yesterday afternoon.

I put on some boxers, jeans, and a fitted gray T-shirt.

Jane put on a pair of tiny pink panties and a matching lace bra. Next, she pulled on a pair of mid-rise skinny jeans and a cute charcoal gray v-neck tee that fitted her curves closely and went down past the waist of her jeans.

When we were decent, she grabbed my hand again, and we walked together down the two flights of steps to the ground floor.

“Where did you go to sign the papers with Gabriel last night? I’m a little turned around,” she admitted.

“Oh, this way,” I replied, leading her down the large house’s south wing and into the study.

She walked over to the bookcase behind the desk and pressed in on a nondescript leather volume with the title “Farmer’s Almanac, 1897” printed on the spine.

The book clicked in and popped back out again. Nothing happened, but she stood waiting at the bookcase.

“What are you doing?” I asked in fascination.

“Last night, when you and Gabriel were getting ready to sign the paperwork, Emma was showing us more of the owner’s living quarters upstairs. She told Avery and me about the hidden apartment behind the bookcase in the study. It’s the only place in the house completely void of sunlight.”

As we waited at the neat rows of leather volumes, she explained, “Most of the rooms have blackout blinds so they can walk around the house during the day comfortably, but here they don’t have to worry about it, so this is where they can sleep without concern.”

“Shouldn’t the bookcase pop open?” I asked in amusement.

“It’s not a button to open up the case. It’s a doorbell,” she explained.

After a couple of minutes of waiting, the bookcase recessed into the wall and slid to the side. Emma stood before us in pajama shorts and a tank top.

“Good morning, Jane. Is everything ok?” she frowned.

“Something strange happened this morning, and I wanted to ask Gabriel about it. Is he still awake?”

“Yes, he’s taking a shower before going to sleep. If you want to come in and wait for him, I’ll let him know,” she smiled sleepily.

“Thanks, Emma. Sorry if I woke you.”

“It’s alright, love.”

Emma walked across the long living space, turned on the overhead light, and shuffled out of the room.

We sat on the couch waiting.

After about ten minutes, Gabriel came out in sweats and a tight T-shirt.

Damn, that old dude was somehow both lean and ripped. How could he be more than one thousand years old?

“Hey, you. What can I do for you?” he smiled.

I gestured for Jane to tell him.



“This morning, I got out of bed before Tristan. He was watching me, and I felt his emotions and thoughts about me. While it was happening, I could see through his eyes what I looked like to him as I stood on the patio. I could see myself from behind and felt the feelings he had while looking at me.

“I assumed he was sharing this through the mind-link, but he says he wasn’t. Do you know why that happened?”

He tilted his head to consider it for a moment before answering.

“Well, it’s possible that having my blood in your system could transfer some of my mind-reading abilities to you. It happens sometimes between a vampire and a feeder, but usually, they must have some sort of other relationship, as well.”

I frowned at this, “Do you mean a romantic one?”

Gabriel laughed out loud, “No, I don’t mean that at all. I mean, they are somehow related by blood.”

“Could we be blood relatives?” Jane asked him thoughtfully.

“It’s possible. We could research your genealogy and find out where your family comes from. Perhaps that could explain it. But we could also run an easy experiment,” he proposed.

“What sort of experiment?” I ask warily.

“Nothing complicated or invasive. Jane could try to read minds other than yours. It’s possible she has an ability surfacing now due to the completion of the mate bond. Many abilities lie dormant in supernatural beings until a powerful or significant change occurs in their lives.”

“So maybe she’s just a superhero now who can read minds?” I teased.

“A superhero, huh?” Gabriel chuckled.

“You might as well be one to us, Gabe,” Jane said with a smile.

“Thank you, Gabriel. That’s a lot to think about,” I said.

Gabriel stood and spoke to me, “I’m going to catch an hour or two of sleep, then I’ll meet you in the study to give you the layout of the ranch. While you’re gone, I’ll begin working on the new design of the property as we discussed.”

I smiled, “Can’t wait!”

Jane hugged Gabriel, and we left the secret apartment the way we’d entered.

“How do you feel about reading minds?” I asked her.

“It sounds exhausting but interesting,” she answered.

I held my hand out to her and asked hopefully, “We have two hours to kill. Why don’t we head back to bed?”

“Mmmm,” she moaned as she placed her hand in mine, “sounds perfect.”

I retracted my hand and instead lifted her into my arms bridal style as she giggled. I bounded up the steps, taking them two at a time, eager to return to the privacy of our bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### Jane's POV

After an hour in bed, which was all too short, Tristan and I went down to the kitchen to scrounge some breakfast. We were pleasantly surprised to find Diane there with several options ready.

The kitchen mostly smelled of bacon and baking, and I took a deep whiff, which caused my stomach to grumble out its hunger.

We sat at the kitchen island on large, plush, low bar stools and ate our heaping plates of eggs, bacon, croissants, muffins, and fruit.

Somehow, Diane learned that I didn't like coffee, and she served me the most delicious, warm cup of cocoa with my meal. Tristan sipped on his cup of black coffee between huge bites of mouth-watering food.

Avery and Angelica joined us halfway through breakfast. Angelica kissed her mom on the cheek before she and Avery began heaping piles of food on their plates.

"Back in your element, I see, Diane," Avery smiled happily as they sat on the kitchen island stools next to Tristan and me.

I looked up at Diane after I swallowed a bite of muffin, "You're an excellent cook. This is delicious!"

Diane smiled at me happily, "Cooking for people is one of my favorite things."

A comfortable silence settled over us as we continued eating, and Diane pulled baked goods out of the oven and transferred them to cooling racks.

When satisfied, we thanked Diane for the breakfast and headed out.

There was a lot of work to do to prepare for the arrival of our new pack members. We didn't know precisely when they were coming, but we knew some would arrive soon.

Angelica and I walked over to the detached garage with Avery and Tristan. It looked like a large warehouse on the outside, and once we stepped inside, we could see it housed over twenty cars. There were twelve pick-up trucks, a five-seater sedan, one sports car, and three SUVs of various sizes, plus the SUV limo.

Since Gabriel had turned over ownership of the ranch and all property on the ranch to us, the vehicles now belonged to us.

The garage was more beautiful and well-kept than the house I lived in with my father before we moved to the pack house. It had a thirty-foot-tall cedar plank ceiling with large metal chandeliers hanging down from the rafters. The floor was a shining, polished concrete of charcoal gray.

The walls were a stainless-steel surface with racks, workbenches, and shelves of tools and supplies. There were two stations with lifts and pits for changing oil and working on vehicles, and in the back left corner was a large office with a giant plate glass window looking out into the garage. There were two men seated at computers inside the office, and they stood when they saw us enter.

Tristan walked over to the office, and the two men shook his hand. I recognized the younger man who'd driven us from the hangar to the house the previous evening.

"I'm Tristan Martin, the new owner, and this is my wife, Jane Martin," my mate began the introductions.

The men shook my hand and then Avery's and Angelica's hands as they were introduced as our business partners.

"I'm Allen, and this is Crypton," the older man introduced.

My eyes widened at the second name, and the younger man, probably used to such a reaction, grinned and shrugged, "My parents loved superheroes."

Allen took us on a tour of the garage, and then, coming back to the office, he finally said, "I'm the manager of the garage, and we have one other guy, Tony, who does the oil

changes and vehicle maintenance and repairs. He works evenings and overnights.”

“Crypton here is the driver and bodyguard. If Mrs. Martin needs to go anywhere outside the ranch, he will accompany her. He’s a trained martial artist and weapons specialist with extra-human abilities.”

“What kind of abilities?” Avery asked with great interest.

“He was born of a human woman with a vampire father, which is very rare. He can see in the dark, is extremely fast, and I’ve seen him chase off a few rogues with ease. They believed Montana would be easy pickings since there weren’t any packs here until now.”

“I’m at your service, Luna,” he bowed in my direction.

Tristan seemed satisfied. We didn’t know what to expect when meeting the ranch staff. We figured they would likely know about Gabriel being a vampire, but we didn’t know what they knew of wolves or packs. We thought we might have to ease them into it.

Allen continued, “Mr. Gabriel explained the change of ownership and the situation. Since she is the Luna of your pack and Mr. Gabriel’s feeder, everyone who works and lives here will treat her with care and the utmost respect. They will give their lives to protect her.”

Tristan smiled and dipped his head slightly as he said, “I’m grateful.”

Allen seemed surprised at his humility. Most alphas would never bow their head to anyone but the king. Tristan was a different kind of alpha. He was powerful enough to destroy almost anyone around him, but he believed in serving, protecting, and showing gratitude.

Allen cleared his throat and said, “Everyone who works here is alive today because Mr. Gabriel saved us in some way or another. If he cares for and respects you all enough to gift you the ranch, then our loyalty is yours.

“None of us employees are wolves, except for Wolfgang. However, if you allow us, we will pledge allegiance to join

your pack and continue to serve the ranch and you,” he finished his speech with a bow of his head.

Tristan looked over the three of us, mind-linking us before speaking aloud. We all nodded our agreement. This was a new pack. We have to make the rules here. There were no traditions to follow, no pack laws to uphold yet beyond the fundamental wolf rights assigned by the North American Pack Council.

Tristan finally looked at Allen. “My pack agrees; welcome to our family. When the next group of wolves arrives, let all the employees who want to become a part of the pack know to be there. They can take their pledges with the others.

“It’s not usual for humans and vampire hybrids to join a wolf pack. However, we have a human Luna, and Gabriel and Emma are honorary members, so we aren’t going to be a typical pack anyway.”

“Thank you, Alpha. I’m proud to serve you,” Allen bowed his head, and Crypton followed his example.

Tristan grinned, then stepped over to the largest pick-up in the garage and slapped it on top of the hood. The front of the truck was nearly as tall as him.

“Where do I get the keys to this beast?”

Crypton’s face broke into a huge smile. He reached just inside the door of the office, opening a key box hanging on the wall. He grabbed the set of keys without even looking and tossed them to Tristan.

“Thanks, man,” he said with the enthusiasm of a kid about to test a new toy.

“I’ll see you this afternoon, Jane Marie Martin,” Tristan said as he leaned over and kissed me on the mouth, causing a delicious tingle to spread down the length of my body.

When he pulled away, I sighed happily, and his chest rumbled in approval.

Avery kissed her mate and then climbed into the vehicle with Tristan. Angelica and I watched as they drove off in the huge monster of a truck.

They were going to survey all the outbuildings on the property, including the bunkhouses and cabins built to house the ranch employees. Their goal today was to see how many buildings could be used as temporary living quarters until we were able to build enough for everyone to live comfortably.

Angelica and I would take inventory of the house and supplies and see what we needed to order.

I turned to Angelica and asked, "Are you ready?"

"At your service, Luna," she smiled.

We waved to the men in the garage and left, walking back towards the house as I organized my ideas.

I talked to Angelica as we went.

"I'll walk the bedrooms and other rooms of the house to see how many we can sleep in the main house."

"I want you to inventory the linen closets and see how many full sets of sheets we have and what bed sizes they are. We also need to know how many towels we have."

"You got it, Luna," Angelica said pleasantly.

"Call me Jane," I insisted.

"Ok, Jane," she replied.

I continued my organizational thoughts aloud, "Diane is already inventorying the kitchen and measuring the Great Room to see how many tables we can fit in it for a temporary Dining Hall. She'll be running the kitchen at the main house for now and will continue as long as she wants."

"Wise choice," Angelica smiled, "She makes the best food."

"Judging by breakfast, that's totally believable," I smiled back.

We got to the side door of the main house to find a middle-aged man in overalls standing there waiting for us.

"Luna Martin?" he asked.

"That's me," I replied, then said to Angelica, "Go ahead and get started. I'll be in soon."

Angelica nodded and went into the house. We both knew from Gabriel that he ran a tight ship here regarding

security, so no one was likely to be on the property that shouldn't be. Considering this, I felt comfortable talking to anyone who came looking for me by name.

The man held out his hand, and as I shook it, he said, "I'm Joshua. I run the wood shop on the ranch. We usually just repair fences and build things needed for the ranch, but Alpha Tristan called a few minutes ago and asked if any of us knew how to make furniture. There are eight of us in the wood shop, and we all know how to build furniture, so I'm here to get your orders."

I'm sure my eyes lit up. We definitely needed Joshua.

"Thank you, Joshua. I'm happy to meet you. I was just about to walk the house now and see what we can convert into living quarters temporarily."

He nodded and said, "I'm not familiar with any rooms in the house other than the ground floor study and common rooms, but I can walk it with you. I have my trusty measuring tape and notepad."

He patted a couple of the pockets in his overalls.

After pulling out his notepad and a pencil, he continued, "I can write down what you need us to make as we go. We also have a storage facility near the shop where we can store any furniture you need to get out of the way to make room for beds and such."

I thanked the goddess again for the great gift of this new home. It was turning out to be so much more than any of us realized or expected.

"Come with me, Joshua," I smiled at him, and we went to work.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### Jane's POV

Joshua and I walked through the first floor and straight to the kitchen to see Diane first. She looked up at me from the extra-large kitchen island where she was prepping dough. Her face was covered in flour, and she was smiling from ear to ear.

“You look happy,” I smiled back at her.

“I am. I used to run the pack house kitchen for Alpha MacKenzie, but when I got pregnant with Angelica, he basically fired me. He said she-wolves should be home raising their pups and not working,” she scowled.

“Don’t get me wrong, I loved raising Angelica. It’s just I enjoy making food for everyone. It makes me happy.”

I couldn’t help the smile that formed on my face. Seeing pack members happy and loving their work increased my own happiness tenfold.

Two young men came in from the kitchen side door carrying bags of groceries.

Diane looked up and said to them, “Line the counters, boys. I’ll unpack them in a few minutes.”

I tilted my head as I ultimately watched four different young men bring in more than fifty bags of food and fill the countertops. Diane glanced at me and then explained.

“The four guys are line cooks from the chow wagon for the ranch hands, cowgirls, and cowboys that run the cattle. They have a huge set-up out there, like a cafeteria, for feeding all ninety-six of the ranch’s employees.”

“Gabriel sent me out there to meet them last night, and the head chef loaned these four guys to me for the next couple of days. I gave them a list and the credit card Tristan had given me to go into town and buy what I needed to stock the pantry.”

I was very impressed.

“We’ll have to make a list and get on a regular order system to have things delivered in the long run. I have a ledger here where I’m going to enter the receipts until you and Tristan decide on a budget for the main house pantry.”

She turned back to the boys, who had finished bringing in the bags of food by this time, “Can you gentlemen start clearing out the Great Hall of furniture and take it to the storage warehouse? We need to get some tables and chairs in here.”

“You got it,” one of the guys said as they headed out.

“It looks like you have things well in hand here,” I said to her happily, and then, “Diane, do you have an approximate breakdown of who David will be bringing to us? Avery said it would be somewhere around five hundred people.”

She dusted her hands on her apron and then walked over to a counter set up a bit like a desk with notepads, notes, and pencils everywhere.

She shuffled through the small stacks. She found what she was looking for and came back with a sheet of paper.

“I made you a list of general numbers and demographics. This is both David’s and my families. There are twenty-one heads of household, but as you can see, most of the adults have mated and are now having children. I’ve made note of families and a few unmated wolves, whether they’re male or female, and so on.”

I looked down at the list, thinking that Diane was an impressive organizer. No one could pay me enough to fire her from any job in my household. Alpha MacKenzie must be a foolish old wolf.

I quickly scanned the list: twenty-one heads of house plus their mates, children, children’s mates, and grandchildren. The total number of wolves in their families was 456. Beneath that was written “+53” and the total circled was “509”.

“What’s this plus fifty-three?” I asked.

“Avery added that. When Tristan told her your story and what happened to you both after you found out you were mates, she told him about these wolves. These are all the wolves in her father’s pack who have no families and are treated like slaves. Many of them are orphans who have no blood relation to us.

“One of the things she and Tristan asked David to do is to bring as many of them as possible. David had his uncles gather them secretly before they left MacKenzie’s territory.”

My chest felt tight, and my eyes filled with tears. Who knows what kinds of horrors these pups had suffered? I felt so touched that Avery and Tristan had done this. No wonder he had been so happy when I told him I wanted to make sure no one was ever treated like I was. He was bringing to me a lot of wolves that would need this thoughtful care.

I swallowed and blinked away my tears before reading the final breakdown of wolves: 75 mated pairs, 41 unmated adults, 288 children living with parents, and 30 orphan children.

On the back of the page was the household breakdown of the number of people per family unit. Diane noted that she thought the best idea was to create a bunkhouse for the kids and have a few adults staying with them to care for them, like a sleep-away camp. Then, we can bunk several adults in each bedroom temporarily if necessary.

“This is a great idea, Diane.”

She nodded and continued, “I also made note that there are two bedrooms on the ground floor and thirty bedrooms on the second floor. They all have private bathrooms. Additionally, since we are converting the Great Hall into a dining hall, the formal dining room on the ground floor could potentially be partitioned into two additional bedrooms if we can clear out the furniture. That gives us a total of 34 bedrooms we can use.”

“I know Avery and Angelica are moving up to the third floor with you and Tristan for now. David and I will take

you up on the offer to stay in one of the other bedrooms if that suits you.”

I nodded, “Yes, please do. You will both be working hard to help us get everyone settled. You need a good bed.”

She nodded gratefully, “Thank you, Luna.”

Joshua had been looking over my shoulder as I went through the numbers and spoke with Diane. He was making notes on his pad. He glanced up at me and saw me watching him.

“What have you noted there?” I asked.

“You’ve got your unmated adults and children that can sleep in bunk beds for now. That’s 180 bunk beds that will sleep 360 people. We just need a place to put them all.”

“Let’s plan on 160 bunk beds for the children. I have another idea for the unmated adults.”

I started thinking about where all these bunks could be placed and realized we had the perfect spot.

“Come with me, Joshua,” I said with excitement.

We left the kitchen and walked down the south wing hallway. At the end of the hall, a pair of ornate double doors were covered in dust and looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in ages.

“What’s this?” Joshua asked.

“It’s a ballroom!” I revealed as I threw open the double doors.

Joshua opened his mouth in shock, “I had no idea there was a ballroom here!”

“Gabriel told me that the year the house construction was completed, there was a vampire council ball, and he was the host. That’s why he designed the house with an extra-large ballroom and so many bedrooms. It was essentially built to host the council’s celebration that year.”

We stood in the doorway, looking into the massive space. From this vantage point, it seemed like half a football field could fit inside.

I stepped in and looked beside the doors until I found two panels of switches. I flipped up all the ones on the panel labeled “lights.”

Examining the second panel labeled “shades,” I also decided to flip all of these up. A soft humming noise began to echo across the ballroom as we watched all the blackout shades rising along one wall.

This turned out to be an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out into the forest. It was breathtaking.

Once the shades were fully open, I turned to survey the ballroom, which was now flooded with light. It smelled a little musty, and the floor was covered in a layer of thick dust.

I walked over to the windows, and as I got closer, I noticed a larger panel with one big switch just to the right of the window wall. It wasn’t labeled, but I flipped it up to see what it would do. The sound of creaking mechanisms echoed through the ballroom as the wall of windows began to retract.

The process was slow, and the windows took about three minutes to open fully. Just outside the ballroom, a flat stone patio had been laid in a decorative pattern. The stones went right up to the edge of the forest.

The sudden influx of fresh air lessened the heaviness of the ballroom atmosphere.

I glanced around, taking in the details of the modern-style ballroom. It reminded me a lot of the garage, with thirty-foot-tall cedar-planked ceilings and massive iron chandeliers of a simple, clean design.

The floors were polished concrete with a beautiful, scrolling design stained across them. There was a luxurious fabric wallpaper along all the walls that didn’t contain windows. It seemed to be made of some linen in a dark charcoal gray color. Vampires and black appeared to be a theme.

Joshua called, “I’ll be right back!”

He jogged down the hall and out of sight. I walked around the room and took in the fine details as I waited for him to return. He reappeared in less than ten minutes with a measuring wheel, which looked like a single wheel on the end of a stick.

Joshua placed it on the floor in one corner of the ballroom and jogged the length of the space while rolling the wheel along between him and the wall.

As he worked, I stepped outside the ballroom back down the hall and observed two more ornate doors on either side of the hallway with signs reading “Gentlemen” and “Ladies.”

I knew the bathrooms were built for the event. I stepped into the ladies’ room and saw it was massive. There was a sitting area with plush furniture in shades of brown and gold. Past that were sinks, mirrors, and a few vanities. Walking further into the space, I counted thirty toilet stalls and, past that, a door with frosted glass. It read “Showers” in the middle of the frost.

Curious, I opened the door to this space and saw a sauna, a dozen shower stalls, and another door, also frosted, that read “Pool.”

This surprised me as I didn’t know the house even had a pool. I pushed through this door and was enveloped by a pleasant warmth. An indoor pool of Olympic size spread out in front of me. There were lounging chairs surrounding the ample space on either side of the crystal-clear water. And again, there was an entire wall of windows with mechanical shades. The extravagance and opulence of this space seemed out of line with Gabriel’s character, but I knew from our conversation about the council’s events that these words were synonymous with typical vampires of great age. It was obvious to me he had built it for the gathering.

I retraced my steps, exited the ladies’ bathroom, and crossed the hall to walk through the door labeled “Gentlemen.” This bathroom was similar to the ladies’

room but with urinals instead of the vanities installed in the gentlemen's room. This gentlemen's space also had showers, a sauna, and a smaller room with a half-sized pool and hot tub.

With the ballroom dusty and disused, it was a surprise to see these pool rooms so well kept, and I wondered if they were part of the ranch staff's housekeeping or gardening chores.

Heading back to the ballroom, I considered how converting it into a children's dorm gave the kids easy access to these facilities. It was very convenient, but I might decide to lock the pool rooms unless there were adults present to supervise the children.

I arrived back in the ballroom just as Joshua jogged back towards the door.

He looked down at his paper and said, "We can fill it with bunk beds along this longer empty wall across from the windows. At the far end, I suggest erecting a few cubicle walls and placing beds and dressers inside to house any adults or parents who are willing to stay and oversee the children."

"Perfect," I replied.

Joshua looked at me and then asked curiously, "How do you know so much about the house already?"

"Gabriel gave me an overview yesterday evening along with the architecture plans. I studied them briefly last night while I waited for Tristan to finish his meeting, but clearly, I didn't read them in great detail."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"There are two indoor swimming pools attached to the shower rooms in these bathrooms," I gestured out into the hallway.

Joshua grinned, "I've heard about them, but I haven't been there. The landscaping staff maintains the pool areas, but no one dares to use them without permission."

I nodded, and Joshua continued, "Do you have any additional ideas for this children's dorm?"

“Maybe keeping the central space open for a play area? I’m not sure about the size of the bunk beds, but will they all fit?”

“They’ll fit. I have some ideas for that,” Joshua replied confidently.

“It’s a lot to build,” he continued. “This will go faster if we pull some ranch hands, cowgirls, and cowboys over to help.”

“Including partitions for the ballroom, twelve queen beds, dressers, 160 bunks, and a dining room partitioned into two bedrooms with beds and dressers, I think we can do it in two days if we have enough hands.”

I sighed with relief, “Then go ahead, please. I’ll have Diane send the boys from the Chuck Wagon over to give the ballroom a good clean now while you’re working on gathering supplies and people. You get it done, and I’ll get the mattresses and bedding ordered for when the beds are complete.”

Joshua replied, “Hold off on the cleaning for now. We’re going to build the beds right inside the ballroom, so it’s best to let us clean up after the builds before the mattresses come in.”

“Great idea, thank you.”

Joshua nodded, then pulled a cell phone out of his pocket to call the shop, “Excuse me, Luna.”

I nodded and began to walk down the hallway away from the ballroom. I could hear Joshua’s conversation as I walked.

“Vera, get everyone down here to the south wing ballroom inside the main house—the whole shop. Call Easton down at the hardware store in town and tell him we want every two-by-four, four-by-four, and a sheet of sanded plywood available in the state of Montana...that’s right, all sizes. We’ve got some work to do, and I need all hands on deck,” Joshua was saying into the phone.

The ballroom would temporarily sort out the children and twelve mated couples. That left us with housing to



prepare for 41 unmated wolves and 63 mated couples. We had 34 bedrooms once the dining room was converted. So that left us with a need for 70 beds still.

As I headed into the central area of the house, I mind-linked Angelica to meet me in the downstairs library to report on linens and towels. I stopped off in the kitchen with Diane to ask for something to keep the receipts in. She happened to have a medium box with a lid that was the perfect size.

When I got to the library, I saw Angelica seated on a comfortable sofa in a seating area arranged by the fireplace. She appeared to be deep in thought, tapping on her notepad with a pencil.

I walked in, and she looked up at me.

I grinned, pulled the black card out of my back pocket, and said, "Online shopping?"

Her face broke into a huge smile, "Now you're speaking my language."

I pulled out two of the ranch's laptops from a bottom drawer in the large central desk in the room. Gabriel had told me about the many ranch laptops in the manor and where to find them.

I handed one to Angelica as I settled on the sofa next to her. I put my feet up on a small, cushioned ottoman and opened my laptop. They were not password-protected and were already on the ranch's wi-fi network.

We discussed our game plan and then got to work ordering mattresses, pillows, sheet sets, blankets, towels, washcloths, and rugs. We focused on stores that could deliver the items to us the next day or within two days at most.

Three hours later, we had found enough items to make the house livable for all the wolves we were expecting.

After completing the orders and printing receipts to place in our box, we both stood to stretch.

"Let's get some lunch," I said, and my stomach growled at the thought.

We headed to the kitchen for lunch, where, hopefully, Tristan and Avery would meet us to give us an idea of how much housing was available outside the main mansion.

I felt satisfied with a meaningful morning's work and couldn't wait to meet our new pack members.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### Tristan's POV

Avery and I spent the morning meeting all the employees on the ranch and getting the lay of the land. The ranch was well-developed and well-managed.

All of the employees we spoke to had heard of our offer to Allen in the garage that morning and expressed their desire to join the pack and continue on the ranch.

The more people we spoke with, the greater my respect for Gabriel became. Each one of the ranch's ninety-six employees had been disadvantaged and living tough lives when Gabriel found them and brought them here. They all came to work for him not only because they wanted to but because they genuinely loved and respected him.

Of all the things I'd heard about vampires in my life, this was the first time I'd knowingly met a one thousand-plus-year-old one. That he spent his life saving and caring for so many, humans and otherwise, was remarkable.

Our ranch employees came from so many backgrounds. There were folks he rescued from sex trafficking, drug rings, gangs, abusive families, and the list goes on. These were all good people who had been through some horrific circumstances, and one powerful being had truly seen them and offered them a better way of life.

There was something deeply touching about a powerful being who cared for others whom a lesser man would consider beneath him. At this point, I would offer Gabriel my own blood if he asked for it.

As we were meeting the ranch staff, many were being called away to the house to help my Luna prepare for the influx of wolves that would soon arrive. I smiled and released them into her service.

The ranch foreman took us out to the staff cabins, and we toured one of them. They all had the same layout: a

kitchen/dining room combo with a living room, two bedrooms, and one bathroom. They were all furnished simply with a dining table and a sofa, and each bedroom had a queen-sized bed with a simple dresser and two bedside tables.

The foreman informed us that there were 148 staff cabins, but only 92 were occupied. The cabins were originally built to grow the ranch, but Gabriel hadn't progressed with the next phase of the ranch's development yet.

This fortunate set of circumstances left us with fifty-six vacant two-bedroom cabins or 112 beds in total. I made a mental note to bring this information to Jane at lunchtime.

The foreman drove us to the stables to meet the staff that cared for the horses. We would meet the cowgirls and cowboys another time since they were out with the cattle this morning.

On the way there, Avery's new cell phone rang. It was an unknown number. She looked at me and then picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Avery, it's David. We have an issue," he began.

"One second, David, let me put you on speaker so the Alpha can hear you, too," she held out the phone and tapped the speaker button.

"Hi, David. Tristan here," I said.

"Alpha, we managed to get everyone out last night. All 509 of us successfully left MacKenzie's pack. He didn't discover we'd left until early this morning when he checked in with border patrol and realized there was no one patrolling the borders."

"He threatened us through the mind-link to return immediately, or he would turn us rogue and notify all the packs in the east to capture us as traitors."

"Where is everyone now?" I asked.

"We gave up all the vehicles to the families with children to drive directly west along the northern US to head straight

to Montana. They were driving through the night and rotating drivers for minimal stops. They should arrive by tomorrow morning at the latest.”

“Where are the rest of you?” I asked.

Once they pledged to me and I received them into the pack, I would be able to locate any member through the link. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t be in the pack for another couple of days at best.

David answered, “The rest of us shifted and started running south to draw anyone chasing us away from the children. We made it to the south and have run all the way to the Louisiana/Texas border since there were large areas to run through that didn’t belong to any packs.”

“Are they catching up to you?” I asked.

“We got a good eight-hour head start, so it’s not likely they’ll catch up too soon, but Alpha MacKenzie severed us from the pack. We are now rogues.”

“From here on out, most of the territory we must cross belongs to other packs. We’re scenting as rogues, and no pack is going to allow this large number of rogues to cross their territory. We’re trapped between three packs and going back the way we came. We will have to cross one of them before MacKenzie’s hunters catch up to us,” he finished.

I knew this area vaguely, “All of East and North Texas, that’s Alpha Clovis’s territory - the Divine Moon Pack. I’ve only met him once, but I know he and my father didn’t get along.

“Father said he was too progressive with his attitudes towards humans. He was also disgusted that he has five unmated daughters, all in their mid-to-late twenties.”

David replied, “Alpha MacKenzie also disliked him greatly. I’ve never met him, so I’m not sure how receptive he would be to letting us through his territory.”

“David, is this your cell phone number?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s a burner phone I picked up at a gas station nearby to call you.”

I replied, "Keep it handy. I'm going to try to contact Alpha Clovis. Hopefully, he'll be willing to let you through. I'll call or text you back."

I sent David's number to my new cell phone and saved it. After, I dialed Gabriel's cell.

He picked up after five rings, "Tristan?"

"Sorry to wake you, Gabriel, but I have a situation. Do you know Alpha Clovis from the Divine Moon Pack by any chance?"

"Of course, I have a ranch in Texas, too," he revealed.

"How friendly are you with him?" I asked.

"Your pack is rogued and needs to get through," he said factually. It wasn't a question.

"Don't worry, Tristan. I know him well. I'll give him a call for you. Standby for my text," Gabriel said.

"Thank you, Gabriel," I said and hung up.

We continued to tour the stables while we awaited Gabriel's text.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### Gabriel's POV

Emma popped her head into my bedroom door as I was getting dressed.

"I'm going to help Diane prepare lunch for everyone. She's closed all the blackout shades in the main house, except for the ballroom, so you can move freely when you finish your call," she informed me.

"Thank you, Emma," I said, and she left the apartment.

I dressed quickly, headed to the small office inside our hidden blackout apartment, and flipped on the light switch before sitting at the desk.

I dialed Alpha Clovis in a video call. I needed him to see the urgency of the situation. I know he wouldn't deny me anything if he could help it, but one hundred-plus rogues crossing pack territory was a big ask.

After two rings, he picked up, "Gabriel, old friend, what can I do for you?"

He was clearly at his training field.

"How did you know I need something?" I laughed.

"Video call. That's where you give me the pleading eyes," he chuckled as he walked outside of the training arena to step into the edge of his forest nearby.

My voice somber, I began, "I've got a big ask, Clovis. It's a serious situation, and you might be the only person that can help us."

"Does this have to do with the 116 rogues we can scent about a mile from our eastern border?"

Alpha Clovis was a bright man with strong senses and a keen awareness of all that happened around his territory.

"It does," I started, "I'm up at the ranch in Montana. It's no longer mine. I've given the entire thing to Alpha Tristan Martin and his Luna Jane Martin. Jane is my new feeder, and Tristan needed his own pack."

“Tristan Martin? Ah, yes, I remember the boy. He was an intelligent kid when I met him. Hates his father. We have that in common, so I liked him right away. He’s Alpha in Montana now, eh? And your feeder is a Luna?” he asked curiously.

I answered, “Yes. The million-acre ranch I paid in the contract is now his pack territory. When we’re all settled, he’ll be inviting all the North American Alphas to introduce the new pack.

“But the rogues near your border are his pack. They left Alpha MacKenzie to join Alpha Tristan. Tristan’s Beta is Avery MacKenzie.”

Clovis let out a low whistle, “You really took on a big project this time, Gabriel. A huge crowd of treasonous wolves on the run from Alphas Martin and MacKenzie. I’m sure you know there’s going to be a war from this.”

“We’re all aware, but there’s a good reason. The Alphas in question threatened Tristan and Avery’s true mates to reject them. They intended to mate Tristan and Avery to each other. Tristan’s mate, Jane, ended up in my forest near death. If I had been even three or four minutes later, she would have died.

“She’d been whipped near to death, Clovis. Martin had beaten them both, and still, they would not reject each other. He hung Tristan from some gallows to force her to reject him before they rogued her and threw her into my forest. I’m sure he believed I would scent the blood and finish her off for him.”

Clovis’s stern expression turned angry as I spoke.

“Say no more, Gabriel. We’ll let them through. I’m glad to hear that Tristan and Jane are mated and safe in Montana.”

I nodded, “As am I. Thank you, Clovis. I owe you one.”

Clovis waved his hand in the air as if it were nothing, “Martin whipped and hung his own son, did he? Not honoring the mating bond is bad enough, but treating his only child like that is unforgivable.



“I’ll tell border patrol to get them a few miles inside the border now, and Saranya and I will go to meet them. We’ll escort them to the pack house and give them lodging and meals so they can rest safely before we send them on their way to you. I’ll even provide them an escort if necessary to make it to Montana without incident.”

“I’m grateful,” I said truthfully.

“We all have a responsibility to this world, Gabriel, as you know. If a war is coming, Alpha Tristan and his pack have my full support,” he assured me, and then we hung up the call.

I texted Tristan, “All is well. Alpha Clovis escorting pack to pack house for rest before helping them on to you. Tell them to meet border patrol at the border ASAP.”

“Thank you, Gabriel,” he messaged back immediately.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### David's POV

I read the text from Tristan, "Proceed to the border. Border patrol will take you to meet Alpha Clovis and his daughter, Saranya. They are offering you food and shelter for the night and will see you off tomorrow."

I sighed in relief and passed the phone to my older brother, Jesse. He read it, handed it back to me, then turned to address our pack. He didn't need to speak loudly; we were all wolves, so we could easily hear him.

"Listen up, dogs! We're rogued now, but Alpha Tristan has negotiated food and shelter for the night with the Divine Moon Pack's Alpha Clovis. We are to show them our best behavior and lots of respect while we're here. Absolutely no shenanigans! I'm looking at you, John," he pointed at one of our brothers.

John looked away, and the other brothers laughed while his mate, LeeAnn, bit her lip to keep her giggle from escaping.

"We will obey the Alpha's orders while we're here and bring honor to our new pack. Savvy?"

"Savvy," we all answered Jesse's familiar question in unison.

When Jesse turned back to face the border, we saw a dozen wolves in their human form waiting to escort us into their territory.

Jesse stepped up first and shook their hands, introducing himself as the eldest brother and expressing his gratitude.

The border patrol was friendly and seemed unbothered by our presence. I wondered how Tristan managed to get them to trust us so quickly.

We all hiked for an hour, chatting amiably with the border wolves until we reached a clearing that looked like a satellite training ground.

When we arrived, we immediately noticed Alpha Clovis, an enormous and intimidating figure of about 6'5" or so. Next to him stood what I assumed to be his daughter.

She was 5'11" if she were an inch and was extremely beautiful and intimidating in her own right. Her long reddish-brown hair reached down her back to her waist, and her eyes glowed a golden-brown honey color. She looked like a superhero standing there confidently, with the wind blowing her hair around her.

I realized that if everyone in this Alpha's family were so powerful and intimidating, it's no wonder they weren't worried about a few dozen newly rogued wolves on their way home to a new pack.

"Everything really *is* bigger in Texas," blurted John, and a few of the men snickered, including the border patrol.

The corner of Alpha Clovis's lip twitched in amusement, and the daughter rolled her eyes.

"Welcome, First Montana Pack. I'm Alpha Clovis, and this is my middle daughter, Saranya. She is my best warrior and is happy to include you in any of her training sessions while you're here," Alpha Clovis began.

Jesse stepped forward to bow his head and replied, "Thank you for your hospitality, Alpha. You're a lifesaver. Literally. Nice to meet you, Saranya."

Saranya nodded at him silently.

"Jesse, is it?" Alpha Clovis asked, and Jesse nodded.

"Is everyone rested enough to shift and run ten miles? It's a little way to the pack house," he continued.

Jesse answered, "We're ready when you are, Alpha."

Alpha Clovis and his daughter stripped and shifted so quickly that we didn't have time to take our shirts off. Many of us froze there, shirts half lifted with our mouths hanging open.

Alpha Clovis was one of the most enormous wolves we'd ever seen. As a wolf, his back came up to my shoulder height. While unique, it was understandable because he was an Alpha.

What we were staring at with our mouths gaping open was Saranya. Her wolf was a reddish-brown-furred beauty with a glowing blue crescent moon on her forehead. But that wasn't all. Most astonishing and unheard of to any of us, Saranya's wolf was the same size as her father's.

We'd barely registered this incredible sight when Jesse breathed deeply and turned his head back toward the direction from which we'd come. The scent of another pack nearing the border wafted through the air.

Jesse said, "They sure got here fast. Alpha?"

One of the border guards replied, "The Alpha wants y'all to follow him to the pack house. Border patrol will handle it."

Jesse nodded and shifted. The rest of us shifted shortly after, and the Alpha and Saranya took off running at what I guessed was probably half speed for them.

We all followed, now in wolf form. We kept up a good pace, running through the forest, weaving in and out of trees, and jumping over fallen logs and underbrush.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived on the large front lawn of what I assumed was the pack house. It was an enormous structure that looked more like a palace if a palace could be made with massive cedar logs.

A gorgeous middle-aged woman was standing in front of the steps that led to a vast wrap-around porch. She handed the Alpha some shorts and a T-shirt.

She then passed Saranya a jumpsuit that looked like spandex training gear. She stepped into the fitted legs, pulled the sleeves up and over her shoulders, and zipped the front closed.

All the unmated males in our group couldn't seem to take their eyes off her while she dressed. Even though nudity was perceived differently in packs than it was in the human world, staring was still considered either rude or an invitation.

Sensing she was being ogled, Saranya looked up and let out a low growl. The power carried within that sound caused

the aforementioned males to look down, and some of the younger ones even whimpered.

Alpha Clovis chuckled under his breath, and Saranya glared at her father, who immediately put on a straight face.

As we all shifted back to human form, the lovely older woman spoke, “Welcome, First Montana Pack. I’m Luna Megan. Please help yourself to the clothing here on the porch. You’ve met my daughter Saranya, and these are my other four daughters laying out your clothing: Audra, Kendra, Loie, and Desta.”

Four beautiful young ladies in their twenties stood on the porch draping shorts, T-shirts, and sundresses over the porch’s railing.

“When you’re dressed, my daughters will show you to your rooms. You’re welcome to freshen up. All rooms have showers and fresh clothing, so please help yourselves.”

She smiled as she continued, “Whenever you feel ready, you can make your way down to the first floor, and someone will show you to the dining hall. I’m sure you’re hungry after such a long journey,” she finished.

Our people murmured thanks and selected clothing to wear. Again, the unmated males in our group were eyeing the other four girls. They were just as beautiful and only slightly less intimidating than Saranya.

Saranya walked up the steps to help her sisters. The single males lingered near the railing, looking at the girls with open admiration.

Saranya began draping clothes over the rail and side-eyed the young men, saying in an even tone, “If you aren’t their mates, then get lost. None of us will settle for anything less.”

The young men looked down and scattered away, giving the girls some peace.

I watched the whole thing with amusement as I pulled on my shorts and tee. Once I was dressed, I followed Jesse up the steps to greet the Luna, who was now in the entryway with two of her daughters. They were directing guests to the guest wing of the pack house.

“Luna Megan,” I bowed my head to her, “thank you for your hospitality. I’m David, and this is my eldest brother, Jesse. If anyone causes any problems while we’re here, just let either of us know, and we’ll take care of it.”

She reached out her hand and shook ours pleasantly, “Welcome, gentlemen. I’m glad we could offer you shelter, and I’m confident everyone will behave themselves,” she said with an amused wink.

“My daughters are happy to show you to your rooms, and we’ll see you both at dinner,” she offered.

One of the girls smiled at us and said, “Follow me.”

Jesse and I decided to share a room since most of the guest rooms had two beds, and there were over a hundred of us. We took turns showering and then went down to have dinner.

The Divine Moon Pack treated us like honored guests. After we had our fill of the delicious meal, the older pack members headed to bed.

The younger ones were invited out with Divine Moon Pack’s young adults to find some entertainment. There was mention of a bonfire and dancing, but I was about as interested in that as I was contracting a serious case of worms.

Jesse and I got back to the room, and I was out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### Jane's POV

It was morning, and I was in the ballroom helping things along. David said the children and parents would arrive by the following morning at the latest.

The cubicles with queen beds and dressers were complete. Each had a nice rug on the floor that Angelica had ordered. Angelica was dressing the queen beds while I helped sand the last of the bunks smooth. We had thirty more to sand down, and the wood shop folks were working much faster than I. The mix of experience, and in some cases, vampire, wolf, or hybrid speed, made them supernaturally efficient. Once the wood was smooth, we would put on the mattresses and sheets.

We decided not to stain or paint the bunks due to time restraints, but it could be done at a later date. We planned to give the beds to the families of our new pack members once their homes were built.

The beds would all be ready by tonight. Only half of the mattresses had arrived, though. I thought we might want to go down to the sporting goods shop in town and get a bunch of sleeping bags, just in case.

The most remarkable thing was that Joshua had devised a fantastic solution for fitting all the bunks. He had lined up the head of half of the bunks along the walls with three feet between them. Then, he had built a loft above them for the rest of the bunks.

The ceiling in the massive ballroom was thirty feet tall, and there was plenty of room to build up. It was all temporary structure, but it was sturdy and safe.

One of the ladies from the shop, Vera, had even built the loft to look like a giant, long treehouse with walls, a roof, and large window cutouts so the kids could look down into

the ballroom. This was undoubtedly the largest and best treehouse I had ever seen.

Another staff member didn't want the kids on the first-floor bunks to feel bad, so she, Lainey, had sewn cloth walls at the foot of each bunk that looked like medieval castle tent flaps and hung twinkle lights to look like stars along the roof, created by the loft.

Since the bunks were only along the longest wall, and the adult cubicles were along a second wall, this would leave the entire wall of windows and the center of the ballroom empty for the kids to play. Most of the toys we had ordered were here already.

Amos, the youngest staff member from the wood shop, and his friends from the stables had built several stackable wooden toy boxes to hold the smaller toys. They'd even built a couple of bike racks to store the scooters and bikes we bought for the kids.

This was like a huge kids' sleep-away camp paradise, or it would be when they were finished.

Lainey came over to me, took the sandpaper from my hands, and smiled. She said, "I'll finish here, Luna. That way, you can check on the rest of the house."

I smiled gratefully at her, "Thanks, Lainey. I'm just amazed at all you've accomplished in two days!"

She replied, "All the cowboys, cowgirls, and ranch hands came to help and worked all night to make it happen. We have good people here."

"I can see that," I said, waving at her as I headed for the ballroom doors and down the hall.

I checked all thirty-four guest bedrooms in the house. Diane had already made sure they had fresh linens on the beds, blankets, and towels placed in the bathrooms. That woman was worth her weight in gold.

Avery had driven down just after breakfast to supervise the dressing of the beds in the now clean and vacant staff cabins.



To my surprise, we had enough rooms for everyone. We would have six cabins to spare, and one of the bedrooms in Tristan and my third-floor apartment was also vacant, but we had dressed the beds just in case.

The children's dorm idea was truly brilliant and made it possible for everyone to have a place when they arrived. After a couple of days of settling in and organizing everyone, we would break ground on permanent housing for each family.

A big surprise to me was that Gabriel was a full-fledged architect, among many other things since he had lived so long. The house in which we now lived was his own design, and he'd personally overseen construction. Currently, he was busy working on dozens of plans.

I walked down to the study where Gabriel and Tristan were working together on all things pack planning related.

Tristan and I decided, with Gabriel's guidance, that the best thing to do would be to build a town square with some essential buildings and a small town. Gabriel had already designed the square and the road map. At the moment, he was working on designing all the buildings in the town square. The speed with which he drew across the paper baffled my mind.

We were going to have a separate pack house to office our pack leaders and host official events. The next building would be a central security facility since the town would be built between our home and the property's front gates.

The security facilities Tristan envisioned were a massive undertaking. He wanted cameras everywhere and for all the facilities in the square and our home to run on underground generators, so it would be tough for anyone to disable them.

The Pack House would have a large-scale kitchen, ballroom, and a brilliant dining hall. I had no idea how we were going to build all of this or how long it would take, but Tristan and Gabriel said it was going to be magnificent.

Earlier, when I asked them about the cost involved in all of this, Gabriel had chuckled. He'd asked if I'd checked the

accounts that came with the property. I hadn't, of course. Tristan had pulled up the banking app on his phone and showed me that there were twenty different accounts, and most had balances of more than a billion dollars.

One of the accounts had my name on it. I'd asked what it was, and Tristan had said it was my personal money and I could spend it any way I wanted. I'd guffawed at that. What in the world would I spend a billion dollars on?

Over fifteen billion dollars in funds were available to us and our ranch. I don't think we could ever spend it all.

We were basically worth the same as a small social media empire. It was enough money to fund everything for generations. Additionally, the ranch continued to make a profit, which fed into the accounts.

In shock, I'd forgotten my manners and asked Gabriel how much money he still had, and he'd just shaken his head and said, "You don't want to know. First Montana Pack is now the wealthiest pack in the world, though, so that's something."

"That makes me wish we'd chosen a better name," I'd said.

"We still can once everyone is settled," Tristan had replied.

When I walked into the room today, I said to them, "I know what I want to do with some of my money."

"Oh yeah?" Tristan said as he looked up at me and smiled.

"Yes," I nodded decidedly, "In addition to the ranch hands, we'll have 509 new pack members. They left everything behind to come here. They did it because of us: Avery, Angelica, you, and me.

"I want to give every pack member \$50,000 to furnish their lives. The wolves traveling from far, and the ones here on the ranch who will pledge their loyalty to us. And everyone that joins going forward, I want to give it to them, too."

“If we’re going to be the wealthiest pack in the world, not a single person who lives here should be poor or lack anything they need. The money should be enough to meet those needs, but not so much that they don’t want to work with us on our community.”

Tristan got up from his desk and walked over to me. His face was full of emotion as he put his hands on either side of my face and whispered, “Best. Luna. Ever.” Then he kissed me deeply.

When he pulled away, he was beaming at me with adoration and pride. I smiled up at him with so much love that Gabriel started clearing his throat.

“Sorry, Gabe,” I laughed and then walked around to the drafting table he was sitting at along the wall of bookcases.

“Once your pack arrives, you take their info: names, birthdates, etc. Add their files to the filing cabinet behind Tristan’s desk. That’s also where the ranch employee files are. Once you have all the names, you can take them to my bank manager in town and have him create bank accounts for the adults and trust accounts for the children,” Gabriel instructed as he continued to draw.

“Your bank manager?” I asked.

Gabriel grinned but kept his focus on the drawing, “I own the bank.”

“You own USEU Bank and Trust!? The International bank that’s in every city and town in all Americas and Europe?”

“Mmhmm,” he replied.

Gabriel was probably the most important vampire in the entire world by any standard you could think of, and I hadn’t known this before. He was important to me, but he was just Gabriel.

He felt like a beloved grandfather who saved my life and made all my dreams come true. Maybe I should call him my Fairy Godvampire.

He chuckled at that, clearly reading my thoughts.

I stood beside him silently for several minutes while he continued to work and watched the plans appear beneath his fast-working fingertips.

“What’s this?” I finally asked.

“I’ve completed the city planning and the designs on the Pack House, Fire Station, Security facilities, Training facility, and the schools. This,” he continued, “is a sound-proof apartment building. Each apartment’s ceilings, floors, and outer walls will be sufficiently insulated so that those who choose to live here will have privacy from supernatural hearing.”

“That’s brilliant!”

“It was your mate’s idea. He wanted the unmated adults to have a place to build friendships and a sense of community. Normally, this is the function of a pack house, but the large scale of our pack at the start presents some unique challenges as we can’t house them all inside the pack house.”

I smiled proudly at Tristan, who was also busy working on something.

I walked over to him and looked over his shoulder. He turned his chair and pulled me into his lap to show me his work.

“This is a contract with one of the largest residential architecture firms in the country. We’re paying for the families in the pack to go to their catalog of architectural plans and pick out the houses they want to build. They’ll also receive custom alterations to the plans included in our contract.”

My heart felt so full. Tristan is such a caring and considerate Alpha. Providing for his pack in every way possible had already made him miles above his father.

In less than three days here, he had mated, met the entire staff, taken over the accounts, and started designing an entire city for our pack. All while considering the security, well-being, and happiness of each wolf, human, and vampire, too.

He was the most beautiful, sexiest, and most incredible being I would ever have the privilege of meeting, and I could see through his eyes that he felt the same about me. It was humbling, and it made me feel warm in the depths of my soul.

Tristan signed the contract with the architecture firm and stood, still holding me princess-style.

“We have something to go do, and we better get it done before everyone starts arriving.”

“We do?” I asked.

He carried me to one of the trucks parked in front of the house and buckled me in the passenger seat.

He climbed into the driver’s side and headed toward the barns that serviced the cattle. I hadn’t been out there yet, and I was curious about why we had to do something near the barns.

Tristan flipped on the radio as we drove with the windows down and started singing along with the song playing. I closed my eyes and reveled in my other senses. The sexy baritone of his voice made my skin tingle as I listened to him sing.

The wind blew my shoulder-length hair around, and the cool air felt refreshing. I loved the smell of the outdoors on our ranch. It was unseasonably less cold than the eastern states had been. The aromas of leather, grass, fresh-cut wood, and wildflowers enveloped us.

Tristan’s rich voice washed over me, and the sunlight felt warm and friendly on my face. This is happiness. I sighed in contented bliss.

We pulled up in front of one of the barns, and he turned in his seat to face me.

“Two things,” he said, “One, Gabriel needs to feed tonight, so you’ll have your first feeder session since the contract was signed. I will be there with you in case you’re nervous, so don’t worry.”

He paused to wait for my response.

“Ok, thank you,” I smiled.

He nodded and continued, “Two, remember how I told you that you’ll see about marking me?”

I looked towards the barn and then back at him, “Am I going to brand you like a piece of cattle?” I joked.

“Yep,” he said, grinning.

“Won’t it just heal?” I asked, “You’re a wolf.”

“Normally, yes. But this ranch, under Gabriel’s ownership, developed a wolfsbane-infused metal. It’s infused with many things that are lethal to all sorts of supernatural beings. Because it was developed by the ranch, it now belongs to us.”

“Wolfsbane infused metal?! The implications of that are enormous, Tristan. A wound made with that on a wolf wouldn’t heal properly. It would create a permanent scar. That could be very dangerous in the wrong hands,” I frowned, now worried.

“You’re right. It could be, and that’s why the only people who know about it are Gabriel, Emma, me, you, and the wolf scientist who created it with Gabriel.”

“Who is that scientist, and where is he now?” I asked.

“He’s the only wolf staff Gabriel had here on the ranch. He’s the head chef of the chow wagon, Wolfgang. He’s also the newest member of our pack. He gave his pledge yesterday afternoon when Gabriel introduced us.

“I thought I felt another bond forming. Wolfgang, you say?” I giggled.

“He said he’s older than that other chef of the same name, so he’s the original.”

My face suddenly became serious as I considered what he’d revealed, “Tristan, we won’t use the metal, will we?”

“We won’t use it unless there is something massive that requires it. That would have to be something like a world war.”

“I’m not going to let anyone get their hands on it,” he continued.

“Once the security facility is built, it will be kept in a special safe room that Gabriel, Wolfgang, and I will

personally build in secret. Only you, Wolfgang, and I will be able to open the door via biometric scanners. The three of us and Gabriel will be the only ones that know of its location.”

“But we’re going to test it now?” I asked.

“Yes. Gabriel told me about it when we were alone before boarding the plane back east. When you asked how you were going to mark me, I immediately thought of this,” he finished with a smile.

I smiled back. He never forgot anything I expressed concern over, always considering my happiness.

He got out of the truck and came around to open my door. I hopped out, and we walked into the barn together, holding hands.

Wolfgang was waiting for us near a large metal security door behind a huge wall of hay bales.

“Wolfgang, this is your Luna,” Tristan introduced us.

Wolfgang put his hand to his heart and bowed his head low, “It is an honor to meet you, my Luna.”

I had only seen the very oldest of wolves use this gesture towards their Alphas and Lunas. Wolfgang must be ancient. I knew wolves could live a very long time, but a scientist under Gabriel’s care could literally be any age and not surprise me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wolfgang,” I smiled at him.

Wolfgang turned and placed his palm on a scanner pad near the metal door, causing a light to blink. Then, the door popped open.

He held the door and let us in, not coming with us.

“When you are finished, there is a similar pad on the inside wall that will open the door to exit the room, and either of your handprints will open it,” he told us.

Bowing, Wolfgang closed the door behind us once we had entered.

“A wolf of few words,” I said.

An automatic light lit up the space. It was a long, narrow room the length of the barn. One side had countertops with

a sink at one end. Two stools against the wall could be moved up to the bar-height countertop or left against the wall and still leave room for the occupants to walk the length of the narrow space to a bathroom at the far end.

Just a few feet inside the room, a short-handled brand was on the countertop, being heated in a small electric box.

Tristan pulled a stool up to the counter, removed his shirt, and sat down. He picked up the thick glove lying on the counter next to the small box. Pulling my hand to him, he kissed my palm and then gloved my hand.

“The brand handle will be hot, so this will protect your hand so you can use it,” he explained.

Once I was gloved, he leaned against the counter and tilted his head away from me to expose that soft, tender spot that joins the neck to the shoulder.

I stood silent for a moment. My mate and Alpha was baring his neck to me. Normally, to a wolf, this was a sign of submission. It felt as though I was walking on sacred ground.

I lifted my hand to grab the brand and pulled it from the box. The brand on the end was only about two inches wide and glowing red with heat.

I stepped closer to Tristan and lifted my hand.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Yes, love. Mark me,” he replied in a deep, sexy voice full of emotion.

I pressed the brand to his neck with a decent amount of pressure, left it there to the count of two, and then removed it. The smell of burning flesh filled the room, and I was expecting Tristan to flinch or hiss or make some sign that it was painful, but he didn't. He sat perfectly still and quietly received my mark.

I placed the brand back in the box and took off the glove. I looked up at his neck to inspect the burn mark. There it was, two inches wide. In small, neat letters of angry red and a little bit of charred black was the name, “JANE MARIE MARTIN.”



Tears filled my eyes. I felt overwhelmed, loved, sorry I hurt him, and happy he wanted me to mark him.

He stepped down to the floor and pulled me to him. We stood like that, hugging quietly for a long time.

After a while, he pulled back a little and lifted my chin to say, "Look at it now."

I looked. The burn had already scabbed over. Normally, something like this on a wolf would have healed by now, but because of the wolfsbane-infused metal, it would scab over and scar him.

"Tristan, you amaze me every second of every day. I love you," I whispered.

"I feel the same about you," he said before claiming my lips with his own.

It was a long time before we left the narrow safe room hidden behind the hay bales at the back of the barn.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### Tristan's POV

Later that evening, we went back to the house. Gabriel was still in the study, working on the plans. He didn't need much rest or sustenance, so he could work for hours at a time without having any physical needs to distract him.

I held my mate's hand as I called out to him, "Gabriel, do you need to feed?"

He looked up at us and nodded before he rose from the drafting table and walked to the bookcase door entrance to the dark apartment. We followed him inside, and he closed the door after turning on the lights.

I settled on the sofa and pulled Jane into my lap so she could lean on me in case she felt a little tired afterward.

Gabriel pulled a chair over beside us and asked Jane, "Are you ready?"

She held her arm out to him, wrist up, and smiled, "Help yourself, Gabe."

He laughed lightly before responding, "I'm going to start the mind manipulation now. The first time a person sees a vampire's bloodthirsty eyes can be a little frightening. It will help with the pain, too, as we discussed."

"Alright," she answered.

After a few seconds, she went nearly limp in my lap, with her head resting completely on my shoulder. She was awake and breathing regularly but was very relaxed.

Gabriel looked at me, and I nodded to him. My wolf, Onan, was curled up in his den, ignoring the whole process as if this were just a boring humanoid thing that held no interest to him.

Gabriel's eyes flashed red as his fangs extended. He lifted Jane's wrist to his mouth, his eyes on hers, while he bit into her flesh, drinking deeply.

Something began to shift, and I noticed my mate bond with Jane strengthening. As Gabriel continued to feed, it glistened and vibrated with a new feeling of weightiness, as if something were being added.

My senses heightened, and inside of me, Onan lifted his head. If a wolf could smile, he was doing it with his snout in the air, breathing in deeply.

It was then that I noticed a new aroma in the air. When I first scented Jane as my mate, she smelled of fresh earth and citrus. Now, there was a new depth to the aroma I could only describe as sunshine on a summer day.

I felt mildly disoriented even as I could feel Onan's happy satisfaction. He wasn't surprised, but he was extremely pleased.

After several minutes, Gabriel removed his mouth from Jane's wrist and pierced the tip of his own finger with his fang.

He rubbed his now bleeding finger against her wound, and his blood healed the puncture marks completely as if they had never existed.

Now that he had finished feeding and Jane was healed, we both watched her face as we waited for something. I wasn't sure what.

She was awake, but her eyes were glazed over, as if she were staring at something, not of this world. It looked like someone mind-linking or speaking to their wolf, but that wasn't possible, was it?

"Jane?" I whispered.

Gabriel put his hand on my arm and shook his head, indicating that I should wait.

We watched her for a long time, maybe an hour, before her glazed look faded. She looked up at me and smiled one of the brightest smiles I'd ever seen on her lips.

She reached out to Gabriel and gripped his hand, saying simply, "Thank you."

I wanted to ask her what happened as Onan stood up in my mind, tail wagging, and playfully grumbled, "*Finally!*"

A new voice entered my head through the mind-link. It sounded like Jane but earthier and deeper. It said, "*Onan, my love.*"

"*Welcome back, Kasia,*" he replied with a wolfish grin in his gruff voice.

My eyes widened as I met Jane's eyes. Her joy was almost tangible.

Gabriel laughed beside us, and we looked at him. He was happy. Happier than I had ever seen him.

"Kasia? Jane, you have a wolf!" I said in a voice of awe.

Instead of speaking out loud, Gabriel spoke into our minds, "*I thought I recognized your voice, Onan. Kasia, you darling pup, I'm so happy to see you again.*"

I looked back at Jane, and her radiant face beamed as she said, "I had a wolf all along, Tristan. Kasia has been there all this time. Jessica, your cousin, and my dad's mate, had a witch curse me to separate us and lock her away.

"Jessica wanted the pack to think I was human, like my mom, so that they would treat me as a servant, and she wouldn't have to see me. She knows how your dad feels about humans," she frowned briefly.

Many emotions burned in my chest. I was furious with Jessica for doing something so despicable. I was angry at my father for thinking humans were worthless. I was mad at myself for bullying her when we were young because she was different.

But most of all, and most importantly, I felt even more complete than I imagined I could ever feel. I felt whole when I marked Jane, but now I felt...more.

"Why did curse break now?" I asked.

Jane smiled up at Gabriel and said, "You tell him."

Gabriel grinned, "It was the feeding. Blood from a person with a curse or a spell placed on them tastes extra rich to a vampire. I knew right away it was a blood curse, so I fed until her blood tasted normal. Essentially, I sucked the curse out of her.

“I’m sorry I took a little more than a pint, but you shouldn’t feel too lightheaded. It wasn’t much more, and I closed the wound with my blood, so you should be fully recovered by now, especially now that you have access to your wolf’s accelerated healing,” he explained.

I still had one more question, and Gabriel knew what it was.

“Your wolves are quite a bit older than the two of you. I’ve seen it a handful of times over the centuries. Most of your kind get a new wolf when they’re born, but sometimes, for reasons known only to the Moon Goddess at the time, she reincarnates wolves into new people. Typically, this can only be done when the person hosting the wolf is a descendant of the previous host.”

“Why us?” I asked.

Gabriel shrugged lightly, “Usually, it’s a big purpose, which means something important is coming in your lifetimes that you must do. Your wolves are still you; they’ve just lived more lives.”

“You knew the previous wolves that hosted Onan and Kasia?” I asked in astonishment.

“I should say so,” Gabriel chuckled happily, “Kasia was my granddaughter, and Onan was her true mate.”

Jane was smiling happily up at Gabriel, “I guess we are related after all.”

“It seems so,” he replied with a grin.

“Your granddaughter was a wolf?” I asked.

Gabriel continued to pull out exciting new information from his bag of tricks almost daily. He nodded, and his eyes glazed over with a faraway look as he explained.

“My daughter mated a wolf, and their daughter, Gwendolyn, had Kasia for her wolf. This was before I was a vampire. I was just a regular human back then. When Kasia would come out for runs, I would run into the woods with her, and we would play.”

“I witnessed her and Onan finding each other for the first time in those woods. That was more than 1,100 years

ago. And she, Kasia, witnessed a vampire woman turning me in those same woods.”

Gabriel continued, “And now the two of you need to get into the forest right away. Kasia hasn’t had a run in a very long time, and Onan is impatient to see her again in the flesh.”

Gabriel walked over to the bookcase door and opened it, leading us out of the front door and into the woods about a hundred yards away. He jogged into the forest a few feet and waited with his back to us.

Jane and I stripped and shifted. Usually, a wolf’s first shift was awkward and painful, but she shifted with ease, and I figured it must have something to do with the fact that our wolves were older.

I receded into Onan’s mind as he took over and stretched his long legs. The moment he saw Kasia take over, he ran to her and flung himself against her. The two of them rolled around on the forest floor for a bit before they curled up together and nuzzled each other.

My gaze roamed over Jane’s wolf with Onan’s eyes. She was a snow-white wolf with deep brown eyes, very much like Jane’s. This seemed an impossible combination to me, but who was I to argue with visible evidence? She simply existed this way, and she was beautiful.

It didn’t escape my notice that the two of us were both larger-than-average wolves. Maybe it had something to do with our wolves being ancient.

Gabriel stood waiting nearby, looking up into the tree canopy in the dark. The sun was setting now, and it was darker in the trees.

A random thought crossed my mind that this was one of several times I’d seen Gabriel go into the sun. I guessed that being so ancient and powerful had its perks. He once described it as moderately uncomfortable, but I knew it would burn lesser vampires to ash.

After a time, Kasia got up and loped over to Gabriel to nudge against his leg. He crouched down beside her and put

both hands around her face, bending down to put his forehead against hers. They sat there that way, eyes closed, speaking into each other's minds for about ten minutes before they both looked over at me.

Gabriel said to Onan, "Let's run!"

Gabriel and Kasia took off running at full speed, and Onan grumbled, "Bloody cheaters," though he was laughing as he chased them into the forest.

We ran with Gabriel for nearly two hours before I scented the multitude of wolves crossing into our territory. The families and children in our pack were arriving.

Onan let out a howl, calling Kasia and Gabriel to return with him to the house.

When we reached the place where we had left our clothes on the ground, our wolves receded, and Jane and I dressed quickly.

I mind-linked Avery just as we made it home so she could get the bonfire going in the pasture behind the big house and call the ranch hands to dinner.

By the time the vehicles started pulling up in front of the mansion, Jane and I, along with Avery, Angelica, Diane, and Emma, were standing in front of it, ready to welcome them home.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### Alpha Clovis's POV

Early, before breakfast, I was in my study with my Beta and younger brother, Elder. We were discussing plans for a pack event when my second daughter, Kendra, knocked on the door.

“Come,” I called.

Kendra stepped into the room and walked up to my desk.

“Father, I need to go with Saranya today when she escorts First Montana Pack home.”

I lifted a brow at her, “Why is that Kiwi?”

“I need to see Luna Jane Martin,” she answered plainly.

“It’s important?” I asked her.

“Yes, Father.”

I knew better than to question Kendra’s purpose. Over the years, we had learned to trust her unique awareness of the world and events. She never spoke more than was necessary, so I didn’t pry into her reasons. I trusted her abilities and knew that if she needed to see the Luna, then it must be done.

I had already considered escorting the pack myself, along with Saranya, but Kendra deciding to go just made my decision for me.

“Ok, my dear. I’ll inform your mother, as well. She and I will leave with Saranya and you to escort the pack home after breakfast.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she smiled and quietly exited the office.

I looked over at Elder and said, “Well, I guess the pack is in your care until we return, brother. Make sure Audra doesn’t over-train.”

“Will do,” he said before heading out and closing the door behind him.



Two hours later, two of my pack's motor coach buses were parked in the drive of the pack house. I'd decided that driving us all to Montana together was safest for everyone. One hundred and sixteen rogues running across America would cause more of a stir than was necessary.

Saranya was well known to packs in the West as my warrior daughter, and she wouldn't have had any trouble gaining passage through the country on her own. Having me with her would make things even more accessible.

My Luna was here because I never went anywhere without her. Since the day we mated, we had never been separated by more than 100 miles at a time. Even that distance was simply because we were on different parts of our large pack territory.

Saranya and Kendra climbed onto the bus with the unmated wolves and some of the young mated adults.

Megan and I joined the older mated couples on the bus where Jesse was sitting with David and their other six brothers.

It was going to take twenty-four hours to get to Montana if we drove straight through. We brought two drivers per bus to keep moving, and there were toilet facilities at the back of both buses, so we didn't have to stop at all unless we had a good reason.

Jesse counted the people on our bus, and then I gave him the count on the other bus, as mind-linked over by Saranya, and he nodded that it was everyone.

I mind-linked both drivers to head out, and the buses roared to life. Meandering down the long front drive of my territory gave everyone an opportunity to appreciate the ancient, tall oaks that formed a canopy across the road. As we moved closer to the exit of pack lands and onto the interstate highway, I leaned back and adjusted my legs to get more comfortable.

I found myself eager to meet with Alpha Tristan and visit with Gabriel. This would be an interesting trip.

I put my arm around Megan, and she leaned into me. I rested my head on the top of hers, and we snuggled together for a long while before Jesse riled up his brothers into singing bawdy songs from their childhood.

It wasn't long before we all knew the words, and Megan and I joined in with enthusiasm. If there was one thing the Alpha Clovis Entropus family knew how to do, besides kicking ass, it was singing.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### Diane's POV

Seeing some of our families again was a joyous occasion. The best part was feeling free. Our family had thrived, not because of Alpha MacKenzie, but despite him.

Here, with Tristan and Avery mated to their true mates, this pack was something special. I knew that we were all the luckiest, most blessed wolves on earth to have found ourselves in the care of such exceptional young leaders.

My sisters all rushed over to me, crying and laughing, happy to be reunited. I missed my mate terribly, but these six sisters of mine were the next best thing.

Dido, the eldest, pulled away from the hug first and then looked me over.

“Diane, you’re so happy! This place must be amazing if it’s had this effect on you.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I responded with excitement, “Avery and Angelica are mated! Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane are proving to be capable and considerate leaders.”

Dresda, my third sister, interrupted, “So what can we do? Driving for two days has worn me clean out. I need some work!”

I smiled at her ceaseless need for motion, “Don’t worry, there is so much work to do. Soon, there will be a check-in, and they’ll take your information. Once they know about your skills, I’m sure they won’t hesitate to put you to work.”

“Music to my ears!” Dresda said, rubbing her hands together.

Once everyone was out of the vehicles and scattered around the drive and lawn, Alpha Tristan held up a hand, and all the new arrivals became quiet, eyes on him.

He smiled out at the crowd of 300+ children and 75 adults.

“Welcome to First Montana Pack,” he began.

“Luna Jane and I are proud to have you as a part of our pack and our family. I know that Beta Avery and her mate Angelica are very touched and grateful to all of you for your support.”

The Alpha’s face turned earnest as he continued, “I want to make it clear that every single one of you is welcome here. I do need to warn you that this pack isn’t going to be like any other pack you’ve ever known or heard of.

“No one will be forced to stay. Everyone will have a place, a job, and a purpose. That job will not be decided by your Alpha or your Luna but by your wishes, talents, and ambitions.

“We are also treading new ground because tonight, we will be welcoming others into our pack. We are the first pack to welcome humans and vampires who wish to pledge their loyalty and join our family. They will be full-fledged pack members who will work alongside us to build a strong pack where everyone can thrive together,” he declared as a low murmur made its way around the crowd.

Standing tall, with confidence, he carried on, “If this isn’t something that appeals to you, or if after some time you feel this is not your home, your Luna and I will help you find one.”

Alpha Tristan then turned to Luna Jane, who stepped forward and scanned the crowd for the children.

She smiled widely and said in a sweet and kind voice, “I hear we have some special wolves with us. If you are an orphan, please come to the front.”

About thirty children stepped forward timidly with their heads hanging low. Some of them even trembled as they walked to the front.

I counted about thirty children standing in various states before Jane: some defiant, some terrified. The adults who brought them here tensed as if expecting something bad to happen.

“Welcome, pups,” Jane began.

“Can everyone be brave right now and look up at my face? I want you to listen very closely, ok?”

Jane paused while she waited until every pup had their eyes on her before she continued.

“I want to tell you something special. I am an orphan, just like you.”

One of the little girls, about four years old, blurted, “But you’re the Luna!”

“That’s right, sweetie, I *am* the Luna! I’m your Luna.”

The little girl’s eyes went wide with awe.

Jane went on, “I know that many of you have been mistreated in the past because you had no family to protect you and defend you. It happened to me, too.”

The kids’ silence was deafening as she continued, “Some packs aren’t very kind or understanding and take advantage of kids who can’t protect themselves. But I want you to know that is not going to happen here in your new home. You will be a full member of this pack, just like me.”

The tension among the adults relaxed, and many of them were looking at Jane with complete adoration. She had already won their devotion.

Jane continued, “You will get to go to school, play, learn, and grow just as well as any other pup in the pack. And if you grow up and want to have a job in our pack, then Alpha Tristan and I will do everything we can to help you.”

“But we still don’t have any families,” another girl of about six said with a bitter tone.

Jane stepped forward, crouched down in front of the girl, and smiled, “Would you like to be my daughter?”

The girl’s eyes widened, and she was left speechless.

“What is your name?” Jane asked.

“Amy,” she whispered.

“Listen to me, Amy,” Jane said, looking around at all of the children. “This goes for everyone here. The Alpha and I already discussed this before you arrived.

“If any one of you wants to be adopted, then any family in our pack can adopt you, and you will have a family. If you

want to stay here in our house with me and the Alpha, then you will be our children. None of you are going to stay orphans, ok?"

The four-year-old girl from earlier pushed her way through to Jane and said, "I want to be addotted."

"What's your name?" Jane smiled at her.

"Everyone calls me Selly," she replied.

"Selly, you are going to be adopted. I promise," Jane said to her.

Amy hung her head low, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she began to cry in earnest. Sniffles could be heard among the orphans as many of them cried quietly while others tried to hold back their tears.

Tristan stepped forward and picked Amy up as if she weighed no more than a piece of paper. He held the child like a veteran father as she buried her little face in his shoulder and shook with her sobs. He patted her back and let her cry, murmuring comforting words to her all the while.

I scanned the faces in the crowd. Every adult was quiet and reverent, watching with awe and gratitude as their new Alpha and Luna had stolen every heart for life - even mine.

The crying soon died down as the Alpha and Luna circulated, meeting all the children. They took their time with each one. Tristan would ruffle their hair and pat their backs while Jane crouched down, gave out smiles and hugs, and answered questions.

After a bit, Avery stepped forward.

"I know everyone must be tired from your journey. Come inside and go straight back under the stairs, and you'll find the temporary dining hall. Help yourself to the buffet of food," she announced.

A few stomachs in the crowd rumbled, and Angelica giggled next to Avery as she continued, "Angelica and I will be coming around to register you with the pack and assign you a place to sleep. Anyone who wants to say their pledge

to the Alpha tonight before bed, head out to the bonfire behind the house after you've eaten your fill."

That was my cue. I grabbed my sisters and pulled them back into the house and through to the kitchen. I'd already made them plates of food. I needed them to help me keep the buffet stocked until everyone had finished.

We stood around the large kitchen island together, eating and laughing as we caught up after a few days apart.

Dido shook her head and said, "I can't believe how mature and impressive Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane are. Didn't you say they are only eighteen?"

I nodded, "Yes, they are eighteen, but they feel much older to me, too. I've spent the last couple of days getting to know them better, and I truly believe this is going to be the best pack in the nation."

Dana, the youngest of us seven, piped up, "What a handsome couple, too. They're magazine cover worthy."

We all laughed and continued eating before we would have to check on the buffet.

It was good to be home.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### Moon Goddess Selene's POV

The vampire goddess Kali sat next to me in an elaborate castle I had fabricated on the moon to watch over my children. It was invisible to the human eye but often visited by other gods and goddesses.

Before us stood the wall-sized mirror I'd installed, which gave a view into the lives of my blessed children. Currently, we watched Jane particularly, and Gabriel, Kali's favored one.

"It happened just as you said," she admitted while sipping her wine.

"Thanks to a little help from your Gabriel," I reminded her as I tipped my wineglass to her.

She touched her glass to mine, creating a tinkling sound before bringing it back to her blood-red lips.

"I admit I had my doubts that it would work out this way. Gabriel never disappoints me, though. He's my treasured creation," Kali admitted.

"You have every reason to be proud," I agreed.

"Your daughters seem to be faring well," Kali remarked.

She suddenly sat forward in her chair and shushed me, "Be quiet now. I want to see this part."

I chuckled in amusement; I hadn't said anything.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### Jane's POV

Every single member of the ranch staff and every single wolf that had arrived this evening wanted to pledge their loyalty to Tristan and our pack.

It took two hours, and we thought we were done, but then Gabriel and Emma stepped forward.

Tristan looked Gabriel in the eye and said, "Gabriel, you're already a part of our family. We owe you so much; you don't need to kneel to me."

Gabriel grinned, "It's already been decided. You said we could join your pack. Is that true?"

"Of course," he replied.

Emma knelt first.

"I, Emma Jones, pledge my allegiance to you, Tristan Martin, as my Alpha. This pack shall be my family, and where you go shall be my home as long as I shall live."

Tristan replied, "I, Tristan Martin, pledge to you, Emma Jones, to be a strong and just Alpha. Protecting and leading this pack as my family as long as I shall live. Stand to your feet, Elder Emma of the First Montana Pack."

Emma stood and hugged Tristan and then me.

Gabriel knelt on both knees before Tristan and looked him in the eyes.

"I, Gabriel Michael Francisco, pledge my allegiance to you, Tristan Martin, as my Alpha. This pack shall be my family, and where you go shall be my home as long as I shall live."

A wave of power surged from Gabriel's body and flowed over the entire pack present tonight. Tristan looked down at his hands, and they were somehow larger again. He was larger again.

In a voice full of awe and emotion, he responded, "I, Tristan Martin, pledge to you, Gabriel Michael Francisco, to

be a strong and just Alpha. Protecting and leading this pack as my family as long as I shall live. Stand to your feet, Elder Gabriel of the First Montana Pack.”

They clasped hands, and Tristan pulled Gabriel to his feet, and then they hugged one another unashamedly.

Gabriel turned to me and kissed my forehead gently, then stepped back to smile at the both of us. His smile broke into a grin just before Avery shouted, “And now we run!”

A great cheer roared through the crowd, and all the wolves stripped and shifted. Tristan and I shifted, too, and led everyone into the forest.

Gabriel and Emma kept up the pace with us using their vampire speed, while some of the wolves stayed behind for a few minutes to encourage the others.

They nudged the children who couldn’t shift yet and the human ranch hands, who were now pack members, to follow us into the forest and run, too.

The children happily followed behind, laughing and running with all their might through the trees.

Crypton was the first part-human adult to make up his mind. He made a loud whooping sound and ran into the woods with the rest of the pack. Soon after, the others followed, laughing and running through the forest with all of us at a much slower rate of speed.

Tristan and I circled back around and wove through the children and humans playfully, encouraging them and welcoming them to the run.

The air was crisp with the fresh scent of our pack, weaving itself into the scents of all new members and floating adrift on the cool breeze that wandered through the trees.

I looked up as we loped around, and my breath caught at the magical sight of hundreds of fireflies dancing above our heads through the trees. Moonbeams cut through the canopy, and as each wolf darted beneath the beams, their coats shimmered and shined with the glow of it.

We ran and played together in the forest for an hour before the humans began to tire, so we headed back to the bonfire, where we shifted back and dressed.

I could see that everyone was exhausted at this point and running on pure happiness and adrenaline.

Tristan and I mind-linked, and then to the pack, he said, “Everyone, get a good night’s rest. You have no responsibilities tomorrow other than resting and exploring your new home. The rest of our pack and your families arrive the next morning. Let’s be well-rested to welcome them home.”

Everyone cheered again, and people started filtering into the house.

Crypton and Allen had brought the SUVs to the big house and started calling out, “If you’ve been assigned a cabin, we’ll take you there now! It’s going to take a few trips, but just wait out here, and we’ll be back shortly!”

I went into the house as they were loading up the unmated wolves and a few couples to deliver them to their temporary housing.

Helping the parents corral all of the children took several minutes, and then I led them to the ballroom. We’d already explained the children’s dorm, and Angelica had chosen the twelve couples that would stay with the pups there.

I flung open the double doors, and the children ran in and looked around, blinking and letting their mouths hang open.

“There are pajamas on the first set of bunks to the left,” I called out. Find ones that fit you. The bathrooms are out here in the hallway. Choose a toothbrush there and brush your teeth!”

I helped the parents get all of the children’s teeth brushed, their clothes changed, and tucked into bed. I had to brush my teeth seven times to persuade some of the littler orphans to brush.

It was midnight when I finally made my way up to my room in the third-floor apartment. I flung myself onto the

bed and was asleep as soon as I pulled the covers up to my neck.

At some point, after I fell asleep, Tristan came in, stripped us both, and then climbed into bed beside me. He pulled me against him, skin against skin, and I fell back to sleep soundly and snugly against his warmth.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### Saranya's POV

We'd been driving non-stop on the interstate for twenty hours from Texas to Montana. We were less than five hours from First Montana Pack now.

Our bus was full of unmated young adult wolves and a handful of young, mated pairs. It was awkward at first because the male wolves couldn't seem to keep their eyes off Kendra and me.

I knew we were beautiful, but there were a number of gorgeous women in their own pack, so it seemed a little awkward to have them staring at us.

Finally, a young she-wolf of about twenty-two came to sit across the aisle from us and struck up a conversation.

Her name was Flora, and she was friendly and smiled a lot. She had soft blonde hair, light blue eyes, and pale skin. Even her eyebrows and eyelashes were blonde. She had a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

She also asked a lot of nosy questions that were none of her business.

"Are you adopted?" she asked Kendra.

"No," Kendra answered.

"Why do you look so differently from your sisters?" she continued to pry.

Three of my sisters and I had varying shades of red and brown hair. We were all tall and had brown or green eyes. But Kendra was different. She was short with long black hair and violet eyes.

Our mother had thought once that she was switched at birth, but a DNA test had proved she was our blood relation.

"It's how the goddess made me," Kendra shrugged.

"That's as good an answer as any," Flora said.

"I'm an orphan," she continued.

“We didn’t have adoption in the old pack. The orphans were servants there. I wonder if the new pack will make us servants, too. Jesse says they won’t, but I’ve never seen orphans treated kindly in a wolf pack.”

“I suppose you haven’t met many packs,” I said to her.

“Only three, really,” she considered.

“Most packs aren’t like MacKenzie’s pack anymore. They’ve finally progressed past the dark ages,” I informed her.

“Progressed how?” she asked me.

“Pack members have a choice in jobs. Women can be warriors. Women aren’t forced to relocate to their mate’s pack. If the female is a higher rank than their mate, the mate comes to live with them. There are even a couple of packs with female Alphas,” I listed off a few.

Flora whistled, “Female Alphas? That’s impressive. Most packs are reformed, you say?”

“There are only three others in the Americas besides MacKenzie’s and Martin’s packs that believe humans and orphans, among others, are beneath them. Unfortunately, they are unwilling to revise their outdated laws and cling to prejudice and hate,” I explained.

I sat by the window and was talking over Kendra’s head to Flora. When I noticed the corners of Kendra’s mouth lifting into an amused smile, I knew what that meant.

I lifted my head and looked around us. The other young wolves on the bus had crowded up as close to us as possible to listen attentively to our conversation. Had they been living under a rock? They seemed to know nothing.

I made eye contact with another young she-wolf, and she asked, “Do you know Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane?”

“I’ve met Tristan Martin a few times. He was polite and respectful to me and my sisters. He’s a few years younger than us. Now that I think about it, he should be just eighteen,” I answered.

“He wasn’t anything like his father,” I recalled.

Kendra interjected, “Luna Jane is an orphan, too, and was treated as a servant in Alpha Martin’s household. When Tristan and Jane discovered they were true mates, his father tried to force them to reject each other and beat them both. They refused to reject one another, so he tried to kill Tristan to force her to reject him.”

I looked up to see everyone on the bus listening to her with rapt attention. Kendra rarely spoke so much. She continued the story without looking back at everyone, telling the tale of Tristan and Jane and their journey to Montana.

She concluded, “That is why all of you are on this bus, leaving your homes to find a new one. You needn’t worry. You will all find better lives there.”

They went back to their seats and started discussing the information that Kendra had revealed.

I watched Kendra for a while, then turned to look out of the window.

I spoke in a low voice, “How did you know all of that?”

“Kasia told me,” she answered.

“And who is that?” I inquired.

“Luna Jane’s wolf,” she replied.

I turned to look at her and narrowed my eyes, “How do you know Jane’s wolf, Kendra?”

“Circe knows her.”

I turned back towards the window and stopped questioning her.

Circe was Kendra’s wolf. All of my and my sisters’ wolves were special in some way. Even we didn’t know the full extent of it, but Circe seemed to know everything.

There was no point in wondering exactly how the information was gained. If Circe said it, then it was true.

Four hours to go. Now, even I was interested to see Tristan again and meet his Luna.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### Tristan's POV

Today was a good day. The children were all settling in, and we'd discovered a number of talented and hardworking individuals among our new pack.

Family members also gave info on the others that were coming with Alpha Clovis on the buses.

He'd called me directly and let us know that he was escorting our pack to us. He'd wondered if he and his Luna and two of their daughters could impose on our hospitality to stay a few days.

I'd agreed happily. He'd done us a huge favor, and I wasn't about to tell him no. It would be good to see them again. Their pack was one of the few I highly respected, and I would gladly host them anytime.

Jane planned to put Clovis and Megan in the largest of the spare bedrooms in our apartment and their daughters in one of the available two-bedroom cabins we'd made ready for our new pack.

The exciting discoveries of our new pack members were bountiful. It included many teachers, nurses, doctors, and warriors. There were also chefs and those who loved to clean and organize. Some artists and musicians had never been allowed to use their talents anywhere but privately. We also had several engineers, electricians, plumbers, and heating and air conditioning guys.

Of particular interest to our workshop staff was a pair of master craftsman woodworkers who had a talent for building beautiful furniture.

We even had two veterinarians who used to be in charge of the health of Alpha MacKenzie's horses. That man had treated his horses better than his pack.

Building homes and an entire town was a lot of work, but we had the means and the people to do it well.



Gabriel and I were in the study, working on plans and contracts with local businesses to supply the ranch with deliveries of food, building materials, and heavy construction equipment.

The phone on the desk in the study rang. In the few days we had been here, it had never rung once. Gabriel indicated that I should pick it up and continued at his drafting table.

“Hello?” I greeted the caller.

“Tristan,” my father’s voice sounded on the other end of the line.

“Good evening, Alpha Martin,” I replied and then fell silent.

“You are with Gabriel, as I suspected. Did you turn yourself rogue? Is that why you severed yourself from the pack?” He demanded answers in a gruff tone of voice. I could tell he was furious.

I said nothing.

“Is Avery with you? If you were going to run away with the girl, I don’t know why you didn’t just mate with her here, son. You could have been Alpha!” his volume level was rising.

“I am Alpha, father. Avery is my Beta, and she is mated to her true mate. As am I,” I added.

“That’s impossible. Jane is dead,” he said flatly.

“You’re mistaken. She’s alive and well and bears my mark on her neck,” I kept my voice even and void of emotion.

“This is ridiculous, Tristan. Come home. You can’t play Alpha without a pack and a territory! If you stay rogued too long, you know what will happen!”

“I believe you will find that I do have a pack and a territory. Now, if there’s nothing else, the remaining members of my very large pack arrive in the morning, and I have a lot of work to do. Goodbye, Alpha Martin,” I finished and hung up.

The phone rang again almost immediately, and Gabriel got up and pulled the cord, disconnecting it from the

telephone. Then, he simply strode back to his drafting table and went back to work.

I sat back down at the desk and resumed looking over the orders for building supplies, my encounter with my father already forgotten.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### Alpha Clovis's POV

It was early morning, and we were two hours out from the First Montana Pack border when we had to stop the bus for a bit. Some of the older pack members needed a few minutes to walk around and stretch their legs.

I stood at the southern edge of the rest stop, which looked more like a park cut into the wooded area, and breathed in deeply. My mind automatically sorted the scents into buckets.

People I knew and people I didn't, the creatures in the forest, vehicle fumes, food, the snacks inside the vehicles, the forest itself, grass, dirt, rocks, wildflowers, etc.

Then, there was the intoxicating scent of my Luna across the parking lot - lavender and mint. They were the most precious scents on earth to me. I could hone in on them from three states away and tell anyone exactly where she was and if she was ok.

Not that I'd tested that since we officially mated. We hadn't often been more than a few rooms apart since that day over thirty years ago. She'd slept in my bed every night since, even when my bed was a forest floor in the middle of a war.

With determination, she had trained with our pack until she had mastered enough self-defense to go with me everywhere. Not that she would ever need to defend herself without me, but she wanted to stay with me always.

I could scent my daughters standing at other points around the perimeter of the reststop park. I was watching the south, Saranya the east, and Kendra the west. The North was the parking lot where my Luna was keeping an eye on things at the bus.

To me, Saranya smelled like leather and the forest after a rainstorm with a hint of autumn apples. Kendra smelled

like exotic fruits, spices, and nuts, which is where my nickname for her, Kiwi, came from.

Where my mate's essence caused intense feelings of longing, desire, and deep love, the scents of my daughters evoked fatherly love.

A good papa wolf scented his children and felt protectiveness, pride, and hope. Hope that they would reach their potential, find all the happiness in life that was possible, and always be safe.

I had long since known that my girls could take care of themselves. I'd stopped defending them when someone talked down to or insulted them because I respected my daughters and had earned the privilege of watching them defend themselves.

I was startled from my thoughts by my cell phone ringing. It rarely did so since my pack mainly communicated through our pack mind-link.

I looked at the caller ID. Alpha Martin.

I had been expecting his call. He would know by now that his hunters tracked MacKenzie's rogues to my land and were allowed entry.

I answered, "You're up early, Martin. How can I help you?"

"Clovis," he practically snarled at me, "what is the meaning of this? Why would you let rogues into your territory?"

"Last time I checked, I was the Alpha of the Divine Moon Pack, and I can let whoever I want into my borders."

"They're traitors!" he growled.

"I think you need to refresh yourself on pack laws in this country, Martin. From what I understand, you and MacKenzie dishonored the mate bonds of your children.

"Additionally, pack members of any pack are allowed to revoke their pledge and leave their packs to seek new ones. This isn't Wild West Wolves; this is the modern age.

“Instead of allowing the pack to relocate and seek transfer papers, MacKenzie rogued them in the middle of the country, which could have had serious consequences.

“I’m surprised you’d want to support MacKenzie’s actions against your own son’s pack. But then again, you did hang Tristan from some gallows, so maybe you support MacKenzie?”

“MY SON’S PACK?!” he yelled.

I grinned into the phone, “You didn’t know about that?”

“Mind your own business, Clovis! This is going to have serious consequences when I contact the vampire and pack councils. You and Gabriel better watch your backs,” he spat.

“I’d think twice about that if I were you. The councils only get involved when the sacred laws are broken. And the only ones here I can see that broke any laws are you and MacKenzie.”

The line went dead.

That had been extremely satisfying.

Saranya’s sharp whistle sounded from across the park, and I turned to head back to the bus. It was 6 am now. We would arrive around 8 am. I was looking forward to it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### Jane's POV

I woke early in the morning feeling refreshed and rested. It was the beginning of dawn, with only a faint whisper of light peeking over the windowsill in our bedroom.

I rolled over to find Tristan already awake and watching me with love in his eyes.

Smiling across the pillows at him, I sighed happily.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” he said softly as he reached over to slide a stray lock of hair out of my face and behind my ear.

“Good morning, my love,” I answered him.

“Why are you awake so early?” I asked.

“You were dreaming something very intensely, and I felt it through the bond. Do you remember what it was?”

I considered for a moment, and then my eyes widened as I recalled the visions I had witnessed in the night.

“It wasn’t a dream, Tristan. Kasia was showing me Gwendolyn’s life - no, my previous life. We are the same person. You are the same person as Gwendolyn’s mate. We were born anew,” I finished in awe.

Tristan smiled brightly, “Yes, I know. Onan showed me as I slept, too.”

I moved closer to him, and we wrapped our arms around each other.

“We are so blessed to spend two lifetimes together, Tristan. Let’s thank Selene on the next full moon,” I suggested.

“Alright,” Tristan smiled against the top of my head.

I pulled back suddenly and sat straight up as I remembered something important, “Circe! She’s on her way. Tristan - Wolfgang and the metal. It’s not just infused with wolfsbane. That metal isn’t only capable of killing

wolves. It can kill all supernaturals, even the gods themselves!”

Tristan sat up and rubbed his hand through his hair, sighing heavily.

“Wolfgang did his duty, Jane. It’s going to be necessary in the coming years, but until then, we can speak of it to no one but Wolfgang and Circe herself,” he revealed.

I nodded my agreement.

He proposed, “When Circe approaches you, tell her that Wolfgang succeeded, and we await her orders.”

Jane nodded solemnly, “I will do so.”

Tristan leaned against the headboard and pulled me onto his lap. We snuggled for a while before he got up and carried me, giggling, into the shower.

## OMNISCIENT POV

At 8:07 am, two motor coach buses crossed the border into First Montana Pack territory and drove straight to the main house.

By the time the buses made it to the drive near the lodge-sized house, the entire pack had come out to the lawn and porches to greet the new arrivals.

Everyone piled out of the buses and reunited with their families and friends. There were plenty of smiles and tears of relief that all had made it safely home.

Tristan didn’t make any big speeches this time. He would save that for tonight at the official welcome-home dinner.

Avery and Angelica greeted Saranya and Kendra and offered to take them on a tour of the territory, which they accepted.

Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane sought out Alpha Clovis and Luna Megan to greet them. They were the last to step off the bus, and Jane’s eyes widened at Clovis’s large size.

Tristan wasn’t short. He towered over her at 6’2”, but Alpha Clovis was at least three inches taller than that.

Tristan and Clovis clasped hands, and Tristan was the first to speak, "Welcome to you both. I'm grateful for your help and pleased to see you again."

Clovis smiled, "You've got a good pack here, Tristan. You have our full support."

"That means a lot to me, sir," Tristan replied.

Alpha Clovis clapped him on the shoulder, and they turned to the ladies, intending to introduce them, but Megan was faster.

Luna Megan reached out both hands to Jane, who took them and said, "You must be Jane. I've been so looking forward to meeting you!"

"Thank you, Luna Megan. The pleasure is mine. Please make yourself at home and let me know if there is anything at all that you need," Jane smiled back.

"If I'm to feel at home, you must let me know how I can help. Shall we go inside and discuss the projects you're working on?" Luna Megan asked with a grin.

Jane smiled adoringly at the older Luna and linked her arm through Meagan's, leading her into the house as if they were old friends.

"My mate's never met a stranger," Alpha Clovis explained to Alpha Tristan.

"Would you like to see Gabriel's design of our pack territory?" Tristan asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hell yeah, I would," Alpha Clovis replied with excitement, "lead the way."

The morning was full of excitement and interest for everyone on the ranch that day. Lots of friendships were formed, and information was gathered.

Everyone met up in the converted Great Hall at noon for lunch. The room was packed, and some of the residents overflowed into the dining tables that had been set up in the back garden.

Diane and her sisters, with Emma's help, had turned out a veritable feast.



There was Texas-smoked brisket (in honor of Alpha Clovis's family) and many other meaty selections. Potatoes and other vegetables filled out the buffet tables. A vast array of freshly baked breads of all flavors and colors, just begging to be devoured, were separated by bowls of freshly churned butter.

The children kept hovering around the dessert table, which was more like five tables. It displayed a variety of cakes, pies, and cookies.

Every few minutes, an adult passed by the table and called to all the children to not even think about the desserts until they'd finished their meat and vegetables. The children lurking there would scurry back to their tables to devour their plate's contents while staring at the desserts.

Alphas Tristan and Clovis sat together with Lunas Jane and Megan, Saranya, Kendra, Avery, and Angelica. They discussed possible buildings and businesses that would be nice to have in their new town, and the young ladies came up with some very insightful options. They discussed all types of cuisine and shops that would be necessary, as well as luxury boutiques that would be fun to include in their business park.

After lunch, everyone planned to go to their rooms and freshen up for the evening's festivities, where the rest of the pack would make their pledges to Alpha Tristan and the First Montana Pack.

Kendra fell into step beside Jane and asked, "I wondered if I might have an hour of your time, Luna?"

Jane smiled at her, "You can just call me Jane, Kendra. And yes, I have some time. Would you like to go for a run with me?"

Kendra smiled, "How did you know?"

"Kasia suggested it. She's excited to see you again, Circe," she answered.

Kendra's eyes glowed as they flashed her wolf's acknowledgment of the greeting, then she tilted her head and mischievously said, "Race ya!"

They split apart, and both ran out from different exits of the house and out across the lawn into the forest. They stripped their clothes off on the run and shifted, leaping in human form and landing in wolf form at the edge of the forest.

Jane's snow-white wolf with brown eyes was a stark contrast to Kendra's raven-black wolf with violet eyes. A glowing violet crescent moon on Circe's front right shoulder shimmered magically in the light.

They were each slightly larger than the average Alpha wolf but not nearly as large as Saranya or Alpha Clovis.

They ran together at full speed, weaving through the trees and crossing paths again and again to taunt each other into going faster. After twenty solid minutes of running, they came to a stop at a four-foot-deep stream running through the forest.

Their wolves lapped at the water, drinking the pure liquid that flowed past them at a gentle pace. It was warmer than they expected it to be at this time of year.

Shifting back into human form, Jane waded into the stream that was clearly fed from a hot spring somewhere on the territory. Winter had broken, and spring was upon them, but it was still a little chilly outdoors.

Wolves had higher body temperatures than humans, but the stream's warm water felt good on her skin. She waded out a little way and then bent her knees so that she was up to her shoulders in the warm stream.

Kendra shifted and followed her in, sighing in satisfaction at the water's temperature.

They swam around silently for several minutes, dunking their heads under occasionally to warm their faces, too.

The silence was comfortable and familiar to them, and they felt no need to disturb it.

After some time, Kendra spoke.

"This was nice, running with you again."

Even though she and Kendra had never met in this lifetime, Jane knew what she meant. Their wolves had been friends over a thousand years ago.

At the time, Kasia had been a new wolf and Circe, the thousand-year-old demigod daughter of Selene, the Moon Goddess.

“It was nice,” Jane smiled affectionately.

“This isn’t why you wanted to see me, though, is it?” Jane asked her.

“You and Kasia have integrated well,” she replied.

“She is me, and I am her,” Jane shrugged.

“I’m glad you understand.”

“You want to tell me something? You always know something,” Jane prompted.

“The barrier is weakening. We have a year, maybe two at best. My sisters aren’t aware of who they are yet,” Kendra said, swimming in a circle around Jane.

“Their wolves haven’t told them?” Jane was surprised.

Kendra shook her head, “They need to focus on getting strong, on getting ready for their mates.”

“Wolfgang is here. Tristan and I know about his mission now, thanks to Onan and Kasia. Tristan said to tell you that he succeeded,” Jane revealed.

“That’s what I needed to know. Thank you, Kasia. You made me a promise, and you kept it. You are a faithful and true friend,” Kendra said softly.

“As are you, Circe,” Jane smiled back.

After another few minutes of swimming, Kendra spoke up again.

“Alphas Martin and MacKenzie are not going to back down. There will be a war. My father will help you when the time comes, and so will we.”

Jane nodded her understanding and waded out of the stream, shifting back to her wolf. Kendra followed and shifted back, too.

The two of them loped back to the place on the lawn where they had left their clothing. They quickly retook their human forms and dressed.

“Thank you, Kendra. That was a lovely way to spend an afternoon. I’ll see you at dinner?” Jane asked.

Kendra smiled and bowed her chin down in agreement.

Jane strolled slowly back to the house, considering what Kendra had told her. As she reached her room on the third floor, she headed into the bathroom to take a shower and get ready for the evening.

Her thoughts were heavy with the weight of the revelation. The barrier was going to fail. She was thinking so deeply about this as the hot water rushed over her skin, that she was slightly startled when Tristan joined her in the shower.

“What’s the matter, my love?” he inquired as he pulled Jane into his arms.

She smiled and leaned against him, her arms coming up around his neck. He kissed Jane’s nose and looked into her eyes with love and care, waiting for her to speak.

“Kendra said the barrier is weakening. She said we have a year, two at best,” Jane revealed as worry etched across her forehead.

Tristan stroked her back and sighed, “Then we better make the most of the time we have until we’re called into service. Don’t worry too much, Jane. If anyone can lead us to win this war, it’s Circe and her sisters. I’ve heard the demigoddesses were quite a sight on the battlefield, though we’ve never experienced a war by their side.”

Jane felt warm comfort spread through her chest at Tristan’s words. Pulling his face closer, she began to kiss him passionately. They were a little late to dinner, but no one minded. It was a party, after all.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### Omniscient POV

Alpha Clovis and the rest of the Entropus family bore witness to the pledges made by the new arrivals to the First Montana Pack that night after dinner.

Luna Megan could feel that something big was on the horizon. She sensed that Kendra and her wolf, Circe, knew something.

Megan was curious but knew she would be told what she should know when it was time.

Having a best friend and sister-in-law as a powerful magic user had taught her many years ago not to ask too many questions. Having Kendra and her wolf, Circe, for a daughter taught her that some information wasn't for her to know right away. Besides, Luna Megan had her own knowledge to safeguard regarding her family and their futures.

Jane and Kendra seemed to have formed a close friendship in less than a day. Her daughter wasn't close to anyone outside of their family, and this gave Megan something to ponder. It obviously wasn't the first time they were meeting, but how they could've met previously was a mystery to the older Luna.

Many other thoughts swirled in her mind about the events of the last few days. Not the least of which was the fact that in the two years since she had seen Tristan Martin, he had not only grown to a much larger size, but he seemed to have mentally matured a decade or more.

Jane also seemed much older than eighteen and she couldn't help but think this had something to do with her newly discovered wolf.

Clovis had told her a lot of things about this pack and what had been occurring.

He told her about what Alpha Martin had done to them and how Gabriel responded to work out a mutually beneficial contract for himself and the true mates.

Megan always admired Gabriel as both a friend and a wise elder. It was curious that he'd chosen to join the First Montana Pack.

To Megan's knowledge, no vampire had ever joined a wolf pack, especially not an ancient one like Gabriel.

Clovis relayed to her what Tristan had said about the event and how, upon Gabriel's pledge, some of his power was granted to the pack. This was interesting information, too.

One thing was certain; woe be to the persons who would set themselves against this pack. The resources and power housed within would be something frightening if they were set against you.

Megan was startled to discover Gabriel standing next to her and gave him a sheepish look.

"My thoughts were that loud, eh?"

Gabriel chuckled.

"Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane are something extraordinary, don't you think Luna?" Gabriel asked.

"I do," Megan replied sincerely.

"Are they going to end up with thirty adopted children?" she teased.

"I hear most of the children have been adopted already. Two girls that asked to stay with the Alpha and the Luna, and they've agreed to adopt them," Gabriel answered.

"How wonderful!" Megan said.

"Girls are a lot of work, but they are also such a blessing," Megan reminisced.

"That we can agree on," Gabriel smiled back.

"Oh?" Megan said, surprised, "don't tell me that you were once a father!"

Gabriel laughed, "Yes, indeed, Megan. I was quite a good father who both spoiled my daughters endlessly while - gasp - educating them!"

Megan tilted her head at him, “I suppose there weren’t many educated women over a thousand years ago.”

“Most couldn’t read,” he replied.

“But my daughters could read and do higher maths and understood biology and geography and art. They were beautiful, too,” he sighed at the long ago memory.

“How many girls did you have?”

“I had two lovely girls. One pursued many studies happily until the end. The other married a wolf, her true mate. I guess you could say you’ve met my granddaughter.”

Megan’s eyes widened in surprise, “I’ve met her?”

Gabriel explained, “Jane’s wolf, Kasia. She is my granddaughter’s reincarnated wolf. But she and Jane have integrated deeply, and Jane now carries the memories of my granddaughter. To her, I am beloved family. I reciprocate those feelings.”

“This explains much. Thank you for sharing this with me,” Luna Megan replied.

“Now you know why I gave this pack my pledge and my protection - even some of my power. They are family. I’m sure you can also guess...”

“Circe and Kasia. They know one another,” Megan stated.

“Bingo,” he said.

“Well, Gabriel,” Luna Megan finally said, “this has been a very enlightening conversation. I thank you for your candor.”

“I’m sure you’re aware how much I care for the friendship I have with your family. Please feel free to contact me should you need any other information or if you have something to share,” he finished, his intense gaze meeting hers.

“Understood,” Luna Megan answered before watching Gabriel walk away to rejoin Tristan and Jane playing with the pack pups.

The following afternoon, Clovis, Megan, Saranya and Kendra said their ‘see-you-laters’ and boarded one of their buses to head back to Texas.

Kendra sat next to her mother on the bus.

“Did you want to ask me anything?” Kendra offered.

Megan smiled at Kendra, reaching for her hand to hold and then resumed looking out of the window.

“I’m not surprised that my daughter is even more remarkable than I knew,” she answered.

“Do you know about your wolf, mother?” she asked.

“Mmmm, yes, dear. Since the beginning. Although, I didn’t expect that to be the case for you, as well. I should have guessed. I suppose this means your sisters are the same, even if they don’t know it yet.”

Kendra leaned her head on her mom’s shoulder, and they rode a long way cuddled together in silence.



## CHAPTER FORTY

### Omniscient POV

Days on the ranch of the First Montana Pack territory became extremely busy over the next few months.

Jane, now aware of her relation to Gabriel, began to train her newfound abilities under his guidance. Her power to see into others' minds was getting stronger.

She couldn't read minds as clearly or as effortlessly as Gabriel, but she could see enough to distinguish lies from truth and understand the motives of others.

The sense of completion and oneness that the revelations of the past several months had brought to her and Tristan as wolves and as mates was astounding and satisfying in the extreme.

In other news, everything was suspiciously quiet on the Alphas Martin and MacKenzie front.

The pack broke ground on the town square and hired hundreds of construction workers from seven states to come and lay out the square, build the roads, and pour the foundations of the planned community.

In the end, with the help of Gabriel and the pack engineers, as well as their plumbers and electricians, Tristan decided to go ahead with plans for their own power and water treatment plants.

In six months, they had fully operational power grids, sewers, and treated water supply.

The town square was also completed at that time. The Pack House, security facilities, fire station, schools, and even the apartment building were constructed around the square on three sides.

The fourth side was a strip of more than thirty shop fronts that were yet to be occupied. Pack members weighed in on the shops and restaurants they were hoping to see take up residence there.

Tristan received several applications for shop rentals with proposed business plans for their purpose. He and Jane would need to think carefully about which they would accept since they had more applications than shops to lease. It looked like they might need to plan another phase of businesses to build in the near future.

All the unmated adults and many of the young families relocated to the apartments and settled into a close-knit community lifestyle as they sent kids to school and took up jobs in the pack.

Fifty-three individual homes were also completed for larger families with too many children to fit comfortably into an apartment. Each home had a five-acre plot of land on the streets and blocks that radiated out around the town square.

They were close enough to be part of the community but spread out enough to offer some privacy while living among other sensitive hearers.

The builders had been careful to build the homes without cutting down too many trees, so the five-acre home sites, cut into the forest, still retained much of the forest around them to further cement each resident's privacy. This setup was also crucial in supporting the health of the pack members' wolves, who needed frequent runs.

Another two dozen homes were in various stages of construction and would all be completed within the next couple of months.

Gabriel used his connections in the Montana state government to help Tristan annex their one-million-acre ranch into its own county. This way, many of the taxes collected would go to maintaining their own town.

Diane and David had chosen to move into one of the ranch's staff cabins permanently.

Avery and Angelica chose to live in the apartment building with their now-adopted son, five-year-old Bryant. It was close enough to the school for him to walk to and fro each day since he was a remarkably independent pup, and

the school was only across the square from the apartment complex.

Bryant was a brilliant kid with a mop of crazy wild brown hair and silver eyes that shone with above-average intelligence. He latched onto Beta Avery early on his arrival to the pack and followed her everywhere he was allowed to go. It particularly irked him that he was now forced to attend school Monday through Friday with the “children.”

Bryant would go to school each day, then rush home, finish his homework, and wait for Angelica to take him to the main house to visit his next favorite person in the world, six-year-old Amy.

Amy and Selly both accepted Tristan and Jane’s offer to adopt them. They were settling in well to the third-floor apartment bedrooms at the top of the main house, which had recently been vacated by Diane, David, Avery, and Angelica.

The girls were complete opposites of one another. Amy also had above-average intelligence, was tall, and had a great sense of humor once she became comfortable in her new home. She was tough, hard-working, and honest and adored her new little sister. She was also attached at the hip to Bryant whenever family life or school did not separate them.

Selly was only four years old and tiny for her age, possibly due to malnutrition from their former pack. She had curly golden-brown hair, crystal blue eyes, and a preference for princesses and fancy dresses.

She loved dolls and tea parties and all things pink and rainbow. She liked to spend her free time in the kitchen with Grandma Diane after pre-school. She would often shoot Diane the puppy dog eyes to get her to read her articles in homemaker and interior design magazines that Diane kept subscriptions to.

Selly thought that Emma was the most beautiful creature in the whole world and had convinced herself that she could turn her own eyes from blue to the sparkling green of Emma’s once she grew up.

Both girls loved Tristan and Jane and had long since begun calling them Mom and Dad. They also called Gabriel granddad, which pleased him to no end.

It was late afternoon on one particularly windy, early autumn day. Angelica was driving Bryant to the main house to drop him off so he could spend the evening there and have dinner with Amy. Avery would bring him back after she had dinner with those still temporarily in residence at the main house. She wanted to update them on the progress of their home builds.

Angelica couldn't stay since she had promised to take the elementary school teachers into the nearby town for a nice dinner to celebrate the new school year and the opening of their official elementary school.

Angelica was the principal of the elementary school since no one else wanted the responsibility. She had worked all through high school in the administrative offices of her previous pack's school board and had a good understanding of how schools operated. Most of the elementary teachers were experienced teachers who appreciated Angelica's efforts, and they worked well together.

Angelica was rushing to get Bryant to the main house so she could head into town and secure the large table for their reservation as soon as possible.

Bryant rode in the back seat, his nose pressed to the car window when he noticed a group of birds scatter wildly in all directions up from the woods and over the trees. He immediately knew that something was wrong and called up to Angelica.

"Mommy, when will we be there?"

"We are pulling uuuuuuuup.....now," she said.

"Thank-you-mommy-I-love-you-bye," he called as he jumped out of the car and ran into the house.

Instead of seeking out Amy as was his habit, he immediately raced down the hall to the ground floor study and walked in without ceremony.

Tristan was seated on the sofa, reading lease applications for the shopfronts from a file. He looked up to see Bryant walk past him and drag a chair over to the bookcase door behind his desk.

The boy climbed up on the chair and searched the titles until he found the Farmer's Almanac doorbell button and began to press it once every five seconds.

Tristan raised an eyebrow at this odd behavior and called out, "Bry? Is everything ok?"

"No, Alpha! I need Gabriel to tell you!" he replied urgently.

Soon after, the bookcase recessed and slid open to reveal Gabriel standing there. He registered the sight of Bryant on a chair next to the door.

"What can I do for you, little man?" he asked jovially as he picked him up and carried him to the sofa where Tristan sat.

Bryant pointed to his head over and over and said, "Look at what I saw, Elder Gabriel!"

Bryant closed his eyes and focused on the memory of the birds fleeing from the forest.

Gabriel immediately turned serious and mind-linked the images to Tristan.

Tristan put his hands on Bryant's shoulders gently and said, "Good job, Bryant! I'm proud of you!"

Tristan picked him up and carried him to the kitchen to leave him with Diane and the girls before rushing out to the garage to hop in one of the trucks. Gabriel climbed in next to him.

Tristan next mind-linked Jane to stay with the children until she heard from him.

Tristan drove the mile down the road to where Bryant had seen the disturbance, mind-linking Avery, and their security center to send some warriors over for backup. He and Gabriel were going in to check it out.

Tristan parked the truck on the edge of the forest, and the two of them got out and stepped a few feet into the

woods. They stood still, listening and taking deep breaths to try to catch any unfamiliar scents.

Their conversations transitioned over to the mind-link to hide their thoughts from possible intruders.

*"I smell nothing. That's not normal,"* he told Gabriel.

*"The absence of any scent means magical interference or protection,"* the vampire replied.

*"Alpha MacKenzie has a powerful witch by his side,"* Tristan said.

*"Yes, he does,"* Gabriel answered and then waited for Tristan's decision.

*"Logically speaking, you are the most capable of piercing such a barrier to scout out the situation,"* Tristan finally said through the link.

Gabriel nodded and disappeared in a blink.

A few minutes later, Gabriel blinked back by Tristan's side.

Still speaking telepathically, Gabriel said, *"We've got company. I count about fifty wolf warriors spread throughout this part of the woods, tracking toward the main house. They're MacKenzie's men. The witch is with them."*

Tristan sighed. Things just got real and fast.

Tristan mind-linked the security team and instructed them to check in with the south border patrol and get responses from every single wolf ASAP.

It was only a few minutes before the reply came, *"No response, Alpha. Border Patrol presumed MLA."*

Tristan mind-linked the pack, *"All security personnel to your designated forest's edge station. Wait for my orders. All other pack members shelter in place. Don't let anyone unknown to you inside."*

*"Yes, Alpha,"* came the chorus of responses.

*"How do you wish to proceed, Alpha?"* Gabriel asked.

*"With a vengeance,"* Tristan answered.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### Jane's POV

After Tristan's mind-link came through, Diane and I took the children into the secret apartment. Emma was waiting for us with the door open.

Mind-linking Avery and Angelica, I informed them, "*Bryant is with Diane in the secret apartment. She'll keep the kids safe.*"

Angelica answered, "*Thank you, Luna.*"

Diane took them inside and waited for me to enter, but I shook my head.

"Emma will help you look after them. I have to make a call," I told her.

She looked worried, but she nodded. Emma hit the button to close the bookcase door.

As soon as the door was sealed shut, I turned and walked over to Tristan's desk. The phone had remained unplugged since his father had called him. I plugged it back in and dialed a number I had taken care to memorize.

As the phone rang, Tristan's mind-link came through to me with details regarding the situation.

*"About fifty of MacKenzie's wolves. His witch is here. She's created some kind of magic void around them where they can't be scented."*

"Understood," I replied through the link just as the phone was answered.

"Jane?" Kendra's voice sounded on the other end of the line.

"Yes. MacKenzie is here with his witch. She's helped them into our borders with magic."

"What does the magic do?" Kendra asked.

"It makes them undetectable by scent. I'm not sure what else she'll do. She's here with them," I replied.

“Standby. I’ll get my Aunt Amelia here to help us,” she said.

“Circe, can’t you just...” I started to ask.

Kendra replied, “I could if I could release our full power, but we aren’t able to yet. It’s sealed until I’m mated. The tough thing is that Aunt Amelia is definitely more powerful than MacKenzie’s witch, but she is terrible at transportation magic. I don’t know if she can get us to you quickly or not.”

A click sounded. Another phone receiver was picked up, “Luna Jane? What’s the situation?”

“Hi, Amelia. Sorry for the intrusion, but we have a war practically on our doorstep,” I began, then proceeded to explain the situation.

“Kendra told me to expect this. I’ve already reached out to my coven to have a couple of transporter witches on standby to get Kendra and me to you quickly. Until then, I understand that the witch is MacKenzie’s?” Amelia spoke quickly.

“Mmm, yes,” I answered.

“Do you know if there’s anyone who transferred packs and shares blood with her?”

“Let me check. Standby,” I answered.

I mind-linked Avery, “*Your father’s witch. Is anyone in our pack related to her by blood?*”

The answer came quickly. “*Yes! Most of them are. The closest is Jesse, David’s older brother. He’s her biological father, but he didn’t raise her. My dad took her from him when she was a child because he realized she was powerful.*”

“*Thanks, Avery,*” I answered.

“*You got it, Luna,*” she replied.

I went back to the phone, “Amelia? We have her biological father here.”

“Perfect! Get him to your location. We have a couple of witches who can transport us to you. See you soon,” and with that, Amelia and Kendra hung up.

I mind-linked Jesse, “*Jesse, I need you in the first-floor study of the main house.*”



*"On my way, Luna,"* he answered immediately.

Then, I sat on the edge of the desk to wait as Tristan's reports kept flooding in.

*"Fifty on the south border."*

*"Seventy-three on the north border."*

*"Thirty on the west border."*

*"East border...794."*

*"Tristan?"* I might have just panicked a little.

*"It's ok, Jane. We got this. You just do your part, and it will all be fine, ok?"* Tristan spoke back, comforting me.

We had less than three hundred warriors. All told he had nearly 1,000, and that's only what we could see!

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry.

*"Yes, Alpha,"* I linked back.

Waiting here in the study was the longest ten minutes of my life.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### Jane's POV

Jesse entered the study shortly after my phone call with Amelia ended.

“Jesse, I need to ask for something big,” I began, my body tense with the gravity of what I would ask.

“I am at your service, Luna. Whatever it is,” he replied.

“Abigail is here. Her magic is cloaking the scents of the intruders. I have some powerful witches on the way. They’re going to need your blood,” I gave it to him straight and observed him closely for any sign of reluctance.

“You got it, Luna,” he answered without hesitation.

“Is this going to be hard for you? You can say no,” I added.

He sighed in resignation, “I ceased to be her father long ago. I will do anything to protect the pack,” then he looked straight into my eyes, “My loyalty is to my Alpha.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed, “Thank you, Jesse.”

The phone rang, and I picked it up to Kendra’s voice on the line, saying, “Go out to the drive, Jane! We won’t fit in the study. Transporting in sixty seconds!”

Then she hung up.

Jesse and I ran out to the front porch just as a loud crack sizzled the air outside.

I had to blink to register what I was seeing.

Kendra and Amelia were there with a dozen other witches. Fine. Sure. Got it.

It was what was behind them that both startled me and brought me a great sense of relief.

The entire Entropus family stood behind them, along with about 400 wolf warriors.

*Tristan! Gabriel!* I mind-linked, “*Divine Moon Pack is here: Alpha’s family, witches, warriors! They came!*”

The dozen witches scattered and disappeared into the woods.

I embraced Kendra, “You amazing woman. I adore you!”

Kendra grinned, “The Old Man insisted. He said he made a promise to support your pack when the time came.”

I stepped forward to Alpha Clovis and hugged him gingerly, “Thank you, Alpha.”

He chuckled and patted my back softly, “Don’t worry, Luna. The day shall be ours!”

I stepped back and smiled at him and then turned to Luna Megan, holding my hands out to her. She enveloped me in a warm hug and then whispered, “You stay strong, Luna. We’ve got this!”

I was more grateful to them than I could even express.

Amelia cleared her throat, “First things first. We have to neutralize the magic. If we use blood that flows through her veins, then her ability to cloak scents will have no power here. Are you the father?”

Jesse nodded and stepped forward.

“Hold out your hands, palms up. I’m going to slice them both open. You have to squeeze them into fists above the bowl. Do it quickly. You will heal fast,” she instructed him.

Jesse obeyed.

By the time the blood hit the bowl, the dozen witches who had previously disappeared into the forest had returned with items they had gathered: grass, bush leaves, moss, pinecones, rocks, dirt, bark from trees, etc. They placed the items they brought back into the bowl, and each item touched a part of the blood. Amelia chanted in a language I didn’t understand, and then the blood turned a glowing blue and consumed the gathered materials.

Amelia nodded with satisfaction, “It’s done. Her cloaking magic won’t work within view of any of these forces of nature.”

I nodded and sent the information to Tristan, Gabriel, and the security team through the link.

Tristan linked back, *“Got it. We can scent everyone now. You did it, Jane!”*

I listened to a few short instructions from Tristan that he wanted me to relay to Alpha Clovis.

“Alpha, Luna, Tristan says he’s glad you’re here,” I began.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Clovis said with a grin.

“Tristan wants you and your daughters with him. He’s tracking MacKenzie and his witch. Gabriel is with Tristan.”

Clovis nodded and said, “There are five Alphas here besides Tristan and me. As soon as the magic faded, I could scent them.”

“Five?” my eyes went wide.

“MacKenzie, Martin, Trent, Fillmore, and Kline. These are the Alphas who have been against progressive values in the packs and the council. They defy the council and continue to treat humans, their subordinates, and women like property.”

I frowned. This was serious.

“We can handle it, Jane, but you have to make sure everyone is safe,” Clovis said.

“You let the non-warriors and children know they have to lock themselves indoors.”

I nodded, and he turned to run. His wife and daughters followed him, stripping at the edge of the south forest and shifting as soon as they entered the woods.

That was a sight to behold. Seven of the largest wolves I had ever seen besides Tristan’s and mine. They could probably strike terror into the hearts of every non-Alpha wolf in the forest today.

I assumed Alpha Clovis linked his pack because they all shifted, splitting into four groups, each heading in a different direction.

I turned back to Amelia, “Everyone has already been asked to shelter in place. Can your witches put barriers around the buildings to keep the children safe?”

Amelia turned to her coven and motioned to one of the witches and the dozen ladies vanished with a crack of the air.

“Come,” she said to me.

I followed her into the house, and she headed to the study, where she placed a hand on the hidden bookcase door and spoke a few words. A blue light seeped from her fingertips and covered the door before retracting behind it and disappearing.

I linked Diane to let her know it was a protection spell so the children wouldn't be afraid.

Amelia walked out of the study and up the staircase to our third-floor apartment and stepped inside.

She hurried across the living room, and the balcony doors flung open for her to step out into the night air.

The balcony that wrapped around our apartment offered 360-degree views of the entire ranch. It was really a rooftop patio since it sat atop the part of the second-floor roof that wasn't covered by our apartment.

Amelia crouched down and put her hand on the patio to the left of her feet, then stood slowly, stretching her arm up into the air to draw a magic blue light arch over her body and completing it by touching the patio next to her right foot.

She then opened both hands wide and pushed at the arch. The arch turned into a growing bubble that eventually formed a barrier over the entire main house.

We were currently facing south, where I knew Tristan and Gabriel were trying to deal with MacKenzie and the witch Abigail.

Amelia stretched out her hand towards the south curve of the barrier and pulsed it three times. A point of more vivid blue light appeared on the bubble, and it began to draw.

It drew the forest beneath us and then wolves all in miniature like a map. Lots and lots of wolves. They were running through the trees. I could make out the seven

massive wolves running towards another large wolf and a man who were being surrounded by dozens of smaller wolves.

It played out like a movie but was translucent, with glowing blue lines showing the outer shells and motion of the creatures. I understood this was like a live feed of what was happening, and it was Gabriel and Tristan who were being surrounded.

When Amelia was satisfied with the reach of her view to the south, she began to walk around the entire wrap-around patio, pulsing her hand toward the barrier as she walked. More points appeared and began to draw the forest and the creatures moving inside of it.

She came back to the south, where I was watching Tristan anxiously.

Amelia walked closer to the bubble and tapped the seven large wolves running toward Tristan and Gabriel. They began to move faster. She had somehow boosted them to an otherworldly speed.

She finally gestured to the bubble and said to me, "Command Central. You are the mind-link to First Montana, and I am the link to Divine Moon. Speak your communications aloud so that we can relay information more efficiently."

"Got it," I replied.

Amelia walked around the circle, scanning and watching the other movements in different directions while I stood, my eyes fixed on my family as they were surrounded.

The detail on the feed was excellent. I could see how Tristan shifted his face towards MacKenzie's stench, and Gabriel had turned his back to Tristan, facing the witch's direction.

"Alpha Clovis and his family are almost there, Tristan. Hang in there," I linked aloud.

Seven wolves on the front line broke through the trees and lunged at Tristan and Gabriel.

Gabriel moved at vampire speed, snapping the necks of four of them while Tristan crushed the throats of the other three, one after the other, with his jaws and tossed them aside.

Amelia mind-linked aloud, “The 700 plus to the east are half rogues!”

“Divine Moon Pack is here to aid us. Half of the army to your east are rogues,” I repeated through the link for my pack.

I glanced at the feed to the east and saw a large crowd of Clovis’s pack joining up with half of our warriors waiting at the forest’s edge. The wolves greeted and intermingled, loping to sniff one another until they could recognize their allies by scent.

There was a chorus of “*Yes, Luna*” in reply.

The combined army of First Montana and Divine Moon dove into the woods at full speed toward the invading army. The invaders caught scent of them and began to run towards them, though they were some distance apart.

We were four hundred wolves to the east against 794 invaders, half of which were rogues.

I took several deep breaths and sent up a prayer to the goddess that she would protect our packs tonight. I didn’t want to lose a single wolf.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### Tristan's POV

The blood of our enemies dripped down my muzzle. There were eighteen more closing in, and the bloodthirst of my wolf was full-on.

These smaller average wolves stood no chance. I felt a twinge of human sorrow at the loss of lives in so meaningless a way, but my wolf answered it with the howl that was his battle cry.

Must. Protect. Pack.

Yes, Onan.

I could smell their fear as if they were spraying it directly up my nose. My size, coupled with the presence of such a vampire as Gabriel, had them quaking in terror. But they could not disobey orders from their Alpha.

This was a tragedy - one of MacKenzie's and my father's making. They would have to pay a price - a foolish price that could have been avoided if they had simply stayed away.

The eighteen wolves closing in were crouched down low, crawling towards us, preparing to lunge. I braced myself for the inevitable tearing of my flesh, but they wouldn't bring me down. It was physically impossible.

In a flash, they pounced directly at me. Their attempts to avoid Gabriel were in vain. His vampire speed was legendary. He dispatched a dozen of them in the time it takes most people to bring air into their lungs and let it out again.

The remaining six were upon me. Onan met them with the full force of our body, knocking four of them up into the air and away until their bodies' flight was cut short by slamming into various trees and rock formations.

The other two were snapping and snarling, attempting to latch onto my throat. I hooked my teeth onto the throat of one wolf, dragging him toward the other before I



gathered both of their necks in my muzzle at once and bit down, crushing the life out of them.

We hadn't even broken a sweat yet. But it was going to get harder from here.

MacKenzie was closing in behind the remaining twenty-five warriors and the witch. He was emitting an alpha aura and command to force the warriors into battle. Some were resisting, or he wouldn't need to command them with his Alpha order.

They shouldn't have to die, but once the Alpha command was received, they couldn't be stopped unless they were dead or the command changed. Such was the nature of our wolf forms. Pack is all.

The twenty-five were nearing. We could see them all, but I couldn't lay eyes on MacKenzie, though his stench was palpable.

In the blink of an eye, several things happened at once. The twenty-five warriors leapt into the air at Gabriel and me just as the Entropus wolves arrived on the scene.

Alpha Clovis burst through the trees first, with Saranya's wolf at his side. They had ripped out four throats each before they even reached us.

MacKenzie lunged out of hiding, going straight for what he perceived to be the weakest link, Luna Meagan's wolf, and earned himself a pile of four Alpha-sized daughters sinking their teeth into his flesh and tearing chunks asunder.

He managed to remain standing and darted behind some trees to circle around, trying to get at me.

Luna Meagan's wolf, not slowed by MacKenzie's attempted assault, dispatched three warriors by snapping their necks clean in half.

Saranya avidly sought out the other enemies without pause and with precision. She had taken down five more in a flash.

The acrid aroma of MacKenzie's blood permeated the air. Other than him, only nine warriors, plus the witch, remained in our vicinity.

She stood in the trees several yards away doing nothing. We knew her barrier had been neutralized by her father's blood, but she was still a wolf. Not to mention, she must have other magical tricks up her sleeve.

Gabriel, seeing things were well in hand here, made eye contact with her and stalked towards her. He could have been at her side in an instant, but instead, he took deliberate, terrifying, red-eyed, fang-mouthed steps toward her.

She didn't move. She simply stood still and waited. She made one final attempt to raise her hands in the air towards him and chant, but nothing happened. She was defeated.

There was no circumstance in which Gabriel would allow her to live. When she got her magic back, she would be able to come back. She couldn't run fast enough, even in wolf form, to get away from him.

When he reached her, only one step away, she bowed her head and closed her eyes in resignation. Gabriel took the last step, fisted her hair to pull her head aside, and sunk his teeth into her neck. He drank her empty of every last drop of her blood in less than sixty seconds. Her pale, empty shell flopped to the ground.

Renewed with the power of his feeding, he returned to my side.

I stood scanning the forest for MacKenzie as the Entropus family took care of the remaining warriors.

He had retreated like the coward he was. His stench lessened with every mile he put between us. Just as I was deciding whether or not to go after him, his scent vanished in the wind.

My wolf made eye contact with Gabriel, bowed his head, and then blinked away in a flash, heading for the army to the east.

Jane had mind-linked me the information from Clovis about the other Alphas that were here.

Having taken care of the situation in the South, Clovis and I had a clear understanding of one goal and one goal alone. Find the Alphas and take them out.

In sync, we turned towards the west and bolted into the forest, following our noses to the closest one: Trent.

Six of the fiercest she-wolf warriors in existence followed close behind.

Trent didn't stand a chance.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

### Gabriel's POV

I arrived at the eastern forest front in less than five minutes. Closing my eyes, I focused my mind. Over one thousand wolves running at each other through the trees, and I listened to them.

Hundreds of warriors were emitting scents and thoughts of hatred, war, and fear.

Something was off, though. I knew there were rogues here, but their thoughts were different. They had no pony in this race, and they didn't want to be here.

I listened for a few more minutes and realized what was happening.

There were 397 rogues present in the forest. They held hate in their hearts only for Alpha Martin of Moon Blood Pack. Every last one of them had been exiled from Martin's pack over the years for unjustifiable reasons.

All they wanted was a pack - a home - safety for their families.

Telepathically, I ordered our pack and Clovis's to stop running and wait for direction.

I reached out to the most powerful rogue I could find - a former Beta - and I entered his mind.

*"Beta Wolf, what is your name?"* I called into his mind.

*"Who are you?"* he answered gruffly.

*"I am the vampire Gabriel, an elder of First Montana Pack. Why do you fight for Martin? You don't want to be here,"* I questioned.

*"Gabriel! This is Homer Anders. Please help us! Martin is holding our mates and children hostage. If he loses the battle, he will have them slaughtered."*

I knew this wolf. He was Martin's beta fifteen years ago. I met with him a handful of times back then to negotiate trade between Martin's pack and me.

*"Homer, I'm going to help you. Are you able to link the other rogues?"*

*"We have no pack. There is no mind-link,"* he answered desperately.

*"It's ok! I will reach out to the ones furthest from you first. Scent out the ones you can find and try to pull them away towards the south. I'll link Alpha Tristan. We will fix this, Homer. You have my word."*

*"Thank you, Gabriel."* Relief flooded back to me with his reply, and then he was on the move.

I mind-linked Tristan, *"Alpha, we have good news and bad news."*

*"Yep, let's hear it,"* he linked back as he ran towards the west.

*"The rogues to the east aren't here of their own free will. They don't want to be here. They are wolves who were rogued from your father's pack for unjustifiable reasons. He's currently holding their mates and children hostage and forcing them to fight,"* I revealed.

*"We have to take my father down,"* Tristan replied.

*"Yes, but here's the bad news,"* I started.

*"You mean that wasn't the bad news?"*

*"Not even close. Martin is keeping their families somewhere with instructions to kill them all if they lose the battle."*

*"What do you recommend?"* he asked me.

I hesitated.

*"Tell me, Gabriel,"* he pressed.

*"Alpha pack leadership automatically transfers to whoever challenges and kills the Alpha,"* I reminded him.

*"The only way to rescue their families is for me to challenge and kill my father. The hostage keepers will obey me as their new Alpha,"* he replied grimly.

*"It doesn't have to be you. It just has to be an Alpha. Clovis could do it,"* I suggested, but I knew he wouldn't accept that answer.

*"It has to be me, and you know it,"* came his response.

*"I'll enter the rogues' minds and send them a message, but it will take some time. I'm telling them to continue to move towards us*

*discreetly. They won't be able to keep MacKenzie in the dark for long. He'll start to realize something is wrong."*

"Do it. Clovis will handle the others. I'm on my way," he linked back.

I stepped into the forest behind our pack and Clovis's. First blood had yet to be shed on the eastern battlefield.

The rogues were at the front of Alpha Martin's army. He was sending them to slaughter first to preserve his warriors' lives. He was the worst kind of creature: a beast of no redemption.

I could smell Avery a couple of minutes before she appeared at my side in wolf form, covered in the blood of other wolves.

*"The north is clear,"* she linked to me.

I mind-linked her the situation. She yelped at me in acknowledgment and linked me, Tristan, Jane, and the First Montana pack members currently before her in the east forest.

*"The rogues are being forced to fight. Let them pass you by. Do not attack,"* she linked.

I understood what she was saying. This was a more strategic plan than sending them off in another direction. It would take longer to detect the deviation from Martin's orders.

I focused my mind. My ability to enter the minds of multiple wolves at once - ones outside the pack - was sharp and empowered by the blood of the witch I had drained.

I reached out to every rogue nearest us and spoke into their minds: *"This is the vampire, Gabriel. We know your families are hostages. We're going to help, but you have to follow our plan. Run towards us as if you were going to attack. Run through and past us to the edge of the forest. Wait there for further instructions."*

The minds erupted in response.

*"Gabriel! Thank the goddess!"*

*"Please save my mate!"*

*"I'll do anything just save my pups."*

I quickly moved on and sought out more rogues, repeating my message into their minds.

I did this again and again until I had reached everyone. By the time the last was told, the first set of rogues was speeding past me and out of the trees. It would take time for them all to get through. They couldn't go too quickly, or MacKenzie would catch on.

I stepped out of the forest and called out to the rogues, "Shed some blood the Alpha can scent. We have to keep him in the dark as long as possible!"

The rogues started biting into their own legs and paws, causing them to bleed. They loped in circles with the liquid flowing down their bodies so that the wind could blow the aromas through the air.

I could smell Tristan nearing us, and so could the rogues. They bowed down, their eyes to the ground as he raced past us and into the woods.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### Jane's POV

The north and south forests were largely empty now, the intruders slain. I watched Tristan break off from the Entropus family and head east.

Walking inside our blue magic Command Central, I followed him. I heard all the links and knew where he was going - to kill his father. It was the only way to save the hostages and free the rogues.

My heart was heavy. It wasn't that we held any great love for his father. It was likely that if Tristan had stayed and been forced to mark Avery, he would have killed him in the near future anyway.

What saddened me was that an Alpha of a very large pack and a father was such a spiteful, hateful, and awful individual that he had to force his son to kill him or watch hundreds of ill-treated wolves be murdered for his own selfish ends.

We didn't even know how many of these wolves were actually from Martin's pack. There were five Alphas here, and they probably had brought warriors from each of the packs, but not all of them. If they had each deployed all their warriors, there would have been quite a lot more than one thousand.

I could see that most of the rogues were out of the forest now, and the forces were more evenly matched on each side. Both sides, sans rogues, were now clashed in a vicious battle. Wolves were dropping all across the forest.

My heart ached as I watched them fall. A heavy ball formed in the pit of my stomach as my eyes followed my mate through the trees, weaving through and leaping over the smaller wolves engaged in battle. He wasn't wasting any time. He was following his nose to the end goal.



The sooner Alpha Martin fell, the sooner he could call off that pack's warriors. It would turn the tide of the entire battle and possibly end it once and for all.

Behind me on the west side of Command Central, Amelia spoke aloud her link to Clovis.

"Alpha, Trent is moving towards the north to join up with two of the other alphas. Tristan is on his way to the east to deal with Alpha Martin. Alpha MacKenzie is no longer on the field. I'm unable to locate him."

I couldn't hear the link back from Clovis, but I looked over my shoulder and saw Clovis's large-wolfed family split into two groups. They were going to circle the three alphas that were meeting up to the north.

I turned back to Tristan, who was still heading straight for a particular point.

I looked ahead of him on the feed, and I could see one bigger wolf among the others. That was Alpha Martin. His wolf wasn't as big as Tristan's, but it was still larger than a regular wolf.

I knew better than to underestimate the strength that was gained from a hateful heart. Watching Alpha Martin kick the stool out from under Tristan's feet that day at the gallows had taught me this painful truth.

I mind-linked my mate, "*Tristan...*"

"*Don't worry, my love,*" came his answer.

"*But he's family. Are you ok?*"

"*No, Jane. You are family. Amy and Selly are family. Gabriel is family. The pack is family. Alpha Martin is nothing more than a threat to that family. After today, he never will be one again. To anyone,*" his voice sounded calm and focused.

"*I love you, Tristan.*"

"*I love you, Jane. I've loved you since we were fourteen years old. Do you know the day I knew it?*"

Fourteen years old, that was when we started high school. What had changed?

I suddenly realized, "*On the first day of high school. When you started to thank me for serving you breakfast.*"

*“Did you know?”*

*“No, I didn’t. I was afraid to even look at you then. If I had, I probably would have known.”*

*“And now?”*

*“I can’t wait to put eyes on you. Hurry and come back to me so I can,”* I smiled.

*“Yes, my Luna,”* he answered.

Tristan was closing in on Alpha Martin, and he fell silent. He would reach him in a few minutes. I closed the link and let him focus on the task ahead.

A loud crack behind me startled me. I turned to see a beautiful middle-aged bronze-skinned woman standing next to Amelia. I sensed her goodwill and relaxed.

Amelia turned to her and bowed her head, “High Priestess. What brings you here?”

The woman waved her hand at the blue globe surrounding us, and dozens of glowing green points appeared and started to draw across the map.

“That nuisance of a witch, Abigail,” the woman said. “She’s tipped the balance by interfering in unnatural things.”

The green lines finished drawing and completed our view of the surrounding area. There were hundreds of new people on the map. I started jogging around the patio, looking everywhere. They were everywhere.

“What is that?! Why couldn’t we see them before?” I was terrified.

“Luna Jane, this is Her Majesty Esperanza Consuela Maria Rodriguez, wolf witch High Priestess of the Western Hemisphere, Queen of the Fae,” Amelia introduced.

My brain and body froze for a split second, and then I bowed my head, “Your Majesty.”

“Let’s just keep that Queen of the Fae and Her Majesty business on the down low, shall we, Jane? Call me Esperanza,” she replied.

“And that,” she motioned at the green people now on our radar, “is necromancy.”

Amelia tapped her finger on her chin, then furrowed her brow as she studied the display before her. Her jaw clenched as understanding dawned, “Abigail didn’t run from Gabriel because she knew she couldn’t get away. She didn’t run because she needed him to drink her blood and use him to power her undead army.”

“What?” was all I could say.

“To achieve necromancy on this scale, Abigail had to give up all of her life’s blood. But she also needed magical energy, and a lot of it, to power it after she was gone. Now all of that blood is inside an ancient vampire of great power,” Amelia explained.

“There are so many!” my voice cracked.

“Breathe, my dear, breathe,” soothed the high priestess.

Esperanza waved her hand, and the twelve witches who had transported Amelia and the army to us appeared on the patio beside us.

They appeared startled for a moment, then noticed Esperanza and bowed their heads in respect.

“High Priestess,” they said in unison.

“Go and get the vampire Gabriel and tell him Luna Jane needs him. Transport him directly here,” Esperanza ordered.

“Yes, High Priestess,” they replied, and they vanished with a loud crack.

Esperanza turned to me, “Go down to your kitchen’s walk-in fridge and bring up every bag of blood you have in there. And prepare to be fed on. Bring Emma back with you. The children will be safe with Diane.”

I started to run through the apartment to head downstairs when Esperanza called out, “Every single bag, Jane!”

“Got it!” I called back as I ran.

A voice sounded in my head, “*Are you ok, Jane? Is something wrong?*”

It was Gabriel.

*“Come with them, Gabriel. You are needed at the house,”* I linked back.

*“I’ll be there in less than five. Just give me a minute,”* he answered.

I ran straight to the study and called to Emma through the bookcase door to meet me in the walk-in. Then, I sprinted to the kitchen.

I looked around the dry pantry for a moment and then found the reusable shopping bags folded neatly in a bin on the floor under the shelves.

Emma came in when I was pulling them out.

“Blood. We need all of the blood carried to the rooftop patio,” I explained.

Emma took some of the bags without question or hesitation and opened the walk-in. We both entered and started filling our sacks with blood bags.

It only took us a minute to load up all the bags. Emma and I raced back up to the apartment and dropped the bags on the patio. A loud crack sounded, and the twelve witches appeared with Gabriel.

I looked around us at the green-outlined bodies on the map moving towards the east and the west. They were moving slowly, but there were so very many.

I stepped to the patio railing and looked down. Looking through the magic bubble and down to the lawn of the house, I could physically see some of them walking across the grass and past the house. The stench was overwhelming.

Most of them looked like burnt skeletons with torn, rotting clothing and flesh hanging from their bones. Some of them were fresher and looked more like people with stiff and awkward joints.

“Ah, Esperanza,” Gabriel made a courteous but friendly bow, “it’s been a long time. Nice to see you.”

“Remember that in a few hours when you’re cursing my name,” Esperanza smiled back.

“Why would I ever do such a thing?” he replied.

Then Gabriel looked up at the globe of visibility into the pack lands. He was startled and flashed to my side to peer over the railing.

He sighed in acceptance of the situation, "Well, this explains why that witch didn't run."

Amelia had dragged two reclining patio loungers over to Esperanza and said to Gabriel, "Lie down."

Gabriel nodded at the witch, but first, he strode over to Emma. He took each of her shoulders in his hands and said, "I love you, Em."

Then he kissed her hard on the lips. Her eyes opened in shock and confusion for a moment, but soon, she was leaning into the kiss. When he pulled away, her eyes were glistening, "Gabriel?" She whispered.

"Don't be so dramatic, Gabriel, you're going to be fine," Esperanza rolled her eyes.

Gabriel ignored her and was looking down into Emma's face. "I've loved you for over a century. When I wake up, I want to marry you. Will you have me?"

"Wake up?! What do you..?" Emma sputtered, clearly having many things trying to come out at the same time, "I - Gabriel, what's happening?" Her hands gripped his shirt in front of her.

Esperanza answered her, "I have to completely drain him of blood. He will lose all of his power. We will replace the blood with the bags you've brought, and he will be able to feed on Jane even in his coma. But it will be some time before he wakes up again."

"How long?" I asked.

"I don't know the answer to that. Whatever time it takes for his body to convert the blood from the bags into his own blood. He will need your blood, Jane, in order to accomplish this since you're a direct descendant through your mother," Esperanza answered.

My head was spinning.

Tears were running down Emma's face. "I will marry you, Gabriel. I love you, too."

“He can’t die, right?” my voice trembled as I asked.

“Oh no, no, no,” Esperanza assured.

“You may go,” Esperanza said to the dozen witches, and they cracked the air as they vanished.

Esperanza turned to me and Emma, “He can’t die. He’s immortal. But you will have to keep his body safe in that dark apartment of yours. If anyone knows about this, it would be a lot easier to remove his head from his body, and then he *would* die.”

Gabriel kissed Emma again and then stepped over to me, hugged me tight, and kissed me on the top of my head.

Then he stepped over to the lounge chair and laid down.

“You too, Jane,” Esperanza said.

I laid down next to Gabriel in the other lounge.

“What am I to do?” I asked.

Esperanza crouched down to look me in the eyes and said, “Listen, Jane. We don’t have time to beat around the bush, so I’ll give it to you straight. It is both fortunate and opportune that you are currently pregnant.”

I bolted up in the lounge, “I’m pregnant?!”

“You are. And when a she-wolf is pregnant, her body changes to accommodate and tolerate more than one blood type within her body. This is fortunate for Gabriel because all of these blood bags can be used to restore blood to his body, but it must flow through your body first.”

“Like a filter?” I asked.

“Something like that. The blood will flow through you and touch your blood, and then when Gabriel drinks from you, all of the blood will have some of yours in it. As a descendant of Gabriel, your blood will keep his veins from rejecting the foreign blood. Normally, a vampire’s own blood consumes foreign blood and turns it into nourishment. But he won’t have any of his own blood for a while. A drained vampire is vulnerable.”

“But the baby?” I asked worriedly.

Esperanza reassured me, “The baby will be fine, I promise you. He has a great destiny before him, which this will not alter.

“This is going to take some time, though. He can only drink two pints from you at a time, so we have to put two pints of the bagged blood into your system and wait an hour or two before he feeds again. You have to keep eating and drinking during this time so you have the strength to process the foreign blood, ok?”

I nodded.

“He’s going to be unconscious while he feeds, so he will not be able to stop himself. Amelia will have to be here to stop him after two pints each time until all of the bagged blood is gone.”

Esperanza turned to Emma, “Red meat, spinach, kale, lots of fruit and starches. She needs iron and sugars to process the blood faster.”

Emma, who was holding Gabriel’s hand, nodded at Esperanza in understanding.

Gabriel reached out and squeezed my hand, “You don’t have to do this, Jane.”

I scoffed, “Of course I do, you idiot. Our family can’t be without you for long, so you better recover quickly. Don’t miss your great-great-great-and-so-on grandson’s birth, or I’ll never forgive you.”

Gabriel laughed, “Ok, my dear.”

Gabriel and I looked up at Esperanza and nodded that we were ready.

Amelia waved her hand in the air, and a medium-sized black caldron appeared beside Gabriel’s chair on the ground.

I laughed out loud at the cliché despite my fraught emotions.

Amelia side-eyed me, “Some old things still have their uses.”

Esperanza waived into existence a refrigerator, IV bag rack, and a tray of medical supplies.

“Emma, do you remember any of your medical training?” Amelia asked.

“Enough to tap a vein, I should think,” she replied with a nod.

Emma got to work cleaning my arm in the middle at the inside bend of my elbow. Before I knew it, she’d inserted the tube into my vein and taped it down. She attached a saline bag to one line and hung a blood bag from another hook but didn’t yet attach it to the second line.

She then got to work putting all of the remaining blood bags in the refrigerator nearby.

Lying there, I had time to seriously ponder the oddness of my life since turning eighteen. I wondered how I managed to have so many strange and extraordinary circumstances thrust upon me in less than a year.

Gabriel chuckled beside me but said nothing.

“I’ll begin then,” Esperanza announced.

She took hold of Gabriel’s forearm and held his hand and wrist over the cauldron. Then, with her finger pointed straight, she slid it down his forearm, from inside elbow to wrist, and the blood soon began to flow out of him and into the iron pot.

The liquid falling into the cauldron hissed and popped as if it were burning, and indeed, that’s what was occurring. Amelia had heated the metal to destroy the blood as soon as it hit the surface of the inside of the cauldron.

As blood began to burn, a few of the lit-up green undead on our radar began to blip and disappear. As more blood drained and burned, more and more of the undead fell.

“That’s going to be one hell of a clean-up job,” I sighed.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### Alpha Clovis's POV

My family and I ran towards the west through the forest. I received a mind-link from Amelia letting us know that the other Alphas were headed to the north.

I heard earlier that Beta Avery had already cleared the north, so I wondered why they were headed that way.

I reached out to my mate and daughters to let them know.

Saranya split off to head north directly with Audra and Kendra. Of my daughters, they were the three strongest warriors.

I continued west for a ways with my Luna and two other daughters, Loie and Desta, before hooking around to head north.

We would come at them from two sides. Three Alphas wouldn't be a problem for the seven of us to take out, but it might take some time.

Suddenly, a rotten stench permeated the air. It didn't take long to identify it, either.

Inside the woods to the north were hundreds of undead wandering around seeking meals in the form of flesh.

I mind-linked my family and warriors, letting them know what I was seeing and advising them to use caution.

We were going to have to take the long way around. We couldn't go through them without severe delay, so I shifted course, continuing further west again to try to go around them.

They were denser than I initially thought, and I couldn't see an opening anywhere. What's worse, they were circling in behind us as we ran.

*"Father..."* Desta linked to me as we ran.

*“Rip their heads clean off. Just breaking necks or tearing out the throat won’t do. Heads off is the only way to terminate them,”* I linked to all the girls.

*“Yes, Alpha,”* came the reply.

Here goes nothing, I thought as we could no longer avoid the creatures. I leapt into the fray, clamping my jaws around heads and popping them off their undead bodies.

This slowed our progress by much, but we didn’t have any other choice. It was clear now why the Alphas were running to the north. To put the undead between themselves and the enemy.

Painstakingly, we cleared a path through the trees, felling the rotten army like plucking flowers. My wolf’s mouth flooded with saliva, attempting to wash the foul taste of the putrid flesh from our jaws.

It took more than an hour to finish clearing a path, and we were covered in so much dead flesh that it would be surprising if the Alphas could scent us at this point without assuming we were undead.

The creatures that lined the path we cleared turned to us, following us as we ran, but we did not heed them. I pinned down the scents of Alphas Trent, Fillmore, and Kline. They were familiar to me as I’d met them all previously.

They were a nasty trio who were aging and outliving their place in this world. No longer in their prime, it was clear that they were hoping to avoid personal confrontation while sending their warriors into the fray.

My eyes located them just where my nose said they would be. They were in human form, up on an elevated hill surrounded by a large circle of boulders with a small clearing in the center. Their heads were visible above the boulders.

From that vantage point, they would see anyone coming for them, and the boulders would shield them from any undead activity. It would have been a smart choice if it hadn’t been for my family.

Saranya's wolf, Alessia, made eye contact with mine, and we jumped to the top of the rock formations. Megan and the other girls were circling the outside.

We stood still and silent, looking down at the three Alphas as they shifted, snarled, and growled warnings at us.

If I had been in human form, I would have laughed in their faces. I could smell the fear radiating from them at the sheer size of Saranya and me.

Saranya and I began to creep and leap across the tops of the boulder circle until, finally, jumping down into the clearing before the alpha cowards.

We towered over them, and Kline's wolf hip-checked the other two towards us before leaping up to the tops of the rocks and disappearing over the edge.

When he jumped down the back of the hill, I heard Audra and Kendra growl low before the sounds of ripping flesh reverberated into the night sky.

Trent lowered his head and fell to his belly at my feet, showing me his neck. He was hoping that the submissive stance would save his life, but it would not.

I was aware of the hundreds and hundreds of she-wolves and humans he had tortured and killed in his four decades as alpha, and because of this, his life would end here today.

I walked towards him, clamped my jaws around his bared neck, and bit down, snapping it in two.

While I was ending Trent's life, Fillmore slid his paws back slowly under Saranya's wolf's watchful eye and made a run for it toward the base of the boulders.

Alessia's teeth clamped down on his shoulder in mid-leap, and she twisted her head, throwing him to the ground hard. As he drew in a deep breath to try and get the air back into his lungs, her quick jaws wrapped around his throat, and she yanked her head back, ripping his head from his shoulders.

Alessia huffed into her nose and snorted, clearing the blood from her airways. Then she lifted her face to the sky and howled long and loud. The deep, mournful sound was

one of both victory and sorrow. Her sisters' wolves answered her cry with howls of their own.

I jumped up again to the top of the boulders and scanned the woods around the clearing and noticed the undead had fallen. Whatever magic had breathed life into them was now extinguished.

Three packs had new Alphas that day, and I suspected a fourth would soon follow.

Saranya, Audra, and I mind-linked our new pack members with a clear message, "*Stand down. Go home. Await your new Alpha.*"

All of our minds flooded with responses of, "*Yes, Alpha.*"

I tipped back my head and howled my deep booming howl into the air, which meant, "All is well. Goddess speed, Tristan."

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### Tristan's POV

Something big had just happened. No one told me anything, but I felt it. Gabriel's presence was faint in the pack. He was still there, but it was like he was small and very far away, fading into the distance.

This was what it felt like when a pack member was dying. I knew this from the many members we'd lost in my father's pack while I was growing up.

Onan stopped running and turned his head back, circling towards the house and then towards Alpha Martin, trying to decide.

We had completely passed the armies at battle and were in an empty part of the woods only half a mile from my father's location.

I mind-linked him, "*Gabriel?*"

There was no answer.

I tried again, "*Avery?*"

"*Yes, boss,*" came the instant reply.

"*Have you seen Gabriel?*"

"*He was with the rogues just outside the forest when I got here. I'm in the fight now,*" Avery linked back.

Ok. Next.

"*Jane?*" I linked.

"*Tristan,*" she answered, sounding sleepy even through the link.

"*What's happening? What's wrong?*" I asked, becoming concerned as Onan loped in a circle between the two places I needed to go.

"*Everything is fine, my Alpha. I'm just tired. Need to sleep...Emma. Talk to Emma...*" and her voice faded.

I immediately linked Emma, "*What's happening?*"

"*It's a long story,*" Emma replied, sounding worn out.

“Summarize,” I demanded, my tone imparting more Alpha command than I intended.

*“When Gabriel drained the witch Abigail, she was giving her blood for his power to supply her necromancy and an undead army of hundreds. The High Priestess Esperanza arrived, and she and Amelia, Clovis’s witch, had to act fast to down the undead army. They’ve drained Gabriel of his and Abigail’s blood. His power is gone, but it worked. The army has fallen.”*

“Emma,” I growled.

*“He’s going to be ok, Alpha. He’s just in a coma. Jane’s tired because she had to feed him more than usual. We’re replenishing her blood and feeding her well. She just needs to rest since she’ll be feeding him more often for a while.”*

“She’s pregnant! She can’t do more!” I roared into the link.

“You knew?!” Emma sounded astonished.

*“Of course, I knew! What kind of Alpha can’t scent his own pup growing inside his mate?! I was just waiting for her to tell me,”* I snapped, Onan’s ears twitching in frustration.

Emma was cut off from the mind-link, and a new voice sounded. It was feminine and warm, trilling with an accent, and so calm it bordered on casual.

*“Alpha Tristan, High Priestess Esperanza here. Forgive the intrusion, but I felt you needed some reassurance in order to keep you on task.*

*“I assure you that your pup will be fine. It is because Jane is pregnant that we can save Gabriel. This is a process, and everyone will be a little tired, but your son has a great future ahead and a destiny in this world. He will fulfill it.*

*“Now it’s time to fulfill your destiny and stop Martin. He’s about to become aware of the rogues’ treachery. You don’t have much time left to save those families. Esperanza out.”*

The link went silent again.

Onan stood still, torn between his mate, pup, Gabriel, and the mission. It didn’t take long for me to urge him, “Today, Martin pays for his sins.”

Onan answered back, which was rare for him, “Yes, Alpha.”

He turned back towards my father and took off running again.

I felt touched and humbled by his response.

Alphas and their wolves are complex creatures. We are Alphas because of our wolves because they are Alpha wolves and carry the mantle and power of authority. But we are also the ones who command those wolves, oversee them, and use their power. We keep their baser instincts under control where situations call for more subtlety than wolfing out and ripping a throat apart.

It's a symbiotic relationship but a complex one as well. We are the same being, two sides of a coin, but we can still think independently of one another.

In my case, Onan and I had an entire previous lifetime together, but he had also had an afterlife long before he came to me again. An experience he'd only given me glimpses of until now. He was old and wise and a being in his own right, becoming a willing part of me at my birth.

More than that, he was the reason I was not like my mother and father. Before I even understood it, he was teaching me, raising me, and correcting my course.

He would bleed his emotions into me to teach me right from wrong. When I would bully Jane as children, he would let his disappointment and guilt flow freely through my tiny body until it wasn't worth it to do such a thing anymore. When I made a good choice, his pride wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

This great ancient wolf who had led me to manhood had submitted his instincts to my command with a simple, "Yes, Alpha."

I knew he could feel how touched I was, and he sent me an image of him licking my face, and then his focus returned to the hunt.

I could see him now, my father's wolf. He was standing alone next to a tree, waiting for me.

I was fairly certain he thought I would pause before him, but Onan and I had decided long ago that this wolf, this man, wasn't anything to us.

Right now, he was just the enemy, with hundreds of mates and children held hostage.

Onan growled out his challenge only a split second before we made contact.

My larger body, ramming into his, slammed him against the nearby tree, but he dropped low and slipped away underneath us, grazing my leg with his teeth. He wasn't able to sink them into anything but made a long scratch up the side as he wriggled away.

I could practically taste the fury radiating from him. He always radiated anger when things didn't go as he expected, and I was a much larger wolf than the last time he had seen me. Good. Angry wolves make foolish mistakes.

He circled quickly and tried to latch onto my hindquarters, but Onan kicked out our back paws and clawed him across the face.

While he was reeling from the assault, I whirled around and bit into his belly, ripping it open. It wasn't a large rip; he had pulled away at the last second. I hadn't gotten as big a bite as I'd hoped, but he still had a gaping wound there that was soaking his fur in his blood.

He began to snarl and growl, frothing at the mouth like an angry, out-of-control dog.

He jumped forward, going for my neck, but I lowered my head and lunged at him, head-butting him in the mouth. The pain this caused him made him jerk backward, and I continued aggressively and purposefully.

He backed away as quickly as he dared, and then his nose twitched. He was learning something I didn't want him to know. I took advantage of his distraction before he could link anyone holding the hostages and bit into his neck. He growled and snarled, trying to yank his body away from me, but I clamped my jaws down tighter. He was trapped.



I pressed in, forcing him to lie down at my feet, my mouth still around his neck. When he was on the ground, I tightened my grip to sink my teeth further into his neck before I crunched down completely, snapping his neck in two.

His neck was broken, but he was still breathing, so I took hold of his throat and tore it out. Now, he was dead.

Mind-links flooded my mind, ones that were meant for Alpha Martin. I was the new Alpha of the Moon Blood pack.

*"Your orders regarding the hostages, Alpha?"* I recognized the voice of my father's Beta.

*"Release them,"* I ordered.

There was a pause, and then, *"Tristan?"*

*"That's Alpha to you, Douglas,"* I answered.

*"Releasing the hostages, Alpha,"* he replied.

I linked the entirety of my father's pack, *"Go home. Your new Alpha will meet you there soon."*

A chorus of *"Yes, Alpha"* followed.

Then, another voice full of sorrow and pain permeated my mind, *"Tristan."*

It was my mother.

*"Rest now, mother. I'll be back to sort things out soon."*

There were a few seconds of silence, and then her broken voice replied, *"Yes, Alpha."*

That settled, I turned towards home and ran as fast as Onan's legs could carry me back to my mate.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

### Avery's POV

The battle had been won. Four Alphas were dead, and their packs were transferred to others. All of the enemies on the field that day stood down either because they had new alphas or their Alpha, my father, was MIA.

I'd tracked Alpha MacKenzie's blood from the place where the Entropus family had taken a few bites out of him. I followed it to where he ran, and then the trail simply vanished.

My attempts to contact him at home via phone over the next few days also met with dead ends. According to my mother and his higher-ranking wolves, he hadn't returned from the battle, and they hadn't heard from him since.

My mother said she could still feel him alive through the mate bond, but he wouldn't respond to anyone. The pack was in chaos, and the Beta wasn't able to keep it under control.

Wolves that had been oppressed their whole lives were up and leaving or trying to take control.

I urged my mother to leave there, but she insisted on waiting for her mate. I told her to go to Martin's old pack if she was in danger, that it now belonged to Tristan, and he would offer her sanctuary, but as far as I knew, she hadn't done so yet.

Alpha Clovis, Saranya, and Audra had gone directly from First Montana Pack to the packs of the alphas they had defeated and became their new alphas. They determined to bring the packs into the modern age, abolishing laws and customs that persecuted women and the defenseless. The packs were coached on equal treatment of women, protecting humans, not harming them, and working for pay rather than in servitude.

They were offered the chance to join Divine Moon Pack under Alpha Clovis or to be free to go find another pack. Most of them chose to join Divine Moon, and only a few left to seek other homes.

A handful of those wolves were headed here to Montana to join our pack since they had family that mated into my father's pack years ago and wanted to rejoin them here.

The lands and properties left behind were being auctioned up to other packs via the council. All money received by Divine Moon pack from the sales would be put into trust for the children of the original packs.

Alpha Martin's pack reverted to Tristan after he'd killed his father.

It had taken two weeks for Jane to process all of the blood bags and feed them to Gabriel. Amelia had gone home to Divine Moon, and Gabriel was still in a coma under Emma's watchful eye.

Tristan assigned Jessie, David, and the rest of the brothers to trade shifts, stand guard in the study, and alert security if anyone showed up who shouldn't be there.

Tristan left this morning, taking Jane and the girls to the pack where they grew up to sort things out there. He hoped his mother would return with them, along with the other pack members. They were already automatically integrated into our mind-link once Martin died, but they still had to swear loyalty to Tristan if they were to stay.

The pack Tristan and Jane came from were good people and wolves who were forced to obey Alpha Martin's evil orders. They all knew Tristan, and he was confident they would all submit to him since they had expected him to be their Alpha one day anyway.

I was left in charge at First Montana to keep things running until they returned.

There was just that one little problem I couldn't shake. Where in the world was my father, the former Alpha MacKenzie?

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

### Tristan's POV

I knew Jane had reservations about bringing the girls with us to our childhood pack. She was maltreated there, and her only good memories were of her and me, but even all of those weren't good.

She didn't know what I knew - now that she was Luna, she would be treated with respect and kindness.

They were good people who followed bad leadership to preserve their own lives. Most would decide to do the same in the face of a powerful tyrant if only to keep their families safe.

It was still going to be difficult. We would see people that had mistreated her. I was going to have to face Beta Douglas, who had whipped both Jane and me and helped my father hang me from the gallows.

My mother was another issue. Jane's only memories of her were being ignored for eighteen years and then her overreacting to us being mates and causing a fuss that turned into us being beaten and separated.

I knew my mother hadn't intended any of it when she told my father we were mates. At the time, she believed I would reject her and we could move on. Until that day, she hadn't known the extent of my father's hatred nor my commitment to spending my life with my true mate.

We would also have to deal with my cousin Jessica, who had paid a witch to lock away Jane's wolf.

I had realized the previous night, as we were preparing to leave, that technically, Jane and I weren't fully mated. I had marked her, and she had branded me, but now that she had her wolf, she could mark me as a wolf.

She had wanted to mark me over the brand to hopefully hide it, but I wouldn't let her. I loved carrying her name on my flesh. Instead, she sunk her teeth into the opposite

shoulder, and our night had been full of passion and a renewed closeness, unlike what we had experienced previously, which I hadn't thought possible.

I noticed today that completing the bond was helping her anxiety as we flew closer to the east.

We were on the private plane, and it turned out Crypton was the pilot. We headed towards the place that was no longer home.

It was my hope that the children would tug at my mom's heart and bring her and Jane together. She loved children, and she had wanted me mated as soon as I was eighteen because she wanted grandpups.

Her true objection to Jane wasn't necessarily that she had been a servant in our house. It was that she had no wolf. That presented the possibility that any grandchildren might not have a wolf, as well.

My mother knew better than anyone my father's hatred for those with no wolf, and I knew her objections, though poorly handled and communicated, were based on a fear that her eventual grandchildren would be mistreated.

Jane and I had discussed this all and more as I reassured her that my mother's reactions to her would be different now that my father was gone.

She trusted me, but it was hard for her to imagine.

I'd asked her how she felt about going back to our childhood pack, and she'd expressed anxiety over it. I wasn't surprised to learn that she felt it was her duty to go anyway. She said that she had lingering feelings of anger and resentment but that she didn't want them to overtake her role as Luna. She believed she was to be empathetic and compassionate to all of our pack, even the ones that had made her childhood hell.

While I was proud of her commitment to her duty, I also made it clear that I thought her anger and resentment were valid and justified. I, too, had those feelings when I thought of my parents and the former leadership of that pack.

Together, we determined to do right by the pack anyway. We could choose to be better than they were. We could bring about change by being a good example rather than seeking vengeance.

I watched Jane following Selly, who was opening and picking up everything on the plane that wasn't bolted down.

Amy was sitting in her seat on the plane, looking out of the window with fascination.

Soon, there would be a third pup that belonged to us. A son, the High Priestess had said. Jane hadn't told me yet, and I wondered if she knew it was a boy.

Selly finally came back to her seat and leaned against her window, looking out at the same sky Amy was observing. After a little while, she slumped in her seat, drifting off to sleep to the vibrations of the plane's engines.

Jane tried to walk past me to take her seat, but I pulled her onto my lap instead and held her close. She nuzzled her forehead against my neck and sighed, resting her full weight against me.

I smiled to myself and then placed a hand on her belly. She sat upright and looked into my eyes.

"You knew?" she smiled.

"Silly mate. I could scent him weeks ago," I revealed.

She wrapped her arms around me and laid her head back on my chest. I held her firmly as I stroked her back with one hand. Eventually, her breathing turned deep and even, and I knew she was asleep.

I was glad she was getting some rest.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

### Tristan's POV

We arrived at our childhood pack, and there weren't many people hanging around the pack house. I told the warriors all to go home and wait for me at the pack, but they were clearly in their homes and not here.

Jane and I took the kids up to my bedroom, which seemed to have been cleaned thoroughly since I disappeared that day almost a year ago. It smelled like my mother.

There was a knock on the door, and I answered, "Come in."

The door opened slowly to reveal my mother. She appeared much older than the last time I had seen her. She somehow looked like she had faded. All of the vibrancy and pride she carried previously was gone.

"Tristan," she started, but her voice cracked, and tears fell down her cheeks.

Jane was closer to the door and rushed over to wrap her arms around my mother in an act of kindness so generous that my mother clung to her, and she began to sob in earnest.

I walked over to them and wrapped my arms around them both. Soon after, Selly was trying to wrap her arms around our legs, and Amy was gripping the edge of my T-shirt.

I started to laugh, and Jane looked up at me with a smile.

My mother sniffled and pulled away, looking at Jane with guilt clear on her face, "Jane, I..."

Jane held her hand in both of her own and said, "Shhhh. It's forgotten.

"Now! I'd like you to meet your two granddaughters. This is Amy, and this is Selly."

"Girls, come meet your grandmother," I said to them.

My mother's eyes widened, and she looked at both of us in surprise as the girls stepped closer.

"Hello, I'm Amy," she said from a bit of a distance.

Selly walked right up to her and said, "Hello, Grandmother. It's nice to meet you. I'm Selly, and I'm four years old, but I'm almost five years old. My birthday is next month. Will you come to my birthday?"

My mother crouched down on a level with Selly and said, "My, what a friendly pup you are. I would love to come to your birthday."

She looked over at Amy and said, "It's nice to meet you, Amy. How old are you, dear?"

"I'm six," Amy said simply. She wasn't as talkative with people she didn't know well and liked to say less and observe more.

"Let me show you ladies and your father to your rooms," my mom said as she stood up.

It suddenly made sense why my former room smelled like her. She had been living in it.

"You switched the rooms around, Mom?" I asked.

"You two are the Alpha and Luna now. You will use the Alpha's quarters. I'd been living in your old room since you left, anyway. I didn't move just because you said you were coming," she explained.

She must have been really angry with my father to have moved out of their rooms when I left. That somehow gave me a little bit of satisfaction that he had suffered a bit from his actions. Other than the me killing him part, that is.

We arrived at the double doors at the end of the hall, and my mother opened them and then stood to the side for us to enter.

I hadn't been in here since I was a child. The rooms had been cleaned and freshened. The only scent that lingered was my mother's. She must have made it ready herself.

The doors opened into a little entryway that my father had used to strip off muddy or bloody clothes before taking the door to the right, which was the bathroom.



There was a large shower big enough for four people and a giant bathtub I used to imagine swimming in when I was a pup.

Past the bathroom door was a sitting area with a fireplace and two comfortable armchairs nearby. The other shelves were lined with bookcases full of novels and history books. My mom was an avid reader, and my parents had spent occasional evenings here when there was nothing pressing in the pack.

Through the sitting area, a single door led to the bedroom. It was huge, with a larger-than-king-sized custom four-poster bed. It had clearly been fitted with a brand-new mattress and linens.

There was a walk-in closet to the right that also connected with the bathroom behind the sitting area.

A prominent window to the left had a window seat beneath it, and the curtains were open, allowing sunlight to flood the room.

On one side of the window was another single door that led to another bedroom, which had been the Luna's room way back when packs tried to emulate Europe's lavish aristocracy where the lord and lady of the house kept separate beds. To my knowledge, my parents had never used it.

My mom walked over to the door and opened it.

"I did clean this room and dressed the bed although I didn't think Jane would want to use it. I'm happy I did since it will make a good space for the girls to sleep."

"Thank you, Mom," I said.

"What would you all like for dinner?" she asked.

"Not everyone eats at the pack house anymore. They got out of the habit, trying to avoid your dad and his bad temper," she frowned.

"That explains why there aren't as many people around," I replied.

"What do you usually have for dinner, Luna?" Jane asked her.

She waved her hands in front of herself, “You’re the Luna now, Jane. Just call me Beverly... or Mom, if you’d like to.”

“Ok, Mom, what do you usually have for dinner?” Jane repeated her question.

I smiled with pride at my Jane. I never expected her to forgive my mother. Or be anything more than tolerant of her presence while we sorted out the business of these pack lands.

She was extending not only forgiveness but also an invitation to be a part of our family. That was something even I couldn’t do. It had to come from Jane, but I never hoped or even imagined it would occur.

The girls were getting bored standing there listening to the adults, so I took their hands and led them into the Luna’s bedroom through the door.

There was a queen-sized four-poster bed that was a smaller version of the one in the main bedroom. A large window here faced the same direction as the one in the Alpha’s room, and bookcases full of books lined the back wall. There was also another walk-in closet that connected with the Alpha’s closet and through to the bathroom.

The girls ran over to the bed and pulled themselves up. Amy stretched out her feet with her hands behind her head, and Selly began jumping on the bed, making her sister bounce slightly where she lay.

I smiled down at them and then let out the playful growl I give when we play Daddy’s-gonna-get-you’. The girls both squealed, jumped off the bed, started laughing, and ran about looking for places to hide.

Amy discovered the walk-in closet and grabbed Selly’s hand. They took off through the closet back into the Alpha’s room for a quick escape.

I gave them a ten-second head start and followed them through the closet, popping my head out on the alpha’s side just as they ran out of the suite’s doors and into the hallway.

Jane and my mother were still discussing menus and how many people usually came to the main house for dinner.

I stalked the girls out of the door and down the hallway. I could scent that they had gone left where two hallways intersected, and so I took the left corridor and stopped in my tracks.

The girls stood in the middle of the hallway, looking up at my cousin, Jessica, who sneered at them as if they were a couple of filthy insects.

I guess she wasn't one of the ones who had moved out of the pack house, unfortunately.

I walked up to the girls, crouched down next to them, and said, "Let's play later. Why don't you run back to Mommy and Grandmother for now, ok? Maybe you can get them to make you some cake with dinner."

Selly's eyes lit up, and she started tugging on Amy's hand to go back the way they had come, "It has to be chocolate cake, Amy! Hurry, we have to tell them!"

Amy followed Selly but watched us with a frown until they turned the corner back towards our rooms.

I stood up and looked down at Jessica. I had always been taller than her, but now I towered over her since I bore the Alpha Mantle.

The sour look changed to a fake smile as she whined out, "It's good to see you, cousin. We missed you so much."

"Cut the bullshit, Jessica," I replied.

Her eyes widened, and she replied, "What's the matter, Tristan? I haven't seen you in almost a year, and I don't think I've done anything to warrant such a hostile greeting."

"Oh, haven't you?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

She began to look nervous and shuffled her feet.

"I suggest you pack your bags and find somewhere else to live. I'm not kicking you out of the pack yet. That will be up to Jane to decide. But you can't stay at the pack house anymore," I said in a stern tone.

Jessica squeezed a few fake tears out of her eyes and squealed, "What have I done to offend you? Surely, my

stepdaughter wouldn't want her own mother to be homeless. I've hardly been in the same room with her since she was a child!"

"Your *Luna* knows about the witch and how you had her wolf locked away. Guess what, Jessica? The wolf is back," I finished with a humorless grin.

Her eyes went wide with shock, and she hunched her shoulders for a moment before turning and rushing back to her bedroom to pack her bags.

"Be gone before dinner," I growled after her.

I went downstairs to my father's old study. His scent lingered there. I stood there for a moment, processing all the emotions his scent and his old domain brought up inside me. Mostly, it was anger mixed with the relief that he would never be able to poison our lives again. But beneath that was a more simplistic sadness. Feelings from the child somewhere deep inside me who had grown up not hating his father and now grieved his loss.

No one had touched it since he'd left, and it was starting to gather dust.

Papers were strewn over the desk, and filing cabinets were bursting with documents. In life, my father had never been particularly tidy, and he'd never let anyone else handle his papers.

I knew there was also a safe behind the large portrait of my father and mother that hung on the wall above the desk. My father had given me the combination on my eighteenth birthday. I wondered if it was still the same.

I walked around the desk, sat in the oversized, worn leather chair, and looked at the papers lying across its surface.

There were invoices for kitchen supplies and letters from other packs.

I picked one up and read the letter. Then, I picked up another and another. These were between my father, MacKenzie, and the other three alphas that had invaded my

pack territory. He hadn't even bothered to hide them. The hubris of that old dog was astounding.

I gathered all of the ones between the five alphas and made a pile. I would read through them in detail later and see if there were any clues as to where MacKenzie might have gone.

For now, I sorted through the other piles of paper on the desk and found several unpaid and late invoices for supplies to the pack.

Curiously, I flipped on my father's laptop and waited for it to boot. When the password screen came up, I entered the password my father had always used for everything, and it still worked.

Opening the web browser, I typed in the name of the pack's bank and logged into the accounts using the same login and password my father used for his laptop. It also worked there.

There were seven accounts under this login, and six of them were in the red, overdrawn, and collecting thousands of dollars in fees.

The seventh account had over a million dollars in it, and when I clicked on it, I could see that it was my mother's trust account. Her father had given it to her when she married my father, and it hadn't been touched.

Clicking on that account, I could see that while this login had access to view the account, there wasn't anything that could be done with it. All the action buttons, like "transfer funds" and "order checks," were grayed out and unavailable.

I was sure that if they had been available, this account would also be in the red.

I clicked on the overdrawn accounts and viewed the transactions. Several relatively large amounts had been paid out every year to the council. Packs weren't required to pay this much for council membership or maintenance. This amount was more than one hundred times what was required.

Why did my father pay so much to the council? Were they bribes? I now knew that the way my father and MacKenzie ran their packs was outside of the guidelines the council had set for acceptable pack operations. Were they able to do this because they'd bribed the council?

It wasn't just the pack council, either. He was also paying hefty amounts to the vampire council.

What was my father's neck deep in? I suddenly felt like I'd just stepped into a whole lot of dog shit.

I wished Gabriel was awake so I could talk to him about this.

There was a knock on the door, and I sighed heavily. It was former Beta Edward Douglas.

"Come in," I called.

He stepped into the room, closed the door behind him, and then got on his knees on the floor with his head down.

"Douglas," I said.

"Yes, Alpha," he replied, his head still bowed.

"Why was my father bribing the councils?"

He was startled into looking up at my face. He didn't know about this.

"You didn't know?"

"No, Alpha," he looked back down at the floor.

"What do you know?" I asked.

"Not much. Your father sent me off for six months, capturing rogues and their families. He built a prison camp for the families, and I was in charge of that. The rogues were brought here for training."

"Where is this prison camp?" I asked.

"In the mountains of Arizona," he replied.

"The pack council is in Arizona. Did you see the council while you were there?"

"Yes, Alpha," he answered.

"Douglas, don't make me ask specific questions. Tell me what you know," I warned.

"Three members of the pack council were in charge of inspecting the prison camp. Alpha Martin paid for the camp

and was allowed to use it to house the rogues' families. Once we were...done with it...it was going to belong to the council."

"So, you're saying my father spent every dime and then some of this pack's money to build a prison camp with the council so that he could hold rogue families hostage? Then he forced the rogues to go into battle against their will to enact his revenge against me?" I summarized.

"Yes, Alpha," he answered honestly.

I thought for a moment. Douglas had released the hostages upon my orders, and shortly after, the rogues had left my pack territory and disappeared.

I knew now that many of those rogues had been unjustifiably exiled from my father's and MacKenzie's packs. They shouldn't even be rogues in the first place.

"Douglas," I said quietly, "get up."

He stood up but kept his eyes on the floor.

"You are no longer Beta of this pack. The Beta of my pack is Avery MacKenzie. That being said, you need to inform everyone to be at the training arena tonight at 8 pm after dinner. Everyone. I want every single pack member in attendance. Clear?" I said.

"Yes, Alpha," he said.

"You're dismissed," I said, and he left quietly.

Jane and I needed to make some decisions. This pack was without funds and was, therefore, dead. I would put the territory up for auction with the council to pay off the debts accumulated at the bank.

It was the corruption of the councils that gave me pause. This would need to be handled carefully. I had more than enough proof in my father's office to make accusations and bring them to trial, but it wouldn't be an entirely safe endeavor.

The only other thing to do immediately was to decide who would come with us to Montana and who would be cut loose. I didn't relish the idea of roguing any of the pack, but it may come to that in the end.

It was going to be a long few days. I looked forward to getting back home as soon as possible.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

### Jane's POV

That night, Tristan, his mother, the girls, and I had a quiet dinner together in the pack's smaller family dining room. The cook, Connie, and the housekeeper, Liza, served us and kept glancing over at me nervously.

They were the ones I had worked under during my time as a servant here, and I'm sure they were wondering what was going to happen to them.

They hadn't really treated me that badly, just the occasional smack on the back of my head when I got something wrong as a child. This was a pretty common way in any pack to correct pups. It wasn't the modern way, but in their generation, it was common everywhere.

When the cook set down the third plate in front of me, and it rattled down because she was shaking so badly, I took her hand in mine and looked up at her.

"Connie, calm down. I'm not angry with you, ok?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, and her face scrunched up as she started to cry, "Luna, I'm just that sorry! You were such a sweet and good little child, and we didn't show you any affection. You were just a poor, lonely orphan with that nasty Jessica for a stepmother. We should have done better."

Liza had come to her side during her tearful speech and said, "She's right, Luna. We could have been more compassionate and not so harsh. We both regret it and have ever since the day *he* threw you out in the cold. Connie cried all night when they did it. She thought you had died and we'd given you such a miserable childhood. She prayed to the goddess every night that by some miracle you survived."

"Then your prayers were answered," Tristan said cheerfully.

“Let’s not think of it anymore. All is well, and no one is upset with you,” I finished.

“Thank you, Luna. You’re just as lovely and kind as ever you were. Goddess bless you, Luna!” Connie blubbered.

Liza turned to Connie, “You just go wash your hands and face now. I’ll finish service.”

Connie left the room, wiping her tear-stained face on her apron and crying some more.

Tristan reached out, put his hand over mine, and smiled at me. His pride was evident on his face.

Selly piped up, “Mommy, why was that old lady crying so much?”

I paused, considering how I should explain it to my four-year-old.

Beverly answered her, “When your mommy was a little girl here in this pack, she was an orphan and had no wolf. Some of us weren’t very nice to her. But your mommy is a kind and strong person who is better than us. She knows how to forgive and show kindness. We can learn a lot from her.”

“We were orphans, too. Now we’re the daughters of the Alpha and Luna,” Amy said. “You should never be unkind. You don’t know where someone will end up.”

Beverly turned to her, “You’re a very smart pup, Amy. I wish more adults could think like you.”

I cleared my throat and wiped my mouth with my napkin. Tristan and I had discussed telling his mom and the girls at dinner, so I decided this was a good time.

“Daddy and I have something to tell you and Grandmother,” I began.

Tristan’s eyes twinkled with delight.

“What is it, mommy?” Selly asked.

Amy tensed, and her big eyes focused intently on me.

“Mommy has a little pup growing in her belly. I’m pregnant!”

Selly hopped up from her chair and ran over to me, jumping up and down, “I’m going to be a big sister!”

Beverly's face lit up with happiness for the first time since we'd arrived.

Amy, on the other hand, did not seem pleased. She sat quietly, staring down at her plate, and stabbing her chicken with her fork.

Tristan and I exchanged glances, and he got up and walked over to Amy, picked her up, and then sat back down with her on his lap.

"What's wrong, munchkin?" he asked.

"Congratulations, Daddy," she said flatly.

"Thanks, kiddo. Congratulations to you, too. You're going to have a little brother," he replied.

She nodded but said nothing.

I pushed my chair back from the table and said, "Amy, come here."

She came over to me and stood there, looking down at the floor.

"Would you like to listen to the pup?" I asked.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Remember what I told you when you joined our family?" I reminded her.

She looked up at me then, "You said that I'm your first-born child and would always be the first one to make you a mommy. But I'm not your firstborn; he is," she said and pointed to my stomach.

I took Amy in my arms and pulled her onto my lap.

"Baby, you are my firstborn. You're the eldest of all of our children and the first one we adopted. I became a mommy because of you first. That is never going to change. I wasn't a mommy before you came into our family, and then you came, and I was. You made me a mommy. That's special to me, and you will be special to me forever."

She relaxed a little in my arms and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Congratulations, Mommy," she said softly.

Selly had been quietly waiting for us to talk it out, and then she smiled, “And congratulations to me! I’ve never been a big sister before, but now I am!”

Tristan picked her up and said, “Congratulations to you, big sister!”

“I even bought some special shirts to celebrate our growing family,” I grinned.

Amy sat up and said, “Can I see?”

“You absolutely can see. We’ll be having dessert later with the pack, so we can go up now and take a look,” I said.

We all traipsed up to the Alpha’s quarters, and I unzipped my bag, which was sitting on the bench at the end of our bed.

I reached in and pulled out a stack of charcoal black T-shirts with white lettering on them. It was kind of cringe, and I hoped Tristan wouldn’t refuse to wear his, but I thought they were cute.

I handed Tristan his first, and he held it up. In the white block lettering, it read “Alpha Daddy.” He grinned at me, stripped off his plain T-shirt, and pulled the new shirt over his head.

He looked sexy as hell, standing there in jeans and the tight black shirt that showed every single ripple of his arm, shoulders, chest, and ab muscles. Thank the goddess for this fabric.

I felt a little warmth in my center, gazing at how sexy he looked wearing that silly T-shirt with a proud smile on his face.

I pulled out the next one and tossed it to Beverly, who had followed us in and not expected it. Her wolf reflexes kicked in, and she grabbed the shirt just before it fell to the floor.

She turned the shirt around and held it up to her chest with a big smile. It read “Grandma Wolf.”

Selly was jumping up and down, demanding Amy read her the shirts, which she did.

I handed Amy hers next. She held it up to read it out loud to Selly, “It says ‘Alpha’s Little Genius.’”

She grinned up at me and said, “Thanks, Mommy.”

Selly was reaching out her hands to me, flexing her fingers over and over in a gimme motion.

I handed her the little shirt, which she immediately put on over her dress and said, “Read it! Read it!”

Amy giggled and said, “It says ‘Alpha’s Little Princess.’”

Selly’s eyes went wide as she stroked the white letters and nodded, “Yes, that’s good.”

I finally pulled the last shirt out of the bag and put it on over my sundress. Over my chest, it said, “Luna Mommy.” And over my belly, it said in smaller letters, “Alpha’s Little Warrior.”

Tristan laughed, and Beverly came over to give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, saying, “Congratulations, dear.”

I hugged her back, and Tristan and the girls piled into another group hug.

I could get used to this family tradition.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

### Jane's POV

About a half hour after we had all changed into our jeans and family T-shirts, including Beverly, we took a walk out to the training arena that was a half mile from the pack house.

The girls needed to burn some energy, and this would be our first meeting with the whole pack as Alpha and Luna.

Tristan warned me that we needed to make some decisions regarding moving these wolves to the Montana pack. A lot of them would have to stay in the main house with us and at the ranch-hand cabins until more housing could be built.

We decided to build a second apartment building with the same plans as the first so that we could quickly add more housing until more single-family homes could be finished.

That building had been underway when we departed for our trip here, but it would still be three months before it was completed.

We stepped into the arena, which was lit up in the field. Hundreds of pack members, including men, women, and children, were in the stands.

Douglas came running up to us as we entered the arena and said something to Tristan, who leaned over to Beverly and said, "Sit there on the front row with the girls."

She sat in the space reserved for them, and Tristan took my hand as we walked out to the center of the training arena.

Tristan called out in his rich, booming voice. He didn't have to talk very loudly; this was an arena full of wolves, but his voice exuded authority.

"Two weeks ago, I challenged my father, Alpha Martin, when he invaded my territory in Montana with the intent to kill me and my pack. I won the challenge. I am here to receive your allegiance or your challenge. Choose now."

There was a murmur around the crowd, but it didn't get very loud. No one came forward with a challenge, and Tristan nodded.

"You can make your pledges tonight at the pack house. If you wish to offer neither pledge nor challenge, you may pack up your belongings and leave to find a new home first thing in the morning."

"If you choose this option, you will notify First Montana Pack when you have chosen a new pack and a proper transfer will be made. Only those who have broken the law will be rogued from this pack."

He paused again to allow everyone to consider his words.

Then Tristan held my hand up in the air for a moment and said, "This is Jane Marie Martin. Many of you remember her as an orphan servant in this pack house who was exiled from the pack. Jane is my true mate and my Luna.

"Some of you might remember that you were unkind to her. If you have such a memory, you need to come down to the field and line up to speak your apologies. Be specific. I don't want any generic sorries.

"I think you will find that your Luna is a kind and forgiving woman. It is not she that has asked for this. It is I who am requiring this of all of you.

"If your apology does not satisfy me or if she does not forgive you, you will be exiled. Abusing innocent pack members who have done nothing wrong is against pack council law, and there will be no exceptions. You are at Luna Jane's mercy."

There were gasps everywhere in the crowd, and slowly, people got up from their seats and made their way down to the field to line up before me.

I was a little overwhelmed by the length of the line, but I recognized all the faces, and the memories flooded my head.

I looked over at Tristan. He stood near me, off to the side, with a steady expression on his face. He locked eyes

with me, and I suddenly realized Tristan wasn't doing this to punish them or to stroke my ego. He was doing this to give the pack a fresh start and to show them what we were made of. This would not be like his father's pack.

I understood him. After Connie's reaction at dinner, I believed he was making a good decision for the pack. It just so happened that it was also good for me.

This gave me a chance to heal and them an opportunity to alleviate their guilt. Then, we could all move forward together in Montana as a united and free pack.

I stood there for two hours listening to apologies and forgiving people who had bullied me and spoken ill of me to my face. There were even a few people who had done things I never realized, and their apologies were honest and sincere. With each person I forgave, I felt lighter somehow and ready and willing to welcome them into our pack family.

At the end of the line was Jessica. She looked nervous and uncertain, but she came forward and knelt at my feet.

"Luna, I'd like to apologize to you for everything," she said.

"What is 'everything'?" Tristan demanded harshly.

"F-f-for treating you badly when I became your dad's mate. For making you hide from me as a child because of my temper. For being a bad stepmother," she stopped again.

Tristan glared down at her, "And?!"

"I'm sorry for paying a witch to lock up your wolf and making my uncle think you were human so he would make you a servant," she finished.

There were gasps all around the arena. People hadn't realized that I wasn't just a woman without a wolf. It wasn't surprising they hadn't noticed since, to them, I would primarily smell like their Alpha. He had long since marked me, and my scent had changed accordingly.

Immediately, people began to look at her with scorn and hate. This was a serious crime and offense in our world. To restrain someone's wolf, a child's wolf, who had done nothing wrong would be equivalent to cutting off



someone's arm or leg just because. It was a high crime and cruel in the extreme.

In that moment, I knew that it didn't matter if I forgave her or not; the pack wasn't ever going to accept her again. They would only consider her a danger to others after what she had done.

I thought carefully for a moment, and our pack fell silent as I began to speak: "Jessica, you were a terrible mate to my father and a worse stepmother to me. What you did was a serious crime. I am thankful to the vampire Gabriel, who was able to remove your witch's curse and set my wolf free. It is because I have been restored and because I wish to never think of you again I am choosing to forgive you."

People gasped in astonishment. They had not expected me to be so lenient. But I wasn't finished.

"However, you can't be trusted to be loyal to this pack. We also can't be sure that you won't be a continued danger to me or others. Because of this, I have no choice but to think of the pack's safety. You will be exiled. I'll give you tonight to leave the territory. You will be severed from the pack at first light."

Jessica fell into the dirt of the arena floor and began to sob. I turned on my heel and marched out of the arena, never to think of her again.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

### Jane's POV

A few days later, Tristan and I returned home to First Montana Pack with our children. Beverly stayed behind to pack up all the things in the house she wished to keep. Not long after, she relocated to Montana with a moving truck full of boxes.

Most of the pack chose to stay with Tristan and me and moved to Montana, too. A few others scattered to other packs where they had family.

The old pack lands had been sold, and this chapter of our lives was closed, but our work was far from over.

Tristan and I would be making a trip to meet with the highest wolf authorities in the world: the Royal High Council of Wolves, aka the Wolf Council, and the King.

We were scheduled to present our evidence regarding the transgressions of the five dead alphas and the conspiracy with several of the wolf council members.

Since the dead alphas had already been taken care of, this trial would focus on the corruption of the American Wolf Council and the lives they had cost the Western Hemisphere.

The allegations were numerous: corruption, bribery, inciting war, and interfering in true-mate bonding. Though some of these crimes were Martin's and MacKenzie's, the council was aware of what was happening and, in doing nothing, became accomplices to the crimes.

Alpha Clovis and his family would meet us in the royal city and stand witness to the allegations during the trial against our council. We were so thankful for their support and alliance and would never forget, despite their protests, how much we owed them.

One of our concerns regarding the proceedings was an allegation against Tristan and me for which we would face

trial. The Vampire World Council had noticed Gabriel's absence. His duties for and communications with the council had ceased.

They had decided to make the journey to the wolf royal city in order to accuse us of killing him. There would be a trial, and our legal counsel strongly advised us to produce Gabriel.

This was something we were unwilling to do as he was still unconscious and unable to awaken, which left him defenseless. Transporting him to the wolf council would give any number of his enemies a chance to sever his head and, therefore, end him.

Onan had explained to Tristan that even several of the Vampire Council members wished him dead, and this was likely a plot to take advantage of his unconscious state.

We had to choose a different route that involved producing witnesses to his continued existence without revealing his location, and it would be no easy task. Several demands would be made to reveal his whereabouts, and we would likely be held in contempt of court when we refused to comply.

In light of these circumstances, Wolfgang revealed that there was a secure bunker somewhere in the vast acreage of our ranch that would be invisible to all and impenetrable by anyone. Emma took Gabriel there and stayed with him to ensure his safety and keep us updated through the pack mind-link regarding his recovery.

They were under orders by their Alpha not to leave the bunker for any reason until Tristan himself arrived home and called the all-clear or Gabriel himself awakened.

When I expressed concern to Wolfgang regarding the accommodations, he explained that the "bunker" was more of an underground house that had fully functioning electricity, plumbing, etc., that was invisible as all the lines and even the door had been buried well beneath the ground.

He promised to stock it full of everything Emma and Gabriel would need for several months, even though it was unlikely they would be sequestered there for that long.

My mind was eased a bit, but I was still worried about all of the upcoming trials besides the fact that I had never before met the King.

King Avalore was a lycan wolf over four hundred years old and was on his second chance mate, which was rare for a lycan. Most lycans died when their mate died, but sometimes, rarely, the goddess saw fit to spare them and bless them with a second mate bond. The King and his current mate, Queen Alexandra, had ruled together for nearly three hundred years and had seven children, each of whom was more than 100 years old.

Alpha Clovis Entropus and his family were close friends of the King, and Clovis tried to reassure me many times that Tristan and I would have his support during the trials.

Tristan spoke to the King over the phone, and during the call, the King confirmed this sentiment with Tristan directly while officially inviting us to stay at the palace during the proceedings.

We accepted the invitation, but I was nervous to do so, not having been raised in conditions that taught me formal royal etiquette. Tristan explained that only very minor etiquette was required as we were all wolves, and the most crucial thing about wolves was hierarchy. No one cared if you ate with your fingers or your fork.

My wolf Kasia tried to soothe and comfort me and promised she would be present near the surface to offer me kind advice and reach out to the other wolves for information. It did make me feel a little better to know that she and Onan would always be near to support us.

I'd done all the reading I could about the Royal City and its rulers up until today. In the morning, we would depart on our private plane and begin the journey to Russia.

We traveled only with Crypton as our pilot, our team of attorneys, and a small squad of pack warriors as bodyguards.

Alpha Clovis recommended this because many people believed we knew where Gabriel was and would happily stoop to nefarious means to find out.

The children were staying with Beverly on the ranch since we weren't sure what we'd be facing once we arrived.

We would stop over once on the way to fuel and continue.

That night, I curled up against Tristan as closely as I could and allowed him to wrap himself around me. His presence soothed me into a peaceful slumber.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

### Jane's POV

After two days of flying, Tristan, myself, and our team of bodyguards and attorneys finally touched down on the runway of the royal airfield two hours outside of St. Petersburg in Russia. It appeared that we were landing on a large airstrip in the middle of nowhere between several hangars surrounded by forests.

Disembarking our private plane, we were met with several large black SUVs with royal emblems that would ferry us to the royal palace. Said palace was supposed to be a mere fifteen minutes away from the airfield, but as I searched the hills behind the forests, I couldn't make out any buildings of any kind amongst the landscape.

Our luggage was loaded into the cars. Tristan and I took up the backseat of the first SUV in the line of vehicles and settled back in the comfortable leather. Tristan rested his hand on my thigh and squeezed gently, smiling down at me encouragingly.

I smiled back up at him and placed my hand over his. He flipped his hand to lace our fingers together.

Turning to look out of the windows as we drove, I could see nothing but road, hills, and trees. I was curious as to when the palace would appear and kept pondering this mystery until, at once, a blue shimmer passed through the car. I recognized this energy as a magic barrier similar to the one the witch Amelia had placed around our home during the war.

The SUVs passed through the shield without incident, and we were suddenly on a considerable road driving through a bustling city. In the distance, I could make out the faint outline of an enormous palace up on a hill through the trees. A gentle fog settled over the palace towers even as the sun shone behind it.

As our motorcade made its way through the city, other cars in the streets pulled over to the side of the road to allow us to pass without interference.

“The royal vehicles always have the right of way, regardless of who they are carrying,” Tristan explained.

I had so many questions but decided to ask the one to which Tristan was most likely to know the answer.

“Does the barrier make the royal city invisible to the outside world?” I wondered.

Instead, the driver answered in a light Russian accent, “Yes, the city can only be seen by those who know where and what it is. The royal vehicles have free pass through the barrier, but any other persons or vehicles must stop outside of the barrier to gain clearance.”

It seemed we were receiving the VIP treatment, but I wouldn’t complain. It made me feel a bit better about being somewhere we were obviously welcome.

A few minutes later, we were passing through an open ornate gate and winding up a long drive. We came to a stop under an elaborate portico that led to the entrance of the palace. Men in navy and gold uniforms were standing near the columns that supported the portico’s roof. They stepped forward to open the vehicle doors so we could exit.

Tristan walked around the rear of the vehicle to my side and reached out his hand to help me step down from the high carriage of the SUV. He squeezed my hand firmly and smiled at me one last time before he led me through the open doors of the palace.

The warmth of his hand around mine gave me a measure of calm, and I was glad for his support.

We entered a grand foyer that seemed entirely constructed of gold and was the size of a small ballroom. A formally dressed gentleman wolf bowed his head before greeting us in perfect English, “Alpha Tristan Martin, Luna Jane Martin, welcome to the Royal Palace. Their Majesties are waiting to greet you in the throne room. Please follow me.”

Tristan mind-linked me, “*He’s the butler.*” And then out loud said, “Thank you, Mr. Madison. It’s nice to see you again.”

Mr. Madison turned his head to the side as we followed him out of the foyer and down a marble hallway that was just as grand. He replied, “Likewise, Alpha Tristan. It is a privilege to host your stay in the capital.”

Every wall was covered in ornate designs, and every ceiling was molded with gold.

We reached an ostentatious set of double doors that were bright white with deep gold carvings decorating the surface of the wood. I suddenly felt as if I were in a fairytale castle. The large handles on the enormous doors seemed to be made of solid gold and still shone brightly after probably decades, if not centuries, of daily use.

Two guards stood outside of the doors and stepped forward to swing the throne room doors inward and held them for us to pass through.

Mr. Madison proceeded us into the room and then paused just inside, calling out in a firm but not overly loud voice, “Alpha Tristan Martin and Luna Jane Martin of First Montana Pack.”

When he finished his announcement, he sidestepped and turned to bow to us. Tristan passed him, my hand in his, and led me to approach the two thrones, which were only raised from the main floor by one large 18-inch step onto the dais. As lycans were often taller than wolves, they didn’t need to be raised much in order to see out over a crowd.

I kept my eyes lowered to the floor as we approached, and Tristan brought me to a stop several feet away from the platform. I could sense his head was also bowed, and he remained silent, waiting respectfully.

A deep, warm, and friendly voice greeted us, “At ease, Alpha, Luna. Welcome to my home.”

Tristan raised his head, and I ventured to do the same.

I brought my gaze up to scan the King and Queen seated on their thrones, careful not to make eye contact.



They were large and beautiful creatures, both well over six feet tall. Everything said about lycans must be true. They appeared youthful well into their fourth and fifth centuries and had flawless skin and shining hair in their human forms. Their royal highnesses appeared to be in their mid-forties, even though they were both over four hundred years old.

I carefully took in the fine details of their courtly clothing and fit physiques and was glad I had worn a lovely dress to our first meeting.

“We are grateful for your kind invitation, Your Majesty,” Tristan replied with a smile.

King Avalore stood and took the hand of his Queen, and together, they stepped down from the platform to come down and greet us.

As Tristan and King Avalore shook hands, the Queen stepped closer, placed a manicured finger under my chin, and raised my face to hers. I might have been terrified, except that I felt nothing but warmth and good intentions radiating from her mind.

“Jane, you are free to look me in the eye and call me Alexandra. I have been eager to see you for many months,” her rich, friendly voice carried her sincerity.

I met her eyes and smiled shyly as I admired the blazing green of her irises and her long, black lashes.

“You wanted to see me, your Highness?” I asked quietly.

She frowned at me, and I corrected myself, “Excuse me, I meant Alexandra.”

She smiled at me and then probed further, “Does Kasia have anything to say, my dear?”

Kasia giggled into my mind and then unlocked a memory centering around those unforgettable green eyes.

My own brown eyes widened in surprise, and then a joyous smile broke out on my face.

I met Alexandra’s eyes again as full understanding dawned on me, “You are much older than your rumored four hundred years...Aunt Alex.”

Alexandra pulled me into a firm but gentle hug and sighed happily, “Let’s just keep that little piece of information between the four of us, shall we?”

I smiled into her shoulder and returned the hug until she released me and stepped back again.

Tristan grinned down at me and teased, “Kasia is quite good at keeping secrets, isn’t she?”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” I replied seriously.

King Avalore chuckled and gestured towards the door, “Please allow us to show you to your rooms. I’m sure you’re both tired after your long journey and would like to get settled in.”

Tristan bowed his head to the King, and the two of them led the way out of the throne room and down the hall.

Alexandra and I followed behind, chatting happily. She asked me about First Montana Pack and wanted to know about how it was growing and what we had built. She seemed genuinely interested in all the fine details and asked intelligent and probing questions.

I found myself enjoying the conversation immensely as we walked through the enormous palace and down several hallways until we reached another grand set of doors.

The King produced a key card from his pocket and handed it to Tristan, “Your luggage will have already been placed in your suite. Please rest as long as you would like and join us tomorrow evening in our apartment for a quiet dinner.”

“I look forward to that,” Tristan replied with another bow of his head.

The Queen smiled at both of us and then looked me in the eyes again, “Rest well, my dear. We can continue our conversation tomorrow evening.”

“I can’t wait,” I replied, returning the smile.

They turned and walked away, hand in hand, down the long, bright hallway, chatting pleasantly with one another.

I watched them for a few moments until I heard Tristan slide the key card in the door. It beeped and clicked open, granting us entrance to our temporary home.

We stepped inside a small entryway that opened up into a large suite. A living room with big, bright windows looked out into the forest. To the right was a small hallway leading to a fairly large guest bedroom with a king-sized bed. Attached to that was an enormous bathroom, the likes of which I'd never seen in my life.

The golden theme carried into the guest quarters and accented all the trims and fixtures in the place.

To the left of the entry was a lovely medium-sized kitchen open to a living space. It had a long island with eight comfortably plush bar stools with high backs. Everything was on a larger scale than usual, to the point that I felt a bit like a child next to the high kitchen countertops and twenty-foot ceilings.

"Everything is lycan-sized," I laughed.

"I kind of like this. I don't have to bend over to use the countertops. Maybe I should get our kitchen remodeled like this in our apartment back home," he teased.

"Don't even joke about it. I'd need a step ladder just to make a snack," I laughed.

Tristan helped me up onto one of the tall bar stools, and I laughed again. It was pretty comfortable, and I didn't mind Tristan lifting me up anytime, anyplace. Maybe I would consider a remodel if he was going to help me up onto the stools every time.

He got me a bottle of water from the fridge and opened it before passing it to me.

I greedily drank the cool, refreshing water. I didn't realize how thirsty I had become, but he must have felt it.

After I finished drinking, he asked, "Do you want to talk about your link to the Queen?"

I smiled softly, reveling in the new memories Kasia had given me access to.

“There isn’t much to it. She’s Gwendolyn’s and, therefore, my aunt. Onan never knew her because she disappeared a year before he and Kasia met. But I’m surprised that Gabriel didn’t mention it.

“He once told me that of his two daughters, one was my mother, and the other stayed single her entire life and pursued studies until the end. But that daughter was Alexandra. She didn’t die.

“I know Gabriel must know she is the Queen. I’m sure he’s been here before. And how is she a lycan when Gabriel’s daughters were human? This makes no sense to me, although I know I’m not mistaken.”

Tristan replied thoughtfully, “The most likely explanation is that King Avalore is also much older than his rumored 400 years.”

“When a lycan finds his mate, no matter what species she is, his mark will force his mate to become a lycan. This is for the lycan’s own survival. When a regular wolf loses a mate, it is excruciating, but when a lycan loses a mate, it can drive him mad or even kill him.”

“So, in a sense, Alexandra, the human, did die. She was simply reborn lycan.”

He thought for a moment and then continued, “It’s very plausible that this is a secret that Gabriel didn’t feel was his to share. It’s obvious that, for some reason, the royal family didn’t wish for people to know how old they actually were. And it’s possible that the entire reason Gabriel became a vampire was to stay alive with his family. He was the grandfather to the royal princes and princesses, after all.

“The only people that would be aware of any of this information are those that are old enough to know, which means maybe a handful of vampires and any other lycans of similar age. That can’t be many people.”

“I guess that all makes me a cousin of those princes and princesses,” I grinned.

“I suppose it does,” Tristan chuckled.

“Just when I think I’ve discovered all of the family secrets, more are revealed,” I shook my head in amazement.

“I guess you aren’t nervous anymore?” He asked jokingly.

“How could I be? Aunt Alex! She may be beautiful and perfectly graceful, but that girl knows how to play. The hijinks she would get up to with her favorite niece were legendary back in the day,” I revealed.

“I can’t wait to hear all about it sometime, but for now, I think we should sleep,” he stated as I let out a monstrous yawn.

He picked me up princess style and carried me down the hall to the bedroom, where he stripped me of my clothes down to my panties. He left me standing there for a short moment while he took one of his softest T-shirts from our luggage and pulled it on over my head.

Afterward, he stripped down to his boxers and carried me to bed, climbing in next to me and pulling my back against him. I wiggled my butt across his belly, and he growled low.

“Sleep, Jane. You and the baby need rest. I’ll play with you in the morning,” he promised, and I sighed happily in response before drifting off to dreamland.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

### Jane's POV

It turns out that Tristan making me sleep was brilliant since it would be a while before we had such a peaceful rest again.

The following day, we lingered in bed, making love many times over and drifting into naps between rounds. By six pm, we were well satiated in one sense but starving in another. We made our way to the King and Queen's royal quarters.

We were led to their double-door entrance by Mr. Madison and then left there to knock ourselves.

Alexandra opened the door, and she warmly invited us in.

As we followed her to the dining room, I took in the ornate and tasteful decor of the enormous apartment. It appeared that their quarters were large enough to fit our own home inside of it and then some.

The dining room was very welcoming, with a fire burning in the hearth at one end and a long table with twenty chairs arranged around it.

There were already several people seated around the table, and I paused in the doorway to ask, "I'm sorry for keeping everyone waiting. Are we late?"

The King stood and came forward to take my hand, raising it to his lips for a quick kiss, "Not at all, my dear. We are only family tonight. Allow me to introduce everyone."

The King led me by the hand to the head of the table so that I might see everyone's faces. Tristan followed and stood beside me.

"Attention beasts," the King teased, "This is Alpha Tristan Martin and Luna Jane Martin of First Montana Pack back in the United States. Luna Jane is your mother's niece

and, therefore, your cousin. Treat her better than you treat your other cousins, Boys, or your mother will have your head.”

There was good-natured groaning and chuckling around the room as the six male lycans around the table stood to their feet.

The largest of the six bowed his head slightly to me and introduced himself, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jane, Alpha Tristan. I’m your eldest cousin, Alexander, but you can call me Xander. These five beasts, in order of birth, are Agron, Arduin, Alfonso, Atreus, and Arthur.”

The five other princes bowed their heads in acknowledgment, then smiled up at us in a friendly and open manner.

Before Tristan or I could say a word, a beautiful young lyan, who appeared to be the youngest of the family and bore a strong resemblance to Queen Alexandra, entered.

She surveyed the room, and when her eyes fell upon Tristan and me next to the king, her face lit up. She rushed forward to pull me into a warm hug, then stepped back, grasping my hands in her own.

“Jane! I’ve been waiting all day to meet you, but Mother wouldn’t let me disturb you. I’m Atia, but you can call me Tia,” she smiled excitedly with bright eyes and much sincerity.

I finally found my voice and smiled back, “It’s a great honor and surprise to meet all of you. Tristan and I are grateful for the opportunity to get to know you better.”

Everyone responded with a mixture of smiles and grins and then began to chuckle as my stomach let out a loud grumble of hunger.

Alexandra’s musical laughter preceded her declaration, “Let’s all sit and feed this girl before she wastes away.”

The King pulled out the chair to his right near the head of the table and gestured for me to be seated, giving me the place of honor at his table. I sat down in awe of this arrangement as Alexandra came to Tristan’s side, and sliding

her arm through the crook of his, she led him to the foot of the table. There, she gave him the seat to the right of her own, which was the second-best position at the table.

Tia sat to the left of her father and smiled warmly at me, clearly happy she would be able to converse with me throughout the meal. To my other side sat Xander, and on alternating sides down the table, the rest of the princes were seated in order of birth.

Once the ladies were seated, the King sat in his throne-like dining chair, and then Tristan and his sons made themselves comfortable in their places.

She-wolves dressed in the same navy and gold uniforms as other palace staff entered the room and placed plates of delectable-looking dishes on top of the chargers in front of us. My mouth watered with hunger, but I waited for all of the dishes to be served and turned to look at Aunt Alex, knowing that no one was supposed to eat until the Queen took her first bite.

She tore off a piece of her bread roll and placed it delicately in her mouth, and then the males at the table began tearing into their food with enthusiasm.

It didn't seem like we were going to be served a formal meal of several courses since on my plate was a large piece of beef smothered in a butter sauce along with asparagus, potatoes, and a giant, roasted turkey leg. It was common for wolves to receive two kinds of meat with their meals since we required more protein than humans.

We were each given two large bread rolls on small plates and a generous serving of butter on a tiny plate next to that.

Everyone was eating comfortably and informally, which made me relax. I cut a huge piece of the beef to thrust into my mouth. It was so tender and juicy that it nearly melted in my mouth, and I moaned in delight.

Tristan was watching me and winked with a smile from down at the other end of the table.

Tia continued to smile at me as she ate and then suddenly asked, "When are you due, Jane?"



I looked up at her, surprised since we hadn't told anyone yet that I was pregnant.

King Avalore chuckled at my expression and then explained, "Lycans can scent a pregnancy at conception."

I nodded and smiled back at Tia, "I'm a little over two months along. So...four months to go."

Typical she-wolf pregnancies lasted six months as opposed to the human length of nine months. This allowed them to have as many pups as possible during their childbearing years if they so desired.

Alexandra's brow furrowed as she voiced her thoughts, "I hope this trial business is concluded well before then so you can return home before he arrives."

King Avalore spoke to his wife in a warm and comforting tone, "I'm certain we can make sure of that, my love. Don't worry overmuch. I won't allow them to do anything extreme to our niece and her mate."

"I know, Avi, but the Vampire Council will make demands. You know as well as I do they have a dark agenda that will be difficult to combat... legally speaking, that is."

Aunt Alex looked at me, "Jane, I know you and Tristan did not bring Gabriel with you. I know, too, that you are keeping him safe. But have the two of you thought of a strategy for when they demand proof of life?"

I smiled at my aunt, trying to ease her worries, "We have several witness testimonies as recent as three days ago that he lives. We have a notarized sworn statement from Emma Jones testifying that he is in her care until he recovers and that he cannot be moved."

Avalore smiled at me, "Those are a good start. Emma is well known to the Vampire Council and has actual medical training for vampires."

Tristan looked up at the king, "Medical training for vampires?"

Avalore nodded, "Yes, vampire medical training focuses on circumstances that threaten the lives of vampires"

specifically, much like medical emergency training for humans.”

“Very few things can harm vampires, but the medical training teaches treatment for UV wounds, healing stake wounds if they don’t actually pierce the heart, and treating wolf venom bites. There are also courses on combatting magic used against vampires specifically.”

Nodding thoughtfully, I interjected, “I knew that Emma had some medical training, but I just didn’t realize it was specifically for vampires.”

Alexandra replied, “Emma is one of the most skilled doctors in the vampire world and has been offered many positions at educational institutions for vampires, but she wouldn’t leave Gabriel.”

Grinning at my aunt, I revealed, “They’re going to get married when he wakes up.”

“Finally!” Alexandra shouted, startling her sons, who merely grumbled and continued eating the second round of plates they were served.

Xander piped up, “I win! I called the year.”

Tia narrowed her eyes at him, “Wait just one minute, mister. They aren’t married yet, and we don’t even know when he finally confessed and proposed. Those are all separate bets!”

I laughed, “It was about three weeks ago, during the pack war. Gabriel had to be drained of blood because of the witch Abigail’s necromancy spell. Just before he submitted to the procedure, he kissed Emma, confessed he’d loved her for centuries, and asked her to marry him when he woke up. She said yes, of course.”

Tia grinned an almost wicked grin at Xander, “I won the bets on confession and proposal. You still don’t know when he will wake up and actually marry her.”

“I won first kiss!” Arthur exclaimed.

I started giggling, and the royal family all smiled at me and each other before Alexandra started laughing, the hall ringing with her rich musical tone. I hadn’t known what to

expect when I'd anticipated getting to know this family, but I had to admit it hadn't been this. They were full of warmth, playfulness, and evident love for each other.

"It is a relief, after all, that they're finally progressing," Aunt Alex admitted.

I groaned, "You're telling me. Tristan and I had to live with them for months, watching them avoid the subject altogether. It was practically torture!"

"How romantic!" Tia sighed.

We all burst into laughter again and settled into a comfortable silence as we finished the meal.

We spent a good two hours after dinner with the royal family in their great room, learning more about them. It turned out that none of the princes and princesses had found their mates yet, even though they were all over 100 years old. However, not one of them looked a day over twenty-five.

It was commonplace for lycans to wait more than one hundred years for their mates since they often had to wait for them to be born and reach the age of eighteen. They also had to travel to find them, and the royal offspring hadn't all seen the world yet.

The conversation was pleasant and informative, and I enjoyed myself immensely. I truly felt a part of this family and marveled at the speed with which my family was growing.

I never would have believed the course of my life if someone had told me before I reached eighteen that it would be this way.

That night after Tristan made love to me again in our quarters, I sighed dreamily as my happiness bubbled over and warmed my mate's heart, too.

We snuggled, fitting together perfectly, and slept well, even if that sleep only lasted a couple of hours.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

### Tristan's POV

A loud pounding on the door of our quarters woke me at six in the morning. Jane groaned and tried to snuggle deeper into my side.

I stroked her hair as I gently pulled my arm out from under her, throwing on some sweatpants on my way to the door. I opened it to find guards there, but they weren't wearing the royal uniform. Behind them stood three men who were completely still and quite pale. I realized suddenly that these were vampires.

"How can I help you, gentlemen?" I inquired with a passive expression on my face.

One of the guards spoke aggressively, "You and your Luna are under arrest for the murder of Gabriel Michael Francisco. Both of you are to get dressed and come with us!"

I glanced behind the guards to find two of the vampires staring at me with utter disgust and the third observing me with mild interest. I could detect no malice in him, but he might just be more skilled in hiding his motivations.

Mr. Madison came running down the hall to address one of the vampires, "Your Grace, I understand you have a warrant, but you still have no right to barge into the royal guest wing without invitation. You should have presented your warrant to me and allowed the King to deliver the Alpha and Luna to you for questioning later today. That is proper procedure! You know this!"

The vampire addressed as 'your grace' hissed at Mr. Madison, "Serious crimes are beyond protocol!"

Mr. Madison stood his ground, "The law does not support your statement, sir."

His Grace bared his fangs and stepped towards Mr. Madison but was interrupted by a gust of wind that blew past him.

King Avalore appeared beside Madison at an impossible speed and declared in a slightly raised tone of voice, “I know you were not about to inflict harm on my loyal servant, Nevil.”

His Grace, Nevil, replied with a sneer, “You ought to teach your servants some respect, Your Highness.”

The ‘Your Highness’ was said with biting sarcasm, but Avalore ignored it.

“Council members with an inability to follow law and royal protocol have a long way to go to earn respect. Even from my servants,” the King declared.

Nevil was so enraged I could practically see steam coming out of his ears, but he held himself in check. I wondered who would win in a fight between them. My bet was on Avalore.

“Your warrant?” Avalore asked, holding out his hand.

One of the other vampires glided forward and placed a thick sheet of paper on his open palm. He held it up and read it briefly.

“Your ‘warrant’ is not an arrest warrant, as I’ve been told your guard declared moments ago. It is a summons to court for questioning. You have no right to barge in here and attempt to remove my guests from my home to take them to goddess knows where. I expect you to vacate the premises and leave it to me to deliver them to the court at the appointed time.”

Nevil sneered, considering his options. Apparently seeing none, he spit, “Fine!”

At that, the entourage of vampires and guards was gone. If I’d blinked, I’d have missed it—hell, I missed it anyway.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

### Emma's POV

Things were getting heated in the royal city. Tristan had mind-linked me with the details, and I knew that they would have to attend court for questioning later that day.

I leaned over Gabriel to check his condition and then sighed heavily, sitting down in the chair beside his bed.

“My love, things are getting difficult for Jane and Tristan at the capitol. Try to wake up soon. They might need you,” I sighed again.

I gripped his hand in mine and held it for a good long while. He squeezed back in reflex but made no other movements. I pressed my cheek against the back of his hand. He shouldn't be asleep much longer, I knew, but I worried it might be too late.

Tristan refused to allow me to transport Gabriel to the royal city. He said it was far too dangerous with Gabriel in a defenseless state. I knew this was true, but I also suspected Gabriel wouldn't have wanted to stay in a bunker when Jane and Tristan were in trouble, regardless of his state of awareness.

Still, I wouldn't argue with my Alpha. He was making this decision out of love, and I understood that all too well.

If they were imprisoned or otherwise punished, then such a decision could be reversed once Gabriel awakened unless execution was the punishment. That could not be corrected. However unlikely, this was my greatest fear.

I could only wait and pray to the goddesses that they would speed his recovery along and keep our Alpha and Luna safe.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

### Omniscient POV

King Avalore escorted Alpha Tristan and Luna Jane Martin to the vampire wing of the royal courthouse later that afternoon.

He and Queen Alexandra had assured them that they couldn't be taken into custody after one round of questioning unless there was overwhelming evidence that they had murdered Gabriel outright and on purpose. There was none, and so they felt somewhat reassured.

Additionally, the King commanded the head of his legal team to join the Martins' team in order to ensure the best possible defense.

Jane loaded up on good food until she was very full, packing in as many nutrients as possible so that she could focus her mind on the coming trial. It would be beneficial for both her and Tristan if she could sense who intended to do them harm and who did not. Though, there would likely be more of the former than the latter.

The vampire wing of the courthouse had a gothic feel. There were gargoyles and gruesome images of humans being fed on lasciviously. It felt surreal and inappropriate for a courthouse, but the supernatural world had its own rules and customs, and art wasn't something they tended to police in any way.

Jane shivered as she approached the doors to their assigned courtroom.

Tristan took her hand in his and whispered, "What's wrong, Jane?"

She mind-linked him back, "*There is a lot of malice behind that door.*"

He squeezed her hand and nodded in reply. The guards opened the doors, and the two of them stepped through together.

Their legal team had entered behind them but now moved in front, leading the way to the defense table at the front left of the courtroom. Before them stood a large, raised desk the length of the room. Five judges sat behind the desk, looming over the court, all of them vampires.

There was no jury in a vampire court. Five judges presided over all of the cases, and they were a panel appointed by the Vampire King whenever a seat became vacant. Judges held their positions for life unless they did something to lose their seat, like murder other vampires or start wars or something of that ilk. They were similar to the US Supreme Court in how they were appointed, but their function was quite different.

They heard legal and criminal cases of the highest order regarding serious crimes and accusations and decided based on law and evidence as to the guilt of the parties accused.

While innocent until proven guilty was the model followed by both the vampire and wolf royal courts, the vampire court tended to take a more aggressive stance against the presumed guilty parties than was necessary.

Tristan and Jane had been warned of all of this by their legal team and were prepared to face the severity of the situation, although they had faith that no proof could be produced that they were guilty. No *honest* proof, that is.

As they seated themselves behind the rather long defense table, they were surrounded by their lawyers. The two leads sat with them at the defense table, and the rest of the legal team sat on the bench behind the table.

Jane glanced over at the opposite side of the room where the accusing parties sat, waiting for the center judge's gavel to pound and call the court to order.

The vampire called Nevil was seated with the two other unknown vampires Tristan had seen outside their quarters. They appeared to have an extensive team of lawyers.

A judge banged her gavel once and cleared her throat, "The Royal Vampire Court is now in session. Plaintiff, what are your grievances?"



One of the attorneys stood and began to read from a sheet of paper, “The accused Alpha Tristan Martin and Luna Jane Martin of the First Montana Pack, Wolf County, Montana, USA, stand trial for crimes against the Vampire Council. Chief among these crimes is the murder and disposal of an Ancient, one Gabriel Michael Francisco.”

“Additionally, they are accused of conspiracy for financial gain as all of Mr. Francisco’s assets have been willed to the Martins in the event of his demise. The council believes that Luna Jane Martin deceived Mr. Francisco into believing she was a descendant of his bloodline, thereby defrauding him out of his estate before depriving him of his life.”

Tristan jerked his head at the mention of Gabriel’s will, and he stared at the attorney reading the statement. Neither he nor Jane knew that they were the beneficiaries of Gabriel’s estate in the event of his death. This made things a little more complex but still not impossible. After all, they knew Gabriel was still alive.

The plaintiff’s attorney sat down again.

The Vampire Judge turned to our table, “Defense, how do you plead?”

King Avalore’s attorney, Jackson Wilder, stood and offered his statement without a sheet of paper to reference.

“The defense pleads not guilty on all accounts.”

The judge nodded.

“Very well. We will reconvene for trial tomorrow evening at eight pm. Let’s not have another repeat of the disturbance to everyone’s daytime slumber, eh, Nevil?” she concluded as she peered down her nose at him.

His Grace, Nevil, of the Vampire Council, glowered but said nothing.

The judge banged her gavel again, and everyone rose as she led the other four judges from the room.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

### Tristan's POV

Jane and I sat in the great room of the royal family's apartment with King Avalore, Queen Alexandra, and Jackson, the head of their royal legal team.

Alexandra focused her attention on Jane, "Were you able to sense anything in the courtroom?"

Jane nodded and thought carefully for a moment, "Our accusers are primarily malicious in intent except for one of the Vampire Council. I'm not sure what his name is, but he's more curious about us than anything and hasn't made up his mind yet." This confirmed what I had observed when the three vampires had harassed us in the middle of the night.

Jackson hummed and said, "That would be Viscount Milo Manor. He is one of the few Royal Vampire Council members who does not hold hatred towards other races. He is the Vampire King's nephew. He asked to be included in representing the council at trial in order to make sure it would proceed justly. His Grace was not pleased that the King granted his request."

"Nevil is an ass," Avalore stated plainly.

"That's an understatement," Alexandra said.

"He's probably the one that wants Gabriel dead the most," she revealed.

"Why?" Jane inquired.

Avalore was the one who answered her, "The woman who turned Gabriel was Nevil's mate. She did it out of kindness and sympathy for his daughters, who would outlive him significantly if she hadn't done it.

"Nevil was enraged by the act of compassion, thinking that she loved Gabriel. Turning someone is an act of intimacy most vampires choose never to implement. It creates a lifelong bond between the two when a new

vampire is born, much like a parent and child. Or in the case of a romantic turning, it can be as strong as a mate bond.”

“I didn’t know that Vampires had mates,” Jane thought aloud.

Alexandra explained, “Most of them don’t unless they’re mated to a wolf or turn someone with love. The literary concept of a *Beloved* in vampire fiction is not entirely correct. However, a love turning can resemble this dynamic.”

I nodded, “This explains why Gabriel feels so strongly for Emma, apart from the fact that she’s a beautiful person.”

“Yes, in their case, he turned her romantically as he already loved her, and she became a chosen mate with a mate bond as soon as she was born a vampire,” the Queen confirmed.

Jane shook her head, “Then why did it take so long for them to get together?”

“Dad always did take chivalry to a ridiculous level. Emma was the first woman he loved since my mother, who died hundreds of years before Emma was born. He didn’t want to force her into anything, and though he was reasonably sure she felt the bond, he didn’t want to take advantage of it where her feelings were concerned,” she explained.

Jane sighed, “Stupid grandfather.”

I grinned at them both, calling Gabriel by his familial titles. I knew he would be happy to hear them do that. I hoped that soon he would.

Jackson refocused the conversation on the trial, and we went over some possibilities and strategic responses available to us. There was a lot to remember about court etiquette since the vampire court stood on much more ceremony than the wolf courts, but I was confident that both Jane and I would present ourselves well.

After an hour of going over the information, Jackson left us to continue strategizing with our legal team.

We stayed and had dinner with the royal family again, socializing until the wee hours of the morning when Jane could barely keep her eyes open anymore.

I carried her down the marble hallways back towards our guest quarters and tucked her into bed safe and sound. I wanted nothing more than to take her home with me, and I was annoyed by this entire situation.

After the vampire trial, we still had to hold the wolf trial against the American Wolf Council.

I took a quick shower, then climbed into bed next to Jane to grab what rest I could while I had the chance. It was going to be a very long few weeks.

## CHAPTER SIXTY

### Jane's POV

Here, we sat in the courtroom, listening to our accusers' counsel drone on and on in his opening statement. He talked about the animosity between vampires and wolves and how much Tristan and I had gained by associating with Gabriel.

They cast shadows on our characters by selectively sharing information that Tristan was the son of an unlawful Alpha and had killed his own father for power.

They spoke of how Tristan then stole Alpha MacKenzie's pack and built wealth by acquiring some of Gabriel's assets.

They said I was nothing more than a spiteful servant girl who had manipulated Tristan and then Gabriel in order to elevate myself to a woman of status and power.

It was all ridiculous half-truths and assumptions surrounded by flowery language and spiteful commentary. I was sure almost no one in the courtroom believed it was all true, not even the man who was speaking the accusations.

I had learned from Jackson Wilder that if the Royal Vampire Council could "prove" what they were saying about Tristan and me, Gabriel's assets could be confiscated and turned over to the council. That is, if he were dead, which the plaintiff's attorneys consistently stated as a fact.

Gabriel's assets were virtually limitless, and he owned so much that it would give the Vampire Council a powerful financial reach beyond any other council on earth. This would be pretty dangerous to other species as some of the old vampire ways still lingered within the council - ways of hatred and prejudice, the belief that vampires were superior to every other species that existed.

I couldn't fathom how anyone could agree with this. Not that I felt wolves or lycans were superior, but I now knew

that beings such as the fae, gods and goddesses, and the titans were all real and existed. How could a vampire possibly believe he was superior to the titans who birthed the gods? It was a ridiculous notion.

The plaintiff's counsel completed his opening statement and strongly suggested that the Royal Vampire Court should take custody of Tristan and me to be sure we couldn't escape punishment should we be found guilty.

I could have sworn I saw the head judge roll her eyes at this suggestion. So far, she had been very hard for me to read, but there was no malice in her intentions that I could find. It was more like probing against a brick wall. She was entirely neutral to my senses.

In fact, I found her quite humorous. When she peered down at any of us, I got the impression she was glaring at us over the rim of schoolmarm spectacles, except vampires had perfect vision and didn't need glasses.

Anytime I felt myself amused by her reactions and responses, she would glance my way. After a while, I realized that she likely had the same gift as Gabriel to read thoughts. This probably came in handy for a Royal Court judge.

It was Jackson Wilder's turn to give our opening statements, and I focused my attention back on him.

"My clients deny all of the charges brought by the plaintiffs. Gabriel Michael Francisco lives but is currently unable to wake. We will present evidence, including eyewitness testimony and sworn statements confirming that Mr. Francisco is very much alive. We will also submit DNA evidence provided by the royal medical staff confirming that Luna Jane Martin is a direct descendant of Gabriel Michael Francisco.

"Because Luna Jane is a blood relative of Mr. Francisco, she is unwilling to bring his defenseless body to the capitol and risk the possibility of harm befalling him. He is simply too precious to her to risk it.

“And finally, regarding the other accusations, we request that all charges and allegations involving Alpha Tristan Martin’s dealings in the wolf community be stricken from the record as that is a separate matter that will be addressed in the Royal Wolf Court upon the conclusion of this trial. It is not for the Vampire Court to interfere in dealings between wolves, and therefore, such accusations have no place in this court. Thank you, Your Honors.”

Several of the vampires present hissed with offense at Jackson’s statement, essentially telling them to mind their own business on wolf matters, but the judges remained stoic and impassive.

The head judge announced, “We will break for a half hour while we discuss the proposed limitations of the council and the defense.”

She banged her gavel in dismissal, and all stood as she led the other judges from the room.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

### Jane's POV

The judges returned thirty minutes later and granted our attorneys' request to drop any charges relating to wolf matters. While they didn't grant the council's request to imprison us in vampire custody, they did request that we be placed under restriction within the royal palace.

This meant that we were to be confined to our royal guest quarters (outside of the trial in the courtroom), and the only visitors we were allowed were attorneys, witnesses, and others related to our defense.

The judges added that if this restriction were not adhered to, then they would remove us from the palace and remand us into the vampire council's custody.

The next few days, or nights in this case, were spent with the Vampire Council and their attorneys presenting their case before the court. They had very little evidence other than the fact that no one could locate Gabriel, but the crux of their case was a demand to produce him or admit guilt.

We knew this would happen, and there was absolutely no way we would bring him here, but we were prepared to present other evidence when the time came. Many witnesses would testify that Gabriel was alive and simply recovering from his ordeal in hiding.

While we were in the palace, we weren't even allowed to see the King and Queen. At least Tristan and I were together.

Attorneys and witnesses came and went, but we did see some of our friends and family. It was an arduous journey for them to come all the way to Russia to present testimony, but I was grateful to each and every one of them for being willing to stand with us.

At long last, the day of our defense arrived. The first day was made up of the court clerk reading notarized affidavits



of testimony aloud by those who could not attend, and this included Emma's statement. Emma had thought of including a video of her reading her statement next to a sleeping Gabriel, who was in view of the camera. The video was dated the day before it was played in court. This was the most substantial piece of evidence we had, but we knew it still wouldn't be enough for the council because they wanted access to Gabriel himself.

We knew this was for political reasons, and his enemies were hoping for this to be the forced outcome. However, we were not going to ever give in to this demand no matter what happened. It was the least we could do after everything he had done for us.

The second day of the defense involved interviewing witnesses on the stand. A long list of people from our pack were asked to give their version of events on the date of the pack war as well as the last time they had seen Gabriel, where they had seen him, and what condition he had been in.

Alpha Clovis's pack witch, Amelia, shared her valuable testimony. Since she had been intrinsically involved in inducing Gabriel's current state, her account of events was critical.

It got a little dangerous when Wolfgang was on the stand because they kept asking him if he knew where Gabriel was now, and he had to answer, "Yes."

Then they asked him where he was, and he would answer, "He is with his fiancé, Emma."

"Where is that exactly?" they inquired.

"I cannot say," he answered.

"Cannot say or won't say?"

"Both, to be honest," he replied.

"Why can't you say?"

Wolfgang answered, "My Alpha has commanded me to protect Gabriel from everyone."

"Even himself? Even Luna Jane?" The attorney thought he was being clever.

Wolfgang answered, "Yes," without hesitation.

"Is there anyone else who knows where Gabriel is?"  
The attorney asked.

"Only Emma, Gabriel, and myself know where he is, and I am unable to say by my Alpha's orders," Wolfgang answered.

"If your Alpha released you from that order, would you tell us where he is?"

"No," answered Wolfgang.

"Are you aware you would be in contempt of court if you did not reveal this information?"

"Objection," Jackson called calmly, standing for a moment. "Intimidation and well," he paused, appearing chagrined he was forced to add something so distasteful, "professional misconduct."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tristan suppress a smile.

"Sustained," replied the judge.

She looked down her nose at the council's attorney and said, "You do not have a say in who is in contempt of this court. We decide that. Your questioning of this witness is complete. Does the defense wish to redirect?" Jackson bounced up for a moment, "No, thank you, your Honor."

"The witness may step down," she stated.

All of the other witnesses were much the same. Asking them if they knew where Gabriel was and when the last time they had personally seen him was.

At the end of the day, the head judge made a statement, "The court will concede that only Wolfgang, Emma Jones, and Gabriel Francisco are aware of Gabriel's location. The court also concedes that Gabriel was alive as recently as yesterday. There will be no more questioning along these lines. His location will not be revealed by this court or any witnesses here. Therefore, we will not waste the court's time with such questions."

"Your honor!" Exclaimed Nevil.

“Sit down, Nevil. You will not get your claws into a defenseless Gabriel, and I urge you to abandon such ambitions,” the judge admonished before going on.

“Court will reconvene tomorrow at 2100 hours, and we will begin with the defense’s questioning of Luna Jane Martin. The court is adjourned,” she concluded as she banged her gavel and left the room before anyone even had a chance to stand.

Nevil curled his lip in an angry sneer as he glared over at me. I was getting distinct vibes of hatred from him, and I successfully suppressed a shiver at its potency.

Tristan took my hand and led me out of the courtroom with our attorneys and pack warriors surrounding us.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

### Jane's POV

The next evening, we sat in the court, waiting for the judges to emerge and begin the session.

Something was delaying them. It was already 9 pm, and the courtroom was filled with the chattering sounds of attorneys, witnesses, and spectators.

The judges' chamber door opened, and everyone stood as the five judges made their way to their seats. The head judge banged her gavel, "Court is in session. Defense, your witness." She took her seat without any further explanation or statements.

Jackson stood and said in a loud, clear voice, "The defense calls Gabriel Michael Francisco to the stand."

My eyes shot up to him in a state of shock, and I turned to Tristan, but he looked just as surprised as I was.

The doors at the rear of the courtroom swung open, and the most magnificent sight I had ever seen in my life filled my eyes with tears.

My vampire grandfather, Gabriel, was striding down the aisle towards the stand. He shot me a smile and a wink as he passed our table and gracefully took the witness seat.

Jackson bowed his head respectfully towards Gabriel and stood for a moment until a hush returned to the room. Then he began his questioning, "Mr. Francisco, are you alive?"

Gabriel grinned, "That is quite the philosophical question, Mr. Wilder. There is a school of thought that generally states that vampires are not living creatures at all but members of the classification 'undead.'"

Jackson smiled, "Then allow me to rephrase. Are you dead, Mr. Francisco?"

"No," Gabriel answered, this time with certainty.

They were enjoying this.

Nevil was fuming in his seat. The other vampires at the plaintiff's table seemed to be subtly shifting in their chairs away from him.

Jackson continued his questions, "Is Luna Jane Martin your blood relative?"

"Yes," Gabriel answered.

"Is that the reason you gave your Montana ranch and corresponding bank accounts to her and her mate?"

"No, it is not," he answered.

There was a general intake of air from the gallery. They hadn't been expecting that answer. But Jackson's tone remained unfazed.

"Why did you give them such valuable property and so much money?"

"Luna Jane Martin and I formed a feeder contract before I even knew she was a blood relative," Gabriel answered.

The vampires in the room hissed. This was a little piece of information we had all kept up our sleeves, and until now, no one on the Royal Vampire Council nor any member of the court knew this.

The judge banged her gavel, "Order, please. I can have the gallery removed if we do not have quiet for these proceedings."

Taking advantage of the commotion, Jackson pulled a few pieces of paper out of his folder on the table and stepped back to the witness stand. He handed Gabriel the documents and asked, "Is this an original copy of your contract with Luna Jane Martin?"

Gabriel looked over the papers and nodded, "Yes, it is."

"The defense submits the feeder contract as defense exhibit A," Jackson said as he handed one set of documents to the opposing counsel and another to the court guard, who brought it to the judges' table.

She took a moment to review the contract, then nodded at Jackson to continue.

“What is the reason you made Alpha Tristan Martin and Luna Jane Martin beneficiaries of your entire estate in your will?”

“That was because they are family, and I want them to have everything should anything happen to me,” Gabriel answered.

“Thank you, Mr. Francisco,” Jackson concluded, “No further questions.”

The judge looked over at Nevil, “Care to cross-examine this witness?”

The council’s attorney shook his head, admitting defeat. Even so, Nevil sat in his seat, fuming in rage.

I glanced at Tristan and mind-linked with him, “*If looks could kill...*”

The judge continued, “All charges against Alpha Tristan Martin and Luna Jane Martin are dropped. This case is dismissed. Court is adjourned.”

She banged her gavel, and the five judges exited the courtroom in a hurry.

The other two council members pulled Nevil out of the courtroom. They were tired of the entire ordeal and a bit perturbed at wasting so much time.

I ran to Gabriel, and he picked me up, crushing me against him in a hug and kissing the top of my head.

“Gabriel,” I sobbed with relief.

He stroked my hair and patted my back, “Now, now, my sweet girl. Everything is alright. I woke up before the birth just like I promised.”

Emma approached and wrapped her arms around both of us, also kissing the top of my head.

I sobbed for a while longer, letting go of the stress and exhaustion of this awful experience.

I wanted nothing more than to go home with my family and see the children, but we still had the wolf trial to go.

However, this turned out to be a much simpler and faster affair. Eager to redeem themselves, the Wolf Council of the Americas had conducted an internal investigation

which had identified five corrupt members out of the total twelve. They themselves presented the members to the Royal Wolf Court with more evidence on top of what we provided.

They were quickly found guilty of many charges, including conspiracy, bribery, murder, crimes against sacred pack laws regarding true mates, etc.

There was no leniency for these kinds of offenses, and they were sentenced to death due to the countless crimes they had committed and their severe nature.

The court also sentenced Alpha MacKenzie to death even though he did not show himself despite his court summons. Still, none of us knew where to find him, and no witch, vampire, or wolf had been able to locate him. It was as if he vanished from the earth altogether.

The Royal Wolf Council made the announcement that it would nominate several candidates to replace the corrupt former members of the American Council. It was up to the American packs to vote on who they would accept into the recently vacated positions.

At long last, we were free to go home to our pack and family, and I was full of excitement at the prospect.

King Avalore, Queen Alexandra, and all my cousins came to see us off under the portico in front of the palace. We said our goodbyes amongst promises to see one another again soon and finally climbed into the royal SUVs that would take us back to the royal airfield.

This time, the two-day journey home was peaceful as Tristan and I caught up with Gabriel and Emma. Emma was transcendent as we discussed her upcoming wedding and my pregnancy. She never left Gabriel's side, and I frequently caught them gazing silently at each other in what looked like rapturous bliss. It's easy to recognize it when you've experienced it yourself. We had so much to look forward to, and I was glad that most of the turmoil was now in the past. I prayed to the goddess that it would stay that way.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

### Jane's POV

We arrived home at long last and settled back into a comfortable routine.

So far, Alpha MacKenzie had still not been found, but the Entropus family wasn't going to stop searching for him, utilizing the magic resources at their disposal. It was odd that such methods had yet to turn up any information on his whereabouts, but they assured us that they would keep looking.

After a few months of searching, Tristan and Avery had found all of the rogues that their fathers had exiled over the years. Those who had not committed serious crimes were offered the chance to join First Montana Pack. None refused. They brought their families and made their pledges to their new Alpha, Tristan Martin.

One year after absorbing his father's pack, Tristan completed the building in our territory.

The First Montana Pack - or Wolf County, Montana - was one million acres, somewhere between the size of Rhode Island and Delaware, with a population of 3,497. All were part of the pack, which became the wealthiest and largest pack in the Western World.

Our little town square and neighborhood of 5-acre home sites had blossomed into ten apartment buildings, 1700 houses, some two hundred businesses, shops, and restaurants, and a thriving Pack House with an ultramodern security facility.

We were entirely self-sustaining with our own power plant, water supply, water and sewage treatment plants, recycling plant, and garbage processing facilities.

Tristan and I were beloved by our pack, as were our children: Amy, Selly, and our new son, Rowan.

We'd allied with packs in the neighboring states and



frequently held parties and events to get the young, unmated wolves together.

We were steadily growing in numbers, thanks to many of our pack members finding mates from those surrounding packs.

We always found milestones to celebrate.

On this particular day, a monumental milestone was occurring.

Emma stood in the middle of our living room, looking at herself in the long mirror Tristan brought in for her. I'd been surprised to learn that the whole vampires-can't-be-seen-in-mirrors thing was a myth.

She wore a deep red gown that fitted her curves like a second skin and flowed to the floor in a puddle at her feet. The neckline hung just off the edge of her shoulders and plunged into a deep v between her curvy large breasts. The sleeves were three-quarter length and fitted to her arms.

I stood back, admiring her in the dress, her ruby-red lips, and her golden locks, which shone in the light. Best of all, her green eyes were shimmering with happiness.

The sun had set a couple of hours previously, and the pack had worked all day to set up chairs in front of the enormous outdoor pavilion our woodshop had custom-built for their wedding and reception party.

I knew that right now, the pavilion and surrounding lawn were aglow with fairy lights and flames, creating a romantic atmosphere in the night air.

Everyone was invited - all of our pack and everyone who knew Gabriel. Most had accepted the invitation. Vampires, wolves, fae, magic users, royalty, and humans were present.

Tristan would be giving away the bride at Emma's request, while Avery was to officiate the ceremony.

"Emma, you look amazing!" I said in awe.

"Are you nervous?" Tristan asked with a smile.

"Not. At. All," Emma answered, grinning at him through her reflection.

"Then let's get you married," Tristan said.

“I’ll see you down there,” I kissed her cheek and heard a flash as her photographer caught the moment. We giggled, and I waved as I rushed down the stairs to the car waiting to taxi me to the pavilion wedding site.

I made it a good fifteen minutes before the bride and rushed down to our reserved seats in the front row next to Angelica. I smiled back at Beverly, David, and Diane in the second row with the children. We were all dressed in our best, and I smiled at my girls and whispered, “You both look so beautiful.”

“Yes, we do, Mommy. Just like you,” Selly proudly crowed.

Rowan squirmed a little in Beverly’s arms, and she shifted him to a more upright position so he could see what was going on. He settled down again as his wide, observant eyes roamed the crowd.

Gabriel walked in with Avery, and they took their places. He was gorgeous as always, in a black tuxedo with a blood-red shirt, vest, and bow tie. He looked exquisite and full of happiness.

Avery was wearing a similar black tux but with a white shirt and vest and no bow tie. She looked sharp and elegant in the perfectly tailored clothes. She grinned as she glanced over at Angelica and winked. Adorably, Angelica giggled and blushed as she blew her mate a kiss.

Just then, the music started floating across the pavilion lawn, and we all stood and turned to look down the aisle at the happiest, most beautifully perfect bride we had ever seen.

Tristan escorted her down to the front, where Gabriel waited impatiently, eyeing Emma like he wanted to devour her in a way that she would immensely enjoy.

Once they were about a dozen steps away, and with vampiric speed, Gabriel flashed to Emma’s side, picked her up, and sped with her back to the alter.

Everyone laughed.

Tristan came to sit beside me in the empty chair reserved

for him. He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close to his side.

I sighed with contentment as we watched two of our family and pack members join together while promising eternal love and devotion to one another. This was a promise the two of them were actually capable of keeping.

When the ceremony was over, there was a big reception that lasted until morning. At some point around midnight, Beverly had taken the children to tuck them in and gone to bed herself.

We partied with our families and guests until Gabriel and Emma took their leave, not long before dawn, beneath a night sky lit up with fireworks.

As the Entropus family began to pile into their oversized limousine, Kendra leaned over to me and said, “The first of many mating ceremonies soon to come...”

Saranya and Audra glanced at each other and then gracefully waved goodbye to Tristan and me before disappearing into the limo.

Tristan and I returned to the pavilion and stayed until all the guests had left and the staff had cleaned up the pavilion’s hall. When they were all gone, we remained, sitting on the chairs at a long wooden table that had hosted the bride and groom.

We silently watched the sun rise over the mountains.

Tristan smiled so warmly down at my legs resting across his lap. He was stroking them with his big alpha-sized hands, raising the hem of my long gown. The familiar heat in my center was set aflame, and I hummed as he shifted in the chair and both of his hands slid higher between my thighs to part my legs.

He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me onto his lap so that I was straddling him; the skirt of my dress rode up and ballooned around us. He began to kiss and suck his mark on my neck.

“Janie,” he rumbled into the sensitive skin there, then kissed his way up to suck my earlobe. The teasing of his

tongue on my skin made me shiver with pleasure.

“Hmm?” I moaned in response.

He nibbled on my earlobe, then put his lips against my ear and whispered hotly, “I’m going to make love to you right now on this table.”

“Yes, Alpha,” I said back in a shaky voice full of anticipation.

“Good girl,” he growled.

And then he did.