

## Chapter 15

### Temperance

“I don’t want your body, Temperance, just you,” he whispers, pressing his lips to my head; the action pulls me back to my surroundings, and into the present. Tingles rush up my arms, everywhere his skin touches mine. Zoning back into my surroundings, I feel warmth, too warm, and it doesn’t take me long to see why. My family home is burning, flames lick at the walls eating away at the place.

“And I’ll prove it,” he whispers to me. I remain frozen, fear slivering through my limbs and paralyzing me in his grip as he rocks back and forth.

“Nova?” I whisper. I get no response. I try calling out for Shadow but she too doesn’t answer, making me wonder why I can’t hear them. Did he do something to them? Did he take them from me? He continues to rock back and forth, and I stare at the flames. The windows shatter, huge black billows of smoke flood the air, the smell of death and burned flesh makes my nose wrinkle. Wondering where it is coming from, I turn my head and come face to face with the man holding me. My heart rate quickens when his golden eyes peer back at me. His hand moves and I flinch.

He swallows, his hand stopping just off my face. “I won’t hurt you, I’d never hurt you,” he whispers, cupping my face with his hand. Tingles dance across my skin, where his palm lay, and he exhales a shaky breath, pressing his forehead against mine while I remain frozen, still afraid of his intentions.

“I got you, you’re safe with me. I promise, Temperance. I’ll show you, I’ll show you what it is to feel safe.”

I think over his words. Then mull over everything Nova has spoken of mates, yet he doesn’t make my skin crawl, quite the opposite, it comes alive under his touch. Satish’s men always claimed to be her mate too before they did the vile things they did to us. But I don’t remember this feeling, the feeling of the sparks, delightfully buzzing across my skin. When he pulls back my eyes move over his shoulder to see the other man. In his hands he clutches a book, one I haven’t seen since I was a child, only now it is so much thicker. As thick as the huge dictionaries Daddy used to have on the shelves in his office.

He stares at me for a few seconds, noticing my gaze on the book in his hand. He peers down at it, briefly taking a step closer, and I lean back only for the man who claims I’m his mate to clutch me tighter.

“He won’t hurt you. Casen won’t hurt you,” he whispers, and the man holding the book looks at him.

“She wants the book, give it to her, she recognizes it,” he tells him, but the man shakes his head.

“Eziah, she shouldn’t.” It’s all I have left of them.

My mate, or supposed mate looks at him. Casen curses and shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s what she thinks it is,” he tells him but hesitantly steps forward, hand outstretched. He holds the old scrapbook out to me. My hand shakes as I move to grab it, waiting for him to pull it away and laugh, or mock me, something that Satish’s men would do to Nova.

I snatch it, clutching it close when I feel fingers move down my spine, making me gasp and look at the man with golden eyes. Only then do I realize I am quite literally in his lap. I try to hop off him but he holds me tighter.

“Don’t run, Temperance. I know you’re scared. I promise we aren’t like those men,” he says softly. Some part of me wants to believe him, but I know otherwise, everyone wants something from you, and when they don’t get it they take it. Men are bad, I know because I have encountered far too many and not one besides Daddy was good.

Sitting frozen, I set the scrapbook in my lap, when movement catches my eye, the man behind him walks off, and my eyes track the movement as he walks back toward the forest edge.

“I’ll meet you at the car, Eziah,” he calls, and I look at my supposed mate. Yet thinking those words, I feel their depth, feel the pleasant tingling sensation dancing from his touch. I wonder if Nova was wrong, maybe he really does mean us no harm. He nods, turning his attention back to me, but I turn my gaze back down at the scrapbook. This is mine, it used to be mine, but as I open the first page, I realize it no longer is.

What used to be filled with pictures of my father and mom, was now ruined. The pictures remained, but my mother’s face was now scratched off, a gasp leaves my lips seeing what Satish did to it, the original photos crossed out while more had been added.

“No!” I whisper, my lips quivering. I forgot all about this scrapbook, I made it the day of my birthday, the day Satish ruined my life. I had been so excited to show Daddy, he bought me the book, and the pretty papers and glitter to decorate it. Now all that work had been ruined, scribbled over, and scratched into. Each picture featured my mother’s face scratched out and my father’s eyes removed. Then there was me. The photos of me and Daddy had also been ruined.

“What is it?” Eziah asks as my fingers trace the page where my mother’s face was removed.

“He ruined it,” I murmur, my lips quivering. His lips press to my forehead, and I jerk away, looking at him. Why does he keep doing that?

“I will get you another one, you can make a new one,” he whispers, and my brows furrow. He makes no other move to touch me, and I turn the page to see what was added to find newspaper clippings. They’re old, yellow staining the tattered paper, the edges worn and the picture crinkled and has fold lines, like it had been folded and folded many times. I pick it up, staring at the worn piece of paper. This isn’t mine? I don’t remember these pictures or know where they come from.

In the picture is a man in a suit, and police surrounding him. It looks like some crime scene photo, men sitting in the gutter, hands cuffed behind their back, their heads down looking at the gutter.

“The reaper wolves?” Eziah murmurs, making me look at him. I have heard that name before but I can’t remember where or why I heard it. Although I am sure I heard Satish mention it once. He was fighting with Daddy, but that is all I remember.

“Can I look at that?” he asks, his fingers touching the picture clipping. I let him take it, turning the next page, and my eyes widen in horror at what I see. My entire body trembles and I choke on air.

“That is Dominic, why do you have this? Do you know him?” Eziah asks, but I can’t take my eyes off the picture before me. It is me, not long after Daddy died, I know because I know exactly when this was taken. Satish took pictures, took pictures of the birthday present I received, the one I didn’t want. So many pictures of them doing the things they did and he just watched, letting them.

“Temperance, how do you know this—” Eziah asks, and his words cut off. He slams the book shut, and a feral growl leaves him. I am too shaken by the pictures of me tied down while they have their way with me to fear him. My entire body shakes when Eziah grabs my face, pulling my gaze from the scrapbook that is no longer filled with my parents, no longer filled with photos of me and Daddy, but photos of the torture Satish put me through.

My eyes meet Eziah's golden ones, tears brimming in his eyes. Why is he crying? I blink at him trying to understand what this man wants from me when he finally speaks.

"Breathe, Temperance." Only as he said the words do I realize I am choking, choking for air as the panic attack takes over, memories of that night assaulting my mind and consuming me.

"Nova!" I cry out for her. "Shadow?" I panic as my vision blurs.

"Temperance, breathe, I need you to breathe," he says softly as I continue to choke, he grabs my face in both hands.

"They can't hurt you, they can't hurt you. They're gone," he whispers, his hands shaking as they clutch my face.

"They're gone, look?" he moves his head to the side allowing me to see past him. "See, I killed them," he murmurs, and I blink at what used to be cabins but are now ash and soot, remnants of cabins, remnants of what the pack used to be.

I exhale at the sight. They're really gone? I don't have to go back to them? I try to catch my breath, my breathing harsh as I see what remains, the smell of burning flesh and hair reaches my nose and I now know why. He killed them, just like the man in the woods. He killed them.

"See? You never have to fear anyone again," he whispers, and my eyes move to his.

"I don't...I don't have...you're not..." I can't seem to form words for the questions I want to ask, stuttering terribly.

"Never... No one, and I mean no one, will ever hurt you again. Whoever tries will die, you are mine, Temperance, mine. You're safe with me, mates protect each other and I will protect you," he whispers clutching my face.

"Do you understand?"

I blink at him.

“I don’t need to go back?” I whisper the words, barely audible as they register.

“Never,” he whispers and overwhelming relief floods me, it steals the air from my lungs as I take in his words.

Tears burn my eyes at the thought of what he’s saying. They can’t hurt me. They can’t hurt Nova anymore. I don’t have to live in the dark. I’m free. I’m free just as we always prayed we would be.

## Chapter 16

Eziah

Her relief hits me with the weight of a ton of bricks, it smashes against me as she takes in my words, her lips quiver, and tears trek down her cheeks. She finally breaks down. Her emotions flood into me, so much fear, fear that is suffocating, torturous lifts and overwhelms her. She breaks down, uncontrollably crying while I fight to remain calm, wanting to kill them all over again for making her feel this way, making her fear so strong, making her live the way she did.

I clutch her to me, letting her cry while silently crying with her. I've finally found her, after all those years of torture and enduring what she suffered through in my dreams. Listening to her screams, and begging, feeling her pain, it all lifted away because she is now safe, home. I will protect her, I will keep her safe and kill anyone that dares try to take her from me again.

Wrapping her legs around my waist, I pull the book from off her lap wishing I could burn it. But I know if Casen kept it, there has to be more information in it. Now I understand his hesitance in giving it to her; I wish I had listened. Clutching the newspaper clipping, I stare at it over her shoulder while she wails, huge hiccuping sobs wrack her body while I peer down at the old photo.

I have no doubt it's Dominic, yet why is this photo in her scrapbook? How is he linked to all of this? I don't want to ask her, don't want to force her to remember things or question my intentions in needing to know. Opening the first page, I slip it back inside and shut it before hoisting her higher. Standing, I clutch her tighter, following the old beaten track back to the car.

Malachi is quiet in my head. He is also pondering the picture, yet his rage is potent at the photos we found of her, the ones she has seen. She was just a child. At thirteen, I was worried about school, friends, worried about my parents. Yet she feared something so much worse. I lived like a king while she lived as a sex slave. The vast differences in our upbringing sickens me that someone could do that to a child.

By the time I reach the car, her crying has stopped, and I can feel her breath on my neck, her nose pressed against my mark. Her breathing is shallow, and she hiccups with each breath, but I can feel through the bond she has passed out, fallen asleep. Casen leans against the hood of the car, a smoke in between his lips, phone in his hands. He looks up at me as I approach.

“You okay?” he asks, his eyes going to her in my arms. I nod my head, and he moves to open the back door. I carefully lay her down while he moves to the trunk and pops it open. He returns with a blanket, and I tuck it around her, quietly shutting the door. Casen offers me a smoke, and I take it, before he leans into the car, grabbing the lighter off the front seat.

I pass him the scrapbook, and he presses his lips in a line, but takes it as I light my smoke. He walks to the hood of the car and leans against it as I peer over my shoulder ensuring she is still asleep before following him.

“I need to speak with Dominic,” I tell him, and he nods his head.

He sets the book down on the hood. “I found it in her brother's room,” he tells me.

“Eziah, I found...”

“I know, she saw.” He nods and curses.

“I should have taken them out. I just grabbed it.”

“It’s fine, I should have known there was a reason for your hesitance, I didn’t think I could just tell she wanted it.”



“Reaper wolves are dead though, Andrei and Dominic made sure of it,” Casen tells me, and I nod. He is right, how do they link back to her?

He opens the book, and I growl, making him stop. “Get rid of them.”

“I can’t Eziah, there’s something you need to see,” he whispers, and I look at him.

“I don’t want to see her like that. Feeling the things they did to her was bad enough.”

“I know, but that wasn’t all I found, he didn’t just keep mementos of what they did to her,” he murmurs.

“I...” He swallows, “I’ll get rid of the other ones. You don’t have to see them, I’ll just leave the ones you will need.” My brows furrow, but I nod, averting my gaze while he rummages through the pictures. Staring ahead, I try to drown out the thought of Casen seeing her naked, seeing them raping her and torturing her. He removes them, setting them aside, when he suddenly turns and throws up, clutching the hood of the car, the photos clutched in his hand, he heaves throwing up violently. I feel numb and absentmindedly rub his back. I can’t bring myself to take them and discard them myself. He is a good friend. When he is done, he holds out his hand.

“The lighter,” he rasps, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. I give it to him, and he burns them, dropping them on the ground and letting them burn to ashes.

“I do need to ask you something,” I tell him. I need to know, I need to know if he was one of them.

He peers back at me, pale as a ghost, and nods once.

“Did her brother...was he...” I can’t bring myself to say it. Casen’s jaw clenches.

“He was the worst,” Casen answers. I nod.

“When you find him...”

I turn my head to look at him.

“You’ll be there,” I tell him knowing he wants to watch him suffer. Casen nods, turning back to the hood of the car. He flicks through the pages, and hands me something. I take it, readying myself to look at it, praying it's not them violating her. Turning it over, I find it is an ultrasound film. I blink down at it, noticing the date to be around the time she would have been born. When I notice the name and medical identification number.

“Ruth Stell?”

“I think it’s her mother.” I nod in agreement. My eyes are on the ultrasound.

“She was a twin,” I gasp, glancing over my shoulder at her, still asleep in the back seat.

“But that is not all,” Casen murmurs. I look back at him, he holds out a photo and glances away. I take it from him, turning it over, I gasp. It’s Temperance, she is bruised and battered, she has a black eye, she is also naked, but that isn’t what shocks me most, she appears to be about fourteen or fifteen years old. She is crying, the look of anguish on her face evident, and I swallow glancing down at the picture. In her arms, she holds a baby wrapped in a blue blanket. She is clutching him to her chest while another man appears to be trying to take him from her.

I shake my head, and look at Casen only for him to pass me another picture. I take it, to find the baby she was clutching in a basket, the same blue teddy bear blanket wrapped around his tiny body. He is sleeping. I look at the Casen.

“There are more, it appears she had a son,” Casen murmurs, handing me ultrasound pictures, Temperance’s name are on these. And I glance between the picture of the baby and the ultrasound with her name on it.

“Then where is he?” I question.

“I don’t know, but I haven’t looked through the rest, I was too scared to in case...”

“In case you found him dead.” I swallow and he nods, taking the pictures and placing them back inside. He closes it, and I draw back on my smoke, my hands shaking.

Casen leans against the hood of the car, we don’t speak, pondering what we just saw in those pictures.

“None of this makes sense,” I murmur after a few minutes. Casen says nothing, instead grabbing the book, and I move to the back of the car, opening the back door.

“Where to now?” Casen asks, looking at me over the roof.

“I need to see my sister, speak with Dominic, but drive to Rose’s pack. I will leave you there, and ring you when I find out more,” I tell him, and he nods, climbing in the driver’s seat while I climb in the back with my mate. Casen puts the scrapbook in the glove compartment and the key in the ignition, while I pull Temperance onto my lap.

“Let’s go home,” I whisper to her, tucking her closer as Casen starts the car. My eyes meet Casen’s in the rearview mirror, and I nod to him and he nods back, starting the car.