

## Chapter 31

### Temperance

The first rays of dawn filter through the gaps in the curtains, I squint up at the ceiling as a cold chill sweeps through the room. Rolling, I try to get up only to feel a heavy weight draped across my waist. Eziah's arm holds me close, creating a warm cocoon around me and making my skin tingle. I try to sit up again, only for him to tuck me closer. He mutters something I can't understand, his tight grip squeezing my aching bladder making the urge to pee worsen. I need to use the bathroom.

Slipping under the covers, I manage to disentangle myself from Eziah's hold and climb out of bed. The moment I place my feet on the floor, a cold rush moves over me and my hair instantly stands on end when I feel Nova stir within me. Relief washes over me feeling her presence, though weak, she is definitely there. "Nova?" I murmur to her. "Here." I let out a sigh, before glancing at the bed. Eziah rolls in his sleep. Nervously, I glance at the bathroom door attached to the room.

"Maybe we should wake him?" Nova suggests, yet guilt creeps through my limbs, forming a pit in my stomach and a lump in my throat.

"He hardly slept," I tell her. "I don't want to upset him, what if he takes us back to Satish?" I ask cautiously.

"He said he's our mate," Nova tells me, though she is not certain about that, yet I feel he is. But doubt creeps in from Nova, about his intentions; he's never hurt us, but that doesn't mean he won't. "Yeah, maybe you're right, Satish didn't like being woken either," Nova states. My stomach

sinks as memories flash through my mind when he first locked us in the basement

Every time we yelled for help, he would come down and beat us for waking him, eventually we stopped yelling, knowing the only one coming down those steps was him, and I couldn't handle hearing Nova scream as he punished her. Swallowing down my fear, I move across the room towards the bathroom. The familiar surroundings take on an alien quality as I take in the tiled room. Despite the clean, everyday bathroom fixtures, an eerie chill seeps into the room following me, almost like I can sense something lurking, watching us. Yet, looking back into the room, we are the only ones here besides Eziah.

I quickly pee. As I go to flush the toilet, Nova says, “No, you'll wake him. If we are quiet, maybe we can sneak back to the bed without him noticing, or maybe find his sister?” She suggests I hesitate before deciding she is right. However, as I turn for the door, the mirror captures my attention, the reflection it shows takes my breath away. The woman looking back at me, her eyes—one pink and one blue—is a mystery. The sudden shock has me jumping back with a suppressed shriek. Nova's voice, soothing yet firm, rings in my head. “Shh, shh, it's us, remember?” Her reassurances do little to calm my racing heart as I peer at the stranger she claims is us.

Looking back at the mirror, I see the same woman mimicking my every move. It's me. This is me. My mind races, the concept is unfamiliar, uncomfortable. My eyes—why are they so different? Nova's calm voice breaks through my confusion, “They've been like that since your 18th birthday,” she tells me as I peer into the mirror, so close my nose is touching it. My breath fogs the glass when a giggle, innocent and out of place, has me turning towards the door, half expecting to see Eziah.

“Did you hear that?” I ask Nova, who nods, my heart pounding as I take in Eziah's sleeping form. Warmth spreads in my chest, a sensation Nova seems to recognize before I do.

“You like Eziah,” she says, a note of amusement coloring her voice.

“He... he makes me tingle,” I confess, my cheeks flushing.

The giggle interrupts our moment once again as I try to find the source, dragging me away from my thoughts. It takes me a few seconds to spot him. A little boy, hardly more than six years old, peeks in through the door. The childlike joy on his face is infectious. “He must be Marabella's son.”

“Who?” Nova asks, the boy holds a finger to his lips then points to Eziah. He beckons me with a small toy car to follow him. “I don't like this, we shouldn't go,” Nova says, urging me to go back to the bed. But I follow, ignoring Nova's warning.

“What's your name?” I ask him. He laughs, the sound makes goosebumps explode over my body. “Temperance...” Nova states, but my eyes are fixated on the child.

“Where's your mother?” I ask him, but he beckons me to follow him. “Are you taking me to your mother?” I whisper. Stepping out into the corridor, it's dark and cold.

“We should go back in the room, with our mate,” Nova tells me, yet he's just a boy, he won't hurt us. Besides, he's taking me to Marabella. “Didn't you want to find Eziah's sister?” I ask her. Nova sighs, she'd rather be near another woman, plus we don't know how long until Eziah wakes up, and it's daytime.

As we explore the manor, the harmless game takes on a sinister undertone. The halls become dark and foreboding, the air heavier. The boy leads me up the stairs, his childish laughter taunting me, “You can't catch me!” he teases, and I smile, shoving the sudden chilling fear away. I chase after him, my laughter mixing with his, until he disappears into a room.

Stepping into the room, I call out to him, expecting him to jump out from some hidden corner. But the boy is gone. “Where did he go?” I ask Nova.

The room is cold, the hair on my arms stands on end as a chill runs down my spine.

“Are you sure he went in here?” Nova asks me, and I chew my lip, glancing around the dark room. “Maybe he went into the room next door?” Nova suggests. I turn to walk back out when the door slams shut, the sudden noise echoing in the silence.

## Chapter 32

### Temperance

“The wind maybe?” I murmur, trying not to panic. I reach for the door handle, but it just turns but doesn't open. I yank on it, feeling panic rise within me. I can't be locked in here, not again.

“Calm down, there has to be a key,” Nova says. I yank on the door handle again, twisting it when I feel a cold draft move my hair. I spin around to face the room, finding nothing there.

“The boy, he knows we're here; he'll come back,” Nova whispers, and I swallow, taking in the room.

A large star, circled with symbols I can't understand, dominates the floor. Dusty books and jars clutter the room. The eeriness is overwhelming, and the air smells damp.

“What is it?” I ask aloud, staring at the mysterious star.

“I don't know, I've seen that symbol before, though,” she tells me.

“Where?” I ask, trying to remember it.

“Satish, he used to draw something similar in the barn, but I don't know what those symbols are, I've never seen those before,” she answers. I step into the star, bending to look closer. The moment I touch one, the temperature plummets and whispers fill my head.

Suddenly, ghostly figures appear, their swirling forms create a vortex of chilling presence around me. “Nova!” I call out, jumping up, only I hit some sort of wall.

The whispers are unsettling, like the walls are alive and breathing, whispering secrets. A wall of ice-cold air prevents me from leaving and

my eyes widen as I take in hundreds of ghostly faces, all crowding around me, every direction I turn I find more, panic rising in my chest.

A scent of rotten flesh and bones, and another like burning firewood, fill my nose. The ghostly figures are skin and bones, their gaunt faces twisted in anguish and despair. Eyes wide open and mouths gaping in fright as they scream and chant, I cover my ears, the noise growing louder and louder, making my head pound, the increasing pressure has me screaming.

Whispers float around me, “You shouldn't be here.” The words are a chilling accusation, “You... the curse-bearer.” The spirits reach for me, their touch as cold as their intent. The swirling forms of see-through figures create a vortex of chilling presence around me, and a chorus of whispers fills the air.

The whispers pierce my ears like a form scratching a chalkboard. The ground shakes beneath my feet, the windows rattling. The walls lined with overflowing shelves, shaking, the contents spilling onto the floor; books covered in dust and cobwebs, jars and containers of dried herbs, preserved insects and animals falling from shelves. The whispers are now just a humming sound, like a hive of bees, and it feels like it is crushing against my skull.

“Temperance!” Eziah's voice forces its way into my head, adding to the pressure. I scream in agony as I try to answer, yet my tongue feels thick in my mouth, my words, and thoughts becoming jumbled as they are consumed by the words from the figures that surround me.

The walls begin to peel and crack, dark patches spread over them like an infection spreading, eating away at the flesh of the manor, the whispers grow louder, like a wave that's trying to consume me.

A hiss cuts through the whispering voices, “Leave!” The command, full of malice and anger, sends a jolt of terror down my spine. “You can't be here, you'll curse us all.” I realize then that I am trapped, alone with spirits fueled by anger. Nova's fear echoes inside me, her howls full of the terror

that grows within. She screams for Shadow to come forward to help, yet she is dormant while Nova is awake, and she can't reach her. I feel it in every breath I draw, an icy chill that threatens to freeze my lungs. "Cursed blood." I try to make sense of their words, but nothing makes sense.

The spirits no longer hover; they penetrate, an onslaught of whispering anger that feels like a thousand ice-cold needles pricking my skin. The room spins, faster and faster, until the boundaries blur into a whirl of terror. A searing pain explodes in my chest, ripping a terrified scream from my throat. The cry dies in the darkening room, the echoes drowned out by the vengeful spirits' assault.

"What do you want from me?" I scream the question, clutching my head, the pressure inside my skull becoming too much. "Justice," they chant, their voices rising in a harmony of anger. "Go back to the pits of hell," they scream.

Confusion and terror wash over me. "What do they mean?" I try to ask Nova, unable to comprehend their rage. Shadow appears in my mind, her presence a thin thread of hope amidst the chaos. But her message is clear.

"Run! You need to get out before they trap you here," her voice barely audible, just a mere whisper in the cacophony of voices. But how? I am trapped, the storm of their magic locking us in the star's boundaries.

Panic overpowers me, and I gasp for air that no longer seems to exist. I crumble, my knees hitting the cold floor as I try to block out the spirits with my hands over my ears. The door pounds, the sound a faint echo over the roar of their hollow voices. Nova, long gone, having been forced to retreat, only Shadow's whispers remain, her voice floating away as the chants grow louder, their voices echoing as my vision tunnels. "Eziah..." my voice travels, I feel the coldness as they start swarming me, moving through me, each one feeling colder than the last, suffocating and freezing my lungs.

With a crash, the door swings open. Dominic and Kyan rush into the room, Eziah following closely behind. Their expressions mirror the fear in my heart as they peer around.

My eyes meet Eziah's and his eyes widen. "No!" he gasps, rushing forward, and I blink, just as I see Dominic reach for him, his panicked voice booming through the room.

"Eziah, no!" But he's too late, Eziah steps into the star, reaching for me. An unseen force throws him back, his body crashing into the wall. His groan of pain is lost in the chaos, but it's the most terrifying sound of all. As his form crumples to the ground, the bond I share with him ripples. Eziah sits up, and I feel my eyes rolling in my head.

"They're killing her," Kyan says from a distance. A cold hand grips my heart, the truth in his words colder than the ghostly figures around me. His hands glow as he chants, his eyes turning a demonic black and the room ripples as his aura shifts. The ghostly figures react to him; his canines protrude when suddenly, he speaks, chanting in a language I don't understand and suddenly the ground is rushing toward my face, my body slumping on the ground as I struggle to suck in a breath.

With a last-ditch effort, Dominic grabs Kyan's hand. The combined strength of their powers creates a surge of energy that clashes with the ghost's relentless assault. I feel my consciousness fading, the world around me becoming a distant echo. The last thing I remember is the soft glow of their magic, and Dominic and Kyan's voices booming through the place. The power of their magic warming me, but it's too late, and the darkness claims me and swallows me whole.



## Chapter 33

Eziah

Her fear has me jolting awake, my heart hammering against my ribs. Instantly, my head turns to find the other side of the bed is cold, empty. “Temperance?” I call out into the quiet room, my voice filled with panic. The emptiness echoes back, swallowing my words.

I leap to my feet and race to the bathroom; the cold marble under my bare feet sends shivers up my spine. I fling open the door but find nothing except silence. “Temperance!” I yell, my voice echoing throughout the manor. I sniff the air, trying to catch her scent, but there's nothing. Just the faint smell of vanilla from the candles she lights before bed.

Desperate, I run through the halls, throwing open doors of bedrooms, the library, and the kitchen, each room as empty as the last. My heart feels like it's about to explode out of my chest as I feel her fear, her pain. It's almost tangible. It's like a vice around my chest, squeezing tighter with each passing second.

“Temperance, where are you?” I call out again, reaching to see if I can find her through the mindlink. But it's quiet, disturbingly so. I freeze, my heart hammering in my chest when a bloodcurdling scream pierces the silence. Her scream.

I spin on my heel, searching for the direction it's coming from. Suddenly, doors fly open, and Kyan bursts out of his room, looking as panicked as I feel. The manor begins to shake, windows rattling in their frames. It's as if the entire house is alive. Marabella emerges, her face white as a sheet. “The kids,” she gasps, racing towards her son's room with Jonah hot on her heels.

I ignore them, my ears trained for the next scream. It's disorienting. The sound seems to be echoing from everywhere and nowhere all at once. That's when I see Dominic peering over the railing two floors above. I follow his gaze, my heart dropping to my stomach as I see the one door we haven't checked—the altar room.

Dominic's voice rings out, pulling me from my thoughts. “The coven room,” he calls, his voice echoing down the hall. I don't need any further prompting, taking off towards the stairs. Kyan is beside me, cursing as he rummages through his pockets. “The keys, where are the fucking keys,” he screams up at his father.

I don't wait for him to find them. Instead, I charge at the door, slamming into it with all my strength. But instead of giving way, I'm thrown back by an unseen force, landing in a heap on the floor. The world spins around me as I struggle to push myself back to my feet. Dominic has made it to the bottom of the stairs, fumbling with the keys as he tries to unlock the door.

Suddenly, Temperance's screams morph into a roar, the sound making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Kyan's body ripples, growing in size as he transforms into his Lycan form. Kaif shoves forward, taking control of Kyan's body, his hands moving in intricate patterns as he chants an ancient spell before they turn black as charcoal before the force explodes from him and hits the door.

“Patefacio!”

With a loud crack, the door flies open, shattering and splintering to pieces. Dominic and Kyan rush in, leaving me scrambling to follow them. Spotting her, I gasp. “No!” I scream, running for the pentagram.

“Eziah, no!” Dominic tries to grab me, but it's too late. The moment I cross the threshold, I'm thrown back by the same invisible force. I crash into a wall, the impact knocking the wind out of me.

I force myself to my feet, every nerve in my body screaming in protest. Not only that, but I can see her now, Temperance. She's in the middle of the room, surrounded by a pentagram that glows with an eerie blue light. Her screams have turned into soft whimpers, her body trembling as she sinks to her knees.

“Shh, shh, what are they saying?” Dominic's voice floats to me from somewhere in the room. He's listening to the spirits, repeating their words under his breath as he tries to decipher their message. Kyan's gaze is locked on Temperance, his hands glowing with magic as he paces the room. Kaif is just below the surface, ready to spring into action at any moment.

“They're killing her,” he murmurs, his voice sounding so small and broken that it makes my heart clench.

“We won't go back,” the voices yell and scream.

I watch in mounting horror as Temperance crumbles to the ground, her small body lifeless on the floor. The voices in the room continue their jarring chorus, each word stinging like an icy needle. I want to help her, but the pentagram holds me back, an unseen barrier preventing me from reaching her.

“Duae sorores natae ex ferro et carmine, una vitam affert, altera cecidit,” mutter the strange, whispered words. The strange sounds seem to bounce off the walls and echo around the room.

Suddenly, Kaif starts to chant a spell in ancient Latin, his voice steady. The sound of his voice reverberates throughout the room. The ground trembles beneath my feet as the spirits respond to his spell, their screams growing louder and more desperate. I want to help, but I am frozen in place, my body unable to move from its spot near the doorway.

Kaif continues his chanting, and slowly, ever so slowly, a crack appears in the pentagram's blue light. Dominic steps forward and joins in Kaif's chant, their voices merging into a single, powerful force.

As they chant, Dominic's magic seems to become one with Kaif's. His magic is fluid now, like water and wind, while Kaif's is hard and strong, like iron and stone. Together, their power creates a spark that blasts through the pentagram's barrier, like a bolt of lightning, when they grab each other's hands.

The spirits scream in pain as Temperance is freed from their grasp. She slumps over onto her side, her eyes glassy and unfocused.

The moment the energy dissipates, the spirits retreat. The room returns to its normal temperature, the deafening silence a stark contrast to the chaos a moment ago. The three of us rush to Temperance's side, relief, and concern etched on our faces. The color has drained from her face, her lips turning a shade of blue as she lies lifeless on the floor. Sweeping her hair back from her face, Dominic pries her eyelids open, her breathing shallow. "Why did they try to kill her?"

"No idea, but the house has been unsettled since she arrived here," Dominic murmurs. He sighs, and I pull my mate into my lap, my lips instantly going to hers as I try to heal her. "She'll be out for a while. She just had an entire coven of dead witches try to kill her; let her rest," Dominic says.

"*Duae sorores natae ex ferro et carmine, una vitam affert, altera cecidit,*" Kaif murmurs, his voice echoing the haunting words of the spirits, his eyes glaze as he repeats the ghostly whispers.

I look towards him, my heart pounding in my chest. The room seems too quiet, the eerie whispers pausing as Kaif's Latin phrase hangs heavily in the air.

“Duae sorores natae ex ferro et carmine, una vitam affert, altera cecidit,” he repeats, his voice a low murmur.

“What is it?” Dominic's voice cuts through my anxiety, echoing my own confusion. I turn to face him, my gaze flitting between him and Kaif.

“I know those words,” Kaif admits, the phrase echoing in the room once more.

## Chapter 34

Eziah

“What words?” I ask, peering down at Temperance passed out in my arms. The intense atmosphere in the room stifles my voice, making it sound hoarse and strained.

“Duae sorores natae ex ferro et carmine, una vitam affert, altera cecidit,” Kaif says again, looking at us with a strange look on his face as if he is trying to remember where he heard the words before.

Dominic's eyes widen slightly, his lips parting as he translates it into English. “Two sisters born of steel and spell, one brings life, the other hell.”

“I don't get it. What do those words mean? It sounds like a Gemini wolf. We already know she had to have been a Gemini,” I say, glancing back at Temperance. Her breaths come in short gasps, her face pale as the morning light streams through the windows.

“They aren't words, Gemini, yes, but not a Gemini wolf. It's a Gemini spell,” Kaif states, his voice filled with a strange dread that tugs at my gut.

“What spell?” Dominic asks, mirroring my confusion. But before he can answer, Kaif starts ripping books from the shelves, grimoire falling to the floor in a flurry of ancient texts. Dominic moves closer to him, curiosity piqued his interest. I can only sit there, watching the eerie chant playing on repeat in my mind.

“The one that created the dagger to kill Hades',” Kaif answers.

“The spell Celeste created?” I ask, trying to work out what is going on when Dominic looks down at Temperance with a grave expression on his face.

“Yes. It seems Temperance might be a part of something bigger, something we are just beginning to comprehend. I can't help but feel we are just at the brink of an abyss, ready to dive into unknown depths.”

“What's that spell got to do with my mate?”

“Indeed, Eziah. Witches have long memories, and their anguish serves them long after death. She drew an entire coven to this room to kill her, and the fact they tried says she is someone important. There is only one way to enter the Shadow realm; if she is of the Octavian bloodline, which she isn't, she does not have witch blood or Octavian magic, but for some reason, they want her gone.”

“So you're saying they left the Shadow realm just to come here to kill my mate? And Temperance just happened to wander into it somehow, like Astral projection.”

“Temperance's twin died in utero. Her spirit could have inadvertently entered the Shadow Realm. Unborn spirits are more susceptible to wandering into such places. But that is also very unlikely and would be a first,” Kaif tells me.

“The Shadow Realm, Eziah, it's not a place one would willingly venture to. It's a prison, a wasteland of lost souls. The only way in there is a blood-relative anchor, which only leaves her twin,” Dominic adds.

“Then how else would Temperance's twin end up there? She died in the womb! And you said she is no relation to you.”

“Now, that's the part I can't explain— how she got into a prison world created for my bloodline. However, once the barrier to the Shadow Realm was broken, the realm didn't disappear. It's still there, but without the barrier, the spirits trapped inside were free to leave. They returned to the place they were most connected to in life, which for us Octavians would be the family manor, so no, Eziah, they didn't return here just to kill your mate. They've been here since your mother broke the curse.”

“That's where the peculiarities of being a Gemini wolf might come into play, Eziah. When Temperance's twin died, her spirit had nowhere to go. The curse attracted the spirit to the Shadow Realm, where she's been trapped, creating an anchor. It may also explain why she has two wolves. In order to save one twin, the other wolf merged with her vessel to strengthen it while casting the other out.”

“So you're saying what exactly she has her twin's wolf? And how do we know which wolf is actually hers, or find out how her twin has access to a prison world created to trap your bloodline?”

“Remember, it's not the Shadow Realm itself that's evil. It's the curse that tainted it. Every curse has a loophole, so that means there is another way in and out of the shadow realm, one I could never figure out, but I knew Temperance was coming and going. It always plagued me how she could come and go.” Dominic seems to think for a second. While I try to wrap my head around all of this.

“So that only means two things, either she's linked to Celeste or...”

“Or she's linked to Hades,” Kaif finishes for him. My brows furrow.

“But both Hades and Celeste are your bloodline?” I point out.

“Yes, but she isn't Octavian, or I would sense her. We can sense other witches, and she certainly isn't one,” Dominic says.

“She has to be linked to your bloodline in some way, though. How else would you know her from the shadow realm?” Dominic shakes his head, clearly not agreeing.

“Maybe she is cursed by Hades with the same curse your family was? Because Hades is certainly part of your bloodline, through Luna.”

“Correct; Luna and I had a son together, which is how the Octavian bloodline continued,” Kaif answers.

“You think they cursed her bloodline?” I ask Dominic.



“Or maybe she is the curse?” Kaif murmurs, peering down at a grimoire he's found, and Dominic looks at him.

“Pardon?” Dominic says, moving toward Kaif. Kaif passes him the grimoire and looks at me. “What is it?” I ask, and Dominic's brows furrow as he reads whatever is on the pages.

“It's time to call on your mother,” Dominic tells me. That is something I'm quite reluctant to do, yet we need answers, and if anyone knows where Temperance's bloodline comes from or how she is linked to any of this, it's my mother.

## Chapter 35

Rose

Casen shut the door in my face. I stand there for a few seconds staring at the wood paneling. Casen's words replay in my mind. "You choose whose side you're taking, and until you choose the right one, you don't get her back! You know where I am when you want me to handle him for you." Like a broken record. My heart thuds in my chest wildly.

"Maybe we could... He's back, he can..." Poppy, my wolf starts to say.

"Help us?" I snort at the thought. "No one can help us," I whisper. I lift my hand to knock on the door and demand my daughter back when Poppy speaks again.

"He still has to wake up," she whispers to me. I drop my hand. Maybe I shouldn't bring her home with me. At least here, she is safe. Tears burn my eyes, and I chew my lip, glancing back at the house, knowing he would wake up eventually.

"Maybe we could stay here?" My wolf sounds hopeful, but even she knows that will make things worse.

"We have to face him sometime," I tell her.

I take one last look at the door before stepping off the porch to find my mother leaning against her door, arms folded across her chest, she has her floral dressing gown on, her hair in a messy bun. I avert my gaze, praying she doesn't come over. No such luck...

My mother starts walking across the green lawns and between the swings of the park, while I hastily start walking home, not wanting to get into another argument with her. Not tonight, I am drained, both physically and emotionally. I have no fight left, nothing.

If only she knew; they all think I am against them. What they don't realize is I am doing this for them. "Rosie!" my mother calls out to me, and I fight back a groan of annoyance. Isn't this enough for one night?

"Rosie!" my mother calls again, only this time grabbing my arm and making me stop.

"What's going on?" she asks. I want to tell her, but if she knows. If she truly knew... I shake my head at the thought. My mother stares at me, her grief written across her face, but also something else. Something I am seeing far too often these days; she's scared for me. As if she didn't have enough fears, I didn't need to be another one of them.

"Nothing, Casey wanted to stay with her father," I smile, the lie rolling off the tip of my tongue so effortlessly, you'd think I've spent my days rehearsing it.

She grabs both my arms. "Tell me, tell me, baby. Say the word, let us intervene."

"Intervene in what? Casey is having a sleepover, you know just like me and Matilda did when we were little. She'll be fine." I play off her words and pull away from her, turning toward my house when she speaks again.

"But will you be?" she asks me. I stop in my tracks when she continues. "You think we don't know but we do... Do you think we can't see it? He doesn't need to leave marks on you. He doesn't need to do it out in the open. You think you hide it... you don't."

"I'm not hiding anything," I breathe, turning to face her. She slowly walks up to me, her hands gripping my face.

"Stop lying, let us help. At least stop lying to yourself," she whispers.

"Nothing is going on, it's just your paranoia," I tell her, seeing the hurt shine in her eyes at my words. If only she knew those words hurt me saying them.

“You can't hide from me, I see you; I've always seen you, Rose. I see your pain, I see how it haunts you.”

I shove her away, impatience building. Her meddling will only tip the scales from bad to worse. My mother growls at my actions. “You can't cloak your wounds in silence forever, Rose,” her voice trembles, echoing the sadness of a thousand unspoken words. “I look at you and I see through your carefully worn facade. Just as I see his abuse reflected in your eyes.”

“Those tiny signs you think no one notices, the nervous twitch of your fingers when voices are raised, the skin-crawling fear that engulfs you — the way it makes your skin itch. I've observed them all first hand, I know the signs.”

I swallow, tears pricking at my eyes, and I try to come up with something to say when she continues. “The distant, vacant gaze when you retreat into your shell... when you shut it out, just so you don't have to feel it break you more. She whispers, choking on each word as if knowing it pains her as it does me.

“I recognize it, Rose. I am no stranger to it. I am not hallucinating or being paranoid. I know the face of a person disintegrating under the weight of their tormentor because I stared at the same haunted expression in my reflection for years. You can't hide from me.”

I shake my head. “You have no idea what you're talking about, Mom, stay out of it. My life is not yours to dictate... to be concerned about.” I turn and stomp off toward the house.

“Then take your title!” she yells. “Challenge your father!”

I swallow, knowing I can't give Vince that sort of power. I can't let him be Alpha... Shaking off her words, I move toward the porch, cutting across the lawn.

“Rose!” She calls after me.

I ignore her, jogging up the front steps and moving toward the front, pulling on the busted handle, the frame all cracked. Only the moment I do, the entire thing falls apart at my feet, the wood turning to splinters.

Glancing over my shoulder, my mother stands staring at me, and at the mess at my feet. My face heats with shame, but I ignore her, closing the mesh screen instead and locking it.

Moving through the house, I grab a dustpan and broom from the laundry to start cleaning up. Vince is still out cold, I suspect he'll stay down for the night, he's had a lot to drink this afternoon. Sweeping around his body, I nudge him with my foot. He groans but doesn't wake, thankfully.

Moving quietly about the house cleaning, I stop near Casey's bedroom door. Guilt gnaws at me. She's so little, yet seen so much. Gripping the door handle, I pull the door closed and move to the master bedroom. Pushing the door open, I move to the dresser to grab some pajamas when I hear Vince's phone ring from the kitchen.

It's like time stops at that first ring, cold sweat beads and slivers down my neck. The second ring makes me jolt as if the sound struck me.

My heart leaps into my throat at the thought of it waking him, and the next second, I am running on my toes to the kitchen to retrieve it. Glancing at him as I rush past the living room, he stirs, and I quickly snatch it off the counter, hitting the button and shutting off the blaring noise. Only then do I finally let out the breath, I didn't know I was holding in when I hear a voice through the speaker.

“Where the fuck have you been?” he growls, and I jump, having forgotten the phone clutched in my hand to busy trying to calm my racing heart. Peering at the phone, I curse myself for not checking what button I pressed. “Hello! Vince! I swear to god if you don't start speaking soon I will give your little pack a visit.”

“That won't be necessary,” I answer, glaring daggers at my mate, lying on the floor. He laughs when he hears my voice.

“Rosie, Rosie, Rosie... like a stubborn bud, refusing to wilt. A trait you got from her.”

A growl escapes me at his words. He only laughs harder, his voice a sinister echo through the phone.

“Oh settle petal, your defiance only hungers me. Makes me want to pluck away each thorn, I wonder if your daughter will share the same fiery spirit when she blooms,” he laughs.

“You come near my daughter,” I snarl, Poppy coming forward at his words, my voice changing to something that matches my father. Rarely does my Alpha voice come out; it's been subdued for so long that I'm almost sure I've lost it.

“Calm down, I'm just playing, you know that. Now where's Vince, I need help,” he tells me.

I glance at the living room floor. “Asleep.”

“Then wake the idiot up. I need him to come get me.” I grit my teeth knowing I can't deny him, but I also don't want to go anywhere near him either, but Vince will get himself killed if he gets behind the wheel in his state.