

Chapter 36

Rose

“He's passed out drunk,” I admit, praying he doesn't demand I come get him. I did not feel like driving for hours or being in a car alone with him.

“Well, then get that tight little ass in the car and come get me. I need a lift into the city.” I suck in a deep breath and am about to make up an excuse.

“I will send you the address,” he tells me hanging up. I stare at Vince's phone, a second later a message comes through and my brows crease together in confusion. That's not far from here?

Grabbing the keys and my jacket, I rush to the car while glancing around. The pack seems to finally be asleep, all the lights are off in the neighboring houses. Hastily, I climb into the car, starting it but leaving the lights off. Leaving the carport, I cringe hearing the tires on the gravel. Once I am clear of the houses and on the actual road, I flick the lights on and start driving to the address he'd given me.

A shudder runs up my spine, knowing I am going to see this prick by myself. Usually, Vince deals with him. After about an hour, I come to some farms. The darkness is almost oppressive as I drive through the narrow country roads, and all around me are tall trees that seem to stretch up toward the night sky. In every direction, I see farms and crops illuminated by a faint moonlight. *Why is he out here?* I wonder to myself.

The GPS announces I'm at my destination, but I see nothing. Slowing down, I can just make out the dirt driveway. Turning the car, I start driving up it when I see lights turn on in the distance. It's an old farmhouse, the

weatherboard house in disrepair, paint flaking, the shudders broken. The place is dark, surrounded by fields of corn. It's old and rather run-down. The walls battered, and the paint faded to the point of being barely visible. The building looks like it's been abandoned for years. And I would believe that if not for the porch light turning on. Pulling up, I stare at the house. After a few minutes when no one comes out, I open my door and climb out of the car.

Instantly, I am alerted by the scent of blood. Poppy presses beneath my skin; goosebumps cover me as I climb the steps. The railing around the porch is rotted, and the wood floorboards creak as I step onto the porch. "Rose... we should wait out here," my wolf warns me, yet she is alert and that scent isn't werewolf blood, it's human.

Stopping at the door, I am about to grip the door handle when it opens.

"My, my, you look more and more like her every day," he says, smiling wickedly when I see a pair of feet on the ground behind him. He glances behind him at the floor.

"Don't mind him, I warned him, they never listen." He shakes his head and steps aside. My heartbeat skips as I peer down at the dead body.

"All he had to do was be quiet and let me finish having fun with his wife, and I would have let 'em live, but no, he had to play hero." He shakes his head, and I swallow the bile rising in my throat, feeling sick to my stomach.

Suddenly, I hear a whimper inside the house. My eyes dart to him, and he smirks. "I should probably take care of that," he says, wandering back into the house.

"I'll do it!" I tell him, rushing after him, earning a strange look.

"That's my girl," he huffs, gripping my shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

"Where are they?" I ask.

“Living room, I will go grab my bag. Are you sure?” he asks like I am merely going to help do the dishes. I smile, trying to keep my heart rate slow. “It's fine, can't have 'em running around screaming about werewolves,” I tell him with a laugh.

“Good, good, bastard actually shot me! The audacity of the man, as if his pissy bullets would hurt me,” he laughs while wandering off toward the back of the house. I rush into the room where I heard the noise and stop dead in my tracks.

A woman is sitting huddled in the corner, knees tucked to her chest, staring at the man torn apart on the floor. She is covered in blood and completely naked. She whimpers as I approach her, and I am quick to clamp my hand over her mouth. I hold a finger to my lips and point to the back of the house. Her eyes widen, and I nod toward the door, praying she remains quiet.

I hear him walking around talking to himself while I try to figure out what to do with her. If I let her leave, he'll hunt her. Glancing around, I see lighter fluid on the fireplace. I move to grab it when the woman grabs my arms. “Don't leave me, he... he's a monster,” she whispers. I grab her arms and give her a warning look. I need her to be quiet.

“I know, but he can hear your heartbeat, I need to make him think you're dead,” I tell her, and she lets me go. I grab the lighter fluid and see a box of matches sitting on the mantle beside it. I snatch it off, rushing back to the woman. I glance at the other door that leads somewhere else. “That door, where does it lead?”

“To the kitchen,” she whispers.

“Can you get out that way?”

She nods, tears streaking her face. I start squirting the lighter fluid on the lacquered floor. “Play dead, I am going to set this room on fire, when we

leave you run out the back door.” She says nothing but gives a small inclination of her head, telling me she understands.

“My husband,” she mouths to me. I smile sadly and shake my head.

“He wouldn't want you to burn with him,” I whisper, and her lip quivers. Hearing footsteps, I stand up squirting the lighter fluid everywhere but leaving it far enough away that she doesn't get burned and can escape. Dipping my fingertips in the blood covering her, she gives me a weird look. I shove her down quickly, moving to the living room door and flick a match.

I toss it just as he comes down the hall toward me, the room goes up instantly, making it difficult to see her. The heat is horrid, but her heartbeat is muffled by the sound of the flames eating away the floor and walls.

“Ready?” I ask him. He glances into the room, and nods. “Finished?” he asks, and I nod, watching as he walks out of the house. I exhale in small relief. Following him outside I head toward the car. “Why have you got to go to the city?” I ask as I open my door to find him gone. A second later I hear her scream.

My eyes widen as I race around the side of the house just in time to witness him snap her neck with an audible crack. My hands go to my mouth in horror, her petrified eyes wide open, vacant. He drops her at his feet.

All I can do is stare. “Lie to me again and you'll meet the same fate,” he growls, storming toward me. I back up, but he pounces before I can even try to run. He grips my throat, his huge thick fingers locking around my neck like a vice, my air supply cut off as he lifts me effortlessly with one hand, my feet kick air and my claws slip out.

“Don't shift,” I warn Poppy knowing if we do, he'll certainly kill us.

“Next time you pretend to kill someone, make sure it's their blood on your fingers.” He grips my hand bringing it to his nose and sniffing them, he then sucks on them, while I choke for air.

“That's not hers, it's her husbands, after his attempt at playing hero, I bent his wife over him. I made sure he felt every thrust until his last dying breath,” he sneers before letting me go. I hit the ground hard, gasping for breath around my mangled windpipe.

“Now let's go,” he snarls, stepping over me. I rub my throat, I can't even bring myself to look at the woman, broken only meters from me. I don't want to see her dead eyes peering back at me.

“Get up, Rose,” Poppy tells me, and I suck in a breath, willing myself to move. Forcing myself to my feet, I follow after Satish before climbing into the driver's seat. He doesn't bother with his seat belt but I clip mine in.

“So where am I taking you exactly?” I start the car.

“To find my sister,” he tells me.

What? I think. He has a sister and could do that to another woman? The thought sickens me, yet I obey and start driving toward the city.

Chapter 37

Rose

In the dim light of the city lights, I navigate my way home, driving across the city's cracked streets. This place, even at this hour is alive, people roaming around enjoying themselves. Four torturous hours in the cramped confines of the vehicle with Satish have left me emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

The stench of his cheap cologne clings to my skin, and his lewd advances echo in my head, causing me to shudder. His roaming hands find their way to my thigh again, despite my countless attempts to shove him away. Pulling into the parking lot of a rundown motel, I park the car when he suddenly squeezes my crotch. I jump as he leans over, kissing me, his filthy tongue slipping into my mouth. I struggle against him again when he bites my lip. With a growl, Poppy comes forward to lend me her strength. I shove him off and slap his face. The clap of my hand against his skin is loud in the quiet car, and I gasp at my own audacity.

Satish snarls, baring his canines that are much too long for a werewolf. His face twisting into that of a monster. He lunges at me, grabbing my hair and I cry out.

“Don't forget who owns you,” he sneers, his fingers tightening in my hair, making my scalp burn. “If I want to fuck you, I will, and your little mate won't do shit, and neither will you...” The venomous threat sends cold shivers down my spine.

Anger ignites in me, and I glare at him, my jaw clenched when he grabs my breast through my shirt with his other hand. “Or maybe I'll pay your mother a visit,” he continues, chuckling darkly. “Remind her who broke her in, or maybe I might leak the footage. Let's see how much respect she's

got left once her past is out there for everyone to see.” His laughter grates on my nerves as he roughly releases my hair and exits the vehicle, leaving me with his vile threats echoing in my ears. Swallowing down my fear, I start the car, trying to see through my blurry vision.

As I drive home, my mind roams back to Vince, the mess he has dragged us into, and the monster he has brought into our lives. It's a living nightmare, knowing that the debt he owed the Reaper Wolves has fallen on me since he claimed me as his mate.

Satish, the monster in human skin, is the looming danger, a threat I can't escape. A threat that now holds the power to claim everything I have, including my freedom and pack if I challenged my father. Which I will never do. Vince would make a terrible Alpha, and the moment Satish found out, he would seize the pack, enslaving everyone.

Upon reaching home, the sun's first light paints the sky with shades of pink and orange. Exhaustion drapes over me like a heavy cloak. As I return to my house, it takes me a few seconds to figure out what is wrong with the setting before me. Vince is no longer on the floor. Dread makes my stomach drop. *Where is he?* I expected him to still be sprawled on the floor where I left him, passed out in his drunken stupor.

The fear crawling up my spine pushes me to move, and I check the kitchen, only to be startled by a firm grip on my hair.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Vince's slurred words ring out, the smell of alcohol overpowering. My heart hammers in my chest as I grip his wrist and try to explain, “I was with Sa-” But he cuts me off mid-sentence.

“Were you with him? With Casen?” His words are laced with rage, and he accuses me, “Do you think I'll let him take you from me again, you little whore?” Before I can deny his accusations, I am thrown across the floor. My head bounces off the floor and I bite my tongue hard. Getting to my hands and knees he is already stalking toward me. I suck in a breath when I see his hand reaching for me, I dodge his grip that goes for my hair but

he grabs my arm instead. His next question chills my blood. “Where is Casey? Where's my fucking daughter?”

My fingers dig into his hand, trying to make him loosen his grip as I try to fend off his angry tirade. I hold on to his wrist, the sharp sting of his nails digging into my skin. I fall silent, knowing that no words will pacify him in this state when he grabs my hair once again.

“He has her, doesn't he?” Vince asks, his voice devoid of any semblance of sanity.

I muster up a reply, “He's her father, he has every right to see her.”

My defense of Casen only seems to fuel his anger as he takes it as confirmation, and he scoffs, “So you were with him?”

Shaking my head, I try to deny his accusations. But it's too late. His fury takes over as he starts dragging me toward the front door screen. I kick and try to make him let go of my hair that's ripping painfully from my scalp. He snarls angrily, kicking me in the ribs, and I cough when the air leaves my lungs. The next second, he slams my head against the hard floor, and darkness envelops me. The last thing I hear is his menacing voice, “I guess I'll have to go get her myself...” Before the world around me goes dark.

Darkness swallows my vision, but only briefly, I know I must be dreaming because of the setting. I've been here before. I've lived here before. Déjà vu washes over me as I sit looking on the bench by the treeline. Casen had been gone for a month now. Our fight replayed in my mind constantly.

He admitted to killing Vince, but that wasn't all. He's also killed the boyfriend I dated two years before him. Hearing that was shocking because he even helped me look for him alongside his family, even took me to the grave where he buried him. Only when I got there, I found six more graves marked out by the carvings in the trunk of trees. I shake the memory away, staring down at the ultrasound in my hand. Glancing at my

phone, I am about to dial his number to tell him he will be a father when I hear a rustle in the trees, making my eyes dart to the tree line.

“Zyan?” I murmur. The wolf smells like Casen's, yet his coloring is slightly off. Poppy presses forward “Mate,” she murmurs excitedly.

“Casen?” I blurt, and the wolf cocks its head to the side. I smile, relieved he's come back. I've done nothing but regret rejecting him. Then on my 18th birthday, I knew he for sure was my mate, his scent in my room drove me crazy just like the wolf's scent is now only in this form it's duller.

“It's you isn't it, you came back,” I cry, wrapping my arms around Zyan's neck. He sniffs me, licking my neck when he nips me. I jerk away, clutching my neck. “You can't mark me, not yet,” I tell him, my hand falling to my stomach. Zyan leans down sniffing my tummy, but then he growls. His paws swipe the fabric of my shirt.

“Geez, I know I fucked up when I rejected you, but no need to be a jerk,” I snap, wiping my tears. I turn to leave, irritated that he would try to hurt his daughter like that. He can be mad at me but I won't let him take it out on her. Suddenly, hands grab me, his scent enveloping me. “I know you're angry but I thought you'd at least be excited about your daughter, Casen,” I whisper. His warmth invades me and I grip his hands as they move over my prominent bump. Yet when his hands turn rough, claws scraping my skin, I grip his wrists.

“Casen, no. Stop, you're hurting me, you're hurting her.” Poppy goes to shove forward. “You can't shift,” I warn her, knowing it could kill Casey. When my blood runs cold.

“Wrong brother,” he snarls before sinking his teeth into my neck. My eyes widen in horror when I feel the bond click into place, feel his hatred, his burning anger, jealousy, making me realize it isn't Casen.

Poppy screams in anguish in my head as his marking me twists my stomach, pain courses through me everywhere and my pants become

soaked, my water breaking. "No, no," I choke on the words, feeling my surroundings darkening, "it's too early," it's too early are my last thoughts.

The next second or it could have been hours, I wake in the hospital bed, my eyes flutter open to see the white ceiling. My stomach is killing me and Poppy is eerily silent. Hands suddenly grab me, my mother's face hovering above mine. "Mom?"

"Thank goodness you're okay," she breathes out in relief, making my hands move to my stomach to find my belly flat.

"Mom?" I say frantically feeling my bump gone, I sit up feeling the strange tug.

"Not so fast you're still healing, your wolf is sedated," she says, gripping my arms.

"Casey?" I blurt.

"She's fine, love." Comes a voice that makes my blood run cold. I turn my head. To find Vince. "Isn't it a miracle, we found him, well, he found you," my mother rambles, but I can't tear my gaze from him. His face is identical to Casen's but also different, a scar runs down one side of his face, it faded, very faded but there.

He brushes my hair back gently. "You should have told me you were pregnant. I would have waited, but you were so excited, had I known." He shakes his head. I look at my mother. Surely, she doesn't believe him.

"Mom?"

"Casey's fine, your father is with her, he hasn't left her side, oh I need to tell him you're awake," she gushes rushing out, and I move to follow her when I am shoved back down by Vince. I open the mindlink only for his hand to connect with my face before it connects to my father.

“One word, and I will drown the spawn you had with my brother, I'm on night duty with her tonight. Now behave, and I will take you to her, may even let you keep her,” he tells me and I growl at his words. The next second a needle is in my arm and my surroundings fade once again, only the next time I wake everyone is gone, and only he remains, my daughter clutched in his arms.

Chapter 38

Casen

It's the same dream that has haunted me ever since that day. The memory is one that I wish I could forget, one I wish time and time again never happened, but it did. They deserved what they got, I don't regret killing them, it's the aftermath of what their deaths cost me that haunts me most. It cost me my brother. It cost me, my mate.

~Flashback~

I stir from my sleep, the room dark and still. Instinctively, I glance to my side, expecting to see Rose sitting engrossed in her video game. But the room is empty.

“Rose?” I sing out, sitting up and scrubbing a hand down my face. An unsettled feeling pricks my skin, and my gut turns as I note the absence of her energetic aura, her usual vibrant presence nowhere to be found. “Rose?” I call out, my voice echoing off the barren walls. But no reply comes.

I jump to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest. “Rose! Vince!” I call again, only to be greeted by a disquieting silence. Panic rises in my chest as I move through the house, checking each room with increasing desperation. Vince's room smells of stale beer and sweat with the faint trace of Rose lingering like a ghost, tugging at my very core.

Why was she in his room? She knows his room is off-limits unless I'm with her. I spot her shirt, which she borrowed from me, carelessly discarded on the floor. Her bathing suit lies crumpled beside it. My blood runs cold as I pick them up, her scent clinging to the fabric.

My heart pounds in my chest as I pull out my phone. I dial Vince's number first; the ringing echoes in my ear before it eventually goes to voicemail. I curse under my breath before trying Rose's number, but it's the same outcome. The house feels oppressively quiet, my worry for Rose filling the space.

Frustration swells within me as I look for my keys, only to remember that I gave them to Alisha, who needed to borrow my car. I storm out of the house, the cool night air doing little to tame my rising panic. I spot Andrei across the yard, his face dark and tense as he approaches.

"Where is she, Casen? She never showed up for training," he growls. The worry in his voice only heightens my own anxiety, and I clench my jaw.

"I need your keys," I say, my tone clipped. Andrei clicks his tongue and sighs heavily, his frustration evident.

"Again? For the love of the Moon Goddess, she's been a right brat lately and driving her mother insane, who in turn is driving me insane," he grumbles, but I can tell his annoyance is masking his own worry. I can't sense her, can't feel her, and it's terrifying.

The bond we share isn't a typical one, it's only one-sided, but the connection is there and it's undeniable. She isn't close; I can't even sense her, I may not have marked her, but having her grow up around me and spending every day with her, a bond has formed naturally.

At first, I couldn't explain it, but I get dribbles of emotion, the loneliness of being sheltered, her defiance at not being able to live outside being the perfect daughter, but most of all, I feel a desperation to be free.

I may not be able to use the bond to find her, but I can usually at least pick up on her. This leaves me with two options. She's either with her friend Emma, who is just as wild as Rose. Or she is with her boyfriend. Neither option is a good one because I usually drag her home each time, kicking and screaming or passing out drunk.

“Find her, and tell your brother not to be late for patrol; he missed the afternoon shift,” Andrei tells me, and I stop in my tracks.

“Wait! Vince started at midnight?” I ask him.

Andrei shakes his head. “No, he started an hour ago and never showed up,” Andrei informs me. My thoughts go to Vince, and I turn, looking at the parking lot to find his bike gone.

Gritting my teeth, I jog toward Andrei's car. “Bring her home, Casen,” he warns me, and I nod once. Great, I know I'll be getting a roasting from Sage tomorrow. I begged for my job, to be allowed to be around her, worrying about her constantly through the bond.

His words weigh heavily on me as I slide into the driver's seat and ignite the engine. The car roars to life, the sound reverberating through the silent night.

I circle a nearby town, my eyes scanning every street and alleyway, hoping to catch a glimpse of Rose. The night is alive with the hum of distant chatter and music, the town bustling with life. I try to ignore the sinking feeling in my gut as I pull up outside Emma's house.

As I suspected, Emma confirmed Rose was heading to a party. What I don't expect to hear is that it was Vince who encouraged this.

The party is in full swing when I arrive, the bass of the music vibrating through the ground beneath my feet.

I wade through the crowd of drunken partygoers, my nostrils filling with the scent of cheap alcohol and sweat. Vince is sprawled on a couch, passed out amongst a pile of empty bottles. I shake him roughly, demanding to know where Rose is. He mutters something unintelligible before drifting back into unconsciousness.

A sickening dread seeps into my bones as I continue my search. I climb the stairs, my footfalls drowned out by the pounding music. Room after

room I search, and I find no sign of Rose. But there's one last door, and when I try to open it, I find it locked.

The pit in my stomach deepens as I twist the knob again, a familiar voice stopping me in my tracks. "This room is taken," comes the slurred voice of her boyfriend, followed by a chorus of snickers. I feel Zyan stir within me, a primal growl rumbling in my throat. The next moment, I kick the door in, my eyes locking on Rose.

Chapter 39

I stride into the room, my heart pounding like a drum. The sight before me is enough to make any man sick. Two boys hover over Rose, hands maliciously moving across her unconscious form as they try to remove her clothes. Her germ of a boyfriend watches them with a twisted grin, encouraging their actions. A pit forms in my stomach, and a wave of anger washes over me.

“Enough,” I growl, taking control from Zyan, who has been fighting for dominance. The sound of my voice causes the room to fall into silence. Her boyfriend, seeing the change in me, immediately stands his ground, daring to challenge me. But it doesn't take long for him to falter under the weight of my stare.

“Get away from her,” I command, my voice hard as stone. I close the gap between us in two long strides, my fist connects with his face. He stumbles backward and the crunching sound of his nose breaking echoes in the room. I don't let him recover, my second punch connects with his jaw, and he crumbles to the floor.

The two other boys freeze, their eyes widening in fear. But one of them is bold enough to shift, his body morphing into a massive wolf. He lunges at me, but I quickly duck and punch his stomach hard. His form shifts back into that of a teenage boy, he cries out in pain before losing consciousness when my hand fists his hair, and I slam his face into the floor.

The fourth one, seeing his friend's defeated attempts, makes a run for it. I reach out and grip the back of his shirt, flinging him back into the room. He hits the dresser before slumping onto the floor, and I deliver a swift kick to his head, ensuring he stays down.

Turning back to Rose, I find her still unconscious, unaware of the danger around her. I curse under my breath, picking her up gently. Carefully, I sit

on the end of the bed, her breathing is soft, and I pry her eyes open to see them rolling in her head.

“The situations you get yourself in,” I whisper, kissing her hair and resting my chin on her head. Peering around, I can't leave them like this; the broken door would raise too many questions. But for now, the priority is Rose, so I set her down and try to fix the door as best I can, closing it slightly. I can't walk out of here with an unconscious girl in my arms while the place is packed.

Hours pass, and the music from the party gradually fades into silence. When the coast is finally clear, I carefully pick up Rose, her unconscious body limp in my arms. I carry her to Andrei's parked car, gently setting her in the passenger seat. Her skin is cold, and I notice goosebumps covering her bare arms. Removing my shirt, I draped it over her, hoping it would provide her some warmth.

With Rose secured, I head back inside to collect Vince. The house is a mess. People are passed out on the floor, and red solo cups are scattered everywhere. Vince is slumped on the couch, his snores filling the otherwise quiet room. It takes a few slaps, and a lot of shaking, to finally wake him up.

“Get up. I'm taking you home,” I command, giving a hard slap across the face. Vince wakes up with a start, his eyes blurry.

“Wha...” he slurs, his voice filled with confusion. Suddenly, I hear a groan. One of the boys from earlier is stumbling down the stairs, looking disoriented. I can practically feel Andrei's rage through our mindlink.

He'll be livid, not just at the boys, but also at me for neglecting to check in sooner.

Swallowing down the guilt, I grab Vince by the arm, practically dragging him towards the car. The desire to rip him apart and make him pay for

what he's done is overwhelming. But I need him to be conscious and understand the gravity of what he's done.

I don't allow him to ask questions. Instead, I grab him by the arm and drag him towards the door. The sight of him, so out of it, fills me with disgust. I toss him in the back seat of my car and then check on Rose. She's still unconscious, covered in goosebumps.

Climbing in the car, I notice the boys coming out of the house. My hands fist the steering wheel as I try to control Zyan, reminding him that the boyfriend is the mayor's nephew, with whom Andrei has an alliance. I try to ignore them, focusing on the road ahead. But it's hard; the memory of what I walked into, and what they tried to do to Rose, is too fresh in my mind.

The car roars to life, my grip tightening further on the steering wheel as I glance back at the house. I can see the boys rushing toward the road, their hollering ringing in my ears. With a heavy sigh, I put the car into gear and drove off, ignoring their catcalls.

Just when I think the night can't get any worse, I notice a car tailing us. I initially brush it off as paranoia and keep driving. But when Andrei's car is rammed from behind at a stop sign, I know it's not just my imagination.

Glancing back at the car, I see the four boys from the party grinning like they've won the lottery. I snarl, ripping the car off to the side of the road. Just a jump out, Rose's boyfriend does too.

I check the back of Andrei's car and curse. "You'll be paying for that, you little prick." He shrugs, uncaring, and moves toward the front of the car. Zyan presses beneath my skin, and I grab his shoulder.

"Go; Andrei will deal with you later," I warn him.

"What's your deal anyway? Always following her around like a lost puppy? Are you tapping that?" he asks, and I hear the car doors open in the car behind me.

“Get in your car, and go home,” I warn, my eyes flashing with a warning. But he only smirks, taunting me with his words.

“Nah, I think I will take my girlfriend home,” he retorts, taking a step closer. His friends join in, adding their own crude comments. A savage growl rips from my throat, my hands clenched into fists.

“You know, I could have your head for touching me? But if you hand her over, I may just forget about all this,” he threatens, the smirk never leaves his face.

Who does this little weasel think he is? Shaking my head, I try to go around him when he places his hand on my chest. Andrei hates this little germ. Unfortunately, he is close with his uncle, the mayor. Yet, I’m sure that won’t stop Andrei from killing him if he finds out what he was attempting to do to his daughter.

I have no idea who the other three are, but after what I witnessed earlier, they are just as vile as this bastard. “I’m not leaving without her,” he mocks, and I step closer.

“Then I guess you’re not leaving at all,” I tell him, letting my claws slip out. The boy’s smirk fades into a look of shock.

I hear a loud banging, my surroundings ripple, causing me to bolt up, alert. I growl when the banging starts again, and I hear Malik’s voice. I spin around, looking for him, but no one is behind me, just the car where Rose is. Though, the picture is fractured, cracking as the real world starts invading my dream.

Chapter 40

Casen

“Casen, wake up!” I jolt awake, like someone tipped ice water over me, finding the banging noise to be the door. I look around for my daughter, who is tucked into my side. Turning my head, I realize the sound is the front door.

“Vince is drunk. He's trying to get into the house,” Malik tells me.

“Where's Rose?” I ask him, and he shrugs.

“Want me to wake up, Andrei?” I shake my head, climbing out of the bed.

“Watch her while I deal with him,” I tell Malik just as I hear the door bang against the wall.

“That's the screen door,” Malik blurts.

My heart begins to echo, its rapid drumming against the hollow of my chest. Every fiber of my being screams alertness, a primal response coming from Zyan as he presses beneath my skin.

Barely conscious, I find myself bounding out of bed. The traces of slumber fall away rapidly, replaced by a raw and angry rage. My senses are sharper; my muscles coil tighter, and an untamed energy courses through me like lightning. I'm awake and just in time to see the front door convulse under the force of an unexpected blow. Time bends around me, morphing into a living entity stretching out every nanosecond, magnifying the fury within me.

My brother. My adversary. Vince. He is an unsteady silhouette swaying in the dimness of the porch light; he peers in the window. “Open the door, Casen!” I watch his silhouette swig from his bottle.

“I'm here to get my daughter,” he slurs, the words slinking into the room like uninvited and angry.

I storm through the living room, where Vince is stumbling around and shouting obscenities while banging on the wooden door.

I take a deep breath and make my way towards the front door. Images of Vince's drunken outbursts when we were younger flash through my mind as I approach the door, but I push them aside. Right now, I have to focus on getting him to leave.

When I swing the door open, I'm greeted by a disheveled and clearly intoxicated Vince. His eyes are red and bloodshot, and his breath reeks of alcohol. “What do you want?” I ask him sternly.

Vince sways on his feet before slurring out a response. “Where is she?” he snarls, his voice low and gritty. I tighten my fists, struggling to remain calm under the pressure of Vince's aggression because I don't want Casey woken.

“She's asleep,” I reply curtly. “Now, it's late, and you're not in a good state. I suggest you go home.” He takes another stumbling step forward, and I can feel Zyan pulse through my veins as my temper flares up in response.

Suddenly, Vince reaches out and attempts to push me aside. Instinctively, I grab his arm and throw him back onto the porch with ease before slamming the door shut behind me. Only a second later, he boots the door, which flings inward and slams harshly against the wall.

He takes a step closer to me, the smell of alcohol radiating off his skin.

Bitter rage swells within me, a churning vortex threatening to consume my restraint. “You're drunk, and tomorrow you can fix that damn door. Go home, Vince,” I command, stepping into his path, an unmovable wall of defiance. The sour reek of alcohol wafts off him, an unwelcome scent when first waking up.

His clouded gaze attempts to look past me, seeking something or someone beyond my shoulder. “Where's Casey? Give her to me,” he spits again, his voice echoing with an unearned sense of entitlement.

Adrenaline surges through me, ramping up my protective instincts. “He's not taking her,” Zyan snarls in my head. Well, that much is clear. I feel like a fortress shielding my loved ones from a storm. “My daughter is asleep. Rose will collect her when she's ready,” I declare, leaving no room for negotiation.

“Do you think you can just waltz back here and reclaim everything you lost?”

Vince's laugh, a hollow, mocking sound, ricochets off the walls, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. “Go home, Vince. It's late. You'll wake Casey,” I warn, my gaze flitting around behind him, searching for Rose. I only encounter shadows and a prickle of unease that snakes down my spine.

“Where is Rose anyway?” I ask.

His gaze snaps to me as I move to force him back, but he lunges toward me with a bottle in his hand. I step back, dodging his hand as he tries to hit me in the head with it.

“What the hell, Vince?” I demand. “You can't just barge in here like this! And where's Rose?”

Vince smirks at me, his eyes glazed and bloodshot. “Oh, she's fine,” he slurs. “Just sleeping like a little angel.”

I feel my fists clenching as I take in his words. What the hell had he done to our mate?

“Get out. Come see me tomorrow,” I snap, advancing on him. Vince staggers backward, tripping over a rug and crashing to the floor.

“Fuck you, Casen,” he spits, struggling to stand up. “You don't know what it was like, watching you be happy with her for all those years.”

My blood runs cold at his words.

“Where is she?” I snarl, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. Vince just laughs, his breath hot and sour against my face.

“As I said, she is taking a nap,” he chuckles. I feel a surge of rage course through me as I hear his words. With a primal roar, I headbutt him, feeling bone crunch beneath the force of my head connecting with his nose.

Vince collapses back onto the floor with a groan, blood pouring from his nose and mouth.

“Where is Rose, Vince?” I snarl.

The answer doesn't come from him. Instead, he lurches forward, drunkenly flailing a fist in my direction. His attack is clumsy, slow from the alcohol, and I smoothly sidestep his lunge, shoving him back out the door. He swings and misses.

Vince growls in pain as his knuckles collide with the solid oak door frame.