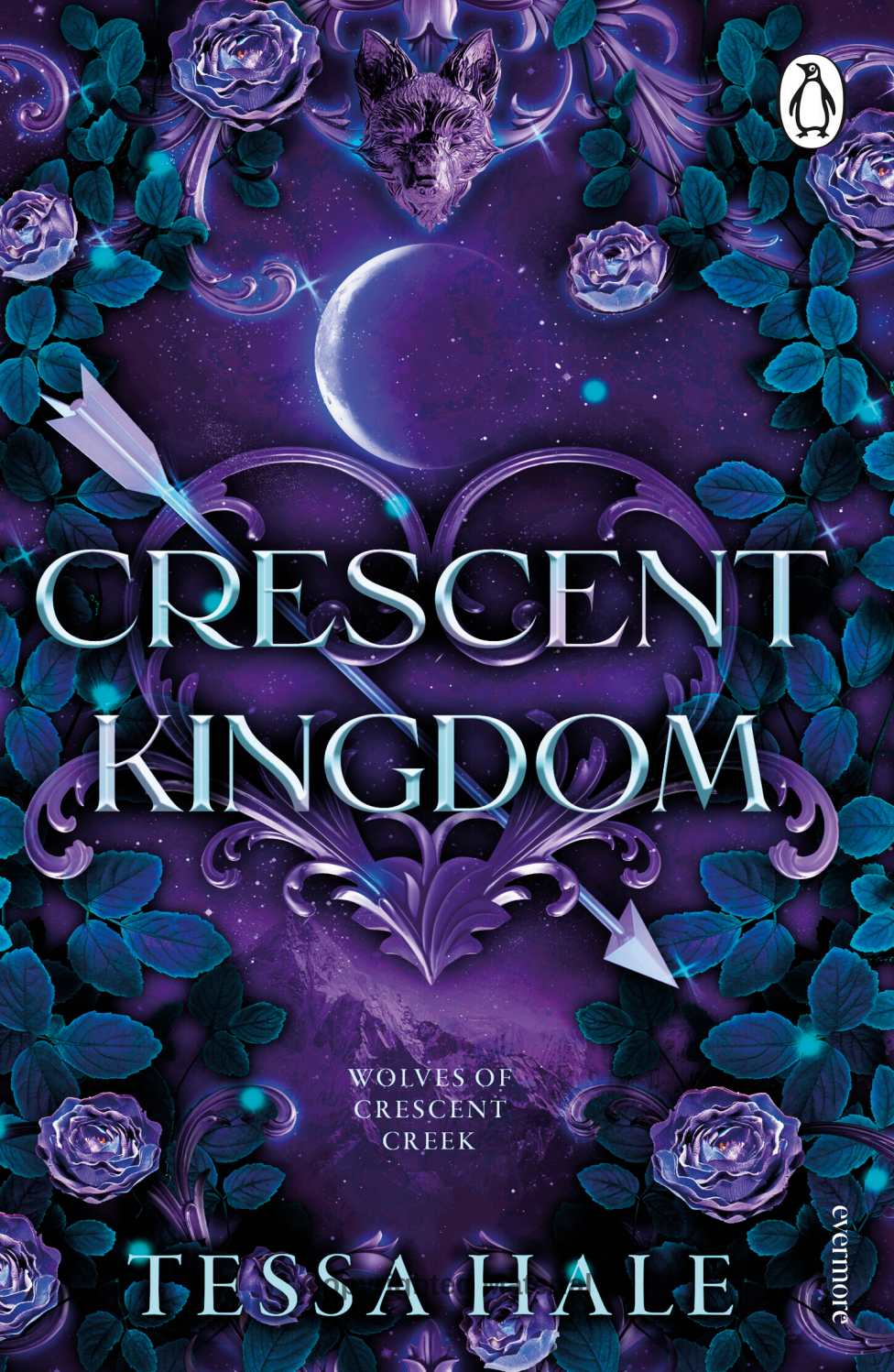

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Prologue

AGE NINE

Billy was sad. The teacher should've known just by looking at him. The way his head was bent, eyes focused on his hands. How he kept sniffling as he tried to keep the tears at bay. I'd learned to match the way people looked with their feelings. Because if I saw it before I felt it, I could sometimes make my shields stronger. But others, I wasn't fast enough.

Like now.

I'd been listening to Ms. Meyer talk about molecules, watching her draw them in a rainbow of colors on the whiteboard, and I hadn't seen it in time. Billy's sadness reached out with icy claws that tried to shred my chest. His hurt wanted to make a home in me, like I'd called to it in some way.

But my mom always said I couldn't let it in. That if I took on the world's pain, it would drown me. So, instead, I hid that I could feel it all.

We hid a lot, Mom and me. Like what our real names were and

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who we were running from. Like the fact that I was half wolf and half caster. But most of all, that I couldn't just take on the world's feelings. I could heal them. Only, if I wasn't careful, that healing might make it so I never woke up again.

"Sarah," Ms. Meyer began, pulling me out of my thoughts—thoughts that weren't on her lessons at all. "Can you tell me what part of the atom electrons circle?"

I clenched my hands, my fingernails digging into my palms. The pain helped sometimes. If I could give myself that, it would distract me from the hurt hitting my shields.

But Billy was *so* sad. I didn't know why. I never got the *why*. I just knew the emotion. Sometimes, I could even name it before the person experiencing it did.

My head started to pound, like it always did when there was too much.

"Sarah?" Ms. Meyer asked, crossing to my desk. "Do you have a headache?"

My mom told her I got them, just like she told every teacher I'd ever had. If it got to be too much, I was supposed to ask to go to the nurse. But I'd already missed half a day this week. I didn't want to miss another.

I took a deep breath and focused on my heartbeat the way Mom had taught me. *"My Little Wren, listen to the song inside you. As long as you hear your voice, you'll always be able to come back to yourself."*

I heard the bah-bump, bah-bump, bah-bump of my heart. I listened to the song that was mine alone. And then the headache and pain in my chest began to ease.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. "The electrons circle the nuclei."

Ms. Meyer's lips twitched. "Sometimes, I need to close my eyes to think of the answer, too."

"Weirdo," Tara muttered from behind me and to the right.

My shields were already up, so I couldn't feel her anger and hate. I was used to that coming from her. Knew that I needed to

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guard and block because ugly feelings lived in her—not just toward others but for herself.

"Tara," Ms. Meyer warned. "We don't name-call in this class."

Tara just let out a huff of air in response.

"All right. Now, who can tell me—?" A knock cut off Ms. Meyer's words. "Come in."

The door opened tentatively, and Ms. Alder, the school receptionist, stood in the entryway. Her face was pale, and her eyes were wide. The image said fear, even with my shields up. She swallowed, her throat struggling with the action. "We need Sarah in the office." Her gaze darted to me and then quickly away again.

Sarah. That was me.

I had to remind myself of the name I was supposed to answer to. It changed so often—every time my mom decided we'd been someplace too long. It was hard to keep up with.

Ms. Meyer nodded, a hint of worry passing over her expression. "Of course. Go on."

Tara made a snickering sound behind me, but I ignored it. All I could think about was the look on Ms. Alder's face. Fear. Shock. Those weren't good emotions. They were the kind that clawed and sliced when I let them in.

I did what I always did. I searched for the reason. I was always trying to find the source. Because if I found that, maybe I could fix the feelings in another way—some way that wouldn't end with me never waking up.

My worn sneakers squeaked against the linoleum as I wove through the desks to get to Ms. Alder. The moment I reached her, she put a hand on my shoulder.

Comfort.

That was what she was trying to give to me. That knowledge only made me more nervous, my stomach doing dips and whirls. I swallowed, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

I glanced up at her as she guided me down the hall. "What's wrong?"

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It took everything inside me to ask the question. Because I knew the answer could be bad. Had someone figured out one of my secrets? My supernatural side?

Mom had worked with me not only on my shields but also on how to hide my scent. The one that told other supes I was a hybrid. Because if they knew that, there was a chance they could tell my father.

The person we were running from.

Ms. Alder's jaw clenched so hard it looked like it might pop right out of the socket. "There are some people here who need to talk to you."

My stomach sank. I pictured humans in lab coats ready to drag me away. To experiment on me because I was different.

But as we rounded the corner, I saw something else. There were two police officers dressed in their typical blue uniforms, guns on their belts. And a woman in a suit who didn't quite fit right, her frizzy hair pulled back into a bun.

My stomach twisted again, my mind trying to put the pieces together. But before I could, that woman was striding forward. She had a gentle smile on her lips. "Hi, Sarah."

I didn't say a word. I couldn't.

The woman's smile wavered a bit. "Why don't we sit down?"

Ms. Alder's hand left my shoulder, replaced by the woman's as she guided me toward a bench outside the school office. The one you sat on when you were in trouble and waiting to see the principal. I'd never sat on it before.

As I lowered myself to the seat, the cold from the metal seeped through my jeans. I didn't look at the woman or the police officers speaking in hushed tones. I stared straight ahead, focused on the second graders' art projects lining the walls above the blue lockers. They were self-portraits. All different shapes and shades.

I tried to examine each and every one, to see the feelings in them. To understand them.

"Sarah." The woman cut into my thoughts. "I'm Maggie."

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It was rare that adults gave me their first names. The use of hers now made me wary and on edge.

"I work with the police when children are involved in a case."

My gaze snapped to her, but still, no words came.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah, but your mom passed away this morning. She's with the angels."

A buzzing sound lit in my ears. It intensified with each second that passed, making my whole body vibrate with it. "No."

The word wasn't a whisper, but it wasn't a shout either. It was a demand. An order for this woman to tell me she was lying.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah."

I hated her saying the words over again. I hated her *sorries*. And I despised her use of a name that wasn't even mine.

"We were able to locate your father. We know you haven't seen him for some time, but he wants to be here for you now."

My spine snapped straight. Fear, thick and black, spread through me as I heard the soles of someone's dress shoes clicking on the linoleum.

No. No. No.

I barely remembered my father. Quick snapshots. I mostly remembered my mother's screams—the ones she let loose as he hit her.

But Mom showed me his photo once a month. That, along with pictures of his closest enforcers. All the people I needed to know so I could run if I saw them.

Only now, there was no option to run.

The man stepped into the artificial glow of one of the overhead lights. His sad look was just as fake as the light above him. I knew it just by looking, but I could feel it, too—the sliminess pushing against my shields.

Some part of me knew that if I let my protections down around this man, he would end me.

His dark, almost-black hair gleamed under the false light. It

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was perfectly arranged, just like the suit he wore. Too perfect. His dark eyes cut to me. "Fleur."

My stomach cramped. I hadn't heard that name in years. There were times I longed for it, craved to simply be myself again. But hearing it now? It didn't fit. Not anymore.

The man took a step closer. "Don't worry, Little Flower. I've got you now. And I'm going to take you home where you belong."

Icy dread coursed through me as my wolf pushed to the surface. She wanted to be free, to run fast and far from Bastian Boudreaux, my so-called father.

I should've listened to her.

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CHAPTER ONE

Wren

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

"Order up," Gary called across the pass-through window as he slid two plates piled high with burgers and fries onto the counter.

Arcane was one of only two bars in the small town of Crescent Creek, Colorado. And by small, I meant minuscule. The population sat right around sixteen hundred. It made sense when the location, nestled between the mountains, meant you could be locked in by snow for weeks at a time.

But I liked the isolated feeling. And the fact that you knew almost everyone. Just like every local knew that while Arcane was known for its booze, it also had the best burgers in town.

I grabbed the two plates, not bothering with a tray. "Thanks, Gar."

He simply gave me a chin lift in response, making the silver

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in his beard catch the light. Gary wasn't big on unnecessary conversation, and it was one of the things I loved most about the big, burly grandpa biker. He never prodded into my life.

It meant I didn't have to lie to him. I'd lived in at least a dozen different places in the eight years since I'd broken free of my father's reign of terror. I'd painted elaborate lies for my past. But they added weight every time I told them.

That could be part of the reason Crescent Creek had felt like home the minute I passed through its town limits. No one pushed. Maybe because those with secrets came here to hide.

There were a handful of supernaturals: a couple of fox shifters, a witch, and even a griffin. But with my scent shields in place, none even gave me a second look.

I tried telling myself that flying under the radar was good. Necessary. But at the thought, my wolf half pressed against my skin, letting loose a keening sound inside me. She missed the contact of her kind, the feeling of being in a pack. And she was getting more than restless at the lack of both.

Weaving through tables, I came to a stop at a two-top. Sliding the plates in front of the two out-of-towners, I glanced at their cups. "Need any refills?"

I felt the brown-haired one's eyes on me. His scrutiny slithered across my emotional shields like oily tentacles. "I think we're good. Any recs for a dinner spot tonight? We're in town on a fishing trip. Here for a couple of days."

I knew the game—the subtle tossing out that he was available for me to warm his bed for a night or two. It probably wouldn't have been a bad idea. He was decent-looking and could maybe satiate my wolf for a few weeks. Give her the touch she so desperately needed.

She bared her teeth in disagreement, scoffing at the idea of this human being even *close* to what she needed.

My shoulders slumped. So much for that idea. "I recommend Gino's, down the block. Great pizza and pasta."

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The blond one leaned forward, his cologne invading my senses. "You could always meet us there."

I stepped back, trying to take a breath free of his sickly sweet scent. "Sorry, got plans. Flag me down if you need a refill or anything else."

My tip might suffer for my abrupt departure, but better that than breaking one of their arms because they put a hand on my ass. As I turned and walked away, the brown-haired one's voice caught my shifter hearing.

He let out a low whistle. "The body on that one."

"Fucking perfect," Blondie agreed. "It's too bad about her face."

Brown Hair chuckled. "I'd just take her from behind."

Anger coursed through me, the kind of rage I knew would take hours of sparring to work through. My fingers itched to move, to trace the scar running from the top of my forehead down my cheek.

Even now, all these years later, I could still feel the bite of the blade, the white-hot pain as I screamed and begged for mercy. But there was none. Never at the hands of Bastian Boudreaux.

It didn't matter how far I ran or how much time passed. I could still hear his voice in my head, taunting me in wakefulness and sleep.

"My daughter will not be a weakling. A submissive. She will be strong. *Even if I have to scar every inch of her body to make her so."*

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CHAPTER TWO

Wren

I can't believe you're heading to the gym after working a double," Dina said, counting out cash behind the bar.

The manager of Arcane had worked in these kinds of places since she was eighteen. Now, at fifty-five, she wore that experience like armor. Locals rarely attempted to cross her, and if they did, they met the other end of her bat.

As she stood there in her black cowboy boots and salt-and-pepper hair woven into a braid that hung halfway down her back, I envied Dina. The way she was so sure of herself. How she knew exactly who she was and made no apologies for it.

I hoisted my duffel over my shoulder. "You know I'm always twitchy after a shift. Gotta work that out."

I'd only been in Crescent Creek for a little over a month, but Dina was observant. And her keen eye meant that even though she didn't ask questions, she saw more than I likely wanted her

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to. Her gaze flicked to me, and then she went back to the money. "Give 'em hell."

I chuckled and headed for the back door. "Thanks, D. Get home safe."

As I slipped outside, I glanced at where my beat-up navy hatchback was parked. Not that anyone would want to steal it—its condition was too crappy. But I liked knowing it was still there. Just in case I needed to escape.

But I didn't need to use the vehicle daily, thanks to Dina renting me the studio apartment above the bar for a steal. I could walk everywhere I needed to go. It wasn't as if I went many places: the tiny grocery store a few blocks down, the woods behind the bar for a run in wolf form, and the gym.

Crescent Kingdom.

The name had called to me the moment I stopped in town, checking out what it had to offer and knowing I didn't have the cash to make it much farther. But Crescent Creek had been exactly what I needed. And the gym was, too.

As I pushed open the door, the familiar sound of gloved hands striking bags and mitts hit my ears. It created the most soothing symphony—the sound of home.

The place was humming, even at ten o'clock at night, largely because Crescent Kingdom's clientele worked long hours at other jobs. Fitting in fight training came after dinners with family or working double shifts at jobs like I did.

"Hey there, girlie. Thought you might be bailing tonight." Clyde ambled over in that stiff, limping walk he had—the gait of a fighter who'd reached his senior years.

I couldn't help the smile that pulled at my lips as I took in his grizzled face. "Never. Just took longer to close up tonight."

Clyde pinned me with a stare. "Rowdy customers?"

I'd never had a father. Not a real one, anyway—someone who cared about my well-being, happiness, and safety. I hadn't had grandparents either. As far as I knew, Bastian's parents were

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dead. And my mom never thought it would be safe for us to be in contact with hers.

But there was something about Clyde's gruff care and grandfatherly demeanor that made my chest ache in the most beautiful way.

"Nothing and no one I can't handle," I assured him.

Clyde chuckled. "I don't doubt that, girlie." He inclined his head toward a man in his late twenties, hitting a heavy bag. "Franco wants to spar if you're up for it. Getting ready for that bout in three weeks."

I watched the shirtless man connect with the bag, sweat glistening on his tan skin. He was fit, attractive, and moved with grace, but I felt nothing but respect for him. No tingling attraction or anything else. Maybe that part of me was broken.

"No problem," I agreed quickly. "Just need to warm up."

"I'll get the ring clear in thirty," Clyde said.

I gave him a quick nod and moved to the far wall, where I tucked my bag. Clyde had a small locker room for the handful of women who frequented the gym, but I didn't want my bag anywhere I couldn't see it, where it might be difficult to get to if I needed to bolt.

I'd learned the hard way to carry everything I needed with me: my current fake ID, along with at least two others, enough cash to get me through a couple of weeks, and a spare set of clothes.

Everything had to be ready so I could flee at a moment's notice and transform. I'd had every hair and eye color under the sun but was currently back to my natural dark brown with blue eyes that almost looked turquoise in certain light. There was only one thing I never changed.

My first name.

It was an homage to my mother—the only piece of her I still carried with me. Because each time I heard someone call my name, I heard my mom's voice in my head. *"My Little Wren, listen to the song inside you. As long as you hear your voice, you'll always be able to come back to yourself."*

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I held tightly to that reminder, using my heart to ground me every time the pain got to be too much—other people's or mine.

Letting my duffel drop to the floor by the wall, I hopped onto a treadmill and turned up the speed to an easy jog. Many female fighters sparred in shorts and bra tops. I didn't have that option if I didn't want to answer questions about the scars riddling my body, so I opted for leggings and a long-sleeved workout shirt.

You could see a couple of the scars on my hands, but most people assumed I had been in a car accident of some sort. Because that made sense. No one would think my own father had inflicted the wounds.

I punched up the speed as the memories tried to take hold. The burn of my muscles always helped, as did my refusal to be a victim any longer.

If my father came for me again, he wouldn't find a trembling little girl.

"Wren," Clyde shouted over the music and the sounds of punches and kicks. "We're ready for you."

I slowed the treadmill's speed, easing back into a jog and then a walk. I didn't rush the process. That was how you ended up with a pulled or torn muscle, and I didn't have time for that.

Stopping the treadmill altogether, I hopped off and did a quick set of stretches. An exaggerated groan sounded to my right.

"Wren, you are *killing* me," Juan muttered. "When are you going to give in and marry me?"

My lips twitched as I glanced over at him from my forward bend. "When you can best me in the ring."

Franco chuckled and slapped Juan on the shoulder. "That's a no-chance-in-hell, my man."

Juan just grinned at him. "Never say never, just like the Biebs says."

Franco scowled. "Jesus."

I laughed. This sort of shit talking made me feel like one of the guys, even if I was sort of being hit on. I knew Juan wasn't serious,

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just like he wasn't serious about fighting. He did it for fun, to stay in shape, and to spend time with his friends.

If I really thought about it, he was probably the healthiest of us all. Because you often found people with demons in these sorts of gyms—those trying to beat them into submission. And it only worked for small snippets of time.

I straightened, testing my limbs to make sure they were loose and warm. "Let's do this."

Franco nodded, took a swig of water, and then tossed the bottle to Juan. "Don't hold back."

Clyde snickered. "Not sure you want to give her that kind of permission."

Warmth spread through me at Clyde's words and his belief in me. He had no idea what sort of gift that was.

I climbed into the practice ring, ducking between the ropes. Crescent Kingdom was a mixed martial arts gym on the whole, but people here generally specialized in boxing or jiujitsu. I wanted to learn it all. To know everything I could use to defeat my opponent.

Franco was training for a local MMA match a few towns over and was one of the fighters at the gym who could give me the best run for my money. He sauntered toward the center of the ring, holding out his knuckles covered by fingerless practice gloves.

Tugging mine on, I met him in the middle to touch fists.

"Ready?" Clyde called, backing away from the ring.

I liked the way Clyde coached. He moved around the ring, sometimes getting right up next to it for a closer view, other times backing off so he could see the full picture. He said it gave him perspective.

Franco lifted his chin in assent, and I did the same.

A whistle sounded in the distance.

Franco immediately rose to the tips of his toes, and we started the dance. Our movements came in testing jabs and kicks. Though we'd sparred countless times before, every day was different. You

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never knew what a person might be carrying with them in those moments.

Franco's fist shot out, trying to get my ribs. I blocked the worst of it, answering with a kick to his side, instantly rebuking myself. I should've gone for his legs, kicking them out from under him.

Too late now.

I moved quickly, darting in for an uppercut to Franco's jaw. His head snapped back, but he quickly righted himself. Neither of us was sparring at full strength. If we had been, that punch would have packed a hell of a lot more heat.

We dodged and wove, each landing the occasional hit. I had to admit, Franco was getting better.

"Stop holding back," he growled.

I should've known he'd realize what I was doing. He was too smart not to. I could never fight with my full shifter strength or speed in here, but I *was* holding back even the human part of me.

Giving Franco what he wanted, I lunged forward. Using my petite size, I ducked under his swing and swept his legs out from under him. Franco hit the mat with a loud thud as a collective series of *ooooh*s sounded around us.

I moved in to pounce, to get him into an armbar or some other hold, but Franco was fast. He leapt to his feet before I got there, hands up by his face. We traded punches, and then the air shifted, something catching on it—a scent I hadn't smelled in weeks.

Wolf.

The shock was enough to have my guard slipping, my hands lowering. And then a fist connected hard with my jaw.

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CHAPTER THREE

Kingston

The moment I stepped into the gym, I finally felt like I was home, unlike when I'd gotten to our pack lands or even our house. Crescent Kingdom had truly become my grounding place.

Six weeks away from it was way too fucking long. It didn't matter if it was for a mission to bring justice to countless souls. Or that we'd walked away with a whole new pile of cash lining our pockets. I hated being away for so long. Especially in the mountains of Siberia. It might be spring in Colorado, but it was the dead of winter there. And I was pretty sure the cold still lived in my bones.

The sound of gloves hitting bags was less than I would've expected given the number of vehicles in the parking lot. But the moment I scanned the room, I saw why.

She was captivating.

Everything in me stilled as I took in the female. My wolf

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instantly rose, pressing against my skin, dying to break free. I took in a deep breath, letting her scent fill my lungs.

Human.

But somehow…different.

That second thought had my wolf going on high alert. There was something about it. A wrongness.

Was she sick? Injured?

As I watched the woman circle the ring, I knew neither of those could be true. She moved like a ballerina, but her hits had the force of someone five times her size. Franco was one of our top human fighters, and she was giving him a run for his money.

I took a few steps deeper into the gym, coming to stand next to my manager, Clyde. "Who is she?"

His gaze flicked to me for a beat before returning to the ring. "Gets in an hour ago, and he's already back at work."

"You know I can't stay away."

Clyde chuckled. "You know what they say about all work and no play."

"This is my play." That much was true. Creating a safe space for people to learn how to protect themselves and work through the worst things they'd been through had given me a purpose in my darkest hour.

Clyde simply scoffed.

"So," I pressed, feeling my wolf's impatience. My human half felt the emotion, too, but my wolf was the part of me I needed to worry about.

One corner of Clyde's mouth kicked up. "Got to town about a month ago. Name's Wren. I have to admit, I didn't think a little thing like her should even be in this gym. But damn if she didn't prove me wrong."

I watched her move, darting forward and sweeping Franco's legs out from under him. It was a thing of beauty. But as he leapt back up, and they circled one another, I couldn't help but notice that she was holding back.

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"Can't even have her truly sparring with any of our women. It's too unfair. Hell, I wouldn't even put her in the ring with half our men. She'd level them."

I mulled over Clyde's words as I moved closer to the ring as if the woman had cast some sort of spell over me.

Wren stiffened, something grabbing her attention just long enough for her gloves to drop. Franco hit her in the jaw—way too fucking hard for a sparring practice.

As the woman hit the mat, Franco cursed, already crouching down. "Shit, Wren. I'm sorry. Just got caught up in the moment."

My strides ate up the distance in no time, and as I reached the edge of the practice ring, I leveled a glare at Franco. I knew my eyes had to be flashing, the silver that warned others I was a predator.

Franco stumbled back a few steps. "I didn't mean to get her so hard. I thought she was gonna block me."

Wren struggled to sit up, blinking away what I was sure was some blurriness in her vision. "I'm fine. I'm an idiot, but I'm fine."

Seeing her like this made her name seem to fit. Wren. Delicate, just like the bird.

"Come on," I said, my voice going gruff. "Let's get some ice on that."

"I'm okay," she argued instantly. "Really."

My wolf bristled. He was already on edge, wanting to rake his claws down the chest of the man who'd hurt his Little Warrior.

His?

Fuck. Was this a mating call? I'd felt them a time or two, the pull of attraction that meant someone could possibly be your mate. It wasn't a guarantee, only a sign that you were compatible.

The only certainty came from a true mating bond—the kind that showed itself the second you had skin-to-skin contact. It was said the bond sang through every nerve ending, and images of your future would flash.

I reached for Wren's elbow as she slid under the rope, trying

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to steady her. She stiffened instantly. I braced, waiting to feel the certainty, to see those images. But there was nothing.

My wolf growled at the lack of it all. He wanted her to be his. And I sure as hell understood the disappointment.

I shook it off, trying to pull myself together. "Come on. Let's get you to my office."

"I'm good. Really—"

"Girlie, you don't gotta listen to him, but you do gotta listen to me if you wanna keep fighting around here. His office so we can take a peek at you."

Wren's head lifted, revealing the full side of her face for the first time. I knew wounds. My brothers and I had received more than a few, so I knew how to recognize what had inflicted them. And this scar hadn't been caused by shattered glass or some freak accident. It was from a blade.

My wolf went rabid.

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