

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HAILEY EDWARDS



DEAD  
AS ADODO

THE YARD BIRDS BOOK 2

DEAD AS A DODO

HAILEY EDWARDS



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Edited by [Sasha Knight](#)

Copy Edited by [Kimberly Cannon](#)

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# CONTENTS

[Dead as a Dodo](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Join the Team](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Hailey Edwards](#)

# DEAD AS A DODO

## **Yard Birds, Book 2**

Ellie has done her best to keep the spark alive in her marriage to Wally, but she has limited options with her husband cursed into the body of a vintage novelty toy. She thought everything was going okay, aside from the fact he's battery-operated and bursts into song whenever his motion sensor is triggered, but he's done being a collector's item.

When the Middles turn up with a half-dead coworker on her doorstep, Ellie jumps at the chance to help her nephews find who's responsible to avoid the problems at home. As the attacks grow deadlier, and the rift between her and Wally grows wider, Ellie has to focus on saving herself if she ever hopes to save her marriage.

## No-Bake Chocolate Oatmeal Cookies

2 cups white sugar

half cup margarine

3 cups quick cooking oats

3 tbsp unsweetened cocoa powder

1 tsp vanilla extract

a pinch of salt

half cup peanut butter

half cup milk

\* Combine sugar, margarine, milk, cocoa, and salt in a saucepan. Bring to a rapid boil for 1 minute.

\* Mix in quick cooking oats, peanut butter, and vanilla. Combine well.

\* Drop by teaspoonsfuls onto waxed paper and let cool.

## CHAPTER ONE



The weight of my age pressed me into the couch, the wiry springs jabbing me, and I groaned through the bright sting as Betty poured peroxide over a deep gash down my right side. I'd earned it in a skirmish with an ornery jackalope who had the gall to gore me for relocating her and her babies after the damn fool thing gave birth in a slight depression on Mayor Tate's prize-winning front lawn.

Jackalopes, in my humble opinion, combined the worst hare traits with a rack of sharp antlers.

Weirdly enough, they were also one of the most counterfeited taxidermy mounts.

Poor humans thought they were so crafty sticking tiny deer antlers on hare heads when the west, mainly Texas, was lousy with the real thing. Though I suppose, being human, they had no way of knowing that.

"I don't want to hear it." Betty capped the bottle then moved on to smearing a yellow-green salve with a rotten egg stink across the raw marks and the single puncture wound. "You did this to yourself."

Had Wally been here when I woke before dawn in a cold sweat, he could have talked sense into me.

But Wally hadn't been here. He *still* wasn't here. And I had no idea when to expect him back.

*Uncle Wally and I are off to watch the will-o'-the-wisp migration.*



That was the note Zander left taped above the Velcro strips where I stuck Wally before falling asleep.

Once he and Wally got home? After I made sure they were safe and sound? Then I would murder them.

“Last I checked,” I grumbled at Betty, “I don’t have antlers, so I most certainly didn’t do this to myself.”

“*Ha.*” She shifted to packing the deepest injury with a mix of dried herbs. “That was a joke, right?”

I wouldn’t be in this mess if her kid hadn’t spirited away my husband. Which I had explained to her at maximum volume the second she rolled through the front door with a first aid kit balanced across her knees.

“Why are you so hostile?” I wriggled deeper into the cushions to escape her. “*I’m* the wronged party.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Unwilling to incriminate her youngest son, she mumbled a nonanswer. That was all she had to say on the topic of Wally’s abduction beyond assuring me she wasn’t worried about either of them. Because Zander would protect his uncle.

If Zander gave a fig about Wally’s safety, he would have left his uncle hanging right where he found him.

*Hmph.*

“Are you trying to tell me I’m overreacting? That I’m wrong to be worried for *my* husband, who is cursed into the body of a singing fish on a plaque *your* son took God only knows where? Wally is collectable. He could get stolen and auctioned off on eBay. And it would be *all* Zander’s fault.”

Maybe, just maybe, I hadn’t been thinking straight when I strapped on Bam-Bam and stomped off in the predawn hours to distract myself from the hurt of waking alone, betrayed by two of the people I loved most in this world, but I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of admitting I knew I had acted a fool.

“You are so full of self-righteous bullshit I have to scrape off my shoes every time I leave your house.”

“Oww.” I flinched away from her stabby fingers. “Can you be more careful?”

Pretty sure her jabbing me was yet another attempt to teach me a lesson about the pitfalls of gallivanting off on quests without backup. As if a jackalope even qualified as a side quest. Had the momma not been on high alert after a birthing, I would have gotten the drop on her.

“Hmm.” A wicked light came to life in her eyes. “Can you tell me about your date with Pastor Joe?”

This must be how it felt to make a deal with the devil, but gossip was the less painful evil.

“It wasn’t a date,” I growled from between clenched teeth. “He had a spare ticket.”

To an MMA match, which I quickly realized held about as much appeal for him as a fashion show would’ve held for me. He was a bit too queasy for ringside. The fresh blood made him squeamish.

“A spare ticket he purchased for you.” She tacked on an unholy grin. “He paid for your dinner too.”

“I bought my own dinner, thank you.” As her touch gentled with her distraction, I fed her more details. “It was a pizza buffet, not an intimate candlelit dinner, and a girls softball team headed to nationals was hogging the pepperoni. Kids were crawling all over the place. I counted *ten* babies.” And I had been grateful to every single one of them for not leaving me alone with my *date*. “Not exactly romantic.”

A thoughtful expression settled across her features that I did not like one bit. “How did Wally take it?”

Fine, or so I had thought. Until he pulled his vanishing trick. Now I was second-guessing myself.

Good Lord, what if he left me over this? What if he never came back? What if he was gone for good?

For a solid minute, Betty watched me squirm then pursed her lips. “Hmm.”

“Stop *hmm*-ing and *mmm-hmm*-ing at me.”

A hard thud against the front door jerked me to attention, and I tugged my housecoat closed over the bandages. Surprise lent me an adrenaline boost I used to stand while Betty spun her scooter clockwise.

“I didn’t sense the perimeter alarm.” I took a step. “Whoever it is, they’re allowed to be here.”

Pain must have dulled the warning tingle that alerted me to guests, solidifying my belief it was someone always welcome in my home. Otherwise, the wards would have pestered me until I acknowledged them.

“Sit back down. You’re hurt.” She shoved me hard enough I hit the cushions and bounced, convinced it was Zander. That if I reached him first, I would throttle him. “I’ll answer it.”

That blasted scooter was quicker than her walker, and faster than me too when she kicked it into high gear. I wasn’t about to let her help Zander escape, so I gave her a head start then crept up behind her, prepared to climb over her *and* her scooter to reach my nephew.

But it wasn’t Zander at the door.

Zack stood on the porch, cradling a limp woman in a bridal carry.

Zeb stood beside them, his shirt soaked through with blood.

## CHAPTER TWO



The Middles, her middle sons, wore matching grave expressions as Betty and I grappled in the doorway.

“Who...?” Betty poised to rise from her seat, trying to glimpse the woman’s face. “What...?”

“Sit your butt down.” I elbowed past her. “As for you two, answer your mother.”

“This is Bernie.” Zack hitched her up higher. “She works for Sweetwater Construction.”

The Sweetwater pack, to which the Middles belonged, owned a small construction company. They kept a tight crew, mostly shifters from their pack and their human family members. Job opportunities were scarce in small towns, even rarer for paras, and Sweetwater was doing their part to employ locals.

“Get in here.” I hustled the boys into the kitchen and cleared the condiment carousel Ida bought me last year for Christmas off the table to give us a clean, flat surface. “You know the drill.”

Lord knows I had bandaged enough scraped knees, stitched my fair share of wounds, and set a broken bone or two sitting right here at this table. Witchlight gave all its agents a basic grasp of first aid, but I had learned more in the field from other agents than I ever had in the classroom, and those skills had never come in handy so much as when Betty started growing her family.

Zack lowered Bernie while I arranged her limbs to make her as comfortable as possible. Not that she had any idea either way. The poor thing had lost so much blood, she didn't even whimper.

Once we got her settled, he started digging out supplies while Betty called in the coven to help.

"Start talking, boys." I ran a sink full of hot, soapy water. "How did this happen?"

"We got to work before dawn." Zack thumped the first aid kit onto the scratched and dented wood. "We were doing our safety checks, as usual, when we picked up the scent of blood. Bernie—Bernadette—is a falcon shifter." He stepped back to give Zeb room to hand over the old kitchen towels I kept washed and bleached for just such occasions. "I thought maybe she got shot down—she likes to fly in to work—but her heart was almost torn from her chest."

That perked Betty's ears, and she rolled in closer for a look. "A black witch?"

A black witch might eat the heart of a shifter in a pinch, but they preferred feasting on white witches—like my coven and me. Except we had so little magic between us, they mostly left us alone.

"She doesn't smell like black magic." I thanked my lucky stars for it too. "This is something else."

"We didn't smell any magic." Zack ruffled his sweaty hair, and it stood on end. "Only blood."

Zeb fixed his stare on me, dipped his gaze to my injured side, then raised an eyebrow.

Only then did Zack catch his brother's drift, and he crinkled his forehead at me in question.

"I'm fine." I waved off their concern. "Let's focus on the girl bleeding to death on my table for now."

Neither of them looked happy about the deflection, but Bernie required my full attention.

“Scissors.” I opened my hand, and Betty slapped them across my palm. “We need to get this shirt off.”

Given the shifter outlook on nudity, and the fact Bernie balanced a hairsbreadth from death, I didn’t fret about preserving her modesty. I cut through her tee, and then her bra. Once I cleared that away, I got an eyeful of what Zack had meant, and the raw mass of her chest made me queasy.

Had there been a whiff of black magic on her, I wouldn’t have been shocked. A black witch’s talons dealt these exact injuries on their prey. But the Middles would have scented one a mile away. The stench of a black witch was like standing next to a full restaurant dumpster during the height of Alabama’s summer.

“No phone.” Zack gathered her things as I removed them. “She must have dropped it during the attack.”

“She was clothed,” Betty talked it out. “She must have already flown in, shifted, then dressed for work.”

Curious where she would have stashed her outfit, I asked the boys, “Do you have porta-potties?”

Zeb stuck out his hand and tilted it from one side to the other.

“A member of the pack has gone into business renting these fancy mobile toilet trailers,” Zack explained. “It gives our employees a clean area to keep their clothes and privacy from humans.”

“Air-conditioned,” Zeb grunted, clearly impressed with that feature above the others.

“That too.” Zack shared a grin with him, but then he sobered. “Bernie was wearing a flannel shirt when we found her.” He refocused on his mother’s line of thought. “We took it off her, and Zeb used it to staunch the bleeding on the drive over. Whoever did this to her, she didn’t have time to remove her clothes and shift before they struck.”

“Check the toilets,” I told them. “Her attacker could have picked the lock and hidden in one to get the drop on her.”

“Have there been any other instances of violence?” Betty sounded every inch the momma bear, despite being a witch. “Has she had a nasty breakup recently? Does she have bad blood with anyone? Has she been thinking of issuing a challenge to move up in the pack?”

Challenges for higher rank within a pack got ugly fast, but only honest wins counted, and witnesses were a prerequisite for making the ruling stick.

“Not as far as we know.” He exchanged glances with Zeb, who might as well share a psychic connection with the brother who was more like his best friend than a sibling. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too.” He shifted his attention to me. “The only recent issue we’ve had was when a drifter showed up at the new Sav ‘n’ Smile we’re building off the highway near Elmore. He issued a challenge to me, thinking I was the alpha, but I explained he would have to talk to Jo Beth if he wanted to fight her for the pack.”

Jo Beth Thompson.

The alpha sow of Sweetwater.

Sweetwater was a catch-all pack the Middles joined after graduation, and Jo Beth was the biggest, meanest bear I ever did see. Hard to believe she packed all that muscle and attitude into her five-foot-nothing human body. She was cute as a bug’s ear, a dead ringer for a young Judy Garland, but you didn’t hear me say that.

“Murdoch,” Zeb reminded his brother, his distaste plain.

“Murdoch?” I glanced between them. “Who’s that?”

“The Murdoch pack,” Zack explained. “The drifter joined them after Jo Beth won their match.”

A prickle along my senses alerted me to the arrival of more guests before I heard car doors slamming.

Joan burst through the front door wearing a soft brown jumpsuit with black boots, hair sticking out everywhere, her massive purse slapping against her hip, and sucked in a sharp breath.

“I brought birdseed,” she panted, hauling out a plastic bag and holding it triumphant above her head.

“That’s...” I settled on, “...helpful.”

“Set it by the toaster,” Betty ordered her then spoke to me from the side of her mouth. “Good Lord.”

“You told her falcon *shifter* and not falcon, right?”

“How many falcons do you know that eat Wild Wonders’ fruit and nut blend?”

I didn’t waste time wondering. If I hadn’t managed to figure out Joan during the decades of our friendship, I wasn’t going to crack the code in the next few minutes.

Checking with the boys, Betty asked, “Do we need to call Bernie’s people?”

Zeb flashed his phone’s screen at her, showing he had texted Jo Beth and told her where to come.

“Did you bring the crystals?” I located Joan, who had dropped to her hands and knees to search under my sink for God only knows what. “We’ll need at least two.”

“Oh.” She produced a hummingbird feeder covered in an inch of dust. “Yes.”

She set the feeder by the sink then hauled herself onto her feet using the counter. She located a magic-infused quartz deep in her bag as two more familiar car doors slammed. She placed one crystal each at the head and foot of the table.

The girls didn’t stand on ceremony. There was no knock. Just a breeze as they blew into the house.

Ida swept into the room dressed in a flouncy navy blue and white polka dot dress. Her hair was slicked back in a high ponytail, and loose ringlets framed her face. Her white pumps, thankfully, were patent leather. She could wipe the blood right off them.

Flo strode in wearing a crimson pantsuit with her hair done up in a French twist. Her mouth was painted a bloody shade



that matched Bernie's gaping wound, and her black stilettos added a good two inches to her height.

They skipped hellos in favor of joining hands with Betty, Joan, and me as we formed a tight circle around Bernie. While Joan harmonized our powers into one smooth wave of magic, we began a healing chant that drew its power from the quartz rather than us.

As Bernie's ragged flesh sealed, the tender skin turning bright pink, we let out a collective sigh of relief.

As depleted as the quartz, the five of us sank into chairs surrounding our patient, beads of sweat dotting our foreheads, while the Middles poured us a round of scotches to put the fire back in our bellies.

All that was left to do now was wait.

And pray.

## CHAPTER THREE



Not twenty minutes after we stabilized Bernie, a tremor ran through my wards, alerting me I had guests. Figuring the stronger zap was Jo Beth, I sent Zack on ahead to fetch her while Zeb stayed behind with us to watch over their recovering packmate.

“Auntie El,” Zack hollered from the yard like he hadn’t been raised better. “You’ve got company.”

“I’m the one who told you—” I whipped my head toward Zeb as it hit me. “*Human* company?”

Zeb gave a firm nod then plucked at the front of his ruined shirt, reminding me I wasn’t dressed to entertain.

“Land o’ Goshen,” I swore. “Who has timing this bad?”

A smile tried its best to crack Zeb’s stern expression, but his concern for Bernie won out.

Flo was less restrained in her glee after she shoved from the table and pressed her face in the window.

“Oh my.” She fanned her face. “Your boyfriend is here, Ellie.”

“Pastor Joe?” Betty required no further encouragement to zip to her side. “He even brought flowers.”

His name reminded me that my husband had yet to return home, and my heart sank like an anchor.

Agreeing to go on a date with Pastor Joe had been Wally’s idea. I only went to prove him wrong. And Joe had proven me

right to doubt. As if I could get serious with someone who blanched at the sight of blood.

“I don’t have time for this.” I grabbed Joan, the least dingy of us, by the arm. “Tell him I’m not home.”

“But you *are* home.” She set down the seed she had been separating into piles of fruits, nuts, and sunflower kernels. “Your yard is also full of cars.”

Of all the times for her to speak sense, she had to point out the flaws in my plan right now.

“I overheard Pastor Joe mention he’s thinking of growing his own oyster mushrooms in his basement,” Ida lied through her flower-pink lips. “I bet he would love pointers from someone more experienced.”

“Oysters?” Joan zoned out for a beat. “They *are* the easiest species to cultivate for beginners.”

“Oh?” Ida set her hands on Joan’s shoulders and aimed her at him. “You two have so much to discuss.”

“Pearl oysters are another variety that might interest him. As well as king oysters.” She ambled onto the porch. “There are even pink, blue, and golden oyster mushrooms. Pinks resemble a rose blossom.” Ida began shutting the door on her heels. “Larger, of course. And lumpier. Asymmetrical.” The latch clicked into place behind her, muffling her voice. “They aren’t much like rose blossoms, really, now that I think about it.”

“Well,” Betty chortled, “if you wanted to get rid of your suitor for good, you’ve done it.”

“If I could be so lucky.” I rubbed the skin over my breastbone. “I’m going to wash up and change.”

Joan was right. I couldn’t avoid Pastor Joe. I had to send him off myself.

“You’re dolling up for him?” Flo pivoted toward me, hand on her hip, bright nails flashing. “You two must be serious.”

“Humans tend to panic at the sight of blood spattering your clothes and vital organs clumping in your hair.” I struck my

own pose. “However, if you’re daring me to walk out there as is, I’m happy to oblige.”

That would break things off with a loud *snap* for sure.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Ida breathed. “What am I saying?” She charged me. “Of course you would.”

When Ida wrapped her arms around my waist to hold me still, I let out an involuntary groan as my aching ribs protested her restraint. “*Ouch.*”

“I’ve been hit by pillows stronger than Ida.” Betty peeled herself from the window. “Stop being a baby.”

“Are you hurt?” Ida recoiled, searching my face. “I thought the blood was all Bernie’s, but...”

“I did too.” Flo dropped her arms to her sides. “What did you do this time?”

Concern crept into her features, as much as the Botox allowed anyway. Then again, maybe I imagined the twitch in her forehead that wanted to be a wrinkle of concern. Her skin was too flawless to be sure.

“Did you help the Middles retrieve Bernie?” Ida fussed over me. “I didn’t realize you were there.”

Zeb, never one to snitch, stared at the floor to avoid outing me.

“I had a disagreement with a momma jackalope.” I glowered at Betty, wanting to throw her—and her no-good youngest son—under the bus for my diminished mental capacity at the time, but I didn’t have the heart to explain the Wally situation again. “Nurse Betty has already doctored my wounds.”

Though she hadn’t healed me with magic. Out of spite. Had Bernie not arrived when she did, in the condition she was in, I might have spent magic on healing myself. But her need far outweighed mine.

“Did I miss a call?” Ida checked her phone, her frown deepening. “When did this happen?”

“Ida, you’re a dear, but you know how our fearless leader operates.” Flo’s lips, possibly the most mobile part of her face these days, puckered. “Ellie saw an opportunity to act a fool, and she took it.”

“I was not acting a fool.” I jerked on my collar. “The jackalope den was in the mayor’s front yard.”

“Ah.” Flo hummed low in her throat. “There was a potential exposure crisis on our hands, and you took it upon yourself to handle the problem.” She nodded. “I’m sure a little old lady limping away from the scene, all black and blue, was much less alarming to bystanders.”

“There were no bystanders.” I turned on my heel and left them to chastise thin air. “I was careful.”

Even with Joan running interference with her inexhaustible knowledge of fungi, I didn’t have time for a shower. Avoiding my gaze in the mirror, I stripped down to my underwear then wet a washcloth to scrub myself clean. That worked for about five minutes. Then I had no choice but to check my reflection.

Mottled purple discolored my left cheek, smudging that side of my jaw with yellow and a touch of green for flare. Bernie’s blood must have covered a multitude of sins for the girls not to notice this sooner.

There was nothing for it. I couldn’t face Pastor Joe looking like this. As much as I hated wasting magic on vanity, I cast a light concealing spell on my face.

Bare feet slapping across the planks, I marched into the kitchen dressed in a fresh floral housecoat with my hair tamed into a bun. I didn’t waste time on shoes, just hit the porch and took the steps in time to catch a smudge of brown fur blending into the woods.

A mule kicked me square in the heart. That was how it felt. But the bear was the wrong color.

Which meant Zander, and my wayward husband, were still MIA.

Since Pastor Joe and Joan stood alone near his car, Zack must have used her arrival to make his escape.

Smart folks didn't keep alphas waiting, especially when they had an injured packmate on-site.

To hurry things along, I used a touch more magic to keep my steps even so as not to betray the extent of my injuries. Pastor Joe was the chivalrous type, and I didn't want him offering to help me into the house.

Betty patching me up was one thing, but I wasn't about to let Pastor Joe play doctor with me.

"Ellie," Pastor Joe called over Joan's gushing recitation of *Pleurotus ostreatus*. "I'm so glad to see you."

The heavy relief in his voice might have flattered if his wild eyes hadn't been begging me to save him.

"How can I help you, Pastor Joe?" I used his title to enforce the distance between us. "The girls and I are having a late breakfast." I left no room for him to wheedle an invitation. If he couldn't handle MMA then he sure couldn't stomach Bernie. "Yard Birds only, I'm afraid."

"Oh." He thrust out his arms, offering me the large terra cotta pot overflowing with bright-orange gerbera daisies Betty had mentioned. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"We're eating?" Joan blinked owlishly at me. "I thought we were distracting—"

Quick as a blink, I slapped my hand over her mouth. "Ida needs your help with the pancakes."

A pleat gathered across her brow, and she mumbled, "But Pastor Joe—"

"We can continue our discussion later, Joan," he rushed out. "Please, go help Ida."

After Joan had gone, I couldn't stop the soft chuckle from escaping. "Not a fan of mushrooms?"

"I may never eat another one as long as I live." His skin took on the faintest green tinge. "I had no idea so many foraged varieties could be found on animal dung."

“That Joan.” I smothered a snort. “Always oversharing about her hobbies.”

“I can’t fathom why she thinks I want to grow them.” His hands trembled under the weight of his gift, which he still held extended toward me. “I can barely grow mold on bread.”

Reluctant to accept the lovely token of his regard, I forced myself to ask, “Are those for me?”

“Yes.” He lowered his gaze. “I bought them from Ruth.” He cleared his throat. “They have roots.”

Ruth was a fellow Samfordian who grew plants in her backyard greenhouse to sell at the weekly market. She must have a touch of green witch in her bloodline for them to flourish even if their new owners had black thumbs instead of green ones.

“Roots?” I had to think fast to recall why it mattered then offered a grudging smile. “You remembered.”

The last time he brought me flowers, they had been in a bouquet. Roses. I asked him to set them on the walkway and told him I preferred ones I could plant or something to that effect. The truth was, I hadn’t wanted to touch him and risk male energy disrupting my aura before the girls and I refilled our crystals.

“I remember everything about you, Ellie.”

“Then you’re ahead of me. I barely remember what I ate for dinner.” I took the plant and braced the damp pot on my hip. “I appreciate the flower, but I really have to go. The girls are waiting on me.”

“Are you doing anything Saturday?”

Grateful a case had fallen into my lap, I didn’t even have to dream up a lie. “I’m swamped this week.”

“Oh.” He stared at his shoes. “I thought you might like to go for a drive.”

A drive? As in him and me? Alone? In his car?

*Ha.*

Like I didn't know how often those rides led to the local Lovers' Lane? Or how the occupants ended up necking in the dark under the stars? How did he think I got into Wally's pants the first time? I had to shove a nail in my own tire to ensure a flat on a dirt road leading nowhere, thank you very much.

That was the problem right there. All paths led back to Wally. For me, they always would.

"*Just* friends don't go on drives," I informed him. "They only ride together with a destination in mind."

That came out sounding more like an invitation than I intended, and I could have kicked myself for it.

"Then how about we go on down to Montgomery? There's a concert at the Riverwalk Amphitheater."

"I'm too busy to make it this week." I was starting to wonder if he was hard of hearing. "*Too busy.*"

"Did I forget to mention it's a concert *series*? A different artist each weekend for a month."

Not hard of hearing then. Just persistent. Had I not been married, I would have found that charming. But I was, and I didn't. I had made the mistake of letting him get his foot in the door by attending that MMA match, and now he was doing his best to work his entire leg through the crack before I slammed it shut.

"Auntie." Zack bounded over to me from, I suspected, the tree line. "Food's getting cold."

Grateful for the save, I juggled the flowers so I could hook my free arm through his. "Okay."

"I thought," Pastor Joe said slowly, "you said this breakfast was Yard Birds only."

"Zack is an honorary member."

The quick hook of his lips called me a liar, but he let it go with a soft huff of air.

"Think on that drive." Pastor Joe crinkled his eyes at me. "I'll call you in a few days for your answer."



To be on the safe side, Zack and I waited in the yard until Pastor Joe was good and gone. Then I set the pot on the ground like it had burned my fingers and angled toward Zack. “Eavesdropping for your mother?”

I was only half teasing. His mother would ask him to do it in a heartbeat, but he wouldn’t have to hide to overhear us. He could have stood in the kitchen with the window cracked and repeated our every word.

“Whatever do you mean?” He did his best to look innocent. “I would never do such a thing.”

“Liar.” I pinched his cheek. “You would do anything for your momma.”

“For you too, Auntie.” He caught my hand, held it in place. “Pastor Joe is one of the good ones.”

Goodness had nothing to do with it. I had given all of my heart away, and I had none left for the pastor.

“I believe that’s a prerequisite for his line of work.” I took my hand back. “Was that Jo Beth earlier?”

“Yeah.” He lifted his head, filled his lungs. “She shifted back while she waited for you to clear the yard.”

With a flick of my bony wrists, I shooed him ahead. “Let’s show her we’ve got manners, shall we?”

“That won’t work.” He jogged ahead, a laugh in his voice. “She knows us too well.”

Shaking my head at the truth in his words, I brought up the rear, leaving the daisies behind.

## CHAPTER FOUR



Jo Beth was standing on two legs, naked as a jaybird, when I reached the back porch. As she listened to Zack's update, muscles strained under her skin. The alpha was not happy to learn one of hers had been hurt, and I couldn't say I blamed her.

As I reached for the doorknob, Jo Beth intercepted my hand and squeezed my fingers. "Thank you."

"Thank the Middles." I patted her bare shoulder. "They were the ones who found Bernie."

"What they do, they do for the pack." She searched my face. "You're under no such obligation."

"I would do anything for those boys." All jokes aside, I loved them dearly. The Middles were the heart of Betty's family. Peacekeepers who weren't afraid to knock heads together if that's what was required for them to keep the peace. "That's why I'm going to help find who's responsible for the attack on Bernie."

And if it distracted me from my personal problems, that was icing on the kidnapped-husband cake.

"It's pack business." Her demeanor hardened a bit. "We'll handle the investigation from here."

"All right." I exchanged glances with Zack over her shoulder. "If that's what you want, I'll abide by it."

Behind her, Zack's lips pinched, but he wouldn't naysay his alpha. Especially not with her a foot away.

With the formalities observed, I welcomed Jo Beth into my home, knowing I didn't need to lead the way for her to find Bernie. The scent of blood and worse overwhelmed the small space and would until I got a spare minute to clean. Since Jo Beth had passed on my offer, I had plenty of time for scrubbing later.

To give the shifters privacy, the girls and I exited the kitchen and entered the living room.

"We're off the case." I lowered myself onto the sofa, my wounds protesting now that I had quit feeding them magic, and I ignored the medicinal smell from my earlier treatment. "Jo Beth wants to handle it."

"No surprise there." Betty sped over a lump in the thick, overlapping rugs. "That's how shifters operate."

"You're practically pack—"

"—which is not the same as being pack." Betty parked next to me. "Let it go."

A snort from Flo, who was too good to sit, told us what she thought about those odds.

Honestly, my furniture wasn't *that* dingy. But, I had to admit, it was covered in fur of all types.

I cared more about comfort than appearance, but she didn't have that luxury when she arrived wearing clothes that cost enough to remodel my kitchen. That was her role within our coven, her burden, and as much trouble as I was already in for the jackalope, I wasn't about to quibble.

"Fine." I rubbed my palms down my thighs. "Consider it let go."

Zack and Zeb had come to us for help, but if their alpha didn't want it, we couldn't force her to take it.

"Daisies symbolize new beginnings in the language of flowers."

The four of us swiveled our heads toward Joan and her sudden burst of insight.

“Good to know.” I tuned back into the shifters’ conversation. “You can have them, if you want.”

The odds of Pastor Joe spotting them in one of her greenhouses on the edge of town were infinitesimal.

“Do you think I should have started with shiitake instead?” Her hand went to her bag. “I have some—”

An earsplitting roar caused my heart to skip a beat, and I lurched to my feet, immediately regretting the sudden movement as my body reminded me I was in no shape to lurch or much else until I healed fully.

“Zack? Zeb? Jo Beth?” Betty rolled closer to the commotion. “Everything all right in there?”

Wood splintered in answer, and glass shattered seconds later, tinkling across the hardwood.

The five of us swarmed the kitchen to find the Middles having one of their wordless conversations.

“Not again.” I crunched over broken window to the busted back door. “I just had this fixed.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again.” Betty exhaled. “Install a doggy door and be done with it.”

Behind us, Zeb sighed at his mother, who simply shrugged without apology.

Years ago, she got wise to the cost of living with temperamental shifters and installed a set of extra-wide floor-to-ceiling saloon doors leading onto her back deck to prevent this exact scenario. Living in Samford, she hadn’t even locked the things. Though her houseful of brawlers probably also affected her decision.

“What’s going on?” Flo wrinkled her nose. Well, she tried to anyway. “Jo Beth went bear on that door.”

“There’s been another attack.” Zack palmed his truck keys. “Can Zeb stay here with Bernie?”

With our healing magic swirling through her, we were of more use to her than a doctor at this point.

“You know you don’t have to ask.” I frowned when it hit me. “This means...Bernie wasn’t the target.”

“We can’t say that for sure.” Zack frowned in the direction of my bedroom. “She might still be at risk.”

The slim chance her attacker might drop by buoyed my mood for the first time today. I could use an outlet for the anger and hurt bubbling in my gut like the punishment for eating too much of Ida’s chili.

“We’ll move her into the bedroom.” I never slept in there anyway. I couldn’t bear the stark memories of sharing that bed with Wally. “Just be careful out there.”

“You’re the best.” He smiled then turned when Betty huffed at the praise. “You’re the best of the best.”

“Get out of here.” She swatted his hip. “And listen to your auntie.”

“I’ll be careful.” He wrapped her up in a gentle hug. “Love you, Momma.”

A snort blasted across the table as Zeb rolled his eyes at his brother, who was laying it on thick.

“He thinks sucking up now will keep him out of future trouble,” I commiserated with the most stoic of Betty’s kids. “He ought to know all it does is make us suspicious.”

Often when Zack dialed up the charm, he was hiding something. Or hiding something for someone else.

Part of the Middles’ gig as peacekeepers included keeping their siblings’ secrets. Even from their mom. Maybe *especially* from their mom. For him to pause during a crisis to butter her up, it must be serious.

“Do you want anything to eat?” Ida swept across the room to Zeb as soon as Zack left. “It’s almost lunch, and I know how you love fried bologna and egg sandwiches.” She pinched his left biceps with a frown. “When was the last time you ate? You’re skin and bones.”

The arm under her fingers was as thick as a felled tree, reminding me Zeb had always been her favorite. I took small

pleasure in seeing I wasn't the only one with my heart so obviously stuck on a particular child.

Smothering his grin, Zeb pecked her cheek then gathered an unconscious Bernie into his arms.

I hustled to clear a path and got the bedroom door open in time for him to shoulder through and set her across the quilt Joan made me forever ago during one of her hyperfixation eras. He took the old rocker in the corner, and I could almost picture a smaller version of him in his dinosaur pajamas, sitting at my feet while I read him a bedtime story. "Do you need anything?"

Zeb shook his head, pulled out his phone, and flashed his screen to show me the book he was reading.

*Introduction to the Theory of the Early Universe: Cosmological Perturbations and Inflationary Theory.*

"You're too smart by half." I walked out shaking my head and bumped into Ida. "He says he's good."

"He always says that." She flicked her wrist. "He didn't even cry when he scraped his knees as a boy."

Leaving her to fuss over him, I found Betty in the kitchen making the promised fried bologna sandwiches and snacking on cheese cubes. She waved a spatula at me, a queen ordering a peasant to do her bidding as she sat on her electric throne. Such as hand her the salt, the pepper, more cheese, and fix her a drink.

For Betty to volunteer to cook, she must have been rattled by the attacks worse than I thought.

"As stimulating as this morning has been," Flo demurred, "I have a charity luncheon to host with Colin."

Colin Rourke, her current husband, would pop in, smile and wave, then make his exit, and we all knew it.

Golf didn't play itself, you know.

Lucky for Colin, the only thing Flo loved more than a good party and even better shoes was watching the back of her

husband as he left. And not because she thought he had a cute butt.

“Have fun.” I stuck white bread slices in my dented toaster. “Save us some hors d’oeuvres.”

“The shrimp ones,” Betty chimed in. “Those are so good, they’ll make you slap your momma.”

“Perhaps I ought to send a few dozen to your house in time for your next family dinner then.”

For someone without hackles, Betty’s were on the rise. “You got something to say to me, Flo?”

“Are you losing your hearing?” Flo tugged on elegant kid leather driving gloves. “First the looks go, and then...” She placed a hand over her ample bosom. “Oh. Poor thing. You never did have looks, did you?”

“Ellie, get that walking botulism out of my kitchen before I ram this spatula through her eye socket.”

“Did you know,” Joan began, “the eyes are a gateway to the brain? With sufficient force, a spatula—”

“This is *my* kitchen.” I took the weapon from Betty. “Play nice or get out. That goes for both of you.”

Unperturbed by the interruption, Joan continued discussing the force required to ram an object through an ocular cavity into the neurocranium. Since she was enjoying herself, I focused on the two still bickering, who were having at least as much fun as Joan.

“Call if there are any updates,” Flo said breezily then exited through the intact—for now—front door.

“One day, I’m going to rip her fancy shoes right off her feet and strangle her with the straps.”

As much as the mental picture amused me, I couldn’t resist a jab. “Then what would you do for fun?”

A grumble as she snatched the spatula confirmed she knew as well as I did that Flo was safe as houses. The only thing Betty loved more than her kids was winding up Flo, and the

only thing Flo loved more than her shoe collection was snubbing Betty.

A whisper skated across my skin as Betty plated the sandwiches for Zeb, and I moved to the window.

“More company?” Betty began rolling away to deliver the food. “You’re popular today.”

Only two people had attenuated themselves to the wards to the point where I barely felt them cross.

A sob rose up as I rushed out onto the front porch, and my chest crumpled like a soda can stomped flat. A tall man with light blond hair and sparkling blue eyes exited his vehicle with a wink for me, as if he had no reason to fear my wrath. He retrieved a rubber bass mounted on a woodgrain plaque made of plastic from the front passenger seat, and I broke.

The sight of Wally, even diminished as he was, never ceased to cause my heart to flutter.

This time, it caused my heart to break.

“Honey,” Zander called, a bounce in his step. “We’re home.”

All the relief I should have felt soured into bitterness and a bone-deep sadness in the face of their smiles.

“Hello, my love.”

“Don’t *my love* me, Walter Gleason. What were you thinking?” I couldn’t hold in the hurt, so I let it explode out of me. “Zander, I don’t want to say something to you I’ll regret later. Please, just leave.”

The fish drooped on his plaque, but Zander didn’t flinch from my rebuke. “Auntie?”

The sweet edge of boyhood he kept honed to run roughshod over me sharpened into adult concern.

“You’re bleeding.” He leaned in close, flaring his nostrils. “What happened to you?”

As fast as my temper had sparked when I set eyes on him, the embers cooled in the face of his very real fear.



“I don’t know whether I should be offended you know the scent of my blood so well.”

“We all know the smell of your blood,” Wally said softly. “You wear it like some women spritz perfume.”

Ignoring the contrite fish, I answered my nephew. “Bernie from Sweetwater was attacked this morning.”

“Bernie?” A frown gathered across his forehead. “The falcon?”

“The very one.” I waved them into the house, and we clogged the hall. “She’s resting in the bedroom.”

“Jo Beth has already been here,” Zander said with certainty. “Zeb stayed behind?”

“I wish I had a nose like yours.” I craned my neck for signs of Betty. “Mine never was that great to begin with, and it hasn’t been the same since I got stuck in the crawlspace under the house with that skunk.”

Even Betty hadn’t had the heart to fuss at me that time for going off on my own. She caught one whiff of me and decided I had been punished enough.

“I hate to say it, Auntie, but that one was your own fault.” He carried Wally into the kitchen at his request and affixed his plaque to the Velcro strips on the wall. “Do you need anything else?”

“I’m good.” He smiled down at his nephew with true gratitude. “Thanks for humoring an old man.”

“Are you serious?” He grinned back. “I’ve never seen so many will-o’-the-wisps in one place.”

“They migrate only once or twice a century. We were fortunate to catch this one.”

The way they talked, like neither of them had a thing to apologize for, stoked the flames of my anger.

“Why don’t you go check on Zeb?” I ordered Zander to the bedroom. “I want to talk with this one.”

“Someone’s in trouble,” Zander sing-songed. “Sorry, Unc, but I must escape the blast radius while I can.”

Despite his joking, he kept an eye on us like he expected a no-holds-barred MMA match to break out.

Sadly, I was too old to solve marital problems with a referee and a mouthguard these days.

“Are you going to pinch my ear and twist until it’s ready to pop off like you used to do?”

“You’re lucky I can’t.” I crossed my arms over my chest, palms cupping my elbows, but it did nothing to contain my hurt. “What were you thinking? You left without a word. All I had to go on was a note.”

Wally roping Zander into his scheme made it even worse, but what had I expected? Zander idolized Wally. Of course he would help if Wally asked him. Wally never should have put Zander in a position where he had to choose which of us to hurt.

“Had I warned you, I wouldn’t have been allowed to leave.”

*Allowed.*

The word fell between us like a rock tossed down a well, and it landed with a deafening splash.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” I refused to let my tears fall. “I only ever meant to protect you.”

“No.” A sigh deflated his thin latex sides. “I’m the one who’s sorry.” His eyelids clicked as they lowered. “For everything.”

“*Everything* encompasses a lot.” I turned on my heel. “Let’s stop while we’re ahead.”

Desperate to escape from his actions, from his words, I did what he couldn’t.

I walked away.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Ida, embarrassed to have witnessed my fight with Wally, made noises about having to fix a late lunch for her husband and left. Joan made no excuse. She toddled off shortly after Ida, loaded down with the seed, the hummingbird feeder, and a packet of yellow pipe cleaners. She didn't offer an explanation, and I knew better than to ask for one. Betty, proving why she was my best friend, held out the longest.

Eventually, she gave up too, claiming she was tired of watching me sulk when I ought to smash something and get over it. But I wasn't a quitter. I was going to sit in my yard and stew, sunscreen be damned, until the wise Wally's words had clamped on my heart quit squeezing enough for me to face him.

"I'm sorry I aided and abetted Uncle Wally." Zander plunked down on the mossy concrete bench next to me. "He sounded...desperate...and I didn't know what else to do. I was worried if I didn't help him, someone else might."

Ever since Wally got cursed into that novelty toy, desperation had become an old friend to both of us.

"I'm not mad you helped him escape his prison." I winced at the bitterness in my voice. "I'm not even mad he wanted to go." I watched a ladybug crawl across my toe. "I'm mad he didn't ask me to take him. Or tell me he planned to leave. He was just...gone."

Hard as that was to swallow, I resented him involving Zander as much as him leaving in the first place.

“Do you think this has anything to do with your date with Pastor Joe?”

That was the question on everyone’s lips today, and it made me want to tape their mouths shut.

Where had that concern been when everyone was playing matchmaker? Nowhere in sight, that’s where.

“You mean the date Wally *told* me to go on?” I could see Pastor Joe’s daisies from where I sat. If I wasn’t so busy *not* sulking, I would have smashed the pot into itty-bitty pieces. “I knew it was a terrible idea.”

“He might not have thought it through.” Zander leaned his shoulder into mine. “Guys can be like that.”

Guys who were Wally’s age ought to know better, but Zander’s perspective gave me fragile hope.

“I never would have accepted if he hadn’t pushed me.” I kicked out my leg, and the ladybug went sailing. “How is this my fault?”

“Maybe because you went?” He lowered his voice. “Or because you had fun?”

Guilt writhed in my belly, but I couldn’t deny it. I had enjoyed myself. The MMA parts anyway. And the buffet. Who doesn’t enjoy all-you-can-eat hot honey and pepperoni pizza? Not to mention all those salad toppings. Chopped lettuce always made me feel fancy.

“You think this boys’ only trip was meant to punish me?”

“Uncle Wally isn’t the petty or vindictive type.” He squinted up at the bright-blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. “Maybe you going out, doing something you used to enjoy, sparked the idea he could still enjoy himself too.” He took his time wording what he said next. “This trial run might have been done in stealth mode to guarantee you wouldn’t put your foot down before we got out the door.”

“I get why a prisoner wouldn’t tell his warden about his plans for a jailbreak, but I’m his *wife*.”

“He didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Well, he sure missed the mark.”

“You should go talk to him.”

I would rather sit here until moss crept over my feet, vines crawled up my legs, and I became a macabre piece of skeletal yard art. “Fine.”

“While you two kiss and make up—” he stood and helped me to my feet, “—I’ll check back in with Zack. He said no one had bothered the toilet trailers.”

“Did he mention if—?” I bit my tongue. “We’re not on the case,” I reminded us both. “Jo Beth said no.”

“I’m just looking out for my brothers,” he assured me, hand over his heart.

“Mmm-hmm.”

The older I got, the more I saw what a terrible influence I had been on him during his formative years. He sniffed out danger like Spanish black pigs hunted truffles. Anatomy had always fascinated him, but he had a sharp mind honed for investigative work. If he grew bored with premed, I wouldn’t be surprised if he pursued a career in law enforcement.

Leaving him to pester his brother, I set out for the house to face the now congealed mess awaiting me.

A lemon-fresh scent swirled out the ruined back door, courtesy of the AC I was wasting on my yard, and I swallowed past a lump in my throat to find the girls had left me with the parting gift of a clean kitchen.

Their kindness freed me up to locate the painter’s tape and a clear plastic drop cloth to seal the frame.

“Are you that angry with me?”

The sound of Wally’s voice when I was so twisted up in my head made me jump. “I’m just busy.”

Turning away from him while I settled my face into neutral lines, I wrestled with my rusty step stool.

“I’m sorry, Ellie.” A metallic whine passed his lips as a sigh. “I shouldn’t have shut you out.”

A tear rolled down my cheek without my permission, and I was glad he couldn't see the effect his words had on me. Witches lived longer than humans, sure. Even us watered-down ones. But we didn't have the time to hold grudges at our ages. Already my back ached from carrying mine around all day.

"Let me seal up the door." I offered him an olive branch. "Then we'll talk."

"I'll be waiting."

And that was the whole problem, wasn't it?

ABOUT THE TIME I FINISHED SEALING THE FRAME, INSIDE AND out, Zander prowled in through the front door.

I wasn't relieved to get out of the talk I promised Wally, you understand, but I was certain whatever put the grim expression on Zander's face was more important than the squabbles of old married people.

"The latest victim is dead."

After gesturing for Zander to sit at the table, I removed Wally from the wall. I propped him against the condiment caddy then took the chair in front of him, angling us both to face our nephew.

"Dead?" Wally flexed his gills. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Whoever is behind this, they're escalating with each victim." Zander's skin rippled with the urge to shift. "Jess, a possum shifter, passed away shortly after she was found."

"How is Jo Beth?" I rested my weathered hand on top of his baby-smooth one. "She must be hurting."

Alphas—the good ones anyway—often internalized their emotions so as not to affect the pack. It didn't mean they weren't suffering too. They were just good at placing the welfare of others above their own.

Allowing his eyes to close, Zander waited until he calmed his inner bear. "We have to stop this."

“Jo Beth wants to handle it in-house.” I blew out a long breath. “We have to respect that.”

“That,” he gritted out, his voice deep, “was before someone killed a member of her pack.”

“You can’t invite yourself into pack matters if you’re not pack.”

Sweetwater was as close to one as Zander had until he got out of college and set down roots, but having relatives in a pack wasn’t the same as being a member. Jo Beth was more tolerant of Betty and her boys sticking their noses in pack matters than any alpha I had ever met, but Zander was an alpha personality. And a bear. They tended to rub one another’s fur the wrong way.

“You want this case. I can tell. You’re doing that thing where you let someone dig their hole deeper then offer them a hand when they’re ready.” Zander leaned back in his seat. “How are you being so patient?” He rocked the chair onto two legs. “Don’t you want to shake sense into her? We could stop this before anyone else gets hurt.”

Normally, I would be champing at the bit, but this thing with Wally had me second-guessing...everything.

“Be grateful,” Wally teased, his eyes shining. “You’re witnessing a miracle.”

“It’s a miracle I haven’t resorted to violence yet?” I considered him. “That’s fair.”

“I meant you showing patience.” He rested against his plaque, his hinges groaning. “I thought I would have to tie weights to your ankles just to get you to sit through class back in the day.”

“Patience can’t be taught.” I flicked his tail. “It can only be faked for short periods of time.”

“You must have been ready to walk off the job the day this one stormed into your gym.” Zander grinned at us, an eager fan of hearing old stories. “I bet you drafted your resignation ten different times during the first week.”

“The day Ellie walked into my gym was the best day of my life.” The fish whirred with amusement. “But I did draft my resignation four or five times. Just not for the reasons you might think.”

“You wanted to be with Auntie El out in the open.” Zander nodded along in all the right places and knew where to ask the right questions. “You would have given up Witchlight for her?”

Wally didn’t hesitate. He never had, and he didn’t now. “In a heartbeat.”

“We would have never seen each other if he resigned.” I breathed life into another ancient argument. “I would have been sent all over the country on assignments while he did whatever it is monster hunters do when they retire early.”

“From what I can tell,” Wally drawled, “they keep hunting monsters.”

“You know...” A sly expression that promised trouble crossed Zander’s features. “The jobsites were both shut down for the day, which means we wouldn’t be in anyone’s way if we drove over for a quick peek.”

That right there was what set Jo Beth’s fur on end around him. The boy was more curious cat than bear at heart.

“Not to sound like a broken record—” I rubbed my face, “—but we need Jo Beth’s permission for that.”

“Jo Beth has her paws full.” Zander was on a roll. “She won’t mind as long as we don’t get in her way.”

A creak announced Zeb inviting himself into the conversation, which he would have heard loud and clear with his sensitive ears, and he loomed over Zander with familiar exasperation twisting his features.

The Middles were likely the only reason Zander hadn’t become a bearskin rug in Jo Beth’s office yet.

“Like auntie, like nephew.” Wally leaned out to see Zeb better. “What do you think?”



Zeb rolled his eyes, took out his phone, and shot off a text. Then we waited.

Within minutes, his phone rang, and Jo Beth's tired voice spilled out over the speaker.

"I don't like this." A rumble vibrated her words. "You're sure you want to involve them?"

Zeb grunted an affirmative, his focus on Zander, the warning he better not regret this clear as day.

"The pack won't react well to another alpha personality on their land, where our packmates were hurt." Jo Beth clipped out, "Even if Zander is your brother, he's still an unaligned boar, and a pain in my ass."

"I'll be the soul of discretion." Zander pumped his fist in the air. "I'll mind my manners even."

"I don't believe you for a hot second." Her scoff was more of a snort. "You're lucky Zeb is vouching for you."

Another grunt from Zeb had his alpha agreeing with his sentiment.

"You're right." She almost laughed. "I wouldn't let him go then without your aunt babysitting him."

"I'm not a baby." Zander stuck out his bottom lip. "I can behave when it matters."

"Of course you can, sweetheart." I pinched his cheek, flashing back to when it was more chubby and less chiseled. "But a little insurance never hurts."

"I'm sorry I was short with you earlier, Ellie." Jo Beth still found it hard to let us in. "An isolated incident is one thing, but I'm not too proud to accept help when I need it. Not if it means keeping my people safe."

Magic sang in my veins, flushing my cheeks with purpose and making me itch to get moving.

"We're always happy to lend a hand if you need one." I got to my feet when sitting still became too hard. "A threat to your

pack is a threat against our boys, and we don't take those lightly."

"I'll send Kimber over to relieve Zeb," Jo Beth offered, "and he can escort you."

Zander and I smirked at one another across the table, and I had to admit Jo Beth had style.

"You're assigning a babysitter to the babysitter."

"Zeb was one of the first on scene." She skirted addressing my comment with a clever bit of misdirection she wielded like a pro. "He found Bernie. That makes him a witness and a valuable resource."

"Whatever you think is best," I demurred, happy for a reason to get out of the house. "Wally?"

Jo Beth and Zeb would hash out the details between them. Zander wasn't budging, so he could update me on the rules she laid down for us later.

"The living room would be nice," he said mildly. "I have some footage from last night, if Zander would be so kind as to cue it up for me before he leaves."

Zander, busy eavesdropping, nodded he would be along shortly.

With that settled, I retrieved Wally, carried him into the living room, and affixed him to the wall.

"I really am sorry, Ellie." He kept his voice low to evade shifter hearing. "Are we okay?"

One of the first things he taught me, after how to survive, was to leave no regrets behind prior to deployment. Anything that needed saying, he advised us to get off our chests in case there wasn't a chance later.

In our line of work, laters were never guaranteed.

Much as I wanted to leave him hanging, I had to ask, "Does this have anything to do with Pastor Joe?"

"No," he said slowly, then he pursed his lips. "And yes."

“Well, that makes things as clear as mud.”

“I’m not jealous, if that’s what you’re asking.” He rolled his eyes with a clicking noise when he caught my expression calling him a liar. “All right, all right. I was ready to spit nails by the time you got home.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Warmth blossomed in my chest. “What does one have to do with the other?”

“It’s no surprise that I’ve been...”

“...unhappy.” That was the kindest word choice I could get past my lips. “And?”

“You going out, doing something you enjoy, sparked an epiphany.”

“You realized you love your wife and don’t want to see her with another man?”

“Yes.” His chest whined as it deflated. “But I also realized we quit living after I was cursed.”

“Wally...”

“Hear me out.” He drew in a breath he didn’t need out of habit. “We got so paranoid this ‘body’ would break, we went on lockdown. You kept the carpets that you hate cleaning just so if you dropped me, I would bounce. All I do is move from room to room, with your help, and you’re not much better. Other than a case here or there, you’re as stuck as I am.”

“As long as I’m stuck with you, I don’t care.” I stroked his rubber cheek. “You’re all I need to be happy.”

“You’re my everything, Ellie, and you always will be, but we need a change. For both our sakes.”

Sweat dampened my palms, but I kept pushing ahead. “What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing salacious.” His mouth hooked to one side. “Unfortunately.”

“We were plenty salacious enough in our youth.” I drew myself up by my bootstraps. Or I would have, if I wore shoes

around the house. “How do we fix this?” I cleared my throat. “Us?”

“I was thinking you could choose a familiar. Lord knows there are plenty of stray kittens around.”

Folks dumped them by the bagful on country roads like ours, which resulted in an excess of feral cats.

Each spring, Betty and I volunteered with the church to catch and neuter them before they got returned to the wild. The solution wasn't perfect, but shelters were full everywhere, and the staff wanted another litter of kittens underfoot about as much as they wanted a parvo outbreak. Leaving the wild cats to fend for themselves, while not a long-term solution, was kinder than euthanizing them.

“I barely qualify for the bond.” I would need crystals to boost my power. “What do I need with one anyway?”

A hub performed the same functions for a Witchlight coven that a familiar did for a full-blooded witch.

One witch per familiar was the rule when you had a well of your own power, but one hub per coven was the ratio when you had to pool your individual magics to get anything done. The only real difference was that, while we both stored magic within ourselves and fed energy to others when called upon, I wasn't a vessel. Or not *only* a vessel. I created my own magic, paltry as it was, while familiars did not.

All that to say I'd never had a reason to choose one. I didn't see the point. Plus, it was dangerous to have an appetizer in residence with so many predatory shifters in and out of the house.

“I humbly request that my soul be transferred into a charm you can fasten on the familiar's collar.”

“We agreed not to go that route.” Souls were fragile things, easily broken. “The risks involved...”

“I'm willing to accept them.”

I tasted bile when he didn't ask if I was, which meant my answer carried no weight in this argument.

“Cats wear break-away collars for a reason.” I swallowed the awful taste. “I could lose you.”

“It’s worth it.” He gentled his tone as Zander joined us. “To me.”

Numbness sank into my bones and left me with a graveyard chill.

A soul transfer.

Wally wanted a *soul* transfer.

The curse might not allow it, since humiliation had been part of the black witch’s revenge. But would we figure that out before we caused irreparable harm? What if we freed him from his rubber prison only for his soul to float away? Would he be called to the afterlife, as he should have when he died, or would he be trapped here on Earth as a shade or worse?

Zander’s hand on my shoulder jolted me out of my head. “Ready?”

No. I wasn’t ready. Not for what Wally wanted from me. “Yes.”

“Keep an eye out for kittens,” Wally called, half joking.

“Don’t worry, I have snacks in the car,” Zander called back, not entirely kidding.

## CHAPTER SIX



The site of the first attack was mostly red clay, standing water, and behemoth machinery. I could name a few pieces of equipment the boys had been obsessed with as kids. Dump truck, backhoe, bulldozer. The rest was a bright yellow mystery. The most recognizable landmark was a pristine rectangle of concrete anchoring massive steel beams that would serve as the backbone of the new Sav ‘n’ Smile skeleton.

A somber Zeb guided us through the muck with a firm hand on my elbow to keep my feet under me.

The comforting weight of Bam-Bam thumped against my back, and a fanny pack cinched my housecoat. I carried silver, magical, and mundane shells. Why waste magic all willy-nilly when you had perfectly good aim?

“Lots of open space.” I scanned the area. “Bernie should have seen her attacker coming.”

Zeb agreed with a grunt, then came to a standstill beside one of the few machines I could identify.

“Bernie operates a bulldozer?” Zander kicked the tread, knocking mud loose. “I would have expected a falcon to pick one of the cranes.”

“Your furry butt didn’t open a u-pick farm so you could sit around munching blackberries all day.”

Zander grumbled, chastised, while Zeb huffed a laugh at his brother’s expense.

“This is where it happened?” I studied a depression near the cab. “She put up a good fight.”

Crouching next to me, Zeb pointed out deep furrows left in the damp clay where Bernie had clawed the earth with her human hands as she tried to escape. The imprint of her heels where she dug them in told us where the mauling occurred, but it also left me with a disturbing revelation.

“No prints,” Zeb informed me when he caught me studying the mishmash of foot traffic.

“There are plenty of footprints now.” I pressed my lips together. “None this morning?”

Zeb shook his head then indicated the set originally belonging to Bernie.

“They came from the sky,” Zander theorized, holding up a brownish-red feather with thick black bands he retrieved from behind the blade.

“I’m no expert on birds,” I had to admit, “but that looks like a falcon feather to me.”

Had she managed a partial shift before her body quit, and she reverted to her human form?

“The scale is wrong.” He twirled it between his fingers. “But the design is similar.”

“I’m guessing your nose can tell you if the feather belongs to a shifter and whether they’re pack.”

“Zeb, you would know better than me.” He offered it to his brother. “What do you think?”

After a short inhale, Zeb confirmed the feather came from a non-pack shifter. Had he recognized its owner from a neighboring pack, he would have said as much. Leaving me convinced it wasn’t a local.

He also texted Jo Beth to let her know Zander had found a clue.

“If nothing else, you’ve got the scent of a suspect.” I was buoyed by that much success. “You can identify them if you

get close, then we can question them.” I caught Zander grinning and warned him, “It doesn’t have to be the attacker. It could have been lost during a flyover.”

“Aerial territory isn’t as policed as the ground here.” Zander hummed. “Did you ever find her phone?”

Brow crinkling, Zeb grunted an eventual *no*.

“See if Jo Beth has the resources to track it,” Zander suggested. “In case her attacker took it with them.”

Mark my words, this whole modern technology thing was what would put us witches out of business. As far as I was concerned, the line between technology and magic had always been thin. Both of them held the capacity to induce awe, and both of them made our lives easier. Even if that ease came at a cost.

“Cell phones don’t weigh much these days. Any bird who did this could have carried one in flight.” I tilted my head toward Zeb. “Sweetwater doesn’t have any other birds, does it?”

He shook his head, but it had been a slim chance. Not many avian species joined terrestrial packs.

“They took out Sweetwater’s eyes in the sky first.” I had to hand it to them, whoever they were, it was smart. “What’s the biggest avian shifter?”

“An albatross or a pelican,” Zander decided. “We’re not so far inland either is an impossibility, but...”

With a thoughtful nod, Zeb murmured, “Rare.”

“Neither of those could have inflicted Bernie’s wounds. The feet are all wrong.” I considered more likely candidates. “What about falcons, eagles, hawks? Any packs in the area have those?” I recalled the birds I saw hunting during my afternoon walks along the property line. Nothing larger than a hawk, but those were raptors. Predators. “They go for the head, not the chest, but it might not be the human part of the brain driving them.”



“Hawks are common in central Alabama,” Zander allowed, “but we might be limiting our suspect pool to assume someone local is responsible. Zeb? You’re more familiar with the team players than I am.”

An avian shifter could have flown in from out of town with a bone to pick, but these weren’t random attacks. They were targeted assaults on members of Sweetwater. That, and their focus on the heart, led me to believe the perpetrator had a personal stake in the outcome.

And, now that I thought about it, the presence of a new avian predator in the area might explain why that blasted momma jackalope got it in her head to nest somewhere she never would have dared if her usual territory had been safe. “Should we interview the Sweetwater pack?”

A low rumble poured out of Zeb, but he cut it off once he noticed what he was doing.

“We’re not saying anyone in the pack is directly responsible,” I soothed Zeb. “Only that they might have information we need to end this before anyone else gets hurt, like visiting relatives or new folks in town who might have joined another pack. The more information we have, the closer we get to ending this.”

A grunt from Zeb told me he was weighing his options, but he didn’t look happy.

“Text Jo Beth.” Zander was quick with his suggestion. “Meanwhile, we can visit the second scene.”

Zander was slick as goose poop when he wanted to be, but Zeb was loyal to his alpha and didn’t believe in cutting corners. That was why, whenever the other kids had started brawls, we always looked to the Middles for help. Not only were they strong enough to take on another shifter with their backup, but they had level heads and a sense of fairness the others lacked.

While Zeb touched base with Jo Beth, Zander and I gave him privacy by heading off to explore the fancy bathroom. Not

for evidence. It had already been eliminated. I was just curious how far porta-potties had come.

It hadn't been that long ago, to my mind, that outhouses had been the pinnacle of modern luxury.

“What if I drop out of premed,” Zander suggested, “and we go into business together as sleuths?”

“Your momma would tan your hide if you gave up on your lifelong dream to run around solving crimes.” I could hear the caterwauling now. “She would wallop me good if I encouraged you.”

“I can't help I'm your favorite.” He swooped in to kiss my cheek. “I'm just that awesome.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You didn't even hear the name.” He spread his hands in the air. “Gleason and Nephew, Private Eyes.”

A snicker-snort burst out of me, but I got the sense that was what Zander had hoped for.

“We dropped you a few times as a baby, but I didn't realize how many times you landed on your head.”

“Rude.” He jostled my shoulder. “I like this. You and me. Off on an adventure. Like the old days.”

Except this wasn't an adventure. It was an investigation. The only reason we were here was because someone had gotten hurt. Badly. And our next stop would be worse. Someone there had lost their life. But today must be made for kicking me in the teeth, because the boy wasn't wrong in how he felt.

When he was little, I took him everywhere with me. Mostly while running dull errands that ended at the ice cream parlor, but there had been a few minor scuffles too. Not that I planned the last part, but I had fought more than one minor nocturnal pest with him balanced on my hip and his blankie clutched in his fist. I should have known his big imagination would blow reality out of proportion.

Leaning against the side of the trailer, I watched Zander's face. "Did Wally put you up to this?"

"No." He motioned for me to go on in, but I refused to be distracted by shiny faucets. "Why?"

"He said almost the same thing earlier." I toyed with Bam-Bam's strap, because sure. The way it cut into my chest was the reason my heart was aching. "That's why he wants a kitten."

"*What?*" Zander's mouth dropped open. "He's going to transfer his soul into a *kitten*?"

The horror splashing his face told me he recalled the one time Betty let the boys try having a pet.

It hadn't ended well. For the boys or for the kitten. I had never seen so many scratches, tears, and so much fur.

"No." I waved away his even worse idea. "Into a *charm*. For the kitten to wear."

The blank stare I got in return confirmed my reaction to Wally's request had been the sane one.

"That's a terrible idea." He sank against the siding next to me. "You're not going to let him—?"

"That's the whole point." I smacked my palm against the metal. "He wants to make his own choices."

"Even if he ends up caught on a rosebush somewhere when the cat thinks walking through bramble is a good idea? What if its head gets stuck in a fence? Or it's hit by a car?" He sliced his hand through the air. "No." He smacked the metal too. "This is a terrible idea."

"This is what he wants, and I can't..." I struggled for the words. "I can't be his jailer."

If Wally grew to resent me for protecting him the only way I knew how, it would shatter me.

His jaunt with Zander proved the seeds had already been planted. I couldn't afford to water them.

“Can we at least include a tracking spell? On the collar? Or the cat? Or the collar *and* the cat?”

“That we can do.” I had a few in mind, but I would consult the girls first to see if they had any better ideas. They often did. “Zeb?” I hadn’t heard him walk round the trailer. “Are we cleared to go?”

With a tight nod, we returned to his truck and headed for what I recognized as a septic tank installation.

The land was located about ten miles outside of town, but we still considered it Samford, seeing as how there wasn’t anything else out there. A new trailer, of the house variety, sat dead center in a small plush lawn that had been laid a month or so ago by the state of its patchwork seams.

We parked and unloaded, and Zeb guided us around back to where his packmate had lost her life.

Behind the cute home and the tidy landscaping waited more red clay and a gaping pit intended for the septic tank. A small backhoe squatted in its tracks, its long arm extended and ready to dig back in, but its driver had left before completing the motion.

“I’m sorry to hear you’re having troubles,” a low voice boomed from the road.

We turned to find a squat man wearing a three-piece suit and a bright white smile that called him a liar.

Gold flashing in his eyes, Zander edged in front of me. “Where did you come from?”

Zeb stepped up beside his brother, forming a wall of muscle I had no hope of wriggling past.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” I unslung Bam-Bam from my shoulder. “Who is he, Zeb?”

The familiar malice in the man’s expression wasn’t that of a random passerby, and it didn’t speak well for him that he knew about the attacks and their locations when they were so fresh. The man, whoever he was, was no friend of Sweetwater.

“Drifter,” Zeb growled the answer, his skin rippling with the urge to shift.

“Drifter?” I placed him a heartbeat later. “The one who challenged Jo Beth?”

At the first crime scene, now that I thought about it.

A deep inhale had Zeb’s upper lip curling away from his teeth. “Murdoch.”

“You’re with the Murdoch pack.” Zander tightened his stance. “Does he know you challenged Jo Beth?”

To avoid strife, alphas did their best not to take in other alpha personalities with a taste for leadership.

“Cecil Murdoch doesn’t have the balls to take what he wants.” His grin was downright predatory as it swept over the boys. “I don’t have that problem.”

Yet he must have bellycrawled to Murdoch to beg asylum after Jo Beth mopped the floor with him.

“How nice for you,” I said around the wall of shifter still hemming me in.

“I’m Kolton Elchikhe, by the way.” The man stuck his arm out toward Zander. “Who might you be?”

“Zander.” He dismissed the proffered hand. “Zeb and Zack are my brothers.”

Careful to keep his distance, Kolton peered around the boys. “And who might you be?”

“None of your damn business,” Zander rumbled, his fingertips lengthening to claws.

Beside him, the muscles in Zeb’s back twitched and flexed as his animal tested the confines of his skin.

“This is Sweetwater land.” I tucked Bam-Bam under my arm so I could rest a palm on each of their upper backs. “You should go now.”

Before the territorial beasts under their straining skins ripped free and added to the day’s body count.

“Public road.” Kolton flashed his teeth. “No laws against walking on it.”

The man strolled away, hands in his pockets, to where he must have parked his vehicle. Not that I could see anything, but he had made a point of mentioning the road was neutral territory.

“Talk about a sore loser.” Zander turned, checking me over. “You okay, Auntie?”

“You’re lucky you’re too old to spank.” I tucked Bam-Bam into her sling. “I don’t need a protector.”

Quick as a whip, Zander flung a pointing finger toward Zeb. “He did it too.”

“He’s got a right to it.” I popped his wrist. “His pack has been attacked twice in one day.”

Certain the next words out of his mouth would involve how I was mistreating my favorite child, I cut him off before he got going by questioning Zeb. “Has Kolton turned up like this before?”

Zeb shook his head, but his expression pinched with thoughts he didn’t share with us.

This was one time I wished he didn’t play his cards quite so close to his chest.

“Let’s get looking.” Zander caved before Zeb. “Maybe we’ll find something.”

“Yeah.” I cast one last glance down the road. “We might not get a second chance.”

From the direction of Zeb’s stare, I wasn’t the only one wary over Kolton’s appearance.

Zeb caught me looking at him and waved me on ahead with Zander while he stood watch.

“Zack says Jess was a possum shifter.” Zander read off his phone. “She was attacked while human too.”

“Jess must have been pinned against the machine for those gouges to be from her heels.”

For once, all the Alabama red clay was coming in handy. It was telling us the story Jess no longer could.

“Shifting takes time. You’re vulnerable for several minutes before the animal takes over. These attacks have centered on shifters who were isolated. Bernie arrived first on the job. Jess was on a one-woman job. They didn’t have anyone to watch their backs, which forced them to confront the threat in their more vulnerable form.”

Something told me that wasn’t a coincidence.

“I don’t like this Kolton Elchikhe character. We need to pin Zeb down and get some answers.”

That ought to be about as easy as squeezing blood from a stone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



About the time Zander and I finished up our snooping and converged on Zeb, he got a call. One he answered on the first ring. I figured it must be Jo Beth, but she had never put that look on his face.

“Leah,” he rumbled, his voice soft. “You okay?”

Three words. Three whole words. Whoever this Leah was, she had wrung more out of him than I ever had in one go.

*Leah* Zander mouthed at me, filing away the tidbit to no doubt torment his brother with later.

A snarl tore through the air before I got a chance to nip that bad idea in the bud.

Zeb jumped in his truck, tore out of the driveway, and hit the road with a *whump* of protesting metal.

Within seconds, Zander and I were stranded at the second crime scene without a ride.

“Care to fill in the little old lady without super hearing?”

“There’s been another attack.” Zander pulled out his phone. “That’s all I could make out between sobs.”

The strangeness of the call, paired with Zeb’s verbosity, made me wonder who this Leah was to him.

“Zack’s on the way.” Zander had made the call while I was woolgathering. “Zeb already texted him.”

“Good.” I wasn’t worried for us, we could protect ourselves, but I was concerned for Zeb. “How long?”



“Ten minutes.” Zander led me to the trailer, and we sat in lawn chairs on its covered porch. “Want to watch funny cat videos with me until he gets here?”

*Cat* reminded me of *kitten*, which got me thinking about Wally, but at least I got to rest my aching feet.



EAGER TO ESCAPE THE MOSQUITOS, ZANDER AND I MET ZACK at the road and climbed into the cab of his truck.

“Sorry, Auntie El.” Zack winced. “Zeb never would have left you behind if he had been in his right mind.”

“Hey.” Zander, who had stuck me in the middle, leaned against the passenger door. “What about me?”

“What about you?” He showed no sympathy. “You could have shifted and walked home.”

“Zeb was all torn up after a call from a Leah.” I fastened my seat belt. “Who got attacked?”

“Leah’s mom.”

“That’s specific.” Zander perked at his evasiveness. “Who is Leah’s mom to him?”

“A nice lady who sometimes bakes him shortbread cookies?”

As Zack fixed his attention on the road, hoping we would leave him alone if he stared hard enough, I got it.

Anytime he defaulted to a nonanswer, he was protecting someone.

For whatever reason, he was covering for Zeb.

Willing to sidestep the issue—for now—I dug for less personal details. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“Cate Trask was digging a trench for sewer lines at the new subdivision in Smith.” Zack’s hands tightened on the wheel. “She slipped in the mud during the fight and banged

her head on the backhoe. Otherwise, she's in decent shape, but she was unconscious when they brought her in."

"She got lucky." Zander whistled. "The attacker must have thought the head injury killed her."

"Even better." His lips twitched, tipping up at the edges. "She heard about Bernie and Jess. She was ready when they came at her. She pumped her attacker full of lead." Silver would have been too much to hope for. Few shifters risked carrying that kind of ammo. "They fled while she was out cold."

"A woman after my own heart." I patted Bam-Bam for emphasis. "I approve."

"Now we have a witness." Zander drummed the dashboard. "Let's go get her side of the story."

"Are we invited to the hospital?" I didn't want to risk Jo Beth's goodwill by showing up unannounced. "We can go home and wait for a report."

"The hospital makes more sense." A gleam lit Zander's eyes. "We can catch a ride to your house from there."

"Fine." Zack sounded like a man defeated. "You can come, but I'm not promising you can grill Cate."

"How about sauté?" Zander mimed swishing a frying pan. "I'll use low heat and everything."

"How about you shut it and be grateful I let you tag along, *little* brother?"

"How about you—?"

"How about you both shut up," I suggested, "and we play the quiet game until we reach the hospital?"

To no one's surprise, Zander lost.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



“*H*old the elevator,” a familiar, breathless voice called from across the lobby.

Zack gripped the doors just as they were sliding closed and held them while Betty accelerated to join us.

“What are *you* doing here?” She zeroed in on me. “How did you find out about Leah before me?”

“What do you mean I *found out* about Leah?” To be on the safe side, I pressed my back against the metal wall. “We were with Zeb when he got the call from her about her mom.”

“He didn’t tell you either?” She smacked a hand over her heart. “She’s his *girlfriend*.”

Oh Lord.

This explained the extra sucking up Zack had been doing, but he ought to know his momma well enough to anticipate holding on to a secret of this magnitude would land him in the doghouse with her.

“I *knew* it.” Zander stabbed a finger at Zack. “Why else would he ditch us at a crime scene?”

“He did *what*?” Betty’s eyes rounded. “I’m going to give that boy a talking to when I see him.”

“He had his reasons.” Zack stood up for his brother. “Good ones.”

Revving her scooter, she stared him down. “What might those be?”

“Leah is human.” Zack stepped out of his mom’s path. “She was adopted into a shifter family.”

The teasing light winked out of Zander’s eyes. “Challenges.”

“For a mate?” I clutched at the collar of my housecoat. “I thought that was for rank within the pack.”

“That’s usually the case, but Zeb is a rare breed.” Zack scratched the stubble on his jaw. “There aren’t many rhinos in the US. That means there’s fierce competition for him. He’s avoided it as best he can by not dating anyone.”

“Now he’s got a vulnerable girlfriend.” I pieced it together. “The pack can’t know, or she might get hurt.”

“He’s not worried about Sweetwater. Jo Beth wouldn’t stand for that nonsense. It’s other packs catching wind of it that worries him. If folks think he’s open to mating, a line will form.”

Poor kid. I had no idea he was isolating himself so much. From Betty’s frown, she hadn’t been aware either.

A ding announced our arrival on the third floor, and the doors rolled open to reveal a crowd choking the hall. Jo Beth was among the visiting pack members, and her scowl when she saw us could have cut glass.

Breaking from the group, she approached us with heavy footsteps. “Hey, Betty.”

“I saw you in Walmart not two days ago, and you didn’t tell me—”

“—what side dish to bring to the cookout.” I slapped a hand over her big mouth. “I was thinking mustard potato salad or those little sausages you simmer in barbeque sauce in a crockpot.”

Since Betty’s voice tended to carry, Zeb had overheard us and stuck his head out of a hospital room.

A curvy girl with rainbow-colored hair leaned out behind him, curious what had caught his attention. Her cornflower-blue eyes lit up when she spotted Betty, who she must have

seen in photos to know on sight. She skirted Zeb, giving me an eyeful of her radioactive polka dot jumper and hot-pink high-top sneakers.

“Miss Betty.” A piercing glinted in her top lip where a beauty mark would be. “Thanks for coming to visit. Mom’s asleep, but it will mean so much to her that you came to support the pack in their time of need.”

The girl’s eyes pleaded with Betty to go along with her, telling me no one here knew about her and Zeb.

“Of course.” Betty switched mental gears with an audible grind. “I had to come down after I heard the news.”

Just not the news that landed Mrs. Trask in the hospital.

“How about we grab a coffee,” I suggested before Betty blew the kids’ cover, “and you update us?”

“I’ll stay with Cate,” Jo Beth offered then smiled at Leah. “You could use a break.”

“The cafeteria’s on one.” I led the procession back to the elevator. “Betty, you get in first.”

Zander, Zack, Zeb, Leah, and I waited until she got settled then packed in next to her.

As soon as the door shut, Leah flung herself at Betty for a hug. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Shifters were a touchy-feely bunch, and that physicality often extended to their human family members.

“From who?” Zander blurted, grunting when I elbowed him in the ribs for mocking his brother.

“You must be the baby.” Her smile glinted as her lips curved. “I’ve heard about you too.”

The way she said *the baby* left no room for doubt that Zeb and Zack or both had regaled her with stories of their youthful antics. Which meant she knew Zander was nothing but trouble.

“I would say the same—” Betty returned Leah’s embrace, “—but I only found out about you today.”

“I’m *so* sorry about that.” She pulled back and took Betty’s hand. “Zeb has such a big heart, and he was so afraid for me.” Her fluorescent-yellow nail polish glowed in the dim light. “Please accept my apology.”

“Come to dinner tonight, and I’ll consider it.” She tilted up her nose. “I am very hurt, you understand.”

An old pro at guilting kids into doing what she wanted them to do, I was watching a master at work.

“Yes, ma’am.” Leah bit her bottom lip. “Only I can’t come tonight.” Her shoulders drooped into a slump. “Mom won’t be released until tomorrow morning. I’m going to stay here with her.”

Unwilling to roll over and play dead just yet, Betty asked, “What about your father?”

“Oh.” Her gaze slid to the floor. “It’s just Mom and me.”

The armor flaked off Betty right before my very eyes, and she softened toward the girl on the spot.

Single motherhood wasn’t an exclusive club, and no one checked your card at the door.

“You sweet girl.” She cupped Leah’s cheek. “Of course you’ll stay. I’ll send over some dinner.”

“You don’t have to do that.” She flushed. “We can order in.”

“It’s nothing.” She snapped her fingers. “We’ll need to hit the grocery store on the way to your house.”

A moment later, I grasped she was talking to me. “*My* house?”

“Yes, yours.” Betty scowled at me, clearly not willing to forgive me learning about Leah’s existence a half hour before her, even if she heard the bigger secret first. “You owe Leah an apology for being so rude to her about Zeb having a girlfriend.”

How she spoke without lightning striking her dead on the spot, I will never know. “*Me?*”

“Ellie must have finally had that stroke her doctor warned us about.” Betty clucked her tongue, slanting me a pitying glance. “You’re just repeating everything I say.”

“You might as well quit while you’re ahead,” Zander murmured to me. “She’s clearly had *an idea*.”

Any scheme Betty cooked up was likely to get us all burned, but I wasn’t her bestie for nothing.

“I thought I smelled smoke,” I muttered back then turned to Leah. “It really was nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She let go of Betty and plastered herself to Zeb. “I hope our families can get together soon.”

The shock of Zeb allowing her to hang off him like a monkey in a tree struck Zander, Betty, and me mute.

With a huff of laughter under his breath, Zack, who was used to this new reality, cleared his throat as we hit the first floor. The couple broke apart, Zeb with his heart in his eyes as Leah exited into the hall along with the rest of us.

As soon as we were clear, he mashed a button, and the doors began to close. “Where’s he going?”

“He volunteered to stand watch over Cate,” Zack explained as Zeb rode the elevator back up to the third floor. “We’re keeping her under surveillance, since she can identify her attacker when she wakes.”

Ah. That explained the quick return trip. He wouldn’t want to leave Cate in someone else’s care.

“So, Leah.” Betty rolled ahead of the rest of us. “How do you like your coffee?”

With a glance back at the elevator, she said, “Tall, dark, and sweet.”

## CHAPTER NINE



The girls met us at the house, and Ida was kind enough to help me cook enough for Leah, her mom, and Zeb. And Zander, who pouted until I caved, which meant I might as well fix Kimber a plate too. The poor thing must be starving after spending the last few hours on impromptu guard duty.

Flo was busy on her phone doing who knows what, Joan was carrying around a lightning bug in a jar, and Betty was zoned out on her scooter with a thoughtful expression that would have made Zeb shake in his boots had he seen it. They had already eaten, so I grazed as I worked to get some calories in me.

“It smells amazing in here.” Kimber stuck her head into the kitchen. “Is that catfish?”

“Catfish.” Zander licked his fingers. “Hushpuppies, coleslaw, and white beans with chow-chow.”

“Come on in.” I waved her over with an oven mitt. “How’s the patient?”

“Bernie regained consciousness a couple times while y’all were gone. Not for long, but it’s progress.” Her gaze strayed toward the plastic covering the busted door I hadn’t had time to worry about fixing yet. “Jo Beth is sending a car for her. We’ll be out of your hair by tonight.”

“There’s no rush.” I finished a new batch of my homemade tartar sauce and scooped a dollop onto the plate I made for her.



“Zander, trade out.” I handed her the food. “Let Kimber eat while the food’s hot.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He walked up behind me, tapped my right shoulder, then stole a hushpuppy over my left when I glanced back. “Can I have a second helping to go?”

Back when Wally and I babysat Betty’s kids, we hadn’t stood on formality. We all ate on the couch in front of the TV. Some old habits died hard, and that one was still kicking. “All right, all right.”

After I finished stacking more fish on his plate, I handed it off then poured Kimber a glass of lemonade. She plopped into the chair he vacated and began eating like she worried the fish might swim away if she wasn’t fast enough.

“I saw that.” Betty snapped out of her thoughts. “You gave him twice as much fish as everyone else.”

“He’s a growing boy.” I turned off the stove, grateful to get away from the smell of hot grease. “Besides, I was the one skinning and filleting, so what I do with my fish is my business.”

“You know the others give him grief for how you treat him.” She huffed. “You can’t have favorites.”

“*Mothers* can’t have favorites.” I dusted off my hands. “Aunts can do whatever they want.” The defense of my behavior made her eyes roll back in her head, but I was used to conversing with wide expanses of her sclera. “I would also like the record to show I’ve never said he’s my favorite in front of the other kids.”

“You don’t have to.” Her eyes rolled again, almost making a full circle. “Zander does it for you.”

“Ah.” Kimber crunched on her coleslaw. “You’re the auntie who spoils Zeb and Zack.”

As much grief as I got for favoring Zander, I wasn’t a slouch in the aunt department for the others. I sent cookies, cakes, and muffins to the Middles’ job sites once a week. I had a harder time with the ones who had moved farther away for

work or school, but I did my best to never leave them doubting Wally and I loved the little rascals.

“We all spoil the children.” Flo tore herself away from her phone. “Ellie is just more obvious about it.”

“Not like you,” Betty drawled, “who is less obvious and yet more demanding of credit for her efforts.”

“Shut it, Scooter.”

“Ladies.” Ida, who had been packing food as fast as I cooked it, flicked a glance at Kimber. “We have a guest.”

“Did you know the word *guest* comes from Middle English *gest*?” Joan snapped to attention. “Also from Old Norse *gestr* and—”

“That’s fascinating, dear.” Ida wiped her hands clean. “Why don’t I drive you home, and you can tell me all about it?”

*Thank you*, I mouthed to Ida, who escorted Joan out with a gentleness borne of endless patience.

“Ugh.” Flo shoved up from the table. “I have to go too.”

“What’s wrong?” I crunched on hushpuppy crumbs. “You’ve got that tone.”

“Flo always has a tone,” Betty said. “How can you tell the difference?”

“Nothing’s wrong, per se.” Flo pulled lipstick from her purse to freshen her color. “Colin is home.”

“Ah.” I watched as she donned her armor to face him. “Sure you wouldn’t rather come with us?”

For a second, she wavered, hand on her compact, but practicality won. “I better not.”

Part of her job was keeping her husband happy, and for men of a certain age, that meant the little woman greeting him at the door with an ice-cold drink after a long day at work. Flo was far from the docile bauble he paid for—I meant *married*—but he wouldn’t learn that until she was through with him.

While she made her exit, I helped myself to another crunchy bit. “Sorry for talking over you, Kimber.”

The shifter, her mouth still full, just smiled through closed lips and kept chewing.

“Are we about ready?” Betty wriggled on her seat. “Zeb says Cate is awake, and the coast is clear.”

Good thing too. Jo Beth wouldn’t appreciate what we had in mind. Zeb might not either.

“Let me grab plastic forks.” I always kept some on hand. “And extra napkins.”

Watching me organize the chaos, Betty asked, “You have enough Tupperware to hold everything?”

“How can you ask me that with a straight face?”

As much as we owned between the four of us, minus Joan, whose Tupperware no one used for fear of what it had held last, we had boxes full. That happened when you were an active member of your church. Or when you had a passel of kids with a gaggle of aunts who always sent home leftovers.

“I can wash the dishes.” Kimber drained her glass. “As a thank you.”

“No thanks needed.” I shooed at her. “Go on and switch out with Zander, and we’ll make this delivery.”

After gathering her dishes, Kimber brought them to the sink and set them down with a frown.

“If you want to wash the dishes that badly,” Betty cut in, “do it after your relief arrives.”

“It’s just...” A flush warmed Kimber’s cheeks. “Mamaw taught me better.”

“I’m willing to sign a slip excusing you from chores this one time.” I handed her three drop cookies made from chocolate, peanut butter, and oatmeal from a jar on the counter. “You’re doing far more important work.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” She cradled her treats in her palms. “I’ll go get Zander.”

“Oh.” I recalled a detail that had slipped my memory. “Did anyone say if more feathers were found at the other scenes?”

“I haven’t heard anything.” She popped a whole cookie in her mouth. “Usually, that means nothing to report.”

“Okay.” That was what I figured. “Thanks.”

After the changing of the guard, Zander helped us gather the food into coolers we loaded into his truck. With shifter strength, he scooped up Betty, twirling with her until she guffawed and swatted him. Then he placed her on the bench with a smacking kiss before loading her scooter in the back without a hitch.

“If Wally and I ever had a kid,” I confessed after the door shut, “I would have prayed for one like him.”

“If you and Wally ever had a kid, it would have disappeared down a dark hole in the middle of the night or been chucked in the lake.” She laughed at my startlement. “He barely tolerated his siblings spending time with you. Do you really think Zander would have shared you with your own actual offspring?”

Heart turning to mush, I couldn’t help smiling. “He’s such a sweet boy.”

“The fact you just let him murder your fictional child yet still called him *a sweet boy* is proof you were right not to reproduce.”

Spend a few decades hunting monsters, and your sense of morality was bound to get skewed.

Plus, his fluffy little nub of a tail was adorable when he shifted into his bear.

When Zander slammed the tailgate, I got serious. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

An interrogation thinly veiled as a dinner delivery, to a hospital no less, might not sit well with the pack.

As much as I wanted to get answers from Cate, even I wouldn’t have been this bold about it.

Probably.

“I don’t want my future in-laws wiped out before I get grandbabies out of Zeb.”

“Good to know you’ve got your priorities straight.”

“Damn right, I do.”

“You only saw the girl for two seconds.”

“What does that matter?” Her expression softened. “Did you see how happy she makes Zeb?”

“Weirdest pairing I ever did see.” I strapped in. “Like a rainbow falling in love with a mud puddle.”

“I’ve always told him he’s my sunshine,” she confided, fastening her seat belt.

How she thought I meant Zeb was the rainbow I couldn’t begin to fathom, but mothers wore blinders, didn’t they? Though it was my own fault for the unflattering comparison. Zeb wasn’t a stick in the mud. He was quiet, thoughtful, good in a crisis. His big heart was my favorite thing about him. I was glad he had found someone to share it with.

As Zander slid behind the wheel, he reached for the radio. “Ready to go?”

We spent the ride to the hospital belting out eighties’ songs on a playlist Zander had made for Betty.

She *loved* Jon Bon Jovi. So much that Zale, her eldest, thought for the longest time that Bon Jovi was his father. That made for an awkward parent-teacher conference after his first week in kindergarten.

“We’re more than halfway there,” Zander sang, and Betty and I chortled at the riff off her favorite song.

Unable to resist, I sang right back. “Livin’ on a prayer we find some answers.”

To which Betty added, after he pulled in and parked, “Take my hand, and we’ll make it upstairs.”

The three of us were still laughing when the elevator doors opened on the floor where Leah's mother was being held. The hall had emptied in the hours since our last visit. The pack had paid their respects then gone home to give Cate time to rest and recover from her ordeal. It was the polite thing to do.

No one had ever accused Betty, Zander, or me of doing that.

As was her right, Betty led the charge down the hall and knocked on the door.

Zeb answered, his posture wary, but he relaxed when he spotted his mom and the rest of us. Leah was right behind him, smiling around him like the sun peeking out from behind a storm cloud. And Zeb was soaking her up like a flower who had spent too long in the dark.

Their sweet affection made me vow that whatever it took, I would set things right with my own love.

"Whatever that is smells fantastic." Leah rushed out to help, but Zander had the coolers well in hand. "I hope you brought enough to eat with us."

"We ate before we left." Betty invited herself into the room. "But we'd be happy to visit with you."

A woman in her late forties with silver-red hair watched from the bed as we tromped through her room.

Careful to avoid rolling over the cords, Betty parked next to the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Pissed I wasn't carrying silver bullets." Cate's quick smile pulled at an angry scab bisecting her lips. "So, you're Zeb's mom." She gestured down her body. "I'm Cate, or what's left of her."

"You look a sight better than the first shifter this whacko got ahold of," Betty said. "We healed Bernie on Ellie's kitchen table to keep her from bleeding out. Poor thing."

"Zeb told us you're a witch." Cate flicked me an assessing glance. "Are you part of her coven?"

“She’s the aunt who spoils the baby,” Leah supplied with a grin. “Ellie and Zander, remember?”

“Right.” Cate raised the head of her bed. “I understand you’re all part of an investigative organization.”

“Officially, we’re retired.” Betty cut me a look. “But we keep a hand in.”

“I appreciate the food, but you don’t have to beat around the bush.” Cate settled her hands across her stomach. “You’re here to ask if I remember the attack.”

“You did sustain a head injury.” Betty flicked a hand at me. “I understand if things are cloudy.”

Fluent in the sign language of her bossiness, I took the hint and began plating food for Cate and Leah.

“Things are perfectly clear.” Cate fisted her hands in the sheet. “That bastard Kolton Elchikhe did this.”

“He’s avian?” I froze mid-scoop. “No one told us that.”

“No one knew.” Leah puffed out her cheeks. “No one outside of the Murdoch pack anyway.”

“What is he?” Betty motioned for me to keep plating. “Ellie was thinking a raptor of some kind was responsible.”

“I’m not sure, except for the biggest damn bird I’ve ever seen.”

For her to be left scratching her head, I considered whether Kolton was a rare breed. If Kolton was rare, it might explain why Murdoch took him in, despite the risk he might set his sights on his pack one day.

“Why target Sweetwater?” I couldn’t make it make sense. “Jo Beth already whooped Kolton.”

“I’m rustier at this detective business than you,” Betty drawled, “but I think that’s what we call *motive*.”

“He’s targeting Sweetwater Construction’s workers.” Zander added his two cents. “Not the pack itself.”

“Maybe he was humiliated.” Leah chewed her bottom lip. “He must have thought he could take on Zack, but he miscalculated. Jo Beth stepped in, and he got his ass handed to him. In front of the crew.”

“You don’t think...” I left Leah holding her plate to approach Cate. “Were you there that day?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her eyes crinkled until they disappeared into her smile. “He took one look at Jo Beth, and he challenged her. In *human* form.” She snorted. “Can you imagine?”

As adorable as Jo Beth was in her human skin, the man was a fool to think it made her any less of an alpha.

“The women on the crew—” she pointed her thumbs at her chest, “—cheered her on while she stomped him.”

*The women on the crew...*

That would explain why he was three for three on women. I should have noticed the pattern sooner.

“Zeb.” Betty read my mind. “Find out if Bernie and Jess were there that day.”

With a curt nod, he excused himself into the hall to get us answers.

“Have you told Jo Beth?” I didn’t want to jump the gun. “Does she know Kolton is to blame?”

“I called her as soon as I woke,” Cate assured me, “but Murdoch claims he flew the coop.”

“*Mom,*” Leah groaned. “That’s not punny.”

Her mother snickered at her daughter, and it was easy to see Leah was as much Cate’s daughter as Betty was the boys’ mother. When you got down to it, blood had nothing to do with family. Love was a choice.

“Raptors are diurnal, right?” I jerked my chin toward the darkened window. “Attacks should be over for the day.”

“Some,” Zander allowed, “but there are nocturnal varieties too.”



“I can do a search,” Betty volunteered. “Get us a list of diurnal raptors.”

“Keep an eye out for rare or endangered shifter species while you’re at it.” I felt no guilt piling onto her workload. Her grandkids kept her more plugged in to modern tech than I cared to be. She was a whizz with a smartphone. Me? I couldn’t tell you where I left mine. “We could also—”

I broke off that thought when Zeb returned wearing a grim expression that confirmed the other workers had been present during Kolton’s beatdown.

“Call Jo Beth,” Betty told him. “Tell her to round up everyone who was present and put them on alert.”

Leaning by the door, he began texting as fast as his thumbs would go.

“Group chat?” Zander raised his eyebrows, and Zeb nodded. Then Zander explained it to me. “That means he can text everyone who works at Sweetwater Construction at once. Everyone sees his texts, and they all see any responses the others make.”

“That’s handy.” I was impressed. “We should do that.”

“The girls and I already have a group chat.” Betty sucked on her teeth. “Which you would know, if you ever checked your phone.” She read my guilt with ease. “You don’t even know where it is, do you?”

“Of course I do.” I couldn’t meet her eyes. “Did you hear back if Jo Beth could track Bernie’s phone?”

“Whoever’s got it is tech savvy,” Zander answered for her. “It’s being kept off so we can’t locate them. We can tell where they were, the two times they powered it on, but not where they are now.”

Watching Zeb’s thumbs flying, I saw a way through our troubles. “I have an idea.”

One that just might spare anyone else from getting hurt.

“Oh Lord.” Betty pinched the bridge of her nose. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

## CHAPTER TEN



With the recipe for the attacks, it was easy to assemble the ingredients to set the stage for another.

Kolton was bold. Or dumb. Hard to tell one from the other sometimes.

He wanted Sweetwater to know he was responsible. Otherwise, he wouldn't have strolled right up to us. Most folks had the sense to shake it off and keep walking after an alpha beat the tar out of them, but not him. We could use that.

To set the scene, we borrowed the backhoe from the second crime scene and had it delivered to my driveway. I didn't have a practical use for it, but I had always wanted a koi pond. I might as well give the actors in our little drama something constructive to do while we waited to see if Kolton took the bait.

We left the hulking yellow machine out in clear view of the road all night like a welcome mat, and Leslie, our bait, another spectator to Kolton's humiliation, arrived around dawn. She took her sweet time with it, enjoying a coffee while she leaned against the side of her truck, giving Kolton ample opportunity to strike her down.

We didn't get so much as a nibble.

This slapdash plan had always been a long shot, but I had hoped Kolton wouldn't be able to resist.

The girls and I had been clustered around the kitchen window for a good thirty minutes, hidden behind a cloaking spell, when Leslie finished her coffee and climbed up onto the

backhoe. She sat, got comfy, and then performed a routine check to buy a few more precious minutes before turning the key.

A half hour into the job, I was growing concerned about the hole steadily expanding in my yard.

Joan, bored with the view, drifted to the table where she began harmonizing our charged crystals.

Since I had already cleaned, primed, and accessorized Bam-Bam three times, I had no room to talk.

“Crap.” I had waffled on adding a second shifter into the mix, but this made up my mind. “Call in Jayma.”

Jayma, our second tidbit of bait, and the final female witness, drove up in a Sweetwater Construction truck and jumped out with a shovel. I had no idea what she was going to do with it to look convincing, but I trusted her to act her role.

An hour later, it was obvious Jayma was only moving dirt from one pile to another.

Two hours in, I was ready to call it quits before Leslie carved out an inground swimming pool.

The cubs would love it, but I didn’t want to spend all my free time picking leaves and bugs out of it.

“I pictured this going better in my head.” Zander’s breath fogged the window. “This is taking too long.”

“The other attacks came quicker.” Betty rolled back. “We should have chosen another location.”

The natural choice had been my land. I had a lot of it and didn’t care if it got roughed up in a brawl. I had long since quit caring about landscaping outside of my immediate yard. There was no point with shifters tromping across the property in their other forms. Wrestling, fighting, causing mischief.

But, since it *was* my land, it must have smelled too much like a setup for Kolton to fall for it.

I had been banking on the fact he hadn’t recognized me as the Middles’ aunt at the second crime scene. But I had gone

and overdrawn my account by assuming he prized revenge above his freedom. Maybe his life.

“Colin is installing a pavilion at one of his properties for parties,” Flo mused. “It’s a bit close to town, but it’s not tied to him or me on paper. One of his junior partners is spearheading the project. Even if Kolton did his research, the paper trail wouldn’t lead back to the coven.”

“Your husband owns half of Samford,” Ida said thoughtfully, “and most of the surrounding area.”

“It sounds so gauche when you phrase it like that,” Flo demurred, “but you’re not wrong.”

The subtle pleasure in her voice wasn’t fooling anyone.

“No one will think twice about it.” Zander gave up on people watching. “That’s what matters.”

“Let’s bring in our willing victims.” I hated calling it quits so early in the day, but this wasn’t working on Kolton, and I was running a risk of owning a small lake. “We’ll set up at the pavilion tomorrow morning.”

My one bright idea, to lure Kolton out via dropping hints in the group chat, had fizzled out.

After Zander explained how those chats worked, I convinced myself that was how Kolton had known where to find Jess and Cate. I must have been wrong about him pocketing Bernie’s phone. It wouldn’t be the first time.

A rumble and thud sent us rushing back to the window, and we peered outside to find the backhoe had smashed into a tree. The metal arm was curling and uncurling, the shrill horn was blaring, and Leslie and Jayma were nowhere in sight.

“Girls.” I flung out my arms, and the coven joined hands. “You’re up, Joan.”

With the crystals already harmonized, she brought us into balance in seconds. Then it was my turn. I drew power from the quartzes and fed it through myself, into the others, saturating them to their max.

“Done.” I forced myself to let go of them, of the magic, and panted. “Let’s go end this.”

With help from the crystals, we blew out the broken door into the backyard in high gear.

*High gear* was subjective, mind you, but it was plenty faster than we could have managed alone.

There was no sign of Jayma, or her shovel, and my heart rose up the back of my throat.

“Spread out,” I snapped out. “Find Jayma.”

Gurgling drew me around the side of the fritzing backhoe to where the largest bird I had ever seen was attacking Leslie. Its beak was a horror. Its wicked talons were easily longer and as thick as my forearms.

“Don’t let that thing get a hold of you,” I hollered to the girls. “It’ll crush your bones.”

Calcium pills could only do so much for women our age. Even with magic coursing through us, our bones were brittle. We had to be careful, or we’d all end up riding scooters. Or dead.

Whatever bird Kolton was it must have been a behemoth in nature to come out on this scale. A shifter didn’t change into an exact replica of their animal. Their magic created a mirror, but the animals came out magnified. Bigger. Tougher. Harder to kill. This bird had a ten-foot wingspan, or my name wasn’t Ellie Gleason.

“That’s a freaking crowned eagle,” Betty blurted. “They were on my list of endangered shifters.”

“They eat children,” Joan panted. “The ancient remains of a skull were found in the stomach of one in 1924, but modern day children’s skulls and bones have been found in their nests as well.”

“Thanks, Joan.” I could believe it. “Any idea how to take it down?”

“Shoot it,” Betty screamed. “Hurry up, Ellie.”

Swinging Bam-Bam off my shoulder, I took aim. I hated using silver on shifters. Even the ones who weren't anaphylactic levels of allergic to it had bad reactions, but Kolton had earned his pain.

"I've got Jayma." Ida hustled over with an arm around Jayma's shoulders. "She almost lost an eye."

"Eyepatches are très chic," Flo offered, spreading magic across the wound to staunch the bleeding.

The kick as the shotgun blasted twinged in my shoulder, but I lined up another shot and took it. I got about three rounds in it before a spine-tingling roar caused my shoulders to bunch up around my ears.

A Bengal tiger dove through the brush right at me. Had I not been so worried I might wet myself, I would have ID'd the bastard as the Murdoch alpha, but I didn't care. I shot him dead in the face to buy us time.

Impact didn't knock Murdoch far, but it was clear he had eaten a magic bullet instead of a silver one. Damn my eyes. I really ought to wear those glasses the doctor prescribed. I had a pair...somewhere. Probably next to my cellphone, wherever that had gone.

"Aww, hell." Betty balled her fists. "This is a coup." She jabbed a finger at Kolton. "He's the witness."

Since Kolton was the one gunning for Sweetwater, I wasn't so sure, but it hardly mattered which was which in the heat of battle. As long as each pack had a witness to any challenge, the results were considered verified and binding.

"Girls." I set Bam-Bam at my feet and held out my hands. "Time to even out the fight."

Even with Murdoch moving at half speed, he was faster than us. The tiger yowled and clawed at his bloody nose, but he was healing with an alpha's quickness as he drew from his pack for aid.

Together, the girls and I raised a ward over our heads. It kept the tiger at bay, but it trapped us with the eagle. Even silver was taking its sweet time bringing Kolton down. He

wasn't half as dead as he ought to be, but I hadn't anticipated him having backup either.

Most packs nowadays had access to potions that helped stave off the effects of silver until they could reach treatment. I was starting to wonder if Kolton hadn't drunk one prior to his arrival to inoculate himself. It wouldn't work for long, but he'd had the element of surprise on his side. Until his altercation with Cate. That one taught him Sweetwater was ready to finish what he started.

"Playtime's over," Jayma snarled, a shaggy beast ripping through her flesh, shredding the illusion I cast earlier to expose the hulking bison beneath. As her throat rumbled, her voice took on a different timbre, until the animalistic sound became deeper and more masculine. "You're going down, Tweety."

Zack, our Jayma stand-in, was a mass of writhing muscle and snapping bone.

"We've got to buy him time." Betty tightened her grip on my fingers. "He has to finish shifting."

As the hub, I was the core of our power. I couldn't let go. The ward would fall without me.

But Zack was vulnerable, and Leslie was fighting for her life as Kolton targeted her with a vengeance. Under the onslaught, her skin rippled while her beast struggled against its human cage.

"I'm going in." Zander stripped on the spot. "Watch my back."

Before he was halfway to bear, Jo Beth stormed from the woods, stripping as she ran. Her shift to a pissed-off grizzly was flawless, almost instantaneous. Proof she was drawing hard on her pack too. She charged, trusting us to open a gap in the ward before she smacked into it, and she bowled over the frantic eagle.

Zack finished his shift then stood watch over Leslie until a white rhino exploded from her skin, blowing Zeb's cover as her stand-in. Climbing to his feet, he pawed the dirt.

All our cards were on the table now. Both Kolton and Murdoch knew exactly who they were up against.

Time to cross our fingers and pray we were holding a royal flush.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN



A snort blasting from his nose, Zeb broke into a gallop straight for Jo Beth, who batted Kolton out of the air. He pinwheeled into Zeb, who gored him on his horn. With a bellow of rage, he flung Kolton into the ward then trampled him while Zack checked on their alpha.

Murdoch, back in action, flung himself against the magic. The first few blows weren't much, but he was pounding away at our reserves. By the fourth strike, I swore I saw stars. Soon we would be out of juice.

We should have had a margarita night with the other Yard Birds to refill our crystals before wading into a battle, but I hadn't anticipated fighting off *two* shifters. I had half expected Kolton to run and this plan to go nowhere. I hadn't anticipated Murdoch would throw his lot in with his newest member.

As far as I knew, the packs weren't friendly, but they were amicable.

Clearly, that had changed after Kolton entered the picture.

As Kolton writhed in a pool of his own blood, muscle spasms overtook him as the shift kickstarted itself.

Changing forms was always painful, but it was so much harder when you were wounded. Let alone after you had expended so much energy on a battle with a grizzly. Even in human form, Jo Beth was a force. I would have thought Kolton had learned that lesson, but as my dearly beloved grandma used to say...

*Life is hard enough, but it's even harder if you're dumb as a steaming cow pie.*

With all three brothers shifted, and Jo Beth in a lather, this little coup didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding.

Too bad Murdoch hadn't clued in to that yet. It would have saved him a lot of pain. Maybe even his life.

Rather than join the Middles, Zander kept pace with the tiger from inside the ward while it clawed at the outside. I waited until the cat got confident, until Zander stood right in front of him on his hind legs, until Murdoch raked the barrier with the assurance he was safe, then I broke the coven's circle and lowered the ward.

The tiger fell into the bear's open arms, and they went tumbling in a ball of multicolored fur.

"The ward is down," I shouted for the shifters' sakes. "Someone help Zander."

Zack snorted a question at Jo Beth, who growled an affirmative then galloped toward the rival alpha.

With that settled, he stood with Zeb over the eagle, waiting for the twitching bird to spit out a human.

"Flo, restrain Kolton when he finishes his shift." I located Ida. "Call the Sweetwater medic."

Halfway to rising out of her seat, thanks to the magic in her system, Betty asked, "What about me?"

"You stay put." I pointed a warning finger at her. "I'm going to help Zander."

As much as she hated being left behind, she wasn't in any shape to run yet, and her scooter wouldn't get her to safety fast enough. She would get clobbered if the fight pivoted toward her. I regretted it, but she would agree with me. Eventually. One day. After she cooled off and got over being sidelined.

As I watched, Murdoch tore a line down Zander's back, but I was the one seeing red.

“Claws off my nephew,” I shouted at Murdoch, “or I’ll beat the stripes off your hide.”

The tiger missed a step at that, and Jo Beth snorted with ursine laughter as she shoved Zander aside.

Scooping up a handful of small rocks, I charged them with magic and hurled them at Murdoch’s furry butt. There wasn’t enough power left in me to really hurt him, but he didn’t need to know I was flagging. The stones detonated with little pops on impact, distracting him while Jo Beth smacked him with her massive paws.

Murdoch reared up, ready to swat her with his claws, but Jo Beth opened his stomach with one swipe.

The tiger fell onto his side, his eyes glassy, but I couldn’t have intervened if I wanted to without breaking shifter law. Whatever his original intent, this was an alpha challenge now. One he had lost if he couldn’t get to his feet, leaving his pack open to a takeover by Sweetwater.

Jo Beth gave him a minute, then two, but he couldn’t do more than twitch and shiver.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the Middles were shifting now that both threats had been subdued.

Aware how fast this could turn on a dime, the coven and I held our ground until the Middles finished the transition back onto two legs. Zander waited until Jo Beth gave a grunt before initiating his own change.

Wisely, she stayed in her bear form until Murdoch shifted or died. Whichever came first.

Within minutes, Murdoch exhaled his last, and the change gripped him one last time.

Flo, her nose wrinkled at the selection, paid a visit to the bin where I kept spare clothes for the boys.

Jo Beth shifted, this time much slower. She prowled over to where Kolton lay sprawled in the dirt.

Before she could say a word, an exhale whistled through his teeth, and his eyes went vacant.

“This makes you alpha of the Murdoch pack.” Zander found his voice first. “Will you incorporate them?”

That pulled me up short, and I pointed out the obvious. “The witness for the other pack is dead.”

“But there was a Witchlight coven present,” Zack said. “That’s grounds for making Jo Beth official.”

Huh.

I didn’t see that one coming.

“This is a headache I did *not* need.” Her head fell back on her neck. “I didn’t want to combine our packs, and that bastard Murdoch knew it. We don’t have the resources to support that many shifters in a small town like ours. That’s one of the reasons why I turned down his formal request to mate with me.”

“He did what now?” Zack recoiled like she had slapped him. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“He was a proud man, and he didn’t take the rejection well.”

“That’s his problem,” Flo cut in. “Not yours.”

The steel underlying her words could leave Jo Beth with no doubt she meant them.

“That’s what Kolton meant,” I realized. “He said Murdoch didn’t have the balls to take what he wanted.”

Neither of them had taken *no* for an answer, and neither of them had much use for balls anymore.

“I never saw this coming.” Jo Beth stood with a grimace for her injuries. “He was a good alpha.”

“Being a good alpha,” Betty said, rolling over with a shirt for Jo Beth, “doesn’t make you a good person.”

The ability to empathize with people you cared for meant nothing if you couldn’t also respect those who stood outside your circle of influence. Goodness was hard to define, but it didn’t result in this. Two dead for no other reason than wounded pride.

“It only takes a spark of anger to light a bonfire of hatred.” I helped Jo Beth into her tee, the fabric acting like a roll of gauze more than clothing. “If Murdoch was still nursing his wounds when Kolton came along with a story about how he got tricked into challenging you while the pack laughed at his expense, I could see them experiencing a lightbulb moment that got them both what they wanted.”

Given how the attacks centered on the heart, I had a feeling Murdoch had made that request himself.

“Murdoch would get his hands on Sweetwater,” Ida murmured, “and Kolton would have his revenge when Jo Beth lost her pack.”

“As much as I hate to see either of those bastards get what they wanted,” Flo began, “I’m willing to offer financial aid to Sweetwater if you’re willing to incorporate the Murdoch pack.” She held up a hand when Jo Beth parted her lips. “Don’t let Murdoch’s or Kolton’s legacies live on. Don’t let pride blind you too.”

A twinkle in her eyes, Jo Beth drawled, “I was just going to say thanks.”

“Smart girl.” Flo fussed with the gold strap on her watch. “It’s not charity.” She couldn’t help defending herself. “Colin loves to build. He’s always hiring new construction companies and God only knows what else. Interior designers. Retail workers. Chefs. Why not let Sweetwater, and other local paras, benefit?”

“Don’t look now—” Zack scooped up Flo and spun her into a waltz, “—but your heart is showing.”

“You little beast.” She smacked at his arms without heat. “Let me go.”

“You’re not half as frosty as you want folks to believe.” He set her down on a paver, as if her shoes hadn’t already been ruined. “You’re all warm and gooey inside.”

“Don’t be vulgar.” She straightened her outfit. “I’m not a cinnamon roll.”

“No.” Joan dialed back in, a mucky toad from who knows where in her hand. “You’re a person.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Betty snorted. “She’s more plastic and toxins than anything.”

“Girls.” I rubbed a finger between my eyes. “Can we please behave in front of company?”

“A crowned eagle—” Zander accepted the challenge, “—a Bengal tiger, and a grizzly bear walk into a bar...”

“I feel your pain.” Jo Beth clamped a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “Leadership isn’t for the weak.”

Truer words had never been spoken.



JO BETH LEFT WITH ANOTHER ROUND OF THANKS AND apologies after her enforcers removed the bodies.

The Middles went with her to greet their new packmates in case the Murdoch pack wasn’t happy about their change in leadership. I felt certain no one would underestimate Sweetwater again any time soon. Let alone their cute as a button alpha.

Fresh out of magic to ease our aches and pains, the girls dispersed once the last of the shifters had gone. They went home to recuperate from the outpouring of magic that ravaged bodies no longer meant to channel so much power.

That left me alone with the decision of what, exactly, to make of the chewed-up pit in my yard. Jo Beth would loan me the people and equipment to transform it into...something... but it was a ragged scar on the landscape at the moment.

“Auntie El?” Zander walked up behind me. “Uncle Wally is asking for you.”

“All right.” I took the stairs onto the porch, pausing to scrape off my shoes. Blood and dirt were a bear to get out of the rugs, so I left the sneakers by the door to wash later. Had I been alone, I might have taken a detour to fix myself a drink.

A stiff one. But Zander kept an eye on me until I shuffled to the living room where Wally had hung since last night. “You rang?”

“I wanted to see you were safe for myself.” He swept his gaze over me. “I heard the noise even in here.”

“What I’ve learned from this is, not only are crowned eagles *gigantic*, but they make a whole heap of racket.” I removed him from the wall and sank onto the couch where I propped him up against a pillow. “There was a whole lot of screeching and squawking, and that was before the tiger got involved.”

“Murdoch was a fool.” He turned his head to see me. “He should have been happy with what he had.”

He was no longer talking about the alphas, but I knew it was guilt speaking. If we didn’t fix our problems, they would only come back later. Twice as hard and twice as fast. That was what happened if you let things fester in a relationship.

“Jo Beth and Murdoch had different ideas on what was best.” I couched my apology in the same manner he did, even if it lent Murdoch too much credit. “His vision wasn’t one she shared, but she’s going to make it work.” The truth was, I would walk over hot coals for Wally. This? His happiness was worth it. Even if it scared the spit out of me. “For the good of the pack.”

*For the good of our marriage*, I tacked on in my head.

“Taylor versus Defour is on in ten.”

“Now that’s one vision I would be happy to share with you.”

“I thought you might say that.” His chuckle warmed me to my bones. “Can I sit with you?”

“Do you have to ask?” I lifted him, kissed his rubbery cheek, then braced him facing out with the back of his plaque resting against my stomach. “That reminds me...” I stroked his exposed fin. “Did I tell you that Pastor Joe almost tossed his cookies when a speck of blood hit his shirt?”

His rasping chuckle told me things were on their way to being okay if we could already laugh about this.

The silence that fell around us as I settled in and switched channels wasn't as comfortable as usual, but it wasn't as awful as before either. I could tell we had a ways to go to mend the wounds we had torn open within each other, but we had both taken strides toward healing.

A gentle mewling noise saved us from further awkwardness as the prematch broadcast filled the room.

Zander strolled in cradling a small kitten in his arms. It was orange and white with a pink and black nose. Half its left ear was missing, along with a section of tail. It might have weighed five pounds soaking wet. I caught a whiff of flea dip that explained its fluffiness. The poor thing must have gotten a bath today.

"I heard someone dumped a litter of strays on Mrs. Dwight's land. I went to see her yesterday afternoon and took a look at them. This little guy is Scrappy. He likes to pick fights." Zander held the kitten up, nose to nose with him. "He does what he wants, always thinks he's right, and Mrs. Dwight says he knows no fear." He smiled at the scrawny thing. "He doesn't look like much, but you can fatten him up in no time."

I yelped when the kitten leapt out of his arms onto my chest. I would have dumped him if Zander hadn't snatched Wally to safety just as fast. Scrappy nestled against my stomach, kneading my thighs and making himself a bed in my lap. He turned a circle three times—a magical number—then conked out.

"Aww." Zander held Wally where he could get a good look. "He likes you."

"Are you sure you want to hang your fate on this particular kitten? You heard what Zander said." I let my gaze slide from Scrappy to Wally. "He picks fights with folks bigger than him —"

"I like a bold spirit."

"—and he's a troublemaker."



“Troublemaker?” Wally’s eyes gentled on me. Not the kitten. “Then I reckon he’ll fit right in around here.”

There was nothing I could say to that except, “Welcome to the family, Scrappy.”

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* best-selling author Hailey Edwards writes about questionable applications of otherwise perfectly good magic, the transformative power of love, the family you choose for yourself, and blowing stuff up. Not necessarily all at once. That could get messy.

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