

Nothing can stay secret forever.

FATE FOUND

HIDDEN OMEGAS BOOK TWO

SABRINA DAY

Fate Found

The Hidden, Volume 2

Sabrina Day

Published by Sabrina Day, 2023.

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First edition. November 26, 2023.

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To the ones who stayed soft when the world did its damnest to turn
you hard. This one's for you.

The sweetheart, the protector, the wildcard and the mastermind.

They've claimed me as their omega. They've told me I'm made just for them. But after a lifetime under my father's thumb, his voice still lingers in my ear, telling me I'm an abomination, unclean and unworthy of love.

Well, his words won't win out. After nearly losing my men, I'm finally sure that I'm right where I need to be, a wild heart among her own kind. It's time to take charge of my destiny, to trust this evolving bond with a pack that's bled for me.

My days are full of courting presents and my nights are spent preparing for my heat. But old threats have a way of returning, and new ones are emerging on all sides waiting for the right moment to strike.

Bring it on.

I'm done running.

This pack has sacrificed enough for me.

No one is touching my men ever again.

Chapter One

THEIR SCENTS ARE HERE but thin.

Not strong enough. Not *deep* enough. They need to be thick in the air. Heavy on my tongue. Twisted tight around each other like a bunch of sleeping packmates. Scents that need to be burrowed far enough underground to just be *mine*.

But they aren't.

Salt, earth, smoke, sweet. Each smell swirls above ground. Split apart. Weak. Too many noses, *not-mine* noses, can capture their scents up here. Too many not-mine noses could think they're welcome to claim what's mine.

I yip my dissatisfaction into the woven rug, angrily pricking at the loops of thread with my claws. The only response my outburst gets is an ear twitch and a light snuffle to the top of my head from the dark shadow trailing alongside me. I huff out another growl, and Shadow replies with a head nudge to my side and a gruff mocking growl of his own — his reminder to focus on tracking down our first prey.

Salt.

My nose takes the lead and tug me down the hall, following Salt's freshest path. His trail ends in front of the closed entrance to my favorite place in this too-big house. I paw at the thin gap that runs up the side of the wood. It takes a few determined scratches, but eventually my nails catch the edge of the door and force it open. A draft of cool air coasts over the edge of the stairs and swirls around my paws. The gust's tart undercurrent is just strong enough to confirm Salt has some sense. He's where he should be. I push the door open the rest of the way and pad down the stairs, nails clicking along wood treads, entering what should be our burrow.

A prickle of Shadow's wild mint and rosemary scent descending around me is the only warning that my companion's mood is about to switch from easygoing lookout to fierce protector. I haven't hit the last step yet when firm fangs sink into the scruff of my neck and I'm swinging through the air. Shadow plops me down on a stair behind him, leaving me with nothing to look at besides a wall of dark fur while he scans the dusky space for predators.

But there are no threats here. Just Salt.

Gabe. Wildflower surfaces from her deep dreaming inside of me long enough to gently layer her name for Salt on top of mine.

I sniff. That may be her name for him but Salt is Salt to me.

Tired of waiting for Shadow to tell me what I already know, I run up a few stairs and take a flying leap over his massive back. He lets out an annoyed bark, the huff of hot breath hitting my belly as I sail overhead. But there's no bite behind his crabbing. He's used to my antics and, with no threats detected, he lets me have free run of the room.

The tang I've been hunting is much thicker here. Not as heavy as it should be, but better. Pleased, I let my tongue hang out and soak the scent up as I close in on my prey.

I stalk towards the twin chairs that shield my goal from my sight. A cloud of salt is concentrated right behind them. The mossy rug under my paws eats up my footfalls as I creep closer, keeping my presence a secret from Salt.

Scrabbling up onto the springy seat of one chair, the urge to curl up against the soft blanket stuffed in the cushion's corner is hard to fight but I don't lie down. I do give the soft folds a quick sniff and then go back one more time for a longer inhale. Sweet was here; The bright mark of the one wildflower calls Mal fills my snout. His fruity sunshine scent is all over the tangled fabric, a tempting distraction. It's been too long since Sweet let me roll around in his lap. A quick nap wrapped up in this substitute for him would be a treat...

Focus.

I shake free of the blanket and leave Sweet's scent behind. Head clear, I hone in on the prey at hand, and find Salt, slumped over, asleep and snoring at Sweet's desk.

Good boy.

I jump onto the crowded desktop. My front claws dig into the soft wood, adding fresh scratches to the weathered surface. My back claws scabble over the edge searching for a toehold. Leaves of paper flutter to the ground as I find my feet and make my way over to Salt.

Cheek pressed against a pad of paper, his arms are curled in a protective stack around his head. Tufts of dark hair peep up like wayward grass from the crook of his elbows and curl around the creases of his shirt. I drum my tail against the worn wood, the hollow thwacks sound out my satisfaction. This is what I wanted to find. Salt safe, underground, reeking of pack.

But not enough of us are present on his skin. The coating Earth and Smoke gave him provides some protection, but it's not complete. I drape myself over the warm wall of Salt's arms and wriggle my nose into the tight hollow where his chin meets his chest. Back and forth, I rub my muzzle against Salt's tender skin. There. Now he's under my protection, too. Salt still needs one more scent, but this is better than nothing.

I give Salt's throat a quick lick, his breath hitches. He starts to stir. Eyes still closed Salt scoops me closer and runs his fingers down the back of my fur, tapping a secret sleepy message only he understands down my spine.

Content, once again Salt's hand comes to rest at the base of my tail as he enters a deeper sleep. I ease out of his loose hold and jump off the desk. I head back upstairs, my personal guard following right behind.

One done. Three more to go.

....

"DOES THIS LOOK LIKE a legal brief to you?" Smoke's question sends a layer of frost snaking across the sun-streaked library's floor straight to our hiding spot behind an overstuffed bookshelf.

"Um, it looks like part of the files Tom left out for me to bring to —" The man facing Smoke stinks of sour sweat and stale air. His hunched back and the fine tremor of his hand give away that while Smoke may be my prey, this rabbit of a man is Smoke's quarry and plaything right now.

I swallow a growl. The time for play is over. Smoke needs to go in for the kill or flush the man out of our home. Either way, both of them need to go away so I can do what I came in here for.

"Tom?" Icicles crack off of Smoke's low voice. "Tom, as in, the asshole ambulance chaser who rents the office space next to mine? That Tom?"

"Um... Yes..." The rabbit, sensing a trap, hesitates before straightening to his full height.

"Tom, who has no reason to be going through my files because I've never consulted on a case with that glad-handing, elitist, shithead? That Tom?"

"Well, that's not quite the impression he gave. He said he was a colleague of yours. That you tasked him with the initial round of closing down your office. He said those files were the legal briefs you needed. I didn't verify the contents because I thought he was your friend." Rabbit's shoes squeak as he shifts his weight from one leg to the other.

"The temp agency may not have shared much about me when they assigned you as my transitional paralegal, so it's understandable you'd

believe that a lying sack of wasted law school knowledge was someone I'd entrust to handle my affairs."

I can't see Smoke, but Rabbit's loud gulp hints that Smoke's favorite "thinking" knife has joined the conversation and is being tossed from hand to hand.

"I will tell you this one time. Details, the predicting of and the management of them, are how my world runs. There will never be a time where the instructions I give will leave out necessary information. For example, if I had asked Tom to *do me a solid*," Rabbit winces at the sharp sarcasm. "And pack my files — a job I explicitly wrote instructions for *you to do by yourself* — you can be certain that's a detail that would be in bold in your itinerary."

"I'm sorr-

"It's done." Smoke cuts Rabbit off. "I trust you've learned your lesson. If something doesn't match my instructions, don't think, don't take initiative. Your first move will be to..." A predatory hush wraps around the bookcase, broken only by Rabbit's wet breath and the tick of some machine buried deeper in the library.

"To call you?" Rabbit's response is a timid question.

"To call me." Smoke continues, "Contact me via phone or text or a two am drive up the coast to wake me up and report any deviations in person, and then *I* will tell *you* what to do next."

"Yes, yes, of course." Rabbit hurries on, leg practically thumping against the floorboards to get past Smoke's annoyance. "Do you want me to find out what he may have taken?"

"Evan -"

"Actually, it's Stephen, sir." Rabbit shuffles in place. Regret lines the small portion of his face, I can see. Like he's surprised and dismayed he was bold enough to let the correction slip out of his mouth.

"Right. Evan was the last temp." Smoke sighs. "Stephen-not-Evan, do you moonlight as a private investigator?"

"No?" Rabbit's reply is quick but unsure.

"No, you don't. So don't go picking up a side job now. Tom will be dealt with by me. Do you know why I hired you?"

"Because you've fired all the other temps, sir?"

"No, well, yes I fired all the other ones. None of them could find their knots with both hands and a map." The thunk of something sharp being

embedded in something hard echoes out emphasizing Smoke's point. "But desperation wasn't what led me to hire you. You put yourself through school, graduated at the top of your class and here you are working as a temp when your classmates who barely passed are advancing in their fields of choice. Do you know what that tells me?"

"Uh, no, sir."

"That the world is taking what they see on the outside and undervaluing what you bring to the table. Your reference at the Standill Law library said you revamped the way their collection is organized and then streamlined their staffing model to better serve the community. A person like that, a person like you, is being misused at a temp agency. I picked you because you need a mentor to show you how to make sure people don't discard your mind because of your packaging. To do that I need you one hundred percent focused on what I tell you to be focused on. And nothing else. Agreed?" No longer playing with Rabbit, Smoke's words are ringed with sincerity.

"Agreed! Thank you sir!" Rabbit's grown two inches taller by the end of Smoke's observation, his leg jostling in excitement now not nervousness.

"Excellent. I'm glad we've come to an accord. Now, let's move on to your new project; how to fold clothes for transport."

"Excuse me?"

Tired of watching Rabbit squirm, I nip my companion's ear, so he'll bend down low enough for me to jump up on his broad back. I want to see my prey. From my new height on top of my shadow, I glimpse Smoke through the crack between two books.

Resting with his back against the window and the sun streaming in behind him, Smoke looks like his head is on fire. The golden rays lightening up the library make his hair look like shifting flames.

Hungry for more of him, I nose the gap between books wider and eat up the sharp planes of Smoke's face. Again, just like with Sweet's scent, there's an ache blossoming in my belly urging me to give up my plan and spend the rest of the day burying myself in Smoke's fire.

Smoke pushes off his perch and tosses a lazy wave at Rabbit to follow to the soft yellow couch tucked behind another set of bookshelves. Smoke moved it in here when he saw that I had made the plush cushions my afternoon nap spot.

"The looks maketh the litigator. I could help but notice the state of the spare suit I had at my office you so kindly you packed. Lesson one in being

taken seriously as the threat I'm going to hone you to be..." Smoke's voice fades as he slips out of view.

Time to move.

Leaving Shadow behind as a lookout, I flick one ear towards Rabbit and Smokes' low tones, muffled by the wall of books separating us and slink across the honeycomb web of wood tiles. I leap onto the chair beside my goal and set my other ear and the rest of my senses on the bit of territory Smoke almost never leaves unguarded.

His desk.

Smooth and sharp where Sweet's is rough and rounded, Smoke's desk is clean. Clear of everything but the crumpled dress shirt Smoke was grumbling about and the one object I was hoping to see.

Balancing on my hind legs, I lean over and snatch up the buzz box, careful to not break it. Rabbit's agitated voice floats out from behind the bookcase, a reminder to escape before they come back but...

Smoke's shirt is all wrong. It smells of dust and metal and nothing of the pack. Any predator would think Smoke was on his own. No claws to defend him besides his own. Any of the mateless ones walking around this claim could think he was free to bite and claim.

No.

On a growl, I pull myself the rest of the way onto the desk. Three quick rolls on top of the smoky cloth and now everyone will know Smoke is mine.

Satisfied, I shuffle back down, careful not to drop my package, and make my way back to Shadow. He slips back out to the hall once he sees I caught my quarry. It's time to go bury my prize where it belongs and continue our hunt.

Chapter Two

SHADOW ISN'T HAPPY I've left him underground to guard all my hard work, but my next target is tricky. Too many of us tracking him would risk alerting him too soon.

It's why, instead of stalking my prey, I've laid a trail for him to follow. Now, from my perch on the railing overlooking the hall, I wait to spring my snare, fine-tuning my inner ear to pick up the faintest trace of his presence.

But it's a wasted effort. My prey's energy is so strong, the weight of his presence presses against my senses long before I hear the slap of his heavy boots round the corner. His messy nest of hair bobs into view under me. A perfect landing spot. The itch to pounce claws its way up my spine, setting my fur on edge.

Not yet, not yet....

Now!

I slice through the air towards my target.

Without breaking his pace, Earth's hands shoot up, his rough palms close gently around my ribcage. My sneak attack is over just as it was getting started.

"Nice try, Birdie, but I invented that move." The world tumbles upside down and blood surges to my head as I'm flipped, then tucked belly-up into the warm cradle of Earth's arm.

"You can't out-stalk your number one stalker, sweetheart. Not that I'm complaining." Earth drags two rough fingers down my throat. I reward his stroke with a rattling purr. "You can scent the ever-living fuck out of my kitchen." Another rough stroke up my throat. "You can track flour all over this damn house whenever you want." His bright brown eyes glint with amusement as he taps the thin bones above my heart. "All that does, pretty girl, is make it easy for me to hunt you down so I can get you to scent the hell out of me." There's a pop of displaced air, and my warm cradle disappears. I flip belly down as the floor is rushes up, just to be caught by the scruff of my neck, again.

Earth's wolf has come out to play.

Earth being free with his wolf is why, next to Salt, he's the smartest one in the pack. He lets his wolf come out and roam with me and Shadow whenever he can. It's the best because Earth's scent is always fresh and

exciting, never stale with sadness when he sees me as I am now. Not like the others.

Earth tosses me onto the cushioned bench lined up against the wall and assumes our familiar fighting stance. His long grey front legs rest flat along the floor, his back arches high in the air, tail wagging with anticipation. Earth tilts his head and barks.

You coming down or what?

I yip back and attack.

You want to play, let's play, old man.

We scrabble, darting in and out, tumbling around in a blur of red and gray. Claws scratch up the floor as we land nips on each other's flanks between delighted growls. Earth lets out a bark of approval when I dodge his attempt to sweep my forelegs. For weeks, that move of his sent me crashing to the ground but not anymore.

Earth falls back and goes belly up after taking two paws to the chest during a flying tackle from me. He makes a show out of chuffing out his defeat, panting, mouth wide with a grin at his first loss.

Victorious, I crawl up Earth's rumbling mountain of a chest. My limbs are heavy with exhaustion, but this is the closest I've come to content today. I close my eyes, my purpose for luring Earth here forgotten. Right now, my entire world is centered on riding the rise and fall of his breaths up and down until my heart matches the beat of his and nothing but our combined scents fills my nose.

A door slams.

Our calm shatters.

I tumble to the floor as Earth rolls over with a grumble and arches back into his skin.

So much skin. I sniff with satisfaction when he makes no move to wrap his ripped clothes around him. Only the pictures on Earth's skin cover him. Now, there's nothing masking my scent on him.

Mine.

"Aiden, have you seen—?" Smoke glides into the hall and freezes, shirt clutched in one fist, the other hand rooting around his pant's pocket. Smoke's sky eyes narrow in on Earth's crotch. I use the distraction to melt into the tiny triangle of space behind the door that's still propped open from earlier.

My lure is working! But I need to stay out of sight if I want my trap to capture both of them.

“What are you doing with your dick out at 8am?”

I peer around the corner of the door and see Smoke raise a hand towards Earth and shake his head. “Nevermind, forget I said anything. Why are you still here? Shouldn’t you be out running down another dead end from Gabe’s crackpot poker buddy?”

“Geiger’s latest tip can wait. I’m sick of being sent to the ass-ends of the Hollows to shake down every shanty beta campout for info.” Earth rolls his shoulders with frustration. “If I have to smell another collection of unwashed wannabe militia asses, just to learn they aren’t the militia we want, I’m going to take that squeaky as fuck chair of his and smash up all of Geiger’s little tech toys.”

Earth blows out a breath and with it the rigid tension bunching up his shoulders deflates. “I just need a day, a full fucking day, back on our claim doing shit that feels useful. So I’m here prepping our girl’s meals, weeding my damn garden and making sure Mal doesn’t lose his shit on Gideon when he head’s down to Red’s tomorrow morning. He’ll be back tonight and you know how he is after these trips with his Dads.”

A sly grin tips up Earth’s lips, “And no, I won’t forget your first question. Why wouldn’t my dick be out at 8am? How could I deprive the sun of my stars?” Muscles shift and ripple down Earth’s back as he prowls closer to Smoke and puts on a show of stretching. Waves of mischief roll off him as he plays with Smoke, invading Smoke’s space. His Earth scent spikes and deepens when Smoke immediately responds by reaching up and tugging the hank of hair that’s spilled over Earth’s forehead to the side with enough force that Earth is forced to bare the side of his throat to Smoke.

“There’s no amount of prep that would acclimate me to seeing the stars you tatted up and down your cock before I’ve had coffee.”

“Aw, I guess a month back in The Hollows full-time isn’t enough to pull those uptight city-alpha sensibilities out of your ass.” I swallow a whine at the banked aggression in his tone. Earth’s words sound friendly, but there’s a growl creeping around their edges.

“I guess not.” Smoke’s smooth reply coils around Earth’s challenge as he closes the distance between them, speaking the words almost against his neck now. “Perhaps I’ll pull those sensibilities out of my ass and shove them up yours. See if being filled up will get you to stop sulking every time I—”

A trill of chirps cut Smoke off.

The buzzing bait I buried below snaps my trap into motion.

“Is that you?” Earth cocks his head towards the repetitive noise coming from the open door. I duck back into the pocket of darkness so he doesn’t see me.

“Quiet!” Smoke snaps.

“Why should I shut up? I didn’t lose your phone.” Earth rumbles.

“I didn’t lose it.” Smoke sighs. “Ava took it.”

A crack of laughter erupts out of Earth. “Is the big bad alpha lawyer using our vixen as an excuse for how he lost his precious lifeline? “

Hidden away, I can’t see them, but I can hear the solid thump of flesh hitting flesh, followed by an amused grunt from Earth. “I don’t need to hide behind excuses. I know it was her because she doused my dress shirt in her scent before she made off with my phone.” Through the crack under the door, I can see Earth’s bare feet and Smoke’s shiny shoes approach, and then walk past my hideout as they descend into the burrow.

“She probably couldn’t stand the stink of your office on your clothes. She needed to get you smelling like pack.”

See, Earth understands.

“Ava can douse every single article of clothing I own in her scent. Nothing would make me happier or get me harder than her marking the fuck out of my wardrobe. But setting traps all over the house to keep us down here has to stop.” Smoke’s voice floats up from the burrow. “She needs to know we can keep her safe everywhere, not just down here.”

They’re greeted by a friendly yip from Shadow.

“Shay, my man, she’s got you playing guard-pup again? Don’t worry, we’ve got it from here. Go head out and hit the trails for a run. Take Hera with you.”

Shadow chuffs a muffled woof back at Earth.

Making as little noise as possible, I creep out and slowly inch down the stairs. Shadow pads passed me on his way upstairs, giving me a quick headbutt. I’ll follow, but first I need eyes on my incomplete pack. Careful to stay hidden I tuck myself against the slats in the basement railing, and bring the three men into view.

Salt, still asleep, is bracketed on either side by Earth and Smoke. Both men gaze at him with satisfied possessiveness. Earth slides his fingers through Salt’s glossy dark hair, twirling a curly strand around one thick knuckle. As if he senses the affectionate pressure, Salt shifts closer and relaxes against Earth’s hip where it’s propped up against the desk.

Smoke watches Earth pet Salt, a half smile teasing the corner of his mouth. He raises a hand towards the two but recoils as if burned when Earth flinches. Restless, I fidget on the stairs. Instinct drives me to comfort Smoke through our bond but I can't give away my hiding place.

Breaking his gaze away from the pair, Smoke frowns as he crouches down and picks up the papers I knocked over.

“What’s the point of Gabe going through these daily reports on Gideon? That prick isn’t doing anything besides riling May up with his tab.” A line wrinkles Smoke’s forehead as he straightens up and thumbs through the stack of paper, reading whatever is on the page.

“Hence Mal’s trip to Red’s tomorrow.” Earth rests a hand on the nape of Salt’s neck. “He’s going to give him an ultimatum. Shift our girl back permanently and then kindly get the hell out of our territory or be forcibly relocated and maybe down a body part or two.”

“Why didn’t either of you tell me about this visit? A united front would send a stronger message.”

“Maybe because that legendary control of yours isn’t worth shit around him? You get all stabby whenever Gideon says Ava’s name and I can only pull one of you off of him. Besides, terrorizing your revolving door of temps is taking up all your time.”

“They’re all incompetent!”

Now that they’re back to bickering, I know they’ll stay where they belong long enough for me to get my last target. Satisfied, I head upstairs.

Sweet’s trail is spotty and cold. The freshest spot I can find of him is in front of the leaf-green door he’s always leaving through.

I hate that door.

I eye the smaller me-shaped flap Earth carved out at the bottom. A breeze sneaks under the stiff leather, teasing the promise of sunshine, fresh air and the possibility of finding Sweet on the other side. I sink to my belly and warily scoot towards the opening like it’s a predator just waiting to attack. Soon I’m close enough to raise a shaky paw to the flap.

Sweet and Smoke’s rage and fear burn my chest from the inside out. Earth’s wolf is gasping his last breaths, my bones are cracking, the wicked man’s knife glints as it moves. Pain explodes around my heart.

A high thin whine fills the air. I jump before I recognize that the noise came from me.

Heeding my memory's warning, I slink back. Nothing good comes from passing through that flap. Defeated, I spin around three times and curl up on the reed mat in front of the door. I soothe myself by picking apart the scents of my pack baked into the woven fibers. Their scents alone are enough to chase away the shakes.

Tomorrow, I will be a real pack member and leave the house. Tomorrow, I will hunt down Sweet and keep him safe underground. But for now, I'll seek comfort the only way I can and tug the bright string connecting Sweet to my heart, sending out gentle pulses to pull my alpha back to me.

The sun creeps from one window over to the other, and still I reach for my missing mate. Earth comes by for a quick pat and leaves a pile of smoked meat sticks at the edge of my mat. Soon after him, Smoke settles on the floor next to me for a time, his gaze a comforting weight on my back as his pen moves across the paper pad in his lap. He stays for a long while before he's called away.

Purple dusk bathes the entryway when Shadow finds me. He says nothing, just wraps his wolf around me as sleep pulls me under.

And when my dreams explode with the scent of sweet fruit and the golden string goes taut and floods my chest with warmth, it feels like I'm soaring through the air and it's easy to mistake the thunder booming in my sleepy fantasy for words.

"Baby, I'm home."

Chapter Three

Mal

NOTHING MAKES YOU TAKE stock of your life like the damp quiet of a scrubby patch of land at the ass-crack of dawn. The hushed birdsong trilling down from the towering walls of the forest at my back adds an extra layer of introspection to the early morning. So I roll with the mood and wade through the mess in my head. Part of me is pissed that I'm out here on two legs instead of home on four legs, dozing in my bed, wrapped around our omega. But the weight of what's coming drives the rest of me, urging me forward.

Unfortunately, when I do the math on what the past month of running my pack ragged has yielded, the answer isn't progress, it's gut cramps and a numb ass. That's the sum total of what I've accomplished in the past four weeks of shoring up our territory. From the cold comfort of my truck bed, this not-so-profound knowledge knocks around my head as I watch the rising sun tinge the gray cloud cover pink in between the tips of the ponderosa pines swaying in the breeze.

Now, the numb ass was to be expected. It's no secret that even for an alpha shifter, I've got a lot of bulk. Spend thirty sunrises starting my day parked here outside Red's, a hulking reminder of just whose land this gun-for-hire is squatting on, followed by countless outreach visits to all the claims scattered across the territory to do a head-count on the pack, popping a squat at each one with that kind of weight planted all off-kilter on the ridges lining my truck bed? There was no question that some of the nerves down below were going to quit as gravity worked its magic, pushing the heft of my top half down into the cold-ass metal.

The gut cramps though, those took me by surprise. Aiden's always on my ass that the only reason I'd survive on my own cooking is because my stomach churned battery acid that could digest a carburetor if I put my mind to eating one. May expressing her displeasure with the situation in her parking lot by giving me scorched tar masked as coffee every morning should bounce right off.

I shy away from thinking too hard about why the cramps dog me from sunrise to sunset long after the coffee's burned off because there's nothing more going on here besides May getting her licks in where she can. The queasiness she's caused by burning away my stomach lining is only kept at

bay by sniffing the trace scent of my wildflower girl left on my wrist every time I take a sip.

Not that the fucker across from me cares that he's the source of my deteriorating gastro-intestinal health.

Thanks to Gideon, everyday it's the same routine: wake up, stare at our gorgeous mate tucked in between me and some combination of Hayes, Aiden or Gabe, drink in her flower and earth scent and, if I'm lucky, she'll break her streak of staying in fur and I'll get to nuzzle the human form she sometimes slips back into when she's unconscious. Then I tear myself away, drive down to the western edge of our claim that borders the edge of Red's parking lot. Once here, I pop a 180 and back up so I'm parked truck-bed-to-truck-bed facing this pain in the ass's truck. I confirm that the bastard hasn't left Red's property with the rotating pack camping out as Gideon's "escorts" should he decide to take a step onto our land.

He never does. So the reports are brief. All there's left to do is wait for him to wake up, mosey out of his cab and shoot me a shit-eating grin as he brushes his teeth. We get our twenty minutes of interrogation disguised as small talk. He pokes around for info on Ava. I fish for what Gideon knows about her family and why he's determined to test my ever waning patience by haunting the edges of my claim. Each of us filing away information gleaned from every comment or muscle twitch.

But no more. This shit ends today.

As if he can sense my thoughts, the bastard's head rises above his truck's dashboard. Watching Gideon unfold himself out of his cab, I wonder if his ass goes numb overnight, sleeping along the cab's bench, boots sticking out the window. Even for a mercenary used to roughing it, this can't be fun for him. He matches me inch for inch, pound for pound, and I know from experience that an alpha of his size needs room to move around.

But if he's stiff and hurting, he doesn't show it. With his weathered face, scruffy with a week-old salt and pepper beard, Gideon manages to look like he rolled out of a feather bed and not an old-ass driver's seat as he stretches and then gets down to his daily pits and bits washup.

"Alpha." I flick the bill of my cap at him and give him a nod.

Gideon tucks his toothbrush into the side of his cheek and tips his chin up. "Alpha."

Niceties observed, I slap the side of my truck and slide off the back. The vehicle rocks to the side as my weight comes off at the same time Aiden

climbs out of the passenger's seat and posts himself against the truck's door. His aviator sunglasses reflect Red's shiny storefront back at us, and my enforcer's causal stance — complete with shit kickers crossed at the ankle — makes it look like he could throw a punch or eat a scone and be equally happy. Knowing Aiden, he'll probably do both before we're done here.

“Well, this is new. To what do I owe the pleasure of not one but two of the Findealay pack members this fine morning?”

“It's time to cut the shit,” I growl.

Gideon cocks a brow, his grin shifting the faded scar connecting the corner of his right eye to the tip of his mouth up higher. “All right then, let's get down to it. Not that there's much to shit to cut. I made my terms plain weeks ago.”

“And so did we.”

Calling it ‘our terms’ makes it sound like we let Hayes submit a well-reasoned offer to Gideon. Not quite the case; the truth is, we barked out our “terms” at him after he ripped the rug out from under us and rewrote Ava's family tree and added a few branches she didn't know about. Between her father's attack, her surprise shift and that little bomb about her sisters, Ava's fox popped right back out once he left. The memory makes my eye twitch. We had just gotten her back; just gotten her safe, and then Gideon pulled this shit out of his pocket and took her away all over again.

We ordered him the hell off our claim, making it clear that he was never to speak to our mate ever again.

Gideon obliged... to an extent. He moved his truck to just over the edge of our claim and set himself up in the back of Red's parking lot. But he hasn't given up on Ava. He refuses to budge one foot more until he can talk to her.

Until he can take her away from us.

“So, I'll ask again, what's different about today? You bring in your muscle to see if you can wrestle me farther away from your territory?” he asks as if unbothered at the idea, but the glint in his eye says that he is honestly curious about Aiden's presence.

For as much as Gideon is an annoying reminder of how out-of-control everything is at the moment, these morning meet-ups have given me a wary respect for the alpha. He's kind and polite to Red's staff, doesn't start shit with any of the shifters, and hasn't forced the conversation about Ava beyond making a daily request to see her and to allow her to leave with him for two days. When I shut him down, he doesn't fight me. Just moves on to shoot the

shit about less explosive subjects until I pack up and leave him to wait out another day in Red's parking lot.

But just because he's halfway decent doesn't make admitting what we need from him any easier.

"The situation has changed. And because we're not ones to choke on our pride, we're willing to put forth a compromise, assuming you're willing to make certain... concessions."

"Concessions, huh?" Gideon leans against the squat base of the pole holding up Red's neon sign and fishes a bag of trail mix out of one of his cargo pants pockets.

"Ava is never leaving our territory without us. That's a non-starter. So let that dream go."

He crunches through a handful of nuts and nods. "Seems like I'd be giving up something pretty significant. Want to share with the class what you'd offer in exchange?"

"Not an offer. Our omega. Our rules." Best to break Gideon of any illusions we're about to horse trade back and forth. Ava's safety trumps everything else and she's safest when she's tucked up in the middle of her pack.

"You get two days' worth of access to Ava at our home. A couple of hours at a time with a chaperone. Discuss whatever you want with Ava, but you come to the four of us first for permission to do anything more than just talk. And you better be prepared to hear a no."

"Four of you?" Gideon muses. "It's official then. So Gabe the sheriff — excuse me, former sheriff — is part of your pack now?"

Our bond goes electric as Aiden sends a definite "he better keep Gabe's name out of his mouth," middle finger to me.

I ignore the mercenary's attempt at fishing. "That's all we're willing to do"

"I'll play along. Say I'm interested in this not-an-offer. Tell me, what do you expect in exchange for access to the little honeybee?"

She's not your damn honeybee. My wolf snarls at the audacity of some other alpha giving my omega a proprietary nickname.

"We expect," I growl, "that you tell us how you're able to force-shift Ava back from her fox."

"Ah, there it is." Gideon's lack of surprise at our request makes my fist itch. The fact that he seemed to expect us to ask this doesn't sit well. But I

keep my stance relaxed and wait for him to continue.

“Having trouble getting her to recognize all of you as her alphas?” Gideon asks with a grin.

“She won’t respond to our commands to shift back,” I grit out. Hackles rise along my wolf’s neck. Neither of us take kindly to the jab to our dominance. Hayes, Aiden, and I may have agreed to be honest with Gideon about what’s going on with Ava, but it cuts deep to have another alpha rub it in our omega isn’t responding to us as they should.

Red’s parking lot is three-quarters full now with a familiar ragtag assortment of trucks and cars. Through the front window I can make out May’s regular crew of shifters and betas seated in their usual spots. All of them here for a cup and a bite with a side of the latest news from around the Hollows.

I track May as she hustles from table to table and count each of the lives I’m responsible for at each of her stops. Neighbors, friends, former schoolmates, cranky old-timers, all of them depend on me and my pack to keep our heads straight and guide the territory through its greatest test yet.

I loop my thumbs through the loops of my jeans and collar my wolf. Ava may not recognize us as her alphas but she sure does seek out the cradle of my arms when she’s sweet and sleeping at night. It’s the memory of my wolf wrapped around her fox last night that soothes the man and the beast inside me. Clear-eyed once again I remember what this visit is about.

Like I told this asshole, pride isn’t something we have time for, so I square up, look the mercenary dead-on and lay it all out there. “She let her fox take over after you left and the vixen’s been in the driver’s seat since then. She only occasionally comes back into her skin when she’s asleep. The moment she wakes up,” I snap my fingers. “Her fox is back before her eyes are fully open.”

“What’s she like these days when her fox takes over?” Smartass grin gone, the alpha isn’t making a causal query. Gideon’s hips may stay planted on the fender of his truck but the easiness of his stance can’t mask the edge of concern buried in his question. Gideon’s gaze is sharp and probing as he folds at the waist and leans in waiting to hear more about Ava’s fox.

“Anxious, mostly. She shadows us all over the house, tries to keep us all together underground in my office.” I frown. “She refuses to go outside. Doesn’t matter what we do, she throws a fit if we try to force it.”

“I was afraid that would happen.” Gideon shakes his head and scrubs a hand down his face, giving me a look like we’re the ones that fucked up.

“Nice of you to warn us,” Aiden snaps. His claim bite on my shoulder aches with his fury.

“You kicked me out, if memory serves.” Gideon spreads his hands wide. “Hard to know what to warn you about if I can’t step foot on your claim.”

My temper snaps. “What’s your hold on her?” I bark. The alpha command echoes across the lot. Shifters exiting the diner catch my flex in their chest, and instinctively bare their necks in the face of my anger.

But after a month of dancing around with him with nothing to show for it, the dam holding back all my rage and frustration is broken. All the pent up question crashing against my skull come flooding out.

“Why did your bark work on us? Hayes’s is damn prodigy at inter-dynamic law and there’s no evidence any-fucking-where that someone like you has that kind of power over us. You’re not a shifter and there’s no pack backing you up. You shouldn’t be able to make us submit to you.”

“And yet I did.” Gideon remains unmoved.

“This motherfuck—” Aiden snarls before cutting himself off. In a sign of how far his self-discipline has come in the last month, I’m impressed when he doesn’t abandon his post guarding the truck door to start shit with Gideon. Still, my shoulder aches with Aiden’s seething cresting down our bond.

“Easy. I meant no disrespect. Just stating facts,” Gideon drawls. “How about this? I accept your not-an-offer, and I’ll sweeten the deal because I like your girl and I want her to be safe.”

He pushes off the sign post and ambles over to the edge of the asphalt — the unofficial line separating our claim from Red’s. “I’ll meet with Ava. We’ll break it up into a few sessions. I’ll make sure her fox can’t take over until she accepts you enough to control her shifts.” He pauses, plants his boots, standing firm and then continues, “I’ll accept a chaperone but it can’t be any of you. This is delicate business what she and I have to do. There’s no place for any of the knot swinging and alpha posturing that’ll pop off if any of you are there.”

“Not going to fly,” Aiden spits out.

Gideon’s brows crash together and his gaze hardens. “You accepting my terms better fucking soar like an angel or your omega is going to spend her life as a fox.”

“You’d leave her to live a half-life like that? You’d be that godsdamn cruel?” Aiden snaps.

I raise my hand toward my pack brother and send a pulse of calm through our bond to get him to settle. He buzzes back with a wave of discontent but stays quiet. I nod to Gideon to continue. “If not one of us, who would chaperone?”

“How about the pretty beta doctor? She seems like good folk. Cares a lot about Ava. She’s made a point of coming by Chez Blackwell,” Gideon kicks his truck’s back tire, “to ask about your girl. Wanted to see if I could tell her how Ava was doing after the attack on your claim.”

I hide my surprise that Kira paid Gideon a visit without the meeting getting back to me and turn his the idea over. Out of everyone outside our cadre, Kira knows the most about Ava’s history. She could watch out for her triggers. If anything came up during Gideon’s time with Ava that posed a threat to her recovery, Kira would alert us.

But Aiden doesn’t like her and all of us sure as shit doesn’t trust her to look out for our interests if they conflict with Ava’s desires. When she came to visit last month without warning, he was quick to share his thoughts that Kira was untrustworthy and was trying to lure Ava away. My sense is that he might be correct; but I’m not afraid that the little beta will convince Ava to leave. Right now, we can’t even get our omega out of the house.

That decides it. I’m certain that the doc genuinely wants the best for Ava, even if the nature of alpha and omega relationships offends her. Like a lot of city bred betas Kira individualistic to her core the idea of anyone having such a gut deep connection there’s no telling where she ends and her mates begin is fucking terrifying.

Plus, Gideon didn’t say shit against me posting a ring of guards around whatever room we give him. If he disturbs a hair on Ava’s head, we’ll separate his head from his body.

“Fine. Kira can chaperone. We’ll reach out to her today.”

“Fantastic. Let’s plan on next week. Got some jobs piling up elsewhere that need a personal touch, so I’ll be gone for a few days.” He smirks. “And just to show how much I’ve appreciated your hospitality, I’ll even set you guys up with some fun toys and backup to shore up your defenses before I leave.”

“Interested in the toys, but we’re good on backup.” The ever-present migraine squeezes the base of my skull at the mention of more bodies to keep

track of.

“Oh, no?” He scans the surrounding treeline. “Missing any wolves lately? Or are you traveling all over the territory every day for shits and giggles?”

I move in until we’re two scarred mirror images of each other, facing off on either side of the asphalt line.

Gideon opens his mouth.

I punch him in the throat.

His head snaps back. He tries to lean into the hit and throw himself backwards, but I hook an arm around his neck in a chokehold and drag him down into the mud. Two jabs to his kidneys and a knee to his back get him prone under me.

I yank his head up and get up close and personal with his ear. “Can’t talk, means you can’t order us to submit. And if you can’t do that, then you need to be real careful around us.” Gideon’s movements start to get sluggish. An ugly purple flush stains his cheeks. “Next time you fuck around and tease that you have information about any shifter being in danger,” I slam his head back down into the wet dirt with a wet squelch, “Won’t be my fist shutting you up. It’ll be my wolf tearing your throat out.” I twist his head back so he can watch my fangs descend and see the predator inside me peering out of my eyes.

For a split second, something alien blazes in Gideon’s cool grey gaze, meeting my wolf’s challenge with a hardness of its own. Then it’s gone.

“Mal, you are perilously close to killing that transient.” I look up into the unamused stare of the heart and soul of Red’s.

“Morning, May.”

“Don’t you *Morning, May* me. Get off that bum and come get this coffee. Ain’t got all day to let the breeze blow up my skirt.”

“We have an understanding?” I ask, my attention trained on the prone alpha.

He reaches back and taps my biceps twice in acquiescence, leaving muddy streaks up and down my arm. I release him and hop up.

May’s back is ramrod straight and her silver bun doesn’t have a hair out of place as she stares us down. She has a tray of coffee balanced in one hand and a plate of scrambled eggs and burnt bacon in the other. There isn’t a stain in sight on her black-and-pink uniform.

“Don’t care if you’re going to be lead pack or alpha to end all alphas or whatever title they’re giving out now. You know the rules. No shifting, no

fighting on my property. You kill anyone, you make sure they settle their bill first and then do it on your side of the property line.”

“Yes ma’am. But in my defense, we kept the scrapping to our side of the line.” I go over to my truck bed and open up the lockbox that lines the back of the bed by the cab. I grab two towels, tossing one of them to Gideon. He spits out a mouthful of mud and blood and gets to work washing up for the second time this morning.

“But you didn’t make sure he settled the tab he’s been running up all month, did you?”

“Sorry May.” I shoot her a sheepish grin. “You know we’re raking it in with the new vacation home jobs. We’re good for it and would never leave a lovely lady hanging.

She snorts and places the breakfast plate and a coffee in Gideon’s truck bed, passing the other coffee off to me. Her gaze softens with delight as she looks behind me. “Morning, Aiden.”

“Morning, May. Looking pretty as a picture as usual.” May flips him off with her free hand and then pulls out a grease-stained bag from her apron pocket. It smells like heaven.

“Got some blueberry scones for your boy. Maybe a few for you and the Boss Man too, so the rest of them make it back to your claim. Tell Gabriel he’s had enough time to heal. He needs to give us a visit. We miss those stupid pretty eyes of his round here.” Hands mostly clean, I catch the warm bag May tosses my way.

“And before you bug me about it, yes it’s the kind with lemon zest and vanilla. No, I will not share the recipe.”

“Oh May, if Carl hadn’t made an honest woman out of you, I’d have claimed you years ago.”

“Don’t even start.” May turns on her heel and starts across the parking lot before wheeling around again. She jabs a finger at Gideon and me. “You two keep the scrapping away from anything I have to pay to fix.”

A chorus of *yes ma’ams* hit May’s retreating back.

“I don’t know where your missing wolves are but I know who caused them to disappear and so do you.” Not at all apologetic at being a shit earlier, Gideon’s dropped the goading edge to his tone as he finishes cleaning up.

“When we first met, I told you the stakes of claiming Ava. That pretty bite mark you graced her with sent you tumbling into a not-so-cold war you can’t deal with on your own. Picking off a few remote shifters and making

them disappear is just an overture to what's coming your way if you don't take the right steps. So be the leader I know you are, accept my help, keep the people you're responsible for alive and maybe get back the few you've lost. That other job I need to leave to handle may yield some information on where your missing shifters are."

"You know, you could have saved yourself a dirt breakfast if you just led with that." I grumble.

"Could've, but I learn a lot more when I push people just so." He winks. "It's been a fun month nudging what type of alpha you are out into the open, Mal. Glad you're the one who took the little kit and her brother in when she needed it." Gideon claps a hand down on my shoulder and passes the towel back. His easy going camaraderie and candid honesty hit me in the gut. This kind of rough approval could've come from any of my fathers after a long and grueling training.

I stop him as he turns back to his truck. "When you said that you could stop Ava from letting her fox take control... Is that something you could do now before you head out?" I ask. "Call it a gesture of good faith."

"Yeah, I could drive up to your place first."

"No need to drive. Just take a few steps this way." I push the go-ahead to Aiden through our bond.

At the signal, the alpha who spent his night splitting his knuckles working over Gieger's latest lead reaches into the truck's cab and brings out a bundled nest of blankets with care that would rival the most doting of grandmothers.

We gather around him as he works a layer of the cloth free to reveal onyx-tipped ears and downy rust-colored fur. Ava curled into herself, unbothered by the movement, stays asleep.

"She's a real beauty, in all her forms, isn't she?" Gideon strokes a calloused finger down her snout. "Bet her sisters are too." I glance sharply at the alpha, the reference to Ava's kin makes it sound like either he's never seen her sisters or has seen them in their shifted form. But before I can ask, my packmate's impatience takes over.

"Can you shift her or not, Old Man?" Aiden's voice is low and rough as he pulls Ava closer to his chest and steps back from the older alpha.

The corner of his mouth tipping up with mirth, Gideon nods. "And lucky for you, I won't need to take her from you to do it." He brings his buzzed head down to Ava's and whispers something into her ear I can't pick up. The collar of his flannel shirt prevents me from reading his lips.

My wolf paces and my gut churns with more than just May's burnt coffee. Another alpha so close to our mate is bad enough but one with a connection to her that rivals ours makes me itch to follow through on my threat to rip out his throat.

All of this is almost forgotten in the next instance as Ava's tiny bones pop and stretch back into shape.

In the blink of an eye, a nest of dark curls replaces her fox ears. The rusty blush highlighting the round bronzed cheeks I've missed so much glow in the morning light.

Ava's lashes flutter but she remains asleep as she murmurs something and curls deeper into Aiden's chest. Gideon's leather and resin scent deepens into something that feels too close to possessive for my comfort. I step between him and our mate as Aiden hustles back into the truck with her as if he's worried Gideon will snatch her from us.

"I've blocked her from her fox for now. It won't hold forever and it'll likely make her more stressed to be separated from the part of her she was using to feel safe, so use this time wisely. She's in flight mode; she doesn't trust herself. Doesn't feel safe in her skin. If you want her to open up, you need to earn her trust, convince her you're worth putting her faith in and submitting to."

"If that's true, why does she listen to you?"

"Like I said, I go way back with Ava and her folks. Already earned the little kit's trust. Whether she remembers this face or not."

"And I told you to cut the shit. What do you mean you already earned her trust?" I snap back. Gideon and his band of mercs were random ex-special forces acquaintances of Aiden's from back in the day. That any of them would have known Ava or her family defies logic, especially since Ava had told us that before the night they ran away she'd never met anyone who wasn't her parents or her brother.

"Not going to tell you about what that means before I tell her. So save your energy and wait your turn."

I grunt, not bothering to respond outside of mentally kicking Gideon several rungs down on my shit list as I walk him back to his truck. "Fine. How long till you can get your guys up here?"

"They're already here." The older alpha turns and leans against his tailgate to face me.

He grins and tugs his ear.

Plumes of dust explode into violent clouds an inch from the toe of my boots. Three neat bullet holes in the dirt line up with the edge of the parking lot.

I whip around. Fangs and claws unsheathed and aching to attack as I check to make sure Aiden and Ava are safe and scan the tree line. There's no sign of the sniper anywhere. The coverage between old growth pines is too dense to pick out where the shots came from.

"See now, Mal," Gideon says around a mouth of eggs, "I might not have a pack but I do have one hell of a crew." He stares down the uneven ridge of a nose that's been more a friend than a stranger to other people's fists, his expression resolute. "You got a hit in, and good on you for getting one over me. I had it coming for being cavalier about your pack's safety. But let this little hello from Ghost remind you, I don't need my voice for my crew to know what to do and when to do it. So you better be real careful around us too."

Chapter Four

Ava

GOTTA RUN, CAN'T STOP.

A child's small brown feet, my feet, stand out against the slick yellow leaves of the forest floor.

Chest burning, I skid and slide across the earthy rot squelching between my toes, stomach clenched tight in the struggle to stay upright. I try and fail to keep up with the two little brown bodies, running ahead of me. The dim gloom of green pressing in from all sides makes it hard to track the brief flashes of their arms and legs as thin branches whip and scratch at my wet cheeks.

I cry out as a rough loop of root scrapes against the top of my foot. The surprise snag sends the trees tilting one way as my ankle rolls the other. I smack face first into the wet earth. Glops of sour mud and bits of grit pack my mouth. The shock of the fall snaps into a searing pain screaming up my leg.

A small hand slaps across my lips, stuffing the whimpers dripping out my scraped up mouth right back down my throat, while another tiny set of hands dig into my arms, sinking in deep enough beads of red well up around their torn fingernails as they try to drag me through the rocky mud to safety.

Soft red fur tickles my nose. The gentle prick of a pair of fangs slide down my throat as a determined muzzle joins the struggle and tugs at the cloth twisted around my neck. The fox's damp blunt snout presses against my neck. She lets go only to lick a kiss to my forehead. She leans back on her haunches, lips pulled back in a vicious growl and lunges over us at the thundering steps closing in behind us.

I am the body,

My flesh is weak.

Suddenly, the forest is gone. The pain is gone. I'm alone, out in the clearing behind our cabin. The scrap heap from father's last supply run is on my right. A pile of split wood on the left.

Sticky and thick, I can't escape the fog of resin hanging over the yard. The syrupy tang of freshly slaughtered wood clings to my clothes and the braids of my hair. I look down. Ropey strands of sap glue my grip tight around my ax's wooden handle.

I pry one hand free and count the blisters covering my palm as if they can answer the questions hanging in the air that start with words like “where” and “when” and end in “am I”. Old flat blisters, tough and numb, are scattered between bulging waterlogged ones shot through with angry red lines which sting at the lightest touch. Then there are the sneaky ones lurking just underneath the rough mess of my palm, aching for their chance to erupt.

I’m chopping wood. Have been for days, I think. Long enough that my entire world is nothing but the spine cracking heft of lifting the heavy ax to the sky, followed by the delicious relief that followed the freefall swing back to earth and brace for the bone-jarring thwack of metal meeting wood which sends pricks of fire licking up my forearms. Twin pieces of young wood tumble to the ground. The blood of another sliced up tree scents the breeze. The small mountain of firewood grows another handspan tall. A fresh blonde scar splits the weathered stump’s alter top the only sign left of the latest sacrifice.

The pattern repeats and repeats and repeats.

Tired and sweaty, on the next swing I track the ax’s downward arc but when my gaze hits the stump there is no fresh log waiting for the bite of my blade. Just me locking eyes with another me, head resting on top of the dead stump altar, halo of dark curls spilling over the sides, scarred throat bare.

A scream claws its way out of my gut. A cry of warning? A screech of an apology? I don’t know what the shrill sound shredding the flesh of my throat is supposed to get across. All I know is that I can’t stop the death blow that’s already in progress.

Honey eyes, my eyes, stare back, calm and accepting.

Other me says, “It’s okay” just before the ax lands.

Blood marks my hands

Sin stains my heart

Harsh yellow-white lights in a harsh yellow white space swim into focus around me. I gag against the sickly sweet taste of the inside of my mouth. I can’t escape the gross flavor, I can’t escape anything. Cold metal kisses the bare skin of my back and legs.

Where am I?

I’m spread out like a star. Tight belts bind my wrists and ankles to a metal table. The tight leather straps chafe the thin skin they’re banded around even though I’m not struggling against them.

I don’t know this room.

The air in here is a gaping hole of nothing. No family scents, no scent of anything at all. Beeps and clicks bounce off the walls. Father's see-through blue eyes peer down at me, his brows scrunched together in angry concentration over the top of the thin paper mask covering the rest of his face.

A wet cloth licks a stripe up my thigh, a sharp prick and a fiery burn burrowing deep into the meat of my leg follows. The stinging pain works its way through all the tiny rivers inside of me. My hips jerk and my spine bows away from the table trying to escape the scorching pressure that's squeezing all my muscles to the point I expect to hear my bones snap. Tears and sweat run together and roll down the sides of my face but I can't scream around my gag. Somehow Father's managed to steal my voice.

"Defective. Again."

Mutters of disappointment whisper as the yellow white room grows hazy and dark.

"You're supposed to be my salvation."

Only suffering can cleanse

Only Father can forgive.

Dizzy and confused, the journey to wake up is a chaotic blur. Breaking the seal of sleep gluing my eyelids shut as the tattered remains of my nightmare threaten to pull me back under. When I can finally pry my eyes open being able to see doesn't help me make sense of anything. The dim space around me looks as strange as I feel. It doesn't help that my head is still ringing with father's required hourly prayer, the one I've recited so many times the words are always ready, just waiting to spring out from under my tongue.

I am the body,

My flesh is weak.

Blood marks my hands

Sin stains my heart

Only suffering can cleanse

Only Father can forgive.

I clench my jaw and swallow back the psalm, refusing to let a piece of my nightmare fly free and taint the calm of, well wherever I am. Instead, I fumble with the fuzzy blanket bunched up under my arms, I pluck at the fuzz along the hem with stiff fingers. I can't figure out how to settle and remember

how I got here. I pull the blanket over my shoulders just to toss it off when the light weight makes my skin crawl.

Now half of me is free but my legs are tied to the bed by sweat-soaked ropes of sheets. I can't tell why but even twisted tight around my thighs the pale bedding feels too smooth. It glides against the dark brown of my legs when I want it to meet resistance. My arms are all off too. They sprout out of the gaping armholes of a white t-shirt I've never seen before and go on for too long. I gingerly bring one arm up and study my hand. My palms look rough. Scarred. Like they know what work is and that they can handle whatever's coming next. Not sure about the rest of my hand. I frown at the short blunt tips capping each finger.

Weak and clumsy. A small voice whispers in my head. Weak and clumsy in this body. That's what I am.

I tilt my head towards the window and sniff the air. The breeze tumbling in carries a whisper of damp heat and growing green things which suggests outside these walls spring or summer has bloomed. But the warmth of the season is not enough to melt the ice block sitting inside my chest. It feels like my soul up and wandered off while I was sleeping and a winter storm took its place.

I blink, temporarily distracted from how wrong everything is by the cool blue moonlight streaming in through the impossibly clear glass a few feet above the foot of the bed. There's an itch in the back of my head that tells me this perfect window is an unnatural sight. A sign I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

I peel sweaty curl after curl away from the back of my neck and consider the smooth white plaster making up the walls surrounding the bed, my bed. Where did the rough wood walls with their splinters my blanket snags on every morning go? And why are there comforting musky scents which cling to my thin t-shirt when there should be a draft blowing the day's dust and my family's scents into my sleeping nook on the floor? My heart races at the lack of answers this too-nice room delivers. All I get from picking apart my surroundings is confirmation of what this place isn't.

This isn't my sleeping pallet.

This isn't our cabin.

But when I reach for the memory of what this place is, there's only mist. The knowledge right behind the fog but it slips away, refusing to be pinned down. My blood buzzes with the urge to give up on this puzzle and retreat

back under the covers or better yet burrow somewhere deeper inside of me. Back to dreamland even if it means more terrified sprints from a faceless predator and strange interactions with my looming father.

I decide this is an great idea and poke around the hollow space inside of me but I can't find the thread that leads me down into that safe place inside of myself.

If I can't retreat, I guess I'll run.

I scramble out of bed and make it four steps before a shadow detaches from the doorway and I slam into a heated wall of skin. I bounce backwards and trip over a furry rock on the floor I missed during my dash out of bed.

"Easy there, Wildcat." Framed by a thatch of dark lashes, moonlight briefly turns silver a pair of concerned pine green eyes.

Safe. Green eyes mean safe.

Two rough paws clap down on my shoulders. I yelp as a sandpaper tongue licks up the side of my face.

Shay

Gabe

Memories, mixed up and out of order, stab at each other in a bloody brawl for my attention. *The escape, Shay's transformation, Mom dying, strange men with disrespectful eyes and grasping hands, Father giving us away, Gabe's hands, Mal's thighs, Hayes' eyes, Aiden's smirk.*

Sweat beads across the back of my neck. I lurch over and hug my arms around my waist, and try to catch my breath. Overwhelmed by the rush of memories, my throat collapses in on itself.

These things happened? It all feels as unreal as the dreamy nightmare I left in the bed behind me. Monsters lurking inside men? Men who bite and claim and worm their way inside you and promise a life of devotion?

Of course, this isn't our cabin. We ran from that hellhole and ended up in a wonderland of wolves and protective huntsmen.

Maybe I'm still asleep. I just need to wake up. Mom will be alive if I can just wake up. Shay will be tall and awkward and *human* if I just wake up. This strange icy hole in my chest will disappear if *I can just wake up.*

"Hey, hey, hey. Whatever is going on up there, I promise we can work it out together. I just need you to be with me for a second." A second set of arms, longer and stronger than mine, wrap around me in a tangy cloud of dirt after rain.

Salt

Another set of memories? dreams? elbow their way into the crowded field. Pictures surface of rough hands stroking down my back. Me, smaller, softer, curled up in a lap that smells a lot like this hug. The beta's rangy frame folding in on itself to fit under a desk with me when everywhere else felt too big and exposed. His rumbling drawl, vibrating the shadows in the dark cramped space, passing the time telling me stories about a younger Gabe running wild in a dusty dying city I've never been to before.

Bit by bit the band loosens around my chest. I straighten up. I don't know if those moments with Gabe actually happened but the steady stitching of safety woven through all those salt scented maybe-memories makes it easier to breathe again.

"There's my girl." Gabe's arms tighten around me before he releases me and steps back. He studies my face, searching for what, I'm not sure but he seems to find it and bobs his head.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. Shay, take Dez and Callum with you and go let the guys know Ava's awake." He directs the command at Shay's wolf, patiently waiting by my side. The eager earnest swish of his midnight black tail the only sign my headstrong younger brother is behind those hunter eyes.

"Take the long way, Ava could use some breathing room before they steamroll in here." Shay tosses a bark of agreement over his shoulder and sprints off down the shadowy hallway.

"He's as bad as you were. Never wants to come back to skin these days." Gabe's rueful gaze follows the young wolf out the door. I give him an uncertain nod, not ready to test my voice yet, still drained from trying to figure out what around me and in my head is real and what's fake.

"C'mon, follow me" Thick fingers tangle around my slender ones. "This won't fix everything but we've got to start somewhere." I allow Gabe to tug me out of the bedroom, happy to surrender control for just a few minutes more until I can find a way to hide away again.

Chapter Five

Ava

“IT’S NO RED’S BUT IT’S pretty close.” Clay scrapes against polished stone as Gabe sets plate after plate down of crumbly sweetbreads, strips of dried meat and *pie*. The new-old word bursts forward and with it the tart taste of strawberry and rhubarb zings along my tongue. My first meal in this new world. That slice of heaven served up by May was devoured in minutes. Bright and sweet, it was the first taste of safety after a bitter lifetime of fear.

“May’s responsible for nearly all of this spread. She keeps sending all of the diner’s greatest hits up here.” Gabe’s lips twitch. “A not so subtle bribe to get me to sneak out and come visit.” He pauses and the twitch becomes a full blown grin. “It’s also a reminder to Aiden that he has competition in her and Carl.” Gabe waves a shadowy hand at the bounty of leftovers he swiped from all over the kitchen and spread across the river rock tabletop. “Speaking of the jerk, the jerky is all Aiden. He’d have my ass if I didn’t give him credit.”

The kitchen is quiet except for the hum of the coldbox and the soft snick of Gabe’s lighter as he lights the fat stack of candles piled up into a small mountain at the center of the table. He thumbs the ridges lining the spark wheel, drawing it back again and again, the tiny gear grinds against the friction and produces flame after flame.

Liquid heat wells up at the dip atop each candle. Growing taller and taller until the wax tips over and drips down the candle stems. The see through beads slip down, carrying the wick’s golden glow inside of them, one drip at a time they roll back the blue-black darkness coating the top of the table.

Shiny rivers of light wind their way through the narrow maze of dishes. Their warm glow chases the washed out light of the moon over the rocky edge of the table, pushing the kitchen’s shadows away until the two of us are wrapped in a bright protective circle of light.

The methodical click of the lighter echoes the chops of my ax hitting the dead stump in my dream. I bang my knee against the underside of table, jolting backwards as if I can throw myself out of the memory before it gets to what else my ax chopped.

Gabe lifts his head up from his task and gives me a curious look.

I shake my head and wrap my arms around my middle. I’m not cold but it seems to satisfy Gabe as he turns his attention back to lighting the last of the

candles. I shift my gaze down and focus on the little fires in front of me, willing them to melt the cold fist around my heart.

Gabe gives his handiwork one last look. With a slight nod of approval he settles back into a chair, his bare shoulder bumps against mine, sparking off a bolt of heat that snakes down my arm. I chase the burn and scooch closer to him. I don't stop until my whole side is pressed against his. I'm afraid if I let in any space between us I'll slip away. I'll break the candle's ring of safety and tip back to the shadows where confusion and nightmares creep.

If he's uncomfortable with how I'm pressed against him he gives no sign of it beyond draping one log of an arm across my shoulders and giving me a quick squeeze before pulling back and dropping his arms so we're shoulder to shoulder again.

Relief trickles down my back. Everything inside of the arms of the bright ring feels certain and solid.

This is real. Not what I left behind in the other room

I relax and ease my shoulders away from the home they made under my ears..

“When I was a little, my mom used to say doctors are great but that most of what she treated at my parent's clinic could be cured without a professional. All most folks need to feel like themselves again is to eat something, or nap on something, or tire themselves out with something.” Gabe nudges a glass of water and a mug of something herby and steamy towards me. “Figured you've slept enough for now. So let's work on getting something warm and filling inside you.”

Gabe's warm rough palm cradles the side of my face. He smooths his thumb across my eyebrow and then drops his hand back. “I want to get rid of those ghosts haunting around your eyes and this seems like a good place to start since by my count you haven't eaten anything in over a day. And -” The corner of his lip tips up and he winks at me, “if we need to move on to exhausting you I'll just bring Mal and the guys in here to drown you in their attention.”

At the mention of the alphas who took over my life, I wrap my free hand around the warm mug and bring it up to my nose. Curls of sweet, grassy steam waft up from the cup. The moist heat hitting my cheeks is no match for the rush of warmth flooding the rest of my face at the memory of those three. I take a long pull and sigh. The ball of tea blazes down my throat, ever so

lightly thawing the ice block sitting over my heart as heats a path to heating my belly.

“Hi.”

It feels silly to break my silence with such a simple start but getting that small word out was like scraping rust off a fender. Raspy and dry, even with tea coating my throat, I barely recognize my voice.

“Hi.” A whole lot of unspoken words are packed into Gabe’s warm and rough echo back to me. But he makes no move to unpack them. He gives me some cover and goes back to describing what May’s cooked up for us and how Aiden’s added his own touch to each dish.

From where our arms are pressed together, Gabe slips one pinkie finger around mine. The gesture is small but the ache of familiarity that kicks in throws me back to the last time we touched like this. Up in his favorite place. The tower hiding spot where I stuck my hands in a giant’s mouth to build a fire and right before Gabe pressed his lips to mine. The rough slick slide of our mouths tangling together, the possessive weight of his hips slotting into the cradle of mine. He slipped behind all my carefully constructed walls at that moment and started to make a home in my heart with one sweet taste of pleasure.

My first kiss.

I’m faintly aware Gabe’s still talking, but more than a little distracted, tracing the outline of his lips with my eyes, reliving the last time we were alone and how it ended.

“Eat and I’ll fill you in on what you missed this past month Sleeping Beauty.”

Hold on what?

“A month?!” I splutter. The quick intake of air lodges a piece of biscuit in my throat. Coughing, I skate my hand across the table blindly searching for my drink.

Gabe slaps my back. “No dying on my watch sweetheart, your brother will kill me and then guys will bring me back and kill me all over again.”

“No one’s dying!” I grit out. But that might be a lie. The shock of losing a month sparks the urge to crawl back inside the hidey-hole inside of me and never come out into a flat-out need. I poke at the hole where my safe place used to be inside of me as I do a sweep of the kitchen and take apart everything around and shake it apart looking for signs of the lost days and weeks.

It doesn't take much searching to find what I missed. Wide awake now, I can see the little things that give away all the lost time. Inky curls of hair brush the nape of Gabe's neck instead of the neat trim that lined up with his uniform collar the first time I met him. He's more solid too. Broader. Like he spent a month throwing boulders around. Whatever Gabe did, while I was asleep inside of myself, rounded out his shoulders with a new level of strength.

Not ready for him to see how thrown I am, I turn away and trade my tea for a glass of water. I drain half the drink in one go. The cold water softens what's left the dry snack stuck in my throat making it easier to swallow down.

Coughing fit tamed, I slump back and frown at Gabe's tense form pressing in. His worried eyes bounce between me and the rest of the biscuit, innocently resting on a napkin by my elbow, as if the piece of bread was going to leap up and finish the job its brother started.

"I'm okay. Nothing to worry about. See, everything is fine." I aim for comfort and pull the corner of my lips up into a smile. But the action feels strange and hard. The muscles of my face are stiff as if I hadn't used them in well, a month.

Gabe's calm cracks. A wild rush of exhaustion and worry bleeds through and curves the tips his brows and mouth downwards. "Everything is *not* fine. Since you've been in our care you've been choked, mauled, knocked out, and the subject to an attempted kidnapping. Twice! And let's not forget being beaten and gutted." Candlelight casts Gabe's face half in shadow, the fierce pain threading his outburst at how he's failed me takes on a sharp desperate edge.

"Baby, this world is cruel. It's itching to snatch you away from us the second we let our guard down, so if I give your midnight snack stink-eye for making you choke, you've got to forgive me. It's been a rough six weeks." Low and hoarse, his voice cracks under his distress over all the hurts I've gone through. The lines of strain bracketing the corner of his eyes tell me I'm not the only one wrestling with nightmares when they go to sleep.

"Hey, hey." Now I'm the one rushing in trying to pull Gabe back into the light. "No one's going to die on your watch. Only soft foods from here on out." I shoot him a small grin. "At least not until I get one more trip to Red's then I'm eating anything she puts in front of me."

“Very funny. Just take it easy.” Gabe snorts and kicks the bottom rung of my chair. I watch wide-eyed as his mask of steady calm drops back down as if his outburst never happened.

Goal to settle Gabe accomplished, it’s time to get some answers.

I pick up the biscuit again, carefully dipping it in the tea until its soft enough a baby could eat it and take another bite. “Now go back to how I’ve been asleep for a month? How is Shay? Did he get hurt during the pack run?” Shay’s wolf looked happy and healthy but I’ve watched my brother crack jokes and do a full day of labor after many a beating so I’m not going to go on just looks to see how he’s doing.

“Not the whole time, just some of it. Most of the time you were awake...” I frown, protest ready to say I was definitely not awake for weeks since the attack on the claim. But Gabe plows right past whatever denial I’m about to spit out.

“You might be a little hazy on what’s been going on because you weren’t yourself Ava.” He says with the same gentleness one would use on a small chipmunk that could spook at any moment. “When your Dad attacked you and Aiden. Something happened. You... shifted, into a fox.”

“What now?” Lightheaded, I swallow and shove my plate and mug away. I’m afraid to put anything in my mouth now if Gabe is going to keep telling me impossible things.

I *shifted* into a fox?

What.

“A fox.” Gabe’s mouth is set in a firm thin line. He’s not joking. I can see the truth of it in his eyes. “And you stayed that way for almost a month. Shay wasn’t hurt during the attack. He was too far away to get caught up in any of the action.” I bend over and rest my forehead on the table. The cold touch of stone is a brief distraction from the sticky swirl of confusion and relief. Shay is and was safe but why can he shift into a wolf but I shift into a fox?

“He’s pissed he wasn’t closer to stop your father from laying a hand on you. Ever since that night he’s spent almost as much time shifted as you. He was your shadow from sunup to sundown, every day, all day.” Gabe’s eyebrows wing up with wonder and a little bit of concern. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Frustration, staticky and hot, sets in as I stumble through the murky water that covers all my thoughts from the past few weeks. All of that time is muddy. A sharp ache starts up behind my forehead when I try to slog through

my thoughts. Each time I bump into a recent memory which seems real, doubt about whether it really happened sets in.

“Well, that’s kind of the problem. I think everything is there but it’s all mixed up.” I grimace and flex my pinkie tighter around his. “The last thing I remember for sure is Father fighting with Aiden. He sprayed some kind of poison in Aiden’s face that made him sick enough he couldn’t shift.” The glinting plates in front of me go wavy as tears build up and spill out. Father looms large, eye bloody, arm ruined, grinning down at Aiden’s wolf.

“Aiden, was... he was dying and I couldn’t help him. I screamed down our bond begging Hayes and Mal to come save him. I wanted to drag them to us and away from the fake trail Father made using the clothes he stripped off of me.” A strange look flashes across Gabe’s face at this. It comes and goes so fast I can’t tell if it’s a trick of the light.

“There are a lot of other things I remember but I can’t tell which thoughts are real and which are dreams I had while I was... a fox.” *A fox. I can shift into a fox!* It doesn’t feel real. Or, it feels as real as everything I was dreaming before I woke up.

I flex my feet, and I swear I can feel the squelch of rotting leaves and mud between my toes instead of the smooth wooden rungs of the chair my heels are propped up on. The sprint through the forest still feels like it just happened. A phantom throb pluses in my ankle from my fall in the forest. I keep checking my palms for blisters that aren’t there and rubbing my wrists to soothe invisible bruises left by restraints I’ve never worn.

And then there’s the worst part.

Honey eyes, my eyes, stare at me. My head on the chopping block greets me whenever I close my eyes. The other me lies there, calm and accepting that I’m about to snuff the life out of her forever..

Scraps of my month of nightmares are piling up, clawing at the edges of our cozy circle. Teasing and testing my will to keep them separate from what is real.

“It didn’t feel like a month” is all I can get out.

“What did it feel like?”

“Safe. It felt safe wherever I was.” I shrug. “It’s strange I felt that way since I think it was a nightmare that woke me up. But even with the nightmares, where I was felt like I had finally found a safe place to rest. That if I hung out there, someone else was going to take control and worry and

figure things out for awhile. So I just-" I lift my shoulders, slightly ashamed of what I was about to say. "Took a break."

"Sometimes I'd, not wake up exactly, but become aware of voices and flashes of movement. I think parts were nice. Did you tell me stories?"

"Oh, yeah." He ducks his head. It could be a trick of the light but I think Gabe's cheeks darken. "I might have told you some tales. You were pretty focused on keeping all of us in Mal's office. And when the guys had to leave to work and or go meet with other packs, you'd go crazy -"

"Until you got under Mal's desk with me." I murmur, moving that experience from the "dream" pile into the "actually happened" pile. "You told me about growing up after your parents died and all the trouble you got into." I think harder, bits and pieces coming back to me. Gabe's low laughter bouncing off the desk walls, recounting embarrassing stories about-

"Wait, wasn't one of those stories about how you got-" I search around for the new word, impatiently jogging my leg, "tattoos! You told me about one night with Aiden, Mal and Hayes that got tattoos, right?"

"Of all the ones for you to remember." His chuckle is a wry rumble of regret. "Of course its the one story you remember that'll bite me in the ass. Yeah, Wildcat I did tell you the tale of the drunken Pack Day celebration that led to Mal getting a tramp stamp. And how he had to go do a walk of shame back to Smith the next day and turn that acorn above his ass into the oak tree back piece he has now," Gabe leans in, eyes narrowing to slits but not enough that I can't see the amusement dancing hiding behind his eyelids, "but that stays between us. Same goes for anything you remember me saying about Hayes and Aiden that night too."

Well, as soon as my head starts working right I'm going hunting for those memories with a quickness.

"I told you a bunch of other stories too. They calmed you. Kept you from tearing out your fur while the rest of the pack, our pack, did what they needed to keep this territory safe." Amusement gone, Gabe turns serious. "That's what I can do for you again."

"Do what?"

Gabe squeezes my shoulder, "You need another anchor. One that's not me. One you'll always have with you. To bring back your confidence in yourself when the scariness inside your head makes you doubt what's real and what's not."

“Not sure where we’re going to find something like that.” If nothing else, the recent past has shown me I was surrounded by secrets and half-truths my entire life and never questioned anything.

“Don’t need to find it because I’m already looking at her.” Gabe straightens up, the picture of a confident huntsman who knows his plan is going to save the day. “I’m going to teach you how to be your own anchor. I love being there for you but I love knowing you can be there for yourself more.”

I cough. Could he be right? Trusting myself to tell fact from folklore is a risk. I jog my leg tapping out a quick rhythm against the floor. The idea that I could trust my body and my mind enough to tell me the truth instead of hiding yet another secret from me is something I want back with all my heart.

When mom was alive, I never questioned myself. Back then I trusted my thoughts. I knew my body from the inside out. What it was capable of, how much pain it could take. But that was before I revealed. Before my world exploded from three people to too many people to count. Everything I’ve learned since then. Hell, everything I’ve seen since then has taken everything I knew and lit it on fire.

“That terror, that sense of dread and helplessness? Those feelings are valid. Full stop. But they don’t control your reality. They just tell you what you need. You woke up scared, worried whatever was hunting you down in your dreams followed you out here. But look, no one’s chasing you, no one’s hurting you, your father isn’t here.”

“But it felt real, I swear I can smell the rotting leaves, I can still feel the ax slicing into my throa-” Agitated, I start to stack the jerky on my plate into a small meat cabin.

“But look-” Gabe palms my throat, I swallow against the heat of the big square of his hand. The wide pad of his thumb brushes the side of my neck and comes to rest in the dip of my collarbone.

“No blood.” He holds his thumb up for inspection. “No cuts. Nothing but the soft beautiful skin of my Ava.”

“Give me your hand.” I think during my long nap Gabe soaked up some of the extra alpha floating around the claim because he doesn’t wait, he goes right ahead and plucks my hand away from the plate and arranges my palm against his throat. A match to his hold on me. “When you feel too much, or like you’re not sure if you’re here or there. I want you to anchor yourself.”

“How do I do that?” I don’t mean to whisper but a loud sound could break our seal of protection. The candles grow weaker with every breath we take and with them our loop of light grows darker, tightening in around us.

I rock forward to stay in the light. Stay where it’s safe. Gabe’s throat bobs, his rough stubble and heated flesh press deeper into my palm. We were close before but now from the chest up there’s not a sliver of space between us. We’ve twisted around in our seats . Gabe’s long lean thighs bracket mine, the dark hair dusting his inner thigh rasps against my outer thighs. Without meaning too, we’ve formed a triangle. Foreheads pressed together, the tips of our noses bump and brush tips with each quiet exhale.

“You start this way, with touch. You can feel me right?”

“Mh-hm.” Of course I can feel him. Every point where we touch, burns.

I love it.

“Words, sweetheart, you’ve got your voice back and I want to hear it. How do the parts of you feel when they are touching me?”

“Hot.” Thick and rough the only response I can push out is met with a rumble of approval. The sweep of Gabe’s lashes kiss my eyelids on a slow blink, the delicate hairs tangle with the fringe of mine. I sigh at the gentle touch. “Soft.”

“Real?” His voice is gut deep now. Daring me to disagree.

“Really real.”

Nightmare banished, my world is the catch of his stubble as it scrapes against my jaws, and the power that surges up through my core when I slide my thighs higher up his and watch his breath stutter and bottom lip tremble.

“Good. Let’s try combining touch with another sense. Lean forward a little bit more.” Slipping his hand around from my throat to the nape of my neck, Gabe takes control, rolling my forehead against his until I’m looking across the table and out to Aiden’s garden. Then gently urging me lower and lower until his crisp chest hair grazes my cheek. It’s all I can do not to bury my face over his heart and lick my way up the shallow valley leading to his throat. Forget May’s spread from Red’s. I can practically taste Gabe’s salty sweat on my tongue and it beats whatever dish May sent over.

“What do you hear?” The rough question breaks through wicked thoughts about how Gabe’s rigid little nipple is right beside the corner of my mouth. All tan and puckered, just begging for me to sink my teeth around its perfect circle.

“Ava.” The slight hint of command adds a thread of iron to question.

Thump Thump thump

I shut my eyes and shove the words out. “Your heart, I hear your heart.”

I whimper as his hand creeps up the back of my neck until the base of my skull is cradled in his palm. His slender fingers tangle their way into the dense thicket of curls. Twisting tighter and tighter, until my scalp starts to sting and a thick knot around his fist forms. A makeshift leash he uses to drag me up and away from the pillow of his chest.

The sharp edge of loss is a kick to the gut.

But this is Gabe. He’s not one to let a wound fester. He heals the hurt right away.

Again he has us swap places. I get tugged up and he swoops down, gently nuzzling a path between my breasts. From one breath to my shirt is both too warm and too thin. The bristles of his beard prick the sensitive inner swells of skin lighting an itch I want him to scratch. The damp heat of his breath licks around my nipples, contracting their tips into achy beads.

“So fucking strong. I love how this heart has been through so much but it’s still punching me in the face, determined to beat no matter what.”

We stay like that. My “fucking strong” heart aching with some warm bruising feeling I’ve never felt before. For one beat, two beats and on the third Gabe pulls away.

“That’s two done. And sometimes two senses may be enough to bring you back to yourself but if not you can keep going.”

“Now this next one is easy. Sight.” Gabe smooths his thumbs along the arc of my eyebrows. “If you ever want to test if you’re dreaming or not, look around for a book or try to find a sign or poster and read it.”

I slink back and fold myself along the back of my chair, the shame of missing such a common skill out in this world slaps the happy haze out of me.

Sensing the sour direction of my thoughts, Gabe hurries on “- but I figure it’s not just reading. Nothing that requires a lot of attention to detail can stand up in a dream. You just need to choose something that would be hard for a dream to match in perfect detail and focus on it. If you can see all the fine parts and they make sense - ta-da you’re awake baby.” Taking on the tone I use on Shay when trying to teach him how to fix parts of our truck, Gabe nods towards the rest of the kitchen. “Pick something complicated. Inspect it to see if it proves that you, and me, and this,” He lightly flicks the side of my mug, “is as real as it gets.”

I let my gaze wander around our corner of the kitchen but it's all straightforward. At this time of day all the wonders I could spend a whole day rooting through are tucked up on shelves behind closed doors. Or lost in the murky corners of the room.

Anything I can see is lovely but boring. The table beside us is beautiful but simple. The pile of candles, resting at the table's center, slump lower and lower, collapsing into a drippy mess of a mountain. Fun to watch but not complex.

I end up back at Gabe. The north star in this room. I skate over all of the golden skin on display and halt my search.

"What about your tattoo?"

A slow proud smile kicks up one side of his mouth and butterflies take flight behind my ribs. "Excellent choice. If I'm just part of a dream, your mind would get my simple tats right but the other ones won't stand up to inspection if you look close enough."

"Like this one." I know this was supposed to be an eyes only lesson but I can't help but trace the tip of my finger warm black outline of the cute otter bobbing on its back, floating on a river, clutching a knife one hand and sporting a cute fang filled grin that's playful and fierce all at once.

"Yes, like that one." Gabe sounds strangely breathless. I snap my head up and look at him. Head bowed, chin to chest, eyes hooded, his gaze is fixed on our point of connection. The lesson is over and the time for touching him is done. I should drop my hand but the tip of my finger stays stuck to the tip of the otter's tail.

"Wait, what's he holding in his other little paw?"

"Over here?" Gabe's hand wraps around my wrist and drags it up the otter's body until my fingertip rests on the closed fist.

Overshadowed by the knife slicing through the air with glee on his other side, I missed how in the sea of dark lines the otter's other fist grips the only hint of color on Gabe's chest.

"It's a pearl." I glance up, curious and questioning, my eyes lock with his.

"Its.. a kind of a stone. A mineral that forms inside some oysters, a creature that lives on the ocean Overtime shiny pebble forms, and because some folks find the shimmer and shine of it pleasing they go trawling for promising shells, thinking they're one cracked shell away from changing their life. But the thing is pearls are fiddley sons of bitches. They take time to develop and no two are exactly alike. They're all forged by their

environment, forming from the left behind pieces of whatever the oyster can't filter out."

"Why did you choose this drawing?" I murmur, unable to contain the slight shudder at the thought of what would've happened to me if I was caught with an image inked on my skin. Symbols and signs always have meaning. Father's red cheeked sermon against the hidden evils buried inside pictures echoes out from the past. How being exposed to them could turn and lead the most devout to stray into impure territory.

"Bold of you to assume I got to pick. This," Gabe taps the otter's stomach. "This was the product of the drunken Pack Day to end all Pack days you're going to pretend I never told you about." Gabe replies with a dry laugh. "Each of the four of us chose for someone else and it got...interesting." He shrugs, in a what can you do way. "So you'll have to ask Aiden why a treasure hoarding psychotic otter haunts my left pec."

"But storytime is over, class is back in session."

"We covered touch, sound and sight. That leaves us with the best two for last. You ready, Wildcat?" The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The lazy pull between us taking on a new energy. A challenge and a check for consent. A combination I'm starting to understand is all Gabe. The choice on whether to be pushed into new territory will always be mine with him.

I nod. I drop my hand back to my side and watch to see what comes next.

"No, that's not going to fly. C'mere sweetheart. We've got to be much closer for these lessons." Finger crooked, Gabe's husky command coaxes me out of my seat and into his lap before I can think better of it.

"Much better." Gabe rocks back until I'm straddling his lap, riding the stiff bulge between his thighs.

"Now you may think you're being sneaky but I see you. You sniff things." A knowing smirk kicks up the side of Gabe's mouth. I freeze in his lap.

"I don't know what you mean." I try to wiggle away but I was trapped with both his arms banded around me. I curse the soggy junk pile that is my memory. Was there a time I leaned too hard on my secret soothing habit in front of him? We've only shared less than a day's worth of time together. How could he have picked up on my habit so fast?

"Oh, so you don't go sniffing the air every time you get a bit jumpy?" He teases. "Kinda like this," Gabe's long lashes sweep down as he sucks in a

gust of air, a ridiculous look of fake concentration wrinkles his nose and purses his lips.

“Don’t say it that way!” Torn between laughter and embarrassment I duck my head.

“What way?” I glance up and snort. Gabe’s still exaggeratedly inhaling, whipping his nose back and forth.

“That way. I don’t ‘sniff’ I-!” I flap my hand out, as if I could snatch the words I’m looking for out of thin air. “I sort. I sort scents in my head.”

“And I don’t make that face!” I kick the back of my heels into his calves.

“This face?” Gabe sucks in air again and somehow crowds his features even closer together before releasing the breath in a minty gust. “Oh yeah, you definitely make this face Wildcat.”

“Don’t pout.” He taps my lips. “The thing is, I love that face. ‘Cause it tells me you’re taking care of yourself. When you take a breath and pick it apart, that’s how you take control, isn’t it baby?” Gabe inches closer and coasts the side of his nose alongside mine.

“How did you know?”

“Like I said, I see you.” Our foreheads rest together again but this time we’re chest to chest, warm belly to belly. Two straight lines crushing themselves into one. For the first time tonight, the gaping hole in my chest starts to close up.

“I’ve been seeing you. The way when you get overwhelmed you square your shoulders just the tiniest bit, scrunch your nose and inhale,” Gabe dips down and sucks in a lungful of the sweaty spot where my neck and shoulder meet. He stays there, head cradled against me, his chest swollen with my scent rubs the achy peaks of my breasts. I whimper at the new level of friction.

“I’ve only got this beta nose to work with but I can see why this works for you. I could sift through your scent all night.” Blowing out a breath Gabe clears the shakes the dreamy look out of his eyes. “But this isn’t about me. It’s your turn, I want you to do what you do best and pick something to smell and talk me through it.”

I’m tempted to continue our game of repeating the other’s actions and bury my nose in his throat but Gabe’s scent is... too much, in the growing darkness, I think it would give too much of myself away to talk about what his scent is to me. What it does for me.

Clearly expecting to be my target, Gabe stiffens slightly in surprise when I dip left and scoop a heap of pie and melting whip cream onto two fingers and bring it up to my mouth. I let the sweet mess flood my nose.

I curl my toes into the chilled stone floor, expecting dirt and grass to sprout up and match the wave of summer upon summer of happy stolen moments with Shay.

“When we were little, we never had anything like this. The closest I we ever came was the few days when the heat got as hot as it was going to and the hidden bush of berries I nursed to life over a handspan of years finally bore fruit.” I roll around in the memory and in scent trapped between us and root deeper into Gabe’s lap. Cramped muscles up slack, finally trusting the safety of Gabe’s embrace.

“Dig deep , close your eyes and talk to me. Tell me what you smell.”

“Sun-ripe berries, the kind that are so ripe their thin little skins burst down one side and the juice just trickles out laying a cloud of sweet so thick you almost get a headache from it. But you don’t because all that ripeness is mixed with a bit of bitter and whole lot of richness I never scented before coming here.”

I crack my eyes open to a hungry Gabe.

“Open.”

“What?” As my question goes out, Gabe’s guides two of my sticky fingers in, past my lips, pressing the fruity-tart jumble against my tongue, sliding my fingers back and forth as if he wants me to suck them clean.

So I suck.

I suck and swirl my tongue around the mess Gabe pushed in. Up and down the table tiny flames wink out along the slump of candles. But just like Gabe wants, I block everything but the taste of pie exploding in my mouth. I’m firmly in the here and now, anchored inside of myself, anchored to him. There’s no room for nightmares when every way in and out of me is greedy to feast on this meal all night long.

Gabe tugs my wrist. My fingers come out with a pop.

“How did you taste, Wildcat?”

“Ripe...sweet and ready for more.” I dart the tip of my tongue out and lick the corner of my mouth, searching for another bit of sweetness but coming away wanting.

“Okay then, let’s get you some more.” Gabe keeps hold of my wrist and gently twists it behind me until my hand is pressed against the small of my

back. The air goes thin and my heart kicks up into my throat as Gabe plucks the last strawberry from the plate and baptizes the dimpled bottom with a crown of cream. I part my lips, already tasting the next burst of sweetness. But Gabe has other plans. He dips his head down and licks the white cream off the rigid tip of the strawberry before biting down with a juicy crunch. Lazy green eyes catch mine. Pink tinged juice trickles down the corner of his mouth. Ripe body ravaged, the strawberry top is tossed aside.

Then there is nothing between us. Gabe's lips brush against mine. A question. I answer by catching a fistful of his hair with my free hand and twisting his head to the side so I can lick the trail of juice back to his mouth and feast on the meal that is his puffy bottom lip. Sweet and salt tangle around my tongue sending darts of pleasure straight to my core. This is where Gabe always needs to be, locked around me. Safe. Feeding off each other until we don't know what's him and what's me.

Gabe is content to let me play until he isn't. He coaxes control back with a firm sweep of his tongue along the seam of my lips, a silent beg to come inside. A gesture so sweet I gasp at the tender touch. It's all the opening Gabe needs. Now he is the one making a slow thoughtful meal out of me.

A wolf howls in the distance.

A bubble of someone else's amused lust bursts in my chest.

Gabe breaks away with a shy smirk. "You're right. You do taste ripe and ready."

"Wildcat, give me some more."

I want to never surface from this. This is a dream that I won't fight if it stretches on and on, burning me up from the inside out so I don't have to face the niggling worry in the back of my head.

All those nightmares Gabe is saving me from?

They sure do feel a lot like memories.

Chapter Six

Hayes

CRESCENT POINTS OF the moon slice through patches in the tree cover. A particularly wide break between branches reveals the ivory scythe in all its glory, hanging low and sharp in the sky. The glowing blade keeps pace with my race through the treetop. Like all sharp and pointy objects, I use it to my benefit and let it carve a path to my goal. Each lance of moonlight illuminates which branch will be my next landing spot.

My part of the night's security work is done. Now it's time to give the problem on the western edge of our claim some personal attention. I let my professional mask fall into a savage grin as the check-in howls of the team I left behind echo off my back, growing fainter with every tree I put between us.

I could've let my wolf out and done this run along the forest floor. But the siren call of a night run pushing my human form to its limit under the stars was too much to pass up. The twin blessings of wolf-sight and alpha strength make a barefooted race through treetops as easy as a pack run along the forest floor. Besides, thanks to my particular assignment, I was already up here so why waste time climbing down.

Efficiency wins. Always.

The next branch is cranky. The old wood issues a soft groan when I land on it. An owl screams and takes flight off to my right, my sudden touchdown shocking them into giving up their hunting post. I grin and toss a two finger salute at the retreating bird's back. I wince when the amused stretch of my mouth catches the inside of my lip on fangs I didn't realize I let down. I shake my head and my grin grows wilder as I take off again. Back amongst my kind fulltime for less than a week and I'm already going around half-shifted without knowing it like some just revealed pup.

I press the tip of my tongue to the cut and come away with a drop of blood. The coppery taste of my mortality sends a savage surge of contentment crashing through my chest. The blood is a reminder that I'm alive. And being alive means there's still time to shape this world to my will.

Clad only in worn jeans and drunk on the freedom the night sky offers I give my self-imposed leash some slack. I push harder, jump further, higher, faster until my muscles scream. Indulging in a wildness I never let loose

when the sun is up. My wolf howls rattle my ribs, thrilled I've narrowed the barrier between man and beast to as thin a film as I can without submitting to him.

This playful openness. Relishing instinct over thought. This is how territory pups spend their childhood. They scramble up and down tree trunks, testing their bodies against gravity. Happy and arrogant that nature will provide a sign of their future as alpha shifters.

Something very close to rage clogs my throat and threatens to rip open the thin screen keeping my wolf at bay. This is youth that *I* deserved. Where I could learn how to make the call for blood and the call for order blend instead of war against each other inside of me. Instead, my youth was indoors. From dawn to dusk, round after round of homeschool lessons comprised every waking hour. No breaks. No exceptions. No celebration for what any part of my body could do besides my mind.

There were lots of other Nos that followed those three. No tumbling. No mock dominance fights with neighborhood kids. No local beta school either. In our house, other children were considered a distraction with nothing worthwhile to teach me. The same applied to any teacher. No other educators could lay the academic foundation I needed as well as Professors Mom and Dad. It's a wonder drawing lessons slipped in there at all since neither professor was a particular patron of the arts.

I snort. Mom and Dad didn't let anything slip in by accident. Those creative lessons served a respectable purpose. The "enrichment" activity they added to the curriculum when I was fifteen was all about realism. No abstract finger painting allowed.

I slow down and settle into a noiseless prowl. My target is now within hearing distance and while I'm not going to hide my presence I don't need him taking off too soon.

Certain that my target is still in place, I allow memories layered over in scar tissue so thick that letting them surface doesn't feel like bleeding out anymore. But as I sink into them, the tension in my clenched jaw gives away how, scarred over or not, bringing up these reminders of the worst time in my life is like pressing on a deep and ugly bruise. It aches right down to the bone but you can't tear yourself away from prodding harder to see how much of the pain you can take.

The professors needed an in-house sketch artist for all their fieldwork discoveries. Why train a bumbling intern that'll they'll lose after a semester

when your offspring is right there wasting their artistic talent on “daydream doodling”.

And thus, so began the parade of taxidermied wildlife in and out of our house along with the assignment to sketch them until they looked like they could prowl off the page.

It's hard to resent the professors for their ulterior motives since it brought me August, the only tutor ever permitted to darken our doorstep. A handful of years older, the slender omega looked as wild and fae as the nature scenes he taught me to draw.

In a house of logic and order, sixteen year old Auggie, was a scatterbomb of instinct and chaos, the likes of which fascinated fourteen year old me. There was a crackling fire inside of him, which nourished everyone in his orbit. Much to his delight, after being cold for so long I ate up his warmth in a way no one else had before.

His parents hoped time spent nurturing a studious beta would tame Auggie's wild edges. Polish him up a bit to stand out to the matching agencies and help him make a better pack match when he turned eighteen. Mine hoped the omega would rub just enough artistic imagination off onto me to make me useful to their upcoming field study. But by putting together a boy who ran too hot with the boy who ran too cold, they created a storm that would eventually destroy them both.

In no time, I became obsessed with wanting to be the one in charge of stoking Auggie's flame. To be the one to create the perfect kiln for him to become the inferno of love and creativity I knew he could be.

Watching him work was like watching art create art. His slender silver ringed fingers were a ballet of downward strokes and soaring arches as his pencil danced across paper. His doe-brown eyes swallowed me whole whenever he gifted me his full attention during our lessons. Everything about him stirred a protective possessive force awake I didn't know how to handle as a supposed beta born from generations of betas.

Those afternoons spent with him, his soft front pressed along my stiff spine, scenting me until I was heady and relaxed with the scent of lemons and roses. My overly technical style finally melting into a free flow of lines and loops that contained more soul than anything I made before Auggie blew up my carefully ordered existence.

I take a final jump and land right above my destination. As I scan the ground below, I send a silent thanks to the omega who made possible the

pads on pads of sketches I have of Ava in all her forms and moods. The delicate rounds of her paws. The gleam of hard won wisdom in the amber ring of the eyes. The dusky circumference of her nipple, how the edges of it dapple into cute dark little specs and fade into the warm brown slope of her breast.

I slouch down and lean back against the rough trunk, getting a lungful of resin for my troubles. It's a wonder I could track my target at all thanks to the waterfall of sap perfuming the air. The seasonal pressure change from Spring to Summer is wringing out every last drop from all the pines.

I stretch one leg out along a tree limb that rivals me in age, and let my other leg swing free into the air. A fresh cloud of evergreen pine wafts up as the hardened beads of pine sap crusting my jeans flake off. My wolf retreats, sick of the forest erasing all traces of the scent that keeps us sane.

Don't skulk off. I came prepared.

I lift up to one side and tug an Ava-scented dress shirt out of my back pocket. A little memento from yesterday afternoon when Ava's fox draped herself in a lazy scarf around my collar and fell asleep warming the back of my neck as I proofread a client brief on our favorite couch in the library. Now, a day later, night's fallen and I'm on edge. This morning Mal got Gideon to shift our girl back but she hasn't woken up yet.

I need to get back home, we all need to be home when she wakes up. She'll need reassurance and the care only her pack can provide. On a selfish note, it's also been too long without her human form in my sight or in my lungs. The gentle pulse of life beating down our bond is the only reason I could travel to the furthest edges of our claim to do this work tonight.

I bury my nose into the wrinkled folds of cotton and breath in the wild spring miracle that is Ava. Clarity and the kind of happiness a cold bastard like me doesn't deserve takes root. My wolf pads closer to the surface, satisfied with the ghost of our girl until we can get back to the real thing.

Focusing back on the task at hand, I stay hidden and settle into a stillness so absolute the inhabitants that make this tree a home return go about their night moves no longer wary of the predator next to them. Splinters of bark work their way into my bare back but the shallow pricks are a small tithe to pay for the feast I'm afforded below. The waning half-moon makes a stage out of the clearing a stone's throw away. The sole actor eating up the scenery around him and putting it to shame is putting on a show for me and I'm too selfish to drop the curtain on until I've looked my fill.

The broad expanse of Aiden's back is a patchwork quilt of scars and tattoos. The former mark him up because he has to do the extreme of everything, all the time. And the latter is a tapestry dedicated to all of Aiden's loves he won't let himself acknowledge out loud but will carry with him into the grave inked deep in his skin. But the tattoos and scars can't hide the flex and flow of muscles bunching and releasing up and down his spine glorious sweaty detail under the bright light of the moon.

This asshole may be the cause of most of my migraines but I can't deny his stubborn as fuck attitude yields results. He's honed himself into a work of art. My lower abs tighten and my cock hardens as I choke back a growl. A knee-jerk response I've grown able to hide from all but not stop.

With his dark hair swept to one side, Aiden's profile is cut from unforgiving stone in the cold moonlight. The forest's blue shadows sway and tickle at the edges of the thicket he's hacking away at, the hint of shadowy darkness adding extra depth to the hollow of his cheeks and sharpens the cruel line of his jaw.

My living blade.

Restless fingers twitch against my thigh. Unsure if they want a pencil to capture the predator beneath me or to slide my dagger from its sheath and see how large an art piece I can carve into the canvas of his skin before he sinks to his knees and bares his neck in submission. My blood thrums with excitement at the idea of claiming my packmate for a second time. Tying the bonds between us tighter, deeper than before.

I shove the offending hand into my pocket. Less than two weeks living back on the claim full-time and I've indulged in the urge to sketch whenever something perks my interest. Or having the weight of a knife in my palm when I need a release.

"Goddamn spy shit." Aiden yanks his hand back from the undergrowth. I chuckle softly into the night air and watch our enforcer's frustrated attempts to work around a particularly dense patch of undergrowth to plant one of the hundreds of sensor "toys" Gideon left in our care. Part sonic fence, part alarm, part surveillance system the palm size discs do it all once they are attached where their owner wants them. In our case, what we want is concentric rings of protection placed high -courtesy of me- and low -what Aiden is cursing- leading to a final ring around the main house and grounds.

The little shit thought he was getting away with something by foisting the job tagging the upper trunks of the trees on me. Thought I'd balk at getting

sap all over me and go home. Now look who's getting his ass served to him by a bunch of nettles.

I leave Aiden to battle it out with the bush, and drop my guard as low as I can to let my wolf rise as high as he can without ceding control to him. Eyes and nose sharper now, I scan the far edges of our corner of the woods.

From up here I can see the appeal the second floor stair railing holds for Ava. Her fox won't let a day end without doing several rounds patrolling the railing that overlooks the first floor. Hearing the click of her nails up and down the polished bannister sets off a rush of possessiveness every time. Each tap is a signal my mate is watching out for me. For us. Always monitoring the comings and goings of her packmates and any one else who we've deemed safe to cross our threshold and breathe the same air as our omega.

The heady feeling of being under Ava's surveillance matches the rush I get now that I've become the watcher. My wolf rumbles out his pleasure with our high vantage point because it keeps our packmate in view. I enjoy the sense of perspective that comes with being twenty feet off the ground.

Perspectives like how now is the time to cut whatever shit creating static between Aiden and I. We don't have the luxury of time to pretend everything is fine. Mal went and played with fucking fire when he gave Gideon the crack he needed to infiltrate our pack. With the mercenary having access to plant whatever garbage he wants in Ava's head every week, I don't have time to allow Aiden "punch-first-ask-for-forgiveness-never" Matherson to continue to run all over the territory "hunting down ledes" just to avoid talking about what happened last month.

We're fixing his problem tonight. Even if it takes pinning him to the ground and making him submit to wring the truth out of him.

No more ambushes. No more bloody and bruised Ava.

No more hiding from what this pack could be.

Other Works By the Author

Thank you for reading *Fate Found*. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please consider leaving a review.

[The Hidden Omegas](#)

The Bargain: A Hidden Omegas standalone prequel Featuring Nina and her pack (Mal's parents) (Preorder)

[Fleeing Fate: Hidden Omegas Book 1](#)

[Fate Found: Hidden Omegas Book 2](#)

Fighting My Devils: Hidden Omegas Book 3

About the Author

Sabrina Day stumbled upon romance books while haunting the stacks of her local library as a pre-teen. Banned from reading romance at home, she was forced into a life of book smuggling and daydreaming about steamy happily-ever-afters. Her current published works are Sabrina's attempt to declutter her head and get all those daydreams out into the world.

Sabrina loves writing characters who find strength in softness, prefers monsters to men and has never said no to more world building.

When she's not yelling at her laptop, Sabrina can be found wandering around New England pushing book recommendations onto people who didn't ask for them.

She loves connecting with readers! Stay in touch with her at any of these places: <https://linktr.ee/sabrinadaywrites>

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