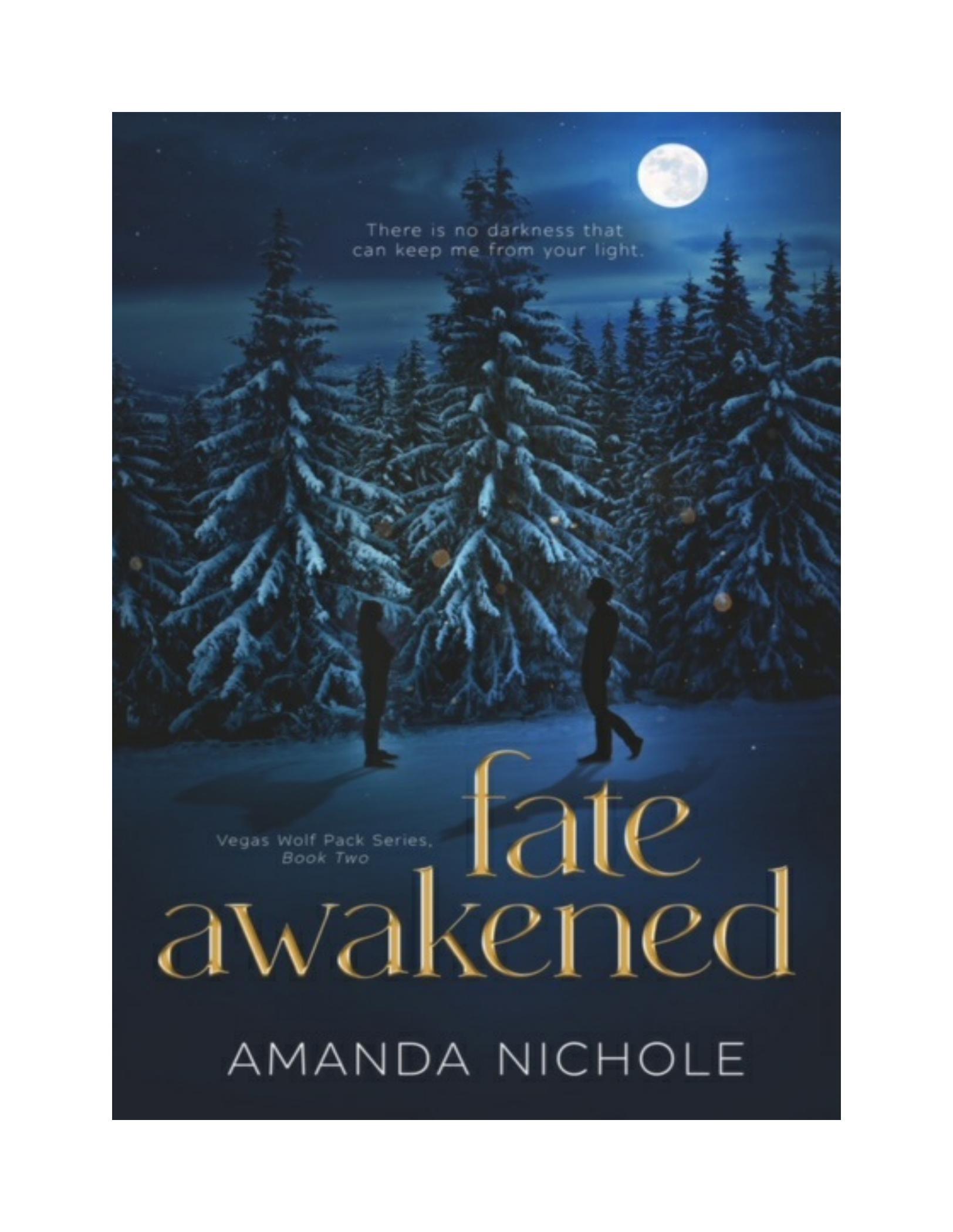


There is no darkness that
can keep me from your light.

Vegas Wolf Pack Series,
Book Two

fate awakened

AMANDA NICHOLE



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Amanda Nichole

Fate Awakened

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*To those who suffer in the dark,
may this book shine a light on you.*



*"When darkness crawls in,
even the brightest light falls dim."*

~Unknown

Content Warning

Fate Awakened is the SECOND book in a trilogy and ends with a CLIFFHANGER. The book picks up where Unawakened Fate left off. Please note that the first three books are one continuous story. If you have not read Unawakened Fate before purchasing this book, please stop now and read book 1 FIRST. Cain and Brielle's story is a slow burn. Their story follows them on a journey of lies, heartbreak, and healing. Their story will end with a HEA.

ADDITIONALLY:

Fate Awakened is an Urban Fantasy with a Fated Mates love story between an Awakened wolf shifter and an Unawakened wolf shifter. While this book is rooted in the supernatural it includes real-life elements which may not be suitable for all readers. Some of these include references to sexual assault, the death of a sibling, car accident trauma, violence, murder, kidnapping, human trafficking, and mental health struggles with panic attacks. Additionally, it explores themes around generational trauma, domestic abuse, addiction, alcohol consumption, gang-related violence, and implied sexual

violence. Please note that due to these elements, this book is intended for adult audiences and is not recommended for anyone under 18 years old. Your mental health matters to me.

Contents

1. Prologue
2. Chapter 1
3. Chapter 2
4. Chapter 3
5. Chapter 4
6. Chapter 5
7. Chapter 6
8. Chapter 7
9. Chapter 8
10. Chapter 9
11. Chapter 10
12. Chapter 11
13. Chapter 12

14. Chapter 13

15. Chapter 14

16. Chapter 15

17. Chapter 16

18. Chapter 17

19. Chapter 18

20. Chapter 19

21. Chapter 20

22. Chapter 21

23. Chapter 22

24. Chapter 23

25. Chapter 24

26. Chapter 25

27. Chapter 26

28. Chapter 27

29. Chapter 28

30. Chapter 29

31. Chapter 30

Acknowledgements

32. Understanding Fate

About the Author

Also By



Prologue

Bri

*I*t's the cold that breaks you down first. The kind of piercing frost that burrows deep into your core and latches on with no intention of release. It covers me like a blanket, hell-bent on numbing every feeling until I turn to stone. My teeth chatter in the darkness, their cadence echoing off the barren, empty floor on which I lay upon a tattered, dust-filled sheet that does little to pad my body from the firmness underneath.

It's a small room, hardly more spacious than a closet, with barely enough capacity to lay out flat. It consists of a single light bulb overhead which I imagine once contained a long chain used as a switch for illuminating the space. Now however, its only control lies beyond the bolt-locked door. The faintest sliver of light sneaks through the gap at the bottom of that solitary exit.

I have to get out of here.

I let out a shaky breath, my body trembling, and I adjust my position, tucking in my legs and wrapping myself in my arms to maintain some body heat. I avoid breathing through my nose as the black spots, barely visible

along the corners and the crack in the ceiling, scream of mold and stink of mildew.

Outside the door, a television drones on with the latest news propaganda warning citizens to protect their money, their houses, their rights. Occasionally, I hear him. Moving to the bathroom or opening another cheap beer can before settling back into his oversized, deteriorating recliner. Every time he gets up, my pulse accelerates in anticipation that he's coming for me.

And I wait.

Time drags on as I struggle to formulate a plan, my brain foggy from the lack of food and biting cold. By now, I assume his wife has passed out, a needle in her arm drifting her away to another world. So, unfortunately, she won't be any help.

Part of me holds onto the hope that he, too, will overindulge and end up drunk and asleep the rest of the night. The other part of me worries that he won't. My fear races through my body, forcing my hands to grip tighter and push away the cold. To keep me alert and ready, counting the minutes until the sun comes out again.

It's then I hear the footsteps, slowly plodding closer. The floor creaks involuntarily as he nears, and I freeze, temper my breathing, and close my eyes. My heartbeat pounds so loudly against my ribs that I'm sure he can hear it. The sharp creak from the top step announces his arrival as the hinges groan with the opening of the door.

I haven't been here long, but I already know this is the most dangerous predicament I've been in yet. Nothing before could've prepared me for the darkness that exists here.



Chapter 1

Cain

*S*he's gone.

It's already been half an hour, and my heart rate hasn't come back down. My skin itches with the strain of holding back my shift, and my brain keeps spinning in circles over how I could've missed it, how all the pieces fell perfectly into place for me to lose her. But, worst of all, it's entirely my fault. I should've protected her. She should've been with me.

The only thing keeping my wolf from fully taking over at this point is the fact that he can't drive. I'm on my motorcycle, speeding faster than I should be while heading to the address Presley sent. I have no idea if anything I'm doing will help find Bri, but I know time isn't on my side.

Hudson took my Mate. Hudson is the mole. Hudson is a dead man.

I turn sharply into an older neighborhood on the edge of Las Vegas just before Henderson. The suburban homes built in the '90s looked almost identical, save for some variations in paint hues. These cookie-cutter homes were probably great thirty years ago, but a lack of upkeep has turned the neighborhood into a less desirable location for families to raise their kids.

Pres messaged to inform me that Keith lived in a two-story at the end of a cul de sac, a property he had acquired last year using funds he earned working for a shell corporation run by Deacon Marlo.

I approached the neighborhood without caring about the noise I was making and had to briefly think about the late hour. Most residents in the area would be long asleep, and a loud Ducati revving through the streets would likely draw attention I didn't need, especially if I needed to take him in. I came here for answers; if I know Keith like I think I do, he won't just hand them over. That suited me fine. I'm looking for a fight—anything to stop feeling the distance growing between my Mate and me.

I lost her.

A growl escapes my lips as I slow my engine, turning down a street just before the one I intend to visit. I pull off next to a small community park and remove my helmet, shaking the sweat-drenched hair from beneath. After orienting myself, I pull out my phone.

Cain: ETA?

Jake: 2 min

Jake had circled back to the compound to grab one of the SUVs to transport Keith for interrogation. My only hope was to hold myself together long enough to get him there because I was seeing red right now. The tension was coiling in my muscles, and my jaw ached from grinding my teeth together in an effort to stay human long enough to find my Firefly.

I'll take out everything and everyone in my way.

Deep inside, my wolf salivates at the thought of punishing those who took her from us. A sadistic grin pulls at the corner of my mouth, and I have something to look forward to for the first time tonight.

Instead of waiting for backup, I round the corner and pull myself over

Keith's back wall. His yard is small, no more than ten feet across, and filled with desert landscaping that looks well-maintained and recently renovated. A fire pit sits in one corner, surrounded by bench seats, cushions, and small tables. Under different circumstances, I could see myself here relaxing with Bri at my side. Keith and Liv would entertain guests of their own. In another life, it would've been a typical Saturday night get-together between friends. But it's not another night; right now, Keith's the only conscious link I have to Marlo's operation.

Careful to stay in the shadows, I slide along the house wall, checking the windows as I pass. Surprisingly, they tend to be the most straightforward entry into homes as most people forget about them in their nightly lock-up routine. The first, located in the kitchen over the sink, stays firmly in place when I tug on it.

Strike one.

I pad to the sliding door, noticing at a glance that there's a wooden stick in its interior track.

Strike two.

Crossing the glass, I continue on my path to the final window exposed on this side of the house. Unfortunately, if this one's locked, I'll have to revert to actually breaking and entering instead of just inviting myself in. I scan its edges and give it a firm tug. Nothing.

Damn it. Strike three.

Turning around behind me, I search the yard for a large enough rock to take care of the glass when I hear a whistle over my shoulder and see Jake standing inside the backdoor, Mason next to him. He'd apparently replaced Jay for entry and technology hangups.

That lock-picking son of a bitch!

Relief fills me, and I storm past them, surprised that I was so distracted I hadn't heard them arrive or enter. I nod as I head up the stairs, knowing instinctively that they've cleared the first floor before opening the back for me.

At the top of the stairs, the house fans out to a loft with doors in three directions. I take the entrance to the left, Jake continues down the hall to the next door, and Mason stacks up just right of Jake's.

We make eye contact, and I count down from three before we enter each room simultaneously. I take my time scanning the room to see that it's an office. The space would make Pres geek out, as there were as many monitors and cables as I'd seen in every setup she had going. Some technology's running, including a server panel connected to the security system. A security system that Pres assured me didn't exist.

Dammit.

All we could hope was that the feeds stayed local because I'm looking at my team live on the monitors in 4k definition. The room Jake's standing in appears to be the master suite, and Mason's is a guest room. All of them are empty.

Rage fills me as I wipe my hand down my face sighing audibly. Nothing's going to plan, and every time we take a step closer, more shit falls apart. Mason enters the office space with Jake on his heels.

"The house is clear," Jake states before glancing at the monitors. "This guy's good. I didn't spot a single camera."

Mason walks around me and slides himself into the desk chair, booting one of the computers.

"Where *is* this guy? There's no way he could know we were coming," I snap, pulling out my phone.

The time reads just after four in the morning, and fatigue is slowly creeping into my body as the adrenaline from the night's events leaks out. I don't have time to sleep or rest. I don't have time to be tired. I have to get to her before she gets to Marlo.

I dial Presley's number and wait for her to pick up.

"Any news?" Her first question flies over the line.

"No. Nothing. And our hacker's in the wind. Mason's trying to work on his home system here to erase any trace of us, but I need you to find him.

"I'll do my best, but understand this won't be as easy as getting into Bri's technology. He's far more skilled at tech security." A whimper creeps up my throat at her name, and I fight to contain it.

She continues, "I'll check his work and see if I can locate a vehicle and start searching traffic cams."

"I saw him tonight. He wasn't driving, but maybe he ended up in someone else's bed. Can you get into Uber's vehicle logs and see if you can find out where it took him? He would've left the bar by their office around midnight."

"I can try. Their security's shit because they grew faster than they could tie up security holes with affiliates and contractors. Give me a few minutes, and I'll get back to you." Before she can hang up, Mason cuts in.

"Pres, I'm going to need some assistance. I can't access his network. He has it blocked and password protected. Even the virus I brought to corrupt the files can't break through the initial firewall."

"Did you try sending in a backdoor trojan?" she asks, still typing away in the background.

"Can't if I can't access the network; he has it covered," Mason responds, his brows furrowing around his round silver frames.

"I've seen his work. I doubt you'll be able to brute force it. Take the

hardware. We can try to piece it back together here,” she instructs before hanging up.

“She expects us to pack all of this up?” Jake asks while his eyes catalog the enormity of that project.

“No, I can just remove the hard drives, and we should be able to work on them there,” Mason responds, pulling out small tools and opening the first case.

Storming out of the office, I’m frustrated that this trip’s a complete waste of time. I head to the master bedroom and scan through, looking for anything to help me unravel his connection to Bri and Marlo.

Standing at the center of the room is a giant king bed set on a high frame with intricately carved hardwood head and footboards. The mattress is made up with a simple black comforter and three large pillows. Next, to the right and left of the bed, sit matching nightstands, and, based on the lack of clutter on the right, I assume he sleeps on the left side of the bed. I march over to the nightstand and pick up the book resting open and face down next to a pair of dark-rimmed glasses.

It’s a book titled *Applied Cryptography: Protocols, Algorithms, and Source Code in C*. He has highlighted and tabbed several sections on quantum processing, but the notes in the margins appear all but illegible to me. Also on the nightstand, sits a solitary framed photo of him with Liv and Bri. I pick it up, tenderly skimming it with my fingers, grazing over Bri’s smile. Her expression brightens her whole face, lighting her up in a way that overshadows the other two. My heart clenches, agony radiating from my core as my brain tumbles through scenario after scenario of where she could be, of what could be happening to her.

I’m coming, Firefly. Hold on.

The sound of Jake clearing his throat shakes me out of my reverie, and I steel my resolve before returning the photo to the nightstand and retreating from the room.

“Mason’s ready.” Jake’s words are clear and focused on the mission, but the look he’s giving me shows he’s far more concerned about where my head is as he handles me like a bomb about to detonate.

“Then let’s get out of here. I want to talk to Kole.” I pass him glancing at the vacant office as I head for the stairs.

“We’re going to get her back,” Jake says. The confidence infused in his words halts my stride as the pain pulses once more in my chest. It feels as if a part of me has been ripped from the inside, and I sit here bleeding with no way to stitch the wound. All I can do is nod before I continue walking.

I know we will. We’re the best at precisely this sort of thing. We’ve returned hundreds of human trafficking victims to their families. We’ve stopped kidnappings and negotiated the safe return of those taken before we came on board. The only problem is the one thought that keeps ringing in my mind.

Will we find her before it's too late? Before she knows the truth of our world? A truth that in itself reveals all of my lies.



Chapter 2

Bri

*P*ain. An overwhelming amount of pain takes over as my body trembles, adding to the sensation that I'm not okay. Ringing in my ears drowns out all else as if I'm trapped underwater, and I struggle to force my body to respond. Pounding in my temples intensifies the muffled noise while blood rushes to my head, my body weight pulling against my hips as if I'm suspended in midair, tangled in a sea of ropes. My mind claws at the strings of a memory before it vanishes like smoke. Tears leak unbidden as I try to grasp a tendril and remember where I am, what happened to me, and why I can't move.

As I inhale, the phantom smell of burnt tires and gasoline fills my lungs, causing me to cough uncontrollably. I force my eyes open, my vision blurred with my tears, and I blink several times to clear them away. I lift my arm to wipe them, only to feel a searing pain emanating from my wrist, leaving me gasping and clenching my fist.

As the world focuses, I see our 2009 Geo Metro roof crumpled unnaturally and covered with debris from the car floor. I try to turn my head, wincing at

the movement before my eyes land on my big brother Sam. He's lying face down on the roof between the front and back seats. His arm, bent at an odd angle, lies lifeless near his hip. His legs remain hidden behind crumpled metal, but blood slowly pooling underneath him draws my eye.

My heart rate escalates, and I attempt to shout at him, but no sound escapes my throat. Panic builds in me as I fight to break free of my position, struggling against the restraints. Then, finally, sounds start sinking in past the ringing in my ears, and I faintly hear distant voices shouting. My eyes fall on the driver's seat and the unconscious body of my mother dangling as if frozen and asleep, fully restrained by her buckle. Her stringy brown hair covers her face, and her bony, scarred and scabbed arms droop unmoving.

I take a minute to reexamine my injuries, not seeing anything missing or out of place. My right wrist is purple and swollen, but otherwise, I don't have any visible damage. I attempt to shout again. This time my voice cooperates partially, and a gravel-filled sound escapes.

"Sammy!"

He stirs, barely moving before his eyes slide halfway open and scan the area. He faces our mother, but his profile is visible from my seat, and I catch the moment he realizes where he is. His eyes dilate and pop the rest of the way open, the adrenaline allowing him to turn his head. Searching, his eyes cover the car before landing on me, relief evident on his face.

He tries to talk, but I can't hear him. No sound reaches my ears between the ringing and the pounding of my heart. So instead, I focus on his mouth, dry and chapped, as he says the words.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay."

I'm crying again. The stress of the accident, Sammy waking up, and the pain emanating through me are too much to hold in. I reach out to Sam with

my good arm, feeling his dark brown curls with my fingers. I make it to his cheek before I realize he, too, is crying, which startles me because Sammy doesn't cry. Not when he's hurt, not when the men she brings home hit him, not even when he's yelling at her. Sammy never cries. I blink away my tears, trying to be strong for him, pulling my hand back to play in his curls, in an attempt to reassure him without words.

The softness of them soothes me as time starts to stretch. I hear more faraway voices and see flashing red and blue lights so intense that they hurt my eyes. I lose consciousness for a time, only to wake to my brother's whispered voice.

“You're okay.....lightning bug.....you're okay. They're coming to get us. Can you hear them? They're coming to get you. Just hold on.” His crystal blue eyes connect with mine, and the heartbreaking realization hits me that I may lose him.

Breathing becomes difficult as I feel more tears fall. Memories of his lanky arms around me when I'm scared, his patience when I wanted all his attention, and the moments when I intentionally pushed his buttons only to have him attack with tickling fingers and laughter all flash between us. He tries to smile at me, but it's forced and full of anguish.

He coughs, it's a wet sickening sound, and I see the blood droplets flying with each expression of air. I notice how pale he looks and know that the blood he's losing is too much. Shaking my head, I try to bring myself out of the hazy fog. Sweat glistens on his chalky freckled skin, his eyelids fall closed, and his breathing becomes more erratic.

“No! Sammy! Wake up, no!” I scream at him, pulling on the curls still laced between my fingers. When he doesn't respond, I turn, aiming my voice at the window.

“Help! Help us. My brother needs help!” I try to shout though it comes out just louder than a whisper. “Please, please help us!”

They can’t hear my pleas. They aren’t moving fast enough. They don’t know that my best friend, my safe place, my big brother, is slipping away.

It dawns on me that he will never cheer at my graduation, fight with me that my future husband isn’t good enough or walk me down the aisle in place of the father I’ve never had. That all of the inside jokes, the incessant teasing about my karaoke singing or taste in movies, and all of the plans we had to get far, far away are fading right in front of me.

I sob harder, screaming with everything I have.

How do I live in a world without him?

I’m helpless, unable to save the one person who always saves me. I’m losing him, and all I can do is watch all the light left in the world fade out of existence, leaving behind cold empty darkness.

My mind drags me out of the nightmare, pulling me into the now with a sharp intake of air. My breath comes in ragged gasps, and my throat is raw. I feel like I’ve run a marathon without water, training, or rest. Exhaling slowly, I try normalizing my heart rate while establishing where I am and what happened.

Cold caresses my skin, causing me to shake against the icy temperature blowing over me, highlighting the damp streams which have forged a path down my cheeks. The air itself feels oppressive, as if it followed me back here to the waking world.

I can tell I’m lying down, but my body responds slowly to my commands. My brain is disoriented and fuzzy, and I feel like I’m moving through sludge each time I try to access it. My eyelids are heavy when I attempt to open them, so I leave them closed and listen instead.

Music plays from a radio, not softly but not especially loud either. The humming of an engine purrs, and I realize I'm in some kind of moving vehicle. I smell sunscreen, old sweat, and a faint undertone of weed. The wind's whistling outside the car brings bitter-cold gusts. I hear the slurping of a drink through a straw, ice tinkling against the plastic.

All at once, my brain catches up with the situation, my heartbeat rises, and I suck in another small gasp of air. Hudson drugged me. Hudson was waiting at my apartment, and he drugged me.

That motherfucker!

I panic, mentally running through the scenario and trying to understand why Hudson would have any reason to take me. Did Cain put him up to this? Would he have sent him to retrieve me? Of course, they work together, but the idea that Cain wouldn't storm down to my place himself has me eliminating that idea altogether. Cain didn't seem particularly close to Hudson from the brief interaction I'd seen anyway.

My mind wanders to other possibilities—things like human trafficking. There have been rumors that it's a big problem in Las Vegas with all the tourists, but Hudson knows I live here. He knows how close I am to Liv.

Oh my God, Liv! What if she's in trouble too? How can I warn her?

I attempt to slowly open my eyes again, trying to do so without alerting him to the fact that I'm awake. Then, I start running through my self-defense training and what I know about how to get out of these situations. I know how to escape a choke hold, get out of duct tape, and even escape zip ties, but I can't even feel enough of my body to be able to tell what's happening at the moment.

My eye cracks open the tiniest of slivers, and I take everything in. It's still night. I'm indeed in a vehicle lying in the backseat of an oversized SUV. The

interior's stone gray and looks like a newer model with darkly tinted windows. In front of me sits Hudson, his massive frame behind the wheel. His deeply bronzed skin and rippling muscles are covered in an intricate full-sleeve tattoo, and his surfer-boy blonde hair is disheveled and flopped to one side, shielding his face from me.

Glancing down my body, I see restraints at my wrists and ankles. A green synthetic rope is looped in some boy scout rated knot. I tug against it, trying to see if there's any give. Nothing. My phone isn't in my front pocket, and I don't see it in the car as I look around.

Strike one... I guess I'm even less likely to be found now.

I'm buckled into the seat belt, which lies loosely across my lap, the shoulder strap resting against the back of the seat above me.

How sweet of you to care about my safety as you kidnap me.

I roll my eyes at the absurdity of him ensuring I have on a seatbelt with everything else going on.

He may need me alive—that I can work with.

Hudson shifts in his seat, turning his head slightly and shaking his hair out of his face. I slam my eyes closed, hoping to play the sleeping victim a bit longer to formulate a plan.

“You always have the nightmares?” the smooth timber of his voice surprises me, and I lay silently, trying to decide what my next move is. “You can stop pretending,” he adds with a dark chuckle.

Shit!

“You've been talking in your sleep for the last twenty minutes. The silence kinda gave you away.”

“Where are you taking me?” I groan out, teeth chattering and my throat feeling like sandpaper as I adjust to a sitting position. The new view allows

me to see the street in front of the car illuminated by the headlights, which show the scenery flying by. Still in the desert. On a highway. No city around for miles.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” he answers, his voice flat and lacking all of the charisma he exuded the night of our date. Instead, his deep-blue eyes glance up at me in the rearview, and his thick eyebrows scrunch together for a moment before he reaches over and clicks the button to roll the window up.

“Sorry about the cold. I forget you guys are more sensitive to the temperature.”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, the words no more than a whisper.

Hudson exhales. His posture deflates as he runs one hand through his hair and squeezes the wheel tight enough to turn his knuckles white with the other.

“You wouldn’t understand, but I’m trying to figure out how to get us both out of this alive.” His words come out gruff, but I sense his desperation beneath them as he slams his hand back onto the wheel. His eyes flip up to the rearview mirror again temporarily, and I see them darken with anguish.

“I don’t know what this is all about, but you can just let me go. I won’t tell anyone. I won’t call the cops. You don’t have to go through with this,” I plead, hoping to help him see reason.

Tip one of being kidnapped. Make them see you as human, a person with a life, family, and people who would miss them.

“Don’t pretend you have no idea why you’re here. You made that video, and ever since, all anyone can talk about is you. This act of yours won’t stop me from making this trade. You may be necessary to the rest of them, but to me, you’re a means to an end.” He turns up the radio, signaling the end of any conversation with me, and my brain begins spinning over his words.

The video. This all comes back to the murders.

Fear reenters my body as I realize the gravity of my situation. I've been kidnapped by someone who works with people who kill people. Hell, he could kill people too, and he's using me as leverage for something.

I lower myself back down on the seat, feeling overwhelmed by the sheer stupidity of my actions. No one knows that I'm missing. Liv thinks I'm at Cain's.

Cain!

Even the thought of him has my heart clenching, and the ache in my chest is back pulsing through every crack, tear, and shatter. I ran out without even telling him where I was going or why.

Would he even care?

He probably has a bubbly redhead in his bed. I cringe involuntarily at the thought. I'm going to die, and it will take days for anyone to notice. Defeat fills me, and the numbness I've honed over years of trauma slides firmly into place.

It's funny how at that moment, I think of my mother. This is her fate, dying alone with no one to care that she ever existed. I never thought it would be mine. I thought I had more time. Time to live the life Sammy and I always talked about. Time to grow a career, fall in love, and make a family. Time to really live.

A single tear slides down my cheek, and I let it fall silently to the seat untouched, not bothering to try and mess with my bound hands. The emptiness burrows deep within me as I close my eyes, hoping to escape the nightmare my reality has become, even for a little while. As I reach for happy memories, my thoughts of Sammy and our lightning bugs lead me back to Cain and the words he said in that parking lot that stuck with me.

“I never want to do anything to make you feel unsafe, Firefly. I want to protect you from everything in this world.”

The joke’s on me for believing him. I spent a lifetime building walls to protect myself from the world. All it took was a couple of weeks, some nicely timed words, and some earth-shattering orgasms to break me.

Talk about a walking cliché.

The tears stream continuously down my face, and my breathing struggles to keep up with my spiraling brain. I don’t even care what Hudson thinks about me sobbing in his backseat. Everything I thought I’d become turned out to be a lie. I’m weak. I’m disposable. I’m exactly like her.

I’m so sorry, Sammy.



Chapter 3

Cain

The motorcycle ride back to VP Securities isn't nearly long enough to calm my racing heart or to relieve any of the stress in my shoulders. The sun is just peaking over the horizon now, and the city is beginning to wake up. The dawning of a new day only brings me more dread. The longer she's gone, the more likely we will lose her. My wolf can't take the idea of that happening, and he continues pushing against my willpower to take over and search for her himself.

Find Mate. Mine.

It gets more challenging with every passing minute to keep him contained. He feels their connection slipping just as much as I do, and part of me wants to pass control over to him, to give in to my baser instincts and hunt for her to the ends of the earth. Only the logical side of my humanity knows we're on a limited timeline, and if we waste it running around in the woods, we could lose her forever. That isn't a risk I'm willing to take.

We will find her. She will return home safely, and she will get to make her own choice as to how she moves forward.

Hold on Firefly. I'm coming.

I park behind the complex, throwing my helmet to the ground as I stalk into the building. My focus is locked in as I take the stairs two at a time heading to the holding cells on the second floor. As I pass the empty rooms, I recall mapping this area on blueprints in Dante's office.

When this facility was first envisioned, this entire floor was to be a training facility for recruits, both for the pack and VP securities. We needed to stay in top shape to be successful in the security world and be ready for a fight should we face one from a neighboring pack or humans as a whole.

It was Jake who pushed Dante to add a level for interrogation and holding cells to allow us to get the information necessary, and it was Jake who saw all of the design and construction. We didn't think we would ever use them at the time, but now here we are a few years later with more than a hundred interrogations completed.

When I reach the end of the hall, I scan my palm on the sensor, unlock the double doors to the interrogation suite, and nod to the guard on duty. His name is Andre, and he's at least three times my age but looks closer to forty with the light peppering in his beard. One of the most significant benefits of being Awakened is the delayed aging process that allows us to live four to five decades longer than most humans, prolonging our ability to protect the pack.

Most Alphas in the US are well over sixty, making Dante's rise at only twenty-two unheard of for the time. He remains the youngest Alpha running a pack by at least a decade. While some packs believe his youth is a weakness, we see it as our competitive advantage because we can adapt to modern technology and utilize it more effectively than previous generations. The

older packs find their progress stunted by antiquated rules and laws, which we've done away with.

“Hey there, Mini Mingan. What brings you down here this early in the morning, though you don't appear to have slept? Maybe for you, it's late at night?” The deep timbre of his voice echoes through the hall and reminds me of a grandfather's warm tone. Andre worked alongside both sets of my grandparents during the old war. He remains one of the most senior in our pack, as the victory we found cost us more than we could've imagined.

“Ain't no rest for the wicked, as they say.” I give him a forced smile as I try to control my wolf and appear unfazed. All I needed was for Kole to read my distress and use it against me, or worse, to lose control and kill him before he could give me any information.

She's counting on us.

“I need him moved to room one,” I state plainly, not bothering to fill him in on more before strolling toward the “tool room,” as we affectionately coined it for the various instruments of pain housed there.

“Of course, but so you know, room one is the Enforcer's favorite. He doesn't take too kindly to anyone else using it.” Even as he answers, he begins grabbing the ring of solid metal keys from the wall and moving toward the holding cells. Jake may be the Head Enforcer in charge of this compound area, but I was the Second, and my word was law over any in the pack save for Dante.

Today I'm pulling rank.

After twenty minutes of perusing the tool room, I waltz into interrogation room one with a solitary purpose.

Find out where they would take her.

Kole was already chained to the room's far wall, looking unamused and disheveled.

"Finally ready to release me?" he asked, an inexplicable amount of confidence oozing out of him. It gives me a moment's pause as I consider his current circumstances.

Kole's an Alpha wolf born into the Reno Pack as the nephew to the current Alpha. He holds no position within the pack due to both his age and what I'd assume is his lack of maturity. Nevertheless, his pack sent him away, hoping to plant a foothold in our territory in an attempt to bring Kole into the role he may someday fill, running the pack in the north.

The problem with their plan came to light when they realized Kole found himself more interested in drugs and women than in furthering pack politics. So while he gathered some support down here, he got sloppy and wound up in our holding cells because of a botched attempt to steal proprietary technology.

"Now, Kole, you hurt my feelings. Just when I thought we were becoming friends." I throw a hand over my heart and pretend he wounded me with his statement. I'd been down here for very little of his actual interrogation, but I know Jake has had him on the brink of death several times based on reports during our weekly council meetings.

"Oh sure, friends of mine often chain me up and torture me for weeks. It's my favorite pastime." His response lacks humor, and his sense of entitlement irritates me.

"I'm so glad we can accommodate." I sneer at him, showing my teeth this time. "Now, I don't have much time for small talk as I'm completely swamped today. I'd appreciate it if you would answer my questions so that I can get on with it. Interrogation becomes so unbelievably dull when I have to

start letting you heal just to remove more body parts.” I yawn in a show of indifference as I eye the tools, contemplating my choices.

“Well, since you asked so nicely...” he rolls his eyes and sighs before continuing, “I told the quiet one everything I knew. I’m not on the council or part of any planning or decision-making. Not to mention, I’ve been in Vegas for over a year. So, you boys are barking up the wrong....”

I walk over to him, interrupting his thought, and in a single motion, grab and twist his shackled hand, instantly breaking the thumb and wrist. He screams, his face losing all of its color.

“Now, I haven’t even asked my question, and already you lie to me. We’ve allowed you to keep your contact with your Alpha. Your mind-link capabilities haven’t been blocked or tampered with. So see, I know the pack has been communicating with you. What I don’t know is why you’re under any impression that I plan to let you survive this session.” His eyes meet mine before looking over my shoulder and realizing I came in alone. No backup, no witnesses, and no one to stop me. I revel in the moment he realizes I’m unhinged.

His eyes begin looking around wildly, and I see him straining to send messages through his mind-link. I smile; his attempt at saving himself only brings my wolf closer to the surface. My eyes shift, and I feel my teeth elongating as more control shifts to my wolf. I return to various tools, eyeing a handheld taser before grabbing it, feeling the weight of it in my hand before strolling back to stand in front of him. Then, in a completely flat and calm voice, I continue.

“They took something that belongs to me, and you’re going to tell me where I can find it, or you’ll not live to see another sunset.” I pause momentarily while he desperately tries to send that message to his Alpha.

“No, no, no, no. We haven’t taken anything. Even the quiet one said you got back the shipment. You got it back. We don’t have it.”

Liar!

I place the taser on the underside of his throat and press the button, relishing in the way his muscles seize and his body convulses under the pain. A rumble curls its way out of my throat as I breathe in Kole’s agony. The taser remains in place for another moment before I back off. His body falls limp, eyes glazing over as he leans all his weight onto the wall. His head hangs back, and he gasps for air, his heartbeat crashing inside his chest frantically from both the electrical current and the fear.

“Where are they taking her?” my voice sounds more beast than man at this point, and Kole’s whimpering sobs are ignored. My patience isn't thin, it's gone, and the only thing keeping him alive are the words I wait to hear falling from his traitorous mouth.

End him.

“Who?!?” he half shouts. “There’s no one. They say we have no one.” My resolve snaps. His screams continue as I break the rest of his fingers one by one, leaving them to heal in odd directions. Kole’s breathing is labored, and sweat covers his entire body.

More lies.

“You had a man on the inside. A mole in my pack. Tell me his name.” I pull his chin up, forcing him to look at me as I await a response. It feels like an eternity before the single word tumbles from his lips.

“Hudson.”

The taser hits home again, surprising me as much as Kole because he gave me the correct information. My wolf doesn’t care, and he’s driving my

choices now. If Kole knows about Hudson, his pack knows he has her. He's lying.

Kill him.

“NO, STOP.”

The familiar feminine shout surprises me as my wolf claws against my remaining willpower to get out. As I process what I just heard, an arm loops around mine, and the Taser flies from my hand. I turn, ready to attack, and find Jake already standing in a defensive position.

“Cain. What the fuck? He's worth nothing if his heart stops.” His hands are raised in front of him as he tries to placate my wolf by showing submission as he prepares for my assault. And it comes a moment later. I drop, completing my shift before leaping from the ground at him.

Kill.

Fight.

Find Mate.

“CAIN!”

I barely hear the name shouted in the back of my mind as my rational brain takes a backseat, and my wolf wholly controls my body, snapping and lunging to eliminate the threat in front of me. I see red as I finally get the upper hand, knocking Jake to his back. His eyes go round, fear evident as he flails his arms, trying to roll my large form off. I snarl at him before opening my mouth, aiming my bite at his throat.

NOOOOOO!!!!

I scream internally, trying to regain control, take over, and get my wolf to see that he's our friend. Just before my teeth connect, my wolf shoves me out completely, and the world fades to black.



Chapter 4

Bri

B aBoom. BaBoom. BaBoom.

The sound of the racing heartbeat draws my attention first. My eyes scan the fluorescently lit room.

There's a man about my age, looking rumped and distressed. His wrists are in solid, intricate-looking handcuffs, which are thick and chained to a wall. His eyes are wild and nearly black. Sweat pours down his forehead as if he's nervous—the skin at his neck pulses with each beat of his heart.

“They took something that belongs to me, and you're going to tell me where I can find it, or you will not live to see another sunset,” a voice says, but I can't tell where the sound comes from. It's familiar, and I can almost place it before the name slips away like smoke through my fingers.

End Him.

The command pulses through me as I struggle to hold onto control.

What the hell kind of dream is this?

The man's eyes are dancing erratically as if arguing with himself, but he isn't sharing out loud. Instead, he appears to be straining himself as his veins

become more pronounced the longer he lies there fighting demons in his mind.

“Who? There’s no one. They say we have no one,” the man shouts, confidence filling his response, his eyes focusing on me now and looking full of fear. Anger builds within me as I gauge his response.

Liar!

My hand reaches out, snapping his fingers, breaking them easily.

“You had a man on the inside. A mole in my pack. Tell me his name,” the voice from my mouth shouts, grabbing the man’s chin. I can see my hand and the intricate pattern of tattoos that paint their way up my arm. I know them intimately.

“Hudson.”

The name flares a memory of him standing at my door and then driving a car.

Oh no! How is this possible?

The hand holding the taser reacts before I can stop it, and the man convulses on the floor.

Kill Him.

The command takes hold, and I can’t move my arm or stop myself from pressing the trigger—the urge to kill overwhelming all of my other senses.

“NO, STOP!” I shout, but no words leave my mouth. This feels too real, and I can’t quite wrap my head around what I see. Why am I hurting this man?

Hands grip my arm, pulling quickly, and the taser launches into the air, causing me to spin and locate the new threat.

“Cain. What the fuck? He’s worth nothing if his heart stops.” The man who disarmed me shouts.

Cain?

Oh my God.

“CAIN!” I scream, attempting to get him to listen to me. I don’t know how this is happening or if it’s even real, but maybe if I can hear him, he can hear me.

CAIN!!!!

I wake up fighting. Firm hands grip my arms as I scream his name, my voice raw from overuse. My cheeks are wet with tears as I claw at the person holding me. My eyes finally focus as his voice breaks through my yelling.

“It’s ok; it’s ok. It’s just a bad dream. You’re ok.” Hudson's eyes meet mine, concern evident, and he appears to be evaluating how far gone I am.

I freeze, falling still and stopping my fight. I close my eyes, attempting to center myself and calm my beating heart and ragged breath.

What the fuck was that?

Never have I had a nightmare feel more realistic, well, except the ones that were real. Those replayed on a loop in my psyche consistently over the last decade. This one was new. It wasn’t a memory I was reliving. This had to be my imagination.

But it felt like I was there. Like it was my hand breaking the fingers. My finger on the trigger of the taser as the electricity vibrated through my palm. My overwhelming urge to kill a man I didn’t even know.

Breathe Bri. Count backward from ten. Focus on something you know is real.

I focus on breathing, going through the steps I learned from years in therapy, and slowly bringing my heart rate back to a regular rhythm.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Opening my eyes, I bring the world back into focus. I'm still sitting in the back of the SUV. The sun peaking over the mountains tells me it's still early morning. Hudson stands in the open rear passenger door looking at me as if I'm a bomb about to go off at a moment's notice.

Well, at least we're all enjoying ourselves.

"Where are we?" I ask, straining my voice as I try to clear my dried-out throat.

"Gas station. Thought you might want breakfast," he responds, handing me a package of mini donuts and apple juice. "They didn't have much, but beggars can't be choosers." He slams the door and moves back to the driver's seat.

"I need to use the restroom," I state, trying to think on my feet. If we're around people, I can maybe find someone with a phone and call for help.

"Not sure that's gonna happen. I see the wheels turning in your head, and I'm not about to chase you down when you try to run." He starts the car without a backward glance.

"I guess I can just pee in the car, not my mess to clean up after all," I say with an air of defiance, causing Hudson to slam his hands on the wheel. Frustration evident. I give him a sweet smile and lift my wrists in the air.

"Fine!" he almost growls out through gritted teeth and a clenched jaw.

"You might want to untie me, too. It would look pretty bad if someone saw me."

I can see him wrestling with the decision of whether it's worth it to let me out or not before he swings his door back open with a sigh and returns to the back seat. He pulls a knife from his pocket, flipping it open before locking eyes with me. His face holds no humor as he issues his warning.

"If you want any chance of making it out of this alive, you'll use the

restroom without incident. Right now, it is in my best interest to keep you breathing, but I won't hesitate to reconsider should the situation arise." He finishes the statement bringing the knife to my ropes, cutting each with a single swipe while never moving his eyes from mine.

Shit.

"The restrooms are in the back. You can't outrun me, and there's only one door." Hudson reaches out a hand, I assume to help me out of the car, but my pride doesn't allow me to take it.

I scoot myself over and slide myself out of the car, only to have my legs give out, and Hudson has to grab me at my ribs to keep me from falling directly on my face.

"Yeah, that sedative's probably still working itself out of your system," he says, trying to hold back a laugh, but fails and ends up shaking with silent laughter. He wraps an arm around my waist and assists me in getting to the rusted backdoor.

The smell hits me before I grab the handle, a gag lifting to my throat as I cover my nose with my free hand.

"Couldn't have chosen a gas station that had been cleaned this century?" I groan, giving him a pointed stare as I consider forgetting the whole thing.

Not going to be able to run on these legs anyway.

"Apologies, Your Highness, I didn't realize you had such elevated standards, or I would've called ahead." The eye roll that accompanies his words makes me want to punch him. It's hard to wrap my head around what I'm feeling about Hudson at the moment.

On the one hand, he drugged me, tied me up, kidnapped me, threatened me with a knife, and is taking me, well, I don't know where, but I'm guessing it isn't a surprise vacation.

On the other hand, he did say he was trying to help me out of this mess. He got me food and is letting me pee despite the escape possibility. I mean, it isn't his fault I took that stupid video.

Maybe there's still hope he'll let me go?

With all the strength I can muster, I place one foot in front of the other into the vile restroom. I try not to breathe as I quickly handle my business, feeling a small ounce of relief when I notice both toilet paper and soap remain stocked.

Exiting, I get as far from the bathrooms as possible before taking a large gulp of air. Hudson stands near me, an amused grin pasted on one side of his face. Without saying a word, he slides his hand back under my arm and guides me back to the SUV.

"We have a few more hours to go," he says, looking me squarely in the eyes before continuing. "Do I need to tie you back up, or can you manage to behave? Option two allows you to sit comfortably until we get there." His tone is all business, but his eyes give him away.

"Maybe if you told me where we were going or what to expect when we get there, it would be easier for me to want to cooperate," I say, hoping he'll reveal anything I can work with. Instead, he exhales audibly while shaking his head. I can tell he isn't used to being this guy, but panic lies behind his easy demeanor, which seems to drive his need to see this through. "Maybe I could help you?" I finish, lowering my voice to let him know I'm not trying to manipulate him.

"Just get in the car, Bri, and please don't make me sedate you again." His exasperated response comes as he pulls open the back passenger door, guiding me inside.

"Okay," my voice is almost a whisper, but I know he hears me as he slams

the door shut and walks back around to the driver's side of the car, muttering to himself.

A few hours. We have a few hours to find a way out.

After buckling back in, my eyes scan the surrounding area. It looks every bit like an abandoned ghost town. Broken-down, dilapidated wood buildings span the length of the main street.

Dated, rusted-out cars with tires that appeared to have melted to the road or cracked off the rim lay parked nearby. No people walking the streets, whether that's due to the early hour or the lack of population, is yet to be seen.

A sign over one of the buildings boasts giant letters spelling "SALOON" as I continue to try to identify where I am. I haven't spent much time outside of Las Vegas, well, really, just one school trip with the Honor Society to California and my beach trip with Keith and Liv after senior year. Hudson pulls off, and before we exit the completely outdated western town, I see a sign that reads, "Thanks for Visiting Goldfield."

Goldfield?

I'm reasonably certain I've never heard of it before, but I didn't let that get me down. I may not know where I am, but I did know that if I could get that information to someone, anyone who could be looking for me, they would have a place to start.

Idly, I reached for the donuts, knowing that food would give me the strength I needed to fight or run when the time came. If there's one thing you learn in the foster care system, you never take a meal for granted because you don't know where your next one would come from. So, as the dry sugary powder invades my taste buds, I begin to devise a plan that will keep me alive and get me home in one piece.



Chapter 5

Dante

D *ante: Where is he?*

I send the mind-link command to Jake minutes after the alert comes in that my Second-In-Command took two sedation bullets from our guard, Andre, in an attempt to keep him from killing not one, but two people.

Cain has been such a pain in my ass lately.

As if this mess couldn't be any worse, now, I have to babysit or lock up my best friend because he can't keep his shit together and look at this like another mission. Fated Mate or not, they aren't bonded. He has a job to do. Period.

Jake: We placed him on the medical floor, Room 4A. Dr. Radolf will meet you there.

He sends the response quickly and efficiently. No fluff, all business, that was Jake. *Now there was a guy who knew how to keep his damn head in the game.*

In an effort to appear calmer, I take a long deep breath and release it slowly before exiting my office past the now-occupied desk of my assistant, Quinn.

She looks up at me, reading my mood before waiting on my directions.

“Can you push my call back an hour? I have a complication down in medical,” I ask, staying intentionally vague. I know Quinn gets most of her office gossip from my sister, her best friend, but I also know with this missing witness, things need to stay tight-lipped until we can get everything solved.

“Of course. Did you also want to reschedule your lunch with Mr. Ruffin?” she asks, pulling up my calendar for the day.

“No, I should have this taken care of by then. Can you ensure Elijah knows the time we need to leave and have Noah take a second look at the contracts? I’ll need them printed when I get back.” I rattle off before marching myself down to the fourth floor, which houses our medical wing.

As I enter 4A, I take note of the restraints locked around Cain’s muzzle, and the harness around his chest is chained solidly to the wall.

Though he appears completely unconscious, I understand the need for additional precautions. Cain remains the only wolf to date who would be a challenge to me. His inky black wolf stands over four feet tall and weighs almost 300 lbs. Couple that with the bastard's inability to see reason and a stubborn streak longer than the Mississippi, and it would be a hell of a fight. One I wasn’t looking to get into today.

“What the hell happened down there?” My question is directed at Jake, who’s standing guard near the door, looking every bit the good soldier, but I can feel the anxiety that rolls from him as he sees Cain’s wolf in chains. Jake may have a good time bringing pain to those that could harm us, but deep down, he has PTSD from being shackled that very few people know about.

“He hasn’t been sleeping. Ever since he lost her... hell, ever since he met her. He just hasn’t been himself.” He shakes his head as if trying to figure out

why Cain lost his mind.

I stare at him momentarily, realizing Cain has kept the pack out of his Mate situation and that it isn't my place to rectify that now. I turn to Dr. Radolf, one of the senior members of the pack from when my dad still led, and wait for his assessment.

“His heart rate and pressure are both high. It could be consistent with a lack of sleep, anxiety, or strain on his wolf. All of his vitals are within normal range with the exception of his adrenaline output which is running off the charts even for us. His wolf is in fight mode, and he hasn't been able to regulate back to normal levels even with two shots of Midazolam to sedate him into a state of rest.” The doctor flips through the screens on his iPad before projecting the numbers on the monitor on the wall.

Our medical facilities are state of the art. Every innovation or upgrade to any system in a hospital lies here within our facility. We even have a hospital-grade operating suite and a world-class surgical team ready at a moment's notice. My father had prided himself on the safety he was able to provide the pack. I took that initiative and threw it into overdrive, ensuring every device was available to guarantee we could save our team. Now if someone could just figure out things like cancer, Alzheimer's, and other autoimmune diseases that we had absolutely no way to correct, we would really be safe.

“Is there anything you can give him to counteract the adrenaline for now? Something that'll allow him to work but will keep him from killing everyone who gets in his way?” I ask, hoping that such a thing exists because if I have to keep my best friend sedated while we work to get his Fated Mate back, he'll undoubtedly be ready for a fight when he wakes.

“I wouldn't recommend giving him anything else at the moment. I'm

hoping once he calms down some, his wolf will relinquish control, and he'll be able to discuss why he's having this reaction. If he doesn't settle, I can try to sedate his wolf directly. It won't be pleasant, and it could make him disoriented to not have his wolf guiding him," he says, his face set in a grim line as he watches the heart rate monitor beep at a rate far faster than average. I nod, attempting to work through how likely that is as I change my line of questioning.

"And Kole's status? Is he still alive?"

"Mr. Delvin had almost nine hundred milliamps of current running through him for nearly half a minute. Many wolves wouldn't even have survived that kind of stress to their heart, but we were able to revive him and have him shift. He's conscious and resting in his cell. He will receive treatment once he has decided to return to his human form." Dr. Radolf sets down the iPad and adjusts the IV lines I now notice have been inserted into Cain's hind leg.

"Please keep me posted on both patients. Any change." I turn, nodding to Jake before exiting the room with him at my heels.

"Cain's current condition and the incident this morning stay between the people present. The last thing we need right now is another leak. Our pack's only as strong as we appear, and right now, we have a rogue mole and a homicidal Second." I stop, locking eyes with him and really seeing him for the first time. His shirt gapes open from a tear at the shoulder, and his flank has a large blood stain.

"Were you injured in the exchange?" I ask, looking for more injuries and finding wounds healing on his neck, arm, and cheek.

"Nothing I can't handle with a shift," he pauses, considering his words carefully before continuing, "Not to overstep, but is there something I need to know about this girl? I've worked with C for more missions than I can count,

and I've never seen him lose his cool. He's always in control, not only of his wolf but of every situation. But, since Erik got shot, something has been off; the only thing that adds up is her. Tell me I'm not losing it." I can tell he's reading me. Looking for a reaction, something to give away the truth, but I've spent my life training to be an Alpha, and part of that's having a good poker face and knowing how to pull the focus off one thing and firmly place it on another.

"Cain's had a lot on his plate lately with Erik's injuries, finding an Unawakened, and then trying to retrieve our stolen technologies. Trust me. I'll ensure he lands on his feet. None of us should be okay right now. Hudson betrayed the pack. That has all of us on edge. We need to be united in this fight to get the witness back and to bring Hudson to justice. I'll be leaning on you as we negotiate for her safe return. No one else will get hurt on my watch, do you understand?" I clamp my hand on his clean shoulder, squeezing it as we nod in unison.

"For the pack," he states, the motto rolling from him with a loyalty deeply ingrained.

"For the pack," I repeat, hoping he can't see through the bravado I've placed over my thinly veiled patience. My pack is slowly unraveling, and my best friend is so tied up in his Mate that I can't even lean on him. These are the times I wish I still had my dad. He always knew exactly what to do. He always led the pack in the right direction.

"Your wolf needs to run. **Go.** I'll let you know when he wakes," I order, not leaving room for argument, before returning to my office.

I traverse the stairwells in hopes of avoiding anyone before I can get this situation more under control, but as I reach my office's floor, I see the distinctive pop of red hair, tousled into a messy bun and held down with her

oversized, pink, cat-shaped headphones. She's leaning against the wall outside my door, music blaring loud enough for me to hear from the stairwell. How she can listen to her music at those volumes is a mystery to me. Still, she has an uncanny ability to be completely aware of her surroundings while oblivious to how loud she is, both visually and audibly.

Everything about Pres is loud, and most of it is annoying. My entrance catches her attention, and she slides the oversized noise-canceling monstrosities down around her neck without bothering to lower the volume.

"How's Cain?" she asks, concern evident on her overtired face.

"As if you don't already know. Let's not pretend you didn't hack into the medical room to listen to the update as I received it," I respond, raising an eyebrow at her as I pass into my office. She flushes crimson. Not because I caught her snooping, Pres very rarely followed the rules despite me being both her older brother and her Alpha, instead, she flushes because she still feels guilty about the witness leaving in the first place.

"I should've said something to her. I should've, I don't know, explained. It's hard when you do what I do, behind the scenes knowing things about people you shouldn't know. I don't often think about the fact that they don't know anything about me." She plops herself down into the chair across from me as I settle into my own.

"You couldn't have predicted it would go down the way it did," I say, trying to comfort her and knowing she'll blame herself until the female returns unharmed. "We're doing everything we can to get her back, and we do have a bit of leverage, though I wasn't planning on releasing Kole."

"Have you been able to contact Hudson?" she asks, her voice smaller, less confident than before. Pres and Hudson were friends, and I could tell his betrayal had her mind spinning as much as the rest of us.

Maybe more so.

“You know as well as I do that the mind-link communication’s a two-way street, and both wolves must accept it. At the moment, his wolf has gone rogue, and as such, isn’t letting my messages get to Hudson to try and talk sense to him.” I lean back idly, pulling at the end of my beard, a habit I haven’t been able to shake since taking over as Alpha.

“I’ve known Hudson his whole life. I was only eight when he was born, but I remember his parent's joy when they introduced him to the pack. His mom lost several pups before she had him.” I shake away the memory as I try to understand why he would’ve turned on us.

His parents had migrated to a Florida pack just after he graduated high school, but Hudson chose to stay and work with our security firm. He had the choice to go with them.

It reminded me that I should contact Elijah and see if we could reach them. There had to be a reason for him to change his alliance from us to our Reno pack.

Presley clears her throat, pulling my attention back to her.

“So the SUV is a dead end. He pulled the GPS before taking it from the lot, so we can’t track it. I think it’s safe to assume he’s headed north toward Reno. Since he’s the one who gave them the information on the tech shipment, it isn’t a leap to believe he’s bringing her to them. What I can’t seem to gather is why he chose her. Yes, she witnessed the tech debacle, but he doesn’t know she’s Unawakened.” Pres rambles while sliding through information on the tablet in her hand. It’s the first time in a long time that I can see Presley anxious. Her nerves evident as she chews on her lip and bounces her leg under the chair.

“He knows she’s important to us. We’ve had her under pack surveillance

for the last few weeks. He knows she's important to Cain, he's been undercover with her as his tutor, and they've gotten more than close. That may be all he needed to use her as a bargaining chip or as leverage to gain favor with that pack to have them take him in—anything Marlo can use against us. The important thing now is trying to get her back before we have an all-out war. Not that we can't handle them, but going to war over a human won't look good to the surrounding packs," I finish, turning away from her, and pull up my system.

"What if we don't get her back?" I barely hear her question, feeling the guilt she's emitting and throwing my doubt on top of it.

"We have to." It's all I can say. There's no winning solution besides getting her back unharmed. The alternative is too dark to even consider. I don't believe we would survive the spiral Cain would enter or the hit the pack would take.

Who knew Cain's Mate would be the crux that could destroy a lifetime of loyalty?

I ignore Pres long enough for her to take the hint and leave my office. My mind spins with questions, scenarios, and alternatives which play out on repeat.

If she dies, we lose Cain.

If Deacon Awakens her, Cain will snap, war will start, we will lose many lives, and we lose Cain.

If she survives but finds out about us, she could reject Cain, and we lose Cain.

If she survives and sides with Marlo, we lose Cain.

Scenario after scenario rolls through my head, and in the end, all I can think is that I'm on the verge of losing not only my best friend but my pack, my

family. I steel my resolve. I need to focus on the things I can control. I send a mind-link message to Elijah.

Dante: I need you to contact the Healys with Bronson's Pack in South Florida. I need them on a call with me within the hour.

Elijah: Bronson is at the LLC regulation trial for the next few weeks. I'll reach out to their Second, Amari. She should be able to get us in contact.

Dante: Whatever it takes.

Finally, a bright spot. If Bronson was away at an LLC meeting, then that means that Deacon, too, will be otherwise unavailable.

Maybe we can get ourselves out of this mess yet.

Looking at the surveillance feeds that cover four of my monitors. I see that Cain is still unconscious, Kole is back to his human self, and, according to my calculations, we have less than five hours before our witness falls into enemy hands.

*Dante: Council, we meet at noon. **Tell no one outside the circle.***



Chapter 6

Keith

E rrrrrrrrrrrrr. Errrrrrrrrrrrr. Errrrrrrrrrrrr.

The distinctive buzzing pattern emanating from my brand-new iPhone pulls me out of a deep, alcohol-induced sleep. I slide my hand across the sheets, searching for the device, only to graze my fingers down the supple smoothness of warm bare skin.

A feminine moan sounds next to me as the bed shifts slightly, followed by a tumbling of arms and legs that fall onto my chest and thigh in a possessive bear hug that dances very close to my ready-for-round-three morning wood.

I crack my eye open, scan for my phone, and catch sight of it underneath the pillow on the other side of the bed. Last night is a blur of drinking and hot distractionary sex. The blonde sprawled on top of me is Mila, one of my regular hookups who I reached out to in an effort to avoid another empty night alone in my big house. She knows my rules, and we frequently satisfy each other's needs without unnecessary emotional hang-ups.

I stretch out my hand and bring the phone up, using facial recognition to open the device. The notification is from the app that controls my security

system; from the looks of it, it has been going off for the last few hours.

Well, shit.

Sliding out from underneath Mila, I head into her bathroom to use the facilities and look at the issue with my system. The surveillance app consists of mostly open-source code that I customized to suit my particular enhanced security needs.

I installed the cameras, scanners, heat, and trip sensors entirely off the grid and housed them on my servers both in the home and an offsite silo. I'd gone so far as to purchase the entire customized kit through black market dealers to disguise the locations of the devices and eliminate the possibility that anyone could find their frequencies within the house. In terms of surveillance, my system rivals the Pentagon, and my software upgrades blow them away.

The app shows fourteen new alerts, and I open them one by one, my jaw clenching and my mood sinking more with each minute of footage I watch.

That fucking bastard!

Elle's criminal, fake student-boyfriend broke into my house. Not only did he break in, but he also brought friends, and one of them took my drives. My blood pressure begins to build as overwhelming anger fills me. Part of it stems from the invasion of my personal space, but the other part lies in the fact that one could circumvent my coded doors and disarm all the alarms without ever entering a password.

The shock hits me that if I had been home when they arrived instead of tangled up with Mila, I'd be dead.

I watch as they scan the rooms like professional SWAT team members, ensuring the space is clear of any assailants and allowing coverage as they move with a fluidity that only comes from repeated practice.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I set my phone on the counter and grab its edge with both hands gripping tightly while exhaling the tension in order to clear my head.

Focus on the facts. Focus on what you can control.

Ok. Cain must know I still have the code.

Where the fuck has K been?

As I think about it, I haven't heard from him in weeks. He stopped responding to my messages before the offsite raid. Of course, the money keeps getting deposited into my account, and the email requests haven't stopped for the continuous code commits, but nothing about K's side project, and now this fucking guy is at my house, hanging around my best friend, not to mention the fact that he came to take everything K had given me.

Well, not everything.

This is becoming far more of a shitstorm than I ever imagined. If I hadn't already gotten a good look at the code, I'd be wondering if any of it was worth the hassle. But that code is exquisite, and even if I wasn't clear on all of the inner workings, I can tell whoever wrote it knows what they're doing. It pushes the envelope on all current AI and systemic machine learning. That code has the ability to be the foundation of a new future technology, and I wanted to dive into every line of it.

What the fuck do I have that's worth sending the team to my home?

It took everything in me to leave it on ice the last few weeks while trying to let the whole project blow over until I could bring it up again. But, unfortunately, based on the criminal team that just broke into my home, this isn't blowing over, and I need to find some leverage to get myself out of this, and I need it soon.

One of the biggest hurdles in this situation is that Elle is now involved. Him working with her can't just be a coincidence. I've put myself into many not-

so-ethical or above-board situations, but I'd never risk Elle. I'm meticulous about security precautions, so the fact that they can trace who I am, and find Elle through me, sends me into a panic. I can't lose her, but more than that, she's been through too much to be part of this. She's too good to be dragged down by my carelessness.

I have to find a way to get him away from her.

My eyes lift to the mirror. A silent determination asserts itself within me as I promise myself that no matter what else happens from all this, Elle will be safe. I'll protect her, or I'll die trying.

After washing up, I return to the bedroom with a newfound calm, gather my clothes, and get dressed. Mila crawls her way over to me as I pull on my socks, and she kisses a line down the side of my neck. Her hands slide themselves around my chest.

"Leaving without saying goodbye, baby?" she purrs into my ear with a nibble. Relaxing to indulge for a moment, I turn, grab her, and lift her easily onto my lap as she squeals. Her thighs straddle mine, and the thin material covering her core does little to hide how ready she is for another round.

"Darling, I assumed you were worn out from last night. I didn't want to disturb that rest you were getting." I kiss her, pulling at her swollen bottom lip with my teeth until she moans into my mouth and grinds her center against my now fully awake length. My hands glide over her exposed ass before playing with the hem of the thong lying across her hip.

"Stay. You can have me for breakfast," she requests, eyes looking up at me from beneath her lashes as she continues to tease me over my pants. I allow her to continue riding me momentarily before I dig my thumbs into her hips, squeezing her firmly and holding her steady to stop the rhythm she's creating.

"As much as I wish I could spend this morning rehashing the highlights of

last night, I have something that's come up that needs my attention immediately," I state, using the grip on her hips to lift her off me. A whimper leaves her mouth as I set her back on the bed and continue sliding on my shoes.

"Can I see you tonight or tomorrow?" her question rolls off her tongue with longing behind it that sends warning signals to my brain. My spine straightens as I steel myself.

Shit. Another one.

"Mila, darling, we talked about this. If you're looking for someone consistent who wants a relationship, that isn't me." I put on a devastatingly charming smile. The one people say makes me look every bit the f-boy I am before leaning over and kissing her cheek lightly. The gesture is an attempt to avoid the tears I can feel coming on from her as she tries to pull back the invitation and deny her growing affection for me.

"But the next time this pretty little cunt needs someone to hit just the right spots, text me." I nip at her jaw, prompting a giggle, and stand myself up, gathering my wallet and glasses from the bedside table before waltzing my way out of her room without another glance.

Time to put Mila on the back burner.

Walking around the UNLV campus allows me time to decide my next move. My car is still at work, and I don't have another shift until Monday. I can't return to my house because there's no way they don't have someone sitting on it. I can't go to Liv and Elle's because he could be there, and the last thing I want to do is put them in danger.

After eliminating the obvious choices, I decide to head to my parent's place. I'm hoping that these guys wouldn't cross that line. I have an old system I

can use to work through the footage and see what they were able to take from my drives. Two birds, one stone, and all that. I could warn them and get some work done.

I pull out my phone and text Elle, hoping that if he's out looking for me, he isn't with her.

Keith: Hey Elle, what are you up to today? Wanna have lunch? We can even go to that horrendous taco cart you like. My treat.

That may have pushed it slightly, but I need to see her. I have to get her to stop tutoring this guy. If I could convince her that he was no good for her, maybe I could keep her safe from these guys. At least she leaves next week for Boston. I just have to keep her safe until then.

A second text goes out via signal in an encrypted message to K.

(KJ)4422225533777: Trouble in Paradise. Same location. Same Time. 01001011 01001010

The adrenaline is back, coursing through me as I wait for the Uber to pick me up. My mind works through each logical possibility.

My hands shake as I realize how bad this all is. If I can find something to exploit these guys, I can keep everyone safe. But how do I keep them safe while I find it? If K meets up with me tonight, maybe I can get some answers.

My phone vibrates in my hand with a response text, and I look down at it to see a message from Elle. My breath rushes out, a sense of relief that if I can get her with me, I can protect her from him.

Elle: You had me at tacos. Grab me at 2

My eyes flip to the time at the top of the screen—four hours to make some progress.

Keith: See you then

The ride to my parent's house is uneventful, but I find myself mentally spinning for the entire trip, retracing every move I made with K and his side jobs. I should never have taken him up on any of them, but initially, it was easy money. The things he needed were child's play compared to the work I could produce, and he overpaid.

I knew the jobs weren't exactly legal. Cleaning up some audio, masking IP addresses, writing a trojan horse to manipulate cameras for "keeping an eye on his girl," and even some security enhancements for his crew. Nothing I couldn't handle, but the requests became more frequent over time, and I started to rely on the money.

Hell, it bought me my house. And that was a web of lies I had to tell Elle and Liv. They would kill me if they knew I bought the damn thing in cash because of black hat dark web side jobs. Liv understood the darkness that comes with money, she grew up immersed in a world of next-level wealth, but Elle was blissfully unaware of all of it. She never had money, so the corrupt power that comes with it was a foreign concept to her.

The car stops in front of the worn-down complex just off the Warm Springs exit off the 215. This side of town used to be full of families with young kids, but those families grew and moved away, leaving the area to fill with lower-income renters who drove the values down.

My parents took pride in their small first-floor two-bedroom condo. I asked my mom once why they'd never moved into a house, trailer, or, hell, a more affluent area, and her response was simply that this was home. She didn't need more rooms to clean, and she didn't need an HOA telling her what she could or couldn't do with her porch.

My mom loved her porch. She spent hours watering the unending supply of plants she housed there. The green thumb certainly stopped with her. I barely

remember to feed myself, so keeping plants, animals, or children alive wasn't happening.

I shake my head as I approach their door, seeing my mom's wild blonde curls bouncing out of the back of her floppy hat. She's out talking to her plants, a mister in her hand. When she spots me, a smile immediately jumps to her face, accentuating the laugh lines and wrinkles on the tanned aging skin near the outsides of her sky-blue eyes; the eyes she gifted me; the ones that get me out of more trouble with women than they should.

"My boy!" she shouts, setting down the mister to wrap me up in a hug. "Well, isn't this a nice surprise? What brings you by?" She pushes me back to get a look at me. Her expression shows her delight but also her inquiring mind.

"Can't I just visit?" I ask innocently, making her eyebrow arch, and a hand goes to her hip.

"Keith Jase Anderson, don't you lie to me. I spent too many hours bent over in excruciating pain to bring you into this world to have you lie to my face," she huffs, making me feel eight years old. "You've never just dropped by. There's always a phone call or text message begging for a home-cooked meal, and I haven't had any such messages."

"Mom, the middle name guilt trip, really? I'm sorry I didn't call first. The internet is down in my area because of some work on the lines, so I figured I'd swing by and use my system here to get some work done before I meet up with Brielle this afternoon." My mom's eyes sparkle at the mention of Elle's name, a distractionary technique I've used in my favor for years while she holds onto hope the two of us will get together.

Yeah, you and me both, Mom.

I should've thought that one through more as my gut tightens, the old ache

inside coming with it.

Just friends.

I yell internally at myself. The constant message has been my tried and true for nearly the last decade since she told me I had to take her and her friend Livinia to the 8th-grade dance, so they wouldn't have to find dates.

"Just as friends, of course, because eww," Her words hadn't stung then, but I still remember her nervously waiting for me in the deep green dress she'd borrowed from Liv that hugged her newly formed curves. That night, she shifted from being the sad neighbor girl to the only girl I wanted, and no one has kicked her off that pedestal since.

"Oh, we certainly miss that girl. How come you didn't bring her by so that we could see her?" My mom interrupts my reverie bringing me back to the here and now.

"I told you, it was a last-minute decision, and I think she's busy tutoring." I finish clenching my jaw at the thought of her sitting for hours with that criminal.

Pot meet kettle.

"Well, you tell her she's welcome anytime. It's been ages since we got to have you both here. I miss having everyone here." Her words say, "everyone." Her words mean "seeing you two together, so one day I can have grandbabies."

"I'll pass your invite along, but I have to get some work done. When is Dad supposed to be home?" I ask, turning to head through the front door.

"He won't be back until after dinner, but I will tell him you stopped by. I think he said he put some mail for you on the counter," she replies before picking up the mister and returning to her plants.

As I pass the counter, I swipe the stack of envelopes, looking for the ones

with my name on them. Most of my mail has been forwarded to my house by now, but occasionally I get something here by mistake. A manilla envelope addressed to me from an address in Reno catches my eye—no company name. And instead of Keith Anderson as the receiver, it shows KJ Anderson. The subtle difference I use in my less-than-desirable work.

I pocket the envelope and swipe an apple from the basket before heading back to my old room.

It looks exactly how I left it when I moved out a little over a year ago and exactly how it appeared through college and high school before that. Tech equipment lines my walls. Textbooks fill my bookshelves, along with figurines from my D&D days.

I fall into the computer chair while pulling the mystery mail from my pocket. My curiosity piqued, I open it.

KJ,

Excuse my presumption in sending this letter. You've previously completed some work for us, and we require your services. Unfortunately, We haven't been able to reach your previous point of contact, and this is the only information we could find for you as you haven't responded to the controlled communication sent to the number on your file. This address is listed on the account we have been paying, and to say it mildly, getting ahold of this information was no easy feat.

Please utilize the same communication method to contact us at the same contact number as before, except replace the final digit with a two.

Please do not delay in your response.

M.

I reread the note twice before flipping back to the envelope to see the postmark date was almost a week ago.

Fuck, K's missing. They can't reach him either.

My palms begin to sweat as the enormity of the situation falls on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I grab my phone, hands unsteady as I open the encryption app. I changed my authentication method to an open-source Yubi key when Cain and his buddies took my phone. They hadn't been able to reach me because of the switch, and even though I updated K, they would never have received it if he's been missing since before then. I send the message to the new number and anxiously await a response.

(KJ) 4422225533777: Message received. Meet location needed.

Six minutes pass before my phone receives a response.

(M) 25557442: Midnight 36.1474° N, 115.1557° W Ask for RP

I release the breath I'd been holding and get to work tracking down anything I can find on Cain, K, and the people I've apparently been working for. I have under four hours to get the upper hand before meeting Elle.

“Ok, Cain, let's see what you're really up to.”



Chapter 7

Bri

After another hour of driving in near silence, I begin to drift off to sleep. The combination of the drugs he knocked me out with and the stress from the night weighing heavily on my heart. My body aches with exhaustion while my mind reels, fighting to find a solution through a fog of uncertainty. Part of me wants to curl up in a ball and give up.

What do I have to fight for anyway?

I don't have a family. I haven't started my career, as much as I was looking forward to that step in my life. I don't even have Cain anymore, not that I'm sure I ever did. So everything seems a little hopeless.

Unfortunately, the other side of me is furious that I've fallen into this situation. I'm smarter than this, stronger, better than dying at the hands of a bunch of criminals. I've lived my entire life on the straight and narrow. I don't break laws. I pay my bills on time, and I have been working my ass off to make something of myself.

None of that matters when you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Life isn't fair. It never has been. If it were, Sam would still be here, and I

would've died in that car, or hell, she could've died and left us both here to live our lives together.

With the two sides of myself warring over what I should do next, my body takes over and shuts itself down.

Maybe sleep will provide some clarity, or perhaps it'll just shorten the time until whoever Hudson's taking me to decides my fate.

I hear the footsteps slowly plodding closer. The floor creaks involuntarily as he nears, and I freeze, temper my breathing, and close my eyes. My heartbeat pounds so loudly against my ribs that I'm sure he can hear it. The sharp creak from the top step announces his arrival as the hinges groan with the opening of the door.

Peeking, so I still appear asleep, I see only his silhouette as the bright light behind him hides his expression. He sways, stretching out an arm to brace himself on the frame. He doesn't descend the stairs immediately, as if considering his decision.

In the three weeks I'd been here, Carl attempted to get me alone a handful of times. But since they were between paychecks, his wife had been sober and, as the jealous type, kept him on a short leash. I was thankful for that aspect of her nature. That was until today when the check came from the state, and she put it straight into her arm, leaving me alone.

I let out a slow breath, attempting to calm my heart rate, sealing my eyes again. Hoping he wasn't the man I thought he was. The man who had stolen glances at me when he thought I wasn't looking. The man with the wrong kind of sparkle in his eye when I walked into his living room behind the CPS worker.

He carefully made his way down to me. The stench of stale beer and

unwashed body odor floated in the air, overpowering even the mildew I'd become accustomed to. I followed the sound of his movements as he leaned down closer to me.

His hand lightly traced my face, tucking a stray hair behind my ear while I focused all of my attention on not flinching under his touch.

Maybe he'll go? If I just hold still, he'll leave.

The thought's out and just as quickly extinguished as that same hand glides to my shoulder in an attempt to slide off my strap.

I move now, flashing my eyes open and attempting to roll away. His hands react, grabbing me more quickly than I could've estimated, holding me in place. His weight pushes into his embrace to ensure I can't slither from his grasp. I fight against him, wriggling with all I have as his hand reaches to cover my mouth just as I attempt to scream.

"Shhhhhhhh... It's gonna be ok," he whispers, his rancid breath floating over me as I cough, struggling to breathe.

"Please stop! You're hurting me! Don't!" I shout into his palm. Tears sting my eyes from the fear I feel building within me.

One hand pins my arms uncomfortably against the concrete floor as I sob, pleading with him. My frail body shakes from the cold as he fumbles with his zipper. I squeeze my eyes shut to keep from seeing him hovering over me. Tears tumble down my cheeks freely as my begging falls on deaf ears.

The jingle of his belt buckle falling to the floor signifies the increased danger of what's to come, and the pounding in my ribcage intensifies. I squirm, trying to throw him off balance, trying to get my hands away, trying, and failing, to save myself.

"Easy there, Baby Girl. I can make this feel real good." He stumbles over the words, but the filthy meaning behind them oozes over my skin, making me

feel unclean. I whimper, opening my eyes, only to see the carnal look in his as they slide down my body.

“Please. Don’t do this,” I plead, my voice wavering, glancing over his shoulder at the open door at his back. Freedom staring me in the face with no way to grasp it. My mind starts to put together a plan to get out of this. If only I can escape his hold.

His hand reaches for my knees which I’ve clenched together, squeezing my muscles with every bit of strength I have left. His palm lands on my kneecap while a vile sneer forms on his face. He loses balance momentarily as he attempts to wrench my thighs apart with a forceful tug, falling on top of me in the process.

“No!”

I’m snatched from the nightmare and thrown into the present, residual terror firmly flowing through my veins. Sweat lays in a light sheen over my skin like morning dew causing fallen strands of my dark brown hair to stick to my forehead. The air feels thick, as if my nightmare left a filmy residue on my body. I faintly hear the echo of my screams and smell the trace of cheap beer and unwashed man lightly floating on my memory. A smell that lingers like a stain unable to be washed away, tattooed in the darkest recesses of my mind.

I hadn’t had nightmares of my time with Carl and Beth Williams in years. I never wanted to relive the horrors I faced there, and it took years in therapy to push that time out of my subconscious. Carl was a drunk. He was a disgusting human being in every sense, and he enjoyed taking advantage of being a foster dad. I don’t know how many kids came through their home before me, but I’m glad no one else will ever have to.

I don’t know if it's the drugs Hudson gave me or the overwhelming lack of control I have in my life that’s been causing me to have all these damn

nightmares, but I need to get a handle on my stress levels because this can't be healthy having panic attack after panic attack.

Shaking my head to return to my current reality, my eyes scan the area as I try to establish my bearings. I'm still in the car, but it's no longer moving, and Hudson is no longer inside. I'm alone.

Closing my eyes, I count backward from ten, deliberately taking slower, deeper lungfuls of air as I get closer to one. My breathing evens as I force myself to calm down.

When my heart rate evens and my muscles relax some, I open my eyes back up.

The brightly lit atmosphere gives the false impression of warmth when the temperature feels to be just above freezing. I run my hands over my arms in an attempt to fight off the chill that's settled in me. The sun beams through the windows making my eyes squint involuntarily as I try to see where he has taken me.

Brown and white patches cover the ground, and towering pine trees fill the landscape as far as I can see. Packed dirt lies visible between small piles of ice and snow. Small patches have been worn into the area, almost like walking trails between the trees.

Turning to look behind me, I see a picturesque log cabin out the back window of the SUV. It isn't enormous. It's a single-story with a front porch that seems worn down by the weather but isn't in disrepair.

Dark curtains cover the windows and appear to be for privacy more than style. A pile of wood sits stacked neatly by a solitary rocking chair near the front door that holds a bright red "No Solicitors" sign nailed to it.

How welcoming.

Before I talk myself out of it, I open the door, listening intently for Hudson.

I hear the faint rustling of leaves, the hum of insects, and the occasional singing of a bird.

Now is my chance.

I hop out, my legs holding me solidly as I close but don't shut the door in hopes he'll think I'm still inside without risking the noise to actually close it. Once I'm around the front of the car without incident, I take off running.

While slow to respond to commands, my body stretches my stride and pushes me onto a trail without looking back. Adrenaline surges through me as I finally wake up entirely to the fight for survival bestowed upon me. I lose count of the number of tall trunks I dodge as I wind myself further into the woods. My breathing slowly becomes labored, and I consider how much farther I should run before I can get my bearings and look for civilization.

Hudson is in excellent shape. Not only that, but from our date together I know exactly how much he trains in the gym to remain that way. It'll be a while before I can even pretend I have a head start. More importantly, I have no idea where I am, what direction I should be going, what direction I'm actually going, or how far from a town or city we are.

At this rate, I'm just as likely to end up lost in the woods and die out here from hypothermia as I am to find my way.

When I'm reasonably certain I've been running long enough, I cut off the worn trail and tuck myself behind a large boulder to catch my breath, cursing myself for not being more diligent with exercising.

That's it; if I live through this, I will start running with Liv.

I lean into the rock doubled over, pulling in large gulps of clean pine-scented air while mentally going through what I know and making a plan.

1. I have been in the SUV for hours. At least six based on where the sun shines down on me, but it could be ten or eleven.

2. He took me North based on the temperature decrease and the presence of snow, which is nonexistent in Las Vegas most years.
3. He needs me alive for some kind of trade.
4. He's part of or is tangled up with the murderous gang from the parking lot.
5. He works with Cain.

This thought throws me, and I pause to think through that piece of evidence I hadn't considered.

Could Cain be mixed up in this gang too?

Shaking my head, I place that thought on the back burner of my mind to dive into more later because whether he is or isn't matters very little if I die out here in the woods, and based on my calculations, I have less than four hours until the sun will disappear, and I can't still be out here when it gets dark.

I turn around, surveying the rugged mountainous terrain, wondering if I could find high ground that would give me some visibility around all these trees. With my breathing solidly back under control, I can hear the sounds of small animals scurrying in the fallen pine needles, the faint snap of a twig, and the gurgle of a stream.

Water. Follow the water.

Maybe I can use it to take me to a pond or lake. People have cabins near lakes, so that could be my best bet.

Stepping back onto the worn trail, I inventory what I have. I'm wearing leggings, the oversized blue hoodie I stole from Keith, and black Nike cross trainers Liv bought me two years ago, hoping I'd be her running partner. I have no water, no food, and a terrible sense of direction.

I'm going to die.

Releasing a sigh, I march forward, trying to pay attention to anything that could be a landmark. A weirdly bent tree, a pile of boulders with lime green moss growing from the cracks, dead tree logs decaying into the undergrowth. I walk for what feels like almost an hour, but without a phone or watch, it could've been twenty minutes for all I knew. I take in the clear blue sky and peaceful sounds as I make my way closer to the sound of water. This would be a lovely hike if I weren't lost, running from my kidnapper, and starting to get really cold.

I laugh at the absurdity of that thought.

“Sure, Bri, joke about being totally alone and lost in the wilderness,” I say aloud as I stumble a little over a loose rock in the trail.

“Not sure about the ‘totally alone’ part, but you sure do look lost, City Girl.”

I scream, jumping a good foot in the air and whipping my head toward that slow deep voice. Standing a few meters behind me on the trail is the most ruggedly handsome half-naked mountain of a man. He has hair that's pure white and cut in a military-style fade, clean on the sides with longer strands on top. He's older than me, maybe mid-thirties, not nearly old enough for hair that white. His eyes are so pale blue that they appear almost colorless and pierce through the confident grin on his chiseled, sun-tanned face, which has a salt and pepper dusting of stubble. Speaking of chiseled, his broad, muscular shoulders and defined chest drop-down to perfectly sculpted abs that are on full display.

As I silently count them, he interrupts me with his voice again.

“My eyes are up here, City,” his voice is playful with just a hint of a southern accent that feels like drinking expensive whiskey. He folds his arms

and leans into a solid tree as if he has nothing to do but wait.

“I’m sorry!” I spit out apologetically, exasperated to have run into a person in the middle of nowhere, a person who has got to be freezing in just a pair of running shorts.

“Aren’t you cold?” I blurt before adding, “It’s freezing out here, and you don’t even have a shirt on.”

“That depends. You offering to keep me warm?” He smiles as he asks, and I’m sure I turn tomato red at his insinuation. His eyes dance with humor as he drags them up my body.

My jaw drops, and I try to speak, only to come up empty and sputtering. I throw my hands over my face and let out a sigh trying to regain my composure.

“Can you please tell me where I am?” I ask after a few moments, dropping my hands and throwing them into my hoodie pocket to keep them warm while also keeping from playing with them, a habit I’ve adopted when I’m nervous.

“On private property,” he responds, not losing the humor on his face.

“Shit. I had no idea.” I spin around, looking aimlessly for a sign or marking indicating I’ve crossed onto someone’s property. Not that I cared. Property meant someone lived out here, and maybe they had a phone.

A phone!

“Can I use your phone?” I ask, stepping toward him and reaching my hand out expectantly.

“Can’t say that I have one on me at the moment,” he responds, looking down at himself, which causes me to skim my eyes over his body again.

Damn it!

“Um, well, could we maybe go to your place to get it? It’s kind of

important,” I say, not wanting to spill my life story to a total stranger but hoping he’ll take me seriously. I smile at him in an effort to come off as less of a crazy person.

“Inviting yourself back to my place? Now times must’ve changed because I can’t say I’ve ever met anyone as forward as you. So tell me, do you often proposition strangers in the woods?” His voice, laced with humor, and the look on his face tells me he likes playing this game.

“I didn’t... I wasn’t...” I growl in frustration. Talking to this man is infuriating, and I’ve lost my patience. “I’m sure this is hard for someone like you to comprehend, but I wasn’t hitting on you. I’m lost. I need help, and if you must know, I have a boyfriend.”

He stares at me. Not speaking. Not reacting. Not changing his half-cocked grin or losing an ounce of the mirth in his eyes. After a few moments, I begin to wonder if he heard me at all.

“I just..” his head snaps left as I begin, his eyes focusing on something I neither hear nor see. I turn to see what’s caught his attention but come up empty. It’s just more trees, more snow, and more wilderness.

Maybe this guy’s crazy?

“Follow me. Stay close.” He adds no additional information, and for a minute, I start to wonder if this is a good idea, following the half-naked man I just ran into in the woods, but the way his demeanor changed so rapidly has me just as nervous as to what caused the sudden shift.

Liv would have a field day with this. “Next on Unsolved Mysteries”

He takes off, heading back toward where I just had come but veering more to the right. He doesn’t look back to see if I follow or slow down so I can catch up. I have to jog to keep up with his long strides, occasionally tripping over a branch or stone I didn’t see in time. If he finds any of my stumbling

about amusing, it doesn't show. He continues, his face giving nothing away and his eyes on constant alert.

While I follow him, my eyes wander across the thick muscles of his shoulders and back. A back that I now notice is covered in hundreds of white scars carved in erratic patterns that appear long since healed. Some are smaller than a cat scratch, while others are longer than my arm and half as thick. Catching up to his side, I lean in to get a better look at a particularly interesting-looking shape just above his shoulder blade when my toe catches on an outstretched branch, and I lurch forward, my hands reaching to brace my fall.

Before I hit the ground, a large arm wraps around my waist, suspending me in mid-air and pulling me back against him. The scream is only half out as I open my eyes, realizing he kept me from falling. We stand there a moment, me catching my breath, neither of us saying a word. I feel his broad chest against my back, and surprisingly it makes me think of Cain, of all the times I curled into his expansive chest and found comfort there.

I hate that he wasn't who I thought he was.

"Thank you," I say, though it comes out as a whisper, and I turn my head to look at him. When my eyes catch his face, he freezes, taking a deep breath before his eyes grow wide. His eyebrows drop in confusion, scanning my face as if some secret code hides on it. I step out of his grasp, concerned at the almost predatory way he looks at me.

"I... I'm sorry... I didn't," I stutter through an apology, though I'm not sure why I'm apologizing for falling. He didn't have to catch me. He grabs my wrist, preventing me from backing any farther away.

"How did you get here?" he asks. His voice, no longer smooth whiskey, sounds guttural and forced.

My eyes widen, and my heart begins pounding out of my chest as panic sets in. My fight or flight reflex is pointing directly to flight as I consider trying to rip my arm from his hold.

“I...” Before I can even get a word out, he yanks my arm, forcing my body to move behind him. Surprise fills me, and I shout out before attempting to escape his grasp. That’s when I hear it. The low growl crawls across my skin, freezing me in place. Every hair on my body stands at attention, fear like electricity humming in my veins.

I peek over the man’s shoulder to see a snarling blue-eyed, golden-fur-covered wolf prowling slowly toward us. Its movements are calculated, and its focus lies solely on me. My body stands paralyzed, unable to flee from the threat before me.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I whisper under my breath, realizing neither of us has a weapon, a phone, or any way to fight off a freaking wolf! Hell, the guy is only wearing gym shorts! My mind races, searching for an answer to how we can escape this. My eyes scan the area looking for a stick or rock I could throw to distract it so maybe we can find some high ground.

As I bend down to grab a nearby branch, a rumble rolls out of the large man causing the wolf to stop approaching. I freeze my hand on the stick, watching the wolf stare down the man before continuing to get ahold of a weapon. Then, just as I stand back up, branch in hand, the wolf drops his head, whimpers, and turns around, retreating in the direction it had come.

We stand in perfect silence, watching the path where it fled.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask after several moments. He startles as if he forgot I was behind him, and he turns around, his face a mask of indifference.

“We should be dead right now. That wolf should’ve torn us to shreds. So how the fuck are we still alive?” I say, my words flying out of my mouth as I

begin pacing in the space between trees, shaking my hands partially to keep them warm and partially to work out the nervous energy from the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“I get kidnapped, driven to God knows where only to escape, maybe, before getting lost in the FUCKING woods in the middle of FUCKING winter with no supplies and no phone, just to run into the only other person for miles, who of course DOESN'T HAVE A FUCKING CELL PHONE IN THE 21st CENTURY, and then if that isn't comical enough, we almost get EATEN BY A FUCKING WOLF!” My voice grows angrier and louder with each statement, and I'm nearly hysterical by the time I finish, fully panting through a panic attack.

Strong arms circle me and pull me into the man. Tears fall down my face as I scream into his shoulder. He doesn't let go. He just allows me to lose it completely. My body shakes, muscles clenching as I try to combat the war raging inside me. My mind feels like a hamster stuck on an endless wheel, dredging hopeless scenes one after another. My brain sends an unending stream of adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol through my body, overwhelming my ability to respond.

“One...one...two...two...three...three...” he begins counting, one breath in and one breath out until my sole focus is on the numbers, not the overwhelming feeling of being out of control.

“Fifteen...fifteen...sixteen...sixteen.” One number for each inhale and exhale. By the time he hits twenty, my heart rate has resumed its normal rhythm, and my breathing falls into a reasonable beat. I feel safe for the first time in the last twelve hours, which is ridiculous because I'm in the arms of a half-naked crazy mountain man who smells like pine trees and hasn't given me his name.

I nod once, and he releases his arms from around me before stepping back. His eyes read me, trying to see if I will lose it again, but behind their apparent hesitation lies a hint of understanding that I can't fully wrap my head around.

"Let's get you warmed up," he says, turning back toward the trail, taking smaller strides this time to keep me from jogging.

"Who are you?" I ask quietly as we make our journey.

"I'm Ghost."



Chapter 8

Cain

Awareness comes back to me slowly. I drift back into consciousness with only traces of a memory of where I am or how I got here. Strong chemical smells assault my nostrils while an incessant beeping rings in my ears. Opening my eyes, I lift my head to look around, trying to get my bearings.

I find myself in the hospital wing of our complex, completely naked, muzzled, and chained to the wall. My mind reaches back to the memory of how I could've gotten here. My lack of clothing gives away that I must've suddenly shifted, destroying any clothes I had on. The tubes and wires attached to my arms and chest must mean I suffered an injury.

Why am I chained up?

I try to stretch out my limbs, feeling for any strain that would indicate a recent injury, but come up empty save for a slight ache in my shoulder. Nothing that would warrant a hospital visit.

Why can't I remember?

Sitting up, I begin unlatching the muzzle from behind my head, removing it easily. I look down at the harness of silver chains around my chest, knowing this will need to be unlocked, already seeing the welts appearing on my skin where the silver has burned me.

After resigning myself to the fact that I'll have to wait to be released, I remove the IV and pull off the wires taped to my skin. As soon as they disconnect from my body, the alarm starts going off. A loud unending beeping from what I assume is the heart rate machine now believing I no longer have a heart rhythm to measure.

The overwhelming volume causes my head to pound, and I attempt to push buttons on the digital screen, hoping to shut it up. But, before I can even figure it out, the door crashes open, and a frantic Dr. Radolf, our pack physician, bursts into the room.

His dark eyes skim over me quickly before he regains his composure and advances to the offending machine, turning off the alarm and grabbing my electronic chart.

Dr. Radolf came to our pack from Oregon several years ago. After the fall of the North in the last great war, several standalone packs in the Portland area merged, allowing him to pass on his role to a neighboring physician and move down to Vegas to be closer to his daughter and her family. His grandson, Finn, will graduate high school in May and is top of the class in our recruitment training. With his talent, it wouldn't surprise me if he ended up in Jake's inner circle.

While Dr. Radolf appears to be in his late fifties, with graying hair and a wiry lean physique, my guess would put him closer to ninety. Pack physicians generally lead long lives due to our need to protect them. As a

result, they avoid most battles and risks allowing them to live well past a hundred years.

“Why am I here?” I ask, my voice coming out hoarse. He looks up, analyzing me for a moment, for what I don’t know, but eventually, he begins tapping some numbers into the device. I roll my shoulders in an attempt to calm myself when I realize my wolf is silent, still knocked out. It’s an eerie feeling not to have him stirring within me.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” His tone is relaxed, unhurried, and professional. I try desperately to scan my mind in search of the answer to his question but come up foggy.

“I’m not sure. Everything is jumbled,” I respond, shaking my head almost in an attempt to break them loose.

“That’s probably the sedative working through you. It’ll come back. In the meantime, how are you feeling? Any pain? Trouble breathing? Numbness? Tingling?”

Sedative?

As he rattles off questions, he briefly examines my blood pressure, listens to my lungs, and shines a bright light into my eyes.

I answer what I can, complying with each request to take a deep breath or move one of my limbs. After several minutes of this, I realize that he hasn’t attempted to unlock the harness that binds me to the wall nor given me any information about why I’m here.

Cain: Tell me what happened. Why am I here?

I send the mind-link message to Dante, exerting more effort than expected, and focus my attention back on the doctor, now typing notes into my chart.

“So what's the prognosis, Doc?” I ask, attempting for calm but missing the mark as my frustration with being chained to the wall creeps in. No one likes

to be locked in chains, but wolves tolerate it even less. Our wild predator side finds the shackles to be a threat.

“Your numbers look much better. However, I want to keep you for observation until your memory returns, just to be sure.” He finishes with a smile, but it's a tense one, more done out of routine than actual emotion.

“You know, if you told me what happened or why using a sedative became necessary, it might help me to recollect how I got here.” I watch his reaction closely. Radolf’s shoulders tense, and his eyes flip away to avoid mine. He begins tapping again, feigning concentration. Fear and anger build within me, and I fight to appear unaffected while trying to find a way out of there.

Why isn't Dante answering me?

Why am I chained to a wall in my pack headquarters?

Why isn't my wolf responding?

A growl escapes my throat as I launch myself at him, forcing my chains to their limit before wrapping him in a headlock and squeezing tightly as he fights against my grasp. His resistance ceases quickly as he realizes that even chained, he’s no match for my strength. Instead, he slumps down, leaning his weight against me while turning his head in an effort to allow more air into his lungs.

*Dante: **Let him go!***

The command flies in, forcing my arms limp and sparking a flight response in the good doctor. He shoves free from my grasp before rapidly exiting the room without so much as a backward glance in my direction.

Dante: I'm coming.

I clench my fists, straining against the chains that still bind me, searching for a way to bring my wolf back.

It's more than thirty minutes before Dante storms into my medical room, his jaw clenched and exhaustion evident on his face. He tosses a pair of sweats at me, allowing me to dress in strained silence. The eyes that meet mine lack their friendly quality and, instead, hold a mixture of rage and what I assume to be disappointment from my Alpha.

Over the last thirty minutes, I pieced my memory back together of the events that led me here. Bri. Hudson. Keith. Kole. Jake. Everything has fallen back into place, and I'm terrified that I killed one of my closest friends. I ask the first question burning me up while finding it difficult to look him in the eye.

"Jake? Is he ok? Did I..." I can't finish the question, hoping they stopped me in time while the echo of those last conscious moments replay through me.

Dante's eyes soften, shifting his face to that of my closest friend as he breathes out a sigh and leans his large frame against the door, crossing his arms.

"He's fine. Andre intervened. He sedated you before you could inflict any major damage." He doesn't elaborate. He simply stares quietly, inspecting me, trying to ascertain my threat level, but I hear the words loud and clear.

Major damage.

Shit. I owe Jake an apology.

I add that to my to-do list before speaking again.

"You have to know, I never meant to hurt him," I explain.

"If that were even a question, you would be dead. Best friend or not. Pack First." The mantra rolls out of him without hesitation, and I nod, understanding. We live by that code. Putting the pack before everything else

and showing our worth through unwavering loyalty. Never before had I questioned the idea of Pack First. Not until I found my Mate.

“You need to let me out of here. I need to get to her.” I beg.

“No.” The solitary word holds more weight than I thought possible, and something inside me splinters. My heart aches, mourning her absence.

“I can’t just sit here chained to a wall while she’s out there with him. With them.” I’m pleading now, trying to get him to see reason, to see my side.

“So, what’s your plan? Huh? You don’t know where she is. You don’t know who’s holding her. You don’t know if this was always the plan to lure you out there to start a war. YOU. DON’T. KNOW. SHIT!” Dante’s words cut through me, hitting the heart of the gaping hole in my plans.

I don’t know shit.

Not knowing those things were driving me insane. I need to know she’s safe. I need to know she’s unharmed. I need to know that there’s a chance I can make things right with her. Steeling my resolve, I continue.

“None of that matters. She’s my Mate, and I will find her, but I can’t do it locked up in this room. Unchain me. You have to let me go!”

He shakes his head, pushing away from the wall, his face set in determination, “As it stands, you’re more of a liability than an asset to the pack and your Mate.” He growls his response, his anger rising back to the surface. My best friend is gone. My Alpha stands before me.

“Until you can find a way to control your wolf and your temper, you’re benched. Pres will keep you updated on our progress.”

Resolved, he turns his back to me halfway out the door.

“You can’t do this! She’s MINE! You have to let me go to her. I can find her. I swear it. Please, Dante, you don’t understand. I can’t just sit here. Remember the accident. I know you know what it’s like to be sidelined,

especially when you're needed the most. You couldn't save your dad, but I can save her. I have to save her. If something happens to her, I won't be able to live with myself."

He freezes, his shoulders tensing at the mention of his father. I hadn't meant to use his pain against him, but he left me no choice. Bri was a part of me now. I'd do anything to get her back.

Anything.

"How do you expect to find her without me?" I ask, using his tactic against him because I know his plan has as many holes as mine.

He relaxes his shoulders and turns to look at me over his shoulder. A ghost of a determined smile slides onto his face, crushing every ounce of hope I was holding onto that he would willingly release me and make me a part of the team.

"Easy. We have Keith Anderson."



Chapter 9

Bri

We walk in companionable silence, neither of us trying for small talk. I've lost feeling in my fingers and am shaking from the cold.

At this point, I'm simply allowing the numbness to sink in. Ghost appears unaffected by the temperature. Even wearing next to nothing, he comfortably ambles through the undergrowth like he doesn't care. His eyes stay firmly alert as we weave in and out of the paths worn between the trees.

The sun barely peaks over the horizon as it transitions from day to night, indicating it's been more than half a day since Hudson took me. It's probably sometime after 4 pm now. The sun doesn't stay out long in the winter, and my fear begins to creep back in with its descent into night.

How am I going to get home?

As we turn to avoid another tight grouping of trees, my eyes catch the sight of a cabin coming into view ahead of us. I squint, taking it in before stopping dead in my tracks.

It's the same cabin I escaped from hours ago. I'm certain of it.

What the fuck!?

Then I realize Ghost has stopped and is now watching me, reading my reaction.

“How...Why...” None of my thoughts come together because my mind is spinning completely out of control. The voice that comes out sounds tortured. My eyes lock onto his, searching for an answer that isn’t there. Some realization would explain how I managed to flee, just to be walked back to the exact place I was escaping.

Ghost says nothing. He simply waits for me. His face gives me no indication of what he could be thinking, and my fear is replaced by frustration.

“Who are you, really? Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?” The words fall in quick succession as I allow my irritation with myself to slide into them.

Sure, Bri, follow the half-naked guy you ran into in the middle of the woods back to his place. Fucking brilliant idea!

“Inside, City, unless you would like to stand out here freezing in some attempt for me to warm you up?” His eyebrow lifts as the flirtation slips back into his voice.

“You want me to go inside? YOU WANT ME TO GO INSIDE?” I begin laughing—hysterical, uncontrollable laughter. Tears fall from my eyes, and even I can’t believe the insanity that is my situation. “ABSOLUTELY, let’s go see what ‘Hudson the kidnapper’ is up to, shall we, Casper?” I finish, unable to do anything but stand there staring at the cabin in the distance, laughter still rolling deliriously from my lips.

I cross my arms, considering my next move. My eyes slide over the tree line, looking for an escape route or anything I could use to gain an advantage.

Should I make another run for it? Sure, and die from hypothermia? Fuck!

Ghost's eyes darken, a challenge rising in them as he sees my wheels turning. He steps forward, startling me as he grabs my face firmly with his hand. Pulling me close to his large frame, he envelops me in his warm woodsy scent. The look in his eyes has me trying to tear away before he leans in. The stubble on his jaw scrapes my cheek. I freeze.

“I don't believe I ever gave the impression that I was a 'friendly' Ghost. Now are you going to be a brat and make me carry you?” he whispers, the smooth whiskey tone seeping back into his voice. His breath is warm as it dances down the skin of my neck.

I suck in a breath, shaking my head against his grip on my chin. His intensity sobers me as he releases my face before creating some distance between our bodies. The cold fills the spaces of warmth his body left behind, and I shudder involuntarily.

Straightening my spine, I walk the distance to the cabin, Ghost falling into step behind me. When we reach the porch, he steps around me, opens the door, and ensures I'm behind him before continuing.

Inside, the warmth hits me first, causing a moan to escape my lips. The cabin turns out to be more spacious than the outside let on and is lit with modern fixtures. This door leads us into the kitchen, which appears almost out of place in the rustic cabin. An industrial-sized fridge and a double oven backdrop the oversized kitchen island, which is topped with white and brown marble.

Beyond the kitchen is the family room, a comfortable-looking brown suede couch with a matching recliner, an oversized rug, and a large fireplace with a fully roaring fire.

At least it's warm.

My eyes scan the space for Hudson but come up empty. A short hallway

leading to several doors is off the side of the room.

“Bathroom is down on the right,” Ghost says before passing me headed for the fridge.

I roll my eyes before heading down the short hall into the restroom. I shut the door, lock it, and fall against it with a sigh.

What the fuck am I going to do?

I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere with no phone, no identification, and no one looking for me. The weight of my situation crushes me, making my chest tight.

Maybe I just need to get Ghost to see my side? He didn’t take me, he didn’t drug me, and he protected me from that wolf.

It’s worth a shot.

I take longer than necessary in the bathroom, using it, cleaning myself up, and washing some of the day off my face and arms. Looking up at the mirror, exhaustion evident on my face after the day I’ve had, I see only the shell of myself. My face is pink from the cold, bags darken the skin under my eyes, and my lips are cracked from the wind and my incessant chewing.

“You can do this,” I whisper, hoping the mantra can help me find the confidence I need to get through this. All I can think of now is how much I miss Cain. I’m not the girl who needs a man to solve all her problems, but he makes me feel more myself. Stronger. I feel brave with him, and I need a little of that to get home.

I exhale, shaking out my tension before I exit the bathroom. It’s probably been twenty minutes, but I needed to collect myself. As I enter the hall, I catch the scent of spices filling the air. A comforting, homey scent draws me into the kitchen, where Ghost is chopping vegetables and throwing them into a wooden salad bowl. Behind him, a large pot simmers on low heat with a

silver lid allowing steam to escape in a stream floating to the ceiling before dissipating.

I pause at the entrance watching him move with an alluring confidence. The towel over his shoulder removes from my mind some of the rugged wild man persona I encountered in the woods. I notice he's now wearing a deep blue shirt over his expansive chest, which fortunately helps me keep my eyes on the knife, sliding easily through a bright red tomato.

"Food should be ready in a minute," he drawls, turning away from the cutting board to retrieve something from the pantry off the side of the kitchen. His eyes never look up at me, and I wonder if I made some sort of sound in my approach.

"I was under the impression kidnappers didn't prepare meals for their hostages," I say, inserting venom into my tone while crossing my arms over my chest. He may be playing the role of host, but I won't fall into a false sense of security that this situation is anything aside from what it is.

He pauses, his eyes flashing back to mine with a challenge.

"Kidnapper? The door is right behind you, City. I don't see anything stopping you from walking out of it," he finishes with a lift of his chin, daring me to walk through it. I'm a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them. I won't survive in the dark in these temperatures; he knows it as much as I do. The side of his mouth tips up in a smirk that's smug and entirely unflattering.

Okay, that's a lie. He's still hot, but now he's annoying.

"How about you just let me use your phone? One call and I could be out of your hair," I offer, hoping if he isn't trying to hold me here, he'll be willing to help get me out of there.

"How about you sit, eat something, and tell me what you're doing here?" he says, turning to dish what I can now see is chili into bowls he set on the

counter before pulling some shredded cheese and sour cream from the fridge.

My stomach growls audibly. I'm starving. The donuts I had hours ago are long since burned through. The survivor in me knows eating now will get me one step closer to having the strength to get out of here, even now planning an early morning escape.

I straighten my spine and walk to the counter, pulling a chair out and sliding into it.

The victory I see flash across his expression irritates me, but I play the long game.

"I'll talk if you will, Casper. You wanna tell me why the guy who kidnapped me brought me here, to you?" I ask, grabbing the bowl he slides my way before adding the cheese and onions to the top.

"He didn't bring you to me," he starts, a sly smile still fixed on his face, "I'm pretty sure I found you all on my own," he finishes, taking a bite of the steaming chili into his mouth.

"You know what I mean. Why am I here?" I focus on my food, blowing the spoon before sliding it into my mouth, inadvertently moaning as the flavors hit my tongue. I close my eyes and enjoy each savory note as I chew the food, wondering who made this for him because the combination of spices has me salivating. This may be the best-tasting food I've ever had.

Catching myself, I mentally snap out of that train of thought, regaining focus on him before I wolf down the entire bowl. I'm unsure if he's being polite or didn't notice my indulgent moment, but he sits staring at his bowl, slowly consuming his portion while slipping in salad bites.

"Better question, who are you?" he asks after a while, not looking up from his bowl.

"I'm nobody important. I just want to go home. Back to my boring

existence answering customer service calls, finishing college, and fighting with my stupid boyfriend for having a hot redhead show up at his house at 2 am,” I respond, knowing how it must sound.

“Ah, City has a boyfriend. Is he the one who brought you here?” he asks, appearing only partially interested as he finishes his bowl before returning to the pot to refill it.

“No, I mean, no to all of it. He wasn’t my boyfriend, not really. Well, I thought he could be. None of that matters now. I’m not making any sense. I thought Cain could be something, but he didn’t bring me here. Hudson did. I barely know him. I went out with him once, but he wasn’t exactly full of information while he drugged me and threw me in the back of his SUV.” Ghost’s head snaps up as I mention Cain’s name, and I kick myself for giving that information away.

He has me off balance. I don’t know how to read him. From what he’s shown me, he seems nice, normal. Part of me feels like I know him and can trust him. His scars resonate with me and my past in a way that feels important. But, on the other hand, if Hudson brought me here, there had to be a reason.

Where the hell was Hudson?

In the bathroom earlier, I peeked out the window, and the SUV he brought me in remained parked out front, but I hadn’t so much as seen him since we arrived back.

“You know your face gives away the rabbit hole you keep diving down. It’s like watching a movie play out as you fight with yourself.” He states, amused, locking his ice-blue eyes with mine as I squirm under his stare.

Setting my jaw, I refuse to cower under his gaze. Just as I open my mouth, a snarky remark loaded on my tongue, the front door opens, and my sass

seeps out of me as Hudson strolls in.

Silence fills the room—a standoff between the three of us. My eyes slide over to Ghost, hoping to glean something from his response to our newest arrival, but his face is impassive, his body relaxed. Hudson shuts the door, the cold draft sealed behind it. He stands waiting, almost as if he needs permission to enter; a balance of power being established.

“Long time Huds... It looks like you’ve been busy.” Ghost says, his drawl enunciated by the slow pace of his words. “You wanna explain why I have VP property wandering around on my land?” His demeanor stays relaxed, but his tone drips with power even I feel. It glides over my skin, urging my compliance even as the words aren’t directed at me. The terms he uses bounce around in my mind, not making any sense.

Am I the VP property? What the hell does that mean?

“I didn’t know you were back in town. Apologies, I just needed a place to hold her until I could talk to Marlo,” Hudson replies, still not moving into the room.

“Sorry to interrupt this beautiful reunion and all, but what the hell are you two talking about? First,” I turn to Ghost, “I’m not anyone’s property. Second,” I turn back to Hudson, “Who the fuck is Marlo?”



Chapter 10

Keith

I fucked up.

I fucked up, and now I get to sit here tied to a chair with a bag over my head, counting the minutes and listening to the hum of the air conditioning unit that's making this room exceptionally cold. I get to sit here waiting for someone to torture or interrogate me, and I get to do it knowing something has happened to Elle.

After spinning my wheels to get dirt on Mr. Breaking and Entering himself, I had nothing. The guy was squeaky clean. He graduated summa cum laude from the UNLV Business School and completed his MBA, became an executive for a security business run by his family friends, and paid his taxes. He had an 800 credit score. Hell, even I admired him.

It wasn't until hours into the search that the truth smacked me in the face. It was there the whole time. He graduated. What the fuck was he doing being tutored in an undergrad business class if he had already long since graduated?

That's when I knew he was a plant—getting close to Elle to get close to me.

Knowing she was in danger because of me made me reckless. I took off without so much as a goodbye to my mom before grabbing an Uber to her apartment. I spent the entire ride there rehearsing what I could say to get her to believe me. I knew by the way she looked at him the other night that things were leaning toward her falling for him, and I absolutely had to get to her and talk some sense into her before that happened.

Elle is my best friend, but for the last eight years, part of me hoped she could be more. I was too scared to put myself out there. I was too afraid to make a move. I was too terrified to lose her as my best friend to do anything but sit idly by while she dated, got hurt, and closed herself off.

If I'd only tried, said something, maybe...

It's too late for what-ifs. I can't change the past, but I can change my choices going forward. I have to warn her about Cain, show her the proof, and convince her she isn't safe with him.

I wasn't exactly sure where we would go, but she couldn't return to her apartment. We would have to find somewhere to hide out, to let this thing blow over.

Will she forgive me for putting her in danger?

I can't think about that now. Getting her to safety is my top priority. Or at least it was. That's until I showed up at her apartment ready to talk her into packing a bag to get away for a few days, and instead, I had a bag thrown over my head and was dragged into a van like some '90s sitcom.

It would be hilarious if I didn't know the people who took me were professionals who dabble in the dark web and all that entails.

I should've done some surveillance. I should've taken precautions. I

should've protected her.

I fucked up. Again.

Now my only stress remained in finding out precisely what they'd done with her and negotiating whatever I had to get her back in one piece.

The sound of a door closing pulls my focus to my right.

“Who's there?” I ask, trying to keep the fear out of my voice.

Footsteps echo off the tile floor, a slow, calculated cadence making me tense as they circle the chair. I tug against the zip ties connecting my ankles and wrists to the metal chair, hoping to find a weakness I could exploit.

I'm not a fighter. I've spent my life in front of a computer, attacking people where it hurts them the most: their bank accounts, their credit scores, and their identities. I've never had to fight because I'm the behind-the-scenes guy—the black hat. I'm anonymous.

Well, at least I thought I was.

That said, I'm 6'4 and can run a mile in five minutes flat. I just need to get out of this chair, and maybe I can surprise them enough to get out of here. Perhaps the threat of fighting me would hold up.

Wishful thinking.

“Mr. Anderson,” the unfamiliar voice begins, deep and authoritative, “you've been quite the thorn in our side these last few weeks.” The metal clanging onto a table echoed in the gaps as he spoke. “Now, I believe in giving everyone a chance to come clean and be honest about their role. So, why don't you tell me what I want to know, so we can both get on with our day.” The calm, business-like words and the commanding tone make me believe I'm talking to someone in charge. Or at least someone who's pretending to be.

“I'm at a disadvantage. You seem to know me, but I have no idea who you

are, nor what business you're in, and as such, I can't begin to know how to answer that or what knowledge you seek. Maybe if you can take off this bag and untie me, we can talk like civilized men." Unfortunately, the last request is a long shot. Even though I knew 90% of all kidnap victims survived, I also knew what type of people I was dealing with.

He and I both know if he reveals himself to me, he'll likely kill me before letting me go. Leaving witnesses alive is bad for business. On the other hand, I also know that I have a unique skill set that most of these "businessmen" would see as an asset, and that's worth the risk for a chance to see my surroundings and find a way out of this.

"I think we can manage just fine without a face-to-face. In our line of work, you, of all people, should know anonymity is such an important facet. Now," he pauses, leaning into the silence which has me anticipating his next words while holding my breath, "tell me about the software."

As he awaits my answer, his boots thump in the rhythm of his pacing.

"See, there again... I work in tech. All day. Everyday. You can't just ask a blanket question about software and expect that to narrow it down for me." I put a smile into my voice, hoping to make this exchange as friendly as possible to try and keep myself alive.

"Keith, can I call you Keith? You and I both know which program code I'm referring to, that is, unless all of your criminal side projects get stolen out from under you. I'd imagine that would lead to a bad reputation, which I must say from what we know is the opposite of what we've heard. So, I'll ask again. Tell me about the software."

"Not sure I can. I didn't have access long enough to grasp its functionality. I assume it was your team that took it from me. You've probably ascertained more than I was able to." I reply honestly, knowing that leaning into the truth

will get me farther than outright lies. What I don't say, however, is that I still have a copy on my cold storage drives. Drives I know the secondary team didn't get yesterday.

His laugh, deep and low, startles me.

"It's our code, Mr. Anderson. I know exactly what it does. I want to know how it came into your possession."

I guess we're no longer on a first-name basis.

"It's yours? How were you able to...." I blurt before catching myself. The questions spinning, threatening to jump out unfiltered. Every fiber of my being wants to know who wrote it, how it works, and more, how they were able to parse the overwhelming amount of data necessary in any reasonable amount of time. That is, without a quantum processor. It took me days just to initialize the software, and even the initialization process was exceptionally computationally expensive. That's when I realized it was impossible. It couldn't be done on even the most advanced GPUs on the market. Commercial or military.

My mind wanders down the list of questions I'd compiled since K gave me the software. His only explanation came when he told me the project scope had grown too large for their engineer. Thus he hired me to dig into it, and see if I could figure out how far the guy had gotten and overcome any final issues before they could take it to market.,

Knowing my captors were the people K worked with allowed my body to relax.

They know my ability. They wouldn't just kill me.

"You know how I got it. I got it from you. I'm the engineer hired to take over the project when *your* guy couldn't handle the scope. You brought me on to dig in and fix any errors before making it ready for market." I explain,

relieved that what started as a no-win situation fighting for my life now likely was just a misunderstanding.

Incessant pounding from my left has me whipping my head in that direction.

What the fuck is that?

“Just a moment. And while you’re waiting, start coming up with some names that may help move this along,” the voice replies while the boots take him to the exit on my right.

The sound of faint yelling slips into my ears. The voices are muffled, so I can’t hear the words, only that whoever’s out there is fighting about something. I mentally roll back through what information I’ve given them so far. Nothing stands out.

I have to find out what they’re going to do with Elle. I can’t give them anything until I know she’ll be ok.

The voices quiet outside, and the door reopens. Before he can resume his questioning, I speak.

“I want to know if my friend Brielle’s okay. She has nothing to do with any of this. You’ve no reason to involve her. I’ll do whatever you need. Please leave her out of this.”

“What makes you think we’ve involved her?” He asks, his demeanor still calm.

“You knew when I’d be there to pick her up. My guess is you’re intercepting her communications or have GPS trackers on all her tech. I know you planted Cain to get close to her to keep an eye on me. I assume this was to ensure your program code wasn’t sold off or given away. I know he was part of the team that reclaimed the software from the warehouse, and I know

his team raided my house this morning. I will do whatever you ask, but please leave her out of it.” My words are firm but pleading as I finish.

“Where did you get the program code?”

“From you, K messaged me through Signal. He made the drop at our normal location with instructions, just like always. The money has been paid every week since. I’m not sure why you’re asking me this; just ask K.” I state, wondering if maybe something had really happened to him.

“How long have you been working with K?” he continues.

“Since junior year. Look, is K here? He can confirm my involvement. The way I see it, we’re all on the same team here. I’m working for you. Can you please take this bag off my head and let me out of here?” My request comes out in a huff as frustration fills me.

I was doing my job. The job they hired me for. There’s no reason I should be tied up like some criminal.

“There’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Anderson. You see, this K you speak of, he doesn’t work for me. He’s a thief. It never belonged to him. So you’ll understand my surprise when it began making requests to our servers from your IP address a few days later.” I inhale sharply, shock running through me as I process his declaration.

If the code didn’t belong to K, they think I’m just as much a part of it going missing.

“I had nothing to do with stealing it. I swear. He told me it was his from some family business up north. I should’ve known he wouldn’t have access to such advanced tech.” My anger builds as I realize the shit K just threw me into, and not just me, Elle too. Panicking now, I continue.

“She has nothing to do with this. Do what you want with me, but leave her out of it.”

“She isn’t your concern,” he replies sternly, causing my protective instincts to flare up.

“The fuck she isn’t!” I shout, forgetting my place as I battle the warring emotions. Clenching my fists, I continued, “You people dragged her into this with your fake tutoring scheme. Yeah, I know all about Cain already graduating. You planted him there to get to me. Well, you have me, and I can be useful to you. I have skills that I’d be happy to use for your needs. I’m willing to make a deal, any deal, but my one stipulation is that she goes on with her life unharmed and uninterrupted.” I finish, setting my jaw and counting the beats of silence as he sits, weighing my words.

Please take the deal.

Despite the cold air circulating the room, a sheen of sweat appears on my forehead as I sit anxiously awaiting his response, Elle’s fate and mine hanging in the balance. His silence is deafening. I don’t know how much time passes before he finally speaks. Slowly... killing me with anticipation.

“Tell me, Keith, how long have you been in love with Ms. DelaCourt?”

The weight of his question pulls the air from my lungs as if I’d been punched in the gut unexpectedly. My jaw drops, and I sputter, trying for denial, confusion, or anything. But no sound or words fall.

Is my bargaining for her that obvious? How could he know? She doesn’t even know.

Before I can formulate a coherent thought, his light laugh reaches me, making me stop to think about what this means for Elle.

Would they hurt her? Kill her?

As my mind spins over the implications, his footsteps head to my right, and he walks out, the door closing with an audible click that feels like a gunshot straight to my heart.

What have I done?



Chapter 11

Cain

I'm tired of being a prisoner.

My wolf is back, fully awake and furious that we're still stuck here and not out looking for our Mate. My conversation with Dante occurred a few hours ago, and I'm still reeling from the bomb he dropped on me.

They have Keith.

They have Keith, and he's here, in the same fucking building as me, and I can't walk in there and beat her location out of him. I imagine the whole "beat him to death" possibility is probably why I'm still chained to a wall in the medical wing instead of doing my job.

I'm failing her.

Every minute she's away from me verifies my deepest fears. She's being hurt, tortured, Awakened, beaten, or raped. The possibilities all play on repeat while I sit immobilized. Helpless.

In times like this, I wish my imagination was less vivid. The stories my grandfather would retell from the war about the women that had to be rescued from breeding camps are burned into the darkest recesses of my mind. The

things less civilized packs not only condoned but celebrated, makes my stomach turn. Everything that happened to those women replays in my mind with Bri's face, Bri's body, and Bri's screams.

I clench my fists, staring at the clock for the millionth time—November 19, 2023, 19:32. Bri has been gone for 17 hours.

She could be anywhere by now.

My heart aches. The guilt I feel for failing her shreds my insides. I lean into the silver harness, enjoying the burning sensation on my skin.

I deserve this.

I deserve so much worse than this. Dropping my head, I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping the pain I feel inside will subside with the new pain I'm inflicting.

“Never took you for a masochist,” her words lack their usual snark.

I look up, surprised I didn't hear her arrive, to see Presley standing in the door frame. Her customarily loud appearance is muted by darker black clothing and the absence of her hot pink, cat-eared headphones I'd become so accustomed to her having on at an unreasonable volume.

Though I can't say I miss hearing her music from across the room.

Her ice-blue eyes scan my harness, wincing at the scabbed flesh beneath it. She purses her lips before bringing her stare to mine. The warring emotions she feels are written on her face. Anger. Guilt. Sadness.

Pres was never very good at keeping her feelings in check. It took her years longer than those her age to control her wolf when her emotions ran high. She always claimed she had a stronger wolf than the others being an Alpha herself, which may be accurate, but Pres feels deeper than others.

“You can't blame yourself, Little P.” I use her old nickname, hoping she will see it as a peace offering between us. I don't blame her. I may have given

her that impression, but the reality is that I blame myself.

“Logically, I know that. Realistically, I keep going back through the moments at your door wondering if I could’ve said something, anything, to let her know who I was...” She trails off, and I see her mind spinning back to the hallway outside my door.

“You couldn’t have predicted what she would think, how she would respond, or that Hudson would be at her apartment waiting for her. You’ve no way of changing the events that happened any more than I do. We need to focus on finding her now. Tell me you’re here to release me from the chains so that I can help.” My eyes plead with her, but I can see the answer a moment before the words are out of my mouth. Her eyes drop to the tablet in her hand.

“I’m sorry, Cain. He says we can’t. Not yet. I’m just here to update you, but he said you would be at the council meeting at nine, so not too long.” She finishes adding a meek smile.

“Update? Have you found her? Where is she? Is Hudson alive? If so, I’ll kill him, and that’s my right. He stole her. I get retribution.” I begin rambling questions off rapid fire without waiting for her response.

“No. We’re still looking. So far, we know he hasn’t contacted any of the allied packs for permission to cross their borders. That only means he’s still in the state, which we assumed anyway. The good news is Deacon isn’t in Reno at the moment. He’s at the LLC regulation trial in Fort Collins. That’s at least one less Alpha we have to worry about finding out her Unawakened status,” she continues with a bit more enthusiasm.

“Their Second isn’t an Alpha?” I ask, trying desperately to remember who took that role after Vinny went to jail for the pack’s more white-collar crimes.

“Nope, it’s Antonio. No relation to the Marlos by blood. He was Deacon’s enforcer before taking the role in Vincent’s stead.” Pres rolls her eyes and shakes herself, almost as if something disgusting touched her.

Big Tony’s a vile wolf. Rumor has it he enjoys slicing off body parts while his victims are still alive and then eating those parts in front of them.

No way Hudson agrees to meet with him. He grew up hearing the horror stories that man produced. He’ll try another option or wait Deacon out.

“How long do we have before the trial completes?” I ask, hoping for a bit of luck.

These trials can take days or weeks depending on the severity of the laws broken and which packs send their delegates. Not everyone is required to attend in person. Some remote in through a live stream, but everyone knows these trials are often a front, allowing packs to talk new alliances and garner support for takeovers, turf wars, and regime exchanges.

Deacon wouldn’t miss an opportunity to rub elbows with the surrounding territories in an effort to sway them to his cause.

“From what we heard from Gordan, who has been attending virtually, it’ll only be another day before they wrap up. So that means we’re on the clock to get our girl back,” she says, confident in her tone. I nod, knowing the New Mexico Pack Alpha wouldn’t lead us astray. Gordan’s Mate, Juliet, is Dante’s favorite aunt.

“What about Keith?” I ask, having forgotten we have him in our custody.

“That’s what the meeting tonight will be about.” She pauses. I’m not sure if she’s intentionally making me wait or figuring out what she’s allowed to share on the subject, but she’s careful with her words which tells me I won’t like it. I take a deep breath and clench my fists to focus my energy on my hands.

“Dante believes Keith isn’t involved in the kidnapping. We think he’s working solely with Kole and that he has no idea the magnitude of what he had, or what it was used for,” she continues under her breath with sarcasm, “probably because he’s too stupid to be able to understand what truly beautiful code can do.” She finishes with her muttering and looks back to me.

My legs give out, and I sink onto the hospital bed, defeated. I wasn’t expecting him not to know anything. I needed him to know something. Anything that could get us to her faster. Anything to bring my Firefly back.

“You’re sure? He’s useless? He knows nothing?” Frustration builds, and my wolf tries to take over. I feel my eyes shift, and my fingers start to, before I slam my jaw shut and exhale a long breath.

Not now. We have to get out of here. Calm Down.

“I know it isn’t the news you wanted, but I need you to trust me when I say we’re doing everything possible to get to her. You have to believe we have everyone working on this.” Her statement brings me little hope, but I know I have to keep my cool, or Dante will never let me back out of this room.

“Thanks, Pres,” I say, barely more than a whisper, but loud enough that her enhanced hearing will pick it up.

“She’s strong, Cain, and a fighter who’s been through a lot. She will get through this too.” Her voice holds reverent confidence that lets me know she believes it.

“I can’t lose her, Pres. I won’t survive it,” I whisper, looking back into her gaze with absolutely no walls up. Every terrified piece of my soul is on display. I’m a broken man. Losing her would mean total destruction. Pres nods her head understanding the words I don’t say.

“We’re going to find her.” She finishes, heading back out of the room before stopping short. “Jake’s bringing you some food to eat before the

meeting. Try to leave him in one piece this time.” She winks at me, trying to go for a light-hearted tone, but the guilt I feel for attacking him slams back into me.

Sure, we’ve fought before, in human and wolf form. We do it for training all the time. But never before had I ever intentionally tried to hurt him. Looks like it's time for yet another apology.

It's forty more minutes before my door opens again. Jake enters without a knock and chucks a brown bag at me. The scent of greasy fries hits me before I can even open it, making me realize how hungry I am.

Before I dig into the bag, I intentionally stop myself and give my attention to Jake. He looks exactly like he always does. Clean cut, wearing his black t-shirt, black fatigues, and combat boots. His tattoos snake out down his arms and up his throat. His face is indifferent. Not revealing emotion, he hovers across the room, leaning against the wall.

His moss-green eyes survey the harness strapped to my body, and a part of me wants to recoil and cover the silver and chains from his view.

“I’m sorry.” The apology comes out rough, my emotions catching in my throat. He may not have known how far I was willing to go, but I knew. I knew I could’ve and would’ve ended his life.

He’s silent, meeting my eyes and scrutinizing my words. Finally, he nods, silently acknowledging my apology. Relief fills me. Jake has been one of my closest friends for years now. Dante’s the only person I’m closer to than him, so his acceptance of my apology means a lot. Before I continue, I do the one thing I should’ve done two weeks ago.

“She’s my Mate.” The words fall easily from my lips. My eyes meet his, and I see only the slightest reaction as his eyes widen. A brief moment of

surprise before an almost indiscernible moment of understanding. “I should’ve said something earlier, but it was a lot to process. Anyway, it’s no excuse. Pack First. Won’t happen again.” I finish pulling open the bag to find three burgers from Fast Eddies with two baskets of spicy, loaded fries.

He isn’t mad.

A calm settles over me as I dive into the first burger, practically inhaling it before moving on to the second. I’m halfway through the third when he finally speaks.

“Dante permitted me to let you shower and change before the meeting. The Kole interrogation incident remains between the five of us.”

It doesn’t surprise me that Dante’s keeping the fact that his Second went off the rails from the rest of the pack. The last thing he needs right now is anyone thinking we’re anything but a united front ready and willing to take on the Marlo Pack, if required.

Oh, it’s going to be necessary.

Marlo stealing the Mate of the Second is an act of war that any neighboring territory would get behind. Very few things are as sacred as our Mates. Finding them was one of the biggest struggles. If you could find your Mate, keeping that union safe became a pack priority.

Now, technically, Deacon didn’t steal Bri. Hudson did, and, technically, neither of them knew she was my Mate. Neither technicality will matter if she’s harmed. They’ll both die at my hands. Consequences be damned.

I shovel the last of the fries into my mouth before throwing the trash into the garbage bin and turning so that Jake can remove my harness. He makes swift work of removing it before leading me out the door.

“Where is he?” I ask, not needing to explain who I mean.

“Dante has him in four.” His answer surprises me. First, I didn’t think he

would willingly tell me where they were keeping Keith, and second I'm surprised Dante has him in the more official interrogation rooms instead of the ones Jake preferred to use.

My feet stumble as my wolf attempts to steer me in that direction before I catch myself and continue behind Jake.

Focus!

We make it the rest of the way to my front door without incident. I wonder momentarily how close this babysitting endeavor will be when he walks in and sits on my couch, remote already in his hand.

"You've got twenty minutes. No primping, Princess." He quips sarcastically before ignoring me altogether.

For precisely two seconds, I consider bolting out the front door, grabbing my motorcycle, and driving north until I can shift and find her. Part of me knew if I was close enough, I could feel her, smell her, hell, anything to get me back to her. It's only two seconds because as I process what that would look like, I realize the gravity of abandoning my pack.

Exile.

I owe them more than that. Not only that, but they have some plan, some information I don't have, and they may be able to help me find her, so instead of abandoning everyone I've ever cared about my entire life, I head toward my room.

My body freezes in the doorway, remembering her last moment with me. Remembering her laugh, her ridiculous moans as she ate her tacos, and her whimpers as she came undone on my cock. Everything in me wants to walk over and inhale the bed if only to have her smell one more time, but I know that if I do, I'll lose the very limited sense of control I'm currently holding onto.

My Firefly.

Steeling my resolve, I walk into the bathroom, pulling off Dante's sweats and tossing them into the large hamper by the door. I prepare myself for the next steps in our investigation, keeping my wolf in check by imagining all of the ways Hudson is going to die.



Chapter 12

Bri

Many times in my life, I've wondered about my safety, be it where my next meal would come from, or who I had to avoid at home to survive. But as I stood in the kitchen next to a bowl of perfectly seasoned chili, I couldn't quite figure out why I wasn't more afraid. Two men, who could easily best me in strength and speed, sat cautiously, discussing the matter of my kidnapping as if it were any typical Sunday dinner.

"I'll have her out of here tomorrow. Tuesday at the latest," Hudson speaks around large spoonfuls, "I just need to get in touch with him," he explains as if my mere existence here is a trivial logistical arrangement.

"I doubt that. He isn't here." Ghost returned, finishing his bowl before heading to the sink. He took his time carefully washing out its contents before placing it into the dishwasher underneath. My attention bounces back to Hudson, noting his hand as it clenches around his fork.

"What do you mean he isn't here?" Hudson's voice comes out through his teeth, and he appears to be trying to contain his anger at this revelation. If Ghost notices Hudson's reaction, he doesn't show it as he continues

portioning the pot of chili into separate Tupperware before carrying the haul to the freezer.

“The LLC is in Denver for the Fallon decision,” Ghost answers matter-of-factly, his back to us as he washes the pot. I file that information away for another time while my eyes continue to slide back and forth like I’m watching a tennis match, idly finishing the chili in my bowl and switching to the salad, glad to have the attention off me as I load up on the food which will allow me to be ready to leave before first light.

“When’s the trial over?” Hudson asks, his voice coming out with less force, but his eyes are locked on Ghost as if his answers will make or break all his plans.

And from the sound of it, they just might.

“Started last Monday. It’s moved to chamber sessions with the voting members. Should be decided any day now.” He shrugs, turning toward me and grabbing my empty bowl to wash in the sink.

Why’s this so damn civilized?

“Who’s Second?” Hudson asks, concern becoming evident on his face. “Vinny?”

“Big Tony,” Ghost responds, shaking his head, and the way he says the name makes me think that guy isn’t a better option.

My mind spins. They’ve yet to answer a single one of my questions since Hudson arrived. I’ve wanted to interrupt to find out something, anything about where I am or why I’m here. But instead, I’ve resorted to listening and trying to decode their conversation on my own.

“So, if this Marlo guy is gone at this trial, why don’t we just return me to Vegas, and no one needs to be the wiser?” My offer surprises Hudson, who looks at me as if he’s just registering that I’m still here.

“I set foot back in Vegas, and I’m a dead man,” he says more to himself than to me, returning his focus to the food in front of him.

“Why? No one knows that I’m missing. My roommate thinks I’m with Cain. Cain’s too busy with his harem to notice I’m not around, and I haven’t missed work or school. No one needs to know,” I say, my voice dropping to be as sweet as I can muster. I want him to believe I’m on his side. To see me as an ally.

Hudson laughs. Full out, like, crazy person laughter.

“You can’t be this stupid. You really have no fucking idea what shit you’re involved in? I thought you were bright. Your roommate certainly made you out to be, but you’ve no idea who he is, do you? You have no idea who you’re in bed with? Just another dumb gold-digging bitch.” His face turns hard. His expression’s harsh as he chastizes me with words I’ve heard a hundred times before.

Idiot girl, think you’re so smart.

What’s it cost to have you instead?

You’re trash, and you’ll always be trash no matter how hard you study.

Think you’re real bright, do ya, girl?

Be a smart girl and just relax.

My body stills at his remarks, and my eyes hit the floor as memories wash over me. My walls close a moment too slowly for me to remain unaffected. I clench my jaw, resisting the burning behind my eyes. Emotion floods to the surface, fighting to get released. I straighten my spine, refusing to allow him to make me feel like a child.

“Gold-digging bitch? Really? Well, please enlighten me.” I force out the words, but I’m proud of how normal they sound despite the war I have going on internally. I pull my gaze back to him, no hint of the tears behind them.

“Hudson.” The single word out of Ghost’s mouth carries a heavy weight, power washes over me for the second time, and I turn my attention to see he’s no longer relaxed, but stands ready, for what I’m not sure.

To defend me? He doesn’t even know me. What the hell is going on?

Hudson pushes back from the counter, knocking his chair beneath him: his eyes shooting to the floor in an almost involuntary response.

“I’m taking a walk. I’ve got calls to make.” He strides out without so much as a glance back.

I stare at the door for a long time, the silence in the room carrying messages I can’t quite grasp. While my gaze is locked there, I note that the door has no deadbolts, no locks, just a rudimentary handle which seems too simple for an escape plan. It isn’t until Ghost speaks that I return my thoughts to him.

“Let me show you to your room,” his words accompany his movements down the hall as he strides stiffly ahead of me.

My body responds, following him without argument. My escape plan slowly comes together in my mind in stages. Leave before the sun rises, walk out the front door, follow the tire marks toward the nearest street, and follow it to a phone and home.

He turns into the room across from the bathroom I used earlier, turning on the light and waiting for me to pass.

The bed in the room is large, a king probably, and has dark gray blankets covering it. It sits under the only window in the room, which faces the rear of the house and is covered in dark, blackout curtains. A solitary night light shines from the only outlet on the left wall.

A small dresser stands against that wall, a giant mirror over its top. The right wall has sliding closet doors, which are closed, leaving the appearance

of a solid white wall. A solitary cream-colored blanket lays on the floor in the corner—no personal items. I walk to the corner of the bed and sit softly.

“Extra blankets are in the closet if it’s too cold for you. Don’t be alarmed if you see the dog. He usually comes in when it’s colder. He’ll leave you be. He sleeps over there.” Ghost says before pointing to the only other door in the hall, “I’m down the hall if Hudson tries to give you any trouble. You’re my guest. No harm will come to you.”

The sincerity of his words and the seriousness of his face have me nodding absently. My eyes flip back to him as he waits for some sign that I’ve understood his statements.

“What did Hudson mean when he said I had no idea what I got involved in?” I ask, hoping with everything I am, that he’ll give me a straight answer. He stands, examining me for a long moment in silence. Then, his eyes soften.

“He believes you to be a sheep among wolves, but he doesn’t see who you truly are.”

“And who am I?”

“A survivor, but soon, the deliverance our world needs.”

With his final statement hanging in the air, he walks away, cracking the door shut without fully closing it.

What the fuck does that mean?

My head begins a subtle throb, and I fall back onto the plush softness of the bed, breathing in the clean mountain scent surrounding me. It smells like the covers are cleaned in the streams and dried in the pines. There’s a calming peace to the scent that feels like home deep within me. As I settle, I try to focus on my plans. Tomorrow I will leave this cabin and return to my life. The life I’ve fought so hard for.

Sleep tugs at me despite being knocked out for hours in the car. The

combination of my full stomach, the comfort of this plush bed, the smells of the forest outside, and the rollercoaster of adrenaline all day have left me drowsy. I can't sleep. I can't let myself. Knowing if I fall asleep, I may not wake in time, I sit up. Instead, allowing my mind to slip into thinking about the one thing I've been avoiding.

Cain.

Just the thought of him invokes pain in my heart. Never before had I felt more connected to anyone. Never have my defenses been so easily broken down. Cain gave me something I hadn't felt in years.

Hope.

The hope that maybe, just maybe, I could have it all. Love, a career, and a life full of impact. He made me believe I could be loved, cherished, adored even. All the fairytale bullshit I rebuffed for years finally made sense. It became reasonable that women threw their dreams, pursuits, and aspirations out the window.

Hell, I'd even begun wondering what jobs I could look for in Vegas, so I wouldn't have to leave him. For a moment, I'd considered changing all of my life's plans to keep him. But it was all for nothing, for a player whose carefully chosen words were meaningless.

I'm a fool.

Catching movement at the door, I freeze instinctively. The fear that Hudson or Ghost would come to collect from me what all men believe they're entitled to from a woman. I curl up on impulse, my self-defense training running through my mind.

- Get them off balance.
- Use their size against them.

- Hit them where it hurts.
- Make noise and run.

Not sure how the ‘make noise’ or ‘run’ would work in the middle of the forest in the winter, but I wouldn’t let them take from my body. I’d die first.

The door slowly opens. I note how silent it is. Not like in the movies where the hinges creak to announce someone has arrived. The hall light is off, so the only visible light comes from the nightlight plugged in near the dresser. Holding as still as I can, I steady my breathing, trying to calm the hammering of my heart.

A large white paw enters the room first, and my breath releases slowly. Following the paw is a large pure white male dog. He’s beautiful. His fur reflects in the small light, and he stops at the entrance to the room as if he realizes I’m in there. I vaguely remember Ghost mentioning a dog, but this guy looks more like he’s ready to pull a sled or join a wolf pack than be a domesticated house pet.

His eyes meet mine, and the icy blue shade fits his frosted look before his head scents the air looking around the room. Cautiously he strides toward the bed.

I hold still, not wanting to provoke him. I’ve never been an animal person. I couldn’t ever get Fleabag to sit near me at the apartment. Dogs usually bark in my direction or run behind their owners like I’d hurt them. Even the hamster at my third foster home would bite my hand if I tried to hold it despite it being friendly with literally everyone else.

He stops at the side of the bed, slowly sitting on his hind legs.

“OK, buddy. You can go lay over there,” I whisper, pointing to the blanket on the floor.

His head turns to look in the direction I point and then returns to me, but he doesn't move.

“Go lay down,” I say a little more forcefully. Hoping the extra command gets him to go away.

He lays down at the side of the bed, tongue lolling out in what appears to be a smile.

Idiot dog.

“Not here, over there,” I correct, still keeping my distance from him.

A whine escapes him as he sits back up, resting his chin on the side of the bed.

“Not the brightest bulb, are you, boy?” I laugh lightly and tentatively reach to pet him.

My hand moves slowly, palm angled downward to show my intent. His eyes trace the movements, but he doesn't change expression. Gently, I trace my fingers over the pristine coat, starting on his head. His muscles relax into the contact, the silky softness giving under my fingertips, allowing for my exploring touch. I move to scratch him behind his perked-up ears, causing him to close his eyes in appreciation.

“You're just a big softie, aren't you, boy?”

I pull my touch away, breaking our connection. His eyes reopen, leveling on me in a way that feels familiar. Strange how I feel more connected to a dog than most humans. I tip my chin up, nodding over to his bedding, and this time he listens, moving gracefully over to the blanket fort on the floor.

It strikes me how perfect this dog is for someone like Ghost—built for the cold weather, independent but fierce. Odd that he didn't bring the dog on his trail today. Though as I think it, I remember the wild wolf we encountered, and I'm momentarily grateful that this guy didn't have to fight for us. The

wolf likely wouldn't have backed off had we had the dog with us. He wouldn't have had a snowball's chance in hell of beating a real feral wolf.

Maybe it's better the way it happened.

A while later, I hear the front door shut and the sound of boots being stomped off.

Hudson's back.

Inside the room, the dog, which I realize I never got a name for and didn't see a collar on, lifts his head as if on alert. He stares down the door crack, unmoving, while sounds in the living room float down the hall. It takes no time before the sounds stop, leading me to believe Hudson has made himself at home on the living room couch.

Fuck. There goes plan A.

The enormous winter dog, which I'm now affectionately calling Snowball, settles back on the blanket. A wide yawn falls from his jaws before his eyes slide closed. The room falls into a peaceful quiet, his breath coming slowly and making a rhythmic sound.

Back into planning mode, I pull my hand up, peeking behind the curtains to see if maybe I could just go out the window when I realize not only does it not open, but it's completely covered on the outside by planks of wood. Firewood, if I were to guess from the size.

Well, there goes that idea.

I try recalling the dateline episodes Liv watched all summer, sorting through the kidnappings where the victim got away, and trying, rather unsuccessfully, to remember how. Most attacked their abductor or could break out a window while they were left alone. Neither option seemed feasible for me.

Fuck Bri, think.

But the more I try to come up with an idea that doesn't have me tiptoeing past the sleeping Hudson into the freezing winter air, the more my mind wanders to home. All the ways I could've avoided being here in the first place.

If I hadn't just run away from my problems like I always seem to do. If, instead, I'd gone back in and confronted him. If I only possessed the courage to look him in the eye, to argue with him, to fight, to hear his side. None of this would be happening.

If I had followed my gut and gone to Keith's place instead of mine. Then Cain wouldn't have been able to follow. I could've been there wallowing in a pint of Ben & Jerry's on his couch.

Shit, I could've even texted Liv and told her what happened instead of leaving it until later; at least she would know I was taken.

Are they looking for me? Do they realize I'm missing yet?

As I let my mind spiral down "what-if" valley, I imagine what each of my friends would be doing today.

I wonder if Cain has gone to my apartment and if he even tried to fight for me once I left. If he hadn't, Liv would assume I was with him. And, while I know she would've sent a text or two by now, I also know deep down she wanted me to let loose and have fun with Cain, so she wouldn't intrude upon that.

If Cain didn't fight for me, Keith wouldn't notice I was missing until tomorrow when I didn't show up for work. He works the late shift and will expect to see me when he comes in. I'm not the type who calls in sick, so he wouldn't hesitate to call me and, subsequently, Liv.

If Cain did try to find me and sat waiting until Liv got home, she would side with me immediately and not allow him in. Once inside, she would know

I wasn't there and would reach out to Keith if she couldn't get ahold of me. This may have them both on alert that I'm gone, but it still doesn't scream foul play, especially if I got into a fight with Cain and ran off to lick my wounds.

Would it be enough for them to call the police? It hasn't been twenty-four hours, but maybe...

It could be another whole day before they realize I'm even gone.

My breathing quickens as I think about how my life has come to this inconsequential moment. One choice could be the thing that changes everything forever. I didn't even realize how important it was until just now.

They're trading me to some evil guys. Mafia? Gangsters? Who knows, but one thing I'm certain of. If I end up with this Marlo guy, I won't survive. All this because I took that stupid video. There has to be a way out of this.



Chapter 13

Cain

If there was a world record for the fastest shower, I might've broken it. Every second I stood in the bathroom reminded me of her. The way she smelled with my soap on her skin, her hair, wet and curly, like she'd spent the day on the beach. Even brushing my teeth reminded me of her minty breath in those final moments.

I rush out of my room, dressed and clean, in less than five minutes. Jake's eyebrow raises at my hasty return, but he says nothing. I'm sure the look on my face matches my internal struggle as we both exit my apartment, headed for the conference rooms. We'll be early, but I don't care. I want whatever information our team has discovered.

As we head down the hallway to the meeting, the sound of arguing meets my ears as I strain to hear what's being said. Jake makes a point to clear his throat loudly, notifying Dante of our approach. The bickering stops immediately, and the room falls into silence.

The tension feels thick as we enter. Pres is behind her laptop, and Dante sits in his seat at the head of the table, fingering his beard with a tense jaw. His

eyes snap to mine as I enter, and I can tell he's assessing my mental state, wondering if I'll be able to handle myself and keep my wolf in check.

Cain: I'm in control.

I send through the mind-link nodding at him before taking my seat.

Dante: Good. Stay that way.

"Will the others be joining us for this one?" Jake asks, his voice assertive.

"Yes, we're waiting on the full council for this," Dante replies before turning his attention back to the presentation screen, which currently shows only the VP Securities wolf emblem.

His response has me sitting up straighter. While the entire council meets monthly for summative pack information, having an emergency session with all members means there are decisions to be made, and Dante wants to appear diplomatic in his response.

They must have found her!

My wolf stirs, excitement and relief flooding me simultaneously.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

I remind him, but inside I know there must be news if we're bringing the full council together. Even as I let my mind wander, I hear chatter down the hall and know others are joining us.

Elijah and James stroll in looking weary after waking up earlier today and getting no time to rest in the last nineteen hours.

"Erik will be just a minute. He stopped at the kitchen in the lobby for a snack," James relays with a bit of humor in his tone. He knows Dante hates it when Erik brings food to our meetings.

"Fucking child," Dante states, rolling his eyes. Erik tiptoes in, an entire submarine sandwich in his hands, two bags of chips, and a prepackaged

cookie. He sits down in his usual spot, crunching his bags loudly in his attempt to get everything situated.

“Alright, I’m here. We can begin,” Erik announces, winking at Presley and then diving in to take a large bite of his sandwich.

Dante stares at Erik, and I feel the power thrown into the mind message he sends him. Erik jumps a good foot out of his seat before straightening up and sliding his food to the side, presumably for a later time.

“Now that we’ve completed the theatrics,” Dante looks pointedly at Erik before continuing, “we have several issues to bring up, and some are more time-sensitive than others.”

My body feels like a live wire, buzzing just under my skin. I try not to fidget as the news is delivered.

“Since some of you missed our last gathering, let’s start with the facts so everyone is on the same page. First, we recovered Presley’s program, the Humanitarian Unification Network for Trafficking Elimination and Recovery, or as she calls it, HUNTER, from when it went ‘missing.’ We believe all functionality has been recovered, thanks largely to our warehouse team a couple of weeks ago. The witness from our first attempt to recover HUNTER is now our focus.” Dante pauses to ensure everyone is paying attention. His eyes sweep to me, and I can tell he’s waiting for my permission. Letting out a heavy sigh, I nod.

“Brielle DelaCourt is our witness. Through our time trailing her, we’ve discovered several things. First, she’s Unawakened.” I see Elijah and James react in perfect unison, jaws falling open. Erik tenses, and his eyes grow wide.

“While that in itself is unbelievable, we’ve also ascertained that she’s Cain’s Mate.”

Every head in the room focuses on me except for Jake and Dante. I focus my energy on staying still and remaining calm so that regardless of how they react, I can stay in control.

Presley's face is where my attention goes first. Her initial shock slides quickly to understanding before I see her guilt creep back in. I shake my head, a small quick gesture that I hope sends the message that this isn't her fault.

My eyes glide back over to our ambassadors. Both of them are older than me by at least a decade, which I know has to make this news difficult to hear since neither of them has found their Mates. It must be frustrating because they travel to other territories far more often than most wolves ever get to. It's hard to explain the depth of emotion I read on their faces. Hope? Admiration? Jealousy? I can't be sure, but neither says a word, so I nod and turn to the final member of our team. Erik is the one I'm most worried will say something to break the firm grip I've been holding on my wolf.

Erik spends no energy trying to cover up the shock he feels. His crystal blue eyes are wide, and his tall frame is jolted upright. I wait as he processes the news, seeing the questions fly across his expression. After a moment, he surprises me by coming to stand by my side.

"My apologies for the comments at our last meeting. I vow my allegiance in bringing your Fated back to you and will protect her with my life. For the Pack." He throws his right fist to his heart and holds the posture waiting for my response.

"Thank you, Erik. I accept your allegiance. For the Pack." I copy his movement, pressing my fist over my heart. One by one, each member of the committee makes the same proclamation. All except for Dante, who, by ceremony rules, cannot pledge a higher allegiance to any member of the pack.

He does, however, complete the motto with his fist on his own heart before allowing the meeting to continue.

“Brielle has been kidnapped. She was taken by our mole, Hudson. He gave away the shipment location, which contained Presley’s code for HUNTER. That’s how it was stolen from us in the first place.

“Hudson has taken her north, and we believe he’s trying to make a deal with the Reno Pack. A deal with Deacon Marlo.” After this statement, Dante turns to Elijah handing him the floor.

“Thank you, Alpha,” he says before turning to the rest of us. “Dante asked me to reach out to David and Rachel Healy’s new pack down in Florida to ascertain what information I could on what was going on with their son, Hudson, and we discovered a few things. First, they left the Fort Lauderdale pack almost four months ago. According to their Second, Amari, they got along well there, but David got mixed up in some underground fighting ring. He made a bet with the wrong kind of people and had to leave town. The Healys told Bronson, the pack’s Alpha, they were moving to be with their son, but we know they never returned here.”

Dante nods, taking in the information and processing his questions. I use this opportunity to ask mine.

“Do we know who David got mixed up with?”

“Amari’s looking into that for me now. She knows some of the big players down there. The ones David got involved with aren’t from her pack but are stronger rogues that live on the outskirts or are members of the Mancini’s Pack further south.” He finishes, and Dante interjects.

“We believe their disappearance is somehow tied to the Marlo pack. Either through an alliance or some deal, and that it’s the reason Hudson turned on us.”

“It’s no excuse. He could’ve come to us. We would’ve fought to get them back. Instead, he let them use him to try and ruin us, and he took her knowing she mattered to me,” I growl the last word, not allowing Dante to finish. I feel no sympathy toward Hudson. He was dead the moment he touched her. No sob story would change that for me.

“Cain.” The one word silences me before Dante continues, “Hudson has no idea Brielle’s Unawakened because he isn’t an Alpha and only some of the council was informed. Additionally, he can’t know that she’s Cain’s Mate. Since we retrieved HUNTER, we assume he had no other bargaining chip, and he only knew she was important to the pack and Cain. At this point, Hudson’s desperate. Once we find out who’s holding the cards, we’ll be able to locate Brielle and negotiate her safe return.” His last statement breeds confidence in my wolf and me.

“Next up. Pres. Where are we with Mr. Anderson?” Dante turns the floor over to Pres, who pulls up the information on the main screen.

“We currently have in custody one Keith Anderson, age 24, a Graduate of UNLV in the College of Engineering with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science. According to transcripts, he graduated in three years with a perfect GPA.” Presley visibly rolls her eyes and comments more to herself than the room, “which I’d bet isn’t that hard when you’re at a school ranked 139th in Computer Science. Not that I’d know. My school, Berkeley, is ranked first.”

I laugh despite my mood because the fact that this guy has gotten completely under her skin is amusing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her flustered by anyone, and that’s saying something because she usually is the smartest person in the room.

“Anyway,” she continues with a less-than-sweet smile, “By day, Keith is an IT manager at Citi Corp, not even using his degree. He has worked there

since his sophomore year, in 2018, and according to a very friendly secretary, he has been offered a job as the director of IT, but he hasn't given them his decision yet," she pauses, letting that information sink in before continuing.

"However, by night, Keith appears to dabble in the more salacious side of the internet. From what I was able to pull off the drives from his house, he has been involved in some serious hacking both on a national and international scale." Presley's face almost appears impressed at this part of the presentation, and I save that little tidbit for some teasing later.

"From what I can gather, he met Kole while attending UNLV. He helped Kole with some school assignments for money. That started their beautiful friendship into more illegal activity until he came face to face with me. I knocked him out and stole my code back in under ten minutes without breaking a sweat."

Her face is flush with enthusiasm, and I lean back, allowing her the moment, despite it being a bald-faced lie. She stood behind me while I took out Keith. Only after he was down did she swoop in to recover her code, but I don't know that the particulars are relevant in this case. Dante's eyes slowly glance my way, and I shake my head quickly. While she might want her moment, he will literally kill me if he thinks for a second she was in danger.

"Yes, Pres, you're a hero to men. Can we get to the new information, please?" Dante asks, pinching the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

"Thank you, I know I am. Umm, so Jake snatched him up earlier today, mostly because he's Brielle's close friend, well actually..." She doesn't get the rest out before Dante clears his throat, his eyes shooting daggers at her as I'm sure he sends a mind-link message her way. Her eyes flash to me before going straight to the floor, and she clears her throat as she continues.

"Keith informed us that he was working for someone named 'K,' which we

confirmed is Kole, and he has no idea about our world, what HUNTER's capability is, or what Kole was involved in. Basically, he's oblivious to everything and doesn't know that Brielle has been kidnapped or where they could be taking her. The one piece of information we could pull from his current cell phone was that he's meeting someone from the Marlo organization at the Strat tonight at midnight. Or... he would be if we didn't have him." She finishes with a smug look on her face.

My attention returns to Dante. My mind wonders briefly what she was going to say that Dante believed was worthy of keeping quiet.

"What does he know?" I ask, curious about what he has uncovered through his work with Kole and through the deep dive into me that I'm sure has already happened.

"Keith knows he was doing illegal work for K, though he has no idea who K works for or what happened with any code he wrote once it was delivered. He knows K stole HUNTER from us. That it was given to him before being subsequently reclaimed. He knows about Cain and his involvement with Brielle, including the not-so-honest tutoring situation. Keith believes we have her and are using her as leverage against him," Dante rattles off.

"How did we find out about the meet tonight?" Elijah asks.

"Because I have his biometrics here in person, I was able to utilize his fingerprint and facial recognition to crack into both his old device and his current one. I've added my passwords and created a mirror device for his communications. The information for the meeting was through an encrypted communications application called Signal on his phone. Luckily, he has it set to erase every 12 hours, so we have today's information, including tonight's meet-up," Pres recites, pride emanating from her.

"So are we sending someone in his place to the meet?" Erik pipes up,

appearing engaged again in the meeting now that it may pertain to his skill set.

“We don't have any civilians we can trust with this content, and we can't risk sending an Awakened wolf because they would scent him before he even sat at the table,” Jake replies first.

“We also don't know how much they know about Mr. Keith Anderson, so it would be risky to send a duplicate. He has social media, an active LinkedIn, and is easily Googleable,” Pres adds.

“What if we didn't do either? What if we send Keith?” Attention turns to me, and Dante raises an eyebrow at my thinking.

“You want to bring Keith in on this?” Dante asks, not hiding his surprise.

“Don't get me wrong, I absolutely don't trust the guy, but you did say he wants to make a deal, right? Why not use that to get him to go to the meeting and get information through him? He thinks we have Brielle, right? So we make him his deal. We let him go under the guise he's a spy for us, and he goes to the meet with eyes and ears. We may be able to use him to find out what they have on Hudson or even where they're keeping Bri.” I finish, excitement coursing through me as I think through all the ways this should work.

“We would be knowingly putting him at risk if he's caught,” Dante responds, not shutting down my idea, but also not with the enthusiasm I have either.

“He was risking himself working with them this whole time. Plus, this keeps our teams safe because we're in the background.” Jake answers, giving my plan more confidence.

“I'm with Cain and Jake on this one,” Erik adds. “He put himself in the line of fire by working with these guys in the first place. We're just exploiting this

dude's stupidity for our gain."

Dante leans back in his seat. His fingers find their way back into his beard as he weighs the pros and cons. Our team sits silently, waiting for his response, as Pres types away on her laptop, utterly oblivious to the tension hanging on this decision.

We need this. We need to find her. This is our chance.

My wolf is steady within me, waiting for Dante's decision.

"Okay, let's say we do this. What will the logistics look like because we're running out of time," Dante asks, scanning the room for answers. Pres speaks first.

"I can have an earpiece and mic ready to deploy. We won't be able to speak to him when he's at the table because, even with the dining room noise, they'll be able to hear it. We will be able to talk him through his entry and exit, and we can listen during the meet."

"We have a security team that works the Strat. They won't seem out of place because they're already building security. They won't be able to be in the dining area, but they will be on site." Erik adds.

"I can do his prep and transport in and out. He already knows I'm involved, so I can show my face to him and give him the information he needs to pull this off. I could have him ready in under thirty minutes," I state calmly, hoping I don't seem too eager for the task.

Dante stares at me as if evaluating my control.

We need this.

"Jake, you'll join Cain in prep and transport. He saw you on his surveillance at his place today, so neither of you needs to be undercover. Erik, add a team of four you trust, just in case shit hits the fan and we have to fight our way out. We aren't sending this guy in to die. We're using his

access to gather information. Our priority is keeping our involvement with this under wraps, but we're not now, nor will we ever be a pack that doesn't value human life. Understood?" He finishes looking squarely at me.

"Pack First." We say in unison.

"You have one hour to get everything into place. Let's go." With that, he slides his chair back and exits the conference room. I turn to Pres.

"Have the equipment charged and ready to go in thirty minutes. Leave it outside Keith's interrogation room. Erik, make sure we have our wheels ready with new plates. Jake, you're with me. Let's move," I say, echoing Dante's confidence.

I won't fuck this up, Firefly. I'm coming.



Chapter 14

Keith

Time passes so unbelievably slowly when you're tied up, alone, in a room with only the air conditioner's hum to listen to. I feel like I've been here for hours, yet I couldn't even begin to estimate how much time has passed. The man I'd been speaking to hasn't returned, and I don't know what that means for me or Elle.

How could I possibly have fucked this up so much?

I should've responded differently to his claim. I should've laughed it off or denied it like I had a hundred times before. The problem was I wasn't expecting it. His words blindsided me, knocking me off balance and keeping me from deflecting quickly enough. This is why I like computers. They're predictable. Each input generates an output. Everything's in balance, or it doesn't work. Any curveball thrown at me by a computer was far more manageable to field.

Just as I'm beginning to wonder if this time alone is a ploy to get me more vulnerable, the door clicks, and boots on the tile echo again.

He's not alone this time.

I start to tense up, wondering if this is when the physical torture begins and hoping I can withstand it. The hood over my head is ripped off, and the fluorescent light from the room assaults my eyes. I squint, turning away from the glare and blinking repetitively to allow my eyes to adjust to the room's brightness.

As my vision clears, I see two pairs of black combat boots and black utility cargo pants, and as my eyes scan up the black t-shirts, recognition flashes in my mind.

“Cain.” The word comes out like a bad taste in my mouth, full of disgust. Even knowing he was part of the team that broke into my house, it still didn’t prepare me for the anger I feel crawling its way through my body.

This motherfucker is lying to Elle. He’s the reason she’s in danger!

“Keith,” he responds with no more warmth in his tone than I had in my greeting. Cain grabs a chair from against the wall before turning it backward and straddling it, throwing both arms casually over the back.

Once my eyes have fully adjusted, I see the room resembles a police interrogation room. There’s a table in front of me, just out of my reach, a large two-way mirror on my left, and an exit on my right. A few chairs line the wall across from the empty table. Zip ties secure my hands to the metal chair I’m sitting on, and beneath it is a chain securing it to the floor. My ankles are similarly shackled. Essentially I’m bound in a way that prevents me from any chance of escape.

Cain’s partner looks vaguely familiar. Possibly from the security footage from my house, but I can’t be sure. He doesn’t say a word and stands barely inside the door as if on guard. Whether it's for my protection or Cain’s is yet to be seen. His facial expression is unreadable. With his posture and confidence, he reminds me of a Navy SEAL. Quiet, capable, deadly.

I'm going to die.

Every thought of escaping, of outrunning them, or even attempting to fight my way free flies out the window as I stare at both my restraints and captors.

“You're here to kill me,” I state—no emotion, no questions, just a certainty that I'm not going to survive this.

“Now, Keith, why would we want to go and do a thing like that? I'm simply here to... tutor you. You see, I think you and I should be friends. I mean, if we're both going to be in Brielle's life, I think it's only fair that we try to figure out a way to get along, don't you?” he asks, but his voice lacks the sarcasm I was expecting.

Friends? Not. Fucking. Possible.

“You want to be friends?” I question. My eyebrow raises as I show my shackles to him. “This is how you make friends?” He laughs.

“Admittedly, not usually through these means, no.”

“You going to let me go?” I ask, genuinely curious about what the fuck his plan is here.

“I'm here to make a deal,” he states.

“Any deal I make with you will have the stipulation that Brielle is off limits, and you no longer get to lie and use her,” I say, my anger seeping into my tone.

He launches out of the chair. His face hardened. His eyes wild. Before I see him move, Cain's partner jumps between us, effectively creating a wall.

“Calm down.” His voice is low and controlled, like you would use on a bear you run into in the woods. After a few breaths, Cain takes his seat, and his partner, the reasonable one out of the two of them, turns to me.

“Listen to me carefully. You will not mention her again if you want to live through this.” He doesn't wait for a response but simply strides back to the

wall again, taking up guard.

I can see Cain visibly struggling to stay in the seat. I can tell he wants to hurt me almost as badly as I want to hurt him.

Anytime asshole.

“We were discussing a deal,” I state, waiting for him to let me know what he wants from me. I may not be thinking clearly, but this guy makes me forget my basic survival instincts and causes my pride to take center stage.

It’s because she wants him.

The thought is quick, but the pain it inflicts is resounding. I’ve been trying to talk to Elle for the last two months. Trying to get the nerve to move our relationship to the next level and maybe give us a real shot. Something always got in the way of the conversation, and, most recently, it’s been this asshole snarling at me.

“We’re willing to let you go under one condition. We understand that you played an almost insignificant role in the grand scheme of this organization. We don’t need to keep you or your services around.” My mind blanks as I try to process what he’s telling me.

They’re just going to let me go?

He continues a moment later. “We do, however, have one task you’ll complete in order to, how should I put it, repay us for your participation in the theft. We wouldn’t want this to get messy after all.” He speaks slowly, as if he’s choosing every word carefully.

“And what task is that?” I ask, already assuming it is an impossible one that will get me arrested, killed, force me to move away, or a hundred other bad outcomes.

“We need you to go to your meeting tonight at the Stratosphere,” he says simply.

Wait, how do they know about my meeting?

My face must give away my thoughts because he pulls out my phone and sets it on the table.

Shit. It hasn't been twelve hours. Everything is on there.

Cain smirks, pulling up one side of his smile in a way that makes my blood boil and my fists clench with the need to beat the smile right off his face. I have to exhale and intentionally loosen my jaw to try and calm down, never looking away from the stare-down I'm locked in.

I wait. Silently anticipating the sound of the other shoe dropping. When I can tell he has nothing else to say, I ask,

“And?”

“That’s it. Show up for the meeting. Act normal. Tell no one what happened today and live your life,” he finishes. His voice finally evened out to an almost casual tone.

“What’s the catch?”

There must be a catch.

“No catch. We’ll give you an earpiece and a mic. Have the meeting as scheduled. All we ask is that nothing about this situation comes up. Use the time to figure out who you’re in business with and what they want with you.”

“You want me to wear a wire? No way, these guys aren’t goons you see in the movies. My work for them hasn’t been legal, and if I were to guess, most of their business isn’t. They will search, scan, and, hell, maybe even force me to go to a new location. If I'm caught wearing a wire. I’m dead.” My voice doesn’t waiver. I know what this is. They’re throwing me to the wolves and hoping to gain information at the expense of my life.

Banging on the mirror pulls both of our attention.

“Excuse me. It looks like your communication devices are here,” he says,

casually nodding to his partner as he walks out the door.

While the door is open, I notice an office-like hallway and a flash of red hair tossed up on top of someone's head, but it closes before I can see the person he's talking to. I turn my focus to Cain's partner.

"They still haven't told me if Brielle is ok. Is she safe? Do you have her?" I ask, hoping she's safe at home and only her cell phone has been tampered with.

His expressionless eyes stay focused on me, but he makes no indication that he heard me. His face remains completely blank. He's like a British guard.

That's a little creepy.

I exhale audibly.

A few minutes later, Cain re-enters, carrying a small zipped bag. He pushes the table closer to me and sets the bag on top before walking over and cutting off the zip ties, effectively freeing my hands but not my feet. He moves back around, switching his chair to the correct sitting position, and eases down on its edge.

"Apologies for our interruption. I believe you agree to my terms, so you can leave this room alive?" His no-nonsense tone solidifies my situation.

Rock meet hard place.

Rubbing my wrists to relieve their stiffness, I note that I can agree to the deal and hope to God the criminal contingent doesn't catch me, or I can say no and be stuck with the current criminal contingent.

Decisions. Decisions.

He leans into the table, taking away most of the space between us. Out of my peripheral vision, I see Cain's partner move one step, and I freeze. If he's worried Cain will hurt me, I should be too.

"This deal saves your annoying life. As much as it doesn't mean shit to me,

Brielle will care if something happens to you. The minute that's no longer true, you become disposable." His voice gives away his hatred for me.

Finally, something we can agree on.

He sits back in the chair, unzips the bag, and lifts each item as he explains its use like I'm a fucking kindergartner and not someone with a degree in a STEM field.

"This is your earpiece. Once inserted, you'll be able to hear me. I won't talk to you during your meeting. It's too risky. I can't have you losing focus. I'm in your ear for entry and exit. If shit goes south, listen to my directions. I will not repeat them. Acting quickly will save your life." He sets down, admittedly, the smallest earpiece I've ever seen.

"Do you know what this is?" he asks condescendingly, lifting an AirPods case.

"Sledgehammer? No, basketball? Oh! Trampoline?" I roll my eyes and wait for his response.

"Okay, smartass. This is your wireless receiver. It looks exactly like an AirPods case. We've even included AirPods to place inside so it looks normal. This can pick up your voice from five feet away. That means we can hear you loud and clear, even if it's in your pocket. You don't need to talk loudly. You don't need to shout at it. We'll be able to hear you. If they attempt to take the case, let them. It'll still transmit, and we'll still get what we need. This shouldn't give them any red flags."

He sets down the receiver and pulls out a UNLV pin and glasses, which look surprisingly similar to the ones I was wearing today. Thankfully my vision is only a problem if I have to drive or read signs far away.

"Your glasses have been fixed with a micro camera. It'll turn off when you first get to the location and will be restarted once they've cleared you. It's

undetected when off and exceptionally difficult to find if on. Don't play with your glasses, don't touch them, twirl them, or chew on them. Leave them on your damn face," Cain snaps the last part.

"And what's the pin? A quick explosive? GPS tracking?" I ask, curious about what technology it holds because it looks like any standard college pin.

"It's a pin. No bells, no whistles. It's a distractionary piece. Pin it to the lanyard around your neck with your keys. They'll likely take it or inspect it, at least. This is just our way of making you look less suspicious." He says as if it's the most obvious answer after the three pieces I was just shown.

"Talk me through what information you want again," I question, trying to ascertain how much work it'll be to get the necessary answers without giving away my intent. I'm going to have to be subtle.

"We believe this meetup will reestablish you with the Marlo Pack, eeerrr, corporation," he quickly corrects himself for some reason and glances back at the Navy SEAL behind him, their faces communicating an entire story without speaking a word out loud.

"It appears that way. I haven't been able to contact K in weeks, and they finally got back into communication with me since *someone* stole my previous phone. It contained the Signal app with my encryption keys and contact numbers," I say pointedly.

"Oh yeah, sorry about that. Remind me to get that back to you," he says with zero remorse in his tone. "This guy here is going to take you to the restroom down the hall to get cleaned up. We leave in twenty minutes. I don't think I have to say this, but I will anyway. If you fuck this up. If you do anything outside of what we've asked of you, I'll personally make sure that you die a slow and painful death."

How nice. So glad we're friends.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting in the back of a vehicle, this time buckled in but still with a bag over my head. I was allowed to see the interrogation room, the hallway to the restroom, and the bathroom itself. After that, I was effectively blindfolded and marched back to the vehicle.

I'll say this, every place they've taken me has been immaculate. Even the vehicle I'm in now smells like a brand-new car. Not at all what I'd expect from a bunch of criminals, but what do I know? I usually stay cooped up in my office for all my criminal activity.

What the fuck did I get myself into...

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my calm composure while figuring out how to live through this meeting. Trying to find a way to get out of this while simultaneously keeping myself, my family, Elle, and Liv safe. Cain has inserted himself so thoroughly into my life, and the lives of the people I love, that I'm not sure what his plan is to walk away.

Elle thinks he needs her, and I can already see her building more than a friendship with him. The truth is going to devastate her. Finding out he used her, because of me, may ruin, not only any chance I have at a future with her, but the friendship we currently have. Compound that with the fact that she's months away from leaving everything behind.

When I first realized that there was more than friendship for me, I told myself she was too young, too fragile, fighting her own battles, and she just needed me to be her friend. So I was that friend because she needed it. Every time I wanted to try, she was in a new relationship, or I'd be the one trying to prove I wasn't interested. The timing was a mess.

Then, senior year, I got wrapped up in Candice Templeton and her double Ds, and I thought, this is it. This is when I move on. She let me fuck her in

the bed of my Dodge Ram, and I was already thinking about bringing her with me away to college. I had admissions acceptance letters and scholarship offers from MIT, Stanford, Berkeley, and Carnegie Mellon, which meant the choice was mine.

My future was all planned out. Brielle was only a sophomore, so she would finish high school with Liv, and I'd use that time to get away from any feelings. We would grow apart.

Then, I got a phone call at one in the morning while lying next to my girlfriend in my bedroom. The call was from University Medical Center Trauma. Elle was in the hospital.

February 11, 2017. Worst night of my life.

I showed up in minutes still wearing my sleep shorts, only having taken the time to add flip-flops and a tank top as I grabbed my truck keys. I hadn't even told Candice where I was going. I just left her there to find her way home. I ran from the ER to the ICU, trying to find her. The less-than-friendly nurse at the information station asked if I was family, and I nodded without hesitation.

Elle is family.

I'm sure she assumed I was her brother, but she led me to her room, filling me in on her condition. They hadn't known who to contact when she first arrived by ambulance. She didn't have any identification on her, only her phone. I was the medical emergency contact, along with Livinia McCoy, who they'd also called, but she hadn't answered.

Elle needed surgery, so that took priority. According to the nurse, one of the broken ribs had punctured a lung. She was lucky to be alive, and I stood there wondering what could've caused so much damage.

I remember standing in the hospital, staring through the window into her

room and not believing it was her. She was too small on that bed, too pale, too damaged. Gauze, wires, oxygen, and machines crowded her.

I stayed there at her bedside for four days before she regained consciousness. I filled out all of her paperwork. I called Liv, who joined in my bedside vigil with her parents, who handled all the legal issues and police. I called my mom, but not once did I even think to reach out to Candice. On my third day there, my mom brought me food and a change of clothes, and she told me Candice had left. In that moment, I realized I didn't care what Candice did. I wouldn't leave Elle.

It wasn't until weeks later that I learned the whole story. The idea of that man, a foster parent, who was supposed to keep her safe, putting his hands on her made me angrier than I'd ever been.

If she hadn't killed that son of a bitch that night, I would've gone back to finish the job.

I'd already given up all of my scholarships and instead sent an application to stay in Vegas at UNLV. It wasn't the best program, but it kept me here, where I could protect her and keep watch over her.

And now, I'm failing at that again.

I shake my head to try and get out of the past, focusing instead on how I'm going to fix the present. The car slows to a stop, and the hood is removed from my head. It's dark outside now, confirming I was there for at least six hours today.

Glancing around, I see the quiet one driving. Cain sits in the passenger seat, and they're both decked out in full tactical gear, flak vests, several guns, earpieces, and radios. We're in an SUV parked in front of my house. The dashboard clock reads 10: 52 pm.

One hour until showtime.

“Let’s go,” Cain says as he exits the vehicle without waiting and strolls to my front door.

I follow behind him, wondering why we’re here. I need my car. I can’t roll up with them to the location without looking suspicious.

“My car’s at work,” I state, unlocking the front door and walking inside. “Why are we here?”

“While there might not be a dress code for the restaurant, you can’t show up in day-old clothes without showering. You have fifteen minutes to shower and change.”

I nod absently, turning and heading up the stairs.

“I’d say make yourself at home, but we both know you already did that this morning without any sort of invitation,” I shout over my shoulder as I turn toward my room.

“The restroom’s this way, right?” I joke, not turning to see if he catches it.

If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought he laughed at that.

I shower and change without incident, taking a long look at the photo of Liv, Elle, and me that sits on my nightstand.

Oh, to go back to that trip.

Returning downstairs, I note that Cain hasn’t moved. He’s on my couch, still flipping through his phone. The duffle bag of surveillance and communications equipment sits on the coffee table in front of Cain. Before grabbing it, I stop in front of him.

“I need you to know that Brielle’s a good person. She doesn’t deserve to be mixed up in any of this. I don’t know your grand plan for getting out of my life and, subsequently, hers, but please make it a clean break so she can move on.”

His eyes stare back at me with an unreadable expression. His jaw clenches

and unclenches as I speak. I can't tell if he wants to hit me or yell, but he does neither. Instead, he opens the bag and hands me my glasses, earpiece, and receiver, which I put on as instructed.

“Just get the information we need. What do they want you to work on? Who exactly are you supposed to be working with or reporting to? And most importantly, who's authorizing this project? Be eager to try and gather information on anything they'll give you and find out ANYTHING you can about what they're currently working on. They stole something important that belongs to us, and we need to know its exact location to get it back. Keith, can you handle that?”

I kiss the inside of my hand and raise a Hunger Games three-finger salute, showing my dedication to the cause with a mock whistle from the movies. His face goes hard. He stands, leaning into me and placing his index finger on my chest.

“You may not give a shit about your life, but if you care about hers, you'll do your absolute best because if you don't get the information we need, know that it's her safety that you'll be risking.”

At that moment, I don't doubt that he would hurt her to hurt me. All my focus and energy will go into doing this one mission correctly, not for my life, but for Elle's.

I can only nod, trying to keep fear from showing in my expression.

“Okay. I'm ready.”

Chapter 15

Keith

After being dropped off at work to grab my car, I drive to the meeting location, closely followed by Cain's black SUV. I pull into the parking structure, grab a ticket, and circle until I find a spot. The parking lot is crowded, and I wonder briefly if something is happening downtown.

Seated in my car, I struggle to squash down my anxiety. After a moment, I take a last look in my rearview mirror and release a deep breath in an attempt to relax me.

This is for Elle.

I get out of the car and casually stride toward the elevator. The piece in my ear sparks to life as I wait for it to arrive.

“We have two red team members on the bottom floor of the casino, one blue team member running security for the elevator, and our green team on surveillance in the offices directly behind the restaurant. According to the green team, two men just arrived and sat in the booth in front of the center bar. Remember, you aren't alone up there. We'll always have eyes and ears on you.” Cain says, giving me a bit of confidence.

I nod as I remember his brief synopsis of the teams: red- rescue, blue- sharpshooters, green- electronics/surveillance. I should be on the green team instead of walking in here.

After a long pause, he speaks again with humor in his tone.

“I need you to respond with more than a nod to ensure your mic works.”

“Got it,” I say, not talking especially loud. “Do you know if they have extra people waiting around for this meeting?”

“Interesting ask, but yes, two in the casino from what we can tell and two at an adjacent table, so don’t piss them off. You’re outnumbered, and the elevator takes forever.”

I chuckle.

“Noted,” I answer as the doors open, and I step into the elevator headed down to the casino. The light elevator music seems almost comical for the situation I find myself in, and I try not to be awkward.

“Did you know that ‘Elevator’ is the company that installed these? They were just called lifts until the company installed so many that people started referring to lifts as elevators, and it stuck, kind of like Band-aids or Q-tips? It’s just a company name,” I say to myself, mainly because the number of useless facts I have in mind at any given moment is astounding, but also to try and calm myself down through the distraction.

The doors open, and I do my best rendition of a confident stroll onto the casino floor. This end of the Strip is full of flashy tourist souvenirs. With rundown carpet and the smell of old cigarettes hanging in the air, the age of the casino shows despite their efforts to update and renovate it. I walk to the desk to buy my ticket, and a less-than-enthusiastic older woman greets me. She’s probably in her early fifties, and I can tell she’s more than ready to clock out.

“Welcome. Just so you know, we close in a little over an hour.” She isn’t rude exactly, but there isn’t any warmth in her voice.

“I appreciate that. Thank you, Kathryn,” I say, noting her name tag and turning on my charming smile. “I will make sure I don’t keep you late,” I finish, winking as I hand her my card, and she smiles back at me, sitting up a little as she takes the payment for my access to the restaurant.

“You’re all set, handsome,” she says with more enthusiasm as I turn and follow the signs to the main elevator.

“Ok, Cassanova, we’re going dark with transmission until you’re cleared. Try not to die in the meantime,” he says with a bit of humor in his voice.

An audible click sounds in my ear, and I exhale.

Game time.

I walk my way forward, noting the lack of patrons due to the late hour, wondering if that’s intentional.

Easier to tie off a loose end without witnesses.

I notice two security guards on the east side of the room adjacent to the slot machines watching me carefully, and I wonder if they are friend or foe.

Friend? Ha, more like foe or foe.

Making a point not to stare, I focus my gaze on the route I’m walking, attempting a low whistle as I go. As we ascend, my nerves get the better of me. My palms start sweating, and I wipe them on the dark wash jeans I decided to pair with my black “There are 10 types of people, those that understand binary, and those who don’t” t-shirt. Not that you can see most of the writing because the damn “fake out lanyard” with the UNLV pin I’m wearing blocks the message, but most people don’t understand my coder shirts anyway.

Yep, focus on the stupid shirt; that will get me right through this.

I approach the restaurant attempting a friendly smile, and ask the host with the oversized nose, receding hairline, and face of someone who smells something awful nearby, if they have a table under the name RP. I'm surprised my voice doesn't waver. My hands are shaking, just a bit, and my heart rate is through the roof.

His eyes scrunch, surveying me and my t-shirt before rolling his eyes and pointing to a row of chairs next to the stand, silently signaling for me to have a seat.

This is starting wonderfully. Even the host doesn't like me.

I run my hands down my shirt, attempting to smooth out the wrinkles I know aren't there. To distract myself and my growing anxiety, I reflect on my pursuits earlier today. I'd spent a reasonable amount of time trying to decode the acronym RP in my head, trying to figure out what it stood for. It could be someone's name—Ryan, Robbie, maybe Ray. The P could be Parker, Paulson, Peterson, Philips, or a million others.

After realizing the endless combination possibilities, I went to more common uses for it. When I gamed, it was for "Role Playing". On the cybersecurity side, it meant "relaying party," which, honestly, would be rather clever to pass on a message. If I went into the engineering side, it meant Rapid Prototyping. It could be a company, a call sign, or hell, the code to kill me. It bothered me that I couldn't solve that particular puzzle without more information. Maybe I'll get it tonight. That is, if they intend to talk to me at all. This could've been an elaborate way to kill me from 1,149 feet in the air.

The host returns with the same condescending look on his face from before but asks me to follow him inside.

The restaurant oozes elegance with dim lighting, large floor-to-ceiling

windows that reveal the night sky beyond the glass, and a breathtaking view of the city. As a local, I'd never been up here. We leave the touring to the tourists.

Light music plays in the background, and only a handful of people remain at tables strewn around the room. Mostly couples, engrossed in a romantic evening. Their light chatter adds to the ambiance, creating an exclusive experience.

We walk around the bar at the center of the opulent revolving room, and I take in the two men sitting before me as I approach.

The first is a middle-aged Italian man. He appears to be relatively tall, though, from his seat, I can't say; he's lean but muscular in the way a soccer player would be. His long, shiny, dark hair falls just below his ears. He's wearing a fitted gray suit with a crisp white button-up shirt that offsets his olive skin tone, and he completes the look with a narrow charcoal tie. His jacket sits unbuttoned, his posture leaned forward, and his forearms braced on the table as he flips through his phone.

The second Italian man appears older only due to the more defined lines on his tanned face and the light graying on the sides of his barber-styled low pompadour with a part and fade. His strong jawline is accented with salt-and-pepper five o'clock shadow. His suit is meticulously tailored to perfection and easily cost him thousands of dollars.

It does nothing to hide the muscled physique that lies beneath. Gold cufflinks that adorn each sleeve show an elegant M, and even his watch has the telltale gold crown splashed across the face.

This man is clearly the boss of the two. He radiates strength, power, and money. As we approach, his eyes lift from the empty highball glass in front

of him to the receptionist in front of me, and I realize he's speaking on his cell phone.

"I wouldn't have it any other way cara, ciao." His smooth foreign voice fits him completely, and I immediately feel like I'm in a crime film. He ends his call and points to the glass before him, prompting the host for another.

"Right away, sir," he responds, quickly retrieving the glass and scurrying off. I stand awkwardly waiting as he places his phone face down on the table and finally shifts his focus to me, his expression unreadable as he assesses me.

"Mr. Anderson, a pleasure," he says, without any warmth. There's no trace of a smile on his face.

The second man slides out of the booth confirming his height as he nearly looks me in the eye.

"Arms," he says, his accent matching his boss's. The one word comes out with no additional information before he steps behind me and slides his hands through my hair.

"Usually, I get dinner first," I blurt, unable to keep the snarky remark from sliding through in my nervousness.

Fucking idiot!

Surprisingly it breaks the hardened exterior of the boss, forcing a low chuckle as the second man continues getting to know me on more than a personal level.

"Empty your pockets, and take off the keys," he commands once his perusal of my body is complete to his satisfaction.

I produce my cell phone, AirPods case, wallet, pack of Extra gum, and chapstick before pulling off the keys. Each item is picked up and searched to

ensure its validity. My anxiety increases as he approaches the AirPods case, and I try to maintain my calm demeanor by looking around the restaurant.

He uses my facial recognition software to unlock my phone before searching to ensure I'm not recording. He powers it off and leaves it on the table with the rest of the items, and pulls an infrared flashlight from his pocket before shining it directly into my glasses, causing me to squint and turn from him before he flashes it to the other items, spending extra time on the pin.

I guess the son of a bitch was right.

It irritates me some to admit that, but it also refocuses me. I allow my gaze to return to the boss, who silently observes the exchange. As he finishes with the item, leaving them on the table, the host returns with a glass of dark amber liquid and places it back on the table.

“He’s clear.” The two words cause me to release some of the tension I’m holding. The second man takes his leave without another word.

Pity. I’m going to miss his chatty personality.

“May I?” I ask, pointing to the items.

“Of course. Apologies for the formality. One can never be too careful,” he says with no remorse in his tone. I nod, gathering the items back into my pocket, leaving the powered-off phone visible on the table in a show of good faith before I take a seat on the side of the booth that’s just been vacated.

It takes all my focus to appear calm as I settle into the plush leather seat. I place my hands together and lean on the table giving him my undivided attention. He taps two fingers against the side of his glass, silently assessing me. The moment drags while I wonder if he’s expecting me to start.

“Would you like a drink?” he asks, gesturing to the bar behind him to get a waiter’s attention.

“An old fashioned with Four Roses Small Batch, extra bitter. Thank you,” I respond directly to the man, who nods and heads back to the bar without writing anything down. It’s my dad’s favorite drink, the first one he and I shared when I turned twenty-one. While I usually wouldn’t start with it, I wanted to be seen as his equal, and I didn’t think a generic beer would sound impressive, though that’s usually what’s available when you hang out with college students.

“A traditionalist. I would’ve guessed some California-based IPA like the Silicon Valley tech crowd tends to lean toward,” he says, though more thinking out loud than addressing me. I don’t respond but rather lift a shoulder in nonchalance.

“I appreciate you meeting with me. I’ve been meaning to have a face-to-face for a while, but unfortunately, my schedule hasn’t been very accommodating.” He picks up his drink, taking a short pull before continuing, his accent showing more as he speaks.

“I believe you worked rather closely with my nephew, Kole,” he states, not asking a question but pausing all the same before continuing, “While he has been unreachable of late, he relayed to us how valuable you’ve been, and we’ve seen first hand some of your results. May I ask when was the last time he contacted you?”

“K? Well, it has to have been a few weeks now. Two? Maybe three? He set me up with the program’s code to dive in and figure out what else needed to be completed. I only had it a day or so before the warehouse was hit, and whoever came in took everything. I tried contacting him a million times since then, but I haven’t heard back,” I say, careful to keep the story to only the facts I should know, rather than the whole story. He tilts his head at the

information, his eyes squinting as if contemplating something or covering up his surprise.

“And while you had this software, what did you uncover?” The way he says “this software” leads me to believe I’ve just stepped further into this than I should’ve.

He didn’t know about the stolen code.

“Unfortunately, I’d barely been able to get any of it to load or initialize before it was taken. I can tell you whoever wrote it was brilliant. It was by far some of the most complex code I’ve ever worked with,” I state, secretly hoping the team in my ear will relay that to whoever on their team actually wrote it. I’d kill to have access to it again and to see it fully functioning.

“I see. Well, if we can locate whoever stole it from you, we’ll have to get you back onto the project,” he states, clearly interested. “Did my nephew give you a timeline or any requirements for the job?”

“The job info he included with the software just specified that he needed me to see how close to functional the code was since the original engineer was no longer on the project, and it needed to be tested before release. I never got far enough in to see what exactly it was supposed to do, but I can tell you I would’ve needed specialized hardware that I don’t have access to, to even get it fully running.” I shrug, taking another slow sip of my drink.

“Interesting.” He shifts his focus over my shoulder, lifting his chin slightly, and our chatty friend returns, leaning over as the boss speaks in a whisper to him. What I can make out sounds like he’s talking entirely in Italian, so I wouldn’t have understood it even if he had spoken at a normal volume. The man nods and walks off again without acknowledging me at all.

“Anyway, I reached out to you because the work you’ve completed for us has been nothing short of exemplary. In fact, it’s so good that I’ll require

more of your focused attention going forward.” He stops, taking in my reaction, which I try to temp down.

“I, uh, thank you?” I stutter out, not sure what he’s asking of me. “Look, I don’t mean to come off ungrateful, the work has been a decent source of income and all, but I have a full-time job. Not only that, I have no idea who you are or who I’ve been working for. This work was originally me helping out a buddy of mine in my free time for some extra cash; from what I can tell, he has up and vanished. That, and my last assignment left me unconscious in an office with my phone, wallet, and everything I was working on stolen. No offense, but I’m not sure I’m interested in continuing in this sort of work.” I aim to be polite in my delivery, hoping the blunt statement doesn’t offend him.

He settles back against his seat, slowly nodding at me as he allows time for my drink to be set down and the waiter to leave us again.

“My apologies. It must be confusing, but you know as well as I do, with the type of work we engage in, these things can happen and are to be expected from time to time. I’ll add an advance for new communication devices for your trouble. To the question of who you’ve been working for, you may call me Marlo. I own a consulting business up north.” As he speaks, he pulls a card from his wallet and slides it over to me.

The card is glossy, thick, black, cardstock with silver calligraphy and boasts a wolf logo on the front.



I flip it over in my hands and see a PO Box Address located in Reno, Nevada.

“What exactly do you consult on?” I ask, setting the card down in front of me and picking up my drink because I know deep down this business is entirely a front for the less-than-legal activities they involve themselves in.

“Most of our work is in acquisitions, but we operate across many industries. We help guide companies or individuals that lose their way,” he says with such smooth delivery, I can tell this is a well-practiced lie, rehearsed and delivered like a script.

Acquisitions? So... theft. They steal companies.

“And, what is it you want from me?” I question, still unsure why he’s risking meeting me to continue my employment rather than sending me the information.

“Currently, I have an urgent need to adjust some identities. I have a few people who need a fresh start. Is this something you could handle?” He asks, knowing full well I have the capability.

“That’s it? Just a few identity modifications? Millions of people could take care of that. Why come to me?” I ask, both genuinely curious and trying to get whatever information I can to satisfy this meeting for Cain.

“Well, Mr. Anderson, I believe you have a more unique skill set than most. This would simply be a great start to our ongoing business relationship. Having allies across the globe is something I think we all need.”

“And if I say no to your offer?” I ask, knowing he would never let me leave here alive if he didn't think I was going to work with him. He smiles, leaning his muscled frame forward.

“Asking was merely a courtesy. I’d prefer a healthy working relationship where I pay you handsomely, but you see, I know quite a lot about you, Mr. Anderson, including where your family resides. Your mother, Alison, is it? She’s an exceptional gardener. I imagine she doesn’t know about any of your extracurricular activities. It would be a shame for her to have to take responsibility for your insolence.”

My jaw sets despite walking into that threat head-on. I knew he had my home address, so it isn’t a leap to think he tracked that to who owned the place.

Fucking perfect. One group has me by the balls because of Elle and the other because of my mother.

“I’m not sure threatening and blackmailing people into doing your work for you is the best way to, what did you say, make allies around the globe. But I understand the threat all the same. You may have the ability to hold those I love over my head in an effort for me to work for you, but I refuse to walk into a blank slate open contract with you. I have limits that I will not cross for you or anyone else, so I want there to be some very firm lines here,” I say

making this shit up as I go because, honestly, I'm not sure there's much I won't do to protect my family.

"I'm listening. State your terms," he says, leaning back and finishing his drink. His casual posture sets me on edge as I devise some hard-line non-negotiables.

"None of the work I complete for you will be facilitating others to rape, murder, or kidnap women or children. I refuse to create any technology that aids in killing people at any scale. I'll give you my services for one year. After which I'm out. Completely out with no strings attached. No one I love will be harmed by ANYONE in your organization, or our contract is void. Do you agree to these terms?" I finish, breathing a little heavier now that I've sped through my demands.

"Mr. Anderson, you have yourself a deal. Though I will add the caveat that if you want to continue working with us, I'd happily discuss an extension." He reaches across the table, extending his palm. I mirror the movement and grab his hand in a firm shake.

Out of the pot and into the fire.

He waves his hand again, and this time the man comes back holding a legal-sized manilla envelope which he slides in front of me.

"This is your first assignment. We have two individuals who need to be completely erased. The details are inside. Every photo, every video, every record of them ever existing down to their yearbook information needs to be gone. Additionally, there's a second assignment that's recently been added as well. It's evolving, but I'll get the details once I know more. For now, I need a new identity for the woman." He sees my hesitation before adding, "something about getting away from a bad relationship. And as for the man,

he was the bad relationship. I need everything you can dig up on him.” I nod, not opening the envelope.

“Timeframe?” I ask to get an idea of how soon he needs this.

“Forty-eight hours. Less if possible,” he responds.

“I have work for the next two days. It’ll have to wait until after that,” I come back, starting to slide out of the booth.

“Then quit. I now own your time for the next year. I think you’ll find your new salary more than sufficient. Your first check is in there. Consider it a signing bonus. Forty-eight hours. That’s it.” I nod, wondering if I can take a leave of absence for the next few weeks while remembering the promotion waiting for me there.

Standing, I start to head toward the exit. Before I take a step, his voice reaches my ears.

“Oh, and Mr. Anderson, I look forward to working with you, *se fallisci ti ammazzo*,” he finishes using what I assume is Italian, and while I have no idea what he said, the threat filters through his tone.

Fuck up, and I’m a deadman.

The trip back to the elevator feels much farther than the first time. My palms are sweating, but my grip on the envelope is firm. I stand silently in the elevator for the entirety of its descent, mainly because three other people are inside with me this time. I don’t want to look crazy talking to myself by trying to reach out to Cain to see if they got what they needed.

Desperately I hope they did so I can start working on my plan B. Get my parents' new identities and move them the hell out of town. Get Elle back and force her to move away as soon as possible. I must scatter everyone I care about as far away from me as possible before making myself disappear.

When the elevator doors open on the casino floor, I exit, heading back to

the elevator for the parking garage. My eyes scan the room, noting the lack of patrons and causing me to pull out my phone to turn it back on and check the time—12:27 am. I hadn't even been up there for half an hour.

The two men who followed me onto the elevator walk casually behind me. I may not have distinguished them from any other tourist dressed for a night on the town, but as everyone from Marlo's crew I met appears to be wearing suits and looking Italian, these two fell right into that crowd.

Why would he have me followed?

I pull my phone up to my ear to fake a conversation, hoping Cain will realize I'm talking to him and respond in my ear. That is, if he's back to watching and listening at all.

"Hey Mila, I just finished work and was wondering if I could come over? I'd invite you over, but I have two roommates to deal with." I say, hoping the code works for him. I wait silently for a second, which feels so much longer, before I'm startled by the female voice that answers.

"Hey, yeah, having roommates really sucks sometimes. You can't try to kick them out tonight?"

"Not likely, but I may be able to sneak away. Tell me where I can meet you," I state, fully aware I have no idea who I'm talking to, as I approach the parking lot elevator. The two guys hang back, not coming up to me.

"How about our usual hang-out spot? How long will it take you to get there?" she asks, playing into the conversation perfectly as the doors open, and I step inside, trying to hit the button for them to close immediately.

"Come on. Come on"

The door begins to shut, and I see the two men trying to move in swiftly, but they don't quite make it before the doors seal.

"Shit, why are they following me?" I ask, dropping the phone from my ear.

“Working on that. Surveillance has them headed for the stairs. My guess is they want to ensure you came alone and aren’t working with anyone. Now listen up. First, once the doors open, stop talking. You're off the phone, and they have better hearing than you do. Second, get to your car casually as fast as you can. When you drive off, don’t go home. Drive around for a while. Go to campus. Whatever, but don’t go home. Make sure no one is following you. Once you’re clear, meet Cain at the complex across from your friend's place.”

“Mila?” I ask, wondering how he would know where she lived.

“No, you idiot. Not your most recent STD candidate. Brielle, or Liv. Either one.” Her voice comes out with more sass than I think a stranger has ever given me, and I mean to comment on it, but before I can, the doors start to open, and I shut up.

Make it to the car. Get out of here. Lose the tail.

By the time I make it to my car, I hear hurried footsteps across the garage. I try to look relaxed as I slide in, turn the key and launch the envelope into the passenger seat. I pull out at a casual pace and drive the route to the exit. As I do, I pass the two men as they jump into a black Mercedes with dark-tinted windows.

Once I hit the main street, I crank the radio in an attempt to drown out the thoughts in my head as I try to determine the best route to ensure no one follows. Rolling down my window, I don’t even feel the bite of the cold air with the adrenaline buzzing through my body. I avoid Las Vegas Boulevard and take back streets, turning right every few roads just to be sure I have lost them before I end up on Sahara and head east.

“Mind losing the music there, Jason Statham. You lost them.” Cain’s voice in my ear startles the fuck out of me. “We’re on them, so you can continue back to the meet point.”

“Who the fuck was in my ear earlier? And where were you? Did you get what you needed?” The questions start flying out of my mouth as I turn into a grocery store parking lot to calm down.

“Yeah, we got it all. We can discuss your next steps once we determine where these two goons are headed.”

Letting out a deep breath, I run my hands through my hair and push my glasses onto my forehead to pinch the top of my nose and relieve some of the pressure building there. It’s then that I remember that they can see everything that I can see.

I remove the glasses, set them on the dash, and point them toward the parked cars around me. Turning the music up a bit to hide the noise, I reach over and grab the envelope. It’s completely blank on the outside. Once I have it open, the documents come falling into my lap.

On top is a blank, unsealed envelope. Sliding my fingers inside, I pull out a premade check and nearly choke out a cough when I catch sight of the total—a quarter of a million dollars.

Holy shit.

I set it aside, filing it into the information I need to sort out later, and grab the first paperclipped chunk of documents. The first several pages show a man and a woman, mostly surveillance shots, along with their data. David and Rachel Healy, from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Apparently, they’ve lived in four states in the last sixty years. I scan back to their photo, wondering if the information needs to be corrected. There’s no way this couple is in their sixties based on these photos, which appear to come from the last few days. He wants them completely deleted as if they never existed.

Shouldn’t be too hard.

Then my eyes skip to the image on the next page, and everything else falls

from my hands as I see Elle staring up at me from her driver's license photo. I shake my head, not believing what I'm seeing before I look at the detailed personal information. It's her. Before I think better of it, I quickly grab the glasses from the dashboard and put them back on before holding up the profile in front of my face.

"You wanna explain to me why Marlo just hired me to change Brielle's identity?" I'm freaking out as I try to remember what he had said about the woman in the second part—something about getting away from her boyfriend.

He fucking hurt her.

It's the only explanation. She ran away from him and somehow contacted these guys in the process. As my mind spins, Cain interrupts my thoughts with words so much worse than I could've imagined.

"Because he has her. They kidnapped her last night."

"When exactly were you going to tell me she was missing, that she was kidnapped, or that these guys had her!?" I scream, hitting the wheel with my fist while wishing he was in front of me so I could take my aggression out on him.

"I only did this meeting with you guys because I wanted to keep her out of all this, to keep her safe. Now you're telling me you don't even fucking have her, that she isn't safe, and the man I was sitting across from, the THUG who threatened to murder my family, has her and is trying to give her a new identity? I should've been doing the deal with him, NOT you! Why does he want her to have a new identity, huh? Tell me that much, Asshole!"

"The truth? I wasn't. I had no intention of ever telling you. Honestly, I don't give a fuck what you think you know about them, about us, about her. I don't need you fucking this up. I'll find her. I'll save her. Your only job is to

get me the information on where she's being held. You're a means to an end." He growls, anger seeping into his words.

"And why the fuck would I trust you to find her? You're using her to get to me. You don't give a shit about her," I yell, squeezing the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

"She's the only thing I give a shit about!" His words come out strangled. Emotion fighting through. For the first time, I realize that she's more than just an insurance policy to him.

What the fuck is going on?

"Well, fuck your intentions. You aren't doing this without me. I won't give you any more information unless I have your word I get to be a part of it." I clench my teeth, seething with anger, ready to fight him on his response.

"Fine, but know, I'll leave you to die if it means saving her. Do not expect anything more."

Oh, I won't.

Fuck Cain. I'm going to find her. I'm going to save her. And then I'm going to protect her from all of this. I'll start by getting her away from all of them.

I'm coming, Elle. Hang on.



Chapter 16

Bri

The smell of coffee wafts into the room, stirring me from sleep. Rolling to my side, I reach for my nightstand to grab my phone. Sliding my hand out before it falls through the air, I realize the nightstand isn't there.

I jolt awake, throwing myself up and looking around frantically, coming to the truth that I'm not at home.

Shit!

I fell asleep. The sun streaks in around the edges of the curtains revealing that night has come and gone, my escape lost with it. I squeeze my eyes shut, sighing at my stupidity.

How could I have fallen asleep?

My eyes glance at the now vacated cream blanket in the corner, noting Snowball is no longer lounging there. Crawling out of the plush bed, I immediately fix the covers. Old habits die hard.

A made bed starts the day off on the right foot.

I'm sure they'll be so happy I made the bed that they'll just let me go. Ha.

Tiptoeing out of the room, I sneak into the bathroom, relieve myself and splash some water on my face before stealing some of the toothpaste and using my finger to brush the stale taste of the last day out of my mouth. Feeling better, my nose guides me back to the kitchen, aiming for the coffee pot.

Hudson sits at the counter with a plate of food in front of him, and Ghost is back in the kitchen cracking eggs into a pan. He doesn't even turn around before addressing me.

"Morning, City. Sleep ok?" His southern drawl out in full effect. I roll my eyes waltzing right to the coffee pot before opening all the cupboards in the area, looking for a cup.

"Oh, you know, as good as can be expected under duress," I reply, growling at the lack of coffee cups. Warm hands grip my shoulders gently, causing me to tense slightly before they turn me and push my feet to walk to the seat at the counter farthest from Hudson. I grind my teeth, not appreciating being forced away from the coffee.

"How'd you like it, darlin'?" he asks.

"Cream and sugar, and don't call me darlin'," I state, putting on his accent with the last word.

"Apologies, City. I forgot. You have a sort of, not anymore, boyfriend who may object." He chuckles, making air quotes with his hands, adding half & half to my cup before stirring it and sliding it in front of me.

"I don't have an anything. And I don't need someone to object to your pet names. Just because you look like that, doesn't mean you get to flirt with everyone," I snap, sliding my hands around the warm cup.

"All I'm hearing is that you think I'm hot, and for the record, I'm not flirting with everyone. I haven't turned my charm on for Hudson here. How

do you like your eggs?

“Unfertilized,” I quip, laughing at my joke. “Scrambled is fine, thanks,” I correct myself, clearing my throat, forgetting I’m not supposed to be comfortable here. I take a long drink from the cup he made me, groaning at the sweetness.

Caffeine can fix everything.

“So what's the plan for today, Hudson? Am I going to be sold off in exchange for whoever you’re trying to save?” I ask, no kindness in my voice. I have none for him.

My eyes slide over to where he sits, noticing the dark circles. I try to force myself to care that Hudson has his reasons behind why he's doing this, but I can't get past the fact that he's offering me as a sacrifice when he could make a million other choices.

It isn't my fault he got into trouble. Maybe he could try working off his debts.

“We meet with Tony at 3 pm,” he says, not looking at me.

“You’re going to turn her over to him?” Ghost asks concern etched on his face.

“It's pack business. You aren't a part of this,” he snaps at Ghost.

“What's 'pack business'?” I ask, looking between them again in a flashback of last night.

“Bri, you're going to be fine. They need you alive to get what they want from Dante.” Hudson says as if this is a typical transaction.

“Fine? I’m going to be fine? You’re trading me to a group of criminals who will use me as bait for Dante. The Dante, who I’ve said hello to exactly one time, yesterday, while drunk. The Dante who doesn’t actually know me? I

know what the people who live in this dark world are capable of. Alive and fine are two very different things,” I yell back at him, my face hardening.

My shouting causes him to visibly recoil, and avert his eyes from my gaze.

“Look, it’s not ideal, but Dante will get you back.” Hudson clenches his jaw shut.

Perfect. Even he doesn’t believe what he’s saying.

“So what do you get? You know, for trading my life. My safety. What do you gain?” I spit the question at him, needing to know what my life is worth.

“My family back,” he snarls, standing up and snatching his plate from the table before dropping it in the sink unwashed and walking out the front door. It slams with a resounding crash that echoes off the cabin walls.

Ghost slides a plate of eggs to me, and my stomach rumbles involuntarily.

“Eat. You’ll need your strength,” he says. His eyes hold mine, and for the first time, I see guilt in them.

“How can you let this happen? How can you stand there and let him hand me over to people like this? What kind of person looks the other way to human trafficking? I’ve been struggling with whether I should trust you. Your actions lead me to believe you’re a decent person. Decent people don’t stand by while bad things are happening right in front of them!” I turn my anger on him. Misplaced as it may be. He isn’t the one walking me into this trade, but he certainly isn’t trying to help me out of it, either.

To his credit, he takes my yelling head-on, unlike Hudson, who runs off every time he doesn’t like the conversation. Squaring his shoulders, Ghost levels his icy blue eyes on mine.

“I don’t get involved in pack business. I have no claim to you. You don’t belong to me. You don’t know this yet, but you’re about to start a war in this state that’s been brewing for a very long time. YOU are the key, and I know

you don't understand, but I cannot interfere," he states firmly. His hands clenched as if holding his frustration at bay.

"What the actual fuck does that even mean? A kidnapped woman is the key? That's bullshit. What are you psychic? Are you going to read my palm next? There's no war in Nevada. I'm being handed over to criminals who kill people on a whim, and you're over here playing Switzerland." Venom weaves through my tone.

Why did I expect more?

"Look City, if I get involved, we both die," his eyes try to convey a message I don't know how to decipher before he continues, his tone serious, begging me to listen. "You're stronger than you realize. You hold something inside of you that will determine the outcome. Just know that when the truth is revealed, you must embrace your destiny. Do not run from it."

"What does that *even* mean? Why are you talking in riddles? What truth? What destiny? How about you just tell me now? You know, take the guesswork out of all this vague prophecy shit," I question, hoping he'll just give in and explain what any of this means.

He lets out a low laugh. A dark chuckle that doesn't give the impression of humor at all.

"Fate doesn't work like that, City. Sometimes it takes a while to be Awakened," He sounds disappointed. Pained in a way that makes zero sense to me.

"Well, I stopped believing in Fate a long time ago," I say, my temper fading at the memory of my brother.

I don't believe in Fate. I don't believe in any higher power, destiny, or God.

Not since I lost Sammy.

If a higher power or someone were pulling all the strings in this universe, they never would've taken him from me. Sure bad things happen, but there's no justice in a world where Elaine gets to live and Sam dies.

Change that, and I'll believe in whoever they want me to.

“That’s a shame because Fate certainly believes in you,” he says before heading out of the kitchen and back toward his bedroom. “Eat.” He says the single word over his shoulder before he disappears from sight.

My appetite is non-existent. I idly push the eggs around for a few minutes before washing off the plate and placing it into the dishwasher. Standing alone in the kitchen, I feel a familiar pull on my heart.

Cain.

I miss his banter, his smile, his smell. He came into my life like a hurricane and left his mark on every part of me. Even now, after everything that’s happened, I struggle to be angry with him. When it comes down to it, I was the one who told him I was leaving. I was the one who told him we couldn’t be serious. I was the one who pushed him away time and again. Then I was the one who flipped out because another girl knocked on his door. We never said we were exclusive.

Even if he did say, it was only me, that what we had was once in a lifetime.

Once in a lifetime. That thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. It's not like I can expect someone who's that hot to be exclusive with a girl who won't commit to him. Our relationship status had only changed twenty-four hours before. Maybe he hadn't had time to cancel his other plans.

I messed everything up. Classic Bri. Run at the first sign of trouble.

I should have let him explain.

My heart clenches thinking of him now. He must be wondering where I am. Thinking that I’m ignoring him, or worse, that I’m done with him altogether.

My body sags onto the counter. The pain of these emotions feels physically heavy.

Maybe I'm not worth saving. Maybe I'm a lost cause. No.

I won't allow my fear to dictate my future. I'm not the key to a criminal war. I'm the only one who can choose my future. Fuck Ghost's divine messages.

I'm in control of my own destiny.

Regaining my spine, I resolve to fight my way back to Cain. To at least give him a chance to explain. Let him tell me what he wants, and stop assuming I know what he's thinking.

A thought occurs to me, and I walk out the front door to the porch. Sitting in the sturdy rocking chair, I find Hudson with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He stares out at the woods, looking every bit like he's about to run off.

"Tell me about the redhead," I state, surprising him.

"What?" His face flashes with confusion, and he throws a rock at the nearest tree, hitting it square in the trunk.

"When I showed up at my apartment, you said I made a mistake. Tell me about the redhead. Who's she?"

"That was probably Pres, Presley, Dante's little sister. Basically, Cain's little sister too. She lives in the other apartment on his floor," he responds, not bothering to look my way as he picks up another rock and repeats the motion, nearly hitting the same spot.

"They aren't together?" I ask, feeling the pit in my stomach grow.

"Not if he's still breathing. Dante would kill him if he ever touched her. Not that I think he'd be interested. Cain doesn't date. Not ever. You're the first one who has ever even appeared to matter to him. That's why I took you. I

knew you were important to him. It makes you valuable to his enemies,” he shrugs, hitting the tree again and again as I juggle my emotions.

I was wrong. I left him for nothing.

Shaking my head, I try to will away the burning of tears that have started behind my eyes.

“So the people you’re giving me to, they hate him? Why?” I adjust my questioning, hoping it will ease my guilt.

“Yes and no.” he shakes his head, still not looking at me.

“Well, that clears everything up,” I respond sarcastically, picking up a rock, throwing it at the same tree, and missing completely.

Well, I won’t count on my aim to get me out of this.

“They want the Vegas territory. Dante controls Vegas. Cain’s his best friend,” he explains, connecting the dots, which creates a vague understanding. I stand there processing this information for several minutes while he walks out to grab more rocks before sitting back down and repeating the process of chucking them at the tree.

“What happened to your family?” I ask, hoping his explanation will help me to understand what he’s doing all this for.

“They’re basically enslaved. Sold to an Alpha in Florida to work off my dad’s gambling bets, but with no way to actually clear their debt.”

“An Alpha?” I ask, confused by the term and noticing his eyes expand at my question.

“Like the head of a family of criminals,” he explains.

“How does trading me to a group here help them?”

“This Alpha and the one in Florida are cousins,” he explains, as some of it finally makes sense to me. I ponder over the trades he’s making and try to put

myself in his shoes. Would I kidnap a person to save Liv or Keith? Probably. I can't imagine losing them.

Sometimes bad guys are just good people in impossible situations.

The thought sinks into my mind and takes hold, not allowing me to ignore it.

Impossible situations still give choices, even if they aren't always easy. He's still choosing wrong.

"Will I be a slave?" I question, my voice dropping slightly as I let my fear leak out.

"No, they'll trade you back for territory or another prisoner," he answers quickly, waving off the question with his hand.

"You sound sure of that," I respond, surprised.

"Leverage is power," he says simply.

"And if they don't think I'm worth the territory?"

"Then you will be sold to someone else or killed. So let's hope Cain cares about you like I think he does, or all of this is for nothing. My betrayal is for nothing," his voice sounds tortured as he finishes.

"If they're willing to trade for me, why wouldn't they just trade for your parents?" I ask, my curiosity taking center stage. He turns his head to look at me for the first time today.

"I didn't tell them. They don't know. I was approached with a solution, and I took it. I'm giving up everything. It needs to work." Desperation seeps into his words as his hands grip the chair.

Nodding, I turn back, heading inside with the conversation rolling around in my head. Before I get inside, I hear him say one more thing.

"I'm sorry." It's barely a whisper, but I know at my core he means it. The sincerity bleeds through, and for the first time, I feel sorry for him. Not

enough to forgive him for his actions, but I understand his desperation to keep those he loves safe.

Knowing now that I'm wrong about Cain, I can only hope he'll try to get me back despite me running away. Despite me bailing at the first sign of trouble. I didn't believe in him. If I had, I wouldn't be here.

This is my fault. This time I deserve this.

I may have jumped to conclusions, but I'm not going to let Cain, or Dante for that matter, give up something important to them for me. I'll find a way out of this mess I created. With only a few hours until I'm face to face with the new threat, it's time to come up with a plan.



Chapter 17

Cain

My jaw will likely shatter soon with the number of times I've had to stop myself from responding, shifting, hell, speaking today. Holding back my wolf becomes increasingly difficult as I'm forced to listen to Keith argue that she belongs to him, that she's his to protect.

The fuck she is. He can't have her. She's mine.

The moment he shouted at me that I didn't give a shit about her, my wolf nearly broke through my grip. It made me all the more thankful that Jake was driving us to her complex. I may not have been able to retain control over the SUV while fighting off the shift.

I shouldn't have revealed my true feelings to him, but my wolf needed him to know she belonged to us. She's the only thing that matters, and I'll kill him myself if he stands between us.

"Should I drop you at the compound?" Jake asks, his face saying what he won't. He doesn't trust me with Keith.

I don't blame him.

“I’m fine,” I respond tersely, focusing my attention out the window as he pulls off the freeway.

“Yeah, but will Keith be fine?” he continues his questioning, not taking his eyes off the road.

I don’t respond, mostly because whatever I return with will be a lie. I can’t be sure how my wolf will react to anything Keith says. The only thing keeping me from eliminating him is knowing that Bri would never forgive me for killing one of her closest friends. However, if he thinks he has even the slightest chance of taking her from me...

“Your growling doesn’t breed much confidence,” Jake says, trying to hold back a smile.

“I’ll handle it,” I reply, releasing a deep breath while flexing and unflexing my fists to remove some tension.

“Great because we’re here,” he says, pulling into the apartment complex. My eyes scan the cars before I locate Keith next to his. I can tell he’s fuming.

His eyes land on our vehicle, and I can see the anger plastered all over his face.

“You manipulative asshole! Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” he begins shouting before I’m even out of the car. “I could’ve asked about her. I could’ve opened the damn papers and found a way to ask about her, and...”

I cut him off before he can finish his statement. “And you could’ve been killed. You could also have made it more dangerous for her. Worst of all, you could’ve gotten her killed. You have no idea who you’re dealing with, what they’re capable of, what they’ll do to her if we can’t get her back!”

He loses some of his bravado, and, for a moment, I can see fear flash across his face.

“How did they even get to her?” he asks, though this time not in an accusatory tone.

“They used someone she knew, but that's not important. They have her, and we have to get her back. Where's the paperwork?”

He reaches back into the car and grabs the envelope containing all the information that he's supposed to use to complete his assignments. I hand them directly to Jake, who heads back to the SUV while calling Pres. As he passes along the information, a new car pulls into the lot, putting us all on guard.

The white Jeep Grand Cherokee pulls to a stop in front of Bri's building with its windows rolled down and music playing out into the night. I watch her roommate, Liv, jump out, slamming the door behind her. With my enhanced hearing, I hear the driver call her a fucking bitch under his breath as he drives away, barely giving her time to clear the path before he guns it.

“Asshole!” she shouts, slamming her high heel into the asphalt.

She throws her hands into the air in frustration, and I can't help but take in the barely there hot pink club dress she has on.

She's got to be freezing.

Before I can begin to hope that she'll head inside without so much as a backward glance, Keith yells to her.

Shit.

“Liv, you ok?” he asks, turning her surprised expression on us. Not realizing she had company witnessing her outburst.

“Keith, what are... why are you here?” Her eyes scan to me, and I attempt a friendly disposition and a wave. “Where's Bri?” she asks, turning her face down and looking between the two of us.

“ Uh... well, she's, Cain?” Keith stumbles through before throwing it to

me.

“She’s back at my place, asleep. She needed a change of clothes for tomorrow, so I came to grab her some. I forgot to grab her keys, so Keith told me he could let me in. Bri said you’d be at your boyfriend’s place and didn’t want to interrupt you,” I say, trying to think on my feet about why we’d both be here, late at night, without her.

“Yeah, well, I’m not. You can come in. I’ll grab her some things,” she says, turning toward the apartment.

“Who was that?” Jake's voice breaks through, pulling my attention back to him. His reappearance surprises me, but his sole focus is on Liv.

Her eyes flash to him, confusion flooding her face.

“Who are you?” she asks, not answering his question but instead throwing her own back instead.

Jake walks closer to Liv, causing her to wrap her arms around herself in a protective manner while taking a step back. He stops directly in front of her. Anger rolls off him in waves.

What’s going on?

I’m confused by the aggression he displays. Jake has his shit, but I’ve never seen him so much as raise his voice to a woman. Not with his history, so this is way out of character for him. I watch silently, my concern growing as he leans in, careful not to touch her.

“Tell me his name,” he demands, his voice rough.

It’s then I see what has him so riled up. Liv turns her face, the right side catching the light for the first time. It highlights the purple bruising and swelling that colors her cheek and eye. Her expression hardens, and her chin lifts.

“That’s none of your business,” she responds defiantly before turning on

her heel and storming back toward the apartment. Jake's fists clench, a growl rolling off of him. I can see him wrestling with the decision to follow her. Before he can move, I step into his line of sight, shaking my head before my eyes flip back to Keith's. I silently tell him to stay with Jake. He nods.

I catch up with Liv at the top of the stairs, catching her scent for the first time.

Whoa, alcohol.

I'm surprised she isn't stumbling in her heels with the amount I smell wafting off her.

"Are you ok? Do you need us to take you somewhere? Hospital? Police? Your parents?" I ask, lowering my voice in an attempt not to hurt her pride.

She laughs, not a full laugh but more a snap at me.

"The tabloids would love that. 'Politician's daughter caught in 'Me Too' accusations amidst campaign.' Thanks, but no thanks. I'm fine." Her voice leaves no room for argument, and she points to the couch. "Wait here. I'll grab her something. Does she work tomorrow?" I nod absently, unsure when Bri's scheduled for her next shift. I follow her instructions and sit down to wait.

When Liv returns, she has a bag on her arm that she extends to me.

"I gave her a few options. Remind her we have early dinner with my parents on Thursday, you know, Thanksgiving and all, and tell her to answer my calls. Next time she goes this long without checking in, I'll send a search party," she says, pausing and looking distressed for a moment before continuing, "As for this," she points to her eye, "I'd appreciate it if we kept this between us. You know Bri, she'd just worry." She sets her jaw waiting for my reaction.

"Are you done with him?" I ask, worrying about her safety. She looks back

at me, no hesitation in her response.

“Yes.” She’s firm, and I believe her.

“You still have to see him in class?” I probe.

“No, he’s a hospitality major. We don’t have classes together,” she reassures me, waving her hand as if throwing the idea away.

“Fraternity entanglements?” I continue.

“No,” she repeats.

I take a moment to read her, trusting my intuition that she’s being honest with me about him before I respond.

“Okay, but if he so much as walks in your direction, I want you to call me,” I say, putting my palm out in a request for her phone. She sighs, giving in, and hands it over. I input my number before passing it back. “I won’t lie to Bri for you, but I won’t bring it up if she doesn’t.” It’s the best I can offer Liv.

I’ve lied to Bri enough.

Leaving her inside, I head out of the apartment, back to Keith and Jake. Keith stands alone outside his car, and Jake returns to his SUV seat.

“Do you know the guy’s name? The one who dropped her off,” I ask Keith, reading the concern on his face.

“Jeffery Denning. He’s a senior. Plays football. I always knew he was an asshole, but I never thought.” He shakes his head, anger building in his face.

“We’ll take care of it,” I state before changing the subject. “I’m going to need you to start your work for Marlo.” I see a look cross his face that I know too well, and my wolf stirs.

“Don’t even think about trying to go rogue on this. You will get her killed,” I growl at him, getting in his face to drive the point home.

“If I’m giving you information, I want to be in on everything. I won’t be

sidelined while you use my information to ride in and save the day. I'm staying with you until WE find her. I can work from wherever you do. I just need a computer," he demands, crossing his arms defiantly.

Jake clears his throat behind me, whispering so Keith can't hear him, but I can.

"Might be a good idea. Pres could keep an eye on his work to ensure he isn't withholding anything from us," he says.

My muscles clench, holding back my wolf as I consider his offer.

"You want in? Fine. But you need to understand one thing. You aren't in charge. You follow instructions without question. If you do anything that compromises her safety, I'll kill you." By the end of my statement, I'm right in his face, and my wolf simmers beneath my skin, begging me to let him handle Keith.

To his credit, he doesn't back down, but rather, he maintains his stance, never looking away from me. I can almost see the gears turning in his head as he chooses his next remark. For a moment, I consider pushing some command into my voice but decide against it.

"Brielle's my priority. I'll do whatever I have to do to get her back safely," he responds, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with my terms. The determination I see on his face satisfies my wolf, and I turn, giving him my back, and head to the SUV while pulling my phone out as I go.

"Then we're on the same page. Grab your shit from the car and get in," I say, shutting the passenger door while dialing Pres.

"Where do you want him?" Pres asks, not bothering with a greeting. That tells me she's been listening through his devices to our conversation.

"Alternate conference room. It's secluded enough to keep pack affairs separate but close enough to keep an eye on him. Give him the basics, but

make sure you can monitor whatever you give him. If he finds her, I want to be the first to know.”

“Got it. It’ll be set up when you arrive. Also, where’s he staying?” she finishes, asking a question I hadn’t thought of, and my eyes slide over to Jake as Keith climbs into the back seat.

“I’ll get back to you,” I end the call while considering where we should keep him.

My eyes wander to the time illuminated on the dashboard. It’s after two.

“Put the bag back on,” I say to Keith in the backseat before nodding to Jake to head out.

My head falls back against the seat, exhaustion setting in. Even after being knocked out for half a day, I still don’t feel rested. Adrenaline has flooded my system all day. My overwhelming need to find Bri has me tense and anxiety-ridden in a way I’ve never experienced before.

I’ve spent most of my life in complete control. Obsessively so. Even with Alpha blood and teenage hormones, I was years ahead of others my age at keeping my emotions in check and maintaining a firm hold over my wolf. For years, Dante would get so pissed at my ability to see clearly through any situation we encountered.

It’s part of why I’m so good at my job. The aggression I get to show, or the calculations I make about risk on the fly are completed with a clear head. Dante spent years fighting his wolf for control, and while he now has become an Alpha with a long fuse, it wasn’t always that way. He chooses to lead from headquarters because he can separate his emotions when he isn’t physically present at the scene. Where I have always been a precision weapon, Dante is more like a bomb; you never know how much damage it will inflict until it goes off.

Today though, I barely cling to control, struggling to maintain any hold as time drags with no new information about her whereabouts.

Where are you, Firefly?

When we return to the compound, Jake and I escort the blindfolded Keith into the main office building. We bypass the stairs and head to the elevator, riding it up in silence.

“Take him to conference room two so he can get himself set up,” I order before turning toward Presley’s office.

I find her typing away furiously, Dante standing over her shoulder. Crossing the room, I set down the surveillance equipment Keith used at the meeting tonight and look over the screens in front of me. Cameras in the conference room have been enlarged and show Keith unplugging cords and re-routing them in the room while Jake watches from the doorframe.

“You didn’t set up the system yourself?” I ask, confused why he’s having to adjust things.

“Oh, I did. Everything was functional,” she says with a chuckle before adding, “he just happens not to like that the cords are twisted, tangled, and knotted.” She pulls her lips in, attempting to hold in her laughter as she continues working on something on an entirely different screen. My eyes trace the cabling on the floor in Presley’s office, noting that every single one is perfectly lined, taped, or mounted, and nothing is a mess.

“How did that happen?” I ask sarcastically, noting the flush of her cheeks and the pull on the corner of her mouth.

“Just a sec,” Pres responds, not slowing her hands.

Dante stands silently behind her with his arms crossed over his chest. He’s showered and changed clothes since the last time I saw him. He now wears

dark blue sweatpants and a white t-shirt that fits snugly against his athletic frame. It dawns on me how much stress I'm putting on my pack. How much they're having to do for me; for my Mate.

"There. Done," she finishes before turning around and continuing, "Keith has an older rig set up in the conference room. I've reconfigured our network firewall. We're now blocking any commonly used ports for encrypted communication protocols. He could try to get around it using an unconventional port, but I'm monitoring his network traffic, recording every keystroke, and all of the information is mirrored to my workstation. On top of that, he has no write permissions anywhere."

"Write permissions?" I ask.

"He can't save any files. This helps protect us from any damage to our systems and minimizes any communications from going out. He can try to do something nefarious, but he won't get anything past me." Her confidence has me nodding my head with her.

"Ok, so then where will he be sleeping?" I ask, turning my attention to Dante.

His focus shifts to me, and he pauses, evaluating me momentarily. I attempt to relax my muscles, hoping to look less wound up.

"He's assigned to 508," Dante responds easily.

"You sure we can't just keep him in a holding cell? I mean, then we wouldn't need to waste a body securing him," I ask, knowing the guest suites are too good for Keith's untrustworthy ass, despite Dante having placed him the farthest he could from the building exit, and he's five floors in the air.

"Keith isn't a prisoner. He's here voluntarily, helping us get Brielle back. I think we can offer him a bed in a guest suite. Erik has a security schedule in place with one guard on the room door and one on-camera monitoring. We

all need to try and get some rest. Tomorrow is make or break for finding her before Marlo has her in his custody; if he doesn't already. I need everyone operating at their best, and that includes Mr. Anderson." His eyebrow lifts at me in a slight challenge as he finishes.

He's right.

As much as I hate it, we need Keith right now. He might just be our ticket to finding her in time.

I exhale, releasing as much tension as I can in the process.

"Fine. But if we don't have new answers soon, I'm going to Reno. We know that's the end game for Hudson. I don't want to be hours away when we locate her. If intel changes before then, fine, but if not, I'm taking a team with me." I state, not asking permission but stating my intentions to avoid getting into an all-out battle tomorrow.

"Meeting at eleven in the MC. We need to have a plan. We can't start a war without evidence. Hopefully, we can get some," he finishes, rubbing his eyes at the top of his nose. "Jake's taking Keith to his room now. You need to go to bed."

He walks out of Presley's office, and I turn back to her.

"I know you've covered your bases, but be careful. We don't know his intentions. He could be acting like he's on our side to sabotage us for Marlo," I warn, hoping she sees that Keith's a wild card and we just waltzed him right into the heart of our operation.

She nods her understanding. I walk out of her office, heading back to my apartment. Back to the bed that smells like my Mate, intending to wrap myself up in Bri's scent for a few hours in hopes that sleep will fix the aching in my heart, and that it will solidify my focus and prepare me for whatever comes next.

Tomorrow the hunt begins.



Chapter 18

Dante

The walk back to my office gives me time to plan our next steps. The last twenty-four hours have thrown several challenges my way, and not having my Second mentally capable of taking some of the load drains me.

Every time I put one fire out, it seems three more pop up, giving me too many proverbial balls in the air.

The Healys, Hudson, Brielle, Mr. Anderson, and now Marlo's plans.

Elijah was able to trace the Healys to the Miami Pack run by Luca Amato, Deacon Marlo's uncle and one of the oldest, nastiest Alphas in the United States. Not only did the Miami Pack happen to be the fifth largest recorded pack in existence, but it also had a ruthless reputation for still being run the old ways.

Slavery, Breeding, Arranged Couplings.

Everything we've spent decades trying to eradicate from our culture. Not that we've ever been able to prove any of the rumors because everyone who has been a witness and tried to testify before the LLC has gone missing, had a sudden change of heart, or lost their nerve. Over the years, the attempts have

been fewer and farther between as Alphas in the surrounding packs have grown tired of the relentless upheaval it causes to their businesses, their pack members, and the lives of those they try to protect the most.

My father sat on the council the last time a claim was submitted, just after the old war. Unfortunately, by that point, Luca had too many of the LLC members in his pocket, either through generous donations or blackmail, and none would hear the case.

Finding out Hudson's parents were traced to his pack was the worst-case scenario. It made me wonder what Hudson was thinking in trading a single human girl in exchange for his parents. It would make more sense if he knew she was Unawakened, but of course, he couldn't; he isn't an Alpha.

Now, had he successfully been able to smuggle HUNTER, Presley's proprietary first-of-its-kind software, he'd have more than enough to trade. Her innovative software could be implemented into any existing system to scan millions of hours of surveillance and ascertain not only individuals who were shifters but also could pick out vampires, fae, angels, and demons in any of their shifted forms using a combination of camera images, thermal indicators, audio vibration, or even scent tracing.

Not only can it be used to identify different species, but it can utilize that data processing power to brute force into any security system, camera, or phone in the world. It does this using proximity processing and low-orbit satellites.

On the human side, it would revolutionize the war on human trafficking. Missing person cases would almost cease to exist due to the ability to follow anyone anywhere in real-time. For other species, it would do the same; however, it could also expose all of us to the human world.

This advancement meant detection, protection, safety, and security for all if

it stayed in the right hands; however, in the wrong hands, it could be a targeting system that could locate anyone. Using it wouldn't just be a witch hunt, it would annihilate an entire species. A complete genocide.

As you can imagine, software this powerful, came with unforeseen side effects. Off the top of my head, I knew that online banking, online shopping, government files and communications, and financial institutions, all of them compromised. Shit, every encryption algorithm that's not quantum-resistant would be vulnerable. That's just the beginning, the list of future side effects is endless.

Because of this, only four people had a working knowledge of the software's capability, and only Pres knew the genuine intricacies of how her algorithms configured the initial data. Cain, Mason, and I understood the general premise, but the inner workings, that's all Presley.

Thankfully Keith wasn't able to work out what the code did.

I fall into my computer chair, pulling up the email Elijah forwarded from Bronson, Alpha of the Fort Lauderdale Pack, the pack the Healys had been a part of the last few years. He details the dates when the Healys left. They correspond to the timeline for Hudson leaking the information so Kole could steal the software.

He was blackmailed.

This news doesn't surprise me, but it puts a pit in my stomach. Cain will never let this go. He'll want his retribution. It pains me to know that Hudson cannot come back from this, despite having little choice.

Why didn't he come to me?

My failures as an Alpha seem to be glaring me in the face. Even my pack members aren't relying on me.

Shaking off those thoughts, I scan through a few more unread emails about

new clients requesting personnel, status reports on the current accounts, a glowing review from a local politician whose daughter we recovered earlier this month after she was taken from her nanny during playtime at the park, and an itemized list of upcoming events put together by Quinn.

The list is over a page long and only lists events we're covering through the end of the year. My eyes catch on the retreat we're hosting for unmated wolves in allied packs.

Three weeks?

The stress eases back into my shoulders as I realize how distracted I've become with the stolen software, Cain's missing Mate, and Kole's presence in our territory. I make a mental note to touch base with the Alphas who are attending, and those who will be sending members.

We need to figure out this mess sooner than later because I can't have our missteps broadcast to fifteen different packs.

Before shutting everything down, I send a to-do list to Quinn, knowing she'll hold down the fort until I can get back to the day-to-day of the business.

Quinn stepped in as my assistant the day I took over the pack. Her mother, Evelyn, held the position for my father when he was in charge, but after his accident, she didn't feel she could continue.

It was temporary at first. She was just filling in where her mom couldn't, but after a few weeks, she created routines, knew my needs before I could ask about them, and became the support I needed to keep the pack running smoothly.

Later when we officially opened VP Securities, her role shifted to cover my duties, both as Alpha and CEO. She's my right hand in all things, and I trust her implicitly.

In truth, I don't think any of this would work without her, and I've been meaning to push her to take some time off for weeks. Once everything settles down, I'll make sure she gets a break. Maybe send her and Pres on a girl's trip.

We will all need a break.

My phone wakes me several hours later, the alarm beeping at me to get up.
Four hours wasn't nearly enough time.

Rolling over, I grab the device to shut it up, and I notice I have several notifications splashed across the screen.

Two missed calls, three emails, and one text message from an unknown number. The text message pulls my attention first, as everyone I know is saved on my phone. I pull it open and nearly drop it from my hands as I read the text.

Restricted number: Trade happening at 3 pm. Negotiate her release before the Alpha returns. Bring the leverage and prepare for a fight. If her Unawakened status is revealed before the trade is made, lives will be lost.

Fuck.

Hudson is already trading her to Reno. We were supposed to have more time. My eyes flick up to the clock on the screen, noting it's already 9:21 am.

Throwing off my sheet, I jump out of bed and rush to get ready.

Dante: Quinn, I'm moving the council meeting to 9:45 am.

Quinn: I'll get the room set up. What do you need?

Dante: Files on leadership within the Reno pack, an updated map of their territory, and an Americano.

Quinn: I'll take care of it.

Pulling off my T-shirt, I head to the bathroom to clean up before the meeting. I take a moment to focus and send a mind-link to the entire council.

Dante: Council, I'm moving the meeting to 9:45 am. Get up, and get here.

Dante: Pres, I need you to trace a number.

Pres: Fuck you and your early bird wake ups

Her response makes me chuckle. Pres has never been a morning person. No time before noon is safe to talk to her because she's usually up half the night coding.

I send along the number once I know she's awake enough to jot it down somewhere and step into the water. Usually, I get the best ideas as I stand amidst the steamy spray. The time in relative silence allows me to approach problems from another angle. Today's shower isn't long enough to sort through anything, and I get out still wondering how this is going to play out.

Dante: Erik, I need the Gulfstream ready by noon. Submit a flight plan to Reno.

Dante: Jake, I need a team of eight ready for wheels up at eleven-thirty. Select four from the black team, two from blue, and two from red.

Erik: Copy.

Jake: Copy.

Each of our traveling response teams specializes in a specific skill set. Our black team consists of the strongest Betas in the pack. They're trained and focused on up-close combat in both wolf and human form. The blue team contains our best sharpshooters covering a dozen different weapons types. Our red team deploys to stealth missions. They tend to be at the center of the human trafficking cases. Honestly, I hope we don't need any of them.

I pull on a pair of black slacks and a deep blue button-up shirt,

remembering I have CEO duties after this meeting that I'll need to take care of before heading north, and I head out of my penthouse apartment.

The elevator ride down, and the subsequent walk to my office are uneventful, and I spend the time working through the best approach for negotiating Brielle's return. It reminds me that we need to be ready for an exchange.

Dante: Andre, I need Kole prepared for transport. Pick-up will be 11:15 am. Bagged and gagged.

Andre: You got it. He'll be ready.

Mentally, I go through everything that needs to be handled as I walk into my office. The files I asked Quinn to grab lay neatly on the desk in clearly labeled folders, and a steaming Americano sits next to them.

At least someone's reliable around here.

I grab the folders and coffee without bothering to sit down. As I turn back around to head toward the conference room, I slam right into the petite bubbly blonde.

"Fuck!" I exclaim, looking down to see her once light pink blouse drenched in dark brown liquid.

"Shit!" Quinn yells simultaneously, dropping the papers in her hands and pulling the garment off her skin to keep it from burning.

"I'm sorry," she quickly slips out, dropping her gaze to the floor, though I'm not entirely sure what she's apologizing for.

"No, it's my fault. I wasn't paying attention, and I didn't hear you come in," I respond, unsure how to help her because wiping at her shirt seems more like sexual harassment than helpful assistance.

I look down to the floor, where more papers are now strewn amongst the splatters of coffee, and I bend down to pick them up. Unfortunately, Quinn

also takes that exact moment to drop to get them, and our foreheads smack together with an audible crack.

“Damnit,” I shout, throwing my hands out to catch her before she falls over in her heels from the force of the hit.

“Ouch,” she whispers as I hold her by the arms to keep her steady. After a moment, her eyes open, and I read them, trying to see if she’s ok, looking for signs of a concussion. The deep brown color of her eyes nearly blends with her pupil, making it hard to determine where one ends and the other begins.

“Are you okay?” I ask, wondering if I should let her go or give her a minute to get her bearings. As I ponder what to do, she stands, running her hands over the soiled dress shirt.

“I’m fine, just embarrassed. I’m not usually this clumsy,” she finishes taking the now-collected papers from my hand. She carefully walks around the spill to my desk and begins organizing them back to the way they started while continuing.

“I’ll have someone come get this floor cleaned up. You have a black button-up shirt in the wardrobe that came back from the cleaners yesterday. That should work with those slacks. Why don’t you get changed and head over to the conference room? It’s all set up. I’ll bring these and a fresh cup of coffee over in just a minute.”

Her assertiveness, despite her size and lineage, has always impressed me. She stands up to anyone who tries to push through her and has held her own against some highly powerful businessmen without batting an eye.

“Thank you, Quinn, and make sure you charge your new shirt to my card when you order a replacement,” I say, not bothering to argue with her as I stare down and notice the stain on my right sleeve. I begin unbuttoning my blue shirt as I walk to the wardrobe, finding the black shirt still covered in

clear cellophane. Shrugging out of my current shirt, I pull the black one from the bag and peel it off the hanger before tossing my soiled shirt onto the floor.

Turning back to the room, I catch Quinn's eyes on me a moment before they snap back to the stack of papers in front of her, her head shaking away a thought.

Was she watching me undress?

No. She was probably just looking to see where my shirt went so she could send it off to the cleaners. I continue buttoning as I exit my office without another word and head the two floors down to the conference room, turning my focus back to our rescue mission.

When I arrive in the conference room, four council members sit in their chairs, silently awaiting news. James isn't here as he needed to take a trip to New Mexico to finalize plans for the retreat. Jake is missing.

Their eyes flip to me as I take my seat at the head of the table.

I look down at my watch, noting we're still a few minutes early.

Dante: ETA, Jake?

Before answering, the door opens, and he walks right to his seat. As he pulls himself up to the table, I notice his right hand is swollen, and his knuckles are split.

Jake: Apologies.

Dante: Everything okay?

Jake: Had to take care of something. Didn't have time to shift. I'll take care of it after the meeting.

I raise an eyebrow, and he nods apologetically, giving no more explanation.

Dante: Quinn, please grab an ice pack for Jake.

Quinn: *Yep, on it*

“Let’s get started. Brielle is being delivered to the Marlo Pack today at 3 pm.” I start, noticing Cain’s eyes flaring with the news.

“I’ll be contacting their Second shortly after, to negotiate her return. I’ve been told that Deacon’s headed back to Reno today, so we need this sorted out tonight before he’s filled in on everything. Especially before he can meet with her to ascertain her Unawakened status.”

“What’s your play?” Cain asks. “There’s no way he’d believe you’d trade a human girl for an Alpha legacy. Kole may not actually be given the reins anytime in the future, but that doesn’t take away his lineage. He’s not only Deacon’s nephew, he’s the only male descendant of his family line since Deacon himself never had any kids. It’s not an equitable trade,” he finishes, pointing out the exact problem I’ve been playing through my head all morning.

“I’m aware. I won’t be pitching an even trade. In fact, I’m not pitching Kole at all. We’re just bringing him as backup, but I’m hoping that I don’t need to let him go. I’ll present Ms. DelaCourt as more of a problem than an asset. One we’d be doing him a favor by taking her off his hands.” It’s not the best plan, but it’s more believable than the alternative.

“You could use her McCoy connections to stir the pot. Mention that they’re sniffing around in her absence and use that to imply you’d send them straight to the Reno Pack,” Elijah adds.

“Having political and legal heat headed their way would certainly not be the best for them. Especially if the newly appointed Second allowed her to stay,” Pres adds, a gleam in her eye as she paints the pictures for us.

“I think it could work. Erik,” I continue shifting focus to the other side of the table, “where are we with transport?” As he starts to brief us, Quinn

walks in, now dressed in a spotless powder blue top, and places the folders in front of me along with a fresh cup of coffee.

She hands Jake the ice pack, which he begrudgingly takes with a quiet thanks in her direction. Quinn smiles at him before she crosses to the other side of the table, toward Pres, and slides her a white sugar-free Monster energy drink, winking at her best friend as she quickly heads out.

The look on Presley's face makes me chuckle under my breath. That girl needs an IV for the amount of caffeine she consumes daily.

Dante: Thank you, Quinn.

“James took Yelena’s flight team in the Gulfstream after our meeting yesterday, so we’ll be using the Cessna. It’s fueled, and Ben’s flight team has been alerted for a noon departure.”

“Good. Jake, teams?”

“Theo, Gabriel, Max, and Jay from the black team. Wyatt and Jess from the blue team. Carter and Colt from the red team. We’re all prepping and will be standing by on the tarmac at eleven thirty.”

“Pres?” I question, nodding at Jake before shifting to her. She takes a long sip of her energy drink before continuing.

“I’ll head up the green team. Mason and I will be your eyes and ears. The equipment’s packed in my office and will be loaded with the machinery. The flight plan has been simulated, and Erik sent in the cover flight information. No trace of take-off or landing will be tied back to us. I have Mason pulling up possible trade locations with isolation and exit routes. Those will be ready by the time we depart.”

I slide the folder with the territory maps over her way.

“My guess is he’s going to want to use home-field advantage. Make sure we have a contingency. Once we have the location, we’ll lock down a more

solid plan. Next, how are we mitigating her absence?”

“After running into her roommate last night, I made sure to respond to her text through the mirrored phone since her original one was smashed. I let her know Bri is staying with me for the rest of the week. Additionally, I emailed her professors through her school email, letting them know that she 'came down with the flu' and will be working from home. That should get us some time. Pres, can you have Keith call in sick for both of them in a few minutes since Bri doesn't have her boss's phone number in her phone? I'm guessing she doesn't use that to call out.” Cain turns to Pres, waiting for her nod.

“How are we handling Mr. Anderson?” My next question falls between Cain and Pres as I'm not entirely sure if we have a plan in place for him.

“I made him a deal. He can be involved in finding her, but we can't have him at the trade in case things go sideways. As much as I'd love a carefully placed accident, he's human and Brielle's best friend. He can't know about us, and there are too many intangibles that could reveal our world, which would sign his death certificate.”

“Pres, can he ride with Mason on this one, stay busy with his Marlo projects, or scan perimeter traffic?” I offer as a way to silo him away from the action.

“Mason's on counterintelligence measures during the trade. I need him to be able to focus. The thieving hacker can stay with me. My role is less obvious and easier to conceal.”

“Then I want an extra body in there to ensure he doesn't turn on you,” I state, not asking.

“I can handle myself,” she growls, “he's a human for crying out loud. I train with the black team weekly. I don't need a babysitter.”

Her stubbornness is infuriating. I've spent her entire life keeping her safe.

She's never unprotected. Even when she was off at college, I had guards on her floor, in her classes, and at every damn frat party she went to. If only she knew the lengths I'd go, and have gone, to ensure her safety. I won't lose her like I have everyone else.

"You won't be set up alone with a grown man who has already proven he'll work against us if it fits his intentions." I grow angrier as I continue. "It would only take you losing focus at the wrong time, or paying too much attention to something else, and he could best you. Not because I think you're weak, but because any of us could get distracted. Everyone has backup. Period. Jake, pull one more for the trip," I order, leaning back in my chair and bringing my fingers to my beard.

Pres sits with anger radiating off her, arms crossed in defiance, and biting the inside of her cheek as she fights her urge to continue.

Dante: You're the only blood I have left.

Her eyes widen, surprised by the message before they fall soft at my words, and the face she makes looks exactly like our mother's. For a moment, I let the pain Pres feels cross through the bond, leaning into the ache in my heart over her loss. One deep breath is all I allow myself to feel. I clear my throat, sealing away my emotions, and continue the meeting.

"Were you able to trace the number?" I ask as a follow-up. She exhales, nodding once before continuing.

"Yes, and no. It was a throw-away number on a burner phone. I was able to ascertain where that phone was purchased, with cash, unfortunately. But the phone type felt familiar, despite it not being a brand we use. All that to say, I did some digging and found where we logged this particular phone type." Intrigue flashes in her eyes while she takes in the 'I know something you don't know' moment.

“We're waiting,” I say, unamused.

We don't have time for this.

“The phone was logged under the files from Detroit,” she says the city name with reverence. An audible gasp fills the air as we all remember the joint task force. Seven people survived that raid. Four are sitting at this table. Two are running what's left of the Detroit Pack. One hasn't been seen since.

Well fuck.

Cain speaks up before I can.

“No way. There's just no fucking way. He's been missing for four years! What the hell is Ghost doing in the middle of this?” The rest of the faces at the table mirror the shock I feel. No one has seen him since Detroit. No one has even heard rumors. He disappeared that night exactly like his namesake.

“No idea. But if he's a player, this just got a whole lot bigger. He doesn't get involved in pack business. If he's warning us, we need to be ready for anything,” I push back from the table to finalize my orders.

“Jake, I need you to transport Kole. He'll be ready at eleven fifteen. Pres, make sure those exits are airtight. I don't want to lose anyone. Erik, ensure all safety protocols on the plane are rechecked before takeoff. Elijah, I need you to review the leadership roster before we make the call. If you know anything about any of them that we can use, now is the time.” I slide the second folder to him. “You have ninety minutes. Dismissed.”

Dante: Cain, stay.

His eyes flash to me at the mind-link message, but he doesn't move. Trying to read his moods has become increasingly difficult lately. He's the wild card in this plan, and I need him to know he can't go rogue on this one.

When the room is clear, I turn my attention to him.

“I need to know that I can trust you out there. I won't sacrifice my pack for

you to play the hero. We're doing this for you. We're doing this for your Mate, but make no mistake, I do not value her life over the lives of those in this pack."

"They're my family too." he spits out, anger sliding through the words.

"Remember that when she's standing across from you. If this trade goes south, we will lose lives," I say, adding emphasis. "Don't make them your fault."

I pull back from the table, using it to push myself up.

"Let's go get your girl," I say as I walk back out of the conference room. I have two meetings before I can pack for the flight. Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I send a single text message to the unknown number.

Dante: I guess legends really don't die.



Chapter 19

Bri

Never before had I realized how slowly time moves when you aren't running from one thing to another. While I wouldn't say my life was over-scheduled like Liv's, there was always somewhere I needed to be. Sitting in a cabin with no technology, completely detached from the outside world, felt like time stood still.

Every attempt to busy myself makes the minutes click more slowly than before. I've stared at the ceiling and wandered all over the house along with the area outside. I've even taken half an hour to look for Snowball to pass the time. Not that I found him. Time beats the rhythm of a slow march toward my death, and it has my anxiety humming beneath my skin.

The longer I'm here, the more likely someone has noticed my absence and is looking for me.

By now, Liv has to be suspicious. Cain must have tried to get me to talk to him in our Global Business Strategies class that happened this morning. Right now, I should be headed to work. Keith would see that I'm gone.

Someone must miss me.

It's wishful thinking at best. Our lives get busy, and it's entirely possible I'd skip class to avoid Cain after leaving the other night. I could be sick or have traded shifts at work. Liv could still believe I was living it up with Cain and just not answering her messages. Instead, I'm twenty minutes from being handed over to some guy named Big Tony, who's just as likely to kill me as sell me.

The sound of the car door shutting outside brings me back to the present. Hudson kicks loose snow off his boots as he walks into the living room, scanning the space until he sees me curled up in a blanket on the far side of the room in an old recliner.

"It's time," he says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his worn-in jeans. His tone almost implies he doesn't want this any more than I do.

"Do I get another chemical cocktail, or can I walk to the car?" I smart.

"Just restraints and blindfold," he shrugs, guilt evident on his face. I sigh, knowing I need to save my strength to escape, and I climb out of the chair. Hudson doesn't stop me as I turn toward the hallway en route to the bathroom. I don't know how long this trip will be, but I don't want another side-of-the-road stop.

Once I relieve myself and wash my hands, I head back out, grab a bottle of water from the fridge, and exit the front door. As Hudson follows behind me silently, I walk to the back door of the SUV and stop, waiting for him to give me instructions.

A blindfold falls over my eyes, and I feel the tugging of the knot he's tying as his fingers tangle in my hair. I clench my teeth at the sharp pain as he tightens the knot, a chunk of my hair coming with it.

Plastic pulls against my wrists, and I feel them come together as the zip tie ratchets down. Silently sending up a thank you that he kept them in front of

me. Trying to get them off from behind would have posed a whole extra level of difficulty I wasn't sure I'd be able to overcome. He leaves them loose enough for circulation, but tight enough that I wouldn't easily be able to remove them.

“Please don't try anything. If you keep your mouth shut and follow directions, chances are you will be back in Vegas in a number of days. If you sass them, fight, or try to escape, they will hurt you, maybe kill you,” he finishes, his voice pleading some in his warning.

“Wouldn't want that on your conscience, now would we,” I say, getting out the last of my 'sass' before letting him guide me into the car.

As we start driving, I don't allow my mind to wander and instead try to keep track of time. I begin singing 99 bottles of beer on the wall to myself to see how much time passes. According to my self-defense instructor, the whole song, sung at an average pace, should take about fifteen minutes to complete. It's not exactly scientific, and I'm not sure it matters since I don't know where I'm starting from, but it helps with my nerves and occupies my mind.

After four rounds and about twelve extra bottles, the car comes to a stop. I hear Hudson shift into park and unbuckle. It's then that my heart rate picks up.

Just breathe. I'm going to be okay. I'm worth more alive.

The door next to me opens, and hands grab under my arm, gently shifting me out of the car. I assume this is still Hudson, as I don't hear any other footsteps.

What people say about removing one sense and heightening the others is accurate. An icy breeze picks up as we walk, and I shiver involuntarily. I hear

the distant sound of cars driving and the faraway chatter of conversation or radio. No birds, no smell of trees. It sounds like I'm in the city.

We enter through a door of a building, and heat caresses my face as the sound of office workers fills my ears. The occasional phone ringing, a quiet conversation, keys typing.

No one thinks it's odd that a blindfolded woman was just escorted in here?

“You Tony’s three o'clock?” a woman asks. Her voice is accusatory as she audibly smacks her gum. I feel more than hear the presence of new people behind me, and my muscles tense.

“Yeah,” Hudson replies, not adding anything more.

“Just a moment,” her voice responds, and the heels clicking on the tile floor echo her departure.

“Well, at least they are...” I don’t get to finish the sentence before the grip on my arm hardens to the point of pain, causing me to cry out.

“You will not speak unless spoken to,” he orders. The voice of the boy from my double date is unrecognizable now as he loosens his grip.

I don’t apologize. Partly because he just told me not to speak, but also because I told myself I’d no longer apologize for existing, for taking up space.

Setting my shoulders back, I stand silent but proud. Rustling next to me has me leaning away from the sounds moments before hands grab my hair, dig into my bun and then slide down my shoulders into the pockets of my hoodie before continuing down to my waist. I bite my lip, restraining myself from kicking at the person searching me.

They’re just making sure it's not a trap.

I think to calm myself as the hands move efficiently down to my shoes.

The telltale click of heels announces the woman before Hudson guides me

to start walking again. As we move, I lose count of the footsteps I hear. Hers are apparent and contrast the others, but I also hear one or two sets behind me.

As we enter what I assume is our meeting room, the pungent smell of cigars hangs in the air. I choke back a cough, shifting my breathing.

“What do we have here?” a slow, deep voice rumbles.

Hudson releases my arm, and I hear the distinct click of the door shut behind me. Fear floods my body despite me knowing this would happen. The reality of being handed over, or more accurately trafficked, causes my knees to feel weak and my hands to shake. I clasp them together to hide the movement and focus on controlling my breathing.

“As I said on the phone, “ Hudson begins, his voice low, less commanding than it had been moments ago. “I’m ready to make the trade for my parents. Your Alpha agreed to have them released if I worked with you. I not only held up my end of the deal, but I came bearing a gift.”

My blindfold is pulled off my eyes, causing them to squint against the room's brightness, and I physically restrain myself from reaching back to rub my hair where it was just ripped from my head.

As my vision focuses, I note I’m standing before a large oak desk. Beautiful mahogany bookshelves fill the walls, full of impressive-looking leatherbound books. Hudson stands on my left, blindfold dangling from his hand, looking more nervous than I have ever seen him.

Behind me stand two guards, both look to be around Hudson’s age and size, though neither is anywhere near as attractive with their unkempt hair and grimacing resting bitch faces.

As I turn back to the front, my eyes lift from the desk to find an enormous man smoking a cigar in an oversized chair.

Hello, Big Tony.

Generally, when someone is called 'big' something, it's ironic because they're small or old, but the man sitting here lives up to his name. He's got to be close to seven feet tall and over three-hundred pounds. Not to say the man is out of shape because he isn't. His bicep looks about the size of my thigh, and for the first time, I understand why Hudson was so keen on me not talking.

Tony sits there quietly assessing me, and I can almost feel his eyes as they slide over my body.

"This little human's a touch old for my taste, but I imagine we could find a use for her, can't we boys," he says, as a dark chuckle rumbles out of his oversized barrel chest. My jaw clenches, and my stomach turns at the insinuation, but I refuse to act like I'm weak, so I hold his stare. His eyes squint as he holds my gaze, and I see his jaw clamp down before I feel the tingling slide over my skin like static electricity, similar to the showdown with Ghost and Hudson at the cabin, but I don't look away.

I'm no one's victim.

"You misunderstand," Hudson interrupts our staring contest after a moment. "She's leverage, not a plaything."

Big Tony lifts his eyebrow before breaking our eye contact and turning his attention to Hudson.

"How?" the one word reverberates off the walls of the room as my palms begin to sweat. I try pulling against the zip ties now that the focus has moved away from me for the moment.

"She belongs to the Vegas Pack Second, Cain," he states, and it takes everything in me not to spit back that I don't belong to anyone.

I belong to me.

“Hardly seems worthy of being called ‘leverage’. She may be nice to look at, but she’s just another human girl in, what I’d assume, is a laundry list of females Cain uses for pleasure. She doesn’t equal the million-dollar debt your father owes Alpha Amato.”

“I betrayed my pack to give you information on the software transport that you successfully stole. That act alone is worth the trade. I brought her as an added incentive. It’s not my fault your team couldn’t hold onto the merchandise,” Hudson replies, no longer holding in his anger.

A growl from one of the men behind me has the hair on the back of my neck standing. I take a second to survey the desk, looking for a letter opener or scissors—anything I can use to get out of these ties if a fight breaks out.

“You will remember your place. You have no rights here. You’re a rogue in our territory because we’ve allowed it, but make no mistake, we will end your stay if you speak to me in that tone again.” Tony is nearly snarling by the end, and the electricity is back. Hudson drops his eyes to the floor, no longer fuming in anger as I slide my eyes between the two men trying to keep up with the conversation happening in front of me.

They’re talking in a weird code that makes little sense to me, but one thing is clear, Hudson is at Big Tony’s mercy. His word will determine if his parents get released or if he gets out of this.

The intercom on the phone beeps once, bringing the standoff to a close, and Big Tony rolls out his shoulders before pressing it.

“Yes, Mindy,” he says, his voice still gruff.

The woman’s voice from the front comes out of the speaker for the room to hear.

“I know you told me not to disturb you, but there’s an Alpha on the phone for you.” I can hear the smacking of her gum as she speaks.

“Which Alpha?” he asks, slowly leaning back in the chair and bringing his fingers to his lips as if he’s trying to guess before she speaks again.

“Vegas,” she says the word, and my heart leaps into my chest.

Hudson said Dante ran Vegas. Maybe this call was about me.

I bite my lip to keep myself from smiling as hope fills my chest, and I let myself believe for just a moment that this may be my ticket out of here.

“Send him through,” he commands, and the phone beeps again.

I expect him to speak, but he doesn’t. He simply waits as ambient noise comes across the line. The seconds drag on, feeling far longer than they really are, before he finally begins.

“Stone.” The word rolls out of his mouth like poison he could physically taste, and at that exact moment, I know the bad blood between these two groups runs deep.

“Antonio,” Dante’s voice replies, equally full of distaste.

“Thought I might be hearing from you,” Tony says, leaving his comment vague.

“Yes, it appears you’ve come into a bit of our property recently. I’m just calling to see where we can pick it up,” he says, with confidence or maybe arrogance in his tone.

“Your property? Not sure what you’re referring to,” he retorts, tapping his pointer fingers against his lips and smirking.

“Oh, I forgot, you’re new to this position. Maybe you haven't been brought into the loop,” Dante starts, his condescending tone is less than subtle. “One of our delivery boys brought you something that belongs to me. Now, I wouldn’t want to overstep your authority, so if I need to talk with Deacon, I would be happy to call back at another time when he and I could have this

chat.” The smile drops from Tony’s face immediately, and I internally cheer, understanding precisely what Dante is doing.

Men and their egos.

“You will talk to me. My Alpha doesn’t have time for your trivial matters,” he responds, leaning toward the phone now.

“Glad to hear it. The reason for my call is that the property you received isn’t exactly without strings,” Dante begins almost conversationally. “You see it’s, how shall I put it, protected, politically that is, and if it isn’t returned, the people sniffing around here may just be pointed in your direction. Now I know I wouldn’t be too happy if my Second took something that didn’t belong to him, and along with it came an entire government investigation. I know that hasn’t gone so well for you guys in the past. How is Vincent holding up? Where is he again? Ely State Prison?” As he continues to speak, a growl rumbles out of Tony, and I wonder who Vincent is to him.

Family member? Coworker?

He looks furious, and his face turns red as he tries to hold back his frustrations.

“And what makes you think I have this property? It sounds like with that kind of heat, it may have been damaged on its way here or extinguished when it arrived due to its less-than-ideal circumstances,” he retorts, surprising me with the mental tennis match he’s trying to play.

My teeth bite down on the inside of my cheek as I decode the meaning of his statement and feel his eyes slide over me again.

Shit. I don’t want to be damaged or extinguished.

“Now, I’d guess that could’ve happened, but it wouldn’t be for me to decide. I’m sure the investigation will go smoothly for you all since you have nothing to hide. There wouldn’t be any evidence of my delivery boy and the

package walking into your consulting firm fifteen minutes ago.” Like clockwork, the computer on his desk dings, and he turns to the screen, clicking the mouse a few times before throwing it in frustration, ripping the cord right out of the machine.

“Get out!” Tony yells, pointing to the two guards behind me before slamming his gigantic hands flat on the desk. “What do you want?” he yells into the phone. All semblance of patience evaporated, and the vein in his forehead pulsing with each heartbeat.

“I can see that you're in a bit of a bind here, and as I need something from you, I'm willing to make a deal,” Dante says, completely calm and rational, the complete opposite of the hulking man in front of me.

“Terms,” Tony spits, falling back into his chair, causing it to groan at the sudden influx of weight.

“There was a deal on the table to release two Florida contracts. Complete that deal, return the package to my custody, and you're clear. No investigation, no follow-up, and no trouble with your Alpha,” Dante explains.

“You want three for nothing. No deal,” Tony replies almost immediately.

“Not for nothing. You got to turn one of mine against me, found a way to steal my property, and you walk away from all of this without bringing down the entire organization in the first few weeks in your new role. Now I would say that's more than fair,” he surmises, sounding very convincing, and the hope that slipped into my chest grows just a little.

For a long moment, neither party says anything. I stare at the phone, not daring to look up at Tony. His response is my life hanging in the balance, so I hold still, slow my breathing and do everything in my power to keep from swaying his decision.

“Not good enough. I want you to return the heir. You can pay the million

for the contract releases and produce Kole. We will ensure the release in Florida and set up the trade here.”

“Now I believe the contract release was half that. Half a million, two releases, and the heir for the package.” He sends back the counteroffer.

“Deal,” Tony says, his smirk returning like he won something.

“Glad we could come to an arrangement. Now I want proof the package hasn’t been harmed. Once the money is transferred and I confirm the release of the Florida contracts, we can set a time for the swap. I assume you will want that to be sooner than later, so you can present the heir to your Alpha upon his return,” Dante says.

“Speak, girl,” Tony orders, and for a moment, I’m at a loss for what to say.

“Hey, Brielle. You doing ok?” he asks, his voice softer, more comforting somehow.

“I’m fine. Unharmed.” I reply, my voice wavering a bit.

“Good, I’m happy to hear it. Hang in there, and we will be seeing you soon. Tony,” he shifts back into his more serious business tone, “email the wallet address for the funds’ transfer. I assume crypto will be fine? Once you have evidence of the contract’s release, let me know the time and meeting location. I can be in the area in under two hours.”

The phone clicks off, signaling Dante has ended the call. I exhale, releasing the stress I was holding in.

I’ll be home today.

Schooling my expression because I know it’s far too early to celebrate, I shift my eyes to Hudson, attempting to read him. I thought he’d be relieved, hearing that his family would be released soon, happy that he got the desired result, but all I see is pain. Turmoil rolling off him as he processes everything.

“Mindy,” Tony shouts into the intercom. “Take these two to the holding room and get Shane to my office now,” he finishes.

The door behind us opens, and the guards are back. Reluctantly I pick up my feet and follow behind one as I’m escorted to a flight of stairs at the end of the hall. He turns, descending to the floor below with Hudson and I trailing him. The second guard stands at Hudson’s back.

They turn us into a room at the end of the hall. It looks just like a police interrogation room; if I were to guess, even the mirror was two-way. The door locks behind us, and I wander over to the chair on the farthest side of the room.

Hudson crosses the space, heading straight for me. The look on his face gives nothing away, and I shrink back into the chair as he approaches, reaching out for me.

“What are you...” I don’t get a chance to finish my question as he grabs my zip-tied wrists, pulls with both hands and snaps my hands free. He doesn't say a word before walking back toward the other chair and collapsing on the opposite side of the lone table in the room. He drops his head into his hands in a position that can only be described as defeated.

Is he worried they won't release his parents?

I wonder before clearing my throat to speak.

“Thank you,” I whisper as I rub each wrist to soothe away the indents that have formed there.

He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t make any move to indicate he’s heard me. I sit awkwardly, attempting to pass the time in silence, but a part of me feels I should be comforting him.

Yep, Stockholm Syndrome at its finest. I'm worried about the guy who kidnapped me.

Out of the silence, Hudson speaks.

“He fixed everything with a phone call.” It’s so low I don’t know if it’s meant for me to hear, but I respond anyway.

“Isn’t that good news?” I ask quietly.

The weak laugh that pushes out of him as he shakes his head illuminates his torment.

“Not when I destroyed everything in my life to try and get them back, only to fail. I should’ve gone to him. I should’ve tried to get them to help me, but instead, I broke every bit of trust I had, and now I’ve lost them all,” he explains.

“People make mistakes. Dante seems like a reasonable guy. Maybe if you talk to him, he’ll understand,” I say, trying to give him some of the hope I’ve been able to latch onto since hearing the negotiations.

“It won’t matter. My Fate was sealed the moment I turned my back on them,” he declares, sadness leaking into his tone.

“They take your phone?” I ask hopefully, wondering if we could reach out to someone.

“Yep,” he replies.

“Well, that would have been helpful. I guess we don’t get one phone call in these kinds of situations, huh?” I ask, trying for light humor.

“Nope.”

“How long do you think they’ll keep us in here?” I ask, more thinking out loud than caring about his guess.

“Are you going to ask questions the whole time we’re in here?” he questions, looking up at me with a hint of irritation on his face.

“Just trying to keep from panicking.” I shrug and focus my attention on picking at my fingernails.

“You should be worrying about getting through this trade alive. I don’t think you understand the bad blood between our packs, er, gangs?” he finishes covering.

“Packs? You make it sound like you’re a bunch of wolves fighting for top dog to run the territory,” I quip, and his face freezes. “I get that you have these family connections, and you guys hate them, like the Bloods and the Crips, but you all are making this out like the next civil war will be starting. It sounded like Dante had it under control on the phone,” I finish trying to make sense of their rivalry.

“If you think for a second that Tony isn’t going to try something while he has the Vegas Alpha in his territory, you’re out of your mind. This battle has been going on since Marlo took over thirty years ago when Dante’s dad was in charge. You need to be ready to fight or run because when the shit hits the fan, like it always does, no one will care about one innocent girl dying.” The seriousness in his expression and tone has my stomach clenching as the anxiety amps up within me. His message is clear.

I have no allies in this. I’m on my own.



Chapter 20

Cain

The flight to the Truckee Tahoe airport went by much more quickly than I expected. We unloaded our teams and moved the operation into a hotel we confirmed didn't have Marlo ties. The hotel was just outside a little California town called Truckee, which sits about thirty minutes away from Reno. We bought out the entire place and set up in the main suite.

As I stare out the hotel window, I wonder how close she could be. My wolf paces beneath my skin, wanting to take control and search for her. We know where she was an hour ago.

The main building of Marlo's official business is Premier Asset Consultants. Stupid place to hold a meeting involving a kidnapped girl, but no one ever said Big Tony had the smarts for the job. My guess? He wanted to be seen as a powerful presence in the office of his title despite it being risky to show off.

Shit, I could be there in thirty minutes.

But could I take out everyone inside without being captured myself? Unlikely.

Arguing with my wolf wears on my self-control. I want exactly what he wants; to go get her. In fact, I just happen to know that all the employees in that building are part of Marlo's pack.

As an Alpha, I'm a formidable opponent, but they could have dozens of wolves in that building. Not only am I not invincible, but I could be overrun by their sheer numbers. That is if I attempt to rescue her alone. Regardless of how strong a wolf is, a single Alpha is no match for an entire pack.

I need to be patient.

My pack is here to help, and I agreed to wait for the exchange. After listening to Dante's negotiation with Big Tony, I gave him my word. Hearing her voice, and seeing the photos Pres was able to grab while she kept tabs on all of Marlo's business locations, sparked a fire back inside me. One that helped me hold control over my wolf. She's alive. She appears unharmed. She'll be back with me tonight.

Mine.

After the phone call, Pres sent the money to the wallet address we were given. It's a gamble since the crypto we're using is untraceable, and Tony could've just cut and run with an extra half a million dollars in his possession. Still, Dante's threats about an investigation were apparently strong enough to keep him on board with the plan. So far, at least.

Shortly after receiving the information that the Healys were released, we confirmed with Bronson that they made it out of Amato's territory. He's kind enough to take them back into his protection until they're healthy enough to travel to Vegas.

We aren't sure they want to stay with our pack, especially now that Hudson is no longer a part of it, but they need to get out of Florida. It'll never be safe for them there.

Turning away from the window, I walk into the office area of the suite and find Pres and Dante working with Jake. They're all leaning over the map of Marlo's territory.

"Flight plans show Deacon leaving Vegas early this morning headed for San Francisco. His pilot added a new flight plan which has him back in town tonight, just before midnight," Pres finishes.

"That gives us a two-hour window to get the trade done and be wheels up before he's back in Reno," Dante remarks, pulling on his beard in thought.

"Will there be any cross-over at the airport?" Jake asks, mulling over the contingencies.

"As long as we complete the trade in under forty minutes, we should be gone before he ever lands," Pres explains.

"Big Tony sent over the location for the switch, and it's about thirty minutes outside of Reno. Jake, can you send a team ahead to scout the area? We have four hours until the meeting, and I need to know everything there is to know about this site. We know he'll have us outnumbered. I need high ground, several exit strategies, and a way to ensure we aren't surrounded. If there's one thing Big Tony is good at, it's fighting, and I don't need it to come to that." His eyes slide back to me.

"Anything to add, Cain?" he throws the question out.

"Pres and Mason can't operate from here. They'll need to be mobile at the location. We can't risk losing eyes and ears. Which means we'll have Keith on location as well. Who's assigned to him?" I ask, turning to Jake.

"Added Ryder to the black team, so Jay," he answers.

Jay will protect Pres and keep Keith in line.

"We need to be sure wherever Keith is, that he sees and hears nothing," I comment, looking around to verify everyone understands my meaning.

Humans are forbidden from knowing about us.

It's one of the few laws established by the LLC that's strictly regulated and enforced. Anyone who figures out we exist dies. No exceptions. I may not like the guy, but I won't be responsible for him getting killed.

"Where's Keith now? Does he know his role?" I ask as I missed that part of this meeting.

"He's in one of the rooms on this floor, working on his Marlo stuff. Jay's outside the door, and we removed the phone from the room. His laptop is the only equipment in there, and I'm scanning it for communications; he's been legit so far. He's already working on his identity sweep of the Healys, which, honestly, now that we've paid for their release, will be useful in giving them a fresh start somewhere with Hudson," Pres finishes.

A growl escapes my throat at the thought of him, and my eyes shift instantly with my wolf fighting to take charge. Her eyes flash to mine, and she registers the motive behind my wolf's intentions.

Hudson's mine. My kill.

Presley's jaw falls open, and her attention flips to Dante before continuing.

"You can't honestly tell me we're allowing Cain to kill him. Exile sure, he betrayed us all, but it's Hudson," she pleads with Dante looking to Jake for support, but not finding any.

"It's his right, Pres. Hudson knew the consequences of his actions when he took her. Kidnapping her was a direct attack against Cain. He's allowed retribution. Period."

Pres turns her attention back to me, and I stare her down, having regained complete control over my wolf.

"I thought we weren't the bad guys. I thought we weren't just murderers." Her stare is accusatory, and part of me wishes I could reassure her, but

Hudson took my Mate. He'll pay for that decision with his life. I will not have her live in a world where anyone is a threat to her. She'll be safe. I'll make her safe.

"Enough, we can deal with him later. For now, Jake, make sure you, Erik, and the teams run their wolves. Everyone needs to be in control tonight. Pres have all the gear charged and ready for disbursement by nineteen thirty, then join Mason for a run. Cain, you will shift with me. I don't trust your wolf to stay away from her, and I'm the only one who you can't best. Questions?" he asks, standing from the chair.

Jake and Pres shake their heads, and Dante walks past me, heading out the door. I follow, knowing that this run will be both necessary and challenging. My wolf wants nothing more than to take control and go to her. The primal need to save her is woven into my very being. Logically, I know we have to wait, but the beast within me operates on an entirely different hierarchy of needs, and our Mate is at the very base level.

The hotel we chose backs up to the Tahoe National Forest, so Dante and I jog about a mile in before stopping to catch our breath and undress to shift. I pull off my t-shirt and toss it behind a large tree before bending to untie my shoes. Once they're both off, I glance at Dante, realizing he hasn't started to undress but is, instead, staring at me as if he wants to say something but is debating it.

"Okay, out with it," I say before pulling my socks off.

"I don't know if you should be there tonight," he states, reading my reaction. "Your wolf is the wildcard. You can't shift in front of her without risking her life," he starts, eyeing my reaction steadily.

"I won't do anything that could harm her," I state, throwing more confidence into my words than I feel, knowing my wolf had already made

decisions I couldn't control when I interrogated Kole.

"I didn't tell you all of Ghost's message," Dante says, waiting for my full attention.

"He said if the trade doesn't happen before her Unawakened status is revealed, people will die. Our people. Maybe her."

"He said she dies?" I quickly respond, as fear fills my insides, knowing Ghost's ability is never wrong.

"No, you know he can't say that. He said lives will be lost. No specifics, or it changes the path," he pauses, letting that sink in. "I worry bringing you is a mistake. If they find out she's Unawakened or your Mate, we will have to fight our way out. I don't want to lose anyone tonight," he finishes, his tone somber.

"I can't stay back," I say honestly, knowing my wolf would fight for control and probably win if I tried to walk away from this exchange.

"I know, but I knew you'd want to understand the stakes. I hope it's enough to get us out of there without incident," Dante says, pulling his shirt off, readying himself for our run.

I can't lose her.

With a final pull of my shorts, I allow my wolf to take over and embrace the change. I lean into the hope that this run will allow me to have the control I need to get her back, to have her by my side.

Dante's able to command my wolf to release control. It takes a few minutes, but he finally relents, and I change back into my clothes. The sun falls slowly out of the sky, and the cold winter air feels good on my lungs.

We walk back to the hotel in silence. The enormity of the trade tonight weighing heavily on us both. The last rays of sunlight bathe the area in a

warm glow. Long shadows stretch into the trees as we maneuver over the undergrowth. The return takes less than ten minutes, and we find the teams gearing up outside. Pres is working through sound checks on our blue and red team members. The black team will go in with only mics as they're coming shifted, and earpieces are a bitch to get out after shifting forms.

I scan each team member, ensuring they're ready for this while memorizing their faces. Anyone could be lost tonight; if that happens, it's because of me. My Mate. My responsibility.

After changing into my black fatigues for tonight and getting my gear from Pres, I guide Keith to Jay's van and remove his blindfold.

"Jay, Keith. Keith, Jay. Now that you're acquainted," I point my thumb to Jay, who turns and gives him a wave. "Jay will be making sure you don't do anything stupid tonight. We're trading one of their people for Bri. Your role is to monitor the cameras we've placed around the site to ensure we don't have any unexpected guests. Do you think you can handle that?" My tone is neither condescending nor mocking, but rather is simply looking for his response. His role is vital to this rescue.

"Where will you be?" he asks, tilting his head with the question.

"I'll be making the trade," I state simply, seeing the jealousy flash in his eyes briefly before he catches himself.

Get used to it. She is Mine.

At that, Pres walks over.

"Everyone is geared. All equipment is working for now. I'll keep the coms going for the entirety of the meeting. They'll expect us to be wired and armed because they'll be as well. Did Jake give you the evacuation routes from the meet?" she asks me, her voice faltering a bit when she realizes that Keith's sitting in this van, and she has now revealed herself to him.

“The voice in my ear, I presume?” Keith says, looking over at Presley and back at me.

“Uh yeah,” she responds, giving him a waving salute before turning back to me, “Evacuation routes?”

“Got ‘em,” I respond, pulling the pages from my back pocket. “Keith, this is Pres. She’ll be riding in your rig. You take your orders from her. If shit hits the fan, stay out of the way and follow directions. No hero bullshit. You still might wind up dead, but if you blow this trade, I can guarantee it,” I say, not mincing my words for him. I’ll kill anyone who keeps her from me. Consequences be damned.

“Okay,” he says, actually saluting me. I look over at Pres to find her staring at him, her expression unreadable.

“You good?” I ask, causing her to shake her head and pull her attention back to me.

“Yep, not my first babysitting gig,” she quips, the corner of her mouth tipping up as she climbs into the back of the rig.

Her van is set up similarly to any surveillance vehicle. Computers, speakers, and wires line the sides along with monitors and tv screens displaying different camera feeds. It’s rather remarkable how fast she could gear out the three vehicles we’d be taking to the site. Four, if you count the one the black team took out there hours ago.

“Okay, check your gear. We roll in ten,” I say over my shoulder, walking back to the van that will take Dante, Jake, Erik, Mason, Kole, and myself to the meet. The third vehicle will carry both the red and blue teams.

Once we received the location, we planned everyone's entry, placement, and exit plans. Presley’s van will be parked off the main road, east of the meeting site. The red team will drop our blue team members at high-ground

positions that can flank our meeting location, then park with the black team van south of the meet site. Mason will drop us off just north before circling back to the south lot to stand guard near the evacuation vehicles.

Once Mason rendezvous with the other two vehicles, the red team will sneak off to the meeting area's border, ready to grab Bri if things go sideways.

Things can't go sideways.

Erik loads Kole into the backseat of our van. He's still cuffed in silver restraints with a bag over his head. His comfort isn't our concern tonight. Mason jumps behind the wheel, and Jake slides into the passenger seat. Dante and I ride in the middle row. This arrangement is less than ideal, but we're making it work.

It's rare that an Alpha and their Second travel in the same vehicle, for the same reason you never see the President and Vice President traveling together. Line of succession. If this was a setup, Marlo's pack could take the core of our council out with a single-car bomb.

I shake my head, throwing the negative thoughts out and focusing on the task at hand.

"Comm check, Alpha?" Pres speaks over the radios and earpieces.

"Lima Charlie."

"Second?"

"Lima Charlie."

"Echo 1?" she asks Erik

"Lima Charlie."

"Echo 2?" to Jake this time.

"Lima Charlie."

She continues down the line, checking Mason, Colt, Carter, Wyatt, and Jess

before continuing.

“Alpha, is the black team on site and responding?” she asks, going through our checklist.

Dante closes his eyes, his jaw flinching as he sends mind-link messages to our team that's shifted on-site.

“All reported in. They’ve spotted two from Marlo’s crew on site scanning the area. Keep an eye on the camera feeds. We’ll have the red team replace anything that gets disturbed in their search.” Dante responds, opening his eyes and throwing his focus back on the road in front of us.

Three miles later, we pull off the road, watching as Jay follows and establishes a spot just inside a clearing of trees, far enough off the road to avoid traffic seeing them, but still with the ability to bail if needed. Before we pull away, Jay jumps out and begins scanning the perimeter. He can’t shift with Keith in the van, so he uses his tactical training to ensure the area is clear before sending a thumbs-up our way.

With the red team’s van following, we drive off and head for the second drop zone. Once both blue team members are released, and we’ve confirmed the red team has linked up with the black team's vehicle, Mason heads to the main drop-off point.

The tension in our vehicle is palpable. Each member locked in, muscles tight, wolves reeling for a fight. Every encounter with this pack has deepened the hatred felt between us. Watching how Deacon tried to manipulate Dante in the wake of his father's death was enough to make me have a deep-seated hatred for him, not to mention the number of times he’s attempted to take control of our territory.

Tonight isn’t about Marlo. It’s about my Mate.

I know things aren’t great right now, but if I can get her back, I can fix us. I

can make her understand. Just the last two days without her has been like missing a limb. The phantom pain is as soul-crushing as any wound.

I can't live without her.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to calm my wolf. I have to keep my head focused on our goal. I'll never forgive myself if I'm the reason she's hurt.

Mason pulls to a stop in an empty parking lot. This entrance is the most public of all locations we could've chosen. Knowing Big Tony has the advantage of knowing this area inside and out, allows us to play into his hand by arriving where he'd expect.

We arrive twenty minutes early for the exchange, wanting to be in place when they show up. Jake's out first and circles the van to ensure there aren't any traps on the ground in the area before Dante and I file out, followed by Erik dragging a mumbling Kole.

To his credit, Kole stayed quiet for most of the drive. We kept him out of the logistics and have kept all conversations around him to a minimum. We don't need him returning to his pack with more information than he already has.

Erik ensured he ate, had no visible marks of our time together, and that he showered. Once he was presentable, he was quickly gagged and bagged. We also gave him a medical transmitter block for this trip, so he couldn't contact Deacon for the next twenty-four hours. That little safety precaution would keep him from informing his pack until we're long gone.

We walk our group of five into the wooded area, traveling until we reach a clearing just off the main hiking trail. Our black team members are scattered in each direction, on the lookout for Marlo's team as we enter. Dante leads our pack, flanked by Jake and I. Erik falls just behind, guiding Kole by the

back of his shirt into the clearing and sitting him down on a boulder on the east side of the clearing.

It's dark, but with our adept vision and the spattering of stars, we can see from one side of the space to the other.

“In position,” Dante says, notifying the groups we’re set and ready. Two black team members move positions in order to bookend our group, and a third moves to cover our six. This setup protects us from both sides and our backs. This leaves our focus in front of us, right where Big Tony and his assortment of wolves and pack mates will enter the clearing.

Surveillance cameras are set remotely around the outside of the clearing in case their pack chooses an alternate route; however, with Tony’s size and his need to walk a prisoner, we assume they’ll enter the clearing exactly the same way we did.

I release a breath, letting out some of the tension building in my chest.

Just a few more minutes.

My nerves dance along my skin because I don’t know what she knows or where her head is. The only thing I know for sure is that I need her to be okay. I need her to look at me with those eyes full of fire so that I know we have a chance—a future.

My whole world stands still as I wait for answers. Nothing matters except her.

Come home, Firefly. I’m waiting.

Chapter 21

Keith

Teamwork has never been my strong suit. I've never had to work on any job with this mentality before. Solo projects, or ones where I do my part and send it away for someone else to figure out the fallout are what I'm used to, but riding in the back of this van scrunched beside every bit of security surveillance equipment they could squeeze into the space, feels oddly like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Listening to Pres call through comm checks is exhilarating and has my adrenaline back to where it had been before last night's meeting. Covert ops may not have been on my radar before, but the idea of using my talents in this fashion to help guys in the field was now burrowing into the back of my mind to think through later.

My eyes trail over to a joystick sitting in front of a monitor with a roving camera feed. Instinctively I reach for it, wanting to see how responsive it is, if there's a delay, and how capable these monitoring units are. Before my hand grasps the control, it is swatted away by the adorably grumpy-looking redhead on the other side of the van.

“No touchy,” she says, turning her attention back to the screen on her right.

I balk, pulling my hand back into my chest in mock pain while internally laughing at her Emperor’s New Groove reference. The girl hasn’t said two words to me since we left the hotel, but her obvious disdain for me has been radiating off of her the entire ride.

“I thought I was here to help? Kinda limits my ability to do that if I’m not allowed to touch anything. However, I’ve been known to be very resourceful with other body parts if it’s simply a hands-off policy,” I say, raising my hands in front of me, turning on my charm, and smiling at her with my crooked grin. I go so far as to slide my tongue across my bottom lip, catching her eyes as she follows the gesture before setting her jaw. She looks at me, no change in her expression save for the eyebrow she arches before responding.

“Does that really work for you? The whole ‘I’m hot and flirty, give me attention’ routine?” she asks, her face hard. It’s definitely not the response I was going for. She huffs out a laugh, rolls her eyes, and resumes the work in front of her, leaving me confused.

Okay, not interested.

“Look, did I do something wrong here? I feel like I must have slighted you in some way. If that's the case, I’d love to know, so I can apologize,” I question sincerely, wondering where all her hostility is coming from.

So much for being on the same team.

“Look, Hef, the list of things you’ve done wrong is too long for me to go through at the moment, and, honestly, they may be better sorted out by your therapist over a few hundred sessions. In the meantime, stay out of my way and don’t touch anything. You’re only here because we can’t kill you, and you need a babysitter so you don’t go rogue.”

Hef? Like Chief?

Her snark makes me want to banter with her, but the cold look in her ocean-blue eyes has me holding my tongue.

“I just want to help,” I say, removing all the bravado from my voice.

“Getting Elle back safely is the only thing that matters. I don’t even know why I was trying to lighten the mood. I’m sorry. How can I help?” I ask, pleading with her to let me do something so my mind doesn’t spiral down a path of statistics on getting hostages back after twenty-four hours has passed, less than forty percent.

She sighs, dragging out the sound, but before she can answer, the van stops. I turn my attention to the front as the driver, Jay, exits, leaving the two of us alone.

“Did Jay explain your job here today?” she asks me, her eyes losing a bit of their icy edge.

“Perimeter surveillance. Nothing goes in without me alerting you,” I repeat the orders given to me by Jay, our driver. Thinking about it, he’s about the only person who has been friendly this entire time. Cain has reasons for his dislike seeing as I did have his stolen software. I just don’t understand why Presley seems so set on hating me.

“Good. Don’t move the cameras unless you see movement. They’re set for full coverage with no gaps. Anytime you move one, we have an area we can’t see; an area we can’t protect,” she informs me, dropping her chin and sliding her eyes to the joystick to highlight her point.

Moving the joystick causes holes in coverage. People could be hurt.

“Got it. Won’t happen again,” I say, understanding her seriousness.

“Not such a slow learner after all,” she says almost under her breath, but she gives me a small reluctant smile. It makes her eyes dance as if she’s

saying more in her head, but it makes me feel a bit better. At least I know there's a sense of humor buried deep, deep down in there somewhere.

"I've set you up on this hardware over here," she says, pointing to the screens closest to the passenger front seat. "Toggle frames with the number keypad. Headphones are to the right." she finishes and returns to her radio.

"In position," it blares before she plugs her bright pink cat-eared headphones into the port.

"Copy. When the black team is in position, let me know," she sends as I shift around to try and find a way to sit on the opposite side of the van. Everybody wants to be tall until you're sardined in a space with nowhere to stash your limbs.

After several attempts at sitting positions, I end up with my legs crossed under the makeshift shelf. I may not be able to get up or out of this position, but it works for now.

Jay hasn't returned to the van, and I wonder what his job is as this trade happens.

"Black team is the ones with the big dogs, right?" I ask, startling Presley and forcing her attention back to me.

"Jay said they were the K9 team, right? The ones that went in first to search the area?" I continue because her face looks puzzled.

"Oh, yeah. K9 unit. Yep," she says before ignoring me again.

This girl is frustrating. She seems hell-bent on ignoring, belittling, or snapping at me. She has made zero attempts at being cordial or trying to get to know me. She may be the most combative female I have ever encountered. She certainly doesn't want me here.

Why does it bother me?

The more she tries to pretend I don't exist, the more some irrational part of

my brain wants to poke at her hardened exterior. The fact that she wants nothing to do with me makes me want her attention more.

Get it together. We're literally here to save Elle, and I'm worrying about what the snarky redhead thinks of me.

I return my focus to the screens in front of me, scanning through twelve feeds spread over the two monitors in my station. The infrared, combined with the resolution of the cameras, allow me to see clearly despite it being dark outside. That, plus the quality of the equipment in this van, tells me everything I need to know about this group's financial status.

They have money to burn.

Movement on feed seven pulls my attention, and I see two large SUV-style vehicles enter into the view. They turn into the small parking lot and stop.

“Hey, we have movement over here,” I shout, signaling to Presley.

“Which camera?” she asks, flipping between several monitors in her area.

“Seven,” I answer, wanting to zoom in on the angle to get a better look, but I'm too worried I'll miss something.

“Look alive, boys. They're here. Two vehicles. Standby for the body counts,” she finishes sounding official, and I stare at her a moment, trying to figure out how old she is. Younger than me, for sure, but you wouldn't know it by her presence in this space. Her poise under pressure is remarkable, and yet, her pale, freckled skin and bright eyes give her a more youthful appearance.

Well, that and the hot pink cat ears. Meow.

I catch myself smiling at her and turn back to the screen as I see three men and two giant dogs jump out of the first vehicle. The second vehicle produces three bodyguard-looking men, one exceptionally large man, and a smaller female I would recognize anywhere.

Elle.

My breath catches as I lean in closer to the screen, trying to examine her to see if she has any injuries, just wanting to know if she's ok.

"They have her," I say out loud, though not really to Presley.

"How many, Keith? Focus. I know you care about her, but I need to know who's with her. How many?" she redirects me, the calm confidence in her voice allowing me to pull myself out of the emotions I was frozen by for a moment.

"Two dogs, six men, one giant, and her," I respond.

"Any staying at the vehicle?" she questions, making me examine their movements.

"Doesn't appear so," I respond.

"Copy, keep an eye on the other feeds. We don't need any surprises. I'll relay the new information," she says before jumping onto the radio.

"Inbound with ten. Hudson and Brielle are both with them. Two shifte... K9s," she corrects herself in the middle of the relay as I maintain all my attention on the other screens.

"They should be at your position in about eight minutes," she adds.

I continue looking over the feeds with no other movement while Presley flies through screens and information in her section. I glance her way and see her zooming in on the feeds, defining the faces, and exporting them into another screen where she runs them through facial recognition, and endless data appears.

"I've got movement on camera two," I say quickly as I see two people sneaking from tree to tree.

"Red team, location?" she asks into the radio. She nods at the response and turns to me.

“Those are friendlies. They’re moving to circle behind the incoming group,” she passes along to me, and I nod.

Every minute seems to drag on as we wait for this group to reach the clearing. Each flutter of a leaf or reflection of snow off a bug's wings causes me to snap to attention. I wait quietly as Presley relays the information she’s discovered about the group arriving, and from the sound of it, none of them are good guys.

At the end of her brief intro to the radio, she listens to a response from the other end.

“Copy that,” she replies, turning to me, “They’re entering the clearing now.”

I nod, returning my gaze to the screens, my blood pressure elevated, knowing we’re this close.

A flash of headlights catches my attention, and I see a sleek black car turn into the same parking lot the group arrived at ten minutes ago. I wait to flag Presley’s attention as I assume this is just a lost hiker looking for directions on the large maps they have stationed in the background of the lot.

It isn’t until the two men get out that I begin to panic, and I shout louder than necessary over to Presley.

“We have a problem!” Her head whips toward me, and her eyes squint in before growing large. Fear enters my body as my mind races back to how this was supposed to go. My next words hang in the air as she processes this new challenge.

“What the fuck is Marlo doing here?”



Chapter 22

Cain

Movement across the clearing has me straightening my spine. Their arrival causes all of our group to tense in anticipation. We haven't had a face-to-face meeting with anyone from the Marlo leadership in almost five years, and while we've encountered many from within the organization over that time, none of the exchanges were peacefully executed.

At the front of their group walks Big Tony. You literally can't miss the guy. He's six foot eight and about three hundred pounds. In both his wolf and human forms, he's intimidating, to say the least. Not only that, he's armed. A handgun hangs from a shoulder holster and sits just below his bicep. He doesn't even attempt to hide it as he strolls into this meeting.

Behind him file several other pack members, none of whom we know outside of the rundown Pres has spent the last ten minutes running us through. I spot Hudson's wild blonde hair and have to fight back a growl as every part of me wants to tear him limb from limb for putting my Mate in this situation. What stops my loss of control is the mess of brown hair, piled on

the top of her head, that I see bobbing just behind Big Tony. My heart stops the moment he moves enough for me to see her fully.

She's walking unassisted with Hudson on her left, and another Marlo pack member on her right. She wears the same black leggings and blue hoodie she wore when she came to my house two days ago.

Has it only been two days since I held her? Since I looked into her eyes and knew she'd be mine?

Her hands are free, and she wears no restraints or leashes.

They underestimate her.

I take a moment to scan her, looking for any sign that she's hurt, but come up empty. She moves with purpose, though her fingers pull nervously on the sleeves of her arms. Her oversized hoodie helps shield her from the temperature, but I can see her lip color fading and her teeth beginning to chatter even as her cheeks show a flush of color from both exertion and the cold.

We need to get her warm.

My wolf urges within me, wanting to give her comfort. I silently beg for her eyes to find mine so that I can unravel her feelings. Her face could never lie to me, even as her mouth often tried to deny our connection. Her body and those flame-touched eyes never could.

Look at me, Firefly.

I plead, needing her eyes on mine. She glances up from her feet, taking in the clearing before recognizing Dante to my right. A hopeful smile briefly lifts the corners of her mouth, and I see the relief wash over her face.

She must have been terrified.

Then, almost in slow motion, I watch her eyes glide away from Dante and find my face. My breathing stops, fearing what I'll see in her expression. I

stand here, ready to fight my way through everyone who gets in the way of our reunion, and I don't even know if she wants that from me.

Her breath catches, and I see the desperation in her gaze. A million thoughts fly across her face, and I try to read each one. The relief that rolls out of me in knowing she needs me as much as I do her fills me with unbelievable hope. My hand tries to reach for her, and I fight to remain standing there.

She squares her shoulders, and I can't help but smile at her.

That's my girl.

Presley's voice comes to life in our ears as their group lines up across from us.

"We have a problem. Marlo just showed up in the parking lot, and he's headed your way with one guard," she relays, her voice threaded with concern.

Fuck!

The most significant advantage we had in this deal, and a key detail to the success of our plan, was having Deacon Marlo not attend this meeting.

My main concern remains that he'll get close enough to my Mate to smell her Unawakened status. Just the idea that he might Awaken her has me fighting every instinct in my body that tells me to shift, rip out Big Tony's throat, and take my Mate out of here.

People will die.

The words from Ghost's prophecy ring in my mind. I can't be responsible for the death of anyone in my pack. They're standing here for me. This whole trade's for my Mate. I reach within myself, attempting to grab onto all of my control.

Big Tony's group stands silently, assessing our pack as we do the same.

The stalemate is a power play, and Big Tony appears unwilling to speak first. The two pack leaders remain locked in their chess match for over a minute before I can no longer take it.

Cain: We have a timetable. They don't. End this pissing match, or I will.

I send the mind-link message to Dante, fighting my wolf's instincts to run the distance between myself and my Mate.

"Antonio," Dante says, his voice resonating with authority.

"Stone. I see you have what I asked for," he replies, motioning to Kole, who still sits tied up and bagged on the rock behind us. "Now, as you can see, I don't have your property in restraints." He points toward my girl to prove his point, and her eyes drop to the floor as she wrings her hands together, not liking the attention he has placed on her.

"Yes, because an adult Alpha male and a young college woman prove the same threat?" Dante responds, illuminating the disparity of the trade. Tony's face hardens as he takes offense to Dante's flippant tone.

"Release him," he demands, causing Dante to growl a warning.

"Don't pretend you can order me to do anything. You will release her first," Dante counters.

"No deal. Do you think I'm stupid? I give you the girl you take off with him." Tony spits back.

"You're running out of time, Dante. Marlo should be at the clearing any minute. Finish the trade," Pres whispers over the radios quietly so the noise doesn't travel to the Reno Pack's enhanced hearing.

"The girl doesn't have the ability to outrun your guards. Once unbound, Kole could shif...", he stops himself, his eyes flashing to Brielle before he changes his phrasing. "Find a way to escape in ways she cannot," He finishes, implying that Kole, being an Alpha, could shift and escape. Kole

shifting at all would be enough to sign Brielle's death warrant. Humans can't know about us.

They don't know she isn't just a human.

Dante must send Erik a mind-link message because he removes the bag from Kole's head and begins untying the gag from his mouth.

"We will trade at the same time. Kole will remain in his silver cuffs. I'm sure you will find a way to remove them. This will prevent him from shifting and even the playing field," Dante says, not mincing his words as the urgency of this trade looms over us.

Big Tony pauses, his face showing confusion momentarily before turning unreadable.

"Just a moment," he says, turning his back to us and walking back toward the center of the field.

Dante's face turns to mine, and I can tell he thinks the same thing I do.

Marlo just gave the order to wait.

Before returning to his line of pack mates, I see Big Tony whisper something into one of the guard's ears. Without hesitation, the guard runs out of the clearing, most likely to escort their Alpha.

Fuck. This isn't good.

"My apologies. My Alpha has found time in his schedule to join us, and as that's who you wanted to speak with in the first place," he finishes throwing on a shit-eating grin.

"Oh, I wasn't aware you needed Daddy to finish your deal. Absolutely, we can wait for him, but I do have a flight to catch, so if we could get these two sorted out while we wait," Dante says, pointing between Kole and Brielle. His comments make Tony clench his jaw at the insinuation that he isn't capable of finishing this on his own.

Before he can respond, I see movement from the opposite side of the clearing. The Reno Pack members, Hudson, and Brielle, all turn to watch as Deacon Marlo, flanked by two shifted guards, strolls into the clearing casually carrying a small backpack.

Deacon's eyes lock on Dante as he moves, and everyone in the vicinity can feel the pure hatred that radiates from him. He smiles. It's dark and cold, not coming close to reaching his eyes.

He says something I can't understand that sounds like Italian, and everyone freezes as the wolf guarding him on his left shifts back into his human form.

An audible gasp resounds from both groups, and a knowing look passes across Deacon's face as he hands the guard the bag which contains his clothing.

My eyes immediately seek out my Mate, looking for her reaction to seeing our world and trying to gauge her thoughts. Her back is to me, but her stiff posture and hanging jaw reveal her shock.

Well, I guess they kept our world a secret until now.

My jaw clenches, and I feel my teeth on the verge of cracking as I look to Dante, hoping his composure can get us through this. His jaw is also flexed, and his nostrils flare as he scowls. At his sides, he stretches and fists his hands in an attempt to control his rage at Deacon's carelessness.

“Apologies for my late arrival, gentlemen. I was traveling and didn't hear about this little trade until recently.” His accent carries the words making him sound every bit the slick businessman he pretends to be. His eyes slide to Tony in almost an admonishment for him not relaying the information sooner, and Big Tony, to his credit, drops his gaze in a submissive apology.

“Now, what did I miss?” Marlo asks, his attention sliding between us as he waits to be filled in.

It's then I chance another look at my Mate. My Mate, who just saw a wolf turn into a human man right before her eyes. My Mate, who, without any choice, was just thrown into this world against her will.

I'm so sorry, Firefly.

My heart clenches as I see the horrified and shocked expression she wears as her eyes remain locked on the face of the guard, who's now fully clothed and standing next to her again. Even from this distance, I can see the wheels turning in her mind as she tries to put some logic together to explain what she just witnessed. Some reasonable way this man could also be a wolf. After a moment, I see her eyes flash to each of the men around her, and her throat bobs as she swallows nervously. Hudson's hand moves to the back of her arm, and my wolf growls in response as she yelps, trying to pull away from him in fear.

Don't touch her.

Logically I know he's stopping her from bolting, which would inevitably mean her death, but on a much more primal level, I want to rip his hand from his body for daring to touch her without permission: hers or mine. He leans down, whispering something to her I don't hear before she takes a large inhale, releases it slowly, and repeats the process several more times.

Dante speaks, pulling her attention to him.

"We were just concluding our trade," he says through gritted teeth, all semblance of his calm demeanor extinguished.

"Oh, wonderful of you to return my nephew to us in exchange for... a member of your pack?" he asks, his eyes searching the group behind him for her.

Before Dante can confirm that, Big Tony speaks up.

"No, just a human girl," Tony recites, proud of himself for putting together

such a lopsided trade, in their favor, of course.

“A human? Dante, it is foolish of you to go through all this trouble for someone who isn’t even one of us. And to give up your leverage, an Alpha nonetheless, seems beneath you,” he finishes stepping closer to my Mate.

“She has ties to some important government officials who want her returned. It’s business. Complete the trade,” he orders, losing control and allowing his eyes to shift.

Deacon moves closer to her, still talking to Dante but not affording him the respect of looking him in the eyes.

“It’s a shame I wasn’t briefed on this trade before arriving. I would’ve been more, how do you say, discreet.” His movements have him standing in front of her, maybe an arm's length away, and I thank whoever is looking out for us that the breeze is blowing away from her, not allowing him to catch her scent.

Panic fills me, and my feet attempt to step without me permitting them as my wolf sees the threat standing before our Mate.

Her eyes show fear as she tries to step backward, but Hudson’s hand on her arm prevents her from running off. I can see the terror in her rapid pulse, beating on her exposed neck, and her quick breaths, which leave small white clouds in the frigid air.

I’m right here. Look at me, don’t look at him.

She bites her bottom lip, closing her eyes briefly as she attempts to stave off the building panic attack. Every fiber of my being wants to scoop her up in my arms and take her away from all of this. To rescue her from this nightmare she’s living in.

“She’s rather beautiful. I can see why you would want her back,” Marlo says, implying things my wolf doesn’t want to hear. “It’s a shame you will

have to kill her,” he finishes, his tone giving away the joy it brings him to put that on Dante.

“That’s our problem, Deacon. Hand her over, and we will release Kole. I tire of your idling,” Dante says, taking a step forward and making the Reno Pack tense.

Erik moves Kole forward in an attempt to get the trade moving.

Deacon walks around her, causing Hudson to back up a step, releasing her in his attempt to put distance between the Reno Alpha and himself. Marlo stops at her side and traces his hand up her arm and across her shoulders before stepping behind her and moving a stray strand of her wild brown hair behind her ear. Her whole body tenses, leaning away from his touch as he dips down to whisper something in her ear.

Her eyes, like saucers, flash up to mine. Tears, slowly falling, leave trails down her cheeks. Her hands fist at her sides, and her discomfort with Marlo’s proximity is enough to have me moving toward her; consequences be damned.

Before I take two steps, I hear it. The sharp intake of air before Marlo's eyes slide up to Dante, recognition flaring in them as a sneer forms on his vile face.

“Now, this is a surprise. You’re not at all what you seem. Are you, *lupo nascosto*? Tell me, have they told you what you are?” Deacon whispers the question into her ear, and her face registers complete confusion.

I can pinpoint the exact moment the idea occurs to him. The wicked thought is broadcast all over his face as he licks his lips.

“Why don’t we show you this world,” he says, raising his hand to move her hoodie off her shoulder.

My eyes are still locked on Brielle’s, and I try to apologize to her a moment

before I completely give myself over to my wolf. The world goes black as I leap toward Marlo, shifting in midair.



Chapter 23

Bri

The further I go into this forest, the more I sense the tension building. My skin feels too tight, and the goosebumps on my arms act as if the tiny hairs are reaching in an attempt to touch something just out of their grasp. It's silent save for my footsteps. No one spoke on the drive over, and even Hudson appears uncomfortable.

Every so often, I stumble, cursing myself for having such terrible coordination. No one tries to catch me or even turns their attention in my direction, and I swear quietly with each almost fall.

Why am I always the one?

My breath comes out in small white puffs as what little warmth I create escapes, and I fight back the chattering of my teeth. The men around me are in t-shirts, and they're walking like it's a beautiful day for a stroll rather than the twenty-five or thirty degrees it really is.

My only comfort lies in the fact that even through all the trees, the stars shine brightly overhead. They illuminate our path and allow me to see my surroundings despite the sun having set and no one using a flashlight. I catch

myself staring at them, often causing me to stumble over a lifted branch due to my lack of focus. A tiny part of me feels like Sam is looking down from those stars, watching over me through this whole ordeal.

I slide my numb fingers over my wrist tattoo as hope builds inside me.

Sammy, I'm still fighting, and even if this is it, I'll go out knowing I tried to live the life we always talked about.

I scan the sparkling stars for the constellations he used to show me, and I find myself smiling as I catch a glimpse of Cassiopeia above us. Before I can even relish in the discovery, my foot catches on yet another root causing me to launch forward.

Shit!

This time, I don't recover fast enough, and my palms slide across the forest floor, scraping open with the impact. A grunt escapes my lips as the wind is knocked out of me, and I feel my cheeks flush from embarrassment. The entire group stops, turning to see the commotion before their hardened faces stare at me, waiting for me to get back up.

"Sorry," I utter, pushing myself off the ground and trying to brush off my leggings without further injuring my bleeding hands.

Glancing down, I see my right palm split below my thumb. The tiny incision leaks beads of blood onto the dirt, now caked in the creases. My left hand has a piece of a branch stuck in it.

Perfect.

I wonder briefly if taking it out would be worse than leaving it in. At least for now, until I can clean and bandage it. The group continues, and my feet begin following on autopilot. Tugging on the sleeve of my hoodie, I slide my hands inside, leaving the large wood splinter in my skin. It's a constant

reminder that I'm still alive and that there will be a life and a future after this.

Focusing my attention, I keep my eyes locked on the ground before me. The last thing I need is to fall again. Big Tony speeds up the pace causing my lungs to burn with the exertion.

I definitely need to work out more.

My heart rate increases, and I grow a bit warmer with the effort. None of the men in the group appear to be fazed by the long hike with no apparent trail. For a moment, I wish I had better navigation skills. Without my phone's GPS, I'm utterly lost. I couldn't tell you what direction we're moving in or even roughly how far we've gone. I just continue putting one foot in front of the other until the trees thin, and I notice it's opening up to a clearing.

Wind dances over my skin, chilling me as we move out of the cover of the trees. The sky opens above me, and I'm mesmerized by how many twinkling stars filter down, lighting the entire area with their glow. I glance down at my sleeve, picturing the watercolor tattoo beneath it and wondering if the fireflies look just as beautiful against the dark sky.

My skin tingles. I can almost feel eyes on me before Big Tony abruptly halts, and I stumble to avoid crashing into his back. Once I've controlled my movement, I adjust to my left in an effort to see around the giant hulk of a man. Hudson and the most disgusting-smelling man I've ever encountered bookend me on the left and right, respectively.

I glance up, catching sight of Dante directly in front of Tony, wearing a slightly smug expression. The relief I feel in that moment allows me to relax my tense muscles and causes that tiny bit of hope I'm holding onto to grow.

Without even seeing him, I can feel Cain's stare, and my heart jumps to my throat as I worry for the first time about what he's feeling. All he knows is

that I left him in the middle of the night, didn't answer his calls, and ended up here for ransom. I never got to explain myself, ask him any of the million questions I had, or even say goodbye.

Intentionally, I take a deep breath, knowing that the look I'll see on his face could spell out our future, and I set my jaw, preparing myself for anything—hatred, anger, apathy, annoyance.

Telling myself I can survive whatever it is, my eyes slide over to him and lock onto his. The storm warring within them allows me to let out a breath as I see the emotions flit across his expression, not hidden by his usual mask—relief, fear, need.

They pour out of him as he scans my body asking questions without saying a word. His hand moves slightly as if he wants to reach out to me, and my heart clenches, aching for him to do just that.

The realization that I'm in love with him crashes into me like a wave at high tide, knocking the wind out of me. I've been a fool to run from the feelings that he's awoken within me since the moment we met.

Seventeen days doesn't seem like enough time to have these feelings, but if I'm being honest, I knew on day three when he calmed down my panic attack and gave me control of the car. I knew on day four when he showed up with sandwiches after I pushed him away. I knew on day eight when he made me laugh until my cheeks hurt and on day fourteen when he showed up with ice cream so that he didn't have to go a day without seeing me.

I knew.

I knew, and yet, I pushed every one of those green flags away because I was so scared I'd have to let him go. I was terrified that loving him would break me in ways that could never be repaired.

Just the idea that I could've lost him in all this has a single tear threatening

to fall.

I love him.

I'm in love with him.

It's absolutely terrifying, but I feel a weight lift as I accept both my feelings and what they could mean for my future. I square my shoulders and lift my chin, ready for whatever comes from this.

As both groups stand, lined up across from each other like a bad game of dodgeball. I scan over the members who stand with Cain and Dante, noting they all look ready and capable of fighting through this. Well, all but the one they have in thick handcuffs and wearing a dark cloth bag over his head. I imagine he won't be fighting anyone in his current state.

He must be "the heir" they're trading me for.

Dante's voice breaks the extended silence and has my eyes sliding back to where he stands at the center of his group, looking every bit like their leader and exuding a confidence that inspires.

"Antonio."

Big Tony, who doesn't look one bit like an 'Antonio,' responds.

"Stone. I see you have what I asked for. Now, as you can see, I don't have your property in restraints." He motions toward me, and every fiber of my being wants to shout at him. 'For the hundredth time, I'm not anyone's property,' but instead, I drop my gaze to the ground hoping my anger doesn't show.

"Yes, because an adult Alpha male and a young college woman offer the same threat level?" Dante answers in a tone that has Big Tony's neck turning red.

"Release him," he growls out.

"Do not pretend you can order me to do anything. You will release her

first,” Dante counters, remaining calm, but I can almost feel the power radiating from him.

“No deal. Do you think I’m stupid? I give you the girl you take off with him.” Tony spits back at him, causing my eyes to look back up and follow the back and forth.

“The girl doesn’t have the ability to outrun your guards. Once unbound, Kole could shif...,” he stops himself, his eyes widening as they flash to me briefly, releasing an irritated grunt before he continues, “find a way to escape in ways she cannot.”

I may not be athletically superior, but I *can* run. The insinuation that I’m weak crawls under my skin and burrows into the darkest, most broken parts of me.

I’m strong. I’m capable. I’m worthy.

Chanting the mantra to myself, I push away the fear that brings to life my doubt. When I refocus on the trade before me, Big Tony turns around, excusing himself. He grabs the putrid-smelling guy on my right and speaks into his ear, causing him to take off back toward the car. Before he turns back to Dante, Big Tony’s eyes meet mine, and the vile sneer he gives me sends chills up my spine and has me wanting to retreat.

Oh no! That look can’t be good.

What the fuck did I just miss?

“My apologies. My Alpha has found time in his schedule to join us, and as that’s who you wanted to speak with in the first place,” Big Tony says. A newfound confidence fills his voice, and I start to panic because whoever is joining us is obviously beneficial to the side I’m rooting against.

Shit!

My attention goes back to Dante as he responds, still unfazed by the

announcement of a new guest.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware you needed Daddy to finish your deal. Absolutely, we can wait for him, but I do have a flight to catch, so if we could get these two sorted out while we wait,” Dante says, pointing between the guy in the cuff and myself. His comment makes Tony clench his jaw and drop a little of the bravado he just had.

Another shot to the ego. Smart Dante.

Before I can smile at him and his tactical negotiation skills, a commotion behind me pulls my attention to the clearing area where we entered just a few minutes ago. An older man carrying a bag in his right hand, flanked by two more dogs, enters the clearing.

Where are they breeding these things? Is there like a bad guy dog breeding program on the black market? Do they come this well-trained?

By my count, we now have eight of these damn things. Not one of them has so much as snarled at the other. No barking. No running to play or fight. They aren’t even on leashes!

The man locks eyes with Dante as he approaches, and the evil I feel in his presence is something I haven’t felt in almost a decade. It’s not just that his face is hard, filled with lines etched into his tanned skin, but none of them are from laughing or smiling.

Hatred pours out of him as he moves toward the two groups. No emotion reaches his eyes which appear almost black as he takes in the scene before him. The hairs on my arms stand straight up with the electricity dancing along my skin, and I have the sudden urge to run for safety.

The man speaks to his dog in what sounds like Spanish or Italian, and before I can even process what’s happening, the dog on his left transforms before my eyes. One second, the black and brown wolf dog is striding toward

us, and the next, a completely naked man stands in his place—a man I now recognize as the disgusting-smelling man who stood next to me a few minutes ago.

My jaw drops, leaving my mouth hanging open as I try to rationalize where the dog went and where the man came from. My stomach clenches, and I feel like I'm going to be sick. Nausea rolls through me, causing my saliva to change its taste as my body prepares to heave up anything it can from my stomach. I wrap my arms around myself in order to hold it back.

What the actual fuck was that?

Werewolves? You've got to be kidding me.

Closing my mouth, I bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. I can't take my eyes off of the man? Wolf? Werewolf? As he dresses quickly and walks back over toward me. I straighten my spine, gripping the hoodie at my waist with all my strength to keep myself standing. My legs threaten to give out beneath me as the evil man reaches the group and stands next to Big Tony on the opposite side, thankfully away from me.

“Apologies for my late arrival, gentlemen. I was traveling and didn't hear about this little trade until recently.” He speaks with a heavy foreign accent that carries his words smoothly as if he's serenading the group.

He turns his head toward me, but his eyes land on Big Tony in almost feigned disapproval, and Big Tony drops his gaze apologetically while hiding a sinister smile from Dante's view.

“Now, what did I miss?” the evil man asks, a sick excitement dances in his eyes.

My stare slides back to the creature beside me, who stands casually as if turning from an animal to a human is no big deal.

Oh, it's a big goddamn deal!

Realization hits me as I scan the other seven dogs.

Oh my God. None of them are dogs. The fucking dogs aren't even dogs?!?!?

My breathing becomes quick and shallow, and my eyes flash to the other men surrounding me—the men who brought me here.

Holy shit.

Fear grips me as I wonder what in the world I've gotten myself mixed up in. My throat is dry, and I attempt to swallow, trying desperately to take in air. My body takes a step to run. Terror overtakes my common sense, when a firm hand grabs the back of my arm, causing me to cry out, and I slam my eyes shut against this new threat. Hoping, praying to a God I don't even believe in, that all of this is a terrible nightmare, a drug-induced psychosis—anything but reality.

My nails dig into the flesh of my palms, reminding me of my injuries, and the pain is the only grounding emotion I have at my disposal.

“You need to breathe. Calm down. Do the counting thing, whatever, but you can't lose your cool right now. You'll die. Fuck, I'm so sorry, Brielle. I never meant for you to get swept up in any of this. We're going to get you out, but you have to find a way to calm down,” Hudson whispers so quietly I almost can't hear him over the pounding in my ears.

The low volume of his voice forces me to focus on his words and, through that distraction, allows me to begin to take back my control.

I'm not a victim. I'm not weak. I'll fight to survive this.

I take a deep breath, allowing my body to hold onto the oxygen as long as it can before slowly releasing it.

Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Exhale. One. Two. Three. Four.

I repeat the breathing three more times before my heart rate slows enough

to allow my muscles to relax. A numbing calm falls over me as the shock of everything I've been through in the last hour washes over me.

Werewolves exist. They have me hostage. They're negotiating a trade with...

My eyes flash open as Dante speaks again, and the reality of the code words finally make sense.

Alpha.

Dante is the Alpha.

They're all wolves.

But Cain...

I force myself to look at him. He stands focused on the exchange happening between Dante and this new man. My eyes trace the muscles on his chest and arms, sliding over the wolf tattoo that peeks out at his collar.

It was always right there in front of me.

Using every bit of resolve I have left, I keep myself from crying. My eyes track the movements of the foreign man, still unable to comprehend what he and Dante are saying in their back-and-forth exchange. He looks at me and begins taking steps in my direction, crossing in front of Big Tony to take a closer look.

Everything around me feels as if it is moving in slow motion. The words he's saying sound as if they're traveling underwater to reach my ears. He stops in front of me. His eyes scan up my body like I'm an item for sale. I bite my lip, hoping the pain will keep me from losing the small amount of control I've been able to regain.

Closing my eyes, I take another deep breath, inhaling with it the scent of his expensive aftershave. The smell is almost familiar. I try to pull at the wisps of the memory before they recede out of my grasp.

The man's words finally form coherently in my mind, and I open my eyes at his now close proximity.

“She’s rather beautiful. I can see why you’d want her back. It’s a shame you’ll have to kill her,” he finishes, his tone giving away the joy it brings him to say those words.

Kill me?

Confusion floods my mind as Dante responds.

“That’s our problem, Deacon. Hand her over, and we will release Kole. I tire of your idling.” With his statement, he steps forward, causing the men around me to tense—all the men except Deacon.

He locks his eyes on mine, stepping closer, his finger drawing a line up the outside of my arm. Every part of me wants to recoil from his touch, but my fear has me frozen in place, knowing I can’t outrun a pack of wolves.

Deacon moves around me, trailing his finger gently across the curve of my shoulder. He places himself directly behind me, pressing his chest into my back, and tucks a wild curl behind my ear. I try to lean away but realize his other hand is locked at my waist, effectively trapping me in front of him.

“I hope you didn’t believe you would be saved,” he whispers into my ear before inhaling at my nape. I cringe, letting out an audible squeak as my eyes lose their battle at holding in my tears.

Locking eyes with Cain, I see his turmoil as he wants to move to get to me.

“Now, this is a surprise. You’re not at all what you seem. Are you, *lupo nascosto*? Tell me, have they told you what you are?” Deacon whispers the question into my ear, making me wonder what the hell he's talking about.

Lupo nascosto? What does that mean? What am I?

Cain’s eyes flare, his jaw set, anger pouring out of him. I can see the instant he decides to break ranks. He’s trying to save me despite what it will mean

for those around him, and for the smallest of moments, my heart soars, knowing that even though I'm going to die, he wants to save me.

“Why don't we show you this world,” Deacon says, grabbing my hoodie and pulling it back, exposing the flesh of my shoulder.

Cain's eyes lock onto mine, and their expression softens as if he's trying to send me some message, an apology, a vow. Then, before my eyes, he, too, transforms. Leaping from the ground as a human and landing on four paws, clothes shredded behind him, sprinting at me.

His wolf is giant, bigger than those around us, and its coat is black, but it's his eyes that grab my attention.

Metallic-silver, gunmetal glowing eyes. Holy fuck!

The memory takes hold, and I flashback to the night in the call center parking lot. The wolf-dog that chased down my car. That was him.

Everything happens in slow motion, my mind trying to sort out the action that's all happening simultaneously. Both sides begin moving, squaring up with opponents, and Cain is blocked from reaching Deacon by the disgusting guard who has once again transformed into a wolf.

Deacon drops his mouth to my neck, and I feel his teeth scrape above my collarbone. My self-defense training kicks in, and I decide if I'm going to die, then I'll go down fighting.

Dropping my body weight, I pull away from his mouth and rotate my hips to the left. My sudden movement causes Deacon to lean forward off balance, trying to maintain his hold. I swing my right arm back with as much force as I can muster, hitting him square in the balls. He releases my waist and shoulder, stepping back just as Cain's wolf throws his opponent off and charges Deacon, who I hear more than see turn into a wolf himself.

I don't wait to see what happens in the fight; instead, I take off toward the

edge of the clearing. Hoping everyone is too caught up in each other to notice me.

Before I make it three steps, I hear a booming voice.

“Uh uh uh, not so fast. Thought you could get away so easy,” Big Tony’s deep voice carries over to me, and I spin around, readying myself for another fight. He stands ten feet behind me, his arm lifting in my direction. My eyes move down his arm to see a handgun raised, pointing at my chest. My hands fly up in surrender, and I shake my head as tears continue to flow down my face.

“No, please, just let me go,” I whimper, knowing deep down nothing I say will get through to him.

“Sorry, baby girl, rules are rules,” he replies with a shrug.

The adrenaline flowing within my body through this nightmare leaves me feeling spent. I’m numb. My eyes flash over to Cain, still wrestling with Deacon, and several other battles are happening on every side of me. I send him these final words, hoping he knows even though I never told him.

I’m sorry. I love you, and I’m sorry.

Tony’s finger moves, squeezing the trigger, and my eyes close in anticipation. The loud bang of the gun firing hits my ears just before the bullet’s power sends me sprawling to the ground. The force of it causes my head to collide with the frozen, unforgiving forest floor. Time slows to a standstill as warm blood soaks the front of my hoodie, contrasting the overwhelming cold that I feel. The pressure on my chest keeps me from being able to breathe. The sound of my gasping for air fills the resounding silence.

I wait for the pain that never comes—feeling nothing but the unending cold.

My vision blurs and black dots dance before my eyes. The stars above cast their twinkling lights in a sad farewell as I feel my lids close and tears slide down my cheeks.

The last thing I think before everything fades to black echoes as nothingness engulfs me.

I'm sorry I never saw the fireflies, Sammy.



Chapter 24

Dante

Multiple gunshots ring out in quick succession from all around us, causing the individual fights to freeze momentarily before everyone scatters toward the trees. The two wolves I'm tangled up with use the distraction to remove themselves from the scuffle, nearly tripping over each other in their attempts to find cover at the edges of the clearing.

I shift back, scanning the area as I move behind the rock structure we placed behind us. My eyes search for my pack mates as I rip the mangled earpiece from my ear, as I send mind-links to the blue team for a status update, so I can figure out who the fuck is shooting.

We've got to find a fucking way to fix that.

Dante: Report blue team

Jess: Two shots fired at Big Tony. He's down.

Wyatt: One fired at Big Tony.

I distinctly heard four shots.

Dante: Who had the fourth shot?

Jess: Big Tony.

My head whips in that direction seeing bodies lying on the ground, blood seeping from them. I move to the right in order to work out the whole scene that's partially blocked by the massive size of Tony's body. My stomach clenches, and I suck in air as I realize.

On the ground, half covered, is an unconscious Brielle. Her lips have turned a pale blue, and no white puffs indicate she's breathing. Lying face down on top of her is Hudson. There's blood everywhere—so much blood.

No!

I run, no longer hesitating as I reach their lifeless forms. My hands grab Hudson's limp arm, and I roll him to his back, quickly assessing the damage. The hole gaping at the front of his chest confirms what I already know.

He's dead.

Movement on my left has me jumping up defensively before I realize it's Cain who drops to his knees on the other side of Brielle. The look etched on his face is pure torture as he approaches his Mate slowly, afraid of what he'll find. I turn back, moving over Hudson's body to determine her status when he growls aggressively.

Fuck!

I lift my hands in a show of surrender, slowing my movements to reach my fingers under her jaw.

Please find a pulse.

My own heartbeat pounds in my ears as I wait for the rhythm. My eyes scan her body, looking for injury, but with all of the blood, I can't tell where it's coming from.

Th-Thump. Th-Thump.

It's slow, but it's there.

“She's alive. We need to get her out of here!” I almost yell in my

excitement.

Cain's eyes fly up, shock evident, before gently scooping her off the ground. He cradles her head, his eyes growing large as he pulls back his hand to find it covered in more blood.

Head injury as a minimum.

I turn to grab Hudson, only to find Jake already lifting him despite the blood leaking from a bite at his calf. He shakes me off when I attempt to assist him. His jaw is set, and remorse fills his eyes.

Turning, I assess each of my pack briefly to ensure we have everyone. Cain has a gash on his right side, still bleeding, but he won't feel it until we get her sorted out. Gabriel is bruised along his torso in what looks like a possible broken rib. Max is limping, leaning heavily on Ryder, and favoring his left leg. Ryder and Theo have no visible injuries. Last up is Erik, who's unharmed and has collected our gear that dropped when we shifted and is moving to the group.

Dante: Where's Kole?

Erik: Lost him when the guns went off. Cain had one headed for his six.

Well, shit.

I nod understanding before turning to my pack.

Dante: Mason, meet us at the green team's location. Have the med kit ready.

Mason: En route. Pres has the kits because Jay is with her.

Jay is one of our best on-scene medics. He trained as a paramedic for the Clark County fire department before coming over to VP Securities full-time. Outside of Radolf, he's who I trust the most.

Let's hope we can get her to him in time.

“Black team, meet with the red team and return to your vehicles. Make sure

everyone is there before you leave. Cain, Erik, Jake, you're with me. Meet at the rendezvous in one hour. Let's go." The order is out, and we're moving.

Dante: Blue team, we're clear. Head back.

Jess: Copy

Wyatt: Copy

Erik takes point with Cain and Jake falling in behind him, both carrying a body, and I bring up the rear, ensuring no one is left behind, and no one follows. None of the earpieces for those involved in the fight are working, so I'm the only one able to contact Pres, who begins screaming at me through our mind-link.

Pres: What the fuck is happening? I've got shots from both blue team members, no one on scene answering comms, and I've got the red team asking for orders.

Dante: It went sideways. Mason's headed to you. Get the med kit ready, and whatever you do, get Keith off the cams. Keep him away from everything.

Pres: Who's down?

Dante: Brielle

Pres: Shit.

She doesn't respond further, and we continue moving, quickly navigating the terrain.

After less than eight minutes, we emerge on the edge of the highway where Jay, Mason, and Pres stand waiting outside the two vehicles. I jog ahead to ensure everything is ready.

"Where's Keith?" I ask, catching the shorts Mason tosses my way.

"Blindfolded in my rig, for now, but he knows something happened to her. He heard the blue team's radio chatter. I had to lose my headphones to help

out the red team without losing comms with everyone else. He was surprisingly helpful, but now he knows about the gunshots. He knows she went down,” she finishes, her face grim.

“We can deal with it later. Get everyone clothed, have Jake and Cain shift their injuries clear, help Erik store the gear, and get ready to roll. She’s in bad shape.”

Shaking off the distraction, I turn back to help Cain guide his Mate into the back of the SUV, where Jay has set up a makeshift medical area. Cain struggles as he physically forces himself to let her go, against his instincts. He releases her but is unwilling to step more than a foot out of the way.

The pain rolling off him in waves is debilitating, and I have to physically block it from coming through our bond. I do my best to portray confidence I don’t feel.

There was so much blood. Her pulse was so faint.

Jay assesses Cain’s demeanor and circles around the car to come at her from the other side. As he approaches, the growl that rumbles from Cain’s chest is wholly predatory and gives Jay pause.

“I won’t hurt her. I just need to check her injuries,” Jay says, his tone soft, placating as he slows his movements to show his intent.

Having dropped the gear in Presley’s rig and thrown on some pants, Erik hurries over to protect Jay from Cain should he have the need. I take on the role of assisting Jay through his examination.

Jay tilts her head back slightly, ensuring her airway is open, and looks into her mouth for any obstructions. Finding none, he places a stethoscope on her chest and begins speaking.

“Airway is clear. Breath sounds are weak but even. Grab me the O₂ mask to help her breathing,” he instructs calmly before moving to her pulse. I grab the

clear plastic tubing and ensure it's secure into the mask before placing it on her mouth gently and then slide the elastic around over her blood-knotted hair.

“Her heart rate is weak and thready. She’s bleeding from somewhere.” He attaches electrodes to her chest and sticks a sensor on her finger, which has the machine next to him beeping to life with her blood pressure, heart rate, and rhythm. “This should help us keep an eye on her numbers.” He moves to her face, lifting her eyelids before shining a light into her eyes.

“Brielle, can you hear me?” he pauses, waiting for a response, but when there is none, he continues. “Pupils are dilated and fixed, non-responsive. She’ll need a CT scan.”

“She’s bleeding from her head. Blood in her hair’s still wet,” I say, moving to allow him to switch places with me. After moving her hair out of the way, he finds it.

“She has about a one-inch laceration. Hand me some gauze and a stitch kit. I’m going to need you to come hold a light.” He turns his attention to Cain before changing his mind and asking Erik.

“I need you to cut off the hoodie. We’ve got to see where all this blood is coming from,” he states, cleaning the head wound with gauze.

“It’s her favorite,” Cain says. His voice is so low Erik freezes, unsure if it’s safe to comply.

“She’ll forgive you,” Jay says, nodding to Erik and continuing to stitch the cut.

Erik grabs a pair of scissors and begins to slice through the front of the blue hoodie. As soon as Cain processes that she’s about to be naked from the waist up, he growls, snatching the scissors from Erik and effectively blocking his view of her body.

Dante: Let him. Go help Pres.

Cain tenderly grabs one side of the slit, exposing the blood-stained skin beneath. My eyes catch on what appears to be a bite on her shoulder, and I have to school my expression to keep from bringing attention to it. I turn my head to avert my eyes after glancing quickly to see none of the red looks fresh or wet.

So it was all Hudson's.

“In the side pouch of the bag at the front should be a gown you can place over her now that we know her torso is clear,” Jay instructs Cain.

“Pres set some clothes by the bag for you too,” I add, knowing he could care less, but Keith will undoubtedly have questions if he's walking around naked, bleeding from his side. Admittedly his cuts aren't life-threatening, but the fact that they will be completely healed in twenty-four hours without so much as a scar means we should still be careful. Cain takes off at a run.

Jay: I'm giving her a mild sedative to ensure she won't wake up in this condition. Her numbers don't look good. We must get her some blood and ensure she has no more internal injuries. With these levels, if she flatlines, we may not get her back.

Dante: Plane's ready when we get there. We move on your call.

“This is finished, but she'll need scans and some blood. Do we know her type?” Jay asks, turning to Cain as he returns, still pulling his arm through a shirt.

“B positive,” he responds robotically while covering her with the gown.

“Great. Now we need to move quickly to get her the care she needs. I'll call Radolf to have the operating room prepped before we arrive so there's no delay. Let's go.”

Mason and Jake jump into the front seat of the vehicle that carries Bri in the

back. The middle seat is dropped, and Cain climbs in with his Mate. Jay rides on the other side of her, monitoring her numbers.

I shut the back doors and contact the other teams to check in.

Dante: Jess, what's the blue team status?

Jess: Wyatt and I are secure in the red team vehicle.

Dante: Carter, what's the red team's status?

Carter: Colt and I are with the blue team in our vehicle. Colt's driving to the meet.

Dante: Ryder, what's the black team's status?

Ryder: All secure and en route.

Dante: How are Max and Gabe's injuries?

Ryder: We had to reset Max's hip, which sounded like it hurt like a bitch. Gabe shifted, so he's all clear.

I jump into the passenger seat and signal Pres to follow Mason onto the highway.

“What the fuck happened to her? Is she going to be okay? Let me see her. Let me help,” I hear Keith snap, desperate to get to her.

“The best thing you can do right now is let us get her to our facility to determine the extent of her injuries. We know she's important to you. We're doing everything we can. Please,” Presley's voice carries emotion I hadn't noticed, and I turn to see a tear falling from her eye. I send her a mind-link.

Dante: I'm sorry about Hudson.

Pres: At least it wasn't Cain.

It's all she says, but I can tell she's struggling. I open the bond and allow her pain to wash into me. Taking it on like a penance.

Hudson was mine to protect. It's my fault.

“Don't,” she says, feeling the weight of her grief lightened. “Let me carry

it,” she finishes, sitting up straighter as she focuses on the road.

“Don’t what? I just need to know if she’s ok,” Keith asks, unsure who Pres is talking to with his blindfold back in place.

“The 'don't' was for me, not you,” I answer over my shoulder at him. “And for now, she’s stable, but she’s lost a lot of blood. We need to get her home to ensure we’ve caught all her injuries. I have a team waiting to treat her. We will do everything we can,” I say confidently, hoping she's as strong as I think she is because she’s in for a hell of a recovery.

The one fear I haven’t allowed myself to entertain is the bite mark imprinted on her shoulder. If Deacon got his venom in her before she got away, her wolf has been Awakened. By law, that not only makes her part of his pack, and this trip is kidnapping, it means taking her home is declaring war. A war that will no longer be supported by the LLC or any of our allies.

A war we cannot win.

Chapter 25

Keith

I'm not sure what was worse. Sitting blindfolded in the car, knowing she was outside and I couldn't get to her, or sitting next to her hospital bed, seeing her attached to every tube, wire, and machine possible, listening to the constant beep of the heart rate monitor.

I can't do this again.

My heart aches remembering the last time she was like this. She looks older this time, yet still so fragile as her life hangs in the balance. Once we got her off the plane and back here, Dante's surgeons quickly took her for scans before heading into the operating room to fix a brain bleed.

Brain surgery.

She isn't even twenty-two yet, and she had to have her skull sawed open. I laugh to myself as I realize Elle will probably be the most upset that they had to shave her hair in order to do it, well, if she wakes up. Just the thought brings my mood back down.

She has to survive this.

The doctor says they got everything, and she's healing, but they can't even estimate when she'll wake up. If she'll wake up.

It's already been almost a day.

At first, they wouldn't let me anywhere near her. Cain staked out her bedside, barely allowing the medical staff to do their jobs. I yelled. I begged. Hell, I even cried. It wasn't until Pres talked to him this morning that I was even allowed to come to see Elle.

And man, Pres has been a godsend.

She spent the first day keeping me busy working through the stuff I had to complete for Marlo because I wasn't supposed to know anything about what happened in Reno. She answered every question I had on Elle's condition, gave me every update, and even let me see Elle from the camera in her room.

Perks of being the security for an in-house medical facility.

She brought me food and sassed me until I ate it, reminding me I was no good to Elle if I pass out from malnutrition. I tried to argue that it would take two-three months for malnutrition to kill me, but she wouldn't hear of it and kept dropping food at my workstation every few hours, whether I wanted it or not.

Not only did she keep my mind busy and feed me, but she also answered my questions. Pres filled me in on some of the gray areas of who I was now working with: VP Securities. On the surface, they were like any security company, bodyguards, surveillance installation, and event consultation. I didn't know they also work with local and federal law enforcement on human trafficking, removing drug smuggling lines, and gang-related interference.

Like Marlo's crime family.

It explained how they got involved, how they came across me, and how Bri got mixed up with them.

Apparently, Marlo is prominent in human trafficking, and after Dante and Cain busted a raid last year, he's been looking for payback. It boils my blood to know Elle was his play at revenge. The only thing that keeps me from turning on him is that he still has leverage over me through my parents. I'm working with Pres to find a way to protect them, but short of making them move from the home they've loved for nearly thirty years, it's not looking good.

At least I know Elle is safe here.

Knowing I inadvertently ended up on "team good guy" makes me feel better about the whole thing.

Now I just need her to wake up.

My eyes slide back to the beeping monitor to see her stats look the same. They've been keeping her hydrated, and her color looks better, but no sign of this coma ending.

The door next to me clicks as Pres walks into the room, signaling the end of my time here. Her face is apologetic, and I know she went to bat for me to even have this time.

"Can't just reset her cache and power cycle her?" she asks, humor lighting her eyes.

"Exactly why I work with computers. They listen when you give them commands. People, not so much." I smile, knowing she understands as much as I do. Pres knows her stuff. From what I've seen in the last few days, she's probably a better coder than I am, not that I'd ever let her know. She has enough sass without me adding to it.

"Well, that explains your rotating door of sorority girls, kind of like mindless zeroes and ones," she smiles sweetly, trying to get a rise out of me.

“Come on, the kitchen is just starting lunch, and if we don’t hurry, the guys from training will snag all the pizza,” she says holding open the door for me.

I stand, walking over to move Elle's blanket up, knowing she always runs cold.

“I know you hate to be late for anything. We’re all waiting for you. The clock’s ticking, Little Ellie.” I gently squeeze her hand, ensuring I don’t mess with the taped IVs. I hold on a second longer, hoping she’ll squeeze back, tense a muscle, anything. But she just lays there, slowly breathing in and out. Taking one last glance, I walk out with Pres.

One significant change that’s happened since returning from Reno is the fact that I’m no longer blindfolded everywhere I go. After discussing my ongoing role with Marlo, Dante offered me a position within their team, and after seeing their caliber firsthand, I didn’t hesitate.

Not to mention I’ve been trying to pry information out of Pres as to who created the software program I’d my hands on. So far, I know it's officially called HUNTER, and it will allegedly revolutionize the war on trafficking. The way Pres talks about it, I can tell she respects the hell out of the engineer who wrote it.

Man, I want to meet him. Maybe I’ll end up on his team.

As we turn into the employee cafeteria, workers are just setting out the buffet-style lunch setup. I inhale, taking in the deep-fried salty aroma of french fries fresh out of the oil and cheesy marinated pizza, pepperonis still sizzling out of the ovens.

Pres hands me a plate before grabbing three large slices and loading up on fries. I take a moment admiring her backside, wondering where she puts any of this food because her long, lean Pilates instructor body had no extra curves. Not that I mind a woman with a full figure. On the contrary, I love

women of all sizes. But Pres looked more like the type to have a salad and hold the dressing.

“There a reason you're staring at my ass?”

Shit!

“Oh ah,” My eyes jump to hers, and I see humor in them. I try explaining, “I was just wondering where you put it,” I finish, running my free hand through my hair and adjusting my glasses. She stares at me curiously as I grab myself a couple of slices.

“Put what?” she asks, irritation leaking into her tone, her cheeks flush.

“I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. Fuck. You’re in great shape, amazing, really. I just didn’t expect you to actually eat —like real, delicious, greasy food. Most women who look like you are all kale and green smoothies. It's refreshing,” I stumble through my explanation, and I’m not sure if I’m making it better or worse when I’m saved her response due to three dozen sweaty young CrossFit model-looking recruits flooding the room.

“Hey, Pres,” one of the guys with, “Team Leader” displayed across the front says as he walks up to the line behind us. She smiles at him and throws her hand up in a wave.

“Hey Ryder, how are they holding up?” Her voice seems softer somehow.

“No one has passed out yet, so you know it's still early,” he responds, grabbing half of the pizza in front of him. Pres giggles, and irritation fills me as my eyes glance between them.

“If you need help with that, I hear you’ve got ’em running bravo later. You know how they hate to lose to a girl,” she pouts the last part, her eyes sparkling at him.

“Aren’t you on babysitting duty?” he asks, eyes glancing my way as I scoop up a few fries pretending I’m not entirely eavesdropping on the

conversation. I clench my jaw.

Oh, so Ryder gets flirty nice Pres, and I get the chip on her shoulder.

I move around her, grab a fruit punch Prime, and stalk off toward an empty table without saying a word to her. I'm not sure why it bothers me so much, but just once, I'd like to see her smile at me with no irritation or sass behind it.

Why do I care who she smiles at?

After throwing myself into the chair, I pull out my phone and AirPods case, hoping to throw on some music and tune all of this out. I can tell I'm tired. I'm never irritable, but with everything that's happened this week, the stress must be wearing my patience thin.

"Trying to get rid of me, Hef?" she says, setting down her plate, which I see has two brownies and a small bag of popcorn added.

"Doesn't seem to be working," I snap. "You don't have to babysit me. I'll be fine," I finish, throwing my AirPods into my ear without looking up.

I'm being an ass. I know it, and yet, I can't shake my irritation. She rips the AirPods out, and I look up, surprised by the audacity of the move. She leans down to be at eye level with me.

"What's your problem?" she asks, visibly confused and angry. Her eyes scan mine, asking silent questions I can't quite catch through my anger.

"You're my problem. Why are you so nice to everyone but me?" I whisper shout the words at her, hearing the absolute absurdity of them the moment they come out. She's done everything to ensure I'm getting through this since Elle arrived. Feeding me, giving me space, filling my time with work so I have a purpose.

Dammit!

She recoils, her face displaying the shock she feels. I know immediately

that I've fucked up, but I don't know what to say to fix my irrational outburst, and I want her answer. She bites her bottom lip shaking her head slightly as if deciding what to say and having that argument in her head.

"You don't think I'm nice to you?" she asks finally, frustration filling her tone.

"Forget it. I'll take this back to my workstation, so you can enjoy your duty-free lunch with your friends." The way I say 'friends' is dripping with disgust, and I cringe internally for letting my emotion slide into it.

I'm not even mad. I need to work anyway. I'm fucking this all up.

Before I can grab my food, she responds, leaning close enough that I can smell the coconut on her skin over the overpowering scents of the buffet.

"I get that you're hurting, but don't take it out on me. I know what it's like to stand idly by, hoping someone will pull through or come back. Jesus. I'm not babysitting you. I was trying to be a friend. You seemed like you needed one." With that, she pulls away, drops her stare, taps the table with her knuckles, and grabs her plate to leave.

"Pres, wait," I plead, regret filling my voice.

"No," she raises her hand to stop my advance. "It's fine. Have a good day, Keith," she finishes with a polite smile that doesn't reach her eyes. And fuck, if I don't hate the sound of my name coming out of her mouth, and I wish with everything in me, she'd have said something snarky, some quip, or unexplained nickname. Hearing her speak to me like a stranger felt a million times worse than her words to Ryder.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I finish gathering my stuff and sulk back to my workstation, hoping Pres will pop in later, but I spend the rest of the day alone. This must be what purgatory feels like.

Lonely and numb.



Chapter 26

Cain

***T**hirty-one hours and eighteen minutes since they completed her four-hour surgery. Still no change.*

Every minute she lies there, not waking up, part of me slips further into the darkness. I never imagined a result where she wasn't okay. It never crossed my mind because I knew. I knew I could save her, yet here I am, helplessly staring at camera footage of her hospital room from the computer in my office.

Keith sits adjacent to her, talking occasionally, spitting out a random fact about surgery recovery rates for brain bleeds, fifty percent, or the number of people who have brain surgery yearly, about fourteen thousand in the US alone.

The stupid shit this guy knows seems endless, and yet I watch her, hoping for a response to the nonsense.

For almost every minute of that thirty-one hours, it's been me in that chair. Talking to her, begging her, hell, I even prayed to the Fates that she'd be ok.

No change.

Jake brought me food, which sat uneaten time and time again. Dr. Radolf would come to do his rounds every few hours, and I'd take those visits to use the restroom before hurrying back to hear his updates. The pity in his eyes each time he told me, 'everything looks good. It's just a matter of time,' tore my heart apart.

She's in there. Her body's healing. Why won't she wake up?

I was spinning. My mind taking a dark path toward wanting to join her and knowing if she didn't recover, I wouldn't either. I knew without a doubt that I couldn't exist in a world without her. A world shrouded in darkness with no visible light. She's my light. My Firefly. My purpose. Nothing can fill the void her absence has created. Nothing ever will.

I was starting to lose myself, giving up on any type of future. After refusing to go back to my apartment to sleep, Pres and Dante cornered me, forcing me to see reason. I needed a shower, to brush my teeth, to change clothes, and to show me that I wasn't the only one in pain.

They told me Keith needed to see her. To know she was okay. Frankly, I didn't give a fuck what Keith needed. I didn't want to leave her. But knowing she'd have a face she knew and trusted if she woke while I was gone gave me the push to leave. Well, that, and Dante's threat about throwing me into a holding cell if I refused his order.

I agreed to thirty minutes the following day. Time for me to crash through the basics while still being able to see her.

If she wakes up while I'm gone, I'll never forgive myself.

One positive that's come out of this wait was finding out her scent hadn't changed. Deacon's attempt at Awakening her hadn't worked. Either he didn't have time to inject the venom, or not enough got into her bloodstream to complete the change.

Small wins.

The downside is that had he Awakened her, her wolf would've been helping her heal, and she may have already been awake. The thought of Awakening her myself has crossed my mind more than once, just to get her through this. But I know deep down she'd want to make the choice. Who does it, how it's done, and when, should all be in her control.

My wolf doesn't wholly agree with that mentality. Seeing her lay there without her spark has him challenging me. He's more the ask-for-forgiveness type, but unfortunately, we already have a lot of apologies to dole out when she wakes up, so I don't intend to add any more.

The alarm on my phone beeps, indicating his thirty minutes with her is up, and I'm moving before I even get it cleared. I open the surveillance on my phone to continue monitoring her as I make my way from my office to her room, eager to be next to her again. I followed every rule I was given. Showered - check. Brushed teeth and shaved - check. Change clothes - check. Give Keith his time - check. Now it was back to her.

Keeping my phone in my hand, I jog down the stairs to the medical floor, landing just as Pres walks Keith from the room. Her eyes flash to me before she turns him toward the elevator on the opposite end of the building.

The moment I enter her room, relief fills me. She's still out, lying peacefully beneath the covers with machines beeping as her chest rises and falls. Walking to her bedside, I slide my knuckles gently over her cheek. I didn't realize how much being near her helped calm my nerves and keep my wolf at bay.

"I'm back, Firefly. You can wake up now," I say for the hundredth time since she came into this room. Stepping back, I move the chair Keith was sitting in back flush with the bed, so I can hold her hand while I sit. I

continue talking, not knowing if she can hear me or process anything, but wanting her to know I'm here all the same.

“Liv's been texting you. I guess you three always do Thanksgiving together. Keith and his parents already RSVP'd. The problem is she doesn't know you were taken. She doesn't even know you're hurt. I didn't have the heart to give her that news without knowing if you'd be up any minute. I know you wouldn't want her to worry. The second you open those beautiful flame-kissed eyes, I promise I'll fill her in so she knows you're okay.”

“Anyway, I texted her back, as you, of course, letting her know you were bringing me to dinner. I thought maybe if I said we'd be there, something in you'd know you had somewhere to be, and it would bring you back to me. You didn't tell me Liv was so scary. I already know she's prepared to give me the third degree about keeping you away from her. It's okay. I can take it. By the end of the dinner, she'll know that I'm no threat.”

“I want you to have your friends and your life: every life experience and every memory. I just want to be there with you while you experience them. I want my life to be about making your dreams come true, but to do that, I need you to wake up. I need you to come back to me. If I could come to you in your head, I would. There is no darkness that can keep me from your light,” I pause as a tear falls, my voice becoming choked up, as I allow it to fall into my lap. I welcome the pain. As long as I'm feeling it and she isn't.

“I need your light back, Firefly. The world's too dark without you. This can't be the end for us. After everything you've endured, now we get our beginning. We get to start our happily ever after. If that means Boston, then we move. If that's Europe, Asia, or Australia, I'll follow you in circles if it means spending my life by your side.” I squeeze her hand, threading my fingers between hers.

“I might be getting a bit ahead of myself.” I let out a low laugh. “You don’t even know that I love you yet. I mean, I hope you know, but I haven’t gotten to see your face as I say the words. Knowing with every fiber of my being that...” I don’t get to finish the statement because I’m interrupted.

Dante: I know you’re busy, but I need you at the council meeting.

Cain: I’m not leaving her.

Dante: This is about her. I know you’ll want a say in what we do going forward.

Cain: What do you mean ‘a say’? I have the only say in that room regarding my Mate.

Dante: Then you need to be here because it's bigger than your Mate. Conference room twenty minutes. I’ll send Quinn to sit with her so she isn’t alone if she wakes.

Cain: Fine. Have Pres put her camera feed on the screen across from me.

My eyes flash to the monitors, reviewing the details for the tenth time. Using my remaining time, I bring my lips to her knuckles, softly kissing each one in turn, memorizing every crease and wrinkle. Hours wouldn’t be enough time to learn every facet, every feature. Decades won’t be enough time with her.

“You’ll have to entertain yourself for a while, Firefly. Duty calls. Now I don’t want to hear about you terrorizing the doctors or talking Quinn’s ear off. She’s too nice to tell you to stop.” I smile, knowing how ridiculous I must sound to anyone else. She’d sass me, roll her eyes, and give me shit.

Fuck, I miss it when she’s mean to me.

The click of the door pulls my attention as Quinn quietly steps in. Her face is somber, and she’s missing the usual peppiness that radiates from her. I nod, forcing a smile I hope she reads as a thank you before standing from the

chair. I release a sigh, forcing out the aches and tension the stress has put on my body. Leaning over the bed, I place a tender kiss at the center of her forehead.

“Keep me in your dreams, Firefly,” I whisper before retreating. As I close the door, I hear Quinn’s sweet voice introduce herself.

“Hi, Brielle. I’m Quinn. Would it be okay if I read to you for a little while? I’m sorry to start a few chapters in, but I just need to know what happens with these two! Quick recap. It’s called *Uncaged*, by Juliet Thomas, and this story is about Sofie and…” Her animated voice fades as the door closes, and I retreat down the hall. For a moment, I let myself believe that everything will be okay.

I’m the last to arrive in the conference room, one minute later than I was supposed to arrive. I avoid the faces of the members around me and throw myself into my regular seat, thankful that Dante followed through with my request for Pres. My attention locks on the screen that shows her lying there, and I fight back the urge to return to her.

“Let’s get to it. I appreciate you coming on short notice to yet another meeting. Lately, I’ve asked quite a lot of you in your various roles, and I apologize for that. I hope we can return to some semblance of normal in the coming weeks. That being said, we have to talk about the ramifications of the botched trade deal,” he says

“It wasn’t botched. We got Brielle, and they got Kole. That was the deal,” Erik interrupts.

“We killed their Second,” Dante snaps, showing his temper, which is usually rather long.

“They killed Hudson and nearly killed Cain’s Mate! You can’t honestly tell

me they got the worse end of this.” Erik shouts back, his grief written all over his face. He’s barely hanging on to his control.

“**Enough.**” The command in Dante’s voice silences him.

I glance from Erik to Dante, noticing how worn out everyone appears, and my stomach clenches.

This is my fault. All of this is because of me.

“Deacon has notified the LLC regulations committee of his side of the events from Monday night. Several complaints are being filed,” Dante finished, his eyes flying to me with concern.

“I’ll stand before the counsel for Antonio’s death,” I state, allowing no emotion into my voice. “All of this falls on me. It was my Mate. I have the right to protect her from harm.”

“Absolutely not. We will send the appropriate counterclaim. No one will be going to a hearing. It won’t get that far once they’ve heard our account. Besides, they’ll want Jess and Wyatt should it come to that,” Dante says, brushing off my statement.

My eyes land back on the screen, noting Quinn flipping the pages in her book as she reads aloud.

“We have bigger problems,” Dante continues pulling my attention back to him.

“Deacon has also filed an accusation against us for kidnapping an Unawakened who was, in his words, ‘under his protection,’”

“The fuck he has. She doesn’t belong to him. She’s mine!” I growl the word.

Dante: Breathe. Hold onto your control. He isn’t here.

“We know. The problem is he has video evidence of her walking freely from his business hours before we flew her unconscious body into our

territory. The optics aren't good." He finishes looking at James, who's finally back from his trip.

"Deacon's using any influence he has to spin the story that we went into his territory to steal the girl. He's saying Hudson was in Reno spying for us and gave us the information about her. We know that isn't true, but unfortunately, several other packs are listening and find it concerning. Especially since Hudson can't testify and Antonio's dead. It's bad," James finishes, his face showing concern.

"My contacts have been reaching out since the trade as well," Elijah jumps in. "They have questions about why Hudson was in the area, how we knew about the girl, why we took her," he rattles off the questions he's been hearing.

"This is the key problem. We agreed to keep the theft of HUNTER a secret. We handled it ourselves. We kept everything in the pack. Now with Hudson gone," Dante pauses, clearing his throat to remove the emotion. "We don't want to sully his name. Outing him as a traitor doesn't feel right, seeing as he jumped in front of a bullet to protect Cain's Mate. In the end, he proved his loyalty." Dante's final statement's directed at me.

My attention slides to the screen. I haven't had time to process what happened that day. My sole focus has been waiting for the moment she wakes up. In the back of my mind, I know Hudson's the only reason there's a possibility she'll survive this. He sacrificed himself so that she had a chance.

But he put her there in the first place.

Without his actions, she never would've been at risk.

I don't know how to feel. Thankful for his final moments? Justified that he got what he deserved? Angry that he stole her? Overjoyed that he tried to give her back?

A million emotions bounce around in my mind, but none of them matter if she doesn't survive this. I know my pack is hurting because of his loss. I can see it on their faces. Feel it rolling off of them in waves. Erik trained him. He was one of Jake's best recruits. Pres and Quinn went through school with him from childhood. Dante was his Alpha.

And now he's dead.

I can tell Dante is pausing because he wants me to agree. To side with him that we shouldn't drag Hudson's name through the mud.

"What choice do we have? If the council agrees with Deacon's claims, we'll be expected to release my Mate to them. Hudson's already given up his life to protect her. It would be in vain if we had to return her to Deacon's Pack."

"I agree with Cain," Presley chimes in. "Hudson's legacy lies in saving one of our own. Despite everything else, he'd want us to clear the pack. Pack first."

Dante's eyes flash to Pres, and I can tell he chooses his next words carefully.

"Then we risk revealing HUNTER to the LLC and every sitting board member." Dante finishes locking his eyes on Presley.

"How? Deacon never got his hands on it,"

"No, but Kole did, and a vampire adjudicator will verify any story we spin about Hudson's involvement. If we leave it out, we will look even more guilty when it's brought to light. Revealing Hudson as anything but a spy working for us opens the door to all of it." The gravity of the situation finally hits me.

We could have to release my Mate into Deacon's custody, or we may alert every powerful Alpha to the fact that we have software that can

instantaneously track and monitor anyone, anywhere, anytime. The target that will be put on the pack would be more than we could handle. We'd lose everyone while simultaneously giving someone unlimited access to a species-tracking machine.

Fuck.

"We knew this could happen. This morning I placed fail-safes into the code. It requires my fingerprint, eye scan, and voice password every 72 hours. Without it, no information can be queried. If more than thirty days elapse without my credentials, it corrupts all of the code," Presley states.

"It's too risky," Dante says. "It just shifts the target from us to you. They have you; they have the code."

Before she can respond, movement on the camera catches my eye. I turn my focus on the screen to see Quinn out of her chair, book strewn on the floor, and movement on the bed.

Her eyes are open!

I'm out of the room instantly, my chair crashing to the floor as I sprint down the hallway to the stairs.

Cain: Get Radolf, now!

Dante: He's on his way.

My feet push harder into the tile as I leap entire staircases to get to the medical floor. My momentum propels me to Bri's door before I collect myself, slowing my breathing as much as possible. I don't want to frighten her by busting in there.

With all of the restraint that I have in me, I exhale, count to three, and slowly walk into the room.



Chapter 27

Bri

Consciousness is such a funny thing. The awareness of what's factual or imagined all jumbled into a belief system that guides you into deciding what's real. I never thought of myself as someone with a wild imagination. I never created made-up friends, conjured fictional worlds with my toys, or pretended to be a princess, astronaut, or dinosaur wrangler. I spent my childhood so focused on analyzing every threat that there wasn't time for make-believe.

My world already had monsters.

As I replay the memory in the clearing, I wonder if I've distorted it somehow. Turned my protectors into loyal wolves fighting to free me, turned my captors into savage beasts deadset on taking me out. No matter the scenario that plays, it always ends with gun-metal eyes.

His voice has been filtering through this version of my reality, intruding upon the balance between what's real and what I've conjured to be true. Words of adoration roll from his lips, and yet, no matter where my attention turns, he's never there.

The vibration of his vocal cords, a cruel joke echoing in the space of my mind.

Cain.

I feel like I'm reaching for him, running in circles while standing still. The effect is dizzying, and it's beginning to make my head hurt. The pounding in my temples becomes unbearable—the sound, a resounding cacophony that overwhelms my senses, followed by endless silence.

“This was it. This was how it ended. One glorious kiss, two beautiful nights, and a lasting ache for a woman that was never mine to...” someone says. The sweet high pitched tone of her voice bounces with an airy enthusiasm as she speaks.

I try to focus on what she's saying.

Is she talking to me?

Her voice is close, and yet, still fuzzy somehow. I hold onto the notes in her timber, catching a strange beeping hum in the background.

Where am I?

It's warm and uncomfortable as my joints protest against any movement. I reposition slightly, attempting to sit up. As I fight to open my eyes, her voice falters, and a gasp escapes her.

“Brielle?” I search for recognition, mentally trying to assign a face to the voice before my eyes begin to cooperate. My vision is fuzzy, and the room is brighter than my eyes are ready for, causing me to force them shut before making another attempt.

“Can you hear me?” she asks.

“Yeah. I can,” I say, and the words feel like sandpaper across my vocal cords. “Can I have a drink? Water?” I ask, forgoing manners while blinking

several times to get my bearings.

I'm in a hospital bed.

The moment I realize this, I inhale, wondering why it doesn't smell like a hospital, despite having the same equipment and style. It smells like fabric softener and vanilla. Turning my head, I wince at the pain. I hear the woman's voice again, causing my eyes to move to her.

Her long blonde hair falls in beautiful blowout curls over her shoulders. She's dressed in business casual attire with a navy silk blouse and dark gray pants. She's my age and has warm dark-brown eyes, which are as big as saucers as she speaks to me.

I blink slowly, realizing she's asking me something as she holds up a small paper cup. Tipping it slowly when she reaches my lips, I find myself grateful she didn't try to hand it to me. The effort of swallowing was wearing me out all on its own.

"Thanks," I whisper, sliding my tongue across my rough lips as she sets the cup on a rolling half-table perched on the side of the bed.

My mouth feels weird.

Do I know her? Why can't I remember what happened?

"Of course. Hang tight—just a minute for me. I'm going to call the doctor in. He'll want to know you've woken up." Before she can turn to do just that, the door opens, and my heart jumps into my throat as Cain tentatively walks in.

He stops on the other side of the door as if deciding what to do.

Omg, he's sexy. Like stupid hot.

My mind replays our night in his bed in slow motion causing my thighs to clench.

"May I come in?" he asks after a moment, uncertainty lining his features,

and I struggle to understand why.

“You just did, Candy Cain,” I say, trying to sound smooth, but I laugh at myself and erupt in a fit of coughs.

He rushes to my bedside, grabs the discarded water cup, and offers it to me. With some effort, I lift my hand and take the cup from him. After a few sips, he guides it back to the table.

“How are you feeling? Are you in pain? What do you need?” his question rattle off in quick succession, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so flustered.

He smells good.

“One thing at a time, handsome,” I attempt a smile, and a pull at my forehead has me reaching up. Cain’s hand stops mine before they reach their intended target.

“You have a bandage there. Leave it until the doctor comes by,” he responds.

“What happened to my head? Why am I in here?” I ask, searching my brain for the last memory I have stored there.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” he asks softly, fear flashing across his face.

“Are you reading my mind?” I ask, concerned he knows about the dirty things I replayed moments ago.

“No, just trying to help you get your bearings,” he says, giving me a small smile.

Oh good! Then... Fuck you’re hot. I want to lick you like a Candy Cain.

I wait, testing him to see if he’s listening and then falling into a fit of giggles.

What medicine do they have me on, and can I have more? Ha!

He lifts an eyebrow at me, studying my odd reaction.

“What medicine are they giving you?” he asks aloud, causing me to stop laughing immediately, my eyes growing large at the realization.

He can hear my thoughts! I knew it!

Before I can call him on it, an older man with round spectacles walks in.

Spectacles is a funny word.

He’s carrying an iPad and looks a little flustered.

“What’s the prognosis, doc?” I ask, putting on an accent in an attempt at a joke. It’s then that I realize how serious everyone else is.

Jeez, who died?

“Hello, Brielle. I’m Doctor Radolf, and I’ve been handling your case.” He hands the device to Quinn and washes his hands while continuing his spiel.

Spiel. Spectacles. Why so serious?

A giggle slips out, causing him to pause.

“How long have you felt... a little loopy?” he asks, his face pleasant and his hands efficient as he checks my heart, lungs, eyes, and ears, finishing by having me squeeze his hands and wiggle my toes.

Wiggle. Ha!

“Loopy? Since I woke up. Is it because of the bandage on my head?” I ask, curious why I feel excellent besides my stiff joints and starving stomach.

“That’s the meds. We can certainly adjust them back now that you’re awake and alert,” the doctor says.

“I’m hungry,” I announce, interrupting his assessment. “Can I eat?” My eyes slide to Cain, who turns back to the doctor.

“In just a minute,” the doctor responds before anyone can move. “Why don’t you tell me what you remember.”

“Well, I went drinking with Liv and Keith to celebrate landing an interview

for this really amazing company out in Boston,” I begin to say, but stop short as the door opens and Dante walks in.

Dante.

I freeze as the memories flood back.

Hudson, Ghost, Big Tony. Dante. Cain. Werewolves. Gun.

I gasp, finding it suddenly difficult to pull air into my lungs. My hands clench the sheets as panic sets in, my eyes flashing from one startled person to the next.

The alarm on the monitor next to me begins blaring a warning tone

“Get out!” I shout to everyone, no longer able to contain the fear that’s crept in. They move immediately, heading for the exit. All but the doctor.

Dr. Radolf adds something to my IV, and for a moment, I wonder if I should be pulling out all of these lines, running, hiding, fighting for my life. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to count while attempting to take large gulps of air.

Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen.

I. Can’t. Breathe.

And the world fades to black.

It’s quiet when I wake. My body feels relaxed, and my muscles are less sore than they had been. The panic and fear I felt earlier had dissipated entirely. Stretching like a cat waking from a long nap, I open my eyes, taking in the room around me. I realize I have no idea how much time has passed because the room looks exactly as it did before. It even still smells of vanilla and fabric softener.

My mind wanders back to the events over the last two days, and I wait for the panic to set in.

Nothing.

Knowing I should be distressed but having my body be completely calm is an odd feeling. Werewolves exist. I was sleeping with one. I was shot.

No panic.

I take a moment to assess my chest and stomach, looking for the wound but not finding one. Peculiar.

No panic.

I reach for my head, the subtle pulsing there the only sign something may be wrong, and find gauze wrapping my head, noting a tender section just above my left ear.

I had a head injury? Did he shoot me in the head?

Still, I don't feel the anxiety creeping in.

Maybe I should ask what he gave me because I like the control I feel.

I sit up, adjusting the bedding around me to allow me room to bend and straighten my arms and legs, rolling my wrists and ankles and flexing my fingers and toes. Once everything feels back to normal, I try to stand before realizing there's a catheter in my bladder.

Great, I'm stuck until someone can remove it.

"Anyone there?" I say, my voice softer than I intended. I clear my throat and try again.

"Hello?" I say louder this time.

The door opens, and an older woman in nurse's scrubs enters.

"Glad to see you back awake. You gave everyone quite a scare," she says, her voice full and boisterous.

"Am I allowed to get out of bed?" I ask, hoping for some freedom.

"I think we can make that happen. Just give me a second," she says, washing her hands quickly and donning some latex gloves. "Now, this is

going to feel a little odd coming out. Just relax your muscles and let it go.”

She slides the catheter out in one smooth motion, and I let out a sigh of relief. She detaches a few lines and sets my IV on a rolling stand.

“All set. Anything I can get you? The doctor won’t be back from his dinner for a bit yet. Hungry? I can get you something light?” Her grandmotherly energy is contagious, and I find myself smiling and nodding. She walks off, promising a quick return, and I attempt to stand from the bed.

My legs feel like Jell-O as I work to stabilize myself. After a few minutes, I’m up and putting one foot in front of the other. One lap around the room is enough to have me climbing back into the bed, worn out from the motion.

Okay, Brielle. What do we do now?

I mentally wrestle with the idea that I know that werewolves exist. How that’s possible? I have no clue, but I saw it. I can’t unsee it.

Cain’s tattoo, wolf hearing, pack business.

If it weren’t so unbelievable, I’d laugh at how it was in front of me that whole time, and I never put it together—hiding in plain sight.

I have a million questions, and I take a few minutes to think through them, knowing there would need to be a conversation.

I need to talk to Cain.

My heart still leaps a little at the thought of him. My brain argues with my emotions battling for who should have control. I try to justify my feelings. Give them merit. I process through actions Cain physically did to prove his love for me was real. He cared for me by calming my panic attacks, grounding me when I couldn’t center myself. He rescued me, showing up in the middle of the woods after I left him without a word. He held me in his arms and told me I was it for him after worshipping my body in bed.

All valid tangible moments, but then my stupid overanalyzing brain

interrupts my reverie with all the conflicting facts that I know.

- Cain's the wolf from the parking lot. The wolf that helped murder two guys. The wolf from my video. The wolf from my dreams.
- Cain showed up at Liv's party. I'd never seen him around campus before. Then he was everywhere. The coffee cart, the library, class.

Holy shit. Was any of it real?

- Cain convinced me to tutor him and to spend every day with him. He was interested in me, flirted with me, and made me feel special.
- Cain showed up at my apartment without me ever telling him where it was, and I slept with him.

I'm a fool.

My heart breaks. The reality that I fell for a man who played me from the moment we met, causing my insides to shatter. Before I know it, tears cascade down my cheeks as I silently cry. My body shakes, curling into a ball, letting the emotional rollercoaster of the last three weeks play out in my head. I roll onto my side, hugging my arms around myself as I let every ounce of emotion leak from my body. All of the lies. All of the coincidences that didn't even give me pause. I gave him my heart, and all he wanted was the video.

I'm no better than Elaine. Chasing a man based on pretty words and vacant promises.

At some point in my breakdown, the nurse returns with the food. I barely register her presence, but I can feel her reading my behavior as I lay there sobbing, unable to stop.

I give myself over to the overwhelming pain I feel, letting it become emptiness and leave me completely numb. An abandoned vessel and a shell

of the girl I once was.

Today I fall apart. Tomorrow I'll pick up the pieces until I find my way back to who I was. Every day after that, I'll wear these scars like armor and use them to remind me never to let anyone past my walls again.

Cain broke me, but my splintered pieces will become the sharp instruments I use to carve a new path.

Never again.



Chapter 28

Cain

The look on Bri's face the moment she remembered everything that happened over the last few days will be seared into my memory until the end of time. The overwhelming fear that crossed her face as she mentally put together that she was in a room surrounded by shifters caused me physical pain. She looked at me like I was a monster.

I am a monster.

It was one of the only times I didn't need to fight my wolf. He allowed us to leave the moment he realized her anguish was our doing.

We hurt her. We scared her.

Dr. Radolf informed me it would be hours until she'd be awake. He'd given her a sedative and anxiety medicine to help combat her panic. She'd wake up relaxed and hopefully willing to talk to me.

I need to explain. I need her to know the truth.

Three hours I've spent staring at the camera feed to her room. It's just after nine at night, and I can see her starting to stir. I have to fight every instinct to

go to her, comfort her, and hold her in my arms. Instead, I wait, allowing her the time she needs to process.

I can't imagine how many questions she must have. How scared she must be. How confused.

She just found out that her whole world is a lie. Everything she believed about fiction and reality now blurred—her entire existence in question.

I try to gauge her understanding as Helen, Andre's wife, helps her get settled.

She stares off the wall for a while, not looking at anything in particular; the wheels turning in her mind are so clear I can see them from here.

After a time, she smiles. It's small, almost thoughtful, as if reliving a memory she's fond of. But almost in slow motion before my eyes, I see her eyebrows drop, concern etched in her expression a moment before the realization hits her.

Everything was a lie.

Pure agony emanates from her as she plays through my betrayal; picking apart every moment we spent together; discovering the subtle lies, unanswered questions, and irrefutable truth that our relationship was a lie. And not a small lie, not one we could laugh about later. One so big, it would change everything.

My entire existence in her life from the moment we met was orchestrated.

It was this truth which was the biggest lie.

Not a single moment of our time together was fake to me.

Fate brought her and I together. Fate knew she was my other half, my perfect match. Fate made sure I found her.

And I let it all slip through my fingers because I was too scared.

My heart shreds as I watch the tears fall from her porcelain cheeks. Her

body shudders as it fights through the emotions. She crumbles into herself, wrapping her body with her arms as if they're her armor, shielding her from the world while holding her together. Folding in on herself, she turns to her side, tucking her legs to her chest and making herself so fucking small.

I want to hold her.

The need to comfort her is overwhelming. It feels like a weight on my chest. I lean back in my chair, absently wiping at the moisture on my face.

It takes all of my willpower to stay in my office chair. To let her have this moment, knowing my presence would do more harm than good. Even as she splits me open with every gutwrenching wail, I refuse to tear my eyes from the screen. Torturing myself as I watch her completely fall apart. I need to memorize this moment. Burn it into my very being and relive this feeling as punishment for my failures. To endure the helplessness of knowing I caused every second of her pain.

After what feels like an eternity, her tears stop, her body stills, and her sniffing ceases. She lays there quietly, not sleeping but rather with her eyes vacant and her face expressionless. She's lost her spark. The fire that lives in her dulled because of my actions. At that moment, I know with soul-crushing clarity that I've lost her.

She's no longer my Firefly.



Chapter 29

Bri

When I finally hit the bottom of my well of emotions, melancholy slides over me. The dull ache of sadness remains coating my insides as I sit myself up, determined to get my life back on track.

After eating the now-cold chicken soup the nurse brought me earlier, I ask her for a notepad and a pen to get my thoughts onto paper. I hate the pity I see in her eyes when she returns with them. I don't want to be pitied. Years of my life were spent with adults giving me precisely that expression once they found out I was in foster care, that my mom was an addict, or that my brother had died.

I don't need your pity.

Setting my spine, I smile at her, knowing she heard my emotional upheaval earlier and that she can see the dark puffy circles beneath my eyes. It's my life and my choice how I live it. I won't allow anything to cause me to lose focus.

When she exits, I start my list. Every question I have about the last three weeks of my life, everyone involved, every conversation I had. I question it

all: the murders, werewolves, the kidnapping, the war. I save my questions about Cain for the end, knowing deep down they'd hurt the most to bring to the surface. I allow the sting of that heartache to simmer as I stare at the three pages I created.

I want answers. I'm going to get answers.

After taking a few moments to compose myself, using the bathroom, washing my face, and finding my resolve, I call the nurse back into my room.

"Everything alright, Brielle?" she asks hesitantly, her eyes scanning me.

"Oh yes. I'm sorry to bother you, but I'd like to talk to Dante," I say, trying to push confidence into my tone.

"To Dante...Right now?" she asks, confusion evident.

"Yes, please."

"Well, I guess I could try him. He's not usually up for a few more hours," she rattles off, causing me to pause.

Shit, what time is it?

Her face pinches and her eyes glance up, and for a moment, I think she's trying to devise an excuse not to let me speak with him. To my surprise, she looks back at me with a smile.

"He's on his way." She turns to start heading out the door when my mouth catches up.

"You can speak with your minds?!?" My voice almost squeaks the last word.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry. I forgot you're new to pack life. Yes, we can all speak to the Alpha with a mind-link. Strongly Mated couples can also mind-link," she explains as if she's telling me honey is good in tea or baking soda helps with stains.

"Of course. Thank you for the clarification," I say, adding 'mind-link' to

my list and filing that under WTF questions as she leaves me again to my thoughts.

Minutes later, there's a gentle knock on my door.

"I can do this," I whisper to myself before clearing my throat and adding, "Come in."

The door opens, and Dante walks in, a relaxed confidence in his stride.

So, this is an Alpha.

He gestures to the chair against the wall, and I nod before he sits himself down.

"Helen said you wanted to speak with me," he says. I note that his voice is neither hesitant nor irritated; instead, it radiates warmth and kindness.

"I have questions, and I would like you to answer them for me honestly," I say before realizing in his position, people probably don't make demands of him and add, "Please."

"Are you sure you don't want Cain to answer them?" he asks, his face giving nothing of his intention. Cain's name feels like a knife to the chest, making me flinch involuntarily, and I attempt to mask the painful moment with a cough.

"Cain has lied to me enough," I reply coolly once I've centered my breathing and fixed the walls around my heart.

He nods. I'm not sure what I expected, a rebuttal, an explanation, I don't know, but his silence wasn't it. When the moment drags on without further remark from him, I fidget with the pen in my hands.

"I'll make you a deal," he starts, causing me to brace myself for his terms. "I'll answer every question you ask me. Wholly and honestly to the best of my ability, *if* when we finish, you'll allow Cain to do the same." I recoil as he finishes. The idea of seeing Cain right now causes me to retreat in any way

that I can. Shaking my head, I start to tell him no to the deal, but he lifts his hand, stopping me before I can begin.

“It doesn’t have to be today. I can understand how traumatic this has all been for you, and for my part in it, I am sorry. But I need you to know that I can’t answer all your questions; some only Cain can. If you’re anything like me, having anything unanswered will gnaw at you, so as long as you agree to speak with him, I’ll accept that the timeline for that will be your own. Do we have an understanding?” Dante asks, his fingers moving to pull on the end of his beard.

Talk to Cain.

Face Cain.

My timeline.

“Okay,” I respond, nodding my agreement as my heart squeezes.

“Then let’s begin,” he says, leaning back casually and crossing his leg.

“You’re a werewolf.” I start with the ones I know to be true.

“That’s not a question, but we prefer the term shifter,” he responds.

“How did you become a... Shifter?” I ask.

“Shifters are born from others with the DNA. Anyone born from a parent with the gene can be Awakened,” I make a face which causes him to continue, “Most of us are Awakened on our tenth birthday by the Alpha of our pack. Alphas have a venom that causes the reaction to the gene. Some don’t grow up with the pack. Unplanned pregnancies, orphaned shifters taken into the system, a one-night stand in Vegas.” He looks at me, reading to see if I’m understanding, so I nod, urging him to continue.

“Those shifters are known as Unawakened because they carry the gene but are never bitten to receive their wolf. Only an Alpha can scent an Unawakened.”

Okay, so not completely weird. Standard biology.

“How long have shifters existed?”

“Our history can be traced back as far as humans. We’ve always existed among them,” he says.

“How have you stayed in secret all this time? How come people don’t have video evidence? Cameras are everywhere,” I begin to ramble, wondering how an entire species could exist right under our noses.

“We have stringent rules. Humans can’t know. If a human finds out about us, they must die.” I inhale sharply.

“We aren’t animals, Brielle. We don’t take killing lightly, but our secret keeps us safe from governments who’d want to test us and turn us into lab rats, or worse, the fear humans would create, leading to a war between the species.”

I’m going to die.

I’m human, and I know about them.

“Why would you heal me if I’m just going to be killed?” I ask, a tremble sneaking into my voice.

“We aren’t going to kill you, Brielle,” he says matter-of-factly, making me even more confused.

“But you just said...” he cuts me off.

“I told you if a human finds out about us, *they* must be killed.”

My mind races, remembering Deacon saying something about that. I close my eyes, focusing on the memory.

“She’s rather beautiful. I can see why you’d want her back. It’s a shame you will have to kill her... Now, this is a surprise. You’re not at all what you seem. Are you, lupo nascosto? Tell me, have they told you what you are?”

“Deacon’s an Alpha,” I say, knowing it sounds stupid, but Dante nods,

seeing my train of thought.

Holy Fuck. I'm Unawakened.

My heart rate starts increasing. My breath becomes shallow. I can feel the panic creep in even as I try to fight it off. I close my eyes, attempting to center myself by counting when Dante speaks.

“Brielle, **calm down.**” His words slide over me like electricity on my skin, and I find my panic retreating. My breathing slows, and my heart rate evens.

“What did you just do to me?” I ask, fearing the panic will come back.

“I used what’s called command. Alpha’s can give orders to other shifters using command,” he explains. “It helps keep packs full of testosterone-filled shifters in line.”

My mind races with the implications that he can literally order me to do anything and the power that comes with that.

“How long have you known?” I ask, not clarifying because he knows what I’m asking.

“We’ve known since your roommate’s party.”

“But you weren’t there?”

“No, I wasn’t,” he says.

“Then how? If only the Alpha can scent an Unawakened, and you weren’t there, and Deacon wasn’t there. How many Alphas are there?” I ask, confused.

“First, let me clarify that a shifter can be an Alpha and not be the Alpha of the pack. My pack, the Vegas Pack, has four Alpha shifters.”

“How does an Alpha shifter become the Alpha of a pack?” I ask.

“That’s not the question you want to know, but I’ll answer it. In some packs, when an Alpha dies, the heir takes over. In others, a gauntlet occurs, and any with Alpha blood may fight to win the role. Sometimes, a takeover

happens where an Alpha is challenged, and they fight to the death. The surviving shifter takes over.”

“How did you become Alpha?” I ask, my curiosity getting the best of me.

For the first time, his face drops. His mask of indifference slips, revealing a pained expression that immediately makes me regret the question. “My father died in a car accident. I took the seat unopposed.” Grief flows from him for a moment before he schools his expression.

“Is Cain an Alpha?”

“Yes, and my best friend. He agreed to take the role of my Second when I took charge of the pack five years ago.”

I nod, understanding. Cain and Dante seem like a good pairing in the same way Liv and I were. Dante seemed reserved, whereas Cain was more direct and outgoing. They balanced each other.

“Why didn’t Cain tell me I was Unawakened?” I almost whisper the question, wanting but not wanting the answer.

Dante pauses, pulling on his beard for a moment before responding.

“I’ll let him answer that because any reason I tell you would be my assumption. Only he knows the truth. What other questions are in that notebook?” he asks, reaching out as if to take it.

Reluctantly I hand it over, and he skims through it, laughing out loud at something in the middle. I snatch the list back from him, mortified by his response.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to laugh. These are all valid questions,” he starts.

“Yes, vampires exist, though not in the sparkle in the sun way. They can walk in the sun like the rest of us, though many do prefer evenings because they have heightened vision, and the sun can be a bitch.”

Dante continues to answer the questions from my list for the next hour. Yes, there are other types of animal shifters. No shifters aren't immortal. Yes, they have heightened senses and reflexes. Yes, there are rogue shifters. No, you don't have to join a pack. Yes, silver can kill them, but so can many other injuries. They heal faster than humans and can shift to heal more significant injuries. Yes, they're at war with Deacon. Yes, the video I filmed was of his pack against Deacon's pack. Yes, that's why Cain was assigned to watch me. On and on.

"Who are the four Alphas in your pack?"

"Myself, Cain, my sister Presley who I believe you met, and a pack mate named Wyatt."

"How did Hudson know I was Unawakened?"

"He didn't. He just knew Cain cares about you."

I bite my bottom lip before going out on a limb.

"Will you punish Hudson for taking me to the other pack?"

Dante stops. He's silent for a long time before carefully choosing his words. Anguish briefly crosses his features, and I hope I can convince him.

"Before you answer, you need to know he only did it to save his parents. He made sure I was fed and comfortable. I know it's weird, and I probably sound like a rambling idiot with Stockholm syndrome, but Hudson deserves grace. He was put in an impossible position, and yes, he made the wrong choice, but he's twenty-one. He's supposed to make bad choices." I watch as Dante clenches his jaw, making me ramble more.

"You didn't see him. He was devastated when he saw how easily you were able to make a deal. He didn't want to break your loyalty. He thought he had to..."

"Brielle," he says, stopping me and taking a deep breath.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but Hudson didn’t survive the trade,” he says softly, pain filling his tone. His eyes drop, and guilt flashes across his face. My heart leaps into my throat.

“What do you mean? What? What do you mean he didn’t survive it?” Tears form in my eyes again as I try to understand his words. My body shakes again as they fall.

They didn’t want Hudson. He wasn’t part of the deal.

“I’m so sorry, Brielle.”

“No, NO! You said you’re hard to kill. You said you heal faster, and you can shift! Why didn’t he shift?” I’m yelling at him when I finish, and Dante, to his credit, lets me.

“He didn’t have a chance. Big Tony was pointing the gun at you. He made a choice. Hudson saved you. He jumped in front of a silver bullet to protect you. It pierced his heart. He didn’t have a chance,” Dante’s voice breaks, and for a few minutes we sit not talking. Him letting me cry while he fights to maintain his composure.

“Do his parents know? Did you tell them?” My voice is strained, the hours of crying, talking, and emotional exhaustion adding up.

“They arrived this morning and spent the day grieving. We scheduled a funeral pyre for Saturday night.”

“Can I go?” I ask, hoping it isn’t exclusive to the pack. Hudson saved my life. I wanted to honor him.

“Of course,” he says, his voice full of kindness that’s reflected on his face.

It’s a while before I speak again. The heaviness of the conversation made anything else lose its importance.

“Do I have to be Awakened?”

“Yes,” he responds.

“Why?”

“Many reasons have recently changed to force this decision on you. The first is that Deacon Marlo knows about you. It isn’t safe for you to stay Unawakened. Without Pack protection, any pack could claim you as property. Since we don’t know your lineage, you don’t have an origin pack. You’d be vulnerable to being kidnapped, again, and not all packs have modern rules when it comes to females.” There’s a darkness to his tone with the last statement.

I’m a shifter. I’m going to be Awakened.

“When?”

“Soon.”

I roll all the information around in my head, trying to figure out how I feel. There is a whole world I didn’t know about and that I have to join.

“I’m not allowed to tell anyone am I?”

Liv...Keith...

They’re the people I care most about in this world, and I’ll have to lie to them. My heart sinks. I can never have a regular relationship, can’t talk to my coworkers or friends...

Oh my God, my future kids.

Bile creeps up my throat, and I feel like I’m going to be sick.

I’ve lost everything. My friends, my career, my future.

“I know that all of this is a lot. Your world is changing, but know that my pack is here for you if you choose. If you prefer another pack, I can recommend those allied with us, who I know will treat you well. You still have a life. Your life. Just different,” he finishes with a sad smile.

Full of warring shifters, kidnapping, and murder.

I sigh, not wanting to fall back down the rabbit hole of emotion I just dug

myself out of.

“Thank you for answering my questions. I have a lot to think about. When am I allowed to leave?” I ask, needing space to process all of this information.

“Doctor Radolf can clear you later this morning, but I can’t let you leave without security. I wasn’t trying to be overprotective when I said you aren’t safe,” he finishes, dropping his gaze as if he’s ashamed of the predicament I find myself in.

I think for a moment.

“Could Ghost be my security? I trust him,” I say, believing it now that I could process everything he said to me.

Don’t run from it.

Fate has to be Awakened.

And the one I still didn’t understand:

You’re the key to this war. The deliverance we need.

Dante’s head snaps up at the mention.

“You met Ghost? How?” he asks, puzzled.

I explain the cabin and Ghost finding me in the woods, the wolf, who I now know was Hudson looking for me, the meal, Snowball. He laughed at that for a long while, bringing a lightness to our conversation's somber mood. Me, I was a little irritated that he snuck into my room.

To protect me? But from who? Hudson?

My heart clenches at the memory of him. Hudson wouldn’t have hurt me. Maybe Ghost didn’t know that.

“Ghost isn’t part of our pack or Marlo’s. He’s a mercenary, and until two days ago, I thought he was dead.”

So no to Security Ghost.

“All I ask is that it’s not Cain. I can’t have him around me. Not yet,” I say, biting my lip to focus on that pain rather than the pieces broken inside me.

“If that’s what you want, but please consider talking to him; he wasn’t allowed to tell you many things. Others, he may have reasons you’ll understand,” he says, his sad smile back in place.

“Why don’t you get some sleep, and I’ll send the doc in just before lunch. I’ll let Keith take you home,” he says, and my jaw drops to the floor.

“Keith is part of your pack?” My mind spins on this new information. How could he lie to me for a decade? Longer. I never once suspected anything. Dante waves me off.

“No, he’s human, but we hired him to work with our engineering team since your kidnapping. He can’t know about us, Brielle. You can’t tell him. It’s his life.” The severity of his words hit home, and I nod.

I’d never do anything to hurt him.

Before Dante leaves the room, he turns back to me.

“I know this isn’t the life you asked for, but my pack is my family. We’d be lucky to have you.” With that, he walks out.

A family.

The tiniest glimmer of hope blossoms in my chest at the word. The one thing I never got to have. But if there's one thing I know about family, you can't rely on them. The only one I can depend on is me.



Chapter 30

Bri

The last two days have been a blur. If I'm being honest with myself, the last few weeks have. Everything in my life has changed, and yet, nothing has. I still have two weeks before finals. I still have to report back to my call center job after my birthday. I still have my interview in Boston.

Well, I guess that changed, too, since the doctor told me that flying on a plane probably wasn't the best idea for another week or two with the whole brain surgery healing.

I tried to argue that I'd already been on a plane, so technically, wouldn't that kind of nullify those risks? Apparently, the first flight only happened because they didn't know I had a brain bleed and needed to get me to safety. In that instance, the reward of my survival outweighed the risk of the altitude making things worse.

Thankfully, Ethan was very understanding about the whole thing and was more than willing to move it to right after finals week. It gave me the chance I needed to get away. Think through all of the eventual significant changes in my life.

Dante mentioned that there were packs he was allied with in other places. I hadn't thought to ask him if Boston was on that list. It would certainly make things easier if my life-changing career move was also my life-changing species shift.

In for a penny in for a pound, I guess.

I still hadn't entirely wrapped my head around the idea that I was going to be Awakened. Everything about me, my whole life was ordinary. I'm not particularly athletic. I'm not a good runner. I've injured myself walking down stairs before. That didn't mesh with the me that was supposed to be able to turn into a wolf.

Keeping all of these new revelations to myself was also becoming increasingly difficult. True to his word, Dante had Keith drive me back to my apartment a little after one that afternoon. When Keith had been allowed to come to my room, his relief seemed palpable. He hugged me like he hadn't just seen me three days before, and I nearly fell apart all over again, thinking of how it would have been if Hudson hadn't stepped in.

It should have been me.

Certainly wouldn't have been a large funeral for me, but Keith and Liv would have been there. Liv's parents too. Their lives would have been affected. They would've cared. It's strange to feel survivor's guilt. I didn't ask to be kidnapped and dragged across the state. I hadn't asked to be waltzed into the middle of a turf war between a supernatural species. I certainly didn't want to die.

But deep down in the parts of me that still ache when I see matching pajamas in family Christmas cards and Hallmark movie childhoods, I know more people are mourning Hudson than ever would have for me. He had parents, a pack, his whole life ahead of him. I just can't understand why he'd

throw it away for someone like me. A foster kid with so much damage that only four people would've shown up at my funeral.

Because of my mood, we didn't talk much on the drive home. Keith watched me like a bomb about to go off while nervously tapping his left leg.

I could tell he wanted to talk about everything that happened, but after my revelations about my relationship with Cain, my new future as a shifter, and the loss of Hudson, I had nothing left. Keith has always been good about reading my moods, and that day in the car was no different. I don't think he's seen me this bad since the last time I was in the hospital five years ago.

I didn't anticipate coming home to find Liv ready for Thanksgiving dinner at her parent's house. A dinner she believed I was still attending and one I hadn't missed in a decade. Keith's embarrassed flush told me I was missing more in that exchange, but I blamed it on the head trauma from slipping while ice skating with Cain.

How romantic.

Pretending he and I were still together was the hardest part. Trying to force a smile and a light tone of voice instead of falling apart was almost my undoing.

I hated it.

I've told Liv everything when it came to boys since we were thirteen, and Brandon Spencer kissed me with his tongue.

Liv was the one person I knew would immediately be on my side defending me. She'd call for us to toilet paper his house or burn everything he ever gave me in a cleansing ritual. She'd also probably try to get me drunk and under someone new, but none of that matters because I can't tell her anything.

I'd gone from an NDA, which in hindsight makes so much more sense now, to full-on witness protection levels of keeping the truth from people.

Because if I slip up, they die.

Thanksgiving had been a bust, but thanks to my head injury talking Liv out of the house and Keith right behind her hadn't been too difficult once I told them how much it was throbbing.

Heart. Head. The pain was everywhere.

Later that night, Liv returned to the apartment with leftovers, and she crawled into my bed to watch a Dateline episode that had me wanting to explain all of the craziness I'd gone through. From escaping the SUV to being found in the woods by a half-naked mountain of a man, it was a story that would be just for me and my memories.

As I dressed for Hudson's funeral pyre, I felt numb. It had been days of emotions flooding my system with an overload of hormones, followed by hours of crying until no tears were left. Top that off with brain surgery, and I felt like a shell of a person.

Yesterday, Cain dropped a new phone off for me since mine had been broken, but I told Liv I wasn't feeling up to visitors, so she never let him in. I was being a coward. Hiding in my room and listening to her talk to him was torture. Hearing his voice felt like a fist squeezing my already obliterated heart. I didn't cry, mostly because I had no more tears left but also because I knew it would do no good now.

He's my past. It's time to leave the pain behind.

He tried texting me several times, but I didn't reply, instead choosing to swipe away the notifications without opening them. I needed one day that was just for me. I used the time to email my counselor at UNLV, asking if it was possible to finish my final semester virtually as I had an opportunity I didn't want to pass up in another state.

Much to my surprise, she responded rather quickly, letting me know I could

do that, so long as my Capstone teacher approved it and I returned for my final assessments.

It was a relief to know that the plans I spent my entire life creating could still be possible and that it would happen right after the new year if the ‘meet the team’ went as planned on December 18th.

Fresh start. New life.

Pulling my hair back in a low bun, strategically covering the bald spot on my scalp, took longer than expected. Once it looked presentable, I had to lint roll my black dress to remove the cat hair Fleabag had gotten on it.

Guess I can understand now why the cat doesn't like me. We're kind of sworn enemies and all that.

I stand before my bedroom mirror, mentally preparing myself to pay my respects to the person who gave me a second chance at the life I wanted.

If I genuinely wanted a clean slate, there was one thing I had to do, and I put it off until absolutely the last possible moment. Grabbing my phone from the charger next to my bed, I open my text messages. Cain had added in my contacts from the previous phone through some magic at the phone store, I'm sure, but what has me forcing back a small smile is the tiny emoji that replaced his name.

A Candy Cane.

Closing my eyes, I give myself a minute to appreciate who Cain was to me before I change the image. Replacing the sweet treat with his real name where it once was, I let out a deep breath trying to prepare my walls for whatever messages are waiting for me.

Cain: When you're ready. I'm here.

Cain: Good night, Firefly

Cain: Good morning, Firefly

Bri: Can we talk? Today before the funeral?

As I send the message, my fingers shake, and I sit staring at the screen. When the three dots pop up to show he's typing a response, I bite down on my lip, chewing it nervously.

I need to do this. I need closure.

Cain: Yes. Anywhere. Anytime. I'll be there.

The desperation I feel from his words causes a dull ache at the center of my chest—the place where my overwhelming sense of love for him used to live. I wish I could say I feel nothing now after breaking apart every piece of myself. Nothing would be a welcome reprieve. Nothing would be infinitely better than the always present vacancy he once filled.

I set the time for thirty minutes before the service today. Giving us enough time to say what we need to say, but also putting a clock on it, so I know that I'll have to walk away. I won't miss the service, not after everything Hudson did to save me.

The address Dante gave me for today's service takes me nearly out of town to an oversized farmhouse on the edge of the Henderson border. Several cars line the driveway to the property, which stands two stories tall with large windows adorned with wood shutters. It looks spacious enough to be a hotel and has homey accents that make it inviting.

I pull in, parking on the edge of the street so I don't get boxed in, and I wonder if this place belongs to Hudson's parents. I can only imagine the childhood he would've had here with all this room to find adventure.

Bracing myself for the emotions of this day, I open my door. The early evening air caresses my skin as I climb out and begin digging in the back seat

for the jacket I borrowed from Liv. I stand there momentarily, taking in the vast open space, with the desert opening up just beyond the house.

People are busy preparing. They walk in and out carrying chairs to the backyard area, lugging bags of ice from a catering van, and placing flowers around the home. I immediately feel out of place and find myself eyeing the few steps back to my car.

Turning, I decide I'll wait in the car until I see Cain or Dante so I'm not looking like a lost puppy. I hear him before I can make it two steps into my retreat.

"Hey, Fire...Brielle," he corrects himself halfway through the pet name as he jogs from the front of the property. I hate that the sound of my real name on his lips hurts so much. My eyes betray me, drinking in his appearance like we're in the middle of a drought. On an average day, Cain looked hotter than should be legal, but today he wore an impeccably tailored black suit that accentuated his lean athletic frame. I couldn't help but flash to him standing at the end of a wedding aisle, and the image in my mind feels like a knife to the heart.

He stops walking a few feet in front of me, and I can tell it's taking all of his control not to reach out and touch me. I find myself gripping the sides of my dress for the same reason.

I miss his touch.

"Hi. Thank you for agreeing to meet early. I know it's a busy day," I say, deliberately avoiding his eyes while my heart rate rises at his proximity.

"I'm never too busy for you," he replies softly and without hesitation, and my traitorous heart does a slight pitter-patter without my permission.

You're supposed to be on my side.

"Why don't you come with me? There's a picnic table off the far side of

the property where we won't be in the way, and there's some privacy," he offers while I try to keep my body on the same page as my mind. He reaches out his hand on instinct, and I find myself recoiling away from it like you would a venomous snake.

Having his hands on me would hurt too much. It would be too hard to walk away from. I need to be strong.

"I'll follow you," I say, leaving my eyes firmly planted on the ground beneath us, knowing the pain in his expression even without seeing it.

We walk in silence, making it to the old wooden table in minutes. It sits next to a small garden area which I'd bet looks stunning in the spring. Today, in the cool air of late November, it lacks the blooms to add color to its desert surroundings.

I pass the table, knowing it would be impossible for me to sit, despite that being the reason he brought us over here. Instead, I focus my attention on the garden. Cain also foregoes sitting and stands a few feet away from me with his hands in his pockets.

"I know you must have a million questions," he starts as I pick at the cuticles around my nails to keep my hands busy.

"Dante answered most of them. Not that knowing the answers makes it easier to believe that my whole life, I've been living with this thing inside me."

"There's no way you could've known. Until you're Awakened, the gene is just like any other floating around in your body," he says, trying to reassure me.

That's not the reassurance I need.

I exhale, thinking back to the list of questions I wrote down, throwing most of them out before forcing myself to be brave.

Turning to face him, my eyes slowly work their way up to his before I ask the one question I can't seem to rationalize without hearing the words from his mouth.

"Was sleeping with me part of your assignment or just one of the perks?" I ask, my voice holding despite the emotional upheaval I have going on in my chest. I work to keep my expression neutral, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me fall apart.

"What? Is that what you think!? Oh my God, Firefly! I'd never have crossed that line with you if this was just about the video. Nothing about how I feel for you is a lie." He steps closer to me as he explains. The shock his face displays makes me angry and brings me back to that embarrassing moment when I realized I was a job to him.

"But it was all based on a lie! How can you claim to lov... care about someone," I catch myself because I almost used the word love, and I had to backtrack.

He never said he loved me.

"And lie to their face day after day. I'll give it to you; you're one hell of an actor. I bought every word. Believed every moment. I was the fool who fell for you entirely, so swept up in the pretty words you'd say that I never stopped to question ANY of it!" I tried to come into this meeting detached, but being this close to him brought back every word, every memory, every single moment I gave him a piece of myself.

My body betrays me again as a hot tear slides down my cheek, and I swipe at it, mad that it fell.

I'm not upset. I'm furious.

Worse, he stands before me with no mask, every emotion broadcast on his face. Anguish. Pain. Hurt. Longing. They pour from him, and every fiber of

my being wants to jump into his arms, forget every terrible thing that happened and fool myself into believing all the beautiful lies were real.

If only I could play pretend.

Coming today was a terrible choice. I turn and walk a few steps, needing some distance from him to work through this hurt. His closeness makes it impossible not to feel everything he feels. That, coupled with everything I'm feeling, has me wanting to run to my car. The only thing stopping me is Hudson. I owe it to him to be here, so, for now, I need to find a way to fight through these overwhelming emotions.

Cain gives me a few moments to collect myself, but I hear his movement behind me. Once I've slowed my heart, I feel his breath on the back of my neck seconds before his masculine scent envelops me, freezing me in place.

"Firefly, I wasn't acting. You were supposed to be a job. Track the witness, and make sure she doesn't talk. Protect the pack. But that all changed when I met you and got to know you. When I fell in love with who you are. I love you, Firefly. Your sass, your attitude, the way you challenge me, everything," his words are almost a whisper by the end. I find myself holding my breath torn between wanting him to wrap his arms around me and hold me until I don't hurt any longer, and wanting him to back up so I can think without his warmth inches from my body.

I choose option number three. Turning to face him, not closing the distance but not backing away. The sincerity of his words is nothing compared to the need in his eyes. My breath catches in my throat, and I bite my lip to keep myself from kissing him, knowing his words aren't enough to fix this.

"Why didn't you tell me I was Unawakened? Once you knew me, once you knew I was like you, and it didn't need to be a secret. If you loved me, why

didn't you tell me what I am?" I ask as more tears flow down my face, this time from the loss I feel.

His face drops, and for a moment, I don't think he's going to answer me.

"It's not that simple. You wouldn't understand," he starts, causing me to snap back at him as I feel every inch of distance between us, literally and metaphorically.

"Then explain it to me because from where I'm standing, you had a hundred chances to tell me, a million reasons it could've made our relationship stronger, and you chose the one where you don't say anything and let me fall in love with a lie!"

"Because we're Fated. You're my Mate. We're destined to be a perfect match, souls put together in the stars and placed on Earth to find each other, and... shit... Firefly, I wanted to know that you wanted me. Cain. Not just that your wolf was destined for mine. I needed to know that the Mate bond was more than just some fairytale where we live happily ever after. My parents weren't Mates, so I didn't grow up knowing I'd find my Mate. I needed it to be real, but I didn't want to change your whole life if you didn't want me, so I waited. I got to know you and fell in love with all of the parts of you that you don't show the rest of the world. By the time I knew that the Fates were right, that you're the only thing I need in this world, I got scared." His voice breaks on the word, and his shoulders slump in defeat. My hands shake as I try to process his words, to understand what he means, but before I can, he continues.

"You have this whole big life planned. All of your dreams involve getting away from here, away from me. It felt selfish to ask you to choose me. I was terrified you wouldn't choose me. I was terrified you would choose me and spend your life resenting me for keeping you from everything you ever

wanted. I want you to have all of your dreams come true, Firefly, and if that means moving to Boston, then I'll follow you there." His statement startles me.

He can't move to Boston. His Pack is here. His family.

"You can't leave your pack. They're your family. They just lost one of their own. They need you here," I say with one hundred percent certainty, avoiding all the parts about us being Fated and Mates.

"I can't lose you again," he whispers as pain flows out of his eyes, making me want to hug him and tell him everything will be okay. His hand reaches up and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear before cradling my cheek.

I lean into his hand, closing my eyes and allowing my heart this moment. Without opening them, I ask my next question.

"Do you feel this way because we're Mates? Because your wolf is Awakened?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper, his hand still holding my face.

"Look at me, Firefly." I slowly slide my lids open before he continues, determination set on his face that reminds me of the library when he was trying to convince me to tutor him.

"My wolf is drawn to you because we're Fated Mates. My love for you exists without any of that. If you were Awakened, your wolf would pull you to mine. But your feelings are your own. Your wolf is a part of you, but she'll have her own impulses, needs, and personality, which will come out when you're Awakened. You'll be able to feel her emotions, but they aren't yours. If you choose to remain Unawakened, I'll love you and protect you from any who wants to harm you. If you choose to be Awakened, that love will still exist even if you reject the bond."

"I get the choice? Dante said I must be Awakened," I explain.

“You will live the life you want. Dante’s right that leaving you Unawakened puts you at risk, but I’ll spend my life protecting your choice. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to have the choice of what life you want.”

“What if my choice doesn’t include you?” I ask, knowing my heart will never heal if he’s always around. A growl resonates from his chest, and his eyes flash silver before he steps back, breaking our connection and leaving me a little off balance.

“I don't know,” he says after a moment. “My wolf will fight to be near you. I’d want to respect your choice, but I’m an Alpha, my wolf is strong, and I can’t always control him when it comes to you. I wouldn’t be able to stay away,” he says, his voice melancholy as he admits he can’t give me what I want.

Wait a minute...

“You're an Alpha,” I repeat, not explaining my surprised response. This isn’t new information, but my realization is. “You could’ve used command on me to get me to do what you wanted. I know it works. Dante used it on me...” Before I can finish the explanation, he interrupts.

“He did what?!?” His eyes are back to silver, and I find myself reaching out and grabbing his forearm to ground him back in this moment.

Why am I not afraid right now?

“He used it to help me calm down from a panic attack.” I finish once I know he’s listening. His muscles sag, and he regains composure pulling me into his chest and wrapping his arms around me. I don’t pull away. I need this moment. I feel his lips kiss my hair, and I memorize his scent basking in the feel of him one more time.

“Why didn’t you use it on me?” I ask again into his chest, trying to understand how someone who could lie to me for weeks, didn’t just use

command to tell me not to talk about the video.

“I would never take away your free will, Firefly.” His statement hits me right in the chest, and damned if the tiniest spark of hope doesn’t flicker to life.

“Thank you. For answering my questions,” I say, attempting to step out of the embrace, but his arm locks behind me, and he pulls my chin up with his finger.

His lips are a breath away from mine, and my eyes stare at him, questioning all of this.

I came here for closure, but my heart has other plans.

“I’m sorry I lied to you. You’re the most important thing in my world. Losing you was like losing myself. I know I hurt you, and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you. My world’s endless darkness without you, Firefly. I need your light.” With that, he closes the distance, and his lips touch mine.

Every emotion I have felt over the last few days pours into this kiss. It conveys every word left unspoken between us, our souls reconnecting. I feel the shards of broken pieces inside me begin to fuse back together as his tongue dances over my lip, requesting access. I comply, opening for him and letting him dive further into me.

My arms loop behind his neck, and I get lost in the intensity. The world around us blurs, and, for a moment, we’re the only two people left. No lies, no betrayal, no pain. Just our love, fighting to bring us back together. I pull back, needing air in my lungs, as I realize I’m crying again. Cain lays his forehead on mine, his breathing heavy.

We don't speak, knowing anything we say now pales in comparison to the conversation our hearts just had.

The sun sets behind us, and time no longer exists. The memory of the kiss on my lips feels like forgiveness, a closing of a chapter. He leans down, kissing the trail of my tears before pulling me back into his arms.

If I came here today with a million questions, I'm leaving with even more.

Do I forgive him? Can I trust him? Could this work? Is this what I want?

Question after question rolls through my thoughts before he finally speaks.

"Get out of your head, Firefly. I can feel your wheels turning from up here," His statement reminds me of his words after he made love to me the first time, and I brace myself at the memory expecting pain to follow.

Nothing.

Letting out a sigh, I step out of his hold. Music is playing on the other side of the house, indicating the service is starting.

We walk side by side, just far enough apart to feel the magnetic pull between us. It sends electricity through my skin, urging me to reach for Cain's hand. I resist the temptation, knowing today was a step toward healing, but it wasn't the end. We need time. I need space.

Cain stands next to me for the length of the service. To his credit, he doesn't reach for me, even when the tears start flowing again. Dante and several pack members stand up to speak, each ending with the same phrase. 'Fates protect you'. Hudson's parents are the last to speak, and I feel guilt as they talk about Hudson's dreams for the future, and love for the pack is almost all-consuming.

They lost their son because of me.

I'm so sorry.

I hope they know how grateful I am. That I won't waste this chance. That it mattered. Once they finish their speeches, Hudson's mom takes one last look at her son and walks back to her seat, tears shaking her body. Dante returns to

the front, kneels before the pyre that holds the body of his fallen pack member, and sets it ablaze.

The crowd sits silently as the flames grow, heating the area and bringing light to the yard. I say my own goodbye, promising Hudson that I'll live a life worthy of his sacrifice and thanking him for giving me this chance.

After the service, Cain walks me back out to my car. We haven't said a word since our moment by the garden. He waits, holding open the door as I toss Liv's jacket inside. Turning back to him, I try to find the words.

"I still have questions, and I don't have all of my feelings sorted out. I want to move past all this, start over, but I'm not there yet. I need time to heal. There's still a huge part of me that doesn't trust you anymore. I'm sorry. I wish I could flip a switch and return to who we were before, but things are different. I'm different, and I need to figure out what I want from all of this." I gesture to him and the house before dropping my arm in defeat.

"I'm broken, and I don't want you to get cut while I put myself back together," I say, giving him a weak smile and hoping he understands that I have to be okay before we can be okay.

I've been kidnapped, lied to, held hostage, human trafficked, held at gunpoint, and had major brain surgery. I know it will take time before I can trust him with my heart again.

"I'll give you whatever time you need, Firefly, but know I'm not afraid to bleed for you. If cutting me open helps you heal, give me your pain, and we can bear the scars together." The intensity of his stare sets my soul on fire. Before I can even try to explain how I'm feeling about his declaration, he steps back, opening the door wider and allowing me to climb inside.

"Get home safe, Firefly," he says before closing my door and knocking on the roof twice to signal I should go.

As I drive the almost forty minutes back to my apartment, my mind spins on what's next. I came tonight ready to move away, leave before school ended, and have a fresh start, but now that I'm going, it feels like running away. From my feelings, from my problems, and from my past. It isn't until I pull into my parking space that the words form, and the memory surfaces.

“You're stronger than you realize. You hold something inside of you that will determine the outcome. Just know that when the truth is revealed, you must embrace your destiny. Do not run from it.”

Well Fuck.

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Lastly, I want to thank you, the readers, for taking the time to read my book! You're the reason we authors throw our words onto pages in hopes our characters' stories come to life in the minds and hearts of others. The characters in this book certainly went off script and made this stand-alone, happily-ever-after book morph quickly into a duet, and, subsequently, a trilogy. Thank you for your patience as I get the rest of our characters connected with their future partners. I hope you enjoyed meeting some of them in this book. The fate of the rest of the Vegas pack and Bri's inner circle will shake out over the next several books. I hope that you enjoyed the character back and forth, and felt every heartbreaking, laughable, tension-building moment.



Understanding Fate

It's interesting how oblivious most people are to the world around them. Wandering in public places, face locked on their screens. Technology has made them addicts, needing their dopamine fix to get through the day. They post pictures of their food, places they visit, and planned events, all while too distracted to actually live in those moments.

It certainly makes my job easier.

In the world we live in, people need to be more paranoid and more aware of their surroundings. If they stopped to look around every now and again, they might see something. Learn something. Feel something.

These days blending into any crowd takes simply wearing a hoodie with some headphones and an illuminated screen in front of my face.

Today, it makes following her child's play. I can tell she's used to being invisible, overlooked, just part of the sidelines. What's more, I can tell she prefers it that way. Keeping her eyes downcast and her free hand firmly on the strap of her carry-on bag as she travels past security to locate her gate.

Her wild brown hair sits tangled on the top of her head, and she, like the rest of the sheep gathered today at the Harry Ried International Airport, has on an oversized hoodie and leggings.

Just like the last time I saw her.

As we find ourselves herded toward the trams, I move casually behind her, allowing her to gain a bit of distance to not alert her to my presence today. Not that she's paying attention. Her phone's out, and she's sliding through screens as she wanders toward Gate D.

For a moment, her attention flies up, scanning the overhead signs which guide our travel onto the Red Line Tram. I slow my pace again and feign interest in my phone, taking the time to discreetly scan the other ticket holders. She doesn't appear to have anyone traveling with her, which irritates and surprises me.

The Vegas Pack Alpha isn't usually so careless with security.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, I spot him. The shifter, I'm betting, is here to protect her. He's doing an excellent job of staying close to her without alerting her to his presence. His problem, he looks like a bodyguard. His eyes scan over the people in the area, track where the cameras are, and constantly search for a threat.

Rule #5: Blend into what's typical for the given environment.

That's the problem with new recruits, no finesse. Fortunately for him, she appears too preoccupied with getting to her gate to notice the tail. But I know this, if he's keeping a low profile, she refused to have a security detail, and Dante sent one anyway.

This poor guy is in for it when she realizes.

I smile to myself, mentally popping popcorn because I'm going to get a front-row seat to the exchange. I guess we will have some in-flight

entertainment on the way to Boston, after all.

About the Author

Amanda writes urban fantasy with a little spice. She believes her characters guide her stories and let them run amok busting outlines, timelines, and even causing series headaches. While writing was a passion she came to find later in life, her love for reading has always been a huge part of her. She spends her days teaching English Language Arts to 8th graders, and her nights and weekends chasing around her three wild children and husband, often on the slopes with a snowboard. In stolen moments in between, she sneaks in a chapter or two to satisfy the need to tell her characters' stories. Amanda lives her life trying to soak in every possible moment, and because of this, drinks an exorbitant amount of caffeine to fuel her busy schedule. Most of all, Amanda hates talking about herself in the third person and is also terrible at tooting her own horn.

Also By

Amanda Nichole

- Unawakened Fate: Vegas Wolf Pack Series Book 1 – January 2023
- Fate Awakened: Vegas Wolf Pack Series Book 2 – September 2023
- Understanding Fate: Vegas Wolf Pack Series Book 3 – Coming 2024
- Coded Fate: Vegas Wolf Pack Series Book 4 – Coming 2024

This book is part of the Vegas Wolf Pack Series. For the latest information about this series see the author's website

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