

SADIE SEARS



NEVER  
TRUST  
AN ALPHA

Never Trust An Alpha  
An Enemies To Lovers Shifter Romance

Wolves Of Blackwood  
Book 1

Sadie Sears

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## Chapter 1

# Tori

Clumps of chestnut brown and platinum blond hair littered the sink and floor of the gas station bathroom in the middle of backwoods Pennsylvania. The place was filthy—not that it had been clean when I'd arrived, but the hacked-off hair scattered around my feet made it worse.

I lifted my gaze to the dingy, pock-marked mirror and turned my head to the right, then left, admiring my new shoulder-length haircut and dye job. Given the tools I had to work with, my amateur color and cut didn't look half-bad. My natural brown hair was now bleached blond with dark streaks. The shorter length gave my curls definition and transformed them into spirals of color. Gone was the usual frizz.

I had a fresh look.

I liked it.

Living life on the run, being hunted like prey, meant learning to survive with limited resources. Without buckets of money at my command, I had to rely on my imagination and whatever I could find on drugstore shelves to change my appearance. I had no choice but to become my own stylist. I took a last, critical glance in the mirror and surveyed myself from one side to the other, and probably would have tried to stand on my head to check the look if this place wasn't so disgusting. This new do would have to suffice for now, whether I wanted it to or not.

It was time to get moving. I couldn't afford to stay in one place for very long. I'd made that mistake in the beginning, four years ago, when the hunters had cornered me in an alleyway of a dilapidated urban city neighborhood. If not for the convenience store on the corner being robbed, I never would've escaped. I managed to disappear amid the chaos of first

responders and gunshots, but from then on out, I tried to be on the move every few weeks.

Quickly but carefully, I gathered the hair clippings and turned on the faucet, watching my hair circle down the drain. I sprayed the surfaces with watered-down bleach from the small bottle I kept in my bag for just this reason and meticulously went over every inch. Hell, the bathroom was twice as clean as it had been when I got here, and nary a fingerprint or any DNA would survive for whoever came looking.

Wiping away all traces of my identity was crucial if I wanted even a remote chance for a clean escape. There was no such thing as being overly cautious when my life hung so deep in the balance. I had to have any edge possible to have a chance of remaining a step ahead. I could never be too careful.

Taking one last look to make sure I hadn't left behind a wayward hair or some other piece of me, I stuffed everything into my deceptively small bag and slowly opened the door. In the far corner, the greased-up dirty gas attendant was busy restocking the fridge with a limited supply of merchandise. He had Pepsi and Mountain Dew, some bottles of Starbucks coffee, and candy that wasn't meant to be refrigerated, but people preferred it that way.

The rest of the place was bare. This wasn't one of the big-name convenience stores but the kind of gas station that got very little traffic. That had its advantages and disadvantages. Pro: No one cared how long I occupied the stanky little bathroom. I probably could have set up camp in there if I could tolerate it. The con to that pro, however, was that there were fewer faces to blur mine, which meant I'd be more memorable. I prayed my skills hadn't failed me and nobody would be able to trace me to this hole in the wall.

With my sweat-stained ball cap slung low over my eyes and my head down, I tossed some cash on the counter. I didn't have much, certainly not enough to cover the cost of the security camera I'd smashed, but I gave what I could afford. I wasn't usually the kind of gal who committed vandalism, but I'd acted out of desperation. I did what needed to be done. Unfortunately, that didn't mean my guilt differentiated between sins I was forced to commit and those I enjoyed. There was no absolution for either.

I'd only narrowly escaped the hunters on my last encounter with them. Their skills were nothing to laugh at, and they acted more like mercenaries

with the amount of training they endured. I had to do what was necessary to maintain my freedom, no matter how far over the line it took me. It was essential to stay one step ahead of them at all times. The hunters had an organization, equipment, and money on their side. I was just lonely, little ol' me. Although I was learning, and that meant something.

Sometimes, when the white noise died down, when true quiet descended over me, I was proud of how far I had come. Four years ago, I'd been a regular high school student who knew nothing about secret societies or life-and-death situations. That felt like a lifetime ago. Back then, I'd cared about my hair for a whole other reason. I'd worn makeup not to disguise but to enhance. But I was learning as I went along, and so far, I had survived. For now, though, there was no rest, no time to reflect. I had to keep moving.

It didn't matter that I was across the country or how sure I was that I'd thrown them off my trail. I had to be completely vigilant at all times. All it would take was one minor slip-up—a scent, a stray hair, something that would clue them in—and the hunters would be on me in no time. Since I valued breathing, and torture wasn't a picnic I wanted to be the guest of honor at, I could *not* afford to be complacent.

They were out for my blood, and these hunters weren't the type to pack it in and go home without their prize. They wouldn't give up until they had me. Orders were orders, and the hunters were trained to keep the organization's secrets and follow the chain of command with no question—there was no democracy there.

Right now, the hunters didn't know what look I was modeling, and that was one of the best defenses I had. My hair had been every natural shade imaginable, but I also had to keep it simple so I didn't stand out. It wouldn't be wise to have blond hair with hot pink tips—learned that one the hard way.

Warm summer air smacked me in the chest as soon as I set foot outside. The thick humidity enveloped me in its sticky embrace, making sweat trickle down my spine. One thing the gas station had going for it was a kick-ass cooling system. I wondered if that was where its profits went because the cleanliness and stock weren't of the highest caliber. Who was I to judge, though? I would have picked the A/C as well.

The lush green landscape surrounding the gas station should have had houses and kids playing outside. There should have been a town here instead of a semi-deserted gas station on a stretch of road no one used. I scanned the area for any threats but saw only one car fueling up—an older, rusted Honda

that had spent more years taking a beating than it had belonged to the average-looking couple gassing it up. It was probably the most dependable car they could afford. The wife, dressed in a cute yellow daisy top with white capris, walked around the parking lot, apparently stretching her legs after a long drive.

Our eyes caught, and a soft, calm smile formed on her face. I hadn't meant to stare, certainly hadn't meant to be caught doing it.

"Hi, there." She waved with one hand, blocking the sun from her eyes with the other. Her long blond hair was pulled back in a low ponytail over one shoulder, and she beamed at me as if competing to outshine the sun.

"Hi." I didn't want to be rude, but I always hesitated to have too much contact with others. My aim was to be a ghost in their lives, for them not to recall anything about me. Unfortunately, this location voided that goal because apart from the gas station attendant, I was the only one here. I was now part of her memory whether I wanted to be or not. I was the girl at the gas station who'd stared at her. I'd made myself memorable.

"It's a hot one, isn't it?" She did a few lunges, and I held back a grin.

I tipped my head in agreement and turned my attention to her husband. He was on the shorter side with a lean frame and wavy brown hair. As he pulled the nozzle from the tank and tapped it against the rim, he nodded once at me. The tapping sound was hollow and familiar. I often traveled from gas station to gas station, sometimes finding shelter in the spaces between. Sometimes I found comfort. Seldom happiness.

It was starting to wear on me.

I walked up to the dead, pothole-ridden road surrounded by a dense forest of trees. These back-channel roads were great for hiding out but made it impossible to hitch a ride with a truck driver. They gave the most comfortable rides and didn't pay much mind to a hitchhiker once they dropped them off.

Chewing my bottom lip, I studied the couple. They didn't give off any obvious warning signals, and my gut was shockingly quiet. If even the slightest thing seemed off, the clawing sensation deep in my belly would have sent me running in the opposite direction. Fast.

I took a deep breath and headed toward the car. They'd already seen me. There was no point risking another person being able to remember me if they were questioned. The fewer people who saw me, the safer I would be.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to bother you, but do you think you could give me



a ride to the next town?” I kept my voice soft and unassuming. I needed to make myself look as small and unthreatening as possible, which wasn’t difficult. I didn’t eat regularly and was below average height, which I’d learned over time to use to my advantage since it helped me blend into crowds easier.

The couple blinked at me, then glanced at each other, communicating silently.

“It’s just...I’m doing this solo road-trip adventure thing, and I’m supposed to meet a friend. My last ride dropped me here, but there aren’t any bus stops nearby.” It was a reasonable story. One they could buy into without digging too deeply to find the truth.

The wife gave me that megawatt-friendly smile of hers. “We’re just returning from our summer break road trip. We’re headed home to Blackwood Creek.” She looked at her husband, who shrugged and smiled at me.

“Hop in,” he said.

My shoulders sagged in relief, and I headed toward the backseat of the passenger side. I climbed in and looked to my left, gasping when I discovered I wasn’t alone. A cute little boy was asleep in his booster seat. He was a young one, maybe four or five years old, with chubby cheeks and features that were a mix of both his parents. His hair was thick and brown, like his father’s.

“We’re James and Fiona Ashworth, and the little tyke passed out back there is Beck,” James said.

“I’m Tori. Thanks again for this.” I smiled awkwardly as I internally cringed. I wasn’t used to giving out my real name—well, nickname—but all my aliases had been blown, and I couldn’t afford to acquire a new one. I had to get a job wherever I landed, so my ID needed to match my name unless I found someone willing to pay me under the table. It meant I wouldn’t be able to stay long in this Blackwood Creek place, but I could save up enough for a new identity, then move on. Hopefully, I could stay longer at my next stop.

It was a relief to be me for a while—Victoria Summers, AKA Tori. I couldn’t tell when I’d last been called by my real name. Easing back against the seat, I was happy that I wouldn’t have to be on alert all the time to make sure I remembered to respond to a different name. That alone was exhausting and helped me stay more secluded.

It also helped that I wasn’t getting any strange feelings from this couple

that I couldn't describe. Since I'd been on the run, I'd just had this...*knowing* when something was off. I wasn't used to feeling this...safety with anyone. A nagging voice at the back of my mind told me it could be deceptive, but I pushed it away. There was no evidence to suggest that, just years of my needing to be suspicious of everyone and everything.

Fiona turned around in the front seat, the seatbelt a dangling ornament more than a safety feature and no real obstruction to her movement. "Of course. If you're traveling through, you should spend some time in Blackwood Creek. It's such a charming little town. It's a great place to explore and relax. The people are such characters."

I smiled at them non-committedly, but I would think about it. I wished I could stay, and it wasn't like I had anywhere else to be, but being in one place for more than a few days was risky.

Although, taking a break for a few weeks—hell, a week—would be nice. Being on the move every other day was a bitch. It got to me sometimes, even though I constantly reminded myself that all the moving kept me alive and out of the hunters' hands. Staying in one place for too long was dangerous, but I couldn't deny that I was tired. I certainly wouldn't have said no to resting if it seemed relatively secure.

The comment on the town's characters had me a little on the fence, but I would see for myself soon enough. If anything was shady or felt off, I'd book it. I'd left places for far less before.

I listened as the Ashworths chatted excitedly about their trip and everything they'd seen. A little bubble of jealousy built inside me. What I wouldn't give to have such a carefree, easygoing vacation. I didn't let it show, though. Instead, I pushed the feelings down deep—a skill I had perfected over years of running.

The constant dye jobs were frying my hair, and the endless sleepless nights and jumping every time an erratic noise took me by surprise had me on edge all the damn time. But what was the point of harboring resentment when my life would never be easygoing or simple? Setting down roots, having the white-picket fence and everything it represented wasn't in my future. I needed to make sure I stopped desiring it, stopped dreaming about it. But surrounded by this little family, seeing what I could have had? Easier said than done.

I watched the trees pass as we drove. The couple talked easily, and there was a contentment between them. That was something else I missed out on. I

had nobody. No one to count on. No one to hold in the darkness or to hold me. No one who knew my darkness and my light. The only company I'd kept in the past four years was myself and the monster inside me...and she wasn't much of a conversationalist.

In the odd jobs I'd taken to survive, I'd never allowed myself to get close to people. What would be the point? I'd either have to ditch them or risk putting them in danger. It was safer to be alone.

"Who're you?" A sleepy voice interrupted the couple's conversation and my musings.

Glancing to my side, I watched Beck yawn loudly and wipe his eyes with the back of his hands, but he kept his wary attention on me.

"I'm Tori." I held my hand out to shake his. "You must be Beck. It's nice to meet you."

He eyed my hand and looked at his parents, who gave him an encouraging smile. He gave me a skeptical look, then shook my hand and started asking questions. It took me several tries to catch on to his way of talking—he mumbled his words—but once I got the hang of it, I couldn't help but be charmed by the little cherub and his natural sense of hesitation. Not openly trusting someone was a plus in my book.

"Where did you come from?" He cocked his little head.

"From the gas station."

"Why?"

"Why was I at the gas station?"

He nodded and stared at me intently, which was a little disconcerting since he was just a kid.

"Because that was where I ended up." That was a safe enough answer and seemed to appease him.

"Are you coming home with us?"

Shaking my head, I said, "No, I'm not. Your parents are only giving me a ride."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have a car."

"Why?"

"I can't afford one."

Beck stared at me as if he was coming to his conclusions about me, and I must've passed his test.

"Do you like dinosaurs?"

Relief flooded me. He was done with the personal questions and moving on to outrageous ones natural for a five-year-old. *What was my favorite dinosaur? Did I prefer dinosaurs or superheroes? Who was my favorite superhero? Did I like ice cream? What was my favorite flavor?*

For the first time in a long while, I sat comfortably in the back of a car with a sweet family, talking to a five-year-old about life and random facts.

Refreshing. That's what it was. I couldn't remember the last time I felt light-hearted enough to laugh for an entire afternoon with not so much as a glance out the windows to make sure nobody was following me or attempting to cause a car wreck.

That had happened once when I first went on the run. It was a difficult memory to let go of. Guilt at the danger I had inadvertently put that man in constantly waged war in my mind. I'd been staying—no, staying implied being in one place for more than a couple of nights—I'd been *hiding* out in the city when I realized I made a mistake. I'd misjudged them. The hunters were closer than they'd ever been. By hunters, I don't mean men who hunted deer or elk. They had weapons specifically designed to hunt monsters, weapons that would never be sold on the shelves of regular outdoor-gear stores. The money the hunters invested had made the organization wealthy beyond compare, and they utilized every cent in the capture and torture of paranormals. Fighting them would be a death sentence, so I'd packed up my shit and left. It was the only choice.

I'd made it out of the town to a nearby truck stop. Normally, I would've hidden in the back of a truck, but I was in such a hurry to get out of town, I'd accepted a lift from a truck driver. He wasn't horrible or sleazy like one would expect from a truck driver, just a young guy working hard to feed his family.

I'd just started to relax when a vehicle pulled alongside us. They made sure I saw a hunter was driving. His vicious smile let me know what lengths they were willing to go to catch me because they couldn't risk me spilling the secrets I held. He drove in front of the lorry and braked. The driver beside me pushed down hard on his brakes. There was nowhere else for him to go. The truck swerved and the load in the rear moved, causing the lorry to go off the road.

It had been a mess. Sobbing, I'd managed to grab my backpack and bolt from the truck, the driver's screams echoing in my ears as I ran.

I'd evaded the hunters hiding in the forest by cutting my hand and putting

my blood on tree stumps and plants. Their senses were better equipped than those of an average person. I snapped branches and twigs to leave a trail, then backtracked and went in the opposite direction. All the while, I prayed I could move fast enough to keep them guessing since their speed had been altered to match mine.

I still felt so guilty for the trauma I'd caused that guy, all because he'd done a good deed. I sent money anonymously to his home address when I was able, having seen the information on his registration. The incident had taught me a couple of valuable lessons. One, never underestimate the hunters and how far they were willing to go just for *moi*, and two, I was on my own. I could never put an innocent in danger like that ever again—not from the hunters or my monster.

I shook myself out of the bad memories and welcomed this new memory I was creating.

It would have to sustain me for a while.

Before long, the squeaky-clean *Welcome to Blackwood Creek* sign came into sight. We'd been driving for at least two hours, but the time had flown by, and part of me was sorry it had to end so soon. My time as a normal person riding in a car was a luxury I wouldn't soon forget.

Slowly, we drove through the charming, quaint town. Some of the shops had white window boxes packed with colorful flowers of all varieties. Others had the kind of striped awnings I'd only seen in old movies. Trees rich with colorful blossoms lined the ample, old-fashioned brick sidewalks. There weren't many cars on the street. Houses of varying sizes stacked close to one another were built off the main road—the downtown living of Blackwood Creek. Everything seemed within walking distance of the main thoroughfare. People were walking and riding bicycles all over.

A beautiful stone fountain stood in the center of town, with a small gazebo on the manicured lawn. People soaked up the sun on park benches and tossed Frisbees while others lay on the grass. Dogs roamed unleashed around the unfenced park. The place was a real-life Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*. It was surreal. I was gobsmacked by the perfect, pretty picture it painted.

Fiona glanced back at me with a smile. "I told you it was charming."

I couldn't speak, so I said nothing. Places as perfect as this stunned me, leaving me temporarily speechless. Given my present circumstances, it was safer for me to stay quiet, anyway.

They didn't stop gushing about the town and its community as we drove. Fiona pointed out a small boutique that sold cute clothes at affordable prices, and James nodded at the mechanic's shop, where they always did a quality job at fair prices. The grocer, Fiona said, sold fresh and delicious produce, and the bookstore sold both new and used volumes. The antique shop had a wealth of trinkets and treasures.

The town should hire them for PR. If they pitched this town on the news, tourism would quadruple in a week.

James pulled into a parking lot off the town square and pointed in the direction of the bed and breakfast, as well as the tavern Fiona had mentioned.

When the car stopped, I could finally form words. "Thank you so much for the ride. I really appreciate it."

I pulled some money from my pocket and leaned forward to hand it to Fiona. Having spent time with the family and seeing what they had, I put two-and-two together—they weren't well-off. The least I could do was give them some gas money for the ride and the slice of normalcy they'd shared with me.

With the money I had left at the station to cover the damaged camera, my cash supply was dwindling fast. Because I didn't spend a lot of time in one place, I couldn't very well expect high-paying jobs. I had set myself up doing freelance graphic design, but my last gig had been more than a month ago. After I counted up the small amount of money I had left, I calculated that I had enough left for one night in a cheap motel. I would need to find a job ASAP. I'd probably have to stay out in the woods for a few nights until I could get some cash, but it wasn't like I hadn't done that before.

I tried to hide my relief when they waved off my attempt to give them money.

"Keep that," James said. "We were coming home this way, anyway. We didn't go out of our way."

Fiona added, "If you're staying in town, I recommend you stay at the Bogford Bed & Breakfast. This town is off the grid and not many people know about it, but its charm is unbeatable. And you have to visit The Topsy Tavern and walk some of the many hiking trails around the outskirts of town. There are so many avid hikers and explorers in town, so the trails are unsurpassable."

Grabbing my bag, I got out of the car, thanking the Ashworths profusely as I did.

“We really hope you stay and that we’ll get to see you around,” Fiona called out the window as James drove away. He waved from the driver’s side window.

I scanned the town square and all the shops. Kids were lined up in front of an ice cream vendor wearing an old-fashioned paper hat. The library sat in the middle of the town, directly across from the town square. The antique store was next to it. All the buildings were old, historical, but well-preserved—no modern designs here.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was like stepping through a portal and landing backward in time.

Inhaling deeply, I filled my lungs with sweet, crisp air. The air was cleaner here, and for the first time in a long time, I could breathe and not feel like I was suffocating under the weight of smog and pollution.

As I worked my way around in slow circles, I took everything in. The town was...angelic—there was no other word for it—and I so badly wanted to belong here. This sort of place could become my forever home, a place where I could settle down, build a family, not be forced to worry every single second of every single day—if something like that was possible for me. In a place like Blackwood Creek, I wouldn’t have to look over my shoulder constantly or have persistent nightmares of losing control. For once, I felt like I could have had all this despite having a monster inside me.

Mentally, I smacked myself out of the dangerous daydream. My inner beast appraised the area. She wasn’t convinced yet, but when she caught sight of the forest wrapping around the town, she ached to roam free. I leashed her and shoved her deep into the recesses of my mind.

I wanted to see more of the town, to examine everything and everyone around me. I could only hope it wasn’t too good to be true. A lot of places looked good on the surface but were actually homes for hunters. Maybe that was what the Ashworths meant by “characters in town.” Leave it to the righteous to live in a place like this—a utopia of sorts.

A sweet, pleasant aroma tickled my nose, and I tensed. I’d never been so attracted and enticed by a mere scent. My wolf liked what she was smelling and wanted to track it down. It was the kind of scent that made my wolf riot for freedom, to take that scent, seek it out, and either roll around and cover herself in it...or destroy the owner. Dread settled in my gut as my heart beat erratically. If I didn’t get a handle on the beast fighting her shackles inside me, things would be bad. I could not lose control of this beast. The

consequences would be beyond anything I could live with.

The charming scenery around me blurred and darkened as a violent, malevolent madness pounded inside my head. Sharp pain shot through my brain. I clamped my jaw, grinding my teeth as I fought the bloodthirsty rage battling to take control of my body.

My fingernails lengthened into talons, and I curled my fists. The scent of blood hit my nostrils. My hands went slick from the nails that had punctured my skin; fresh blood dripped down my wrists.

*Stay put, Wolf. You're not going to destroy this town!* I screamed in my head.

Short, panting breaths puffed from my lungs as I pushed my wolf down to where I could lock her away and keep her hidden. My body tensed as I held each joint, muscle, and bone in a hard vise of determination that had me shaking from the intensity of my hold and the struggle for dominance raging inside me.

My panic increased as I watched the children playing and eating their ice cream, as mothers and daughters held hands while shopping. I couldn't lose this battle and let my wolf hurt someone, some innocent who didn't know the dark depths of the world.

Scanning the buildings, I launched myself through the closest door, which happened to be The Topsy Tavern that Fiona had recommended. I hoped the smell of alcohol might overcome the scents that had triggered this latest inner fight.

The tavern had an old-timey essence—a dark wood bar, a scarred wood floor with deep cherry paneling. Everything was on the darker side of the spectrum, but there was nothing terrible, sinister, or dive-like.

I slid into a booth in the far corner, hunched over, and breathed in deep and slow, concentrating on every long inhale and every slow exhale in the hopes I could squash the intensity under all the air. I shuddered at the immense amount of control I had to exert. Sweat beaded on my forehead, then ran from my temple to my jaw, leaving damp tracks on my cheeks. I shut my eyes to keep the tears at bay.

Blood rushed into my ears, drowning out all the sounds around me—the clink of glasses, the whir of a fan overhead, the voices of others in the place. All I heard was the drumming of my heart. I was so drained, all I wanted was to curl into the fetal position. Between fighting the wolf inside me and the hunters who were always looking for me and others like me, I was fucking



exhausted.

“Hello, miss.” A voice with a light French accent invaded my personal torture. I raised my head and met the man’s eyes, using them to center myself. “My name is Mateo.” He studied me carefully, concern clear in his eyes as he took in my disheveled appearance. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Is something wrong? Can I do anything to help?”

Dread coursed through my veins. It would be so easy—too easy—to hurt this man. To reach up, curl my fingers into his throat, and drag him down where I could tear him apart. It wouldn’t be me, though. It would be *her*. *The beast*.

Fuck. Was I about to kill this nice man? All because he had shown some concern for me? Was my time up? Had it just been luck that I had contained the wolf for four years? Was I doomed to live in hell? That fate seemed so cruel after glimpsing a small piece of heaven.

Swallowing was a battle, and every breath ached in my lungs. My mouth went dry, and my lips cracked and burned. Again, I couldn’t find the words to assure the bartender I was okay. I glanced up at him, and his dark eyes studied me. His forehead pinched with concern.

Out of nowhere, a pleasant, commanding, masculine voice cut through my panic.

“Mateo, give the lady some space and a martini.” His tone was deep and rich, but there was no mistaking this man’s command of the room. Heads turned, mine included.

And it was worth it. The voice belonged to the most attractive man I’d ever seen. Tall and dark. Hair like night. Eyes the color of coal. I was still trembling, though now I couldn’t tell if it was from fighting with my wolf or from my instant, burning desire for him. I was no virgin, had been with men before, but I’d never felt desire like this—desire that thrummed through my veins.

I had to be wary. It wasn’t normal to have this level of attraction from just a few kind words. A man like that would never want someone like me, not that I had time for love. Love needed time and trust, and I had neither to spare.

But his kind, beautiful smile kept me captive. We held each other’s gaze as I focused my attention on his eyes. I followed his breathing, nice and slow. In. Out. In. Out.

He slid onto the bench opposite me. “Is it all right if I sit with you for a

moment? It's been a long day at work, and this is my usual booth." He lifted his brow as if he knew there was a battle for control going on inside me. "But I don't want to bother you."

Without answering, I stared at him as my feral mania ebbed and my control returned. Mateo appeared in front of us, sliding the martini in front of me, but he didn't leave. I didn't know if he saw the monster residing within me or if I was just in that bad of shape. Did he think I was going to hurt his friend?

Needing to take the edge off, I sipped at the martini. Slowly, the tension faded even more. My muscles relaxed, and my body calmed enough that I was almost certain the danger had passed.

Mateo nodded at the other man, apparently satisfied, and he returned to the bar, leaving me alone with my new point of focus.

I studied the handsome stranger across from me, and he stared at me in return. My inner monster relaxed at his appraisal. Sometimes my wolf seemed to become less restless and pent-up when I had no-strings-attached one-night stands. I was busy considering having another as I watched him.

After another long swig of the drink, I eyed the stranger up and down. There was no ignoring the way he made my stomach flip and how I didn't bristle at his attention. Normally, I didn't feel safe and secure with another person, but the way he looked at me quieted the noise in my head. I let my shoulders relax. If he had that effect on me, there was no way I didn't want to be around him longer. I didn't find that kind of escape easily, and I obviously needed it desperately if I was this close to losing control around so many people. A release was exactly what I needed.

But I couldn't be sure if this incredibly gorgeous man in the expensive clean suit would be interested in such a thing with me for one night. I checked his ring finger. No ring, no tan line.

Single.

Perfect.

I closed my eyes and licked the remnants of the martini off my lips.

For now, I had to settle my wolf and unwind, which didn't seem to be an issue with this guy. It would pass the time. A healthy dose of flirting with a handsome stranger—and maybe more, if I played my cards right—could set me right before I moved on to the next town and resumed my life on the run.

Again.

## Chapter 2

# Ridge

I bit back a smile. As the mayor of Blackwood Creek, it was my responsibility to be welcoming and help others. On most occasions, I enjoyed it, but with this alluring little wolf sitting across from me, I wanted to be welcoming in a wholly different way. Looking at her only intensified that need.

The scent she was putting out couldn't lie. Beneath the chemical scent of cheap hair dye was the distinct sweet-and-sour smell of fear. My wolf bristled, wanting nothing more than to ease that fear. But fear wasn't the only scent emanating from her. There was an essence that was all her.

I subconsciously leaned in, chasing the perfume. Man, oh, man, was it delicious. It intrigued and excited me. There was something else there, something I recognized but couldn't put my finger on. Before I could parse it out, my wolf made his interest known, and my cock twitched, signaling its approval.

I had no option but to push my way into her graces. I'd never used my alpha dominance on a female before. Truth be told, I'd never needed to, but I couldn't lie and say I wasn't puffing out my chest to make myself look bigger around her. To show her how big and bad I was, that I was a catch. And what could it hurt that I was mayor and alpha of the pack? I needed to show that I could care for her, that I had the means to look after her.

I nearly spat out my drink, that last thought catching me by complete surprise. What the hell was I thinking? I didn't even know this woman's name, and already I wanted to go all caveman, drag her back to my den, and keep her there. That was not like me at all.

My wolf growled and paced, fighting to get out, to devour her in all his

favorite ways. His potent need surged through my blood. It had been a while since he'd reacted with such fervor. He'd never shown interest in females beyond a need for release and ensuring they had an amazing night.

I was straight to the point and honest with every woman I took to bed. I never let them believe it was anything more than simple pleasure. They knew the score and didn't get uptight when I left shortly after. The only thing I ever promised any of them was a night of great sex with a man who would draw every ounce of passion from them long before he gave over to his own. In my experience, the ones who wanted more really only wanted my name or money. My wolf knew that. I knew that. So, my wolf didn't handle getting close to women very well, but I couldn't pin that all on him.

I wanted more. I wanted someone who wanted me for *me*, and I was willing to wait for her.

Besides, I had so much happening in my life with everything going on with the packs, the hunters, my mayoral duties, my vision for the town's inhabitants, not to mention my family and personal businesses. That didn't leave much chance for any interludes, romantic or otherwise.

I couldn't help sniffing around this lost traveler, though. She was a temptation that was too hard to pass up.

The woman before me took a few sips of her drink, and the tension eased from her in degrees. First, her shoulders relaxed, then the dilation in her eyes evened out. After a few minutes, she stopped clutching at her head and neck as if she was about to burst into flames. She tucked one of her silky curls behind her ear and almost smiled. Whatever bothered her was extreme but lessened with every sip.

"Thank you for the drink. I needed it, but I don't take drinks from men I don't know. So, I'll pay for it." Her self-assured voice was warm honey, smooth and sweet.

I leaned back in the booth while my wolf rumbled his appreciation. I smiled at her. That was a first. People usually always expected me to foot the bill, probably because my family's money was no secret and often made me the subject of gossip. Nobody knew exactly how much money I had, but there was no hiding that I was a Blackwood, or that much of our fortune had been earned through bloodshed, crime, whatever it took. Blood money.

I pushed my introspection aside so I could better focus on the woman across from me. I laughed. "Don't worry about it."

Her outfit, her smile, her *everything* left little to the imagination. The

clothes appeared to be made from some cheap, thin material that had faded from repeated washings. The fatigue—droopy eyes, slow reactions—could only have been brought on by the exhausting travel clinging to her.

It was more than just travel, though. The shifty-eyed glances around the room, always checking that nothing errant was coming her way, the subtle twitches of her body, the way she startled at every sound...fear and self-preservation were the only things fueling her at this point. She was on the run from something, and it wouldn't take long for her to finally collapse. A person could only withstand that sort of life for so long. Wolves could only hold out without another wolf for an even shorter time.

*What are you running from, little wolf? How much danger are you in?*

On the inside of her wrist was a beautiful tattoo of some kind of flower. Even in ink, it looked delicate and frail. It clearly meant something special to her. Each colorful petal had been carefully tattooed and shaded with shadows and light, giving it a three-dimensional effect. Every so often, she turned her wrist and stroked the tattoo with her thumb, like an anxious habit. I doubted she was even aware of it. It was a tell if I'd ever seen one, and I wondered what she was thinking about when she did it.

I wanted to know this woman in a way I didn't remotely understand. One thing was for sure, though: my wolf and I were on the same page, looking for an opening to make it happen.

My fingers tingled at the idea of stroking her soft skin. Would my touch send shivers up her arm? Would touching her make my palms sweat? My cock reacted to the images in my mind, and my pants started to get a little snug. This situation was going to get embarrassing if I didn't tamp down the desire to take control.

If she touched me right now, here in the tavern, I would implode. Possibly. Probably. Very fucking likely.

She took a couple of quick sips as she scanned the room, not avoiding my gaze but not focusing on me, either. She obviously still had her guard up. The martini might have lessened her anxiety by the smallest of increments, but she was still on high alert. Nobody here was a threat to us, but if she interpreted something as an attack or lost control, it could cause me a major headache.

I'd seen her in the throes of panic, the way she had flinched and grabbed her head, her gaze darting to and fro. She'd been so alert yet so spaced out. She had clearly been struggling with something, and although the sight was

something I had seen before, I couldn't help her.

Unbidden, memories of my Aunt Lucille in a similar manic state flashed to the forefront of my mind. When my Uncle Vincent disappeared, she'd taken it badly. They'd had such a unique relationship that she'd cut herself away from the pack, becoming more feral until I barely recognized the loving woman I'd known throughout my boyhood.

I hadn't been able to help my aunt. But maybe I could help this woman...

Worry flooded me, but I hesitated to mention the woman's feral behavior to her. She was, after all, a stranger. For all I knew, she could be battling something else. But with her appearance and the loneliness permeating her scent, I had a strong suspicion of what I was witnessing. She was on the verge of becoming feral.

When a wolf was without the companionship of other wolves, they were in danger of going rogue. Without balance, the wolf took over, similar to a human in a manic period but more dangerous. Essentially, the wolf became a wild animal with no conscience—dangerous for her, and dangerous to our very existence. It only strengthened my desire to help her.

I sipped at my whiskey and studied her features. She was a beauty with her dark, penetrating eyes and shoulder-length wavy hair that framed her delicate features. Her petite size made her appear as fragile as a debutante, but her eyes told a different story. I'd never demean her by labeling her a damsel in distress. There was an air of resilience around her, though her eyes were world-weary. It was obvious she'd witnessed too much in her short life. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five, and she shouldn't have been so demoralized.

My heart ached for that, my wolf whimpering at her clear distress. She should be running free and howling at the moon with a pack of friends. Not holding her sanity together in a tavern in a town she had probably never even heard of until today.

I put my glass down and turned it around a few times before I asked, "What's your name? What brings you to our humble Blackwood Creek?"

As if I'd pushed a magic button, she sat up taller, narrowing those glassy indigo eyes at me. Her instant defensiveness and wariness revealed too much of her already vulnerable state.

She was a prime example of shifters from broken and scattered packs. It angered me that so many of them struck off on their own and ended up getting hurt or worse without the protection of a community of a pack. It was

not how our species was meant to live. Out there on her own, she would only find trouble for herself and others. What if another rogue wolf spotted her? A rogue so close to losing it himself, the hint of madness in her scent would make him feral, make him lose control. She was too small to be much of a match.

My grip on my glass was so tight, it almost cracked. I let go of it and flexed my hand. I had learned at a young age what it took to maintain control, to put on a mask and calm myself before I lost myself. Sometimes, being an alpha meant I had to hide what I was thinking if I wanted to lead effectively and do right by my pack. Alphas had a lot to defend and protect. It wouldn't do the pack justice if our enemies could read what we were thinking.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be so nosy. Hazard of the trade, I'm afraid." I settled back against the warm leather backrest and stayed in a relaxed position to ease her discomfort. "I'm Mayor Ridge Blackwood, and I always take it upon myself to chat with passersby and travelers. It helps me get an idea for bringing more business and tourism into the area."

While that was true, it wasn't the reason I'd approached her. I paused to savor another sip of whiskey and laughed. "I'm only in this booth bothering you because I'm a heartless entrepreneur."

*Yeah, let's go with that. Smooth. Believable. Total bullshit.*

The lady looked at me hard, then grinned. We both knew my words were a lie, but at least it brought out her stunning smile, which quickened my heart a little too much.

"Well, you can jot down my name as Jane Doe for your records, and I'm only here to take in the views. I found them..." She paused and looked me up and down again. "Pleasing."

She winked at me as she finished off her martini. Her eyes soaked me in, desire burning in them.

I swallowed hard. My cock twitched and strained against the zipper of my pants. Despite my surprise at her reply, I kept my face neutral. I'd have thought she'd be more cautious and closed off.

What surprised me more was my wolf's interest in her. He was pleased with her attention. He puffed up and yipped his appreciation. If I shifted now, he'd have pranced around, showing off his coat and teeth. We shared a need to impress her, which I'd never experienced before.

I was a little out of my element and wondered what I should do. I had goals and changes I needed to achieve in the shifter world, which left me with

little else to pursue.

Deep down, I wondered when—*if*—I would meet my fated mate. Very few wolves were granted that gift, but it held me back from settling for just any relationship. I'd seen what it meant to have a fated mate with my aunt and uncle, and what I vaguely remembered of my parents. Their relationships had evoked true love and magic.

Still, I'd resigned myself to the fact that I'd probably never come across her. A sliver of hope still resided inside me, though, because that'd be the most cherished gift this life could ever give me.

I wanted to honor that, but it didn't mean I couldn't have a good night from time to time. I mean, I wasn't marrying the women.

Jane Doe's fingers danced over the rim of the martini glass. The tiny pink tip of her tongue darted out to lick her upper lip before she sucked her soft, plump bottom lip into her mouth, worrying it with her teeth. Those lips could take me to so many places in my imagination. I was already speculating on several fun and creative ideas to play around with later.

What was some harmless flirting, even if it turned out not to be so harmless and led to something more? I worked hard and rarely got the opportunity to have some fun, especially lately, with the climate of the wolves and hunters causing problems. I could use some downtime with a beautiful woman, a little laughter and flirty banter. Even if it didn't go any further than playful fun in a booth at the bar, it'd still be a highlight in a long series of stressful and lonely nights. And maybe it would help her let her guard down a bit so she could start to heal, even just a little.

Why not escape into this beauty for a couple of hours? She could help me avoid the Greenthornes and several other of the town's most demanding, prominent families. They could take care of themselves for a time.

I leaned forward, gazing into her eyes. "Well, if you want to take in more sights, there are a lot of places nearby that are great for a long, good run." I waggled my eyebrows at her.

My inner wolf was frothing at the idea. He desperately wanted to chase her and dominate. We had never had fun running with another female wolf. Others had tried, but that was something I only wanted to do with my mated wolf. It was too private and intimate an act to engage with just anybody. But the idea of running with *Jane Doe* had me reconsidering my firm stance on the subject. I was too tempted, too turned on by the idea, that I didn't take a second to stop and think about it. I just wanted to do it. Immediately.



Her laughter bubbled out of her. “My running career ended when I resigned as team captain on my track team in high school.”

I leaned back and tilted my head as I studied her. What was she talking about? What wolf would give up running? Give up the chase? Give up the embrace of the moonlight on their fur?

It piqued my curiosity. “What school did you go to? Where are you from?”

Instantly, she stiffened. This time, I prepared myself for her reaction.

“Far away.” Her voice lowered to a near-whisper, and my heart lurched. I wanted to know everything about her. *Far away* wasn’t going to do it, but it told me a few things she probably hadn’t intended to communicate.

Jane Doe was in trouble and worried about me finding out who she was. I’d never wanted to know somebody’s secrets so badly, let alone her name.

I warred with my wolf, who demanded we get her to tell us her story. He wanted to force her to submit to her alpha. I didn’t want that. That would make her skip town, never to be heard from again. We had to tread carefully with her. Given how close she was to being feral, she *had* to be traumatized and scared; she might be hiding it physically, but scent never lies.

My every nerve ending buzzed with the need to do more, my protective instincts pounding inside me. I had no control over them; I wanted to ensure she was taken care of properly. She needed to be guarded, guided, cared for. I couldn’t stop the intensity. It overwhelmed me.

She wouldn’t accept my help, though. Despite the outward show of confidence, flirting, and letting her interest be known, skittishness and wariness were her go-to reflexes. I had no doubt she’d bolt at the first hint of a perceived threat, and she’d never ask for help.

The door to the tavern opened, followed by an unwelcome sight. I held in a groan and deflated in my seat. Being in the company of this newcomer, surrounded by her scent, by her, I’d forgotten myself. Forgotten I was avoiding Christie and Martin Greenthorne.

It seemed they’d found me. So much for hiding out. At least I hadn’t had a chance to give them a thought. Jane Doe’s company had been a more-than-welcome distraction.

Gearing up to apologize for what was headed our way, I also wanted to convince Jane Doe to stay. Then lightning struck, and I found myself with a solution unfolding before me.

I gazed at her. This was how I could get closer to her, build a foundation

for the two of us. Fingers crossed, it would also help her with whatever she was running from.

I leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, “You see the stuffy, spoiled-looking couple who just walked in?”

Jane nodded as her eyes twinkled. She knew there was going to be some mischief, and she was ready for it.

“They’ve tormented me with bureaucratic nonsense all day. It’s been exhausting. Well, they might leave me alone if it looked like I was on a date. Would you play the part for me for a moment?”

She looked at me and then at the door.

“It would really help me out,” I added.

Her eyebrows lifted, and the corner of her mouth raised in a smirk.

“I’ll pay for all your drinks for the rest of the night if you do.”

She cocked her head and eyed me up and down once more. A melodic laugh escaped her, reeling me in. Did she know how damned intoxicating that sounded?

My cock twitched again, along with my heart. I loved that sound. I wanted to hear it again.

“Okay, Mayor Blackwood.” She rose from her side of the booth and sauntered over to slide in next to me, her body heat scorching my thigh. There was nothing more divine than that heat.

My inner wolf howled. I had to admit I was proud of my little idea as well.

Watching the annoying Greenthornes strut my way, I leaned toward her ear. “Jane Doe, would it be okay to put my arm around you for believability?”

*And for my hands to stop itching at the idea of touching you?* Visions of my hands roaming over her skin as she was laid out like a sacrifice on my sheets flashed in my mind.

She released a soft giggle and pressed her luscious curves into my side. “My name is Victoria, but call me Tori.” She looked up at me through long lashes. “Throw in mozzarella sticks and buffalo wings with those drinks, and you can get your hands on me.”

Holding back a laugh, then a groan, and willing my cock not to rise to the situation and salute, I wrapped my arm around her and smiled. Seeing her with spit and fire, seeing her lose some of her guardedness, only stirred my craving to know her better.

The Greenthornes were at our table before I could relish the heat of her pressed up against my side. I should have wanted to be proper and professional in my official mayoral role, but Tori's scent was driving me mad. I wanted to lay her across the table and breathe her in, and my wolf was itching to sniff her out. He wanted to burrow into her neck and roll around with her. Her scent blended so well with our own that we wanted to drown in it.

No other wolf's scent had ever caused my wolf to react in this almost violent manner. I ignored the Greenthornes as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. Who was this little wolf, and what was this power she held over me?

## Chapter 3

# Tori

I snuggled in closer to Ridge and forced myself to stay composed. His warmth and strength made me want to just cuddle with him for hours. The scent of his skin, the little shocks that catapulted up my arms and jumped into my heart, were not something I could ignore. Nor could I ignore the molten heat pooling between my legs. I'd never had such an instantaneous attraction to a man before.

Images of ravenous hands touching and caressing, our bodies intertwined, flashed through my mind like my own personal erotic movie, and I was all for it. Even though I'd soon need a new pair of panties.

Stopping my wild imagination from escalating to the point I'd forget we were in public, I stared back at the snobbish couple. If I were Ridge, I'd also want to avoid them. Their stuck-up noses, high-end couture, and ridiculous showcase of bling came with an air of authority wrapped around them like a cloak. How did people evolve into such a loathsome form of being? I'd pay to have them live a day in my life—they wouldn't last an hour.

Mrs. Greenthorne's haughty voice grated on my nerves, and that was before I registered what she had to say. "Mayor, you have a sworn duty to this town, and it's not sitting here drinking with some random, hitchhiking trollop." She sniffed at me and scrunched up her face as if I was an unpleasant smell.

Wow, word got out fast. They must have heard about me getting out of the Ashworths' car earlier. Well, I'd heard worse.

I nestled in closer to Ridge. He toyed with the loose strands of hair that floated around my neck, his touch searing a trail on the skin along my collarbone. I glanced up at him, waiting for him to say something, but he

wasn't paying the woman any mind. He stared at me with his unique gray eyes flecked with blue and silver. They were like dark, turbulent clouds, a thunderstorm all on their own.

His gaze roamed over my face, and my belly warmed when he brushed the hair off my face and tucked it behind my ear. No one had ever looked at me like that—like I was dessert, and he wasn't about to share. I relished the attention, which was weird because I usually hated it, especially when it came from strangers. This felt very different, though. It felt right.

The couple started huffing at the fact that Ridge had so successfully ignored them, and I was about to tell off the old hag. I would have laughed because I found it so hilarious, but I knew I probably shouldn't let it go on for too long.

Ridge didn't seem to mind, but I had come across people like this couple before, ones who thought they were the most important people in every room. I wouldn't have been surprised if they caused an obnoxious scene. The mayor shouldn't have to deal with that. On one hand, I couldn't wait for them to go. On the other hand, if they left, then so did my reason for sitting so close. I wanted to play around with this man some more and see where the evening might head.

"It's well past business hours, Mrs..." I began.

The woman opened her mouth to speak.

I waved my hand lazily. "Never mind, I don't care. It doesn't matter who you are."

The woman clamped her mouth shut as venomous hate seethed from her body.

"As I was saying. It's well past business hours on an average workday, and it doesn't matter how badly you want some extra attention. You'll just have to make do with the 'attentions' of your"—I slowly scanned her husband, showing that he was lacking with my eyes—"husband there. Mayor Blackwood can pencil you into his calendar in the morning, during the aforementioned business hours of nine to five, to hear your no doubt endless complaints about whatever has your high-priced panties in a twist."

The Greenthornes started blustering. Evidently, they'd never been spoken to in such a manner. It was high time that somebody did. I had no problem with it being me.

I lowered my voice into a loud whisper. "Now, if you would kindly leave us alone, I was getting better acquainted with this luscious man right here,

and your presence here is ruining our evening.” I winked at her. The whispering didn’t fool anybody. Everyone in the room who’d turned to stare at us heard every word.

Mateo’s laugh burst out from behind the bar, and several of the other patrons joined. The tavern had gone quiet as everybody took in the show. I’d bet they eagerly awaited what the self-involved couple would do next.

The older lady clutched at her absent pearls as the husband’s face boiled red. Poor guy looked like his head might explode.

“Seriously, Blackwood. Are you going to let this”—the husband’s scolding eyes scanned over me with disgust—“this *nobody* speak to us this way?”

I turned my back to the overbearing couple, giving Ridge a shit-eating smile and winking. His grin lit up his face, but when he turned his attention to the couple, the smile dimmed significantly until it more resembled a scowl.

“She can say anything she wants because this is a public establishment and I’m not worried about controlling everything, unlike you two. I’m also not at your beck and call. The lovely lady has made a good point—make an appointment with my assistant tomorrow. During office hours. I will no doubt hear about everything at our scheduled appointment.” He looked at me, smiled, wagged his eyebrows, then turned back to the couple.

The Greenthornes’ faces went cherry red. They sputtered, words obviously escaping them before they turned and stomped out of the tavern, muttering something about respect and the mayor’s lack of decorum.

Ridge’s arm tightened around my shoulders, and shocks jolted down my body. That had been a lot of fun, and with the way everyone was laughing, it felt good to be part of something bigger than just myself for a small moment. It had been ages since I’d felt so carefree.

The door slammed shut, and I glanced back at Ridge. His smile was blinding and made him ten times more attractive, which I never would have deemed possible.

“You must be my good luck charm because I’ve been trying in vain to get them to leave me alone all day.”

Something about this guy made my belly and everything below it clench. Could have been his smile. Could have been his voice. Could’ve been that he was gorgeous. Any of those things were enough to explain the clenching, but together, they were probably responsible for many a damp panty.

Then he continued talking, and I could have swooned if I was the

swooning type. “Whereas you have them not only gone but running in less than ten minutes.” He shook his head and drank the last of his whiskey.

He kept his arm around me, our thighs and sides still lined tightly against each other.

Some of his hair fell over his forehead. I wanted to push it back and let my hands roam through his dark locks, but I clenched my fist to stop myself. We stared at each other, and I couldn’t help but want more. The lustful craving from before had now catapulted into a need that had my every cell homing in on him.

Sitting here with him, talking, touching, had eased me a lot faster than it usually took after previous episodes. Heavy breathing and meditation were working for me so far, but it took longer to recover every time. The mania had subsided, so why not kick it up a notch and feel euphoric? It was something to shoot for, anyway.

“You know, usually people wear their good luck charms.” I traced my fingers over the buttons of his shirt and batted my lashes at him. For a second, I almost forgot what I was doing because fuck, he had some pretty eyes. “I’d be happy to help you out there, too. I won’t even ask for any more drinks or anything else.”

He sucked in a breath that made his chest even larger, and his eyes darkened with lust while I continued playing with his shirt. The heat from his body scalded my hand, and I ached to stroke his bare skin.

He pulled me in closer, putting his lips close to my ear. “You don’t have to ask for anything. I’d make sure you had everything you needed and more.” He nuzzled the skin below my ear; I hadn’t known that spot was an erogenous zone until now. I felt his breath tickle my neck, felt the words across my skin. “Well, that is, if you’re truly serious about this.” He dragged his head back.

My heart pounded and flames licked at every pulse point on my body. I already missed the heat of him pressed against me.

I leaned in closer and whispered, “I’m very serious.” I nipped his ear playfully, then sucked the tip of his lobe in my mouth.

The mayor groaned, licking his lips as he stared at mine and adjusting himself in his seat as discreetly as he could. My effect on him had me excited. I was clearly getting to him just as much as he was getting to me.

I giggled. It had been a long time since I’d felt so free with a man. I knew I should focus on fading into the background, not spending time with the

most influential man in town and making influential enemies. But no one, nothing, had ever soothed my inner beast like this man. What if I'd shifted in the tavern, in front of all those people? I could still feel my wolf inside me. I could use the time here, with Ridge, to take in as much of this intoxicant as possible. I'd still be ahead of the hunters when I left, and these memories would comfort me in the long days and nights to come.

Before another word was spoken, Ridge wrapped his hand around mine and nudged me out of the booth. We were at the bar in a flash, where he paid for our drinks. Mateo was taking his sweet time processing the payment, and Ridge's eyes were sending laser beams into Mateo's back. I laughed at how Ridge was trying to keep his composure in front of everybody, even though he had to adjust himself a couple more times.

He held onto me the whole time, as if he were worried I would disappear. Which, given my circumstances, was always a distinct possibility. One hint of the hunters, and I would be gone.

As we were leaving, Ridge got several waves and questioning looks, which I assumed were because he was still holding my hand, but I ignored them. I didn't care what anybody here thought. Their opinions meant nothing to me. I was looking forward to a night of fun and stress-reducing fucking. I'd be gone in no time, never to see any of these people again.

The hot summer night air caressed my skin, but the sensation of Ridge holding my hand was all I could truly focus on as goosebumps rose on my arms.

He led me to a luxurious Aston Martin and opened the door for me. I was about to comment on his wheels, but he leaned down and kissed my cheek before I could get any words out. Steam practically sizzled from his lips, and I dropped into the front seat. I wanted to get wherever we were going and fast.

As the car curved around the turns of the town, I saw more of what the place offered. It was still picturesque, matching the charm of the main street and town square, but I didn't care about the amenities at the moment. My focus was all on the driver sitting next to me.

Leaning over the console, I trailed soft kisses along his strong jawline and down his neck. He stiffened, and I felt the car speed up. I laughed at his reaction and nipped at his ear again. A deep, throaty growl punctured the air. My panties dampened even more, and I willed this car to reach our destination faster.



The tip of my tongue traced the outer shell of Ridge's ear, then I sank my teeth into the sensitive flesh.

"Better control yourself, little lady. You might get bitten if you don't," his deep voice warned.

That only made me more excited, and I tamped down the girliest squeal trying to escape. My patience was wearing thin. I was running so hot that I needed him to extinguish this fire within me.

"What if I don't mind a little biting?" I breathed in his ear.

The car went from smooth pavement to crunching gravel and accelerated as a large home came into view. His arm worked the gears and rubbed against my breast, my nipples hardening at the contact. I put my hand on his thigh and gripped him. The muscles there had me drooling. With all the feels I'd gotten to cop this evening, I couldn't wait to get him naked and discover just how built he actually was.

The car slammed to a stop in front of a large garage with enough carports to house an assortment of vehicles. Ridge switched off the engine, then turned to me, captured my head in his hands, and pulled me in for a kiss. His lips crashed against mine, his tongue delving into my mouth, and we dueled for dominance.

Fire licked at my skin as the taste of him ravaged my senses. He tasted like whisky, the outdoors, and primal energy. From that moment forward, I would always associate the thought of the wild with Ridge Blackwood.

I moaned into his mouth as he slowed down and bit my bottom lip. I yelped, then he soothed the sting with his tongue.

"I need you in my bed *now*," he growled.

I giggled as he jumped out of the car and opened my door before I could say *take me already*. He reached across my body, brushed my sensitive breasts, unclipped the seat belt, and then lifted me from the vehicle. Before I knew what was happening, he had me thrown over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

I sucked in a breath at the sight of his gorgeous ass. Without a second thought, I took two nice handfuls and squeezed. His response was a loud smack that stung my ass cheeks, making my core coil.

We laughed as he burst through his front door and ran through his house so fast, I couldn't get a glimpse of anything. His body had me well-distracted as he climbed the stairs two, sometimes three at a time. I squirmed, wanting to relieve some of the throbbing between my legs.

“Eager?”

“You have no idea.” I gasped as he stroked my behind. I squirmed again, needing more.

Lifting my head, I only caught small details of the house. I only registered that it was big because it was taking way too long to get from the car to his bedroom. The door slamming reverberated through the room, and then I was thrown onto an enormous bed. I bounced several times and watched Ridge take several deep breaths, his chest heaving.

I lay back with my arms above my head, rubbing my thighs together and licking my lips in anticipation of what was coming—hopefully, both of us.

Ridge growled again. That sound would be something I’d never get tired of. My core flipped over it, and my panties dampened. He grabbed his tie, loosened it, and pulled it over his head. Thunderous gray eyes roamed over me as he unbuttoned his shirt, much too slow for my liking.

Raising myself off the bed, I reached for the hem of my shirt.

“Leave it,” he ordered. I arched an eyebrow. “I want to undress you.”

I smirked and lay back down, enjoying the show of one cut abdominal muscle at a time being revealed to me. Never mind a six-pack—Ridge had the full eight. My fingers itched to play with them, stroke them, outline them. My mouth watered to lick and suck those taut muscles.

I wanted his skin against mine. Never in my life had I wanted to fuck somebody so badly. This was going to be one hell of a one-night stand, that was for sure.

The curtains were open, the moon’s soft light bathing the room and allowing me to see Ridge. I wanted to saturate every one of my senses this evening because I’d never have another one like it.

I was going to burn this night into my memories. I would need it to help me through the dry spells that were to come.

Ridge had his shirt and tie off, and there was an obvious bulge in his pants. I wanted to see all of him, but he made me wait.

He grabbed my hips and dragged me to the edge of the bed. His hands stroked their way up my legs, causing shockwaves to ignite inside me. By the time he undid the button and zipper of my shorts, I thought I would combust. He pulled the fabric down my legs, then tossed it over his shoulders. My socks and shoes followed.

Leaning down, he hovered right above my pussy and took a long inhale.

“You smell amazing.” His finger played over the wet patch on my

panties. “You’re drenched for me. I wonder how much wetter I can get you.”

“I accept that challenge, Mayor.”

He chuffed, lowered his mouth to the practical cotton, and licked and sucked the material. My hands latched onto his head, and I twined my fingers in his hair.

“Hmmm.”

*Move the damn material.*

I wanted his tongue directly on my bud. I wanted to be in his mouth, but he had different plans.

His surprisingly coarse fingers stroked the skin under my shirt, and his mouth followed the path. I lifted my hips to chase his mouth, but he used his weight to push me down onto the bed. He collected my shirt as he moved his way up my belly and to my chest.

Tingles raced down to my clit as his mouth latched onto my left nipple through my bra. Even through the fabric, his mouth was scorching. Lifting his head, he trailed kisses to the other breast and hovered over the nipple. I moaned, waiting for him to suck that nipple, but he gave it a chaste kiss and moved up my collarbone.

“What?”

“Shhh. Don’t worry. I’ll make you feel good. It’ll be worth it in the end.” The words were a whisper against my skin, and I could feel the curve of his smile.

He reached behind me and I arched my back, thrusting my breasts against his perfect pecs. I hissed at the friction across my nipples. Then he pulled my shirt over my head, and my hair fell to my shoulders. The ends slid over my skin, the sensation heightened by how fucking turned on I was.

He unsnapped my bra from the back, and my breast fell into one of his palms as he tugged the straps down my shoulders. The shirt and bra were discarded somewhere in the room; I couldn’t tell where and didn’t care. His gaze entranced me. The storm that naturally invaded his eyes was now pitch black. His lust had him and was in control. I could taste it in the air.

“Lie back,” he said.

I did as he said and took in the sight of what my body was doing to him. His cock was straining, his pants now fully pitched. I squeezed my legs together as the ache built. I needed more pressure.

As if reading my mind, he bowed his head and kissed right where I needed him most, then rolled my panties down my legs. He lifted the scrap of

fabric to his nose and inhaled deeply. As he stood gazing down at me, he pocketed my panties, making my need ratchet up ever higher.

“Mine.”

I laughed. I didn’t care what he did with them, just as long as he stripped.

Stepping back, he undid his belt, button, and zipper with aching slowness. My heart beat a mile a minute. I wanted him to know exactly what he was doing to me, so I boldly opened my legs for him to see all of me. It could be freeing to be with a stranger you knew you wouldn’t be seeing much of, if at all. It allowed inhibitions to dissolve and fully taking control of one’s pleasure. I would own my pleasure with this man.

He stood still as stone as I licked the fingers of my right hand and then slowly moved them down my neck and collarbone, feathered them over my left breast and nipple, then continued down my stomach. I stopped and traced my fingers back and forth around my belly button before tracing a path down to my little patch of curls and opening my lips slightly to give him the barest peak. Slick liquid coated me, leaking further from my core.

Ridge let out a roar, and he stripped his body bare in seconds. I gulped at the heavy erection that was pointing straight at its destination even as my fingers lazily stroked my pussy.

He got onto the bed and stalked over me. His lips descended on mine, and we dueled once again. I fingered myself faster, and he pushed me further up on the bed. When he had me where he wanted me, he grabbed my hand and sucked my fingers into his mouth. His tongue swirled around my digits, sucking them clean.

“Ridge,” I gasped.

“Delicious. Just as I knew you would be.”

He cradled his hips against mine and coated his cock with my juices, rubbing the bud of nerves that had me whimpering in no time.

His fingers worked furiously, then slowly, then furiously again over my clit.

“You’re dripping for me now. Told you I’d get you wetter.”

Usually, I’d roll my eyes, but I craved him too much. “I need you inside me,” I moaned, then buried my head in his neck as every nerve ending zinged out its own pleasurable rhythm.

One large inhale, and my inner wolf growled. His scent—its deliciousness—was the same as the one I’d reacted to when I first set foot in town. He was what I’d smelled; this had induced my latest mania. The tavern

had been so full of scents, other people, alcohol, and my mania had overwhelmed my sense of smell.

I'd missed it. Oh, help me, gods, I'd missed it.

My inner monster pushed to be freed, wanting a taste. I panicked, bit down on my lips, and held onto Ridge's back for dear life. My nails cut into his skin, but Ridge didn't mind. A loud growl vibrated out of his chest, stimulating my hard nipples. He kissed me passionately, lined himself up, and thrust slowly and deeply into me.

We both growled. Ridge steadily pulled out, then thrust back in fast and deep. My wolf timidly backed off as Ridge increased his pace, and I met him thrust for thrust. He was fucking the monster into submission, and I couldn't have been more grateful.

What would he have thought if I had turned in front of him? He would fear me. I would disgust him.

"Fuck, Tori, you're so damn tight." He rose onto his forearms and worked his lower body like a drill. He pounded and thrust, ensuring he hit my clit and that magical spot while he moved in and out of me.

An electric shock coursed through my body, pulsing, swirling, never abating. A new form of mania overtook me, and it was one I'd gladly endure anytime.

I clung to Ridge's back. Our breathing was erratic and sounded loud in the room. He dropped his head and nipped at my neck and collarbone. Stars formed in my vision.

I lifted my knees higher up around his waist so he could move in deeper.

"Yes. Fuck. Yes!" I cried out.

Still thrusting, he grabbed my hips, moved to his knees, and lifted my ass. At this new angle, he smashed against that non-mythical G-spot with every thrust.

"Ridge. There. Oh, yes. There."

He didn't change positions. He pistoned into me at that exact spot over and over while I climbed and climbed.

"Almost. Almost there."

"Come for me. I need you to come for me."

The smacking of our skin reverberated throughout the room. Sweat coated our skin, mingling and mixing, and I was amazed at how we could hold on to each other without slipping. He never slowed down, never stalled.

He clenched his jaw. His fingers bit into my hips, his breathing haggard.

“Fuck. Come, Tori. Come.”

He thrust harder and faster. I ripped my hand from his shoulder and lowered it to my clit. One flick. Two flicks.

I screamed at the top of my lungs as the room flashed white, and I convulsed with shockwave after shockwave. I clenched hard on Ridge’s cock as he slammed into me.

He burrowed deep inside me and released, my pussy milking him for everything he had.

My body melted as if every ounce of energy I’d ever possessed had evaporated. I collapsed onto the bed, Ridge following as we stayed joined and battled to breathe. And battled our way back to reality.

## Chapter 4

# Ridge

Sunlight streaming through the open curtains woke me. On any other morning when I'd been fucked into oblivion and needed the rest, I would have been annoyed. Not this morning. Nothing could wipe away the dopey-ass smile plastered firmly on my face. I turned to my left, where a beautiful sight greeted me.

Part of me had wondered if she would leave in the night, but Tori lay fast asleep, her small frame curled next to me. Her shoulder-length curls on the pillow framed and emphasized her delicate features. Most of the sheets were wrapped around her shapely legs. Delicious parts of her body were hidden while others were on full display. My mouth watered to latch onto the nipple peeking out from the sheet, but I was content to watch her. She was adorable when she was asleep. When she was awake, she was fiery and sexy.

I appreciated both versions of her. This was a woman who'd always keep life interesting.

I glanced at the alarm clock on my nightstand. It was still early enough; I could let her sleep for a while yet. After we left the tavern last night, I had been so hard, so turned on, and conversation hadn't been necessary, but now I wished I'd at least gotten her to tell me how long she planned to stay in town. I was highly attracted to her and wanted to know everything about her. More, I wanted to know what—or who—she was running from.

Last night was the absolute best sex I'd ever had in my life. Tori's confidence in her body was a major turn-on. I wanted more of it. I had a strong sense that I'd never have enough of her. She was so genuine and sassy in her pleasure. She knew what she wanted, and she gave as well as she got.

My wolf wasn't itching to get her out of our bed. He was relatively quiet,

which was unusual for him, especially after a one-night stand.

Watching the morning light caress Tori's skin, I fought for control. My lips itched to follow the sun's path. I lay propped on one elbow and soaked in the sight of her body, burning every curve of her into my memory.

Another detailed tattoo peeked out underneath her left arm, near her breast. The artist she'd used was extremely talented. As I studied the details of the tattoo, my heart tightened. It was a cage formed from the light of a crescent moon with wolf tracks leading into it.

A soft sigh left her lips, and she buried her head into the pillow. Her hip rolled a little, and my eyes skated down her body to where her leg covered her treasure trove. On her thigh was another elegant tattoo of an intricate dreamcatcher; the image looked woven into her skin. I wanted to trace my fingers over the design, hoping my caresses would cause her skin to pebble and she'd open her legs for my hand to scoop into her heat, but I refrained.

I needed to find out what trouble she was in, if there was anything I could do to help her. Why did it upset her if I broached anything about her past or where she was from? Gazing at all her ink, I wanted to understand the symbolism behind the tattoos, what they meant to her. I had some idea but wanted to hear it from her.

Her peacefulness in sleep was what stopped me. She was on the run from *something*, it was clear as day, and with all her traveling, she had to be beyond exhausted. Looking over her shoulder all the time, never staying put, only having one bag with her. I wanted her to get as much rest as possible. I wanted it to be safe for her, staying here. And I wanted to have her stay longer, so we could work out this attraction for each other.

I quietly lifted myself off the bed. I'd make her some breakfast. She'd need the energy because I wanted another round before the day officially started. I grabbed the pants that lay over the armchair next to the bed and pulled them on before going downstairs toward the massive family kitchen. The mansion had been in our family for generations.

Even though I hated it and everything it represented, it was my home base. When I was a kid, I'd thought my home was a magical place. I was proud to descend from such a strong lineage of alpha wolves. But that all changed after my parents' tragic death when I was a boy. When Uncle Vincent took me in and taught me what I needed to know about my family legacy.

I walked past the expensive artwork my mother had painstakingly curated



in her short life. They decorated the walls of rooms where antique furnishings passed down from generation to generation were tastefully placed.

I often thought about how my family had acquired everything in this home. After all, there was blood on the Blackwood family's hands. In the 1800s, my ancestors sold out other shifter packs and families, striking deals with hunters and giving them information about other paranormal creatures in exchange for riches and their own safety. Even to this day, my gut churned at the idea. I couldn't look around this home without those thoughts playing out in my head—the pain, fear, and deaths my family had instigated, all for selfish greed and dominance.

When I first found out, I hadn't believed my uncle, but the evidence was substantial. He'd made it his life's work to discover our ancestors' true history, putting himself in danger to find the answers as he attempted to rectify everything he could. He'd unearthed prior generations of Blackwoods meeting with hunters, giving names and locations of innocent creatures. All for money and protection.

After I'd learned the truth, I vowed to change everything the Blackwood name stood for. I followed in my uncle's footsteps, and after his death, I took on his cause as my own. I wanted the Blackwood name to be something to be proud of, wanted my accomplishments not to make people fear me the way they did, wanted the past not to taint the family name or this mansion.

So far, the battle had been never-ending. No matter what I did, the trust between the Blackwood name and the shifters beyond my own pack was so damaged, so profoundly severed, that the generational pain wouldn't be fixed in one lifetime. I acknowledged that, but I'd keep doing my damndest to keep going. To continue carrying on Uncle Vincent's work to build a town where shifters and humans could live harmoniously. Where shifters got to live side by side with family and friends of both species.

Swiping my hand down my face, I said, "Stop thinking like this, man. You have a beautiful woman upstairs in your bed. Just feed her."

I chuckled. Tori had me talking to myself now.

I grabbed items from the fridge, relieved there was enough food. As a bachelor, I didn't do much cooking. Most times, I ate out or had a sandwich over the sink. I figured an omelet, diced fruit, bacon, and coffee would be more than sufficient, but if she were still hungry, I'd make the little wolf whatever her heart desired.

The radio by the oven beckoned me to play it. I turned it to one of the

oldie stations while I moved around the kitchen. It was a relaxing morning, and I couldn't remember having had one in a long time. I still had to face my duties and obligations today, but I wasn't so stressed about it. All thanks to a little wolf upstairs in my bed.

I cleaned the kitchen as I cooked, but I left the dishes in the sink. Arranging the food on a tray, I went back upstairs. Before I hit my bedroom door, the sound of the running shower hit my ears, Tori's scent mingling with the steam. It had my wolf salivating for more.

I couldn't agree with him more strongly. My arousal was building, and I was ready for another round. Placing the tray on the nightstand, I stripped out of my pants and left them in a heap on the floor as I stepped into the en suite bathroom.

Tori had her head backward, and the water cascaded down her pinkened flesh. Steam billowed in the air, and her wet hair hung down to her shoulders as she let the hot water wash over her face.

I froze in place as I took her in. My heart raked up a few notches, and my arousal slammed against me, fighting to consume me and take control of the situation. I wanted her up against the shower wall, wanted to be buried inside her.

I stalked toward the shower and opened the glass door without wasting another moment. Tori jumped in surprise, fear flashing in her eyes as she turned her head. Laughter bubbled out of her when she saw me, chasing away the haunted look. Her soulful eyes raked over my body, and when they landed on my heavy erection, she licked her lips.

I smirked, preening under her hooded gaze. In less than a heartbeat, I had the shower door shut and her wrapped in my arms, dominating her mouth with mine.

As I roamed my hands over her slick, wet skin, she shivered in my arms as I controlled the kiss that she was more than happy to reciprocate. I pushed my cock against her belly, swallowing her little moans of pleasure.

Breaking the kiss, I trailed my lips down her jaw to her neck and her ear. "Maybe after we work off some of this tension in here, we could go on a morning run together, little wolf." The idea made my body tense even tighter, and I couldn't wait for both releases.

Tori stopped dead and started trembling. The sweet scent of her arousal was gone, replaced by the familiar sour scent of fear, but this wasn't just fear. This was *panic*.

She struggled in my embrace and pushed me back, but I held her tighter. “Tori, what’s wrong?”

Fear clouded her eyes, and she bared her teeth. With every ounce of energy she possessed, she threw me backward, and I went hurtling through the glass wall of my shower.

Glass cut into my back and feet, but I felt nothing as I launched to a crouch when Tori bolted out of the bathroom. What the fuck? What had caused her to run? It seemed she was acting on pure instinct, fight or flight. The little wolf was afraid, and I needed to get through to her. Before her fragile psyche shattered and she turned completely feral.

I was on her heels as she scoped out the room with a frenetic energy, pacing, trying to find a way to escape.

Lifting my hands and lowering my tone, I said, “Tori, easy. Easy.” I didn’t understand what had caused her to panic in such a way. Whatever I’d done, it had terrified her completely.

I forced my alpha wolf down and chased her to the corner of the room. I worried she’d hurt herself if she tried to get out by using the stairs or jumping out of the window.

My alpha instincts battled with me to pin her down and force her to submit for attacking me. But my mind kept rationalizing that wasn’t what had happened. I’d scared her, forcing her to run. However, my wolf didn’t want to be rational. He wanted her submission.

I kept my hands in the air for her to see. “Tori, you’re okay. You have nothing to fear from me. I’d never hurt you. I could never hurt you.”

Her shivering turned into entire body shakes, and tears burst from her eyes as she spewed her words. “You’re a wolf, too. How did I not notice? How did I let this happen?” She slammed her fist into the wall. “How did I not know? Stupid, Tori. You’re so stupid.”

“Tori, calm down. Please calm down.”

She wasn’t listening to me. Her chest heaved, her breaths shallow and heavy. Tears streamed down her beautiful face. Her frightened eyes would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I trembled at her reaction to finding out I was a wolf, too. Her fear was no act. Something had made her react this way, made her unhinged. I was physically ill from her fear and self-loathing. What had happened to her? How had she not recognized the scent or auras of another shifter, many other shifters? It was one of the first things young shifters were taught,

She gripped her head as she focused on her breathing. This was what she had been battling with yesterday when I met her at the tavern. The feral part was working its way up to the surface. This little wolf had been on her own for a long time.

My wolf should've been calming her down, taking away the animalistic edge of shifting. But since she was a lone wolf, relaxing her would take more than just the presence of another wolf.

I couldn't believe it was too late for her, though. For most of our time together, she was sane and put together. Her feral side wasn't controlling her. From what I witnessed between yesterday and today, her feral side only battled for dominance when she was afraid or uncertain.

"Tori, listen to me."

She shook her head and continued to hit her head against the wall.

"Tori, stop and listen."

A threatening growl reverberated from her as she continued to rock herself.

"Please, Tori. I need you to sit down."

I stepped toward her. Her eyes narrowed, and she let loose a deep growl.

Raising my hands in surrender, I stepped back and crouched until I was level with her. "Tori. I'm not going to come near you. I'm not going to hurt you. I need you to calm down and stop hurting yourself, okay? Please."

She cocked her head at me, and I sucked in my breath at the blank look in her eyes. It only happened in a flash, but at that moment, she wasn't human. Finally, she stopped hitting her head against the wall. I couldn't believe how much easier I could breathe after she stopped hurting herself.

"I'd never hurt you. I could never hurt you. I only want to help. You don't need to be afraid of me. I'm just like you. I'm here to help." I kept speaking to her in low, gentle murmurs like she was a child or a scared animal—which she was. I prayed that my words were sinking in. "I'm like you. I won't hurt you."

Her breathing started to calm down, and mine followed suit.

The air in the room was tight with tension, the silence making the rush of my blood deafen my ears. I never took my gaze off the little wolf, though. My heart broke at how shattered she seemed. Whatever she'd gone through was exactly what I was working so hard to prevent from happening to wolves. She was a prime example of what I needed to fix.

It was ten times worse that she was someone I'd found a personal

connection with. It was harder to separate myself from this.

Anger fueled her eyes as her body locked up in a tense pose. “You’re lying. Of course you’re going to end up hurting me. You’re a fucking shifter. That’s what shifters do.” Hatred and fear spewed from her lips. If I hadn’t seen the passionate woman and witnessed everything with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have known that this was Tori.

She rose from her panicked position and worked her way around the room, glaring at me while she picked up her clothes and dressed.

I took a step closer to her.

“Don’t you dare get closer to me, shifter. Stay back.” Her words hissed out as she finished up. “Where’s the nearest bus or train station?”

I was stunned into silence. Never had I heard another shifter speak about their own species with such hatred and vitriol. How could she think shifters were inherently bad? Sure, there were good and bad ones, just like with humans, but she truly believed we were all monsters.

Had she not been around shifters before? That made no sense. My heart dropped into my stomach. Or, the shifters she’d known had mistreated her. Hurt her. Scared her.

My wolf and I saw red, and I wanted their blood for damaging this wolf so severely that she felt like she had to make it on her own, threatening her well-being.

“Tori—”

“Don’t. I just need to get out of here and away from you. Where’s the bus or train station?” She bared her teeth at me.

It couldn’t have been an accident that she had arrived here. Blackwood Creek was my life’s ambition. It was to become a haven for all shifters, especially those like her who deserved to witness other shifters in packs lead happy, healthy, balanced lives—living as one with their shifting.

Tori needed that more than any other shifter. More than that, I wanted it for her. If she made peace with her wolf, I had no doubt she’d be magnificent.

That was my new vow. She was too young to have been on her own for this long. I was determined to help her and protect her, no matter the cost or what she had to say about it. I wasn’t sure I understood this compulsion—and it was exactly that, a compulsion—but I did understand that my wolf would take it badly if I didn’t try to bring this woman and wolf together and repair their damaged bond.

“Please, stay in town for a couple of days. It will help you feel better if you stick around. I’m not the only shifter here; many of the townspeople are like you and me. You could get your bearings.”

I wasn’t above begging. Anything to get her to stay.

She stopped moving around and stood tall as she eyed me. Her stance was aggressive, but her eyes showed a flash of vulnerability. She was tired and lonely. I wanted to fill that void for her because who knew how much longer she’d make it before becoming completely lost to the feral nature?

My wolf howled to come out so he could soothe her, which surprised me. He wasn’t the type to coddle. He demanded respect and obedience, but witnessing her breakdown made him want to protect her. Like I did.

“What do you mean by feeling better?”

She was analyzing me and deciding whether I’d lie to her. The trust wouldn’t be there, not for some time, but curiosity had her heeding my words. My instincts guided me on how to answer. It wouldn’t go over well if I informed her that she was going feral. No shifter would ever accept that diagnosis.

I softened my stance and tried to make my large frame smaller and non-threatening. It didn’t help that I was naked and had blood smeared over my body, but I could sense my wounds stitching themselves back up, the annoying itching being the most significant indicator. The recovery time of a shifter had a lot of major perks, but the itching was a downside.

I wanted to show Tori all the perks of being a shifter when she was ready to embrace who she was.

“You’re running from something, I can tell.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but I held up my hand. “I won’t push you on it. That’s your business. I’m here if you want to discuss it, but I won’t be in your business.” Even though it was killing me not to know exactly what was going on, her sanity and safety meant more to me than my curiosity. “I will pay for you to stay at the local bed and breakfast, and I’ll get you anything else you might need if you give Blackwood Creek a chance for a few weeks.”

I much preferred that she lived with me, shared my bed, but that’d push things too far. Tori was struggling just to look at me now that she knew I was like her.

I wasn’t going to lie and say it didn’t sting a little. After last night, I hated the way she was looking at me now. She was full of hatred and disgust.

Before, she'd gazed at me with want and lust. The radical shift was a shock. My wolf paced inside me, growling to come out, but I kept him under lock and key. I didn't want her to bolt now. Not when I held onto solid hope that she'd take my offer.

"If you stay, you won't have to worry about anything," I emphasized. "I'll cover all the costs."

Tori stiffened. Her nostrils flared and anger ravaged her face. "I can pay my own way, thank you very much. I don't need or want your money. Keep yourself away from me and keep your mouth shut about ever seeing or knowing me."

To say I was surprised would be putting it mildly. That was the second time she had made it quite clear that she didn't want me or my money to take care of everything. Normally, if I offered to pay, people accepted it without question. It was even expected that I would pay, so they didn't even raise a token effort to contribute.

Even with the attitude back in place, Tori was a breath of fresh air.

"And when I'm ready to leave, I'll disappear. It's none of your fucking business what happens to me."

My wolf growled. Like hell it wasn't my business. I'd made her my business. I wanted everything about her to be my business.

I just couldn't understand why.

## Chapter 5

# Tori

Working furiously to control my mind and emotions, I glared at the man—no, the half-beast—before me. I couldn't believe this cute little town was unknowingly led by a monster like him. No doubt he was murderous. All shifters were.

I'd know. I'd almost become a murderer myself. It took everything in me to control the monster.

Anger bubbled inside me. How the hell did I end up sleeping with one of them? How could I not have known? It didn't help at all that the man was sexy, that he was shameless about his nakedness. Or that my body still throbbed for more.

Then he'd insulted me by throwing his money around, trying to get me to stay. What the fuck was up with that? Was it a ploy to keep me in town so he could tell the hunters where I was? I wouldn't be surprised. I'd been sold out for far less, and by people with more meaningful bonds to me.

Feeling a desperate urge to escape, I couldn't get away fast enough. I started for my bag when Ridge blocked my path. His hands stayed up in the air, but he wasn't letting me leave the corner of his room. My beast stomped around inside my head, and I couldn't help the pulsing heat of anger rolling through me.

One more step, and he blocked me again, but some energy force pushed me back. I shrank down and cowered against the wall, my primal instinct flashing hot in my head. Not only was this another shifter, but he was also an alpha. An alpha I'd angered somehow.

"You, little wolf, are absolutely my business." A guttural tone laced his voice. "When a frightened, defenseless wolf who's clearly in trouble ends up



in my town—the very town I’ve worked endlessly to make a safe haven for shifters—they become my business.”

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes never leaving mine. “It’s not natural for a wolf shifter to be alone. It’ll only end with you getting hurt, slaughtered by hunters, or placed in a fucking insane asylum.”

He stood taller. It seemed like an immense power entered the room as he kept talking. I cowered more, even though I fought my beast not to submit. Sweat broke out on my brow. I. Would. Not. Submit.

“You’re going to stick around Blackwood Creek until you get a grip on yourself. At this point, you’re not only a danger to yourself but to every person you come into contact with. Do you want their blood on your hands?”

Shame slammed into my chest. An innocent being hurt because of this monster inside me? That was my biggest fear.

“You need to get control of your wolf. I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I can tell it’s been a lot, so it’s even more imperative that you get a sense of normalcy, even if it’s temporary. Both of you deserve a safe place to relax and breathe without dreading that everything coming around the corner is coming at you. Being here will help settle you down and hopefully calm your wolf.”

The weight of power in the room slowly ebbed, and I didn’t feel such a strong urge to submit. I hated that what he’d said was effective, that it held such a ring of truth. Mostly, I hated that his sheer alphaness was a major turn-on. My core ached to rehash the night before.

I still couldn’t comprehend how I’d slept with another shifter without realizing what he was. Weren’t shifters supposed to sense each other? He obviously knew who I was, *what* I was. Determination fueled me as I vowed that nothing would ever happen between us ever again. I’d never fuck a shifter ever again.

Shifters were monstrous beasts, and no good ever came from any of them. I’d know. My family has hunted them for generations, and one killed my mother. By killing her, that shifter had taken everything from me.

I still didn’t know how I became a shifter. Perhaps because of some horrible curse, or a far more terrible thing—such as my mom becoming pregnant at the hands of a shifter, either willingly or by force. It didn’t matter, though. No matter how incredibly handsome or talented he was with his cock, an alpha stood in front of me, and I didn’t like that one fucking bit.

I refused to act like one of them, refused to let the monster inside come

out. I certainly wouldn't be with one of them again, much less ever make a life or family with one.

I turned my head so I wasn't gazing at the hot specimen before me; it'd cost me if he caught on to my arousal. I snapped back at him instead. "Fine, Old Yeller, I'll stay in Blackwood Creek for a week or so as long as you stay the hell away from me. You better make sure that no other shifters in this town start coming around me and trying to sniff my butt, either."

A smile slowly began to lift the corners of his lips, but he caught it in time and set his face back to neutral, calming his stance.

"And if you have half a dog's brain, you'll forget you ever saw me here, and you'll go on with your life as the self-imposed do-gooder of this town without breathing a word about my existence to anybody who might ask," I said. "Got it, Lassie?"

Spoiling for a fight so I could save face and back out of this ridiculous agreement, I waited for the alpha mayor to be insulted. But relief relaxed his body.

"You mean that? You'll stay?" he asked.

Hesitating for a second, I finally nodded. "Yes, I'll stay, but just for a week. Maybe two."

He let out a big breath of air. "It'd be better if you stayed around not just for a few weeks but months. You may find being around shifters will do you some good." He rushed on before I could tell him to screw himself. "We're social creatures. Being around our own kind helps us stay calm and centered."

Hope flashed in his eyes and settled on his handsome face, affecting me more than it should.

I mumbled, "I'll decide how long I stay without your help." Noticing the smeared blood on his skin and the broken glass in the bathroom, I carefully added, "I'll probably be here for at least a couple of weeks. And I'll need to get a job to pay you back for shattering your shower wall."

Appalled that I had caused such a mess with my unchecked shifter strength, I couldn't help but want to rectify the destruction I'd inadvertently caused. Ridge didn't seem to be harmed or the worse for wear, but it had to have hurt him when it happened. Plus, losing control like that...what if he'd been a human? He'd be in the hospital. Or dead.

Ridge burst out laughing. "I've been wanting to renovate the bathroom, anyway. Now would be a good time to start. So, you don't owe me anything.

I should thank you, really. It will push me to put my ass in gear.”

He seemed so at ease, like everything we’d just been through was all cleared up and wrapped up in a tiny little box with a bow on top. In contrast, the multiple emotions warring through me warped my brain and exhausted my body.

“I made you breakfast.” He pointed at the tray on the far side of the bed. “You should eat. Would you consider going on that run with me? It’d be relaxing.”

His handsome smile, those perfect Prince Charming teeth, flashed at me as if I hadn’t just thrown him through a glass wall and he hadn’t tried to dominate me. The fact that I found him hard to resist grated on my nerves. I wanted to be around him more, and the beast inside me was scraping to burst out and entice the hunky alpha to chase us around the woods. To wrestle and play.

Mentally smacking myself across the face, I pushed the beast down, refusing to get caught up in such a pretty snare. Who knew what he’d do once he thought he had me? I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of trapping me.

“Remember, Pluto, while I’m in town, you keep your distance.” I pointed at him. “And preferably, the next time I see you, you’ll have your fucking clothes on.”

His laughter made me seethe. Why the hell was I so amusing to him?

“Can it, Scooby. I’m not here to be your amusement.”

“Right. Sorry.”

He wasn’t sorry, but at least he had the decency to toss on last night’s clothes. It took everything in me not to take in one last fill of his glorious nakedness because I wouldn’t see it again. My arousal was still sky-high, no matter how much I commanded myself to not lust over the alpha mayor. The guy was officially off-limits.

He stepped back, no longer attempting to block my escape. I eyed him carefully as I grabbed my bag and scanned the room to make sure I had all my belongings. He raised his arm, indicating that he would follow behind me.

I didn’t dawdle as I made it to the door and scanned the hallway to figure out where I was going. I took in my surroundings, awed. Eyeing the stairs, I headed straight for them.

I hadn’t seen any of this last night. I’d been too busy appraising the ass of the century to take in that this place was a freaking mansion. An old mansion, like from the 1800s. The detail of the wood markings and staircases was

remarkable. The spaciousness and style were gorgeous. The artwork that lined the halls was not of the “my child did this in class today” variety. They were pieces of fine art that had to be worth a mint. This was serious money.

It took me several wrong turns to navigate where I was going. Ridge wasn't of any help; he just followed me around with amusement on his face. I wanted to smack it right off.

“What are the meanings of your tattoos?” he asked. “They're beautiful. The artist really captured the designs.”

I held back my shock and refrained from telling him I did them myself. That was none of his business, and neither was their meaning. I did them for me and not for anybody else.

“Thank you,” I muttered as I took another turn that led down another hallway. “What the hell? How do you get out of this place?”

Ridge took his hand out of his pocket and pointed to another corner. I headed in that direction, and another staircase appeared. I took the stairs down, only to find another flight of stairs. Man, no wonder it had taken us so long to get from the car to the bed. This place was a fucking castle.

Glee filled me when I finally hit the bottom step and noticed the grand entrance hall, and by grand, I mean it was bigger than the house I'd grown up in. How could people live in something this big?

I looked over my shoulder at Ridge. Did he seriously live here by himself? Didn't it get lonely?

Shaking off the concerned feelings, I rushed to the front door and had it open before Ridge could stop me. Before I stepped through the doorway, I said, “If you bill me for the shower, do it via messenger or something like that. Remember, for me to stay, you leave me alone, no matter how mayoral you want to be. No contact.”

I pointed my finger at him and rushed off before he could say anything. I needed to have the last word.

I hurried down the long driveway of the ridiculously landscaped property. It looked like a European monarch managed the home, with the rose garden, grass hills, and topiary trees. It was a dream of a home.

When I made it to the end of the gravel road and turned to take in the vastness of the house, Ridge still stood in the doorway, watching me. His presence there made the place appear lonely. It was too much for one person.

I followed the road back to Blackwood Creek. It was a hell of a long walk. When I got to the town's limits and homes started appearing, I was

grateful not to have to walk much farther. Ridge's place was farther out than I had thought. It hadn't felt so far by car, but it was definitely a hike.

The houses gave way to businesses, and it was strange how people stared at me. Even the people driving by slowed down and watched me rudely.

I understood the curiosity, though. It was a small town, and I was a stranger. Plus, a lot of them probably scented me as a shifter.

I clenched my jaw. Leave it to me to come to a place filled with the monsters.

Several people, though, were cold and downright judgmental in their perusal of me. Since I wasn't planning on sticking around for too long and was tired of being the fish in the fishbowl, I happily flipped off those people who sent me malicious looks. I pegged them for shifters by their beady eyes and the way they were practically frothing at the mouth as they watched me.

"Safe place for shifters, my ass," I muttered as I continued walking. Ridge could say all he wanted about having a place for shifters, but I knew the score. They weren't saints, and their demonic ways were bound to escape and harm and maim. It was inevitable.

That's why it was best for me to keep moving and never form ties. If no one was close to me, then I couldn't hurt anyone but myself.

The sign for the Bogford Bed & Breakfast swung on its chains. The square where the Ashworths dropped me off yesterday was within view of the place. It was a cute two-story home, the American dream home with a white-picket fence, flower boxes, and flower beds with bright colors springing up everywhere, as well as cheerful blue shutters and the all-American red door. The place's charm was so sweet, my teeth ached from it, but I had to admit I could go for sweet right now. It got tiresome staying in crappy motels where the sheets were questionable and cockroaches wanted to be your bedmates.

I walked up the path and slowly opened the door. The A/C smacked right against my face, and goosebumps livened up my skin. The cold air felt amazing. The heat had hit, despite the early hour, and walking the miles from Mayor Snoopy's house meant I had sweat coating my skin—it certainly wasn't a dewy glow. I was sure my face was red and my hair lank.

A shrewd-faced woman stood behind the front desk, but her smile was bright and kind when I stepped toward her. She had to have been about my mother's age. Or rather, the age she would have been were she still alive.

"Welcome to Bogford Bed & Breakfast. How may I help you?"

Her motherly voice instantly put me at ease and made me feel I was genuinely being invited into her home. “Hello. I was passing through and was wondering if I could get a room.” I swiped my hair behind my ear, realizing I probably looked a mess. This woman was probably more used to families and newlyweds staying here.

“Most certainly. We have a couple of rooms available. I can get you set up in a jiffy. Do you know how long you’ll be staying?”

I danced my fingers against the counter. “I’m not too sure. Maybe a couple of weeks? I’ll for sure let you know when I know.”

She smiled and asked for my name. I gave her my real first name but a made-up last name.

“What brings you to Blackwood Creek?”

I hated when people asked that question. Why did everyone have to be so nosy about it?

“Personal business that I’d appreciate the town not being privy to. I definitely value my privacy.” I hoped I didn’t come off as snotty, but when telling people you needed them to butt out, you couldn’t be sweet about it.

The woman smiled and handed me a key. “I understand all about wanting privacy. Don’t worry. You’ll get that here at Bogford Bed & Breakfast.” She held out her hand to shake mine. “Diana Bogford, at your service.”

I smiled at her and decided I liked the woman as I shook her hand. “Nice to meet you, Diana.”

Diana smiled and pointed to the stairs after I declined to have her show me where the room was.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know about any temporary job openings in walking distance, would you? I’m a hard worker and happy to do anything.”

I hadn’t had time to grab my laptop before I’d lit out of my last location, which meant I couldn’t do any of my freelance designer jobs. It still killed me that I’d had to leave my computer behind. I’d worked hard to get that thing, but it wasn’t safe for me to track back and get it. The hunters had been closing in, and if I’d gone back, it would’ve tipped them off. My life wasn’t worth the laptop, even though making money made being on the run easier.

“Sorry, hon, I don’t, but you should go ask my daughter Margo. She’d be the best person to help you. She’s a waitress over at the Moonlight Café. She comes across everybody in town and always seems to know what people are looking for.”

“Great, I’ll take a quick shower and head over. Thanks again.”

Diana smiled at me, and I doubled-timed it up the stairs. The sooner I got some money, the sooner I could leave and get myself out of this feeling of debt to the insufferably handsome mayor. I didn't want to owe him anything, so I wanted to pay for the drink and the shower. Then my conscience would be free and clear.

After taking my second shower of the morning and looking through what little clothing I had, I realized I needed to get to a laundromat and fast. I got directions from Diana on my way out of the B&B, but once I left the building and started walking, I realized it had been unnecessary to ask. Everything was located around the town square.

People still gave me curious looks as I headed in the cafe's direction, and one couple even glared. By the style of dress and jewels that adorned them, they were inevitably friends of the lovely Greenthornes I'd met last night. I had to hold in my wicked grin at that memory.

Like the tavern, the diner was old-timey but had a '50s soda shop feel. It had the customary black-and-white tiled floor, and the decorations were bright and colorful. A well-worn jukebox in the corner played old music.

When I walked up to the counter, it was hard to miss Margo. She was a petite, bubbly ball of energy with the same genuine smile her mom sported. She clapped and hugged me when I came toward her.

"Momma just called and let me know you were on your way. I'm Margo Bogford. It's so nice to meet you, Tori."

I laughed at her exuberance, but I couldn't help but wince at her familiarity.

Before I could begin to panic, Margo carried on, "But I would have known you anywhere, even if my momma hadn't called. You're the talk of the town, cutie. The mysterious stranger who waltzed her way into town and caught the eye of our very own single and serious mayor all in one go."

I opened and closed my mouth like a fish. "Ah...um..." I didn't know what to say. So much for keeping my head down. It seemed everyone was gossiping about my seductive reputation. So far, my attempts at anonymity weren't exactly going to plan. A discord with one of the influential families in town, a steamy night with the mayor—who just so happened to be a shifter—and now here in the diner, where it seemed everyone knew my face and everything I'd done since I'd arrived. How many people here were shifters?

"Oh, no worries. The Magpies keep everyone informed." She giggled at my stupefied expression.

“Who the hell are the Magpies?” Why were birds talking about me? Were they some kind of avian shifter I’d never heard of before?

Margo laced her arm through mine and turned us around to face the booths, where everybody openly stared at us—at me. She pointed out two gossiping older women dressed in black in the far booth at the back.

When I glanced over at them, the women waved at us with big, unapologetic smiles. So the Magpies were women; as to shifters, the jury was still out.

Margo laughed. “Sorry, cutie. Blackwood Creek is a small town and word gets around fast. Now, spill. Is it true you actually spent the night at Blackwood Manor?”

I groaned loudly and buried my face in the hand still in Margo’s hold. “Please don’t ask me about that. I just want to forget all about my walk of shame.” So much for privacy.

Margo threw her head back and laughed hysterically. I looked over my shoulder to see the whole diner had fallen silent. I swore the people closest to us were leaning in, trying to reap some fresh gossip.

“Hey, boss!” Margo shouted across the room, and a balding head peeked out from the open hole in the wall, where plates were waiting under heat lamps. “We got a new waitress. I’m vouching for her.”

Suddenly, I was to be a perky waitress at The Moonlight Café. I was really starting to wonder if staying here was a good idea. I’d made this stupid deal with Ridge, promised I would stay, but I had to think of my safety, his safety, and the safety of his precious town. Being far away felt like the safer option. It seemed everyone I met in town had an opinion about me, which meant I wasn’t exactly lying low, and working in the diner meant I would be even more visible.

But it was a paying job, which made it that much easier to reach my goal of getting out of this town and not getting too close to anyone at the next one. Then everyone would be a hell of a lot safer.



## Chapter 6

# Tori

After a week of living in Blackwood Creek, the shock of shifters and humans intermingling still hadn't worn off. I'd been paying close attention, and there hadn't been any suspicious animal sightings or deaths due to strange animal wounds. The town was quiet and ran smoothly, just like the town in *The Andy Griffith Show* it so reminded me of.

It was unsettling. Was it possible? Could shifters really live amicably with humans?

Wiping down the counter at the diner, I shook my head. It was all a daydream, wishful thinking on my part not to have to get up and go again. It was dangerous to think like that. At the end of the day, survival was all I had, and I needed to remain focused on that.

I kept to myself around town, and even though everybody was nosy, they weren't outright rude to me. Several gave me looks of disdain, but nobody said a word. That was progress in my book.

Another shock was that Diana and Margo Bogford were also wolf shifters. My instincts were way off because I hadn't realized it. It wasn't until Margo caught on to my scent that I found out. A couple of days ago, she casually but quietly invited me to the Full Moon Howl she was arranging for the *others* in town.

I'd nearly dropped the tray of glasses I was holding when she mentioned it was a run she often organized to ensure our community was relaxed and happy. I bowed my head, hoping to hide the horror on my face. My wolf prowled inside, growling and telling me to say yes, but I was too freaked out at the idea of being around that many shifters in one place while in our other forms. I muzzled my wolf quickly and told Margo that I appreciated the offer,

but I had to decline.

To my relief, Margo just shrugged and told me to let her know if I changed my mind.

Now it was a few days later, and I still hadn't changed my mind.

I couldn't help but feel calmer around the Bogfords, though. The duo was so welcoming. Margo had taken me in under her wing at work. She was endearing, hilarious, outspoken, and so full of life, I'd quickly come to think of her as a friend. I hadn't had a friend in four years. Longer than that, if I were honest with myself.

I kept to myself, both at the B&B and at work, but that didn't stop the tenacious Margo. If she wanted to be your friend, then she made you her friend.

It didn't take long for curious people to frequent the café more than usual. From the way Margo explained it, regulars who had their set days and times were coming in on their off days, and people who rarely ate at the diner were now almost regulars. She loved it because it meant more tips. I laughed along with her because she made an excellent point.

The Magpies were an interesting duo. They were older widows who shared the same first name: Maggie. One of them, though I couldn't remember which, owned the diner. The two women knew what was what in this town, and made sure everybody else knew it, too.

When they approached me on my second day and introduced themselves, their interrogation was subtle, but I held my own against them. They were sweet about it, but they were chomping at the bit to get the scoop. Usually, that'd annoy the hell out of me, but coming from them, I found it entertaining. They had their own language, which meant people often ignored them because it was too irritating to figure out what they were saying. If they wanted you to know, they would tell you, and boy oh boy, did they tell you.

After the Magpies were through with me, it wasn't long before the town's sheriff swept into the diner. A tall, handsome man, he filled out his uniform nicely, and his smile was open and friendly. He made my heart skip a beat, but it wasn't because of his good looks. It had everything to do with the badge he carried, but he gave off a calming sensation that meant my wolf merely kept a close eye on him and wasn't clawing to get out and run.

I was once again wiping down the tables—because that was seventy percent of a waitress's job—when he approached me.

“Hello, miss. I'm Sheriff Birch Clawson. Just wanted to stop by and

introduce myself.” He had an easygoing smile as he held his hand out.

I stood and appraised him for a second before I shook his hand. “Tori. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m here if you need anything. I like to make sure to sniff out any potential trouble, but I don’t see there being any issues here.” He winked at me, his wide smile showing off a complete set of canine teeth. Somehow, he managed to look welcoming instead of threatening.

Laughing, I let go of his hand. “Why, thank you. I appreciate that. No problems here.”

“This is a good town, and people feel safe here. I want you to know that you’re safe here. I mean it when I say my door is always open if you have any problems or concerns. I’m here to help.”

A healthy dose of surprise hit me when I realized that he, too, was a shifter. He hadn’t done anything to hide the fact—his scent had hit me when he reached over to take my hand. I shouldn’t have been surprised by anything regarding the shifter community in this town, but a shifter sheriff was an interesting twist I hadn’t seen coming.

I studied him. He had the same demeanor as the mayor, and I had a feeling both of them really meant it when they said they wanted Blackwood Creek to be a safe place for shifters. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around the idea, though.

“Thank you, Sheriff. I appreciate you taking the time to seek me out.”

He smiled and looked around the room. His shoulders sagged a little when he didn’t find whatever it was he was looking for, but his smile brightened again when it landed back on me. “Well, I’ll let you get back to work. The sheriff’s office is just down the street that way.” He pointed past the town square. “Big sign. Can’t miss it.” He laughed and headed to the door.

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

As soon as he was gone, Margo peeked out from behind the swinging door to the kitchen.

“Is he gone?” she mouthed.

I picked up my rag and went to the counter. “The sheriff?”

Margo nodded.

“Yeah, he’s gone. Why were you hiding in the kitchen?”

“What?” Margo fiddled with her perfect hair. “I wasn’t hiding.”

Hmm. Okay. I grinned at her. “Why were you hiding?”

She laughed and waved off the question. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

That made me throw my head back and laugh. She wasn’t *that* much older than me.

My curiosity had to be put aside as the lunch rush started. The diner was always busy, serving three meals a day, which said a lot about this town. The people here supported the local establishments.

I worked the late-afternoon shift the next day. It was Margo’s day off, and the other waitress was helping the cook organize the kitchen. With how busy I’d been, the previous day’s meeting with the sheriff felt like it had been ages ago.

My eye caught on the mess beneath the cash register, so I got to work on reorganizing, dusting, and throwing things away that should’ve been thrown out ages ago. There were only a handful of people in the café. An old, crabby man was sitting in the corner booth that was more for large parties, but he came in every day around this time and snagged that spot. He drank his coffee, nursing that one cup, and watched the pedestrians walking past or kept his eyes on the town square. I tried conversing with him once, but he just grunted out his coffee order. That was A-okay with me. I hated making idle chit-chat, too; one could never be too cautious. It was easy to let something slip in a conversation without meaning to. I was always very careful.

The older librarian, Mrs. Marrow, was finishing off a late lunch—another diner patron who followed a regimented schedule. The Magpies were in their standard booth, which nobody else ever sat at unless invited.

After I was satisfied with the shelving underneath the cash register, I sanitized the countertop where the stragglers usually ate. My mind wandered to other people in town, and I wondered whether the sweet Ashworth family and the nasty Greenthornes were shifters. Honestly, I’d believe the latter to be monsters, but not the Ashworths. They were too kind.

I cursed at myself for thinking like that. The Bogfords were terrific and were shifters. I was starting to realize that not all shifters were the same, and trying to figure out if someone was a shifter was not as cut-and-dry as I’d believed. It wasn’t all about scent, nor was it a personality test. How was I supposed to know? No one had taught me the intricacies of being a shifter. I was making it up as I went along.

Honestly, a small part of me envied Margo. She’d grown up with a loving parent to guide and help with the transition, someone to ask questions. I

wasn't ready to open up to these people, but it didn't stop the green-eyed monster from surfacing when I watched the ease people in this town had—shifters and humans alike. It was confusing, and I didn't know what to make of it.

The bell above the door chimed, and I glanced in that direction. A quick sniff told me the newcomer was human. He looked a little older than me, and he was aiming his big, toothy grin right at me. It made me a little uncomfortable because the smile was obviously forced.

I kept my thoughts to myself, though, and gave him a little smile. I was in customer service, after all. Another reason I hated that I'd left my laptop behind. If I had it, I wouldn't have to deal with this guy and others like him.

The man introduced himself before I even grabbed a menu to hand to him. "Hey, I'm Phillip Hill, but I prefer to be called Phil Hill. You know, for the rhyming." He tried for an easygoing laugh, but his eyes were scrutinizing me, his gaze so intense that most women in my situation would have squirmed.

It put my back up. I'd have to be extra cautious around this guy.

"I'm Tori." My instincts told me to remain tight-lipped and keep everything close to the chest, just like I had for the last few years. I had secrets aplenty locked down in the darkest recesses of my mind, and it would take more than a small-town, rumor-mongering hick to drag them into the light.

His smile tightened, but he kept his pearly whites out for everybody to see. To those who couldn't hear the tension, we looked friendly enough.

"So, you're the new girl everyone's talking about. You know how it is in small towns. The rumor mill is chomping for something. Anything," he said.

I tilted my head, keeping a carefully schooled smile on my face. Waiting. Locked down meant locked down. Besides, he wasn't really the kind of man I would ever be tempted to tell my secrets to, though he was a persistent fucker.

"The town is curious about you. They can only talk for so long about why you've been a hermit since arriving and only ever seen at the B&B and here at the diner."

I shrugged. Since when had being quiet and compliant been an issue? Shouldn't the troublemakers be more of the talk of the town?

"Just a gal minding her own business," I said. I wished he would give that a go, too.

“What’s your last name?”

Apparently, we’d moved past pretending to be pleasant. His attitude and insistence were irritating, and I was about to tell him where he could shove his questions when he shifted his weight, and I caught a glimpse of the deputy badge on his chest under his jacket. It made a little more sense that he was probably just doing his job and checking out the newcomer, but didn’t the police force here communicate with one another? Hadn’t the sheriff told him he’d met me and we’d had a friendly conversation?

Just because he was the law didn’t mean I had to tell him anything about myself, and I didn’t want him poking around in my business. Especially when I didn’t have a believable fake ID on hand. He had no reason to follow up on me. So, I did the next best thing. I ignored him.

“Well, *Deputy*, would you like some coffee, tea, or something else?” I wanted him to know that I was well-aware of who he was. And that I didn’t care.

I stepped back to reach for the coffee pot when he rudely grabbed the cleaning rag I was still holding and pulled me in closer to him.

“Don’t play with me. You’ve been hanging around with Margo, and I want to know if you’re in trouble or bringing trouble here because she doesn’t need that in her life.” He added a little venom to his tone and dug his fingers into the soft tissue of my upper arm. “Now, you have two choices. You can tell me your name, why you came to Blackwood Creek, and why you’re acting so shady, or I can haul you to the station and lock you up for a couple of days. As you said, I’m a deputy and have a right to those answers.”

Right? He had no *right* to anything. Men like him were all the same, and it made my blood boil.

But more worrisome than that, my wolf was responding to the threat. I tried hard to control her, doing the best I could, but bloodlust flooded every one of my senses. An aching pain throbbed behind my eyes. The room seemed to flicker in and out of darkness as my body moved erratically, making it difficult to keep my footing. My legs tangled together, coming dangerously close to sending me sprawling to the ground.

Getting away was my only option. If I didn’t, I’d bring the trouble that he was so bent on finding out about me.

I yanked the rag out of his hand. “Mind your own damn business,” I hissed, fighting to keep the threatening growl out of my voice.

I could feel the inner fight to shift. My wolf was building up to a

ferocious howl, yearning to tear him to shreds. I didn't care what people saw when I treated him harshly in my human form. I was far more worried about the wolf's violent urges inside me and what harm she'd cause to the people in this café if I lost control.

I swiveled around to make my way to the back of the diner when he grabbed my arm again. My shoulder twinged from being forced to stop my forward momentum.

A dark growl started to fall from my lips, but I clamped my jaws shut, hoping I'd caught it fast enough. It wasn't normal for a woman to growl and snap her teeth.

I tried to breathe and didn't turn around. If I looked at the deputy, I wasn't sure I'd be able to control my infuriated wolf. My skin crawled as she clawed her way to the surface, my body aching as my joints popped. Panic and anger battled inside my head. Once again, my wolf and I were at odds.

A loud chime from the door sounded in the room, and Ridge's spicy scent wrapped around me like a warm blanket. My wolf settled enough to give her attention to the alpha.

"Deputy Hill, let go of her now." A harsh command emanated from his voice, and my wolf fought the urge to bare her neck. "I need to speak with you about a pressing matter on the way to the sheriff's office."

Ridge's tone was one of commanding authority, and he expected to be obeyed completely—there was no question about that. Phil instantly let go of me. He huffed, but the squeak of his shoes thundered through the quiet diner. The door slammed shut, and then Ridge's scent was gone.

The remaining customers started whispering energetically as I went to the back of the restaurant and stormed out the back door. I didn't tell anybody I was leaving. I couldn't. I needed space to walk out this aggression before I did something stupid like shifting in the middle of the diner or something else equally insane.

I stomped on the ground with every step, keeping my arms and fists tense as I worked through the anger, fear, and self-loathing. Without watching where I was going, I followed a trail that led into the woods.

The fresh air calmed the beast and helped me rationalize my mind against the wolf. It could take ages to get her settled until I didn't have to worry about an impromptu shift. The thought scared the shit out of me. I wouldn't know what to do if I shifted.

At least for now, though, I'd ensured the people around me were safe.

I wasn't sure how long I had been walking, but the sun had started to set and the light streaming through the trees was fading. I knew it was time to head back. I had left the marked trail some time ago, wanting to be as far away from anyone as possible.

I circled back and noticed a woman who was out for an evening hike. She looked lost in her thoughts. Not wanting to scare her, I made sure to make a lot of noise.

She was a human. The longer I stayed in town, the easier it was for me to differentiate between human and shifter. Scent was still my go-to clue, but I'd started to notice that shifters had a subtle energy buzzing around them while humans had a quieter aura.

"Oh, hello." Her soft, shy voice met my ears.

"Hello. Out for an evening stroll?" This town had to be getting to me. I would normally never start a conversation with a stranger unless it was for my gain.

She laughed. "Yeah, something like that. I like to go on walks between sessions to refresh myself and allow myself to be fully present with my next clients."

I leaned my head to the side. *Session. Clients. A woman with a need to be present.* "Yoga instructor?"

She smiled. "In another life, but in this one, I'm the town psychiatrist."

"Ah." The words made sense now. Shrinks had *clients* and clients had *sessions*.

"Lola Kipling," she said, holding out her hand.

I shook her hand. "Tori."

"I recently moved to town and still don't know many people, so this helps me get out of my office, or else I'd be stuck behind my desk all day." She chuckled. "And it's a lovely day."

I gestured back to town, silently asking her whether I could join her on the return journey. It seemed silly to walk separately if we were going the same way, and it would give me the chance to speak to another newcomer and get her perspective on Blackwood Creek and its denizens.

She nodded, and we started walking back together. The walk was slow, amicable even, as if she wasn't in a hurry to get away from me. I appreciated that.

"That makes two of us, then," I said. "New to town, I mean."

She laughed. "Yeah, I may not be friends with many people, but you're



the buzz of the town. You've had quite an impactful introduction."

Word of my interaction with the mayor and the cranky couple had already made the rumor rounds. Typical small-town life. But I didn't want to talk about myself.

"So, Doc, why did you move to Blackwood?" I didn't know much about making friends, but I knew it required a certain amount of getting to know one another, and that meant asking questions. Listening. Caring.

Her face lit up. "I've visited the town several times since I was a child, and it fascinated me. I've been reading up on it ever since. It has a rich, intriguing history." She shrugged. "When I decided to open my practice, this was where I wanted to settle down and get some roots planted. I can now fully immerse myself in the history of this town. It's a dream come true to live here."

She seemed so excited, and I felt genuinely happy for her. It felt a little odd since other people's feelings didn't generally affect me. But something about the way Lola's voice filled with excitement and her eyes sparkled with joy as she spoke about the town made me glad for her, though. I'd never been that excited about a place before, or dedicated to a single topic. Well, besides my art, but even that had been lost because of the way I had to live and survive.

Lola chatted on about the town and all the amazing things it had to offer—the food, the stores, the people. It kept the conversation flowing. For a psychiatrist, she didn't ask many questions, and nothing she asked was overly personal or intrusive. It was a very ordinary conversation between two people taking a hike.

It was difficult not to like her. She seemed genuinely pleasant, and I didn't get any bad vibes from her, nor did the wolf inside me feel threatened by her small stature. Lola truly loved this town and her job and was grateful to have made her dream come true. If she was a hunter, she hid it well, and I deserved to be caught.

We made it back to town and crossed the parking lot to reach the diner. Her office was right next door. This town was small enough that everybody knew everybody's business just by looking outside the window. A simple visit to the store was fodder for gossip. By the time you returned, everyone knew where you'd been, who you'd spoken to, and the contents of your shopping cart to boot. That being said, the town had its charm.

A pearly white convertible BMW honked furiously at us as we headed

toward the sidewalk. The young female behind the wheel gesticulated rudely. Lola jumped, and I glared.

“That’s Audrey Greenthorne,” Lola told me.

She had to be the daughter of the couple I met the first night I was here. I could see the family resemblance—rich, rude, and entitled. I looked around the parking lot. There were several open parking spaces, but evidently, they weren’t good enough. Oh no, she wanted the one we were currently standing on. We moved to the safety of the sidewalk outside the diner.

Parking her car, she stomped out of the vehicle, slammed her car door, and marched toward us.

“Lola, I know you’re here in town to permanently stick your big nose in and meddle in everyone’s drama, but the least you could do is do it without getting in my way. Okay?” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and pushed her sunglasses up. “The only reason you’re still in town is thanks to me. So, do me a favor. Stay out of my way.”

Each word of the last sentence was punctuated with the stabbing motion of her finger in Lola’s direction. She had created the situation purely to berate Lola.

I glanced at Lola. With her shy demeanor, she couldn’t take on the likes of a Greenthorne. She curled her shoulders in on herself as her face fell and she began apologizing.

A red haze clouded my vision as the aggression I’d worked so hard to dampen started resurfacing. My wolf was giddy at the idea of tearing into this woman.

I stepped between the two women, and when I got level with Audrey, I quickly realized she was a shifter. A beautiful shifter, but her attitude made her ugly. Beauty was wasted on bitches.

“Look here, Barbie. There are literally a dozen other parking spots. You could’ve parked in any one of them. If you’re going to actively be a bitch today, then go and do it somewhere else because I’m not in the mood to deal with any condescending crap, especially from the likes of you.”

Lola gasped behind me, but I didn’t remove my gaze from the entitled shifter in front of me. Audrey’s jaw dropped, and her eyes widened in shock before narrowing into a glare.

I raised my brows, expecting some sort of angry response that would lead to the verbal altercation to end all other altercations. But the woman decided to pull a tantrum by stomping her foot like the child she clearly was and

returning to her car.

She peeled out in reverse, but before she took off, she rolled down her window and shouted, "I'm not surprised the mayor lost interest in you. You're clearly not worth it."

I would have laughed at her childish comeback, but I had said all I needed to say, so I let it be. I was more annoyed by the mention of Ridge. My head was all fogged and jumbled over him. It didn't help that I'd scented him earlier when he came into the diner, which was more than enough to jumpstart my arousal, but I was also annoyed because he'd listened to my demands and dutifully stayed away from me. I hadn't expected that, but he didn't seem to have a problem following instructions like I'd thought he would. So far, that wasn't going over well with the demanding, monstrous wolf that shared my body. I was having to work harder than ever at keeping her under lock and key.

The worst thing was that everybody knew about the interest he'd shown in me when I arrived. This was not the place to have a one-night stand or a fling, because one way or another, the entire town would find out about it.

"Thank you, but you didn't have to do that."

I'd forgotten that Lola was still behind me. Her soft, hesitant voice spooked me.

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "She's just a bully who needed someone to snap back at her." Nine times out of ten, it worked to bitch back at someone like Audrey, but someone like Lola would be easy prey for the Greenthorne family. I hated that.

A sweet smile was on her lips. "Thank you, anyway. Not many people have the guts to put the Greenthornes in their place. Mostly because they're annoying afterward, and it's not worth the hassle."

I shrugged. It didn't bother me. Much. I wouldn't be here long enough to have to deal with their crap, but I was happy to handle it for Lola while I could.

I motioned toward the front door of the diner. "Oh, well. Look, I need to get back to work, but I'll see you around."

"See you around."

We waved and headed off in different directions. As I entered the diner to finish my shift, people eyed me with interest. I hated how everybody kept watching me. Maybe after all this time of being sought and watched and stalked, I should have been used to it. But I had always relied on that creepy

feeling to let me know when it was time to get away from hunters.

When I felt eyes on me here, it was mere curiosity, not because the people wanted to kill me. So I didn't get the same sense of being watched. It meant I wouldn't have that head start when my luck ran out.

This wasn't the safest place for me. It was time to move on. No matter what I'd told the sexy-as-sin mayor or how nice it'd be to become better friends with Margo—and potentially Lola—it was best if I left town when I got my first paycheck. I didn't want to bring trouble here. It wouldn't be wise to settle down, even for a few weeks.

My wolf whimpered and howled. She paced around restlessly, and it took every ounce of energy I had to tamp her down for the rest of my shift. It was exhausting. Frustration oozed out of my pores. After everything we'd been through—the isolation of being on the run, being lost and confused—the wild animal was choosing now to be the most problematic. She'd never had issues with us moving on before. In fact, she got itchy if we stayed somewhere too long.

Ridge's face popped into my head, and the wolf whined again. So that was why she was putting up such a fuss. Well, too bad. I was determined to forget about him.

*Listen here, wolf, we're avoiding the mayor, and we're not mentioning him again. We need to leave town.*

## Chapter 7

# Ridge

I clenched and unclenched my fists over and over as I led Deputy Hill toward the sheriff's office. I had a weekly meeting with the sheriff because as nice a place as it was, this town didn't run itself, and I was the mayor, the man in charge of making sure it seemed like it *did* run itself.

After what he'd done, he was lucky I didn't turn my wolf loose and let him at the little prick. My wolf was ready to make an example out of Hill, and I battled with him to not violently assault the deputy for putting his hands on Tori. The sight of him with his hands on her, the fear in her eyes and her scent, had been more than I was prepared to forgive and forget. The urge to snuff out this threat to her was not something I had ever felt the need to do for another person. As far as my wolf and I were concerned, Tori was off-limits, and nobody should dare to go near her.

For the last three days, she'd haunted my thoughts. I couldn't get anything done without her running through my mind. Sleeping in my bed was torture. Even though I'd washed the sheets twice in bleach, her scent still permeated the bedroom. I gave up two nights ago and slept in one of the guest rooms. Her scent evoked images of her beneath me and memories of how my cock had felt wrapped in her pussy.

An erection seemed to be a constant infliction for me, and no number of cold showers or jerking off left me satisfied. The only thing that calmed me down was replaying the fear in her eyes the morning after. I really didn't want to see that look again.

My wolf and I were in a constant tug-of-war about checking up on her, but I stood steadfast. I was in charge, and this time, I meant what I'd said. The fact that she'd stuck to the bargain and stayed in town filled me with

relief. Seeking her out would have meant breaking my promise. I wanted—no, I *needed*—her to trust me. And I'd bet every dollar in my bank account, every piece of art, every asset I had that breaking my word would scare her off. If she slinked away, my wolf had made it clear he'd go insane and demand we chase after her. It would take an army and a shitload of willpower not to track her down.

As the mayor and alpha, I couldn't do that. I had commitments, responsibilities. The only way to guarantee she wouldn't flee was to keep my end of the deal and stay away, no matter how much my wolf and I ached to see her again.

There were some advantages to my status in town, though. Just because I couldn't check on Tori in person didn't mean I hadn't asked Diana Bogford about her a few times. Well, several times.

Diana and I were close. She was a maternal figure in my life. She was also big on discretion and never once questioned my concern for Tori. I'd peppered her with questions. Like, could Tori pay for her room? Was she able to get everything she needed? I hated the idea of her wanting for anything. I wanted her life to be easier, not harder.

During our last conversation, Diana had said, "Oh, Ridge, our newcomer has been faring just fine. She's fiercely independent, you know. Scrappy. I like her." Her chuckle had made me smile.

Tori was all that and more. I hated that some bastard part of me wanted her to struggle a little so I could step in, be a knight in shining armor. I had to laugh at that thought because Tori would only see that as me messing around in her life. She'd never accept anything from anybody unless they were giving it in payment for something she'd worked for herself.

It was so refreshing and a change to the usual dynamics of my relationships. I admired her.

"What about your conversation with that large shifter pack in Montana?" Clawson's question interrupted my musings of my little wolf.

Phil lifted his brow at me as he and the sheriff waited for my response. The deputy wasn't a shifter, but as with most of the law enforcement in this town, he was aware of the shifter population. It had never bothered him that we co-existed. As long as everyone followed the law, he didn't see the difference between the two species.

Sighing, I leaned back in my chair. "The pack in Montana refuses to budge from their territory. They're adamant about staying where they are, no

matter how many shifters disappear from their lands or ours.”

Neither man looked surprised. Moving an entire pack of shifters was a big deal. Wolves were naturally territorial creatures, so being forced off their homelands wasn't something that would be taken lightly.

The Montana pack had lost around ten percent of its shifters in the last two months, but their alpha had a point about too many of us being in one place. I couldn't decide if too many was better or not. The added strength would be a plus, but the larger numbers and permanence of the town could make us a target if someone was looking to take out a large group of shifters at once.

“The alpha's sure it's hunters,” I continued, “but he's stubborn and doesn't think a permanent place like Blackwood Creek is safe for our kind. He even tried to convince me to move our pack there.”

Clawson chuffed at the idea, and I smiled in agreement. This was a safe community. We had better defenses since we knew the ins and outs of the area and had safeguards in place.

Not wanting to disclose the other alpha's misgivings, I didn't tell them that he'd also subtly hinted at not being keen on trusting a Blackwood in the first place. With my family history, I couldn't fault him, even though it stung not to be judged based on my own deeds and actions. But who was I to question his decisions? He was their alpha, and the lives of his shifters were in his hands.

“I'll get in touch with more packs as soon as we track them down.” With the hunters driving everyone underground, we hadn't had a lot of luck finding anyone. “There are bound to be more packs out there who'd want to come into our fold and settle in a safe place.”

The plan was for shifters and humans to live together in harmony and build up shifter reinforcements against the growing number of hunter attacks. The hunters could mobilize and have a more regimented force at any time. It'd be wise to have something similar so we could better defend ourselves.

“Hunters coming to town because of the shifters might also endanger the humans,” Phil spoke up. “I could help with that. We should crack down on everyone in town who knows about the shifters and make sure they're not telling any other humans. The shifters should also be closely monitored to ensure no one is raising suspicions about who resides here.”

I lifted my brow and looked at Sheriff Clawson. The words *crack down* could have been interpreted a whole lot of different ways, but I had no doubt

I was reading Phil's meaning exactly the way he meant it, and it wasn't a good connotation. The last thing we needed was a half-cocked deputy threatening the humans who lived here. We needed peace and harmony.

"I mean, you have to see where I'm coming from," Phil said. "The Full Moon Howl Margo is organizing is a stupid idea. The humans living here who don't know about shifters are bound to notice all the howling that goes on at one of those things. They're sure as fuck not going to think all the coyotes and hounds in town got together." He shook his head. "And it's gonna start a thing, I'm telling you. They're going to start worrying about the wolf population in this part of Pennsylvania. One person reports it to animal control, and it'll give our town more unwanted attention. Every hunter out there will be gathering their silver bullets and gearing up to check us out."

"We've had plenty of Full Moon Howls in the past," Clawson snapped at his deputy. "The wolves run far enough away from Blackwood Creek. We've never had any trouble, and no one is ever suspicious. If it was an issue, it would have been brought up generations ago. You should be concerned with the law, Deputy, not with what shifters do as wolves."

His tone was sharp, edged with anger, and a growl emanated from his throat, but it was all man, nothing of the wolf, even though I scented his wolf's agitation. It wasn't the first time I witnessed the sheriff get heated with the deputy over the past few months. They'd gotten into it in public often enough that people had started talking. I had no clue what was escalating the drama or what had caused it, but I knew my friend Clawson well, and he did his damndest to keep his feelings and work obligations separate and in check.

Even with his obvious irritation at Phil, he was still working relatively well with him. As a rule, though, shifters hated hearing from a human how shifters should function. Humans had no clue what it was like to have control be a constant need. Shifting and running was what helped us stay balanced.

Phil's jaw twitched as he muttered, "I'll stick to protecting everyone in town, no matter what it takes or how your fun run fucks everything up." His gaze fell on me, and he narrowed his eyes. "That includes checking out suspicious new characters in town."

There was no mistaking who he was talking about. My wolf growled, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. He perceived the deputy's comments as a threat to Tori.

A cell phone rang—the lead lines of "Baby Got Back"—and we all



turned to look at Phil. Somehow, it defused the tension by a notch.

Phil grabbed his cell and answered. “What?...yeah...okay...I’m heading out now. I’m in the sheriff’s office. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

He hung up without saying goodbye and pushed his chair back.

“That was Deputy Dailey. He needs me to check on something.” He stood and left the room without further comment. What was more important than deciding how to protect this town?

As soon as the door closed behind him, I turned to Clawson. “Make sure your deputy doesn’t inadvertently stir up trouble. His heart might be in the right place”—and I couldn’t be certain it was, but I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt—“but Phil doesn’t understand shifter culture. It might divide the town if he tries getting involved in everyone’s personal business like he’s threatening.”

Clawson waved me off as I stood to leave. It was almost as if he didn’t care what happened, but I knew he did. This was his town, too.

“You have to see to that,” I pressed.

“Yeah, I see it. I’ll keep him in line,” Clawson said, and I left his office.

Smiling at the deputies and dispatchers in the office, I headed outside. Tori’s intoxicating scent rattled me immediately. It came from the Moonlight Café and wafted in the direction of the B&B.

My wolf whimpered and my cock hardened.

I could head out and follow her, use her scent as my guide and maybe get a glimpse of her. But a glimpse wouldn’t be enough. Of course, I could say I had business to discuss with Diana. It wouldn’t be a complete fucking lie. We always discussed the town, the direction we each wanted to see the town take. She was a solid sounding board for me, and it would give me a chance to be near Tori.

I took a few steps toward the B&B before shaking myself out of the impulsive trance.

No, Tori wanted distance. I had to respect that.

I barely knew the woman, and I needed to hold off on this protective urge toward her. It was bordering on *overprotective*.

Moving away from the town hall, I walked through the square. It was a sunny day, warm but not too hot, and several people greeted me as I passed. Because Blackwood Creek was so small, I knew everyone’s names. I couldn’t claim to know every resident well, but I always had a smile and a greeting for anyone who passed me.

Across the square and making a beeline for me were Mr. and Mrs. Banes, one of the more affluent couples in town. They were part of the righteous group of people who lived in town, and they held a deep frenemy relationship with the Greenthornes. I wondered how their friendship worked, since they were always gunning for the top rung of the hierarchy.

The Banes also had their daughter with them. She was around my age, and it had been suggested to me many times over the years that we would make a *lovely* couple. At one time or other, it had been suggested that every available woman from border to border of this town would be a *quality wife, a good partner, a girlfriend who would do whatever I asked*.

The attempts at matchmaking were old, and I wasn't interested. I wanted to be free of it all. The townspeople, shifters and humans alike, constantly pushed their daughters, granddaughters, nieces, and any other single female they knew at me, thinking marriage—or in other cases, mating—would happen in an instant. The constant hinting at my eligibility all the time was irksome.

Wanting to avoid the Banes, I veered into The Topsy Tavern and prayed they wouldn't follow me. I couldn't deal with them at the moment. I had too much on my mind—the safety of the other packs, trying and trying to bring them into the fold, Blackwood Creek, and Tori. At the moment, Tori seemed to be my biggest concern.

“Yo, Mr. Mayor, what can I get for you?” Mateo was drying a glass as I walked to a stool and sat.

“Whiskey. Neat.” I didn't even care if it was the cheap, rotgut swill. I needed a drink, and I needed it now.

“You got it.” Matteo was on his way to a healthy tip.

My wolf prowled inside me, agitated that I'd stopped him from going after Tori. I'd have to figure out how to deal with him because he didn't like being kept away from the pretty little wolf. Pretty soon, he'd start acting out and force me to shift.

Mateo set a glass in front of me, and I lifted it in thanks before taking a long swig. I looked at him and nodded because now he seemed to be staring. “What's new with you, Mateo? Anything interesting happening?”

He also knew about the shifters. It made life easier to have a bartender whose patrons didn't have to worry about letting anything slip when they got drunk. Mateo was as solid as they came, and he'd been the town's therapist until Ms. Kipling came along. That had been the running joke for a long time

now.

We laughed over some of the Magpies' shenanigans and the local gossip. Then, of course, he brought up Tori because she was the talk of the town.

"So, Mayor, you and Tori, huh? You played it cool that first night, but come on, you didn't hide it well." Mateo smirked at me.

Cocking my head at the bartender, I waited for him to continue.

"Come on, you two only had eyes for each other. It was probably smart not to let the town see you two together after that first night. There's no hiding that chemistry, let me tell you." His smirk widened into a full-out grin.

Laughing, I shook my head. The guy had no idea. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He wiped down the bar, then smacked the rag over his shoulder. "Hey, I get it. You're trying to keep things on the down low. I can respect that, even if no one else can. Small-town living at its finest." He chuckled, and I joined him.

Finishing up my whiskey, I left cash on the bar, smacked it twice, and said my goodbyes. I didn't need to talk about Tori when I was trying to stop thinking about her all the damn time.

As I headed toward the door, Zander Elkins shoved my shoulder. I wasn't surprised that he was a little unsteady on his feet, but he was a shifter of the troublemaking kind who always felt it was his duty to take digs at me.

He was born an alpha. It was common practice between two alphas to tussle for position, but his issue was that he was weaker than me and didn't handle it well, knowing that I'd force his submission publicly.

He always had to needle and challenge me, and I had to reign in my wolf before I demonstrated my dominance over him. It'd get ugly, which wasn't what I wanted for Blackwood Creek. I wanted this place to be for all shifters, which meant welcoming all alphas into the fold—provided they didn't challenge me. If they did, I would answer the challenge and dispel the challenger as duty required.

"If it isn't the big bad mayor." Zander slung his arm around my shoulders and breathed in my face. Whatever he'd been drinking smelled like sewage. "What are you doing here at the bar? Already lost interest in that tasty newcomer after just one night?" He closed his eyes, and I shoved him off me. "I bet she's a tight little fuck, isn't she?" He cackled like he'd just heard the funniest joke. "Word around town is you used and abused her, then kicked her to the curb." He puffed out his chest and staggered. "Just like a spoiled

rich boy to tire of his new toy so soon. It's surprising that you're fucking a woman in town, though. I thought you usually went out of town for your particular needs. What, is nobody here good enough for the great Ridge Blackwood? Is that what makes the stranger so appealing to you? She's not from around here, so she's higher class?"

I clenched my fists and jaw, and my wolf's hair started brandishing along my forearms. I threw up all the barriers I could and slammed my wolf down. This wasn't the time or place.

I moved around Zander and headed toward the door, but before I could get outside, the drunk son of a bitch had to get in one last comment. One I couldn't and wouldn't ignore.

"You know, I think maybe I'll make my interest known to the little wolf. Show her a good time. Tell me, how was she in bed? She seems fiery. What would you rate her out of ten?" He snickered.

My fists balled up, and my wolf forced his way through. I couldn't control him any longer, and I didn't want to.

Taking a brief second, I scanned the bar, made sure nobody was watching, and dragged Zander outside around the building where we wouldn't be seen. I slammed him hard against the brick wall, waited for him to slink forward, then shoved him against it again. I wanted to be sure I had his undivided attention.

I pooled all my alpha energy, focusing it on my command. "Zander, you'll stay the hell away from her, or you'll have to deal with me. And let me tell you something, you little fuck. You don't want to do that because contrary to what you might believe, spoiled rich boys like me don't play nice, and I will beat the fuck out of you without even breaking a sweat. I have no problem letting my wolf put you in your place." I stared him down and delighted in his struggle not to submit. "If I so much as catch a whiff of you near Tori, I will make you regret it every day until you fucking die." I moved in closer, lowering my voice and clenching my teeth. "I'll enjoy every moment of it, too."

Zander's drunken gaze aligned with mine, and he sneered at me. "I'm not afraid of you, Ridge."

I contorted my mouth to bare my canines at him and roared in his face. He whimpered and showed his throat to me. I chuckled mirthlessly at his submission and released him.

Zander cowered and slinked away from me, but I caught him swearing as

he moved to the bar's front door. Annoyance burned through me. That asshole was going back to get even more wasted, just like always. If he put as much effort into being a good shifter and contributing to the pack as he did into his drinking, he could be somebody. Instead, he was a waste of a perfectly good wolf.

I warred with my wolf until I was fully in control of myself again. He didn't take kindly to only issuing a threat to that sorry excuse for a shifter. He wanted to take a bite out of Zander and make sure that fucker knew, without a doubt, who was alpha around here. And more to the point, he wanted to prove to everyone that Tori was off-limits.

There wouldn't be any warnings next time. If it were up to my wolf, Zander's death would be a punishment, an example to anyone wanting to mess around with Tori.

I took several deep breaths, willing my wolf back. Knowing how he liked to handle things, I allowed his thoughts but controlled his resolve. After all, we couldn't go around killing people. Even if I was the alpha.

The unreasonable fury that had swept over me faded to a bad mood instead of homicidal rage. I itched to see Tori, to smell her, taste her, be around her, and it was hitting me so much harder now than it had in the past few days. I wanted to give her the space she'd demanded, wanted her to feel safe and not harassed. Whatever she had faced before coming here hadn't been good, and I hoped she'd find some solace here. Blackwood Creek was a community that she could rely on; she only needed to see that.

However, I couldn't stay away from her forever. The rage from my wolf had made that clear. He needed to see her, needed to know she was okay.

Resolved, I decided to approach her sometime in the coming days. Nothing too overt, though—I'd just stop by at the diner or the B&B and politely make sure that she was doing okay. I hadn't been in the diner since she'd started working there, but it was ridiculous for her to think I would stay away entirely. She'd have to see the reasoning in that, but I needed to give this assurance to my wolf, and if I was completely honest, I needed it for myself as well.

Putting my hands in my pockets, I looked up at the sky. I smiled and couldn't help but look forward to the Full Moon Howl tonight. I needed a good run, to let my wolf have free rein for a little while.

It was also just what I needed to distract myself from constantly thinking about Tori, which was beginning to be more maddening than anything my

wolf could do.

## Chapter 8

# Tori

I curled up in bed, struggling to get the day out of my head. The deputy had irritated me, sure, and I hadn't enjoyed one second of our interaction, but he wasn't the one taking up prime property in my mind. The fucking mayor had taken up a permanent residency there. I wanted to evict him from my mind, and I wanted to kick my own ass for not maintaining the low profile I'd always kept before.

I'd never let myself be so visible in any town I lived in. And now I knew why.

Ridge Blackwood. The mayor with the sexy body was overpowering my thoughts now. The wolf inside me, unsurprisingly, wasn't fighting me tooth and nail. Instead, she was putting him at the forefront of every decision and thought I had.

*Seriously, wolf? It was stupid to sleep with the mayor. Get it through your thick head. We're more at risk now. People are sniffing around, and I don't like it.*

She grumbled but didn't push back—for the moment, anyway. It was too late, though. The insanely rich alpha had tapped his way in so that no more than a sliver of brain power remained for any other topic. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate, he somehow wriggled even through the tightest locks I had in my mind.

The mere thought of him filled my nostrils with his deep, earthy scent. I could still feel calloused hands where he'd stroked my skin, his soft, feathery lips over every inch of my body. I could still hear his rumbling voice in my ear. Could still remember how good he'd felt inside me. And that lust-filled gaze penetrating my soul.

Heat singed my body as my hips rocked up in the air. My pussy ached to be filled. Slowly, my hands roamed, following the path Ridge had blazed down my body. He'd burned the route onto my skin, branding me with his pleasure.

I bit my bottom lip and closed my eyes, imagining him above me. My hands were his hands. I dipped my fingers down, pushing aside the elastic of my sleep shorts...

As I was about to touch myself to relieve the ache that seemed to come from deep in my soul, howls invaded the night. My wolf's ears perked, and she let out a long, low whine.

I snatched my hands from their destination, thoughts of pleasure chased away by the sounds that only reminded me of the alpha. Ridge was probably out there, leading the pack on their run. I rolled over, trying to get myself comfortable and fall asleep. But sleep had evaded me for the past couple of hours, and I doubted it would take me now.

Cursing, I moved the pillow over my ears to drown out the wolves. It was the Full Moon Howl that Margo had invited me to. I'd forgotten it was tonight. Of course, I wouldn't have reconsidered the invitation, but I would've invested in earplugs.

My wolf was pacing and demanding, but I wasn't about to budge.

*Are you an idiot? We're running. Hunted. On the lam. I'm never going to let you out again. The one and only time you came out, you almost killed somebody. Do you seriously think I'd let you run around with a pack of wolves?*

Invisible claws held me down, and my throat went tight. I fought hard to shake the wolf off and regain control before I turned over in bed again. Squeezing my eyes shut as tight as I could get them, I worked on my meditative breathing, taking slow and steady deep breaths, filling my lungs with oxygen, struggling to find a quiet place in my mind.

She was strong and used more force to demand the shift tonight, but I refused to give in. I couldn't. I had to be stronger than her.

After several heavy breaths, I regained my control. I managed to hold her in place, though I knew it wouldn't be long before the struggle started again. But she wouldn't get out now, and that was a win for tonight.

Suddenly, a strong and vibrant howl joined the wolves' serenade outside. My hands shook and my gut twisted as an ache throbbed between my legs.

My wolf launched inside my chest and ravaged me as she went berserk.



She had to go to that howl. It beckoned to us. She snapped the figurative chains I held her under to stop the shift. Pain racketed up my spine and my body contorted, every joint popping, every muscle tearing. I cried out as the wolf snarled at me.

The world was turning black around me, panic taking over my mind. I was shifting. I was turning for the second time in my life, and I couldn't control the monster.

Within moments, I fell into a sea of darkness. The wolf, the monster, had complete control.



Birds sang a chorus above me as I shivered and felt rocks, leaves, and branches digging into my skin. My teeth chattered, and I forced my eyes to open. My entire body ached. The sun's rays peeked out from behind low, dense clouds that hadn't burned off yet. They painted the morning sky, but the sun had yet to make its appearance.

I sat up and gazed down at my exposed body. Dried blood flaked off my skin. The taste of copper coated my tongue. My stomach churned, and my mouth filled with saliva. I was going to be sick. *Please let it be my blood.*

Quickly, I roamed my hands over my body to find any punctures, marks, or tears.

*Please. Please. Please be my blood. Please let me be injured.*

It was a fruitless search. I had no surprise cuts, no abrasions, no lacerations. No wounds at all.

Stumbling onto my knees with the overwhelming urge to be sick, I felt ice infuse my veins as images of every horrible thing that could have happened last night ran through my mind. Vivid images that could've been memories made a slasher movie of my thoughts. I hoped to God they weren't memories.

My wolf sighed and stretched inside me. She was content and had a happy glow to her. Before I could think of anything else, I grabbed the mental chains, wrapped her tightly, and yanked her into a cage deep in my mind.

*You're never doing that again, you monster. What did you do?*

She huffed and yawned at me before curling up into a ball and snoozing.

I was in turmoil, and the monster who had caused the disaster was taking a fucking nap. Trembling, I fought back the tears that pooled in my eyes and threatened to spill down my cheeks.

I scanned the woods. It seemed I was pretty close to the path I walked yesterday before meeting up with Lola. That meant I was still in Blackwood Forest.

My joints hurt and I was exhausted, but I gathered enough strength to get to my feet. I turned several times, looking left and right and center. I had to know if there were others around, anyone who might've seen what I'd done.

I wrapped my arms around my chest as I worked to hide my nudity, but that was the best I could do. Goosebumps cascaded down my skin, and I hated how my nipples were as hard as tiny rocks because of the cold. I would die of embarrassment if anybody saw me.

When it hit me after several long surveying glances that nobody was around, I looked around the area. There were no pools of blood—only the blood on my legs, abdomen, and chest. Or at least, that was all I could see.

Slowly, watching my steps so as not to step on a wayward stick or pebble, I trudged in the direction of the town. My feet were sore, and I'd kill for a pair of shoes—but I quickly shook away the grim terminology. What if I *had* killed someone?

I tried to be quiet as I moved, not wanting to alert anyone. Last thing I needed was to be discovered by an early morning hiker or jogger who liked the rough terrain. Even a mountain biker was a possibility in these parts.

I tried to call to mind a memory, something that would explain my current state of bloodiness, but the events of the night before wouldn't come to mind no matter how hard I dug for even the slightest of snippets. The wolf was holding them close to her chest.

After a few minutes of trying to recall anything, I vaguely remembered shifting in the B&B and prayed I hadn't damaged anything. That was not how I wanted to repay Diana and Margo. They'd been so good to me that it would gut me if I'd destroyed the room.

And then a bigger piece of the night came back to me: the howl from the last wolf who'd joined the run. My wolf had gone berserk at the sound. I hadn't been able to stop her. Then, once we'd made it outside, she ran into the forest, catching and following a dark, woodsy, earthy scent.

I knew that scent. Ached for it.

That scent owned us—not just my wolf—like we were possessed. It was a driving need.

I ran my hands through my hair as if holding my head would bring back the memories of the night before, but nothing more came to me.

*Oh, please, let me have hunted a deer or an animal nearby. Please, not a human. Oh, God, what did I allow to happen?*

The inner monster did nothing. She was sound asleep without a care in the world. I wanted to curse her out, but what good would that do? She was part of me.

The soft trickling of water nearby caught my attention. Inching over twigs, rocks, and various kinds of detritus, I finally came to a small stream flowing gently down the rolling hills. I dropped into the water, taking a few handfuls and swishing the cool liquid all over me. A chill ran over my body in the cold water, but the urgency to clean myself of the blood was too strong. I washed the blood from my hair, skin, and nails, scrubbing as best I could without soap and a cloth. I'd never feel clean. My skin was rubbed raw from my fear and the intensity of my scrubbing. I had blood on my hands, and I didn't know how it had gotten there.

After scrubbing my face, hair, and neck far longer than the rest of my body, I couldn't be sure I got it all, but it would have to do. My teeth were chattering from the morning chill and the freezing water. I scurried along, hoping to get out of these woods as fast as possible.

God, it had been so stupid of my wolf to shift, let alone inside the B&B. Plus, there was the added problem of someone seeing it happen or being in the path of a feral wolf. It wouldn't take much for a hunter to find out about it. Especially if something terrible had happened...

My heart raced at the thoughts shooting through my mind like a bullet. What if hunters were around and heard about a wolf running through town? I needed to pack. I needed to get out of here. This town wasn't safe. I'd overstayed my welcome. Adios, Blackwood Creek.

Panic grasped my chest again, holding my lungs in a tight vise as I struggled to get oxygen to them.

“Tori? Tori?” Ridge's voice yelled in the distance.

The skyline of the town's businesses was ahead of me and now within walking distance. Relief sparked inside me. I'd made it back. I scanned the somewhat sleepy town and tried to devise a plan. It was morning. There would be people around, getting their coffees and heading to the diner for the

early-bird special, walking their dogs, getting the paper from the front walk.

Oh, this was bad. This was so bad.

“Tori!” Ridge’s voice got louder as he got closer.

My heart hammered in my chest and my hands shook. I could smell him now. He was close.

He couldn’t see me like this. Nobody could see me like this.

I ran across the last path toward the closest building, which had a door with a lock I could break. I moved faster to the safety of shadow and cover, not thinking about the consequences, just the desperate need to be out of sight.

To my surprise, the door wasn’t locked. That would’ve never happened in the city. Within moments, I quietly opened the door and was inside.

I looked at the shelves filled with bottled liquor, bulk bags of shelled peanuts and chips, bar napkins, and coasters. Appraising the items around me, I realized it was the back room of The Tippy Tavern. I almost shouted in glee when I spotted a pile of clothes that had to belong to Mateo—T-shirts and skinny jeans were definitely his style—stacked with aprons by an old washer-and-dryer set.

Without second-guessing myself, I threw on a T-shirt that went to my knees and a pair of basketball shorts, then headed back to the door and cracked it open a notch. I planned to head back out that way and sneak back to the B&B, but Ridge’s scent hit me like a ton of bricks. It came from upwind, and I’d have no option but to pass him.

Life was unfair. This was just more proof.

Wanting to avoid him, I quietly shut the door and hurried toward the front of the tavern. Hopefully, I’d make my way out the front door before Ridge or any other townsfolk caught me. Not waiting to get spotted, I moved fast. Not even James Bond had such stealthy moves.

I went through the swinging door from the backroom and kitchen area to the waitress station. I’d only taken three steps inside the bar when I skidded to a halt.

Oh, fuck. This was bad. Deputy Phillip Hill was lying on the center of the bar in a large pool of semi-dried blood. His eyes were half open, and his mouth was twisted in pain. There was no doubt this man was dead. Massive claw marks tore through his chest cavity, and his throat looked to have been ripped out. Pieces of his skin and muscle were lying in clumps around his body.

My blood pressure dropped and I got lightheaded at the scene before me. I couldn't move, and then a noise sounded to the left of me. A door opened, and a triangle of light lit the floor. Feet walked across, clacking on the hardwood.

Audrey Greenthorne walked into the room from Mateo's private entrance. She glared at me, then her gaze shifted, settling on the body. She screamed at the top of her lungs—a real scary movie kind of screeching howl—and I winced as her high-pitched cry rattled my ears.

“You killed him!” She pointed at me and then put her hand over her mouth. “You fucking killed him! Tori killed the deputy! Help! Somebody help!”

Oh, this was about to get really bad for me.

Wearing only sweatpants, Mateo hurried into the room as the Magpies and Mr. Greenthorne ran inside from the front door. It would only be a matter of seconds before the whole town stood in the tavern, pointing their judgy little fingers at me, and here I was without an alibi and the first person at the scene.

Did Mateo seriously leave the front door unlocked even though the business was clearly closed? I mean, he'd obviously left the back door open and his clothes where I could get to them. Both of which I was thankful for, but damn. The front door?

Audrey screeched and pointed her finger at me. “She did it! She killed the deputy.”

Flabbergasted and overwhelmed by the gory sight before me, along with the screeched accusations, I found speaking was impossible. Even if I could speak, I didn't know what to say. I shook my head and repeated *no* over and over again.

The Ashworths and Mrs. Marrow rushed into the building as well. They all gasped and covered their mouths. Some turned away, but people kept coming through the door like the bar was a sideshow at a county fair.

My voice finally made a grand reappearance when my wolf woke up from her nap and nudged me to say something. “I didn't. I swear I didn't. I just got here and saw this at the same time as Audrey did. I have no idea what is going on,” I pleaded. It didn't matter what I said, though. I could have remained silent, and it would have had the same effect as my denial.

Even though my wolf was guiding me to point fingers at Audrey, too, I reasoned that it'd take more time to figure out who killed the man if there

were multiple suspects. Of course, I was the only one standing at the scene of the crime, and I didn't know who to try to blame to shift the focus from me.

So, I silenced my wolf and shoved the idea away. I wouldn't do that. I couldn't point the finger at somebody who hadn't done anything. No matter how much she annoyed the shit out of me.

"She had to have done it. We don't know her, and she was here alone with the body," Audrey said. "Why would she be here when the bar's closed, anyway?" She was starting to piss me off, but I wasn't quite up to a fight with a wolf who was a little too big for her britches.

I glanced down at my hands, worried that I'd missed some blood, and my shoulders dropped. I could only imagine what they were all thinking. Everything about this moment made me appear horribly guilty. Worse, I didn't know how I'd gotten the blood all over me, so I couldn't offer any reasonable explanations.

My heartbeat doubled as realization jackhammered into me. I didn't want to believe that I could've murdered the deputy, but it certainly was possible. My monster hated him and was still so fucking mad at him for the way he'd put his hands on me. Then there was the fact that I couldn't remember what I'd done after I'd shifted. Of course, I could very well have killed the man. I had motive and opportunity, and since he'd obviously been killed by a shifter, I had the means. And worse, I'd woken up covered in blood—not that anyone else had seen it.

My stomach churned several times, threatening to expel its contents. This time, though, a headache hit me hard, and the mania that swept over me from time to time started building up under everyone's horrified stares.

I dug into the deepest recesses of my mind, trying to remember the evening for any signs that my monster had done this. There had to be a way to figure it out, to prove that I didn't kill anyone, that it wasn't in my nature. Except it was in my wolf's. It was why I had to keep such tight control over her. She was a rogue. Uncontrollable. Feral. And last night, I'd let her beat me. She'd won and blocked me out.

The front door slammed open, and Sheriff Birch Clawson and Ridge hurried into the bar.

"Gang's all here," I muttered.

Everybody gasped at the sight of Ridge. I did the same when I took in his disheveled appearance. He wasn't as put together as I'd always seen him. He wore rumpled clothes, though his hair was freshly washed. Still, the sight was

a shock to everybody around us, but more so to the humans, it seemed. He at least still had his suit on, even though it would probably need to be thrown out. No amount of dry-cleaning would get rid of those dirt stains.

Audrey pointed at me again and told the sheriff and Ridge that I had killed the deputy. I dropped my eyes. I didn't have any way to fight this. I could be guilty. Hell, I certainly looked guilty.

Ridge stepped around the body and came to stand between Audrey, me, and her accusations.

“Tori did not kill Deputy Hill. We were together all night.”

Lifting my eyes to catch Ridge's, shock zapped into me once again. I was certain my body was about to combust or something. I didn't know how many more surprises I could take this morning.

He didn't look at me. He looked around the room, so I followed his gaze. I took in the confusion and distrust on all the faces of the humans present. I was seen here alone, and Ridge had happened upon us after so many had already checked everything out. It was suspicious for him to alibi me. Adding to the mix that I was a stranger with the dead body before us, it would be hard *not* to think the worst.

I did know, though, that Ridge didn't kill the deputy. He wouldn't do that and leave this kind of a mess behind. Because how in the world would an animal attack one person in an enclosed space such as this, not destroy anything else in the room, and get out? It'd leave too many questions, and Ridge wouldn't leave questions, ever. He'd make sure the body could never be found or set it out in the woods or something to really showcase that it had been an animal attack.

Ridge was the mayor. He had other ways to control the deputy, too. He would have done things differently.

“A rabid animal in the woods went after Tori and me. It might have got in here and attacked the deputy, too.”

He was so nonchalant that I couldn't believe how fast he came up with it. It didn't do the trick, though. Everyone exchanged glances, stopping to gaze at the body for brief moments. It wasn't easy to look at the deputy's mangled corpse. The humans in the room looked like they were trying to piece everything together.

The looks they gave me were filled with suspicion and terror. They stood farther back from me and wouldn't look me in the eye.

Audrey huffed. “No, Tori killed the deputy, and she needs to be put

behind bars. She's a murderer."

One of the Magpies piped up after Audrey. "Now, it does look like an animal attack, and Tori certainly had some sort of bone to pick with the deputy yesterday." She shrugged her bony, frail shoulders as she hefted me under the bus that was rolling past. "Maybe she's hiding something and disguised his murder as an animal attack."

Hurt pooled in my chest. I wasn't a part of this town, that was certain, but I thought I'd surely have *some* of them on my side. Ridge had defended me, and I couldn't help but be delighted by that despite the aching misery inside me. My wolf wanted to nuzzle him, to have him wrap his arms around us. I'd thought I got along with the Magpies, that they'd at least wait a moment before passing judgment.

Audrey, on the other hand, was no surprise at all. She wouldn't have thrown a life preserver my way if she saw me drowning. No way would she risk her pretty Prada pumps getting damp.

With Audrey already casting aspersions, Mr. Greenthorne jumped in and couldn't wait to point his stubby finger my way. He had his righteous gloating locked and loaded and a smug air about him. He wanted me gone, and there wasn't much more *gone* than prison.

People started murmuring, talking over each other. I subtly stepped toward Ridge, not entirely realizing what I was doing until he stepped closer, put his hand on my lower back, and stroked my skin with his thumb. My wolf whimpered and wanted me to burrow in closer to his heat, but it would have looked bad while I was listening to all the ways people thought I'd killed the deputy.

The sheriff stuck two fingers from each hand into the corners of his mouth and whistled loudly. All the wolves in the room cringed, while the humans only looked annoyed or angry or suspicious.

He walked to the center of the room. "All of you, stop shouting. This is a crime scene, and we need to investigate. Stop pointing fingers and get out. Let us do our work and gather the evidence."

The crime scene was so contaminated now that it had to work in my favor.

Mrs. Marrow, the librarian who'd always smiled and waved at me, raised her hand before speaking softly. "Now I just want to say, just because Tori didn't seem to get off on the right foot with the deputy doesn't mean she'd attack the man." She smiled and cocked her head at me. Such a sweet, little



old lady. “After all, didn’t they just meet yesterday? Why would she have any reason to go after him? She has a very good alibi if both she and our mayor were attacked together in the woods. Far away from here.” She scanned the room. “That’s all I wanted to say.”

I gulped audibly at the emotions welling inside me. I wanted to hug the woman for making some sense, but I still didn’t trust my wolf. What if she’d done this? I had no idea. I could have killed someone, or I could have been with Ridge the whole time. Not knowing was killing me.

The room fell silent and everyone stared at me, waiting for an explanation. I stiffened, and Ridge stepped in front of me slightly, but it didn’t help. Nothing was going to change the fact that every single person in the tavern was staring at me in suspicion. His hand moved from my back to my arm, rubbing warmth into my skin in a motion that didn’t feel soothing. I desperately wanted to take his hand and keep it there.

The door opened, and Margo, Diana, and Lola raced into the bar. As soon as Lola witnessed the deputy’s body in the middle of the bloodshed, she stumbled forward and fainted. The sheriff caught her before she hit her head on the floor and softly set her down, tapping her cheeks to get her to wake up.

Margo ran around the gawkers and launched herself at me, hugging me with both arms in a tight embrace. Diana came around and started inspecting me up and down. She went into mother mode while they both jumped over each other with questions. I couldn’t have found words to convey how amazing it felt to have these two women worried about me.

“What happened? Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Margo held my hands in hers and looked deep into my eyes. Her concern was genuine, and I appreciated it so much that I couldn’t stop tears from pooling in my eyes.

Diana cooed over me, touching me to ensure I had no wounds. “Do we need to get you to a doctor? You look like you’re in shock. Oh, sweetheart, you’re freezing.” She looked over her shoulder at the sheriff. “Ger her a blanket.”

I stood frozen as they inspected me with the utmost care. I wanted to rage at my wolf for causing this confusion in my head. I was afraid I’d killed the nosy deputy when I lost control of the damn wolf, and though I’d slept for an ungodly amount of time—it always felt that way when the wolf pushed me out of my own consciousness—I was spent and didn’t know what to do next.

Diana wrapped Margo and me in a hug. “Oh, sweetheart, you’re safe. You’re okay now.”

I discreetly wiped away the single tear that fell down my cheek. I could remember the last time I'd had a motherly hug, but it had been way too long.

Ridge's hand curled at my lower back, his heat searing my skin. His alpha presence and the simple fact that he was here calmed me.

The door opened again, and it was about to be standing room only in here. A few of the other town deputies walked in, stared at the man eviscerated on the bar, and took in the rest of the scene before them. That was their friend and colleague. They held stiff jaws but went straight to work, guiding everybody outside and sealing off the area with yellow tape.

The sheriff was the last to follow us out as he helped Lola out of the building and sat her on one of the benches that lined the street. "Now, this is an active crime scene. Everybody needs to stop pointing fingers." When Audrey opened her mouth, probably to give some sort of long-winded lock-her-up speech, the sheriff held up his hand. "I don't want to hear it." He looked at me, then at Audrey and Mateo, then swept his gaze at the assembled crowd. "All of you, stay nearby. I'm going to question each and every one of you. It'll take a while, and I don't want any of you pissing and moaning about it."

He stared straight at me. "Whether this was a murder or a wild animal, we'll get to the bottom of it." He eyed every person who had been in the bar, making his point across the board. "Is that clear?"

No one spoke and everyone nodded, even though Audrey and Mr. Greenthorne wanted to speak more on the subject. But the sheriff walked away before they could get another word out.

## Chapter 9

# Ridge

I stayed by Tori's side as we were all shuffled outside. My wolf was on high alert, even more so now at the distress exuding from Tori. We were hyper-aware of all the suspicious looks of horror and disgust the townsfolk were shooting at Tori.

It made it all the more difficult to control my wolf. He wanted to challenge everyone—wolf and human alike—and remind them exactly who was in charge and to watch what they said or did. That wasn't reasonable, though; I was well-aware of that. I reasoned with the wolf, urging him not to lose his shit. Attacking them would only look worse on Tori and scare her even more.

Needing a moment alone with her, I grabbed Tori's hand and guided her away from the bar, but not far enough to make Clawson think we were making a run for it. Gently, I captured her chin, turning her face away from the distrust and angst of the crowd so she'd focus on me and I could speak with her.

The crowd's contempt for this little wolf had me frothing at the mouth like a rabid dog. I wished I'd found her sooner to avoid her being the center of this, but Tori's status as a newcomer within a close-knit community like this would make her prime suspect number one. Plus, she'd had a very public altercation with Hill. That didn't help her case one bit, even though Phil had been a jackass. It was easier to believe an outsider was capable of the brutal killing than one of our own.

However, I was almost sure Tori didn't kill him. I hadn't exactly known where she was when looking for her this morning. But after what we'd done together last night, I didn't entertain the notion that she'd played any part in

his death.

We stepped far enough away from the crowd, and I shielded her as much as I could. I wanted her away from Audrey's accusatory shouts more than anything. That woman had a screech that drew attention, which was the last thing Tori needed right now. I could at least turn her away from the prying eyes, but I couldn't stop the high-pitched squeals of the privileged wolf.

I released Tori's hand and started checking her over myself. Despite having watched Margo and Diana do exactly that, I needed to do it for me and my wolf's peace of mind. She was shaking like a leaf, hyperventilating. The second I released her hand, she clutched her head again. All signs pointed to the fact that her escalating panic was quickly overtaking her. It reminded me of her appearance the day I met her.

Anger and worry warred within me. Anger at the crowd for inducing this episode and worry that she wouldn't come out of it. When a wolf struggled against becoming feral, one never knew when the feral psyche would completely take control and consume the wolf, who would never be brought back to humanity.

Bundling her into my arms, I held her close, comforting her and whispering in her ear, "You're okay, Tori. I won't let anything happen to you. You're safe." I spoke firmly, hoping my words would get through to her.

She whimpered, and the sound of her despair arrowed into my heart, shattering it. That sound was full of hopelessness and loneliness. Rocking her, I cautiously attempted to spread my scent over her. I needed her wolf to realize she wasn't alone and another wolf was with her. I wouldn't let the feral take her from me, not now that I'd found her.

"Shhh, Tori. You got this. You'll calm down, just like you've done in the past. You're so strong. You're safe. Shhh."

I kept up a stream of soothing words. I was prepared to do this for her as long as she needed, but her fight and spirit were strong. It didn't take long for the shaking to subside, for her breathing to even out into deep inhales and exhales.

We stood still with her in my embrace. She rested her head against my chest, her hands clenched under her chin. Several sniffles escaped her, and a patch of wetness soaked through my shirt. I held her tightly and kept my chin resting on her head.

My wolf was content. Tori was calming down and letting us hold her, but I prayed nobody came toward us just yet, because then my wolf would snap.

Tori was our only priority at the moment.

Slowly, Tori moved her head and wiped away the tears. I kept holding her. She wouldn't feel alone or discarded again, not with me around.

"Ridge, please let me go. I need to go turn myself in." Her voice was sad and throaty.

Surprise had me holding onto her tighter. "Do you remember killing the deputy?"

The tone I used was slightly sterner than it probably should've been. I couldn't help it, though. After being in wolf form last night, she might not have any memories of what happened. Sometimes the wolf didn't want their counterpart to know, so it hid the details. Hid everything, even the headlines. Her wolf had seemed somewhat feral. Not so bad that she couldn't come out of it, but enough that Tori was not present in her wolf form.

As she lifted her head to look at me, her heavy sigh blew her warm breath against my neck, and I couldn't help the raging desire that coursed through me, even in a serious moment like this. I chastised myself. This situation was critical, and protecting her was the most important thing right now.

She shook her head slightly as I gazed down at her tear-stained face. Her brows furrowed as she worked to remember the evening.

"I only remember hearing howling last night. I was in bed." She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and closed her eyes with a soft sigh. "Then I woke up in the woods, naked and covered in blood. Clearly, I must've done it. You have to see how incriminating it all is."

Of course, I could see how others might see it as obvious, but in my experience, what was obvious wasn't always true. I rubbed my hands almost absentmindedly over her back, and she curled tighter into my chest. My wolf yipped at her seeking comfort from me. Luckily, I remembered the night and could speak of my whereabouts, or I'd look just as guilty as her.

She pressed her cheek to my chest, sounding defeated when she said, "I wish I could get rid of this fucking monster inside me."

Hearing her refer to her wolf as a monster shattered my heart into smithereens. No shifter should ever have those thoughts about a part of themselves. Being a shifter was a beautiful gift, a privilege.

If it were the last thing I ever did on this earth, I'd show this fantastic creature exactly how wonderful she was, that our species wasn't inherently bad, only that she'd been woefully misguided.

"Tori, don't turn yourself in. I'm pretty sure you didn't commit this

heinous crime.”

Her petite body tensed against mine, then her hands pushed against my chest to escape my arms. My wolf whimpered at the impending loss. He wanted to nuzzle and lick her clean, but I reluctantly released my hold, and my body went cold the second we no longer touched.

Her eyes blazed as she scrutinized me. “Tell me why you look like you’ve been through the wringer.” She stood back, crossing her arms and jutting out her hip.

I smothered a groan of desire at her take-charge attitude.

“Can you remember what happened last night? Why were you calling my name in the woods this morning?” She cocked her head and stared at me. It was fucking adorable.

The only thing missing from this irresistible look was her tapping her foot at me. Her death glare stopped me from taking those thoughts any further. Catching a glimpse of the crowd over her shoulder doused me better than any cold shower. The reality of the situation pulled me from the pleasant memories of the previous night.

“I promise I’ll tell you everything I can remember if you come clean to me about what really brought you to Blackwood Creek.” I didn’t know if that was leverage enough to make her talk. She kept all her information on lockdown.

Tori stood a little taller and clasped her hands together so tight, her knuckles turned white.

“Tori, I’m ensuring that I’m keeping the town safe. Even though I believe you didn’t kill Phil, there could be another reason you’re here. So, I need to know. If you agree to tell me, I can give you an alibi.”

I couldn’t tell her everything, but that was the gist of it, and she needed me. But right now, I also needed to make sure she was here for the right reasons.

*Please give me something to work with.*

Tori’s spitfire nature had gone dormant. I’d never have thought I’d witness this woman be less than confident and demanding and certain of who she was, but here she stood, not looking me in the eye, staring down at her feet with her shoulders slumped and her fingers tapping rapidly against her thighs.

Clawson’s yell from the bar startled us both.

“I’m about to get Miss Greenthorne’s account, then I’ll speak with Tori

and you, Ridge. Separately.” He lifted his brow at me, wondering if I’d challenge him.

He wouldn’t dare speak that way to an alpha in standard pack scenarios, but I nodded. This town had a murder, and he was a sheriff investigating it. To top it all off, the victim was a deputy. Nothing about this scenario was standard.

Tori groaned. “I should just run now. I probably have enough experience to avoid a murder charge for a while.”

Not knowing her well enough, I didn’t know if she was serious or joking, but my wolf and I were desperate to keep her in Blackwood Creek.

“Tori, look at me,” I demanded, but she ignored me. I stepped closer to her and lifted her chin. “Please look at me,” I said softly but with a hint of steel.

Her eyes slowly rose from my chest to my eyes.

“I know you’re slowly going feral.”

Her eyes widened but with confusion, not anger. The small moments I’d shared with her showed how little she seemed to know about our kind, which amazed me. She didn’t have the basics to function properly. Survival had been her only course of action.

“You’re a rogue. Becoming feral happens when you’re alone and away from other wolves. That’s not safe for our kind.” I needed her to hear me, to fully comprehend what I was saying. “Tori, this is only going to get worse, so if you do run, you might actually kill someone—but little wolf, I don’t think that’s happened yet. First things first, we need to get you out of this mess, and I have to know what I’m dealing with. So, I’m asking again, why are you here? If you don’t tell me what I need to know, I can’t help you.”

A long, deep breath shuddered out of her. I held my own breath, wondering what she’d do. My wolf paced, wanting to demand the answers so we could get this over with and haul her back to our den. His possessiveness was something I’d have to investigate another time. It was more than just protectiveness.

Tori’s body shifted like a weight had been lifted off her, and she staggered slightly toward the building. She leaned against it as if she couldn’t hold herself up anymore.

I wondered how long she’d held everything inside. When was the last time she’d talked about anything personal? Hell, how many things about herself had she forgotten while trying to protect herself? How many secrets

did she harbor? Those alone could bury a person, and I wanted her to be unburdened and stand under the sun and moon with pride and freedom.

“I had no clue about this world. About other species—shifters, particularly—even existing until I first shifted four years ago.” She leaned her head against the building. “I was fighting with someone, and the anger was building so fast inside me, I could literally feel it clawing its way out of me.” She held her hands up and looked at them, turning them one way, then another, palms up, palms down. “I tried to get whatever it was out of me, to make it stop and leave me alone, but there was no getting through. Whatever happened to me, it wouldn’t listen. It kept pushing.”

She looked down then, dropping her hands to her sides. “Something inside me snapped. I remember snarling like an animal, and an immense pain shot through my body. I did everything I could not to hurt the other person. The fear and hatred in their eyes, the disgust, had me running as far and as fast as I could.”

Every first shift story was different. Hers was painful. Mine was glorious.

I listened intently to her every word. There was a hesitancy, even though she couldn’t stop the words. She didn’t want to tell this story, and I could tell she’d never told another soul. I hoped sharing it would help put her onto a path of healing and acceptance, to finally share it with somebody who could help her, to share the burdens with her.

“I looked down at my hands.” She held them up again, this time for me to see. “But instead of skin and fingers, there were furry paws. My body twisted and turned in weird, contorted shapes. I hadn’t fully turned before I ran. I made it to the woods, a patch of darkness shrouded by trees, and then I shifted completely. I was so scared.”

“Scared” didn’t really convey what she must have felt, which was likely *terror*. I was born for it, raised to acquire a position as alpha, but there were others who were denied.

I couldn’t imagine not knowing what I was. How could her parents have kept it from her? It was so dangerous. Why hadn’t it been explained to her? A shifter’s first shift should have been honored and celebrated. The fact that it had happened while she was feeling threatened and not knowing what was happening was probably the saddest thing I’d ever heard.

No wonder she despised her wolf. To her way of thinking, it had taken everything from her. Her everyday life had vanished with that first shift.

“I heard gunfire from all directions and kept moving,” she continued. “I



soon realized people were trying to herd me into traps. I wised up to what they were doing. I'm small, so I could sneak and go undetected at times. That was when I discovered there were hunters. Hunters of shifters, I mean."

She looked at me then, her face crumpled with misery. I wanted to scoop her up and cradle her in my arms.

"I shifted back into human form, a young girl naked in the woods, nobody else around. I ran with the hunters hot on my tail." She shook her head. "They've been after me for years. That's why I've never stayed in one place for too long."

A young girl out in the world on her own, hiding and dodging hunters. I couldn't begin to fathom everything she'd survived. How many times had she been hurt or almost been killed? God, this woman was fucking amazing and strong.

My wolf wanted to praise her for being a fighter, wanted to tear those hunters apart and feast on their corpses for the terror they'd inflicted on her. I preferred to eradicate them, but my wolf was bloodthirsty, primarily where Tori was concerned. This time, I wanted him to have his way.

"So you see, Mayor Blackwood, if you were smart, you wouldn't try to get me out of this." She spoke so solemnly, not blinking, not wavering. "It'd be best if you either let me be convicted of murder or send me packing, because whatever you think happened last night doesn't matter. I have no control over the wolf. She does what she wants. I'm fairly sure she did kill the deputy, and even if she didn't kill last night, she will. It's only a matter of time."

Resting her forehead back against the wall, she turned slightly to watch me through a curtain of hair. Exhaustion surrounded her, and she seemed so defeated. I also sensed she was genuinely concerned she had killed somebody.

Punishment was something she sought. If not for murder, then just for existing.

I didn't buy any of that. If she were a killer, she'd be ruthless. She'd jump at the offer of my giving her an alibi. Sadness seeped into my soul. This creature was so terrified, had been on the run for so long. Showing her that Blackwood Creek was the best choice for her and her wolf would be an uphill battle. But my duty as alpha was to look out for and care for any wolves in danger, which was what her original alpha should've done for her.

Given time to think about it, I knew I'd need to work through her

aggression because that was the ultimate task for any alpha worth his salt, and hers had failed her miserably.

I hesitantly stepped closer and leaned against the wall next to her. Just because she told me a small part of her story didn't mean she'd suddenly trust me. She was in constant fight-or-flight mode. She had to be. It had been conditioned into her for the last four years. She must be exhausted.

"Tori, I promise you, we'll figure this out together. I'll make a deal with you." I lightened my tone, thinking that if she had some control, the ability to make decisions instead of being told what to do, she'd be more receptive.

She perked her head toward me. I wanted to smile, but I didn't want her to perceive anything I said to her as a challenge. I tried to make my words as non-threatening as I could.

"If you'll tell me everything you know about the hunters"—which had to be a good amount if she had successfully avoided capture this long—"I'll give you an alibi for being in Blackwood Creek that the townsfolk will believe, and I'll help you understand your wolf."

She was interested in the alibi but scoffed at the mention of her wolf. I'd had a strong suspicion she'd do that.

"I don't want to understand the damned thing." She narrowed her eyes at me, her anger palpable. "And how could you possibly get the town to believe I was with you during the murder? That I'm innocent?" She rolled her eyes at that last part. "Even I don't fucking believe I'm innocent."

It gutted me that she questioned her own innocence. It showed me exactly how far I had to go to help her understand her wolf, how beautiful of a creature she was, and that she wasn't a monster—and she certainly wouldn't be one unless she made herself that way.

The next part would be hard for her to accept, but it had to be believable. The only way we could win over most of the town in one swoop would be for Tori to be intimately connected to me in a position that was beyond question. Something permanent. Something serious. Something important to me that would give her a reason to be here in the first place and *stay* here...give her an excuse to spend a lot of time with me and enable me to vouch for her.

My plan wasn't entirely selfless. For the past few years, I'd been frustrated with all the families in town, specifically the prominent families who were constantly trying to make a bigger name for themselves. They'd regularly parade their daughters and nieces in front of me, as if by putting them before me, I'd start rutting and wedding bells would sound off in no

time. These families wanted money and status in any way they could get it. What better way than hooking me up with one of their females?

There had been countless evenings, especially in the beginning after I'd moved back into Blackwood Manor, where women brought me casseroles, pies...you name it. Some ladies arrived with their dishes, wearing nothing more than a coat and a smile. I'd tried to be kind when I denied them, but eventually, it became easier to slam the door. Or better yet, not answer at all.

So, my alibi for Tori would be a "two birds, one stone" type of situation. If I appeared to be tied intimately to the little wolf, she'd have a better chance of the townspeople being more forgiving toward her and giving her more credibility in the face of this murder. Many people would do 180s in their attitude toward her to get in my good graces, which wasn't an egotistical thought but a fact. If they thought we were romantically involved, it would also give more credibility to the fact that Tori had spent the night with me.

Of course, it could blow up in my face, and I didn't fully understand why I was willing to go this far to lie for her, but everything about Tori had unleashed a need to protect her. My wolf would make things difficult for me if we didn't guard her, even though I felt the same desire.

The lie also gave me the luxurious bonus of the families backing off. I'd savor the break from their matchmaking for as long as I could. Being pursued to the level I was could be exhausting and repulsive.

Tori was a breath of fresh air. Having her on my arm would be refreshing.

I took a deep breath, knowing this was a do-or-die moment. "To make this work, and if you agree, you'll have to pretend to be my fiancé."

She stepped away from the building and gaped at me.

"It will be strictly for show, but it will give you a believable alibi and shift everything in the town's perception. It also gives a solid reason for why you've shown up out of the blue, and why we were together last night."

I put my hands on her shoulders and looked her straight in the eye.

"You can trust me, Tori. Just say yes."

## Chapter 10

# Tori

I gaped at Ridge. He wanted to pretend we were *engaged*? The idea was ludicrous. Who in their right mind would believe we were engaged?

“I’m not saying it’d be easy. We’d have to sell it. Show everyone that we’re madly in love. But they’ll believe it. According to Mateo, my infatuation with you was visible from the minute I laid eyes on you. Our chemistry was off the charts, apparently. It also helps that I leave town often enough on business trips. Sure, they’re *actually* business trips, but people don’t need to know that. They’ll just think I’ve been leaving town to see you.”

I must’ve had my filter turned off and voiced my doubt without realizing it because he answered every concern. That’s how much his offer shocked me. He smirked at me as he tenderly tucked my hair behind my ear.

He stepped forward and grabbed my hands, stroking his thumbs over my knuckles. I relaxed into the touch. Being near him, feeling his hands on mine, staring up into his eyes...it soothed me. When was the last time someone had comforted me like this? The last time anyone had cared enough to do something like this for me? I couldn’t remember. It made a longing I hadn’t even known existed grow fiercer inside me.

I shook myself back to reality, pulling my hands from his and turning around to watch the crowd. They were still shooting suspicious looks at me, studying us much too intently for my liking. Although I doubted anyone had heard what he’d said, they’d certainly witnessed what had to have looked like an intimate scene.

If I left now, I’d hopefully be gone quick enough that the hunters wouldn’t be able to trace me to the town. I was still a relative stranger. I’d

held back enough of myself that people wouldn't have anything specific to say; they'd only get enough information that I'd been here, had killed someone. Verification that I was the monster they claimed I'd always been and always would be. It wouldn't change anything.

Blackwood Creek would be a gold mine for them, even though they didn't know it now. I prayed that I'd been effective enough in covering my tracks so they wouldn't find this town. If they made it here, they'd find a ton of shifters, and they would torture them all. I still didn't care for shifters, but my resolve weakened when I thought about Margo, Diana, and Ridge being hurt because of me.

My initial instincts to run were demanding to be followed; I struggled with the constant battle for survival within me. Either I could turn myself in and let this all finally end, or I could sneak out of town, head back out on the road, and run far away from this place.

I turned to look at Ridge, trying to ignore my inner wolf whimpering and tugging herself toward him. Watching him closely, I thought about what he was proposing. Running from Blackwood Creek and its gorgeous mayor would certainly be easier than staying here and confronting my wolf while pretending to be his fiancée.

*Would it really be easier, though? Was I really going feral? What does that even mean? Was that why I had all these headaches and couldn't control the wolf?*

Fear of the unknown coiled around me like a straitjacket. What if he was right, and I snapped and killed someone while I was on the run? I'd never be able to live with myself if I did that. I *wouldn't* live with myself.

For all my big talk and all my promises to myself—like if I ever hurt someone, I would end it all—it could very well be the case now. Finding who murdered Phillip Hill was a priority, because if I did it, then at least I'd know. I'd take responsibility for losing control, and steps would be taken to ensure it never happened again.

Sorrow and fatigue soaked into the marrow of my bones.

Ridge's tempestuous gray eyes softened as he watched me. They were imploring and filled with concern. He made it seem like he understood the war inside my head. It was another fear that worked its way up to the surface.

I hated how I'd been forced to face all my insecurities since meeting him. Despised that everything was staring me back in the face. Loathed how I had to struggle from moment to moment. I couldn't push everything down all the

time. At some point, it would catch up with me.

Ridge didn't push me, and I appreciated that. If he'd been forceful or demanding, I would have turned him down based on principle alone, but once again, he surprised me with how he handled situations and responded to me. He made an outstanding leader, as alpha and the mayor. The guy wasn't like anyone I'd ever met.

I glanced over my shoulder. Margo and Diana were watching me. Concern radiated from them, but it was a concern *for* me, not about me. It was an awakening moment. How long had I wanted someone to care about me and believe I belonged? Ever since my mother died, I'd been alone. I didn't want to be alone anymore.

I scanned the *Pleasantville*-like town before me, and a longing to belong in this sanctuary called out to me. All my life, I'd never thought a place full of shifters would make me want to settle, but it did, mostly because of the generosity and kindness that Margo and Diane showed me. Not to mention Ridge.

If I stayed here, I could learn how to control my wolf. Learn from others who knew more about this than what I'd gained by frightful experience alone. I'd never be comfortable with my inner beast or letting her come out, but if I could work out how to force her to obey, my life would become easier in unimaginable ways.

The decision wasn't so difficult anymore. My mind decided for me. If I wanted to learn about the wolf and help solve this murder, I had no other choice. I couldn't learn without someone to guide me because I couldn't control the wolf. And if I left, I'd maintain suspicion as the prime suspect.

Huffing, I turned around and pulled my shoulders back and my back straight, daring Ridge to say something stupid that would give the go-ahead to refuse this preposterous idea. "Okay. You have a deal."

Ridge's grin covered half his face, and he reached for my hands again. "This will work. I promise."

I hoped so, but I also doubted it. Nothing had worked out for me so far. But I shrugged; I had nothing more to lose. I was a reasonably good actress, so I could make it believable. I'd had to sell identities and personalities countless times, and this selling myself as Ridge's fiancée wasn't much more than that. It didn't hurt that Ridge was also the mayor. He was in politics, so he could pull off a lie. It was part of the job description.

We were ideally made to represent a fake relationship. I believed that.

It also wouldn't be a massive leap to portray that I was attracted to him because I hadn't wanted much in life the way I wanted him. He was so ridiculously tempting that I no longer needed to worry that the other shifters would sniff out my appreciation. That would help sell this ruse.

Irritation rattled my nerves. I hated how pleased the monster inside me was. She had something up her sleeve; I could sense it. I'd ignored her enough not to understand what she had in mind, but my guard was up, and I clutched the chain around her metaphorical cage a little tighter.

It didn't matter how exhausted I was. I had to do this.

*Listen here, wolf, this is nothing but an act, a part to play. To rectify the mess you caused. No matter how nice he acts toward us, you're not getting close to another beastly shifter. You're grounded for life.*

She chuffed at me but settled down. I wasn't stupid. I was fairly certain she was biding her time, waiting for the moment she wanted. Ridge was close by, and we were staying...for now.

With everybody watching us, I let Ridge keep hold of my hand. I curled my fingers around his and savored the simplicity of the moment. If I kept refusing his touch, it wouldn't make this ruse believable, so I needed to be comfortable with him touching and caressing me. It'd be a struggle to keep my libido in check, but farce or no farce, there was no way we were sleeping together again.

I had to draw the line somewhere. Sex led to feelings, and feelings were complicated. I didn't need anything to be more complicated than it already was. Especially if this didn't work and the whole damned thing went south.

"I'll tell you everything I've experienced and everything I know about hunters," I said. "You can do whatever you want with the info, but it should help you figure out how you can better protect the town."

I didn't know how much more I could give him that he didn't already know. He'd lived as a shifter his whole life. There had to be more history on hunters than what I had, even if I'd survived being on the run from them for several years.

All I had was knowledge of how they hunted, or at least how they'd hunted me. I didn't have any tricks or insights. Except for one detail, but that wasn't something I ever wanted to share.

Ridge's shoulders sagged in relief. "When the sheriff pulls you aside, use our engagement as the backstory for why you came into town. Tell him we've been engaged for a couple of months. It's been a long-distance

relationship. We've been together for a couple of years. He won't get too personal with you. He'll save that for me." He was so confident, it was hard to doubt him.

The whole morning was a daze, from waking up covered in blood after the forced shift, discovering the bloody mess that had been Deputy Phil, and then being accused of the murder I was certain I had committed. It seemed so far-fetched that the *mayor*, of all people, was suddenly my alibi.

"You really think that'll work?" I cocked my head at him, disbelief dripping from every word. "Won't it seem suspicious that nobody knew you were dating, then I'm your fiancée right when I'm the prime suspect in a murder?"

"If we say we've been together for a while, it won't. Plus, people in this town know I tend to be reserved, especially when it comes to my personal life. They'll believe it when they see us together. We'll have to sell that." He gave me a pointed look. "I can sell it on my end."

He winked at me, a lusty smile lifting the corners of his lips. Rolling my eyes, I nodded in agreement even though my gut twitched.

"Okay, so last night, we ran together as wolves and went far away from the crowd for privacy. We got a little carried away with our play fighting, hence why we were both a little worse for wear and got separated," he said.

My eyes bulged at the idea of openly confessing that I was a wolf. I'd never done that before. I hadn't even admitted it to Ridge—he'd told me.

Ridge moved closer and wrapped his arms around me. To everyone else, he looked like he was soothing his distraught fiancée. My body stiffened at that thought because, in actuality, he was. Well, soothing his fake fiancée.

Slowly, I let my muscles relax. I had to get used to him touching me. Being skittish around him wouldn't help people believe I was his fiancée. It also didn't hurt that we'd slept together. I needed to remember that. Ridge knew my body, and I knew his. The lust was real. Only the relationship status was fake.

"Don't worry, Tori. It's going to be okay. Let Clawson know you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. You were trying to find me after we'd shifted back. Stick to the story. It's basic and easy to remember." He smiled at me. "You won't be lying about too much of it, anyway. All you're really lying about is that you remember what happened, and that you were looking for me."

As I lifted my wary gaze to his, I was about to ask what that was



supposed to mean. What couldn't I remember? Before I could question him further, Sheriff Clawson beckoned me forward as Audrey walked away and sat on one of the benches. Her haughty prance and evil smirk gave me no illusions that she'd restrained herself from spitting her venom about me to the sheriff's ears.

After several deep breaths, I steadied my shoulders and went to the sheriff. Ridge walked behind me, his hand still searing the skin on my lower back. I took strength from his touch as I tried to ignore the stares and glares. Many of the townsfolk had already decided on my guilt, happy to play judge, jury, and executioner.

A familiar voice shouted, and I turned to watch as Margo hurried through the crowd, yelling at people to move. She ran up and wrapped me in a tight hug. Relief flooded my body, and I returned her embrace. Tears pricked my eyes, wanting to spill just knowing someone else was in my corner, that I had a friend.

Margo raised her voice unnecessarily, ensuring everybody heard her. "Don't worry, Tori. There's no doubt in my mind you did nothing wrong."

A weak smile came across my face. I didn't have the faith in myself that she did, but it was nice to have somebody fighting for me along with Ridge.

Diana came up behind Margo and hugged me, repeating what her daughter had said. Eventually, they had to let me go so I could speak to the sheriff.

Showtime.

I sat across from the sheriff in his office. The window blinds were open, and I could see the town square. The crowd had easily doubled in size. I twisted my fingers together as goosebumps spread over my body. My leg wouldn't stop shaking, and I worried it made me look guilty. Everything I did made me wonder if it made me look like I'd killed Deputy Hill.

"Now, Tori, I need your honest account of what happened. You can speak freely about shifting and all that. Most people on the police force and the detective teams in Blackwood Creek are either shifters themselves or know about our kind."

That snapped my attention back to Clawson. He was smiling kindly at me.

Shifters were really that open about themselves in this community? Humans actually kept their secrets? I'd never be able to wrap my head around it. It was so strange and the complete opposite of what I'd experienced.

“We’ve been working tirelessly to make this a safe community for all creatures. Honestly, Tori, you’re safe as a wolf can be here.”

Fidgeting in my seat, I nodded. “I shifted for the Full Moon Howl last night and ran with Ridge. I was nervous about being around so many others. So, Ridge and I went off on our own, and then we got carried away. We were play-fighting and had a bit too much fun. We fell asleep in the woods.”

Sheriff Clawson’s expression didn’t change. He still looked at me kindly, and I began to warm to him.

“After we shifted back this morning, I got lost. It was my first run here, and I don’t know my way around yet. I went looking for Ridge. So, I headed toward the bar. I didn’t know where else to look for him, so I thought that was the best place. That was when I stumbled across...” I grew quiet as the deputy’s mangled body flashed through my mind. I shuddered involuntarily and struggled to swallow down the nausea. “I saw the deputy just as Audrey Greenthorne came into the bar from Mateo’s quarters.”

Clawson nodded and studied me closely. After making a couple of notes, he dropped the pen and leaned toward me. Claspng his large hands on the desk, he softened his tone. “Tori, I don’t like prying into other people’s business. People have a right to privacy. But given the circumstances and the fact that no one here knows you, I need to ask. Why did you come to Blackwood Creek? What brought you here?”

A puff of air escaped my lungs, and I let my nerves and the flush of my cheeks sell the act. I gathered my courage, lifting my gaze straight to his. “I understand, Sheriff. I didn’t mean to make people think badly of me. It’s just that, well, we were trying to keep it a secret for a bit. So I could get more comfortable in town and let people get to know me before we...I guess it doesn’t work to keep it a secret.” I paused. “I’m Ridge’s fiancée.”

His eyes bugged out of his head, jaw dropping in shock. He gaped at me, then composed himself. Rolling my bottom lip between my teeth, I waited for him to digest the information.

“Okay. Um.” He was flustered and kept cocking his head as he looked at me. He opened his mouth several times to say something, but never did. Then, out of the blue, he spat out, “Excuse me for a moment.”

He jumped out of the chair as if his ass was on fire and made a beeline for the door.

I peeked out the window from the office and watched as Ridge stood on the outskirts of the crowd, ignoring them, his attention focused solely on the

small building where I currently sat. Suddenly, Clawson erupted from the main doors and rushed up to him.

Clawson's face was red with anger. I was fairly certain I could see steam pouring from his ears. He stood in front of Ridge, attempting to use his height to dominate the mayor. Ridge looked laid-back as he listened to the enraged man, then he barked out a laugh and clapped the sheriff on his right shoulder, nodding. The sheriff's brow furrowed deeper. He shrugged Ridge's hand off his shoulder, turned on his heel, and told Ridge to follow him. He walked back toward the station, never checking if Ridge was following.

The two men walked back toward the front of the station and then appeared in the office. The sheriff shut the door and Ridge sat beside me, putting his arm around me. He tugged me toward him and casually kissed my cheek. The feather-soft touch sent jolts of pleasure across my skin. From behind her iron curtain, I sensed my wolf opening one eye in interest.

Butterflies fluttered a nervous rhythm in my stomach, and I found my foot tapping along to their internal beat. I slowed my breathing and reminded myself to calm down and relax against Ridge's body.

It wouldn't be hard to pretend to be flustered.

Clawson was eyeing us closely. He needed to see for himself that what we were saying was real. So, I put on a show.

"How are you doing?" Ridge asked.

I curled into his hold and buried my face into his neck. This had to work. I couldn't let people know I was a lone wolf on the run and that I was lying about this. They'd kick me out. Now that Ridge had hinted something could be wrong with me, that I could be going feral, I needed to know what that meant and how to stop it. I needed answers.

I inhaled slowly, and my wolf and I calmed at Ridge's spicy scent. It was easy to see why surrounding oneself with other shifters helped. His scent alone made me feel safe.

What could Ridge possibly gain from having a fake relationship with me? I hadn't thought to ask when he'd proposed this insane idea. I had to remind myself to get clarity on the situation later because right now, it all felt pretty one-sided, and I hated being indebted to people.

"Better now that you're here," I said.

Ridge kissed the top of my head again while I kept my eyes closed and buried my head in his neck. This was an important moment. If we didn't pass Clawson's bullshit meter, we'd have no hope with the rest of the town. But I

didn't want to leave the comfort I'd found in the action.

Luckily, the action worked in my favor. Clawson bought it. He eyed Ridge and leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "How long has this been going on? Why keep it a secret? Fuck, Ridge. From me?"

Ridge blew out a breath and stroked my arm.

"Tori and I have known each other for a couple of years. A couple of months ago, when I left town for that business trip up north, I was really with Tori and proposed to her. It felt right."

I sensed Ridge's eyes on me, so I looked up at him. Capturing my eyes with his own, he smiled down at me. The smile that lifted my lips didn't need to be forced. He broke the gaze, turning his attention back to his friend.

"I kept it a secret because we decided we wanted her to feel welcome on her own first. To see if she could make some genuine friends, and not just people who would use her as a connection to me. Come on, Birch, we both know that once she's tied to me in this town, there's no going back. Look at how she was treated once they thought we had a one-night stand. They would've overwhelmed her if they knew she was my fiancée."

Ridge's hold on me tightened when he mentioned the night we'd shared. My arousal kicked up, and he looked down at me with adoration. My heart seemed to want to break the world record for speed.

Sheriff Clawson cleared his throat and sat back in his chair.

I blushed. Our attraction would definitely help as far as selling our fake engagement, but Ridge's easy affections startled me. I'd need to build up some sort of defense because my resolve would break under his touch. I'd also have to figure out a way to handle his scent. Despite the dirt and having been out all night, he was the sexiest thing I'd ever borne witness to, and neither my wolf nor my core had any problems drooling all over him.

Clawson rubbed his large hands over his face, then dropped them on the desk. "Well, that explains why you've been so vehemently against everyone trying to set you up with all the single women in town, and why you stopped coming out with me. This whole time, you had a lady and didn't share her with your friend. Thank you, man." He glared at Ridge.

Ridge shrugged, his chest vibrating as he laughed. I raised a questioning brow at him. People here had been matchmaking? Ridge smiled at me and brushed a soft kiss over my lips, making my skin tingle.

Clawson's eyes widened, but he chuckled. "Don't worry, Tori, he's been a good boy."

The laughter that followed broke the tension.

“I also understand why you’d want to find your own footing in town before publicizing your engagement. The people here are good folk, but they won’t let this go, not with this ongoing investigation happening. Many will nose around and point fingers until it’s solved. Tori, you’re going to be the first on everyone’s list since they don’t know you and don’t understand why you came to town to begin with. So, I suggest you spread word about your engagement, and fast.”

“I agree,” Ridge said. “I’ll announce it at the town hall meeting tonight, although everyone might have put it together by then.”

Sweat slicked my palms, and my leg jumped back into action.

Ridge put his hand on my knee and squeezed gently until the jumping stopped. He kissed my forehead.

“It will be okay, sweetheart. They’re going to welcome you with open arms.”

I nearly snorted in disbelief. All I was sure of, without any shadow of a doubt, was that Ridge’s kisses were becoming addictive.

## Chapter 11

# Ridge

My veins thrummed with joy when Tori accepted the deal. I was allowed to touch her without question—in public, at least—and that was something my wolf and I agreed upon wholeheartedly. Clawson’s shock, then anger, then acceptance nearly had me in stitches. I couldn’t help but laugh at the way he’d stormed out of the sheriff’s office.

Guilt gnawed at me, though. Not only was he my best friend, he was my second-in-command and a huge help with my vision for the town. So, I understood it was a punch to the gut, to say the least, to find out I was engaged while he was investigating a murder. But I could live with a little guilt. Protecting Tori was more important.

Luckily, he accepted it quickly enough and didn’t give Tori a hard time about it. It was a good run for Tori, too. It had taken some convincing to get her on board, but she was a great actress. I didn’t know whether to be thrilled about that or hurt for her, as she’d undoubtedly had to utilize that skill to stay alive.

My right hand rested on her lower back as we walked out of Clawson’s office back into the daylight. She smelled so good, I desperately wanted to wrap my arm around her, pull her flush against my chest, and bury my nose in the crook of her neck. For the moment, however, my wolf and I were content with the touch she was allowing.

As soon as we made it outside, all eyes landed on us, and it was like someone had poured a bucket of ice over my head. Reality came rushing back, and I fought not to let Tori distract me. She didn’t mean to, but whenever she was around, I lost focus and all my attention homed in on her.

I was well-aware of what needed to be done in the aftermath of the

deputy's murder. With everything going on outside of the community—working with other packs to establish a haven for shifters, and building defenses at the risk of hunters snatching and killing our kind—having this happen in town, to a human who was aware of shifters...well, that made the whole situation that much riskier. We needed to determine whether the murder had resulted from shifter or human business.

While we tried to solve this mystery, maintaining the secrecy of shifters from unaware humans was my priority. However, in a town this small, word would travel fast. Both communities would be terrified, on edge, and at each other's throats, fearing a killer in their midst. Murder had a habit of making enemies of the closest friends. Who knew what would be said in heated moments?

Phil had been a big part of the town. I may not have been his biggest supporter, but I still mourned his death. To be killed so senselessly...

I gripped Tori's lower back tighter. She stopped and looked at me with a questioning look, then smiled and rested her hand on my hip.

I reveled in her touch, enjoying the soothing sensation while I could. Pulling double duty as alpha and mayor meant I had a lot of work ahead to calm people down after this horrific incident. I trusted Clawson with the investigation, but my rank meant I had to ensure everyone was safe. I couldn't let my emotions take over, even though I wanted to throw rationality out the window, shift, and work this out.

Deputy Hill may not have been a shifter, but he'd known about our kind and protected that secret. In my book, that meant he'd been under my protection. I was his alpha.

I gazed down at the soft eyes of my beautiful, anxious little wolf when a thought came to mind, one that would make things a little easier with the questioning this evening at the town hall. The eyes of everybody still present were burning holes through us, so this would be a great opportunity.

Leaning down, I whispered into Tori's ear. "Now, with everybody watching, it'd be a good time to do a little PDA, don't you think? It will help for tonight's meeting at the town hall and sell our story."

Silence followed, and I worried I'd have to push her a bit. I was about to backpedal when Tori surprised me. She moved closer to me, wrapped her arms around my neck as she rose on tiptoe, and kissed me soundly.

I tightened my hold on her and hugged her close. It didn't last long, but gasps and whispers suddenly lit up amongst the townsfolk. To me, it was all

background noise. My wolf was pleased that this wild minx was publicly showing a preference for us. I, myself, was thrilled to taste her again.

I lowered my forehead to hers, brushed her hair behind her ears, and cupped her cheeks.

Tori peered into my eyes. So many questions danced in the depths of her eyes, but now was not the time to fine-tune our story or devise a game plan to move forward. The dark circles under her eyes didn't escape me, nor did the constant biting of her inner cheek and fidgeting fingers and jittery legs. She was clearly exhausted, shaken, and dressed in random clothing that I now recognized as Mateo's.

My wolf wasn't too pleased to see her in another man's clothing, but I paid him no mind. It was better than the alternative. I was relieved the town's favorite French bartender, who was well-aware of shifters, hadn't said a word about her ensemble at the crime scene earlier. That would've caused mayhem, and I wouldn't know where to start squashing anything that would've been said.

"Thank you," she mouthed as we stayed in our little cocoon longer than necessary.

Smiling at her, I mouthed back, "No, thank you."

She rolled her eyes, grabbed my hand, and stepped back.

"It's been a really long night," I said. "Why don't you go back to the B&B, get cleaned up, and rest before the town hall meeting?"

Her mouth opened in a yawn, and she turned her head into my shoulder. "Good idea."

I wanted to cuddle up with this adorable woman while she rested, but she wouldn't go for that, and I had a lot to do before tonight's meeting.

"You know, since we'll be acting the part of lovers, it'd probably be best if you moved in with me," I murmured, already prepping myself for the inevitable pushback. "The townsfolk would expect that, and the shifters, well...they know alphas like to keep their mates close by for protection. Being apart could do our story more harm than good."

I laid it on thick. I wanted nothing more than to have her in my home. Well, that wasn't true. What I really wanted was her in my bed every night, but I was taking small steps.

Her living at the manor was the first step. That would create many scenarios and opportunities for me to accidentally bump into her and soften her up. Slow, small steps. I'd teach her she could trust me, because right now,



she trusted no one. Not even herself.

The night we'd spent together was a permanent fixture in my mind, but this ruse wasn't about repeating that night. It was figuring out how she ticked. What else was this mysterious little shifter hiding? I wanted access to all parts of her. Never had I ever wanted to know somebody so intimately and thoroughly, but then no one else was so intriguing to me. Her depths beckoned me to start digging and unearthing all her secrets.

Tori's face flushed red, and I wondered where else that blush had bloomed.

Shaking her head, she huffed at me. "That absolutely doesn't need to happen. We'll talk about this later."

After giving me another quick peck on my lips, she hurried over to Margo and Diana. The feathery feel of her lips on mine lingered as I watched her walk back to the B&B. I wondered if she realized the goodbye she'd given me was one people would expect from an honest relationship, if she was that good at selling a story. I wouldn't harp on it, though. I wanted to see if she'd let her guard down, and where this could end up.

Margo and Diana flanked her as they walked, keeping their arms around her. She was so small compared to them, but her large, energetic life force more than made up for her petite size. I was grateful to the two amazing women for looking after Tori. I didn't know anything about her, but I knew for a fact she had nobody. Until now. Now, she had the three of us.

The three women made it into the B&B without being accosted. I'd fully expected somebody to hassle her and had been ready to jump in. When the door closed behind them, I let out a breath.

I'd breathe a lot easier when she lived with me. We'd be having that conversation again. Our ruse wouldn't last if she didn't. People would talk and question our engagement's legitimacy if my fiancée was barely scraping by and living in the B&B. As a man, especially an alpha, that wouldn't fly with me if we were in a genuine relationship.

It didn't sit well with me now. More so, there was a killer loose in Blackwood Creek. Tori was an easy target for them now if they wanted to frame her, or worse, come after her.

I turned my attention to the crowd lingering outside the crime scene, and for once, I scrutinized every individual. One of them had to be the killer. I'd never been one to speculate and jump to conclusions, but it was different now. They'd all tried to pin this on Tori; I wouldn't stand for that. I'd do

anything and everything necessary to keep her safe.

My wolf huffed as if saying, “Damn right.” He was also paying close attention to every individual. He wanted to do this the shifter way, but I shut him down. We needed to be smart about this. Tori wasn’t the only one at risk; we had the whole shifter community to think about. Just because Tori was a priority didn’t mean we could cut the cords to all our other responsibilities.

I still couldn’t quite fathom how Tori had become so important to me and how protective my wolf and I had become of her. She didn’t see us as her alpha.

*Yet, my wolf mumbled.*

But she was a wolf out on her own who needed my protection. I’d give it freely and happily for her. I’d do anything it took to keep her safe.

With insufficient time to work things out, I got to work. Tori didn’t stray far from my mind, but clearing her name and making her safe motivated me to buckle down.

Clawson moved through the crowd, getting everybody’s statements, while the deputies and forensics collected evidence and took photos of the crime scene.

People who weren’t part of the earlier crowd came up to me, wanting reassurances, and I did my best to stop the panic. I told everyone I spoke with that there’d be a meeting at the town hall tonight and they’d get further updates then.

After making my rounds, I grabbed a coffee to-go at the diner. I wanted to get home and clean up, but I was exhausted. Caffeine would be my saving grace.

As I stepped onto the sidewalk with the steaming cup, I heard someone call out to me. “Mayor.”

“Mayor,” another voice piped up.

Both Magpies stood at the diner’s entrance, eyeing me expectantly. I would have laughed if I wasn’t so beat.

“Ladies, will you please spread the news about the meeting at town hall this evening?” I gave them the details, and they nodded.

“Now, we should expect to be hearing further news as well, shouldn’t we?” one asked.

I smiled. “Yes, there will be further news. I’ll share it with everybody this evening. It’d be best to get as many townsfolk at the meeting as possible.” My smile vanished. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with at the moment,

so it's imperative to keep everyone informed properly and not jump to conclusions or turn gossip into fact. That's how even more problems occur. Our priority is finding out what actually happened to Deputy Hill. Don't you agree?"

Pointedly, I stared each Magpie in the eye. They were the town's telephone, and things could easily get mixed up and reworked into fiction.

Both women narrowed their eyes at me, but when I didn't back down, they acquiesced. They were kind but nosy women and demanded a lot from people, which made many uneasy around them, so they got away with their butting in. But it never worked on me, no matter how hard they tried. I'd learned from the very beginning to stand firm.

It helped that I was an alpha with a natural affinity not to kowtow to anybody—shifter or human.

As I walked to my car, I spotted Mrs. Marrow. She stood in front of the library, comforting a very pale Lola Kipling, who was frowning, chewing her lip, and her cheeks were stained with tears. Lola stood hunched over as Mrs. Marrow stroked her back to soothe her.

Lola looked like she was about to be sick and possibly faint again. From the state of her, she'd need help to walk, and Mrs. Marrow would be unable to help. Thinking I might need to take Lola to the urgent-care center, I headed in their direction.

I stopped in my tracks when Christie Greenthorne appeared in front of me out of nowhere. I hissed out a curse under my breath. I really needed to be more focused on my surroundings.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? I demand to know why you're getting frisky, putting your hands all over the new trollop in town, in front of God and everybody, when you're supposed to be considering the mating proposal with Audrey."

Her high-pitched voice was like nails on a chalkboard. I winced. My wolf was snarling, ready to force her submission for daring to approach her alpha in such a manner and out in public where anybody could hear. What would a human think if they heard the term "mating proposal?"

"Audrey is beside herself right now because of the horrifying murder she witnessed at the hands of that loose tart. You should be comforting her because you're the only one who can meet her needs."

I shut my eyes and pinched my nose as I settled myself down. It wouldn't help to force Christie's submission out in the open like this. I took slow,

measured steps until I was completely in her space and towered over her. Her eyes widened, and for a brief flash, she remembered her place. But a sneer quickly replaced it.

I spoke quietly, my voice dangerously calm. “I already declined your offer of mating with Audrey several times. I’d be more than happy to announce it publicly. In fact, I’ll do it this evening at the town hall meeting. That way, there will be no further question about it.”

I bit back the smile that wanted to break through when Mrs. Greenthorne’s face went apocalyptic-red. Nothing was more embarrassing to her than being shamed in front of people. I didn’t care. I had to control her somehow, and since we were out in the open, it had to be done discreetly.

“As for the other matter, Audrey witnessed nothing more than everyone else because she happened across a horrible scene. Just as Tori did.”

Mrs. Greenthorne opened her mouth, but before she could argue, I spoke over her.

“As for Audrey’s needs, they are obviously being met just fine by the many men she keeps on rotation, including Mateo, since there’s no question that she was with him last night. Why else would she have been at the bar so early in the morning?”

Christie sputtered and chafed before furiously spitting out, “My daughter is only seeking temporary companionship the same way anyone might. The same way you are with that dirty trollop until we officialize you and Audrey’s mating.”

This woman had a screw loose. She hadn’t heard one damn word I’d said. My wolf saw red as I reined in our fury.

“Christie, I will say this once, and only once. So, listen up and soak it in.” I forced a hint of a growl into my voice so she knew without a doubt that her alpha was talking. “There. Will. *Never* be a mating proposal, marriage, or relationship with Audrey. Ever. Nothing. I repeat: Nothing about Tori is temporary, and I will not tolerate hearing my fiancée being called a trollop again.”

Mrs. Greenthorne’s face went ashen; the silence flattered her. The wheels slowly started to turn, and I smirked when it dawned on her that Tori would be her luna, the pack alpha’s mate. Essentially, her queen.

“That’s right, Christie. Be very careful about what you say and do from here on out.” I lowered my mouth to her ear so nobody could hear. “She’s to be my mate, and I won’t tolerate any disobedience or disrespect from anyone

in the pack when it comes to my mate. Understood?”

Stepping back, I lifted my brow, awaiting a response. A cat must've caught her tongue because she bristled and stormed off. It wasn't how I liked to do things, but Tori brought out a side of me I didn't mind showcasing. Not if it meant assuring her safety and the respect of the townsfolk.

A chuckle forced me to turn around. It seemed the Magpies had been watching the show. The smirks on their faces hid no shame.

I tipped my head at them and noticed that Mrs. Marrow and Lola Kipling were no longer outside the library.

Thinking I'd check in with Clawson before I went home, I turned in the opposite direction of my car. One thing about that exchange was that at least the Magpies had tuned in. They'd have news about my engagement to Tori out within the hour. That was more of a relief than a hindrance.

Her coming home with me that first night had not only been great for me and my pleasure, but it had laid a decent foundation for our alibi, too. It showed there had always been something between us from the first time the townsfolk observed Tori. That was the part of the deal with Tori that I didn't like. Since my eligibility had been the hot topic in town between humans and shifters for an annoyingly long time, we would be under the microscope for some time.

Clawson still had a few more statements to get, so I spoke with the deputies and forensic team. There wasn't anything more from when I last checked with them. I called my secretary to make the town hall meeting official, and she took care of the rest.

Tired and relieved to no longer be needed at present, I headed home and scarfed down some food. After shifting and everything that had happened, I needed the energy, and it had been hours since my last meal. After eating, I quickly jumped into a hot shower to clean myself up better than I'd been able to that morning—after all, I'd been covered in dirt and blood, too, which made me replay the night before.

My wolf had stopped dead in his tracks when we heard the heart-pounding howl that joined in on our serenade. We instantly recognized Tori, and we had to get to her. We ditched the group, running hard and fast to catch up to her.

The moment we caught her scent, we no longer saw reason. She appeared before us under the moonlight, and her beauty far outshone any wolf we'd ever been around. She was a force that sucked me in and wouldn't let me go.

Now, my cock hardened at the connection she and I shared last night. I'd wanted her desperately all the time before, but it was different now that our wolves had spent time together. Running next to each other, chasing, playing was so exhilarating, and I'd gotten to witness another side of her that had me falling for her even more. Our wolves felt right together, like fate had played a hand in our finding each other. Tori certainly showed the strain of heading feral, but with me, she was controlled and fun. She was pure beauty and full of life.

But with the demands of getting ready for the meeting, I forced my thoughts away from the night before. I didn't have time to pleasure myself.

I'd invite her out running again with me soon. She needed to become better acquainted with her wolf. She needed to learn to balance human Tori and wolf Tori to stave off the feral nature that was threatening to overwhelm her. Determination to help Tori work through her fear of shifting fueled me.

Tonight's meeting would be a good start for her. She'd be meeting other shifters and see we were ordinary beings holding down ordinary jobs, with the same ordinary hopes, dreams, and worries as humans, but we were just a little furrer and with sharper teeth. She would also meet humans who knew about us and humans who were in the dark. More importantly, she would see how we all lived together, that Blackwood Creek was a safe place for shifters and humans—and for her. Hill's murder wasn't helping me with that argument right now, but as soon as we cleared it up and proved she hadn't killed him, she'd see the town for what it was, and maybe even share my vision for it.

Her knowledge of the hunters made this arrangement mutually beneficial. I could now figure out how to better protect Blackwood Creek's shifter population while teaching her that shifters weren't monsters.

Shutting off the water, I reached for the towel and got ready to announce my engagement to the town and introduce them to my fiancée.

## Chapter 12

# Tori

“Eeeeeek!” Margo screeched as she ran into my room.

I jumped up from the bed where I’d been lying, lost in my thoughts. My heart hammered and fear-laced adrenaline zipped through my veins. My feet caught in the blankets that had slid to the floor, and I fell back on the bed.

“I can’t believe you, missy. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Rather than the hunters I’d feared, Margo launched herself onto the bed, grabbed my hands, and bounced on the bed, a massive grin lighting her beautiful face.

“Huh?” My mind was bleary with exhaustion from everything that had happened. I’d showered and eaten, then napped for a few hours until Diana woke me up a few moments ago to tell me the emergency town hall meeting was soon and I should probably be there. She had given me a motherly smile and pat on the hand, then left me to get dressed.

Margo had not been so gentle. She’d launched in here like a typhoon.

“I heard from a friend who heard from a Magpie that you came to town because you’re Mayor Ridge Blackwood’s fiancée. Fiancée!” She squealed again. “I can’t believe you haven’t said anything. I want all the details, dirty for sure and not so dirty, too. How long has this been going on? Why were you so determined to avoid him and not talk about him when you first arrived? How’s the sex? I mean, he is an alpha. Oh my god, are you two fated mates? I’ve always wanted to see that type of soul connection in real life. This is crazy. Why aren’t you saying anything? Come on, spill.”

*Did the woman even take a breath through all that?*

“Hello, earth to Tori. Anyone home?” Margo waved her hand in front of my face. I must have spaced out for a bit.

Laughing at her antics, I asked, “You done?”

Smacking my hand, Margo implored, “Stop it. Come on, spill everything. I need all the details.”

I crossed my legs to get more comfortable, and Margo did the same. My heart sped up a little, and I swallowed past a lump forming in my throat because this whole scenario—between Diana waking me up and Margo storming into my room, demanding answers—was all too reminiscent of family. The mom and sister I didn’t have. It was nice, but it made me sad. When I’d been running, I’d rarely thought about family, but lately, between the Ashworths and Bogfords, I’d thought of little else.

“Ridge and I are engaged. Have been for a few months.” I didn’t know how to answer all her questions, so I’d have to be as vague as possible until Ridge and I worked out the finer points. “At the bar, Ridge and I were so excited to see each other. We were back in our little world, and then later, after we left the bar, we had a little spat. We talked it over. Running together last night really helped. We’re good now.”

Margo cocked her head and scrunched her brow. “Yeah, what was up with that? You told me you wouldn’t come, and then when we were in the forest, there was this strange howl I’d never heard before.” She shook her head as if she needed to physically get herself back on track. “Now, among us shifters, it’s going around that Ridge took off immediately after hearing it and never came back. Which is odd because the sheriff and our alpha usually like to keep an eye on things and make sure none of the problematic shifters”—she lifted her brow at me—“AKA, Zander, don’t tip off any of the blissfully unaware humans.”

Zander’s name didn’t ring a bell to me. I didn’t know who he was, but I certainly didn’t want to think about last night and how excruciating it had felt for my wolf to seize control. It was only the second time I’d ever shifted, and I needed to ensure it never happened again.

If that was me with the strange howling and Ridge taking off and not coming back, then I assumed what he’d told me to say was probably more true than not.

“It wasn’t anything major. I just wanted to play-fight with my fiancé.”

Margo’s eyebrows dance at me. “Did that lead to you shifting back for a moonlight tryst worthy of getting into the dirty, naughty details?”

I choked out a laugh. I couldn’t help it. Margo was so refreshing and had such a free spirit about her. “Margo, you need a boyfriend.”



With a heavy sigh, she fell back on the bed like a drama queen. “Don’t I know it.”

“Let me get dressed, then we can head to the town hall meeting.”

Margo got off the bed. “Mom and I will meet you in the foyer in ten minutes.”

The three of us arrived at the town hall with plenty of time to spare. I was amazed at how many people turned up. I’d never been to a town hall meeting before, and as soon as I walked in, the loud hum of talking died down and the group started watching me and whispering. They weren’t even subtle about it.

Sheriff Clawson walked up to us. “Hi, Tori. Ridge has a seat available for you. Sorry, Ms. Bogford, Margo, I didn’t think to save you two seats next to Tori.”

The sheriff eyed Margo a little longer than necessary, but I didn’t pay it too much mind as I realized the lone seat Clawson had pointed out was in the very first row next to what I assumed was the mayor’s seat.

Margo and Diana headed to a couple of chairs in the back. I made to follow them, but they shooed me away to follow Sheriff Clawson.

I scanned the room, looking for Ridge but not seeing him anywhere. Clasp my hands in front of me so tight until they were numb and keeping my eyes down, I followed Clawson to the front. I could feel the weight of every eye on me. After years of running and hiding, being so public went against my inherent instincts. I fidgeted, my foot tapping nervously as I waited for Ridge to show. Once he was there, I’d calm down. I could count on that.

Vulnerability and self-consciousness crept into my chest. I had spent the last four years blending in and never getting noticed. That was no longer an option now that I was involved in the prime gossip for the town.

I surveyed the crowd. The shifters were tense and distrustful of everyone, or at least that was what I gleaned. I could only imagine what was going through their minds. This meeting seemed to be an annoyance to them. They wanted this handled like a pack because whoever killed the deputy was putting the shifters’ very existence in jeopardy.

The humans were mourning and scared that a killer or wild animal was loose in their town. They were there for answers. A family with bloodshot eyes and sorrow oozing out of their pores sat a few rows back in the opposite aisle. That had to be Phil Hill’s family. My heart ached for them. Losing somebody you loved in such a manner was devastating. I’d know.

The crowd started rumbling when Ridge arrived. He shook hands and spoke to people as he meandered through the town hall, comfortable in his role of mayor. His gorgeous face, smile, and kind eyes had my inner wolf and me aching for him.

Stomping those thoughts out of my mind, I studied the way he interacted with people. Ridge exuded leadership and alpha power without trying. I noticed how people instigated the interaction, placing themselves in his path so he had no choice but to acknowledge them. After an age, he made it to the podium, winking and smiling at me when he passed me.

My stomach did a little jig, and my wolf preened in approval. The attraction between us was strong, I couldn't deny that. Part of us seemed to fit even though I'd normally run away from a man like him. But for some strange reason, I was staying and letting this charade play out. My wolf made it clear that we wouldn't allow this with any other man.

He addressed the crowd and got everyone quieted down in short order. Commanding that kind of obedience and respect was yet another impressive trait.

“Thank you all for coming. By now, I'm sure everyone has heard about the tragic scene discovered at the bar this morning.” The group nodded and affirmed. Ridge turned to the family. “Our community aches for the Hill family. Phil was a major staple in the Blackwood Creek community, and his loss is deeply felt.” The Hill family accepted his words, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Ridge had already spoken with them in private. “There has been a lot of confusion and fear about this tragedy, so I want to make sure we are all on the same page regarding the ongoing investigation.”

Surprise hit me when James Ashworth stood and spoke. “Why is this being treated like a murder investigation if it looked like an animal attack? Shouldn't we be out hunting the creature?”

His mild-mannered demeanor invoked a lot of murmurings of agreement from the humans. The shifters remained silent.

“That's a great question, James. While it appeared like an animal attack at first glance, Sheriff Birch Clawson's team found evidence to suggest foul play is a genuine possibility here.”

The crowd erupted into gasps and whispered conversations.

Ridge lifted his hands to motion for everybody to settle down. “Now, I'm keeping this vague since this is an ongoing investigation, but we wanted to assure you all that we are putting proper manpower and focus on solving this

serious matter.”

I watched Ridge and the sheriff. They’d probably done it this way so they could investigate the shifter community further without humans raising too many questions.

“I know this probably isn’t what most of you were expecting when you came to this meeting, but it is imperative that everyone remain calm and allow the investigation to progress without any interference. We are a strong and resilient community, but we are also a caring and compassionate one. We will not let this tragedy divide us or break us down. We will overcome this challenge together. Accusing friends or neighbors won’t help solve this. I can assure you that everything that needs to be done is being done.”

Ridge rested his hands on the corner of the podium and scanned the crowd. “Now, a few fingers have already been groundlessly pointed.” His gaze narrowed on the Greenthornes. “The first people who arrived at the crime scene, including my fiancée, are, like everyone else, innocent until proven guilty.” The crowd rumbled again at the mention of his fiancée, but Ridge maintained control of the room. “Right now, they all have solid alibis and shouldn’t be treated with suspicion or ill will.”

Some families who appeared to have daughters my age glared daggers at me, and my wolf growled. She was ready to defend Ridge’s claim and put all those bitches in their place. I almost had to chain her down again, but she settled when we saw the Ashworths smiling at me. Little Beck waved at me, and I fluttered my fingers back at the cutie.

The Bogfords’ smiles were blinding, and Margo gave two thumbs up and a wink. My wolf and I calmed down with their warm celebration of the news. Not wanting my wolf to get into another snit, I returned my focus to Ridge.

“Please let law enforcement do their jobs and be patient as the investigation continues. If anyone has any information, I urge you to cooperate and report any suspicious activity or information you may have. The sooner we solve this, the sooner we can properly honor and mourn Deputy Hill. Any resistance will be seen as a cause for suspicion. Sheriff Clawson has also increased police patrols and security measures to ensure your safety. I would also like to add that everyone in Blackwood Creek deserves a safe place to live, and we’ll stop at nothing to ensure that.”

As Ridge wrapped up the meeting, he asked everyone to stay vigilant, be safe, and be kind to their neighbors.

Wanting to get out of there and away from all the glares, I stood as soon

as Ridge finished speaking, but I couldn't get down the aisle with everyone using the time to socialize and blocking the exit.

Ridge wrapped his arm around my waist. "Brace yourself," he whispered in my ear.

People flocked around us, offering congratulations and talking over each other. It was surreal to be congratulated at one end of the hall while hearing people offering condolences to the Hills on the other.

I stayed glued to Ridge's side. While some people were fake in their enthusiasm, most seemed genuinely thrilled for us. Luckily, the Greenthornes and others who'd had their eye on hooking themselves to Ridge stormed out of the hall.

Ridge's arm tightened around me when people pointed out that I wasn't wearing an engagement ring.

"It's not like you can't afford to get her something fancy, Mayor," someone joked.

Ridge smiled. "The ring is at the jeweler being sized correctly for Tori. It kept slipping off her finger." He smoothly lifted my hand and kissed the spot where the ring should have been.

Several women were awed by the sweet gesture and how lucky I was to have snagged such a catch. Many of the men clapped Ridge on the back, saying they were happy for him and that he'd claimed a real beauty.

Uncomfortable didn't even begin to describe how I was feeling at the moment. There were too many people, and I wasn't used to so much attention. I felt my pulse speed up and my breathing become shallower.

Ridge must've sensed it because he held me close and didn't let me slip into panic. He shielded me with his body and did most of the talking. My fingers worried at his button-down shirt as I kept my arm firmly around his waist. He was my lifeline at the moment, and I wasn't letting go.

Once the strangers slowly dissipated, the people I actually knew came forward, and I could finally take a deep, calming breath. James and Fiona Ashworth beamed at me, and Fiona hugged me. Beck clung to my leg until I picked him up.

"Tori, needing a ride to meet a friend?" Fiona said with a raised eyebrow. "Girl, you really had us fooled. I can't believe you didn't say anything to us. There I was, yakking your ear off about what a great little town this was and that you should stay, and the whole time, you were moving here."

I smiled at her and eyed Ridge. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Fiona. I was a

little nervous about the whole thing. Moving to a new town and making a new life where I only knew Ridge...of course, I had to make it more difficult and do it alone.”

Ridge picked up on what I was saying. “I’m so grateful you gave her a ride to bring her to me. I’d be lost now if you hadn’t done that.”

“We’re thrilled we got to meet and spend quality time with her,” Fiona said, then looked at me. “You better not be a stranger now. We should have lunch.”

I nodded, and she took the wriggling Beck from me.

“Well, we’ve got to get this one in bed. Congratulations again,” she said, and I watched the family walk out of the town hall.

Mrs. Marrow came up and shook my hand. “I was right. You are quite a catch. The mayor wouldn’t pick anybody who wasn’t. As soon as you stepped into town, I knew. After all, a looker like Ridge was bound to find himself such a stunner for a wife.”

I blushed. Ridge threw his head back and laughed, then kissed my cheek.

“You have no idea how lucky I am, Mrs. Marrow. I couldn’t believe she agreed to be my wife.” He stared down at me with admiration. “I’m going to make sure to convince her of that every day.”

Laughing, Mrs. Marrow patted his arms, then hurried off to the Hill family. My heart seized for a moment. It seemed wrong to be celebrating while they were grieving.

Lola squeezed around a couple of people and made her way to us. I smiled at her. The woman was timid, and I wanted to ensure she knew she was welcome.

“I just wanted to wish you both all the best. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you, Lola. That means a lot.”

Lola and I exchanged a warm hug, and Ridge thanked her. Then she shyly left the hall. I wondered how many people noticed that she was even here with her meek demeanor. I couldn’t explain why I so badly wanted to protect her and become her friend.

Ridge led me over to the Hill family, and I offered them my condolences. They offered their congratulations to us in turn. It wasn’t an awkward conversation, but the emotions were so strong that they swirled inside me, and manic energy slowly pulsed beneath my skin.

The Hills left shortly after we spoke to them, and most of the hall cleared out. Margo and Diana were still chatting with several shifters, and several

humans were talking with the sheriff and a couple of the deputies. A pair of shifters stood talking, and several groups of three and four sat around the hall.

Ridge held my hand and guided me outside, away from the people still milling around.

“How are you doing? Especially with all the eyes on us.”

“Ridge, I’m fine.”

Genuine concern showed in his eyes. “Tori, you might still be in shock from everything earlier. It’s been a lot to handle and take in. I want to make sure you’re taking it easy. If you get overwhelmed, please come to me.”

He grabbed my hands and held them to his chest. It was a very intimate move. I let it go since we were in public, and it was PDA. He was right. We needed to ensure people caught us displaying our affections, or we’d have no hope of them believing we were a couple, much less engaged.

“I’m fine, honestly. When I got back to the B&B earlier, I showered and ate, and then I slept. It helped.”

Staring into my eyes as if looking for the truth in my statement, he let it go after a moment. “Dine with me at Blackwood Manor. We can discuss our situation more. We need to be on the same page.”

Out of nowhere, he leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead.

“You’re right,” I acknowledged. “We need to get everything straight. Fine-tune our meet-cute story for all the questions that will be lobbed our way.”

Ridge laughed. “Meet-cute?”

I giggled and waved a hand at him. “Never mind. In answer to your question, yes, I will have dinner with you.”

“Good.” His fingers tightened around mine, causing all my synapses to spark. My wolf let out a contented chuff.

I needed to make my position clear to Ridge and my wolf, though, before we all went down a dangerous path together. “Just so you’re clear, this is for our arrangement. I’m not going to enjoy a single moment of it.”

I wouldn’t. He was a shifter, and the more I was around him, the more my inner monster wanted out. Her getting out again scared me more than the hunters. Okay, maybe more like scared me equally.

A smirk twisted his mouth. “Okay, Tori. No enjoyment.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “I’m serious, Ridge. This is just business.”

“Tori, are you coming or heading off with the mayor?” Margo shouted from the front doors with a grin and a twinkle in her eyes.

Ridge smiled and put his arm around my shoulders. “She’s coming with me, Margo.”

Margo let out a lecherous cackle. “I bet she is.”

Ridge laughed and I blushed. Diana swatted at Margo, shaking her head and trying to hide her smile.

“Be safe, Tori,” Diana said as she and Margo started back toward their place. A warm, squishy feeling puddled in my heart at the two women’s joking and concern.

Ridge squeezed my shoulder and spoke softly. “You belong here, Tori.”

In no time, he had me in his car, and we arrived at Ridge’s fancy manor. This time, I took notice of the elaborate place. He drove slowly down the long driveway, seemingly aware of my interest. This place was a statement piece for sure. It was a grand masterpiece that had many decades of stories to tell.

As he parked the car, I huffed. “You know, you look like the type who grew up with a silver spoon in your mouth.”

Ridge’s easy-going laughter erupted once again. He was so carefree, but after watching him earlier, I wondered if he was only that way with me. Which made me feel sad for him. He had so much responsibility on his shoulders. Did anyone take the time to see if the mayor was happy?

“Most shifters actively avoid silver, even silver spoons.” He exited the car, sighing when I didn’t let him open my door. “I do admit, though, that my family and I have been far more privileged than we had any right to be.”

He grabbed my hand and led me to the front entrance without waiting for my reply. I couldn’t lie—his earnestness caught me off-guard. There was a story to be told about this place and the Blackwoods, but I kept my mouth shut and didn’t ask any questions.

If I started, he’d have free rein to ask his questions, and I didn’t want to answer them.

I wanted to pat myself on the back for refraining from gaping and exclaiming as I walked inside and took in the opulence I’d stormed out of the last time I was here. Ridge pointed rooms out to me as we passed, and I couldn’t help but notice how empty the manor was. Quiet.

Shouldn’t he have a butler to open the front door and have anything Ridge required waiting for him as soon as he walked in? I’d expected there to be a bunch of people working for him, but nobody was here to wait on him.

“So, where’s your Alfred?”

Ridge shook his head as he kept guiding me through his palace. “I only employ one cleaner who stops by once a week. I hire out for landscaping and upkeep. I have two assistants, one for my family business and one for my personal business. Otherwise, I avoid having staff at the manor.”

He pushed through a swinging door, and we stepped into a five-star chef’s wet dream. Ridge settled me on a barstool at the kitchen island, then started getting things together for the meal. I found it sexy that he knew his way around the kitchen.

“The idea of having a full staff here, just for me...well, that’s just pretentious, and I enjoy my privacy.” He sent a smoldering look at me over his shoulder, and my core tightened.

Surprise, surprise, annoyance popped up inside me. This time, though, it was because he was down to earth. Why did he have to be that way? Didn’t he understand that I was trying to pinpoint all his faults so I could keep my distance? He made it harder for me to dislike him, and I couldn’t afford that. He was a shifter—a monster like me. I craved something to drive a wedge between us so this fake relationship wouldn’t pose any emotional threat to me when I left this town.

Because that was still happening. It didn’t matter that I was getting a little attached to people. It would be safer for everyone if I left.

I’d have to wait and see what Ridge’s problems were. Since he was a shifter, there was bound to be an endless list. He couldn’t possibly be as annoyingly perfect as he seemed. Nobody was.



## Chapter 13

# Ridge

Tori's comments about my lack of staff didn't surprise me. Most people assumed I lived like a king, but nothing could be further from the truth. In my early childhood, when my parents were still alive, the house was full of staff. We always had people accompanying us. Then, when I lived with my uncle and aunt, that lifestyle fell away. My uncle taught me the difference between Blackwoods and other shifters and why it was wrong for us to have so many privileges and flaunt them. It made me realize I didn't need servants, butlers, or anything of the sort. I was satisfied paying for services to help sustain other people's businesses.

For me, the real kicker was Tori's face when she watched me cook dinner. Not many people knew I could cook. It shocked her that I knew my way around my own kitchen. I should have mentioned to her that I did my own grocery shopping, too. I chuckled at the thought. That'd probably make her pass out.

I piled utensils and ingredients on the counter next to the stove. I wasn't a gourmet chef by any means, but I liked to cook when I was eating at the diner. I found it relaxing. My aunt taught me how to care for myself by showing me how to cook, do my laundry, and clean. She and my uncle were in agreement that I shouldn't have people taking care of my personal needs. The more self-sufficient I was, the better leader I would become. After all, there was no way to avoid being alpha within my pack. Not with Blackwood as my surname.

Tori needed a nutritious meal. Living the way she had been, I wouldn't be surprised if she rarely ate healthy meals. She needed to build her strength. I decided on baked chicken, roasted potatoes, and a salad. Nothing fancy, but

filling and balanced. Tori offered to help, but I declined. I found I enjoyed cooking and providing for her.

My wolf grumbled—it was a fated mate’s job to provide, and we’d do exactly that. She needed to unwind, and we both had a desire to take care of her.

Wait...what the hell? I shook those thoughts out of my head. Tori couldn’t be my fated mate. Wouldn’t we both have known instantly? It must have been wishful thinking on my part, combined with my desire for her and the overwhelming emotions of the past couple days.

As I cooked, Tori wandered into the adjacent dining room. Her steps echoed back into the kitchen, and I could hear her pausing in front of every portrait on display in there—all of my ancestors. There was also one of me from when I was a child. I was yet to have one commissioned since taking ownership of the manor, as most Blackwoods had done before me.

I waited for one of her cunning retorts about privilege or a dig at shifters, which I found entertaining, though my wolf and I were a little uneasy about that. We liked her sass and feistiness.

She had to still be in shock. Finding a body the way she did, and the fact that it looked like the throat had been ripped out and a shifter had more than likely done it, which she already had issues with...

She was not only being held suspect by the court of public opinion, but she was convinced of her guilt—convinced of her wolf’s guilt. That had to fuck with her mind. I was happy that I could give her a reprieve and bring her to my home for dinner.

“Tori, dinner’s ready,” I called out as I set the table in the kitchen.

She sat at the table, rolling her eyes at my holding out her chair for her.

“Enjoy,” I said with a little grin.

Tori took a bite and muttered, “That’s disappointing.”

Frowning, I looked down at my plate. Lifting a forkful to my nose, I sniffed. It didn’t smell bad, and when I tasted the food, it was fine.

“Is something wrong with it?”

“It’s annoying. The food tastes great. I’m just disappointed that I can’t pick on your cooking skills.” She seemed genuinely upset about it. Her face scrunched up and she scowled at the food as she took another bite.

Laughter erupted from my chest, and it took a while for me to calm down. My response only further annoyed Tori, but I couldn’t help it. Everything about this woman was invigorating.

Most women would have been delighted that a man wanted to cook for her, and even happier that the meal was edible. Tori, though, wanted to find fault with it. I got the feeling she would have been more thrilled if I'd burned the food and she would've had to choke it down.

I calmed down enough to eat, then braced myself for how she'd react to what I was about to say. "Tori, you should stay with me until the murder case is over and they catch whoever killed the deputy."

Tori dropped the fork. "Don't forget, Ridge, I might actually be the one who killed Phil Hill. I'm still not convinced that it wasn't me."

I was about to argue that point, but she steamrolled over me.

"You still haven't told me what happened last night." She closed her eyes as if searching her memories for answers. When she finally looked back at me, she continued, "I'm not about to move in with a perfect stranger. And a shifter, at that."

I understood her trust issues, but I couldn't accept her unwillingness to trust me when I'd done nothing to earn her distrust.

"Have I given you a single reason not to trust me?"

Tori folded her arms and stared at me. "Not yet, but you will."

The way she frustrated me made my head pound. I took a bite of my chicken, my eyes slanted on her. This was a young woman on the run from hunters. There was a vulnerability in her eyes that forced me to stop strategizing how to make her see reason and remember what she had been through. I needed to be patient with her. I would accept this as a challenge and help her through it.

"I'm an open book," I said. "Ask me anything. I'll answer it all if it helps your trust issues."

She uncrossed her arms and rested her hands in her lap. "I admit I have a hard time trusting people. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful that you're helping me with a cover story and an alibi. What I don't understand is why you're doing any of this. What's in it for you? What do you get out of having me pose as your fiancée?"

"You're right. I do get something out of this," I replied. "Firstly, you'll help me better understand the hunters. I need to know what I can do to better protect Blackwood Creek's shifters from them. I meant it when I said this place was to be a haven for all creatures. But I haven't met anybody who's been running from them the way you have. I can't imagine what you've gone through or how you survived, but I've got a hunch it was rough. Secondly, it

will give me a break from the families in town—especially the shifters in town who insist that I find a mate to continue the Blackwood family line.”

Tori picked up her fork and resumed eating, making me ease up. I wanted to make sure she ate enough. She was far too thin. How many times had she gone without food?

“That’s a very archaic way of thinking,” she answered. “You could pick any girl off the street to use as your fake fiancée and shield you from the hordes of women who probably drop at your feet every day. You didn’t need to swoop in and help me when I might actually be guilty.” She pointed her fork at me. “You might have a hero alpha-bossy-pants complex.”

Amusement flooded my system, as it often did around her. Tori made things more fun and exciting. “I’m almost positive you didn’t do it.”

“See? *Almost*. Not completely. When we were in the tavern, you implied we were together during the moonlight run. Please, tell me what happened when my monster got free.”

At the mention of her wolf, she cut into her chicken with such force, the knife clanged against the plate. It gutted me that she’d called her wolf a monster when she was anything but. She was beautiful and strong.

“If you weren’t struggling with the effects of being a lone wolf for so long, and if you weren’t constantly fighting your wolf, it’d be easier for you to shift,” I said. “As shifters, we have to maintain a balance with our inner animals. If you found harmony with your wolf, you’d be able to remember every moment of running, playing, and experiencing freedom in your other form. I’m sure you’d have loved every moment because I did. We had a fun night together. For a little while, at least.”

Her irritation slammed into me. The tension darkened the atmosphere around us and made the air in the room heavy.

“You can save the shifter sales pitch because I’m not interested. All I want to know is what the fuck happened.”

Images of running through the woods together in our wolf forms played in my head. Nipping playfully and chasing each other, then stopping to howl at the moon. The way we’d harmonized was beautiful, something I’d never forget.

From the start, I’d realized the little wolf was in complete control and was far more animalistic, violent, and feral than any other shifter I’d seen before. But those qualities didn’t detract from her beauty, her dark soulful eyes and multicolored brown fur. She was a sight to behold. I wished she could see

herself the way I saw her.

Excitement mounted inside me. I wanted to experience that with her again. I had to figure out how to convince her to let her poor caged wolf out again, and next time, I wanted Tori to be present in her mind to enjoy it. Still, trying to convince her how good and beneficial shifting was could take a lot of time because she was clearly terrified of it.

“I was running with the other wolves when we heard your howl. I had Clawson keep an eye on the other wolves as I sought you out. I had to get to you. There was no way around it. Your howl called to me. When I caught up with you, we started running through the forest together. We had a lot of fun, played with each other. Your wolf was starved for it.”

I couldn't interpret what Tori was thinking. She had one hell of a poker face.

“Your wolf started to get restless, and you started moving and venturing closer to town. You must've scented the humans and wanted to go hunting.”

The bland expression on her face vanished, and in a flash, she paled, her body tensing and her breathing coming out in short, rapid bursts.

“I herded you farther into the woods and distracted your wolf from going into town by hunting other animals. She was having fun and forgot about humans and the town. You were tenacious in the hunt and constantly played with my wolf.”

Even with the feral side in control, she'd acted like a pup. She'd thrown herself into everything as if she'd never done it before. Having heard how Tori spoke of her wolf, I truly believed that her wolf had never been *allowed* to be a wolf. Tori was at war with herself, and that disconnect was slowly driving her mad.

“Then another wolf, Zander Elkins, sniffed us out.”

I lifted my brow to her in query, checking to see if the name rang any bells for her. She shook her head, then paused for a second. “Wait, Margo mentioned a Zander earlier.”

“You need to stay away from him.” Catching Tori's amused and defiant look, I added, “He's a shifter, but he's a troublemaker. He'll cause more grief than anything you need to be dealing with.” I realized this statement wouldn't help her attitude toward shifters, but she needed to understand. “Please, Tori.”

Relief settled in my bones when Tori nodded. I was thrilled that she'd listened to me on the issue and trusted my opinion.

“Zander is the son of one of the town’s human residents, Elliot Elkins. He’s an old coot, but to answer your question, yes, Zander is also an alpha.”

“Two alphas in one area. Is that normal?”

I pushed my plate to the side and leaned on my elbows. “There can be more than one alpha, and there can be hiccups with that. Especially here, where I run it as more of a town than a traditional pack, but that’s the only way it can really be done if we want to create a home and live among humans. Zander likes to make it more difficult because he likes to challenge me and constantly stir up trouble between the shifters and humans.”

When he’d appeared last night, I’d seen red. My wolf was a selfish bastard and wanted Tori all to himself. I’d been close to losing control of my wolf when Zander tackled Tori in a clearing and scented her. Thinking about it now made me growl and my wolf rage.

“Zander isn’t a good alpha. He doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions or the safety of other shifters and humans. He doesn’t have the respect of the other shifters, and that makes for a dangerous combination.”

Tori pursed her lips. “I’ll stay away from him. What happened next?”

I calmed my wolf down. If I lost control in front of her, she’d never trust me. “Zander found us and tackled you. It appeared mostly playful when he pinned you down, but with him, it’s never just playing. It pissed off my wolf, and I pulled him off you. Then shit got serious. I wasn’t expecting your wolf to jump in and attack Zander. She didn’t appreciate him interrupting us, either. That’s why we were covered in blood. Your feral counterpart battled it out with him.”

Tori bit her lower lip. I hated telling her, but she needed to understand exactly what it meant to go feral and how serious it was. Her wolf was small but fierce. She’d perceived Zander as a threat, and I’d had to intervene to stop her wolf from getting carried away and accidentally killing Zander.

“Then the other wolves started howling again, and you raced after them, heading back to Blackwood Creek. You took off so fast, and I was still fighting with Zander, fending off his attack. It took some time, but I was able to force his submission again. You’d think the wolf would learn. Anyway, that’s beside the point. I was finally able to pick up your scent. I raced after you, but the sun was already starting to rise. Once I got closer to town, I shifted so nobody would see me in wolf form. I went and got dressed and continued looking for you, and then I bumped into Clawson. Shortly after that, we heard Audrey screaming.”

Tori was taking it all in, the expressions crossing her face letting me see that. I stayed quiet and let her digest everything I'd said. Contrary to her carefully schooled expression, her face now displayed so many different thoughts. I yearned to know every single one.

What she was thinking wasn't all good because there was a lot of scowling and so much confusion. She was trying hard to remember, but it wasn't coming back to her. I could only imagine how frustrating and fear-inducing that had to be.

"Shit." Her curse jolted me. She'd been quiet for so long before speaking again. Tori covered her face with her hands. "Don't you see, Ridge?" She lowered her hands and looked imploringly at me.

"See what, little wolf?"

"The amount of time I was gone from you gave my wolf enough time to track the deputy down and kill him. It had been enraged when he got in my face at the diner."

Her body shook, but she didn't seem to notice. Her eyes were frantically seeking answers in mine. Her earlier panic returned, ramped up this time. It was written all over her. My heart dropped into my stomach. I had to calm her before she ran.

"Did you wake up in the bar?"

She frowned. "What?"

"Did you wake up in the bar?"

She licked her lips and shook her head. "No, I woke up in the woods. Naked. I was in the bar because I needed something to wear. I couldn't walk around town in the nude."

She sounded so lost, I wanted to pull her into my lap and comfort her. Knowing that would only give her a reason to bite my head off, I refrained with willpower alone.

"Then I highly doubt you killed him. With your wolf more on the feral side, there wouldn't be any rational thinking, only the glory of the hunt and the kill. You wouldn't have left until you had your fill."

Tori's shoulders slumped and her face paled even more, which I hadn't thought possible. She gulped down air. Her eyes flicked around the table, but she wasn't seeing anything. Her mind was sorting through all the details and facts, and none of them were lining up for her. I could tell she didn't believe that she couldn't have killed the deputy.

It bothered me that she was so freaked out and scared of herself. Even

more, I hated how alone and fragile she looked. She was so young to be battling so much.

I moved both plates aside, reached across the table, and grasped her freezing hands.

“Tori, I need you to listen to me. Hear what I’m saying.”

It looked like she’d forgotten I was there for a second, but she made eye contact with me. I squeezed her hands.

“I assure you, Tori, your wolf was playing and having fun. She wasn’t racing back to town to kill. She had her hunt and her prize with the woodland creatures. Play-fighting with me and then fighting with Zander allowed her to be a wolf. The howling of the other wolves made her curious, and she wanted to check it out. She hasn’t been around other wolves, has she?”

Tori’s eyes were a little watery, but no tears fell. Holding everything back wasn’t good for her. She kept everything bottled up so tightly that one day it would come out some way and potentially lead to somebody’s death. It hadn’t happened yet, though. I would do my damndest to make sure it never did.

“Remember, I was running with your wolf. I enjoyed every moment I spent with her. She’s a little on the feral side, but she’s not an outright danger the way you want to believe. She just needs the connection of being with other shifters. Once you gain that, you can work on socializing with her. The two of you can be in complete harmony. Once that trust is there between human and wolf, she’ll be there to protect you whenever you’re in danger. That’s the beauty of being a shifter.”



## Chapter 14

# Tori

My breathing evened out, and I started to feel better. Knowing more or less what had happened after I lost control the previous night calmed my frayed nerves. Still, I wasn't convinced of my innocence purely because I couldn't remember a fucking thing. Having to rely on someone else telling me what had happened didn't sit well in my gut. Still, it was better than nothing, and as nothing was all I'd come up with, I had to be content with that.

Oddly enough, I believed Ridge. Something told me he wouldn't lie to me. There was some driving force inside my head that told me Ridge was to be trusted, that I didn't have to worry when it came to him. We had a connection I didn't fully understand. I wanted to fight to the death about that because I didn't trust *anybody*, and I didn't *want* to trust him, but I accepted his version of events.

I didn't want to keep thinking about what could have happened between when I left Ridge and Zander fighting and woke up in the woods. It made me sick, because although Ridge didn't believe it, that time left open a wide gap for me to have been the killer.

Ridge's absolute confidence in my innocence was difficult to wrap my head around. How could he have so much faith in my monster? It wasn't like she hadn't tried to do this before. What made now any different? The deputy had angered her and upset me. She'd seen an opportunity, and she'd taken it. The monster had wanted her revenge.

Indecision and anger rumbled in the pit of my stomach, and I no longer wanted to think about it. It was best to change the topic, or I'd work myself into a frenzy, and who knew where that would take me.

"Thank you for telling me what happened last night, but I don't want to

connect with shifters. I don't want to become one with my wolf." I lifted a finger. "Which, I may add, I've *never* wanted. So, I'd appreciate it if you could give up now on trying to get me to cozy up to the damn creature. It's not going to happen. *Ever*. You may be happy to accept your monster, but I don't have to accept mine."

Ridge's face fell, but I didn't miss the determined resolve in his shoulders as he leaned closer. I stopped him before he could say anything else.

"Ridge, if we don't move on from this topic, I will walk out the door right now." I wasn't playing games, and I never made idle threats. I always followed through on what I said I'd do. The look Ridge gave me satisfied me. He believed I'd do exactly that.

I gave him a pointed look before moving on. "Now, about what we're going to do moving forward. I'll still stay at the Bogford B&B and keep working at the Moonlight Café."

That was how it was going to be. I had to work and save money. Paying to stay at the B&B would hurt the pocketbook, but it was doable. I'd done it before, repeatedly. Hopefully, I could save up some money to get a new laptop so I could do some more freelance work. That was where I could make some good fast money.

Ridge moved around in his seat and was about to interject, but I pushed on over him.

"I also want to help with the case in any way possible. If I am the one who did this, I have no issue with turning myself in, and if I didn't, then it'd be a relief to clear my conscience."

I could tell he wanted to argue with me about being the killer again. He rolled his tongue over his teeth as a heavy breath left him, but I was grateful that he kept his opinions to himself.

The next part was trickier. I wanted to tell him everything I could about the hunters and their capabilities, but I didn't want him to know exactly *why* they were hunting me and just how much experience I had with them. That was my battle and my burden alone; nobody else should be dragged into that mess. If people in town didn't make it out alive because of me, it would haunt me for the rest of my life.

It would be best if I held those cards close to my chest—or better yet, if I got away from this town and these people. It was best if I was alone.

"I will teach you everything I've learned over the years, all the little things I've picked up about how they track and hunt shifters. I don't assume

it'll be much help, as I did my best to avoid them completely, but I'll give you what I've got and what I've been doing over the past years. Maybe you can extract something from it."

I tried to play down my involvement with the hunters. It wasn't heroic, after all; it was fear and hiding. Making sure I kept my head down and kept moving—nothing remarkable or inspired about that.

Alpha Ridge started making an appearance. I could tell by his hardening demeanor. He made himself more visible, more prominent, which I didn't think could have been possible.

He folded his arms over his chest. "You'll be much safer here at Blackwood Manor. Everyone in town would expect my fiancée to live here."

I scoffed at him, then mimicked his posture. "Well, since I'm not really your fiancée, the town can make do with us just acting lovey-dovey in front of them. And, you know, sporadically mentioning wedding planning or something. That should be perfectly fine. I mean, how hard could it be to convince them? Not *everyone* will be invested in this whole charade."

He was ridiculous to think this engagement was so important to the entire town. People had their own lives and worries. Our so-called engagement meant nothing to them.

Ridge laughed and sat back, shaking his head. "You've never lived in a small town like Blackwood Creek before. It shows."

I arched an eyebrow and looked at him like he was missing a screw or two. Or four.

"Here, everyone—and I do mean *everyone*—is nosy. Add in my family name and everything attached to it, and the interest increases tenfold. The people here never lose interest, and it's been a pain in my ass for years. They didn't even know I was seeing someone, then *bam*, I'm engaged. The townspeople will be buzzing and circling the gossip ring like a band of vultures. There's no question about that. You, little wolf, have become numero uno on the gossip list."

"That sounds a bit over-the-top, Ridge." Not to mention egotistical.

"I'm serious, Tori. We'll be the talk of the town for a few weeks, at the very least. They'll gossip about every time you and I leave the manor or don't leave the manor. They'll document every time one of us so much as glances at another person in town because then they'll think our engagement is going downhill. If we don't hold hands enough or kiss enough, then our relationship is going downhill. If we are over-the-top lovey-dovey, forcing it too much,

our relationship is probably going downhill.” He laughed a little. “If we don’t attend certain gatherings together, people in town will complain that they’re being slighted by missing out on our company and that we’re not being considerate enough. Oh, and you better be prepared for thousands of unsolicited wedding ideas, marital advice, honeymoon advice.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Mating tips from the shifters.” A smirk came out on that last bit. He liked that part a little too much. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they start in on children and how fast or slow we should start having them. Shifters will give tips on what to do once we have pups.”

My eyes widened and my heart seized. Children? Pups? My womb suddenly ached, and there was absolutely no reason for that. I’d never thought of passing along my monstrous genes. But why did the mention of Ridge and me having children leave me aching for it?

“Living in a small town makes people think they have a say in our relationship and know what’s best. I’m just warning you about what to expect. It’s going to come from everybody.”

My leg started bouncing under the table. That couldn’t be true, could it? My survival these last years had come from being invisible, a ghost in the wind. I couldn’t live under a magnifying glass. I had to maintain as much anonymity as possible.

But hell, who was I kidding? Anonymity had gone out the window when I left the bar with Ridge that first night. How could I have been so stupid? So naïve?

Trying to breathe through ever-narrowing airways, I choked down several dry swallows before meekly saying, “Is it too late to back out now?”

Ridge’s rich laughter made my stomach flutter and other parts throb. I hated that. Hated the way my body reacted to him. It wasn’t normal.

“You should move in because it will just be another thing they’ll fixate on.”

“You make it sound like they’ll fixate on it whether I move in or not.” I smiled sweetly. I had him there.

The resolute look in his eyes told me that wouldn’t stop him. Before he could refute the last statement, the doorbell rang. Saved by the bell.

“Excuse me.”

He got up from the table, and I followed him. It would probably be best if I was seen in the manor occasionally. But I would not be living here.

The Magpies were at the door, each holding some homemade treat.

“Magpies, you didn’t have to do this,” Ridge said as he grabbed one of the dishes and I grabbed the other. “You should be home, grieving with the Hills. He was your family, too.”

One of the Magpies smiled softly. “Your engagement is a joyous occasion that needs to be celebrated. The loss of family will still be grieved, but it feels good to mark a special occasion.”

Surprised, my mouth almost dropped, but I contained it in time. I didn’t know either of them was related to Deputy Hill, but I hadn’t been in town long enough to know who was related to whom. I still couldn’t keep the Magpies straight. I’d need to ask Ridge to remind me.

“Shame on you, Mayor, for not telling us sooner about your grand news.” They jokingly frowned, but they both winked at me. “We’re so thrilled for you, Tori, and wanted to make sure you were welcomed properly to Blackwood Creek. After all, you’re in the fold now, and we take care of our own.”

Ridge and I placed the dishes on the table in the foyer, and I wrapped myself in Ridge’s arms, leaning against his side.

“Thank you so much, ladies. I appreciate the welcome. We just finished having dinner, so we’ll enjoy the dessert.” I looked at the Maggie on the left. I was fairly sure she was the one related to the Hills since Ridge had spoken to her directly. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Oh, thank you, dear. I married into the Hill family and have been a widow for quite some time, but Phil was good to me after I lost my husband. I’ll miss his visits and how he’d fix things around the house when I needed them done.” Her face sagged with sorrow.

My heart burned, and guilt swam to the surface. Did I do this? Was I the one responsible for making this woman grieve someone for whom she cared deeply? I hoped to God I wasn’t.

Ridge tightened his arm around my waist as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. Before I could say anything else, both women spoke up.

“Well.” They looked at each other, but only one continued. “We won’t keep you. You lovebirds have a lot to sort out. This wedding will be the biggest social gathering of the year, so we know you two have much to plan. We’ll let you get back to it. Might I add that a fall wedding with the trees changing colors makes for beautiful wedding photos? It’ll also make for earlier nuptials. Just a thought.”

Ridge snickered as we waved them off, and as soon as the door was shut,

I stepped away, glaring at his “I told you so” grin.

Annoyance frothed beneath my skin, not just because he was right about the gossip but because the more he touched and held me, the more my wolf fought me—and the more I, too, wanted to stay where I was. Being close to the man was dangerous, which was exactly why I could not move into the manor.

I geared up to continue the argument of not moving in when the doorbell rang again.

Ridge’s eyes lit up, and he smirked at me. “And so, it begins.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled brightly when he opened the door. Several people stood there with casseroles, baked goods, and flowers. It was insane. As far as I was concerned, all of this should be going to the Hill family.

Ridge must’ve seen the wheels turning in my head because he whispered, “The Hills are being shown the same courtesy, I assure you.” The townspeople apparently cared about each other. They loved to celebrate the joyous occasions and aid in mourning the gut-wrenching ones.

I hadn’t met the older couple standing before us. Ridge introduced them as Jim and Carla Proctor. I hadn’t seen them around town.

“Sorry we couldn’t be at the meeting, but I couldn’t get off work,” Jim apologized. “We just wanted to congratulate you two and welcome you, Tori.” They insisted that if I needed anyone to reach out to, I was always welcome to call on them. Carla was a housewife and could be easily reached at their home in town.

I was touched that they’d gone out of their way to welcome me. It was humbling. Carla’s apple pie looked tasty, and I couldn’t wait to taste it. I couldn’t remember the last time I had a homemade pie—or any pie at all, in fact.

Another younger couple showed up as the Proctors were leaving, and a priest was with them. Owing to the short notice, none of them had been able to make it to the town meeting. They were all joking with Ridge.

“It’s about time you found a girl, Mayor. We’re so happy for you,” the priest said.

“Your babies are going to be gorgeous,” the young wife blurted out.

My face flushed and Ridge laughed, wrapping his arms around my waist again and pulling me into his side to kiss my temple.

“I got so lucky that such a stunning woman agreed to marry me. I can’t agree with you more.”

I swatted Ridge's chest. "Stop, Ridge." I didn't have to act embarrassed because I was burning with embarrassment.

The couple and the priest smiled at me.

"Have you two set a wedding date yet?" The priest was eager, and I sensed he wanted to be the one to preside over the nonexistent wedding.

The deception sent an arrow of guilt into my heart. These were friendly people, good people, and they were making an effort to make sure I was welcomed and included in their community. I hadn't experienced anything like that in more years than I cared to think about, and it soured the lies we were telling even more. I was ashamed, and it made me ill to think about what we were doing. I hated knowing that at the moment, this was the best course of action.

Once again, Ridge must have read my mind because he comforted me with his body and soft kisses against my hair.

"No, Father, we're still deciding. We want to enjoy this part of our relationship for a while. Especially since we're finally a couple publicly here, but as soon as we set a date, we'll make sure to get back to you."

The priest beamed. "I understand. This is such a joyous time for you. I wish you all the best, and if you need to talk or do any relationship counseling, my door is always open. It's best to start a marriage on the right foot and ensure your goals and dreams are aligned."

His kind smile and calm voice nudged something inside me. If Ridge and I really were engaged, I liked to think I would have taken the priest up on that offer. He had a point, and it would be wise to understand your partner and where they wanted to go in life. Because if you wanted different things, what was the point of getting married?

The priest and young couple left, only for us to see another small family walk up with their goodies and well wishes. They had two adorable little girls with curly blond hair, each holding a tray of sugar cookies they'd decorated. My heart melted to see how excited they were. One asked to be a flower girl, while the other shushed her for being rude.

Several more people arrived after that.

Finally, we got a break in the slew of people, and I couldn't shut the door fast enough. I prayed that was the last of the well-wishers.

Leaning against the large front door, I groaned. "Do you think that's the last of them?"

Ridge let loose another one of his easy-going laughs. "You've really

never lived in a small town before.” He shook his head. “Blackwood Creek is fairly small in population, and it’s a tight-knit community. There are still dozens of families and individuals who’ll want to meet you and ask you a billion-and-one questions about how we met and our future nuptials.”

I groaned louder and slid down lower against the door. What the hell had I signed up for? I should have run. It would have been so much easier than this.

“You’ll have to face all that tenfold—and alone, I might add, if you stay at the B&B.” He raised one shoulder in a shrug. “But if you stayed here with me, you’d get a little more privacy and all the space your little heart could desire.” He stepped toward me and poked my chest. “I gave you space before, and I’ll do it again.”

With my head resting against the door, I eyed him. After this little display, he had a point. I’d have no time to myself if I stayed at the Bogfords, but I hated to leave them. Although I’d only been at the B&B a short time, I loved interacting with Margo and Diana every day. But if this was any indication of what was to come, I’d go insane.

*Could I stay here, though?*

I perused the sexy specimen of a man in front of me, hating how much my wolf craved him and how my core tingled and clenched for him. It’d be more complicated with him in my presence every day. Smelling him all the time would make it even harder for me to maintain control over my wolf and keep her caged.

*What else could I do, though?*

“I want space. A lot of space. This place is big enough. Do I get a wing? Because, Ridge, don’t get me wrong, that first night with you was great...” So, I was lying a little. It wasn’t great, it was fucking phenomenal, and I’d replayed it in my head a thousand times, but we couldn’t go there ever again. “But I don’t want to break any more of your showers, and I don’t want anything to do with you outside of helping to solve the murder and teaching you more about the hunters. We’re roommates, and that’s it. Nothing more than that. Until the murder is solved and I can save up enough money, I’m gone. And you’ll let me leave.”

I looked at him straight in the eye. He tried to cover up his frown, but he wasn’t fast enough. I wanted him to look at me and know that I was serious. That I wouldn’t—couldn’t—stay. He had to accept my terms.

Deep down, I was freaked out about how much my wolf revered this



dangerously beautiful creature. I didn't want to get attached to anyone here, let alone him. I had to leave before too long, or I'd draw the hunters to this region. Then I would be responsible for people getting hurt.

Hating shifters was in my DNA, but Margo and Diana's faces played out in my mind, as did Ridge's. Then the people like the Magpies, Lola, and other sweet people like the couples who had just visited us. I didn't want to endanger any of them.

My wolf howled at the idea of Ridge getting hurt, and I burned at the thought of these people who had been kind to me being harmed because of me. This strengthened my resolve to leave and never look back. It was all I could offer them.

Ridge put his hands into his pockets and nodded slowly.

"I promise to respect any space you want." He waggled his eyebrows at me. "I'll keep to that promise even if you don't want any space between us."

Irritation strengthened my resolve. I'd be leaving sooner rather than later, it seemed.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I'll stay in the manor for now, but only to avoid all the people in this town who desperately need to get hobbies, because seriously, it's ridiculous."

Ridge chuckled. "Come on, I'll take you to get your things."

It was my turn to laugh. I didn't have *things*. I had a bag, and that was it, but I didn't tell him that. If he found out how little I actually had, he'd have a whole wardrobe and things he decided I needed to be delivered by tomorrow night.

I didn't understand how I was sure of that, but my wolf rumbled her appreciation. She liked that he'd take care of our needs. Slamming that thought down, I frowned at myself. I didn't need anything. I took care of myself just fine, without any aid from anybody.

"I need to let Diana know that I won't be staying there anymore, and I'd prefer to go alone."

Ridge walked to a little table, pulled out the top drawer, and pulled something out. He walked over to me and handed over a set of keys.

"Okay, take the Range Rover. If you need anything, I'll be getting some work done in my office in the library." He pointed out the direction of the library before walking toward it.

Astonished, I gripped the keys. He was letting me take one of his cars? An expensive, shiny car, no less.

Then I frowned. It was late for him to be working. He should be resting. I figured that with the murder, he probably had a lot more on his plate. He already had significant responsibilities, but the town's safety had just gone out the window. With everyone on edge, there was more pressure on him to resolve this quickly and make sure everyone felt safe again.

It bothered me that all of that fell on his shoulders alone. He needed someone to look out for him because he was bound to overwork himself. Sure, he had Sheriff Clawson, but Ridge was the mayor and the alpha. He wouldn't let anyone step in, do his job, and take over his responsibilities. He needed someone by his side, forcing him to take care of *himself* now and then.

## Chapter 15

# Tori

As I parked the Range Rover in front of the B&B, I couldn't help but love how smooth a ride the luxury vehicle was. Since going on the run, I'd only driven rust buckets if I was fortunate enough to build up some savings. I'd drive the car until it wouldn't go anymore, then leave it on the side of the road and hoof it.

More recently, I'd stuck to buses and hitchhiking. I'd had to burn my last fake identity and still didn't have the funds to get another one. It wasn't easy to get one, and I hated doing it, but it was the only way to stay ahead and alive.

Diana was drinking her nightly chamomile tea in the front room.

"Tori, I didn't expect to see you this evening." She gave me a coy, knowing smile.

"Right, yes." Slightly flustered, I stumbled over my words. "I came by to let you know I won't need a room here anymore. Now that the word is out, my fiancé wants me at his place."

Diana let out a soft chuckle. "Of course, my dear. I'm surprised you stayed here at all. It's not like an alpha to be willing to let his mate be alone and not within easy reach. With a murderer in the town, Ridge wouldn't want you anywhere but at his home."

"Yes, well, I wanted to try to make my own way in town first. I knew that as soon as I was known as Mayor Alpha Blackwood's fiancée"—boy, was that a mouthful—"people would start treating me differently. Except you haven't, and I appreciate that more than I could say."

"I can see why you would want to make your own way for a little while, but I'm fond of you, Tori, and you always have a place here with Margo and

me.” Her gentle eyes lingered over mine. “I hope you know that.”

Swallowing became a chore. “Thank you, Ms. Bogford.”

“Hush on that. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Diana?”

I choked on my emotions and left her to finish her tea so I could pack, but when I passed Margo’s room, I heard the faint sound of crying and sniffles. Indecision seesawed. Did I intrude or leave her be?

I’d let Margo decide. If she wanted to be alone, she would ignore me. Gently, I knocked on the door. Margo invited me in.

“Oh, hey, Tori.” She wiped her eyes with a tissue.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I wasn’t one to comfort people, but seeing my new friend so sad had me sitting on the bed with her and wanting to hurt whoever had made her cry and fix whatever damage was done.

My wolf whined a little at the usually bubbly Margo’s tears.

“Yeah, it’s just been a lot going on. It’s all catching up to me now.” Of course, the deputy’s death. It was only natural that she’d be affected by it. She’d known him. For all I knew, they’d been friends. “Sometimes a girl needs a good cry, and I’m taking advantage of it right now. Normally, I’d put on *Steel Magnolias* or *Beaches* so that I’d have an excuse, but after today, there’s no need for an excuse.”

I hadn’t had the luxury of crying, not since before going on the run. It exerted too much emotion, which was exhausting and distracting.

“I’ll get through it.” She wiped her face and gave me a watery smile, which morphed into her trademarked smirk. “I’m surprised you’re here, now that the cat’s out of the bag.”

I was getting somewhat used to Margo’s abrupt changes in topic and lighthearted demeanor.

“I came to pick up my things. Ridge wants me at the manor to keep me safe.” I fought to roll my eyes, knowing I needed to maintain the act of the devoted little mate so people didn’t catch on. I didn’t know what would confuse people. If this engagement wasn’t fake, I could just be myself and tell everybody to buzz off, but that wasn’t an option.

Margo’s eyebrows danced. “I’m sure our alpha wants you under his roof and in his bed for more than safety, but make sure you use protection. You don’t want to be popping out a pup right after the wedding.”

I heated up at the mere suggestion, making Margo giggle.

Yep, Margo was fine.

“I need to pack now,” I said. “I’ll see you at work.”

Margo’s laugh followed me down the corridor as I shut her door. It was depressing how all my worldly possessions fit in one tattered backpack. Nothing meant a lick to me. All I had was a toothbrush, a couple of outfits I’d picked up in thrift shops, and an extra pair of shoes.

That was all I’d been able to grab from my last hiding spot before the hunters nearly caught me. It seemed like they were getting closer to me each time. The last encounter had been so close, I wondered if my luck had run out and now it was only a matter of time.

The wolf growled in my head. If it were up to her, we’d die before we allowed ourselves to get caught.

Chills rained over me at that thought, images of all the self-harm I could do so that I wouldn’t be caught and tortured flashing through my mind. I’d seen torture. Their torture. Death would be a welcome release.

After one last quick scan of the room, I stripped the sheets and blankets, piling them on the bed so Diana could come in and grab them. I made sure to leave the place as neat as possible.

I reached the foyer but didn’t run into Margo, and Diana wasn’t sitting in her chair anymore. Setting the key on the front desk, I glanced around one last time. This would’ve been a nice place to recharge for a while.

At least the hunters wouldn’t find me at the B&B if they caught up with me in town. At least Margo and Diana wouldn’t have to face that. Ridge, as alpha, was the best person to defend the town and fight the hunters. Knowing that made it easier for me to turn in the key and stay at the manor. The Bogfords didn’t need to be in the crosshairs of my battle.

I hesitated with my hand in midair as yelling echoed from down the street. The shouts increased and became more intense. I opened the car and threw my pack in the backseat, watching Audrey and Mateo facing off in the town square. Nobody else was around that I could see, and although I couldn’t understand what was being said, it didn’t seem like either of them was holding anything back.

Fiddling with the key ring, I toyed with either getting in the car and heading out or staying to watch what happened next.

After a moment, Audrey gave a very unladylike snarl and marched off with her nose high in the air and her arms crossed. Mateo punched his hands onto his hips as he glared at her retreating back, then he waved his arms and said something under his breath before storming back to his bar, which was

no longer taped off as a crime scene.

Usually, I'd ignore such an interaction. It was none of my concern. However, it was odd that Audrey had walked in to find the body almost at the same time I did. What made things more peculiar? Mateo never even mentioned me wearing his work clothes earlier.

Why wouldn't he tell Sheriff Clawson? He didn't know me and didn't owe me anything. So, why not mention it?

Cursing to myself, I locked the car with the fob and rushed over to the bar. I needed to get to the bottom of who killed Phil Hill, even if it was me. I could only do that by talking to people and asking questions. Clawson had probably already checked for this, but it wouldn't hurt to ask Mateo if I could view any video footage. If it turned out my wolf had murdered the poor deputy, then I would take as much accountability and responsibility as possible.

Several people were walking down the sidewalk now, hitting the diner or closing up shop, but I managed to avoid getting stopped by any of them and having to fake the role of the doting fiancée, which was a relief.

I shuffled into the bar. There weren't any patrons at the moment, only Mateo hanging out behind the bar, cleaning glasses.

Walking into the tavern after this morning made the skin between my shoulder blades itch. My heart rate jacked up a couple of notches, and my fingers started to fidget like they always did when I was uncomfortable. I appreciated that the blood had been cleaned up and everything was back to how it was when I'd first entered here a few nights ago.

"Keep the clothes, it's fine. I know shifters have a serious problem with running around nude after a Full Moon Howl." Mateo's accent flowed over me, but he didn't look up at me.

I stopped in my tracks, dread settling heavily in my gut. Mateo was human.

He lifted his head and smiled at me. "I've known about shifters my whole life, and every shifter in town knows they can trust me. Which is why you can ask whatever you want to ask because I don't doubt for a minute that I don't look suspicious to you." He never stopped cleaning each glass and putting it where it needed to be.

Soothing my skittish wolf, I was impressed that he didn't break stride. He was right. I did find him suspicious. To be fair, though, everybody was suspicious, me included.

Stepping forward and taking a seat, I decided to get on with it. “I’m sorry for stealing your clothes. I’ll return them to you after I wash them.” I’d always intended to do that. “But...can you tell me what you know about what might have happened. I mean, it did happen here after all.”

Mateo smirked and waggled his eyebrows at me, which generally would have disgusted me, but with him, I found it funny. The Frenchman had a charm to him. I wouldn’t lie and say I was immune to it.

“I don’t know much. I was otherwise engaged most of the night and only woke up when Audrey screamed. I didn’t hear any noises...well, besides a different sort of screaming.”

I turned my lip up in disgust, and he laughed.

“Could I look at the security footage?” I pointed at the camera behind the bar. When I looked around the room, I noticed there were several others around the large space.

“If I had any, I would gladly let you look at it, but the entire town blacked out for most of the early morning hours. You must’ve not noticed if you were out in the woods. It knocked out the cameras.”

Blackout? Seriously? I studied Mateo, but he didn’t act like he was hiding anything.

“That’s really suspicious.”

He shrugged. “It affected the whole town. Blackouts sometimes happen in Blackwood Creek. You can ask anyone, but this one did have peculiar timing.”

Peculiar timing was putting it mildly. Knowing I wouldn’t get anything else out of him about last night or early this morning, I debated whether I should ask him about his argument with Audrey. They were together last night, so would one of them cover for the other? Or was it a regular relationship spat I didn’t want to know about? If it had nothing to do with the deputy’s death, I didn’t care what they were fighting about. It was no concern of mine.

The door opened, and Mateo sighed heavily. “Go away,” he said to whoever was entering the bar. “I don’t have it in me to fuel a shifter’s rabble-rousing.”

I turned my head to see who had entered. It wasn’t anyone I’d met yet. The shifter was around my age, sporting a man-bun and leather jacket. He gave off the vibe of a rebel. Though he wasn’t hard on the eyes, he didn’t have Ridge’s appeal.

The man eyed me up and down. I ignored his blatant interest until he stepped closer, and I caught a whiff of his scent. It was familiar, but I couldn't place it.

He gave me a sexy smile, sauntered toward me, and leaned down. "Want to go for another run and finish what the mayor interrupted?"

Dread lodged in my gut, and I stifled a groan. Great. Zander Elkins. I promised Ridge I'd stay away from him, and after this introduction, I couldn't agree more with him. Something about Zander was off, and I didn't have the time or inclination to deal with him.

I also didn't appreciate the reminder that someone else had seen my wolf—least of all him.

"Whatever you think got interrupted will have to take a permanent rain check because I'm not interested." My wolf prowled, begging me to let her take a bite out of him.

Zander threw his head back and laughed. When Ridge did that, I got excited. With this shifter, I was annoyed. Zander had alpha energy, and I had a suspicious feeling he thought I was playing hard. He sat down on the stool next to me, traced his finger down my arm, and shouted to Mateo, "Pour us both a drink."

I gritted my teeth to keep myself in check and not gnaw off his hand. I shook my head to Mateo and said, "I came here to chat, not drink. Thanks, Mateo. I'll see you around."

I got off the stool, but Zander grabbed my arm, fingers digging into my skin. "You can chat with me right here since you don't want to have more fun elsewhere just yet." He licked his lips and dropped his gaze down to my breasts.

"No, thanks. I don't like talking to dense people, and you're clearly not getting that I'm not interested. Never have been and never will be." I struggled with my annoyance and my wolf's deafening growls. I wrenched my arm out of his hold. "Don't ever touch me again."

His eyes flamed before me. "If it's because of your bossy future mate..."

I wrinkled my brow, having forgotten for a second my fake engagement, but I leaned in closer to the jerk and huffed, "It's because I don't want to see you get your ass kicked by Ridge Blackwood again."

Zander's face darkened. My wolf and I took satisfaction in watching him sputter.

He growled. "If you hadn't injured my leg so badly and just sat on the



sidelines to watch us fight to win you like any other female wolf would, I would have come out on top.”

I didn't take kindly to the implication that a female shifter was to be fought over, that she was to sit back and enjoy it. The audacity of this pathetic male astounded me. I didn't remember the fight or hurting him, which wasn't so bad since he'd completely healed now—a perk of being a shifter.

I moved closer into his space, baring my teeth.

“Cool it!” Mateo snapped.

I stepped back just as the door opened, and a couple of humans entered. A woman spotted me, and her face lit up as she rushed over to congratulate me on my engagement.

“Mayor Blackwood is wonderful. I'm so happy for you both.”

Zander clenched his jaw, and I took pleasure in his anger.

“It will be good to have another couple to invite over for game nights,” she continued.

I exchanged pleasantries with the woman, and then her husband came up and put his arm around her shoulders, congratulating me as well. I thanked them and told them it was kind of them to think of us for game night and that I'd let Ridge know.

After a couple more minutes of playing the ecstatic fiancée, I slipped away, irritated with Zander. I had no problem following Ridge's request to avoid the jerk—I was equally happy to enforce that one myself.

I rushed to the car so no one else would stop me. I thought about who else I should ask about what might've happened.

Audrey Greenthorne was a big no. Our last two interactions had been... unpleasant, to say the least. On top of it, she'd accused me of being the killer, so I knew I wouldn't get any direct answers from her. Talking to her would be a waste of time.

I headed back to the manor. Parking the car in the massive garage with all the other fancy vehicles, I decided to stop stressing about detective work for the rest of the night. I needed a good night's sleep to decompress, then I could get gung-ho about it again tomorrow.

I shouldered my pack and dangled the keys in my hand as I tried to find my way around the mansion. I kept getting lost, which started to irritate me—seriously, I'd need a map of this place—until I finally happened upon Ridge's office. Thankfully, the door was wide open, so I didn't miss him.

He sat behind his desk, frowning as he rifled through stacks of papers. I leaned against the doorframe and took the opportunity to really study him while he didn't know I was there. The guy looked exhausted. He hunched over the desk instead of sitting. His hair was tousled from running his hands through it too many times in every direction.

Not wanting to get caught watching him, I made a noise and stepped into the room, tossing the keys on the desk. "You should sleep. You've been up for way too long. You can't keep going like this."

His head popped up, and his whole demeanor changed when he looked at me. His piercing grin caught me off-guard. "I didn't realize I was going to be hosting such a caring guest."

I rolled my eyes at Ridge again; it seemed that was my primary way of communicating with the man. "It's more like nagging. I'd hate to see you drop dead of exhaustion when there's a lot we need to do."

His grin got more prominent, and fuck if it wasn't sexy.

"You need to rest to be better equipped to deal with people, especially if there are others like Zander in town."

I winced at the tension straightening Ridge's back. I could have bitten my tongue and not made any comment about it. He was already in the throes of turmoil, and the last thing he needed was this new aggravation from another pest complicating matters.

"You ran into Zander?" His voice had a grit to it, which I'd started to realize was him trying to control his growling. My wolf and I found it enticing.

"Mateo and Audrey were arguing in the town square," I reported in a monotone. "Audrey stormed off in a perfected snit when they finished, and Mateo returned to the bar. So, I headed over there to tell him I'd get his clothes back to him. Then Zander showed up, acting all alpha-ish."

"Zander is hardly the prime example of the average alpha. Although alpha wolves are dominant and territorial, we're also leaders who are fiercely protective of our own. Zander is far more interested in dick-measuring competitions and posturing than he is in actually helping anyone. I don't think he's lifted a finger for a single soul if it didn't benefit him. He doesn't know how to back down from a fight and sometimes snaps and does reckless things that his old man has to clean up."

I perked up at that last bit. "Could that then make Zander a suspect if he got butt-hurt about losing the brawl? Maybe he took it out on the deputy?"

Ridge leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “Nah. As problematic as Zander is, I doubt he’d outright murder a human without a real motive.”

I bit the inside of my cheek as I thought over what he’d said. I was tempted to ask if he had any ideas of anyone else in town who might’ve had a motive to kill Deputy Hill. But Ridge tried to hide a yawn, so I’d let it go for now. We could talk about it tomorrow.

“Ridge, go to bed.”

He laughed as he stood up. “Are you sure this is you nagging and not caring? Because it sounds an awful lot like you feel bad for me.”

He walked closer to me, and the temperature in the room went up a few notches.

I snorted as I stepped back. “I’m incapable of feeling bad for a rich alpha mayor with a hero complex.”

With Ridge’s laughter trailing behind me, I walked out of the room and hunted down a guest room that would be my home for the next couple of weeks. With any luck, we’d find out who had murdered Deputy Hill so I could be gone sooner.

## Chapter 16

# Ridge

The alarm blasted me awake far earlier than I wanted. I hadn't been able to grab more than a few hours of sleep, but with everything going on, a good night's rest wouldn't be in the cards for me for some time.

I managed not only my family's much-older financial portfolio but also my two successful financial brokerages, alongside my roles as the town mayor and the local shifters' alpha. My workload required me to burn the candle at both ends most of the time.

This exhaustion wasn't anything new, but I was especially tired this morning and just wanted to go back to sleep. Yesterday's shocking murder had made my life even harder. Add on the sexy little wolf living right down the hall from me, and I hadn't been able to fall asleep last night. Real or imagined, her intoxicating scent reached me wherever I walked through the manor. Lustful fantasies and memories of our night together ravaged my mind and had me aching for her.

I'd tried to ignore the temptation, but to no avail. Finally, I reasoned with myself that if I got it out of my system, I would sleep. So, I closed my eyes and wrapped my hand around my demanding cock. I stroked myself from base to tip, fast and hard, to my fantasies of her exploring hands, demanding tongue, and tight wet sheath. I ejaculated faster than a teenage virgin. If I'd been with Tori, I would have embarrassed myself with how quickly I came. I would have fought it off, but since I didn't have her beneath me, I came with a growl.

Still, sleep eluded me, my cock hardening again as her scent drifted down the hallway. I resigned myself to the knowledge that while Tori was around, I'd be in a permanent state of near-arousal. I'd better get used to it. Her scent

haunted me and had my wolf and me on edge. We wanted to take care of the neediness that sometimes emanated from her. No matter how hard she fought her attraction to me, I was well-aware of it—unlike words, a scent never lied. If I wasn't a stronger man, I'd take her rejection of her arousal for me as a personal slight.

Slamming my hand on the alarm clock, I sat up in my bed. I was big on positive habits and self-discipline. My uncle had believed in structure, and I found implementing it in my daily life helped immensely. I couldn't afford to let the days get away from me when I had so many responsibilities. If I got behind on one thing, then I'd get behind on everything, and trying to get caught up would be a nightmare.

I dropped to the floor, did my one-hundred-and-fifty pushups, then dressed to go for a run. Running wasn't as fun and freeing as it was in wolf form, but it gave me an outlet to keep myself balanced. Exercise helped me get my head on straight and keep my sanity in check.

Within an hour, I was back at the manor and making a healthy breakfast. I kept my iPad next to the stove as I chopped up veggies and cooked them in an egg scramble on the stove. I scrolled through the emails that had come through in the few hours of sleep I'd managed.

As I ate, I reviewed my schedule, sighing at how tight some of the meetings were. What I really wanted was to direct all my energy toward the murder and pack business. Because out of everything, that was the priority at the moment. I couldn't drop the ball on anything else, though. It was just something else to be added to my never-ending list.

I shut off my tablet and sipped at my coffee in blessed silence. My gaze constantly wandered upward, as if I could see my little wolf through the ceiling. She was so tempting that I debated whether I should wake her, offer her breakfast, and sit with her for a little bit. Tori had a way of calming me. Focusing on her also gave my tired mind a break from my duties.

Draining the last of my coffee, I decided to leave her alone. Respecting her space would be essential to both of us. For one, I didn't trust myself to keep my hands off her, and two, she didn't trust me, period—something I was determined to change. I didn't know why I needed her trust so badly. It would be a challenge, but I had a feeling it would be my greatest accomplishment.

After cleaning up the kitchen, I jogged upstairs to get ready. I dressed in one of my standard suits and checked my watch. It was almost time to meet

with Clawson.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I returned to the kitchen. Just as I was grabbing my tablet and cell phone, Tori wandered in, yawning widely and looking adorably groggy. My libido jumped into overdrive at the sight of her messy bun and baggy pajamas. The innocence of her sleepy actions made me want to hug her tight and curl around her in my bed.

She was sexy no matter what she did, but I wished I could see this “just out of bed” look as often as possible.

My wolf started growling, and it took me a moment to control his raging libido. It didn't help that mine was raging right along with his. He snapped at me for not stepping forward and scooping her into my arms. I couldn't help but imagine her being my mate, but it was purely wishful desire on my part. If we were fated mates, she'd be reacting to me in the same manner.

Her delicate hands rubbed at her eyes as she mumbled a good morning. I glanced at the clock. Shit, I was late for my meeting with Clawson. Well, he'd have to get over it. After all, I wasn't usually late. But time alone with Tori was something I'd take full advantage of whenever I had the chance.

“Good morning. Would you like breakfast?”

She leaned against the counter and scoffed. “I'm already indebted to you enough. You don't need to add a food bill to the list.”

I started chuckling and shook my head. I'd never been around someone so adamant against taking anything from me and using my wealth for their own gain. It was exhilarating but incredibly frustrating at the same time. Tori was the one person I wanted to spoil with anything and everything she could possibly need or want, and so much more besides. Yet, she wouldn't take it. Even a simple breakfast was too much for her.

“I'm working at the diner today. What's the game plan? Any fake fiancée things I should plan on for the day?” she asked. “And we should get together so I can tell you everything I know about the hunters.”

She had a point. We needed to make sure we were on the same page. The more affluent families in town would have something to say about Tori continuing to work at the diner, but I also knew that this fiercely independent woman wouldn't agree to stop working. I would have to pick my battles, and this wasn't one I even remotely wanted to start.

I wasn't ashamed of her. Quite the opposite. I admired Tori. She could have easily taken on the role of my fiancée and gotten a lot of money from me, but that hadn't even crossed her mind.

I liked the idea of pointing out to those people, some of whom had never worked a day in their lives, that Tori had an excellent work ethic. She clearly wasn't marrying me for my money. It'd never been a secret why most of them wanted me to marry into their families, and it wasn't just for my good looks.

I could also force them to get over their expectations of what my future wife should be like. Because no matter who I married, she wouldn't be someone who didn't earn the right to be my luna. She would run the pack alongside me.

My gaze traveled over Tori, taking all of her in. My wolf agreed that she would make a fierce and loyal luna, but I quickly shook my head at that notion. Tori and I weren't even close to being there yet.

"I'll meet you after your shift," I said. "We'll have dinner at one of the nicer restaurants in town. It's a safe place to discuss everything. You should wear a nice dress. With my name and credentials, we'll be expected to hit up the better restaurants."

Tori yawned again, and I poured her a cup of coffee. The dark circles under her eyes made me think she probably got little more sleep than I had and was just as tired. She had a lot to work through, and I could only guess that her fear of having killed the deputy wasn't helping. Even though I didn't think for an instant that she'd killed Hill, Tori was convinced of her guilt.

She huffed but thanked me as she took the mug from me. I tried my best to quash the amusement on my face. As she sat at the table, the tattoo on her wrist caught my attention again. The other tattoos on her body flashed across my mind. They were such a big part of her, I couldn't help but like them all.

"Do the flowers have any meaning?" I leaned against the counter across from her as she sipped the coffee.

Her patented shrug made another appearance. "They're heather flowers. My mother's name was Heather."

"Was?"

It hadn't occurred to me that she was on the run without family to return to. How short-sighted of me. It made sense, though. If she had a family, wouldn't they protect her? Provide for her? Wouldn't they have kept her hidden so she wasn't out on her own?

The questions started rolling around in my head, and I wanted to know the answers. But the steel wall came over her face and body again. I sighed. These peeks behind the steel curtain were something she would give me only

occasionally, so I vowed to relish each time she softened around me.

“I just wanted to tattoo some flowers on my wrist, like a lot of normal girls out there.”

She did those herself? I uncrossed my arms and put my hands on the counter behind me. Tori obviously didn’t want to discuss her mother, so I went the other route.

“You tattooed that yourself? Did you do all your tattoos?”

She put the mug on the counter and lifted her leg to rest on her thigh like she was doing a standing tree pose against the counter.

“Yes, I did. I’m an artist. If there were any job openings in town for a tattoo artist, graphic designer, or whatnot, I’d consider applying.”

Every time I talked with Tori, I became more and more impressed by what a remarkable and strong woman she was. Once again, she shrugged as if her talent was no big deal. That everything she did and had gone through was no biggie at all. But she had serious talent, and she should be able to pursue it.

“I could probably find somebody who’s hiring for something like that if you don’t want to work at the café,” I said.

Tori put her hand up to interrupt me. “Look, I’m not interested in handouts or using my status as your fake fiancée to get a different job. I can take care of myself. I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time, thank you very much. This arrangement is what works for both of us for now, and then I’m gone.”

Why was it suddenly hard for me to swallow? Why did my shirt collar feel so tight around my neck?

She took a couple more sips of coffee, then went to the sink to dump out the rest.

“Thanks again for the coffee.” She headed toward the door. “I hope you don’t go crazy dealing with the Greenthornes and Zanders of the town,” she called over her shoulder before disappearing through the door.

I kept my eye on the doorway, hoping she would return, but I knew that wouldn’t happen. I wouldn’t see her for the rest of the day unless I went to the diner. Tempting as the idea was, I could already see her annoyed expression. I needed an actual, logical reason to be at the diner.

Glimpsing the time on the coffee maker, I realized I was very late for my meeting with Clawson, so I rushed to my office to gather everything I needed for the day before heading out. Tori was on my mind the entire time. She kept



herself so closed off, but I was learning little things about her all the time. I wondered how old she was. She didn't seem much younger than me, but she'd mentioned being on the run for four years. I was positive she'd struggled to get by while out on her own.

Life on the run didn't afford many luxuries, which was evident from the few belongings she'd brought with her from the B&B. Everything she had fit in one backpack, and that backpack had seen better days.

I slammed my hand against the steering wheel. "Dammit."

She didn't have much, and I'd told her to wear something nice to dinner. Where I was taking her, where I was expected to take her, was classy. She had to play the role of my fiancée, and my fiancée would never have to worry about what to wear.

I gritted my teeth. I knew she wouldn't accept my offer to buy her a dress. She would rather struggle with getting something for herself, even though she didn't have to.

I admired her independence, but I grappled so hard with taking care of her—something she'd never let me do.

I hit the call button on the navigation screen in my car and said, "Call Diana Bogford."

The phone rang a few times before Diana's sweet voice came on my car's speakers. "Mayor, what a pleasant surprise."

I knew it was pointless to ask her to call me Ridge like she had before I stepped into my current role. She wouldn't hear of it. She always said respecting my position as her alpha and mayor and treating me as such was only proper. It didn't matter that I'd known her my whole life; she had been good friends with my aunt and uncle. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she'd changed my diapers at one time or another.

"I was hoping you could do me a favor," I said.

"Of course. How can I help?"

That was Diana Bogford for you, always there to assist in any way she could.

When I pulled into my parking spot at the town hall, I had everything settled with Diana and rushed into my office, where Clawson was pacing by my secretary's desk. She looked exasperated. Clawson scowled at me and tapped his watch.

"I know, sorry, but I'm not normally late, am I? Tori and I were talking, and I lost track of time."

My secretary gave me a pleased smile as I greeted her and headed into my office with Clawson traipsing in after me. He shut the door and sat on the chair in front of my desk while I put everything away. He crossed one ankle on top of his other knee and snarled, “How is your *fiancée* doing?”

I laughed. Apparently, my longtime friend was still miffed with me for not telling him about meeting Tori and our engagement. Wait until he found out it was all fake. That would be worse than this, but I’d deal with it when the time came. I was already fighting my wolf, who was protesting the “fake” part relationship. I worried about how he would take it when it ended. I’d never felt anything like this from him. He was more love ’em and leave ’em than me, but with Tori, he was an entirely different wolf.

“Tori was shaken from coming across the scene like that, but she’s a strong and resilient wolf. She’ll get through it.”

Clawson drummed his fingers on his knee as he stared at me. I waited for him to say something. Now that we were alone, he would want some answers. He was kind enough not to have said anything with Tori around because he didn’t have an issue with her—just with me since I was the one who kept my so-called engagement from him.

“Ridge, we’re close. We don’t have many secrets between us. So, why? Why did my alpha and friend keep his engagement a secret? Why didn’t you tell me you found a mate?”

If I was in his shoes, I’d have also been confused. A mate was a big deal. If this relationship wasn’t fake, he would have been among the first people I’d have told. No, he would have been *the* first person.

“You’re right, we’ve been friends a long time. So, I’m asking you to trust me. I have a good reason for not telling you sooner.” I implored Clawson to accept what I said. I’d tell him the truth one day, but not now. “Have you found out anything new since we last spoke?”

Clawson stared at me as he rolled his tongue around in his mouth. He looked like he was trying to invade my mind and figure out what I was playing at, but then he finally nodded and allowed me to steer the conversation in a different direction. I took whatever reprieve he offered me.

“We’re still processing a lot of evidence from the murder scene, but I’ve gotten two more reports from other small shifter packs across the country about pack members going missing or being killed off by hunters.”

I clenched my fist and refrained from slamming it down on my desk as anger raged beneath my skin.

“The hunters are getting more aggressive and better at hunting us down,” Clawson continued. “It’s getting worse out there, and I don’t know if Hill’s death is part of that or a separate, isolated incident. We don’t have enough to work with at the moment.”

I stomped over to the window and looked across to the town square and all its citizens, shifter and human alike. This place was meant to be a safe haven. That’s what I’d sacrificed everything for, and it wasn’t coming together as I hoped.

Clawson interrupted my thoughts. “I’m assuming these are the packs that have declined to join us here?”

Those scattered packs would help reinforce Blackwood Creek and create the sanctuary I’d dreamed up with my uncle. If we had more of a military-style force, we could better defend ourselves against the hunters. After some time, we could go on the offensive when needed instead of sitting around, waiting for them to come after us. This hunter problem needed to end once and for all.

Turning, I looked at my friend. “Yeah, I opened up the conversation with their alphas again. I hoped that this new predicament would change their minds. They didn’t sound swayed, but I got the impression that they might consider it down the road.”

I’d been looking forward to having dinner with Tori tonight, but now I wanted it to happen as soon as possible for different reasons. I wanted her to tell me everything she possibly could about the hunters.

Gratitude and relief settled on my shoulders that she wasn’t one of the shifters who had gone missing. Instead, she’d ended up here in Blackwood Creek.

Now I needed to convince her to stay and make this place her home. If she left, she wouldn’t be safe from the hunters—or herself.

## Chapter 17

# Tori

I grabbed another table's order and shuffled over to deliver it. Today had been worse than I could have imagined. Now that everyone believed I was engaged to their mayor, they all wanted to talk to the mayor's mysterious fiancée.

Many of them were very excited about the news and wanted to know how we met. How long had we been engaged? Was the proposal romantic? Had we set a date yet? It was a whirlwind of activity.

Then there were the veiled, snide comments about me being a gold digger. Why would such a wealthy man marry someone nobody in this town knew, and a waitress at that? Several mutters of my getting pregnant to trap him hadn't escaped my ears.

It was all headache-inducing, and I hated that I couldn't leave because I was on shift.

Of course, everyone made pointed remarks over my lack of a ring. Repeatedly telling everybody that it was at the jeweler's being sized was getting old, and I resisted the urge to tell them to shove it and mind their own business. Thanks to the many customer service jobs I'd worked over the years, though, I managed to keep a semi-polite smile on my face and ensured I didn't embarrass my loving and doting fiancé.

It didn't help that some of them mentioned the murder. I struggled to keep myself calm and reminded them that the sheriff already knew everything he needed to know about the situation. The non-stop attention was wreaking havoc on my nerves, and my wolf was becoming increasingly defensive. She wanted to come out and force people to shut their mouths, which didn't make it any easier for me.

“There was so much blood at the scene. It was a hideous sight,” I overheard one of the Magpies tell a stranger later in the day.

That was the last straw. My head started pounding, and I struggled to get oxygen into my lungs. Panic crawled up my throat and settled in my brain as the apparent feral side effects kicked in. Ridge had said he assumed I was going feral, and these must be the warning signs. I’d never had these issues before, not until a little over a year ago.

Scents around me started making the monster hungry, and she fought to come out to play. I kept her tamped down, dropped what I was doing, and rushed to the café’s back door. The fluorescent lights were messing with my eyes as my surroundings faded in and out of the darkness.

I punched through the back door and made it outside. The woods were right there, and my wolf itched to shed the human body and become the predator she was born to be. She wanted to race into the trees, get lost, then hunt down Ridge.

Anxiety beat me down, making my wolf’s sable fur come to the surface of my skin. My wolf had been refusing to stay buried ever since we came to Blackwood Creek, which was now another point of contention between it and me.

I slammed my back against the cement wall, using the pain to force me into the here and now. Locking every muscle in place, I forced the wolf down. Sweat poured down my body as I clenched my jaw, fighting the monster inside me and forcing her to submit. She raged and warred with me, and my mind slowly started to slip.

Soft popping noises rang in my ears as my fingers painstakingly shifted into claws. Blood rushed inside my veins, deafening the sounds of life and nature around me. The wolf was gaining control. She relished her power, relished overcoming me.

I bit my bottom lip until a metallic taste flooded my tongue. I whimpered out a savage cry, praying nobody heard me.

Gaining enough strength, I smacked my hand hard across my face. My wolf growled at me, but I confused her enough to take back control. I dragged her to the deep dark pits of my mind, chaining her down by leashing and collaring her. I envisioned a muzzle wrapping around her snout, silencing her.

I sagged against the wall as the tension slipped away. My knees were weak and shaky, my stomach roiling, my head spinning. The fur retreated,

leaving pink skin once more. The claws contorted back to eight fingers and two opposable thumbs.

My lungs pumped air hard and fast before I focused on my breathing, forcing myself to take slow breaths of cool, clean air, holding to the count of three and exhaling. Chills sprang up on my skin as the air caught the sweat my body was releasing. My entire body ached as if a semi had just rear-ended me. I wanted to go to sleep and be left alone.

The hinges of the back door squealed, startling me, and I accidentally hit my head against the wall.

“Oh, Tori, are you okay?”

Diana rushed over to me, and I felt her gentle fingers on my head, checking for any injuries and making sure I wasn't bleeding. The motherly tenderness of it made my heart ache more than my head ever had.

“I'm okay. I was just startled.”

She stepped back and let me go, eyeing me closely. “Why are you back here? Are you feeling okay? You look a little pale.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed. “I'm fine, Ms. Bogford. I just needed some air. People can be a lot at times.”

She huffed. “This is a good town, with good people, but they don't know when to mind their own business. You take all the pauses you need.”

I smiled at the older woman. Her face said it all. She was well-aware of what these townspeople were capable of, and she didn't blame me for having to get away.

“Thank you. Did you need me for something?”

Irritation flooded the woman's face. “I've been looking for you because I've about had it with Margo's online shopping splurges. The girl bought yet another dress that didn't fit either of us. This is the fourth time in the last month she's done this, and I'm sick of it. I was wondering if you wanted it because if not, I'll just toss it.”

I cocked my head at the woman. I didn't take her to be a wasteful person, and certainly not over a brand-new dress. “Why don't you return it?”

A little wrinkle appeared in between her eyebrows. “Oh, it costs more to return it than it's worth.” She handed over the bundled fabric to me. “You can do whatever you like with it. Now, I'm off. I have several errands to run. I'm making banana-nut bread and blueberry muffins, so I need to get to the market.”

My mouth watered. My expression must have given me away because

Diana chuckled and said, “I’ll make sure to bring you some.”

I wanted to let her know that she didn’t have to do that, I was no longer a guest at her establishment, but she was already waving me off. She opened the door and was gone as fast as she’d appeared.

Staring at the fabric in my hands, I couldn’t help but think that she was acting odd. Diana wouldn’t usually be annoyed with Margo for something like this. Margo worked and paid her way, so if she’d ordered the wrong dress, it wouldn’t be an issue for Diana.

Shaking out the dress to get a better look, I gasped. It was stunning, definitely high-end. Simple yet elegant, the black satin dress had tiny straps that crisscrossed in the back. A glance at the tag showed it was exactly my size.

How could Margo accidentally buy the wrong size? She was way more petite.

Deciding that the oddness of the situation was none of my business, I blew out a breath. This was actually a stroke of luck because I didn’t have anything to wear to dinner. Now, I had one less thing to worry about. Not knowing how I’d get a suitable dress had probably added to my frustration with the gossips and made things feel worse than they were.

Plus, I wanted to look beautiful for Ridge. I’d never worried about such trivial things like looking beautiful, but something inside me called for me to do little things to catch his attention—even if that attention couldn’t go anywhere.

I folded up the dress nicely, hoping it wouldn’t crease, then I took a steadying breath and went to finish the rest of my shift.



I was grateful that Ridge left me the keys to the Range Rover before he’d headed out this morning. It saved me a lot of time walking to and from town. Back at the manor, I styled my hair and put on some subtle makeup I’d picked up after work.

It had been a while since I’d gotten dressed up or worn makeup, so it came as no surprise to me that I had to wash my face a few times and start over. It had never occurred to me that applying makeup was a skill one could

lose if one didn't do it enough, but who would I have gotten dolled up for? The hunters? I'd had no reason to waste my money on what I thought of as a luxury. Instead, I'd saved it for necessities—food and shelter.

I tossed down the tube of mascara and looked closely at my reflection. It wouldn't get any better than that. My hair took a little bit longer. I found a hair dryer but no straightener, so I decided to create an updo with the horde of bobby pins I'd also purchased. My mother used to do a French twist, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

We were going to a fancy restaurant, after all, and I didn't want to give the town any more reason to make fun of Ridge's choice of future bride. Still, I felt silly as I looked at myself in the mirror. I stared at my reflection as my hands held my hair up, and I tried to get a couple of pieces to fall and frame my face.

Who was I kidding? It wasn't the townspeople I was worried about impressing.

Not wanting to think more about that, I worked faster to get everything done and be ready for Ridge. I figured I would head back into town and meet him at the town hall. This morning, he hadn't said anything about picking me up, and I hadn't heard him come in.

I slipped on some heels I'd been pleased to find at the store in town, and they hadn't been expensive. They weren't fancy, just simple black heels, but I certainly couldn't wear the boots or tennis shoes I wore every day.

*Knock. Knock.*

My head turned to the door. I guess that meant I didn't need to drive into town.

"Just a minute." I smoothed down the dress. Walking carefully, I eased my way over to the mirror. I hadn't worn heels in over four years, and I twirled in front of the full-length mirror in the corner of the room to make sure everything was in order.

I shrugged. It was the best I could do. And the heels made my butt pop nicely.

I opened the door. Ridge stood there, looking hot and all cleaned up. He was downright sexy in his black slacks, white open-collar button-down, and black jacket. He seemed to appreciate what he was looking at because heat burned in his eyes as he swept his gaze over my body.

My core clenched and my nipples puckered at the instant sexual tension in the air. The way his eyes devoured me felt as if he was licking me



senseless, like he had that first night.

Ridge cleared his throat, and a rough edge deepened his voice. “We don’t have to go out in public tonight. We can do everything here, in private.” His eyes trailed over my legs. “Just the two of us.”

My heart started galloping and wet heat slipped into my panties. God, that was a tempting offer. He smelled so good, I wanted to roll around and coat every inch of my body with that scent. It didn’t help that I hadn’t slept well, knowing he was only footsteps away from me. Another fun-filled night would be well worth all the past troubles that had occurred since I arrived in this town.

I snapped back to reality. Just because he’d been nice so far didn’t mean anything. I couldn’t get attached, and another night with him would do that. I wasn’t planning on staying in Blackwood Creek any longer than I had to, and I had to keep reminding myself that I couldn’t trust him.

I couldn’t trust *any* shifter. I couldn’t forget that.

So, I did what I always did best; I got snarky. “I’d rather not eat any more of your rabbit food. Are all overly heroic, loaded alpha mayors health nuts like you?”

Ridge’s rich laughter wrapped around me, soaking my panties that much more.

“We better feed you. Don’t want anybody to say I’m making you suffer from my rabbit food.”

His smile made my stomach flip, which only served to irritate me. What was wrong with me?

Ridge put his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat again. He looked away from me as a shyness I wouldn’t have thought possible seemed to come over him for a second. Then slowly, he pulled out a box from his pocket, handing it to me.

“You should wear this.”

I reached for the box and opened it. I gasped at the stunning, very real, and likely very expensive antique engagement ring. It was made up of a silver band with a prominent princess-cut diamond in the middle and two smaller diamonds framing the larger one. My hands shook at the idea of wearing such an exquisite piece, even if it were only for show. I’d surely never wear anything like this again.

“It’s only for show, obviously, but it was my grandmother’s ring,” Ridge said. “I hope it fits.”

Staring at the ring, I tried not to let the girly fantasies I had as a child run away with me. When I was little, I always imagined a romantic proposal with a breathtaking ring that meant something dear to the man who was proposing, but this wasn't that time. This wasn't my ring. This wasn't my man.

I rolled my eyes at him, hoping it covered the longing I didn't want him to see. Sliding the ring onto my finger, I suppressed a gasp at the perfect fit. "It fits."

Ridge took my hand, his thumb dancing over the ring. He looked me in the eye and whispered, "It does. Perfectly."

"I promise I'll be very careful with it and get it back to you unscathed."

This ring was obviously very important to him, so I'd hate for anything to happen to it. Who knew how long this ring had been in the family? I would make sure it stayed in his family.

Things got awkward pretty fast after the sentimental moment, and we rushed to the car when. The ring hit a little too close to home for me, and guilt hit me at the deception of it all. A proposal was a committed devotion between two people. It wasn't something to mock, and even though our fake engagement wasn't a joke, it still felt very wrong in many ways.

Ridge opened the door to the restaurant for me and guided me inside, his palm resting on my lower back. Chills ran up my spine, and his hand clenched at my back. We were both ignoring the attraction growing between us. How successfully we could continue ignoring it was still to be determined.

We were in a part of town I hadn't been to before, but the area showed it to be the wealthy area of town. We'd passed several mansions on the drive.

The host, an older gentleman, greeted Ridge and me and led us to our table. There was no waiting, and Ridge didn't even give his name. It was honestly a bit of a power trip to be with someone who commanded that kind of attention.

The place was filled with the more affluent members of the town. Some greeted us kindly and offered their well wishes and congratulations. Ridge was even stopped by someone trying to get a word in about some political issue or another, while the wives in the group insisted on us all getting together for a dinner party.

"Thank you," Ridge said graciously. "We'll have to get that arranged, but I'm here to enjoy a lovely meal with my future bride. No shop talk tonight. I don't want to get in her bad books before we're even married."

The men laughed with knowing looks and the wives beamed at me. One even said I was lucky to have a fiancé so obviously devoted to me, and if only her Charles would take the hint and not talk about work when they were out. The husband jokingly grumbled before kissing his wife on the cheek.

They were cute. I suddenly hoped I'd have something like that one day, but then reality set in. That wouldn't ever be me.

We said our farewells to the other couple and made our way to our table. The host stood waiting patiently for us, and as he made to pull out my chair, Ridge waved him off and slid it under me as I sat. The host set down the menus and announced that our server would be with us shortly.

I got comfortable in my seat and took in the atmosphere. I'd never been anywhere so fancy and elegant. It was a fairytale princess moment until I glanced over to see Martin Greenthorne glaring at us. I stiffened and came crashing back to reality.

Ridge noticed my reaction and followed my gaze. He reached for my hand and slipped his fingers between mine. "Don't mind him. That's just how the man looks whenever I'm in the room." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I've even been told it looks like that when I'm not in the room."

I lifted my gaze to Ridge and relaxed at his genuine smile and smooth wink.

"He was one of the first people in the bar after Audrey screamed, so he had to have been nearby," I said.

"He was, and I spoke to Clawson. He thoroughly questioned him, and his alibi for the time of death checked out."

Ridge stroked my skin with his palm to help soothe me. He must've seen how nervous I was to be here with everybody watching us. Luckily, we were sequestered in the back at a private table where people couldn't hear what we were saying.

Ridge leaned toward me and quieted his voice. "The autopsy showed that the deputy was killed at least two hours before the body was discovered, Tori. I'm pretty sure you would've still been running back to Blackwood Creek during that time."

Shaking my head, I released my hand from his and grabbed the menu to look it over. "You're very optimistic, but 'pretty sure' won't cut it for me. I'm going to figure out for certain if I'm guilty sooner or later."

I caught Ridge's frown out of the corner of my eye, but I pretended not to

see it as I studied the menu. Annoyed, I huffed under my breath. They seriously couldn't have listed the prices?

Ridge must have heard me as he gave another of his low, panty-melting chuckles.

"It's not funny. How will I know what to pay you back?" I frowned at him.

He grabbed my hand and pulled it to his mouth for a kiss. "This is part of the deal, so you don't pay me back."

The server arrived before I could argue my point further, so I let it go, deciding I'd bring it up later at the manor when we were alone. I knew if I carried on here, my voice would rise, which wouldn't exactly portray the happily engaged couple act.

We placed our order and sipped at the delicious wine poured for us. I was surprised to find I actually enjoyed it. I didn't know anything about wine and wasn't much of a drinker, but I figured when playing the part, I had to act the part. I relaxed back into my seat.

"So, what do you know about hunters?" Ridge asked.

Okay, so no prelude, then. Straight to the main event.

I gripped my glass and took another sip, desperately trying to hide my shaking hands. I'd never talked about the hunters pursuing me to anyone before. I didn't talk about this part of my life, period. Not that I'd had anyone to talk to, but this was the deal I'd made.

If I did anything, I kept my word. It was all I had left.

"In the late 1800s, humans turned to witches for help hunting down all kinds of paranormal creatures, and over time, they split up into their own separate factions to hunt for specific things. For example, the different versions of shifters? They all have their own specialty class of hunters."

Ridge leaned forward and held my hand again. With the other, he gently reached up and caressed my cheek. I figured he was playing the part of the lovestruck, smitten fiancé. I fought my wolf to not lean into the touch.

"I know that," he said. "There are a lot of historical roots of those witches in this area of Pennsylvania, though I'm pretty sure their magic that helped the original hunters faded a long time ago."

I jerked my head toward him. "I didn't realize they originated in this area, but you're mistaken. The magic didn't fade."

"What do you mean?"

"The hunters who are after me take an oath when they join their

respective faction, then once they're sworn in as hunters, they go through an induction ritual that gives them increased speed and strength—similar to that of a shifter. Their reflexes are also heightened, so they'll be a fair match in a fight.”

Ridge's eyes narrowed.

“The hunters also take advantage of wolf shifter weaknesses like wolfsbane and silver, but their weapons today are a lot more modern and high-tech. There aren't a ton of wolf shifter hunters, but their operation runs just as smoothly as the FBI while being about a hundred percent more secretive. They're a well-oiled organization that functions like a special black ops team.”

Ridge's jaw started ticking as he controlled his anger, but his hold on me didn't waver. It was still just as soothing and gentle.

“How do you know so much if they have never harmed you?” As soon as the words left his mouth, his calm expression vanished. “Did they hurt you? Were you captured?” His nostrils flared as his face reddened.

My heart leaped at his concern, and I reached over and placed my palm on his cheek. “No, I was never captured. I've had a lot of run-ins and close calls, but they've never officially caught me, which is a really good thing. They typically torture any lone shifter they catch to get information out of them—information on shifter locations, when they were last with other shifters. They torture until they get what they need, then they give their captive a merciful death.”

I inwardly scoffed at the words “merciful death.” When was death ever merciful?

Ridge's eyes dilated so fast, I could no longer see the beautiful gray that always made me picture a rainstorm and curling up by a fire. Now, they were black pools. He struggled to control his breathing.

“You're not lying to me, right? You weren't captured and tortured.” His voice held pain and threat of retribution. I'd never seen someone so angry on my behalf before. I didn't know how to receive it.

I leaned over, cupped his face in both hands, and looked at him square in the eyes.

“No, Ridge, I wasn't. I have only been on the run and seen some of this, but they've never once caught me. I wouldn't lie about never being tortured like that.”

He closed his eyes, held my wrists, and rubbed his cheeks against my

palms. He took several deep breaths, and I realized he was sniffing me. To others, this would look like an intimate moment, but he was using my scent to calm his wolf down.

Slowly, those magical storm-gray eyes opened, and he was once again calm and collected. "I'm happy to hear that."

My heart clenched at his concern. It was so foreign to me.

The server walked over with our dishes, so I sat back as he placed them before us. I needed to lighten the mood.

"Right on cue. I'm sure all my talk of torture has stoked our appetites."

Ridge didn't find that funny.

## Chapter 18

# Ridge

Ignoring my food, I stared at Tori as she took her first bite. I reveled in the pleasantly surprised look on her face. But even so, what she'd just told me rolled around in my head. The specifics she'd given me were too thorough. There was no way she'd gleaned that from passing glances, gossip, or chit-chat with lone shifters. Which had to mean she'd been taken at some point.

She ate a few bites while I still hadn't picked up a fork. "Tori, how do you know all this?"

Both my wolf and I were fighting hard to keep our tempers in check. The idea of her in danger had us losing all reasoning, and I was overcome with a potent need to drag her back to the manor and lock her away. I'd never had a reaction or driving need overtake my common sense like this before. I'd witnessed it with other mates, but surely I'd know for certain if she was my fated mate.

I had to ask her again, because I hoped she'd give me the truth if I was persistent. Tori had way more information she wasn't telling me, and I wanted to know what it was. My fists clenched at the thought of anybody laying a hand on her. This beautiful, fiery wolf didn't deserve the hand she'd been dealt.

Tori took a bite of her food and shook her head. "Ridge, seriously, I just picked things up on the road."

She didn't look at me as she stayed focused on the food. I hated that I'd thought to take her to dinner for this discussion. It would have been easier if we had stayed at the manor without people around. Then I could have really grilled her.

Glancing around the restaurant, I saw people darting not-so-furtive looks

at us, and I could hear them discussing us. Some of the comments were kind, such as they were happy that I'd found somebody, especially one so beautiful. Others made me want to put the speakers in their place. So concerned over status and wealth, two things I didn't give a fuck about.

I reached for my fork and knife and dug into my food, giving Tori some peace while she enjoyed her meal. I loved watching her eat and making sure she got enough. I wanted to feed her the highest quality and most nutritious foods to balance out the years she'd been on the run.

She was almost finished when I couldn't keep my mouth shut again. "How old were you when you went on the run? Did they hurt you? Is that why you ran?"

Tori dropped her cutlery onto the plate, wiped her tongue over her teeth, and glared at me. Her fire had my pants tightening, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. The passion she exuded made me hunger for more.

"I agreed to tell you about the hunters, not give you a blow-by-blow of my sob story. It means nothing."

I put my fork down, then leaned over until I was inches from her face. A deep snarl rose from my gut. "If they touched you, they'll answer to me, and I won't show them a merciful death. I will lay them down before your feet."

My wolf praised me for my promise, but Tori froze in shock. Her eyes searched mine. I gazed back, startled and examining my statement, but I found it to be true. It may have been issued from my wolf, but I realized I'd do precisely as I'd vowed.

"Man, you really do have a hero complex." She picked up her fork, shoved another bite of food in her mouth, and moaned. "This is so delicious. Yum."

She chewed and stuffed in another forkful. Clearly, she didn't want to say anything more on the subject. I decided to let it all slide for now. I didn't want to derail her calm demeanor and take away from her experience with the food. I would get to the bottom of everything—determination was something I had in spades. Learning more about Tori, the hunters, and what they had done to her was at the top of my list, though.

We did the perfunctory small talk, asking about each other's day. I had to hide my amusement when she told me about her interaction with Diana Bogford, then had to hold back my growl to hear how forcefully nosy people had been at the diner. I'd expected it, and usually, something like that wouldn't bother me. But with it happening to Tori, I struggled to not only



keep my wolf in check but also my own mind from obsessing over it and demanding names so I could get retribution.

I didn't like how much food she'd left uneaten on the plate, but since she appeared to be satisfied, I let it go. After getting to know her better, I recognized that if she'd wanted to eat it all, she would have.

"May I interest you in the dessert trolley?" our server asked while collecting our plates.

I lifted my brow at Tori. She patted her stomach and smiled. "Oh, no, thank you, I'm stuffed. Please tell the chef the meal was fantastic."

The server nodded enthusiastically and agreed to inform him. "Mayor?"

"No, we'll just have the check, thank you."

"Very well, Mayor Blackwood. I'll be back shortly."

Before long, we were making our way through the restaurant once again, saying our farewells, which meant it took longer than necessary to leave.

As I drove back to the manor, I contemplated if now was the time to mention her wolf again or if I should wait. But I figured now might be easier, given that I had her alone in the car and she couldn't walk away from me. That ended up being the deciding factor.

"Tori, I've been thinking, and I want you to reconsider working with me on understanding your wolf and building a relationship with her. Getting that connection with her would change things, and if you learned to trust her a little, you would stop struggling with the feral side effects."

Tori was calmer than I expected her to be after bringing up her wolf, but she kept looking out the window. "That's not necessary. I'm pretty sure all that feral stuff is just some anxiety. I need to get into a yoga class or start doing meditation. Something to help me remain calm."

I couldn't help it—I laughed as I glanced over at her, not hiding the heat in my eyes or voice. "I'm sure you would look damn good in yoga pants, but yoga won't work. You need to free your inner wolf, not stretch."

The contented look on her face disappeared. She eyed me coldly. "No, Ridge. Drop it, okay? The monster is not coming out again."

Pulling down my driveway, I gripped the steering wheel so tight, my knuckles drained of blood. It pissed me off that Tori kept referring to her wolf as a monster, kept it caged and separated. Shifters were not meant to do that; we were meant to be one with our animals. Why couldn't she see that? Why wouldn't she listen to someone who had control and balance with his animal?

I opened my mouth, but Tori lifted her hand. “Don’t.”

Once I parked inside the garage, Tori was out of the car and in the manor before I could get out and open her door. I chased after her. I would let the hunter conversation go for the moment, but not this one.

“You can run from a lot of things,” I said. “But you don’t need to run from yourself. You need to stop being afraid of your wolf.”

Tori stopped, whirling around so fast that I almost plowed right into her. “If you’re trying to make me feel bad about that monster, it’s not going to work. Of course I’m terrified of it. It’s a fucking wild animal that lives inside my body, and I can’t control it. I won’t let you make me feel bad about it scaring the crap out of me. I feel what I feel, and that’s all. Get over it.”

We scowled at each other.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” I said. “I want to show you how much better life is when you live harmoniously with your wolf. You don’t have to lose control when you shift. It’s all about balance. Once you have that, you’ll be one with the wolf. It will be exhilarating and the greatest rush you’ll ever have. It’s a remarkable experience, nothing scary or shameful about it.”

Tori stepped closer to me and lifted herself onto her toes to get in my face. Her breathing was heavy, and her eyes were black with anger. She looked fierce and gorgeous. I couldn’t help the physical response she evoked from me. It took more willpower than I wanted to admit not to drop my head and consume that evocative mouth with my own.

“Drop. It. I won’t say it again. Drop this for the last time.”

“No,” I growled, stepping closer to her. This wasn’t the most brilliant move. Her scent tickled my nose, driving me to insanity. My cock had been half hard since she’d opened her bedroom door, and my zipper now laid imprints of its teeth on my sensitive skin.

My wolf snarled, wanting to pin her beneath us, force her submission, and show her exactly who was alpha. It got worse as the scent of her arousal intensified, and I didn’t hide the fact that I had taken in her essence. Her eyes flared with lust as she watched me. I scanned her tight little body, where her nipples had stiffened to pebbled peaks beneath her dress, and I craved to have them in my mouth again, rolling and flicking them with my fingers and tongue, hearing her sounds of desire, her hands fisting in my hair.

Her face flushed as she lifted her lashes to me. Her desire quashed her anger—something I wanted to slay at the moment.

My fists clenched and I fucked her with my eyes, but I wouldn't make the first move. She'd wanted distance, and I'd given her the space. Did she want more? She'd have to initiate it. I'd rather live with blue balls for the rest of the time she lived here than scare her off and have her out there on her own again.

Her protection was of the utmost importance to me, and the only way to protect her was to keep her in town. Where other shifters could keep a lookout, and I could kill anyone who dared to scare her and force her back into a life of loneliness.

"If you want to stop losing control, you need to give in now and then to satisfy your wolf."

Figuring I'd pushed her too far this time, I prepared for her to yell at me and storm off, anticipating yet another cold shower.

But Tori was anything but predictable. She stepped in even closer and whispered, "There is *one* thing that seems to keep the monster at bay."

Her breath kissed my skin and her body heat pulsed against mine. Still, we weren't touching, and it was excruciating to have her so close yet still so far away.

"What's that?"

Her man-eating, cock-pulsing grin—the one she'd graced me with on the night of our introduction—came out to play. I prayed to the moon goddess that she wasn't just teasing me.

"This."

Wrapping her hands behind my neck, she pulled me down to her lips and ravaged my mouth.

I gave her ten seconds before I seized control. I bent my knees, took handfuls of her perfect ass, and lifted her to wrap her legs around my waist. Her core grazed my cock, and we moaned in unison.

The taste of her on my tongue made me want to taste more of her. My need consumed me, and my alpha nature took over. Holding her tight in my arms, I began climbing the stairs two at a time to get to my room, never taking my lips from hers.

I got halfway up the stairs when Tori moaned and nipped at my bottom lip. Growling, I pushed her up against the wall. I wrenched my lips from hers, then attacked her neck, licking and sucking down to her collarbone and along the neckline of her dress. She bit softly at my ear as her hands roamed across my back.

I lowered my head to one of her beckoning nipples that had been torturing me all evening. Tori gasped when I closed my mouth over as much of her breast as I could manage. Even through her dress and bra, her heat invaded my mouth. She shivered in my arms, then grasped my hair and pulled my head closer to her.

My hands skated along her body, teasing her through the thin material of the dress, then moving to the side of the garment and unzipping it. Holding her body to the wall with my torso and hips, I snaked one hand behind her dress through the open zipper, where the soft warmth of her skin burned hot against my touch. Since our first night together, I'd craved the freedom to roam my hands over her skin, and I reveled in doing so again.

My other hand plunged between our bodies, where I ground my palm against her soaked core, giving her no mercy when I discovered her tight little bud already throbbing for me.

Her scintillating moan echoed throughout the manor, and I loved that I could elicit such sounds from her. She'd be screaming my name in ecstasy several times before the night was done.

I slid my hand up to grip the nape of her neck. Her back arched and she pushed her breasts out toward me. I raked my fingers against her pulsing core. Raising my head, I watched her dazed, hooded eyes, her face flushed with arousal.

"More," she begged.

"You need more?" Using my middle finger, I teased the length of her slit. Pushing the crotch of her soaked panties aside, I slid my fingers into her luscious heat and circled her clit with my thumb. "What do you need more of?" I growled.

She gasped and rolled her hips to get the desired friction, but I lessened the pressure and pulled my finger from her opening, dragging my knuckle up and along her mound before pulling my hand away. She cried out, cursing at me, her hips chasing after my hand.

I gripped her hips, keeping her pinned against the wall as I took her mouth with mine and brought her body down against my hard cock. She whimpered and rocked against me. I dry-humped her against the wall, though I swore I could feel her wetness soak through my trousers and boxers. Never would I have believed grinding her against my confined cock would be so fucking hot.

My wolf yipped. Our little wolf was ready for us to dominate. I wanted

her body to be an instrument in my hands, and I wanted her to know I could play her body like a master. I wanted her to know who the alpha was.

A glimpse of the fight that embodied my little wolf came out when she scratched down my back and hissed, “Inside me. Get the fuck inside me.”

I laughed, leaned over, and took her mouth in another commanding kiss, greedily swallowing her moans of pleasure.

She bit my lip, and the familiar coppery scent of blood filled my nose, the liquid pooling at the corner of my mouth. My wolf was pleased. I didn’t believe it was possible when my cock hardened further.

I carried her the rest of the way to my room, tossed her down on the bed, and yanked off her dress in one swift movement.

She tried to scurry back towards the headboard, but I grabbed her ankles firmly and pulled her to the edge of the bed. Ripping her black panties off, I took a moment to take in the delights laid before me, every peak and valley, curve and dip. My mouth watered at the glistening, swollen pink lips that were ripe and ready to be plundered, her desire clear by both the moisture on her thighs and her scent—musky desire, soap, and something that was uniquely Tori.

I dropped to my knees, wrapped her legs over my shoulders, and bit the inside of her thigh, my teeth marks marring that pretty skin. She hissed, but the sound quickly morphed into a pleased moan.

Satisfied I’d left my mark, I turned my head and licked along her crease from her ass to above her clit, where I placed a gentle kiss on the erect bundle of nerves, eliciting a ragged moan from Tori. Finally, and with no warning, I plunged my tongue deep into her. I fucked her with my tongue until she writhed and screamed and flooded my mouth.

As soon as I got the first scream of the night, I moved up, and without letting her come down from the first high, I sucked her clit into my mouth. I plunged one finger inside her, then another, sending her higher and higher once again. I played my new favorite instrument, drawing out the most beautiful notes.

She whimpered and scratched her fingers on my head as she tried to hold on. Her feet and legs tightened at my back as she trembled to keep her legs open for me, her heels alternating between drumming into my shoulder blades or digging in.

Within no time, she shattered again, and I got scream number two. Releasing her clit from my mouth with a loud pop, I licked my lips clean of

her juices, still fucking her with my fingers as she convulsed with the aftershocks of her orgasm.

Her head thrashed from side to side as her orgasm racked through her body. Watching her come undone in this way, the small amount of trust she'd awarded me, was easily the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. My cock throbbed painfully.

Tori lay with her legs open, her mouth stretched in a wide, satisfied smile. Her body appeared boneless as she lay across the bed, her arm covering her closed eyes.

"Watch me," I commanded. Her arm fell down beside her and her eyes snapped open.

I slowed my fingers and removed them, then placed them on her lips. Opening her hot mouth, she sucked on my fingers, tasting herself and never breaking our gaze. I stepped back and stripped. My cock was so heavy and full that it smacked against my stomach once I freed it and kept twitching. It seemed to know what it was doing when it homed in right where I needed it to be.

I stepped forward and cupped her mound again, collecting her juices. I fisted my cock with her natural lubrication and pumped myself hard and fast, ensuring I was coated. I helped myself to more from her pussy and slathered myself again. She was so wet, and I couldn't wait to have her wrapped around my cock.

Her eyes were huge and hungry, and she licked her lips as she watched me jerk off.

She spread her legs more and lifted her hips, inviting me to enter her.

Flashing her a wicked grin, I grabbed her legs and flipped her over onto her stomach. She gasped when I gripped her hips and slammed into her depths like a thief in the night. Pulling her back against me, I thrust into her with no mercy.

She squealed, "Oh, God, yes," and gave several deep breaths after the fast invasion as she became accustomed to my hard length stretching her tight walls.

I didn't have to wait long. She met me thrust for thrust. I let her set the pace for a moment because I loved seeing her ride my cock with such abandon, then I slapped her ass cheek and watched the skin ripple, the white of her flesh pinkening.

Tori's internal muscles gripped me tight, and she moaned her pleasure.

“You like that, don’t you? Good girl. Ride my cock.”

She let out a moan and her pussy clenched around my cock, giving away her desire for more. I wanted to paint that perfect ass red, and she started wiggling her ass back and forth. So, I took it as an invitation and smacked her again.

I bit down on my bottom lip and attempted to sear the image of her sliding onto my shaft. Watching her seeking her pleasure on my cock was the hottest thing imaginable. I wanted to savor the picture later.

Leaning over, I unsnapped her bra and let it fall down her arms. “I need to see all of you bouncing for me.” I turned my head so I could catch a glimpse of her pert breasts moving along in time with her ass. It wasn’t exactly what I was hoping for, but next time I’d have her on top riding me so I’d have a prime view.

My wolf, though enjoying this as much as I was, wanted to pin her, bite into her flesh, and rut until she couldn’t walk anymore.

Smacking her ass one last time and a little harder, I held her hips in place and pistoned into her. My balls slapped against her, hitting her clit, my hand reaching under her to pinch her pale pink, stiffened nipple.

“Fuck, Tori, you are so tight and wet. You feel so fucking good.”

My body quaked at the force as sweat covered my body like I was battling an inferno, but I kept up the punishing pace. I wanted to howl when I ripped another scream out of that decadent mouth of hers.

She collapsed, but I wasn’t done. I lay over her body, trapping her beneath me. I turned her head, seeking her lips to resume our kiss. It was wet and sloppy, but we both moaned at the contact.

“Such a good girl, Tori. Fuck, I’ll never get enough of you.”

I kissed the sexy part of her neck where it curved into her shoulder while my balls tightened and pulled up into my body.

Stopping the brutal pounding thrusts, I pulled out my engorged member all the way to the tip. Tori let her displeasure at the loss be known with a wail. I slammed back into her, then did it again. On the last stroke, I buried myself as deep inside her as possible, and with a roar, I found my release. My cock wept inside her. I bit down on her shoulder and held myself inside her, my seed filling her womb.

The muscles of her tight pussy clamped down, milking my cock for everything it had as she screamed for the fourth time. I twitched for several moments, leaning on my forearms so as not to squash her under my weight.

She was limp, and I licked over the bite marks I'd left on her body. My wolf and I were proud to have them adorning her neck like priceless jewelry.

I stayed inside her as I rolled us over on our sides. I wasn't quite ready to pull out yet. I lay next to her and held her as we panted for breath.

I wouldn't ever admit it, but my knees were weak. That was, without question, the best sex I'd ever had. Already, I needed more.

She hummed and had the silliest grin on her face. I slowly pulled out, and we both winced and sighed at the loss. I tugged the blankets up over her and curled myself around her. I knew I should get a rag and clean her, care for her, but who knew if she'd let me hold her again later? I didn't want to miss my chance.

Watching her so blissed out, knowing I'd caused her to be in this state... I'd never felt so content and at peace before. The restless energy that continuously resided inside me was absent, and it had everything to do with this remarkable woman.

My fingers danced over her skin, and I traced the caged crescent moon tattoo on her left side.

"I get the symbolism of this. I just wished you didn't feel like you needed to keep your wolf locked away. I wish you could see yourself the way I do because you're stunning as a wolf, too, Tori." I kept my voice calm and quiet. It brought me such sadness that she wasn't willing to connect with her wolf.

Tori looked at the tattoo and then at me. Her eyes dimmed a little. "I'd love not to be afraid of it, either. But Ridge, I can't face it."

Her face hardened once again, her shield returning. I wanted to kick myself for ruining the moment.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore." She scurried out of the bed, grabbed her clothes and shoes, and ran from my bedroom.

My heart ached and my wolf grew enraged. We wanted her in our bed, forever. I paused at that thought but didn't have the energy to dig deeper into it.

Sitting up, I debated going after her. I wanted to stay right by her side throughout the night, but she craved space right now. She needed that. Preferred it.

I'd give her tonight, but I was still determined to show her it would be safer for everyone, especially her, if she trusted her wolf. Trusted me. That being here in Blackwood Creek was the best thing for her.

My chest tightened at the thought of her running again—this time, from



me.

I wouldn't be able to handle that.

## Chapter 19

# Tori

After showering the next morning, I gaped at my reflection in the mirror. Ridge had covered me with bite marks. It took twenty minutes to cover up the most visible of them, but if somebody were to look close enough, they'd know exactly what the marks were. I only had one shirt with a high enough collar to cover them, or else I would have run out of the makeup I bought yesterday.

I groaned irritably. Having to be in the spotlight with Ridge meant I'd have to dress up from time to time, and I didn't want to waste the money I was saving on freaking makeup.

All my reasoning still didn't stop the butterflies in my stomach from seeing the marks, and I couldn't control the satisfaction rolling off my wolf. Or shut her up when she growled at me for covering the love bites that plastered my skin. She wanted me to show off my skin and be proud. I'd never understand that.

I stomped down the street as I made my way into town. I did not want to face Ridge. It didn't matter that I wasn't working an early shift; I much preferred the idea of sitting in the middle of the town square than coming face to face with the man. Not with last night's steamy moments still fresh on my mind. Last night had been epic for me, and as if to prove it, I couldn't think straight today. I'd started walking out of habit instead of grabbing the keys and taking the Range Rover.

When Ridge caught up with me later, I wouldn't be surprised if he had something to say about it. Who was I kidding? Of course, he'd have something to say. He was a man used to getting his way.

My wolf was very satisfied, and I couldn't blame her. The residual ache

between my legs was sensational. Just the thought of it made my clit tingle and demand more. Not gonna happen.

It should never have happened at all. That part of our arrangement, relationship, whatever you would call it, was over. It had to be over. Last night was the absolute last time I'd give in to how incredibly attractive and addicting Ridge was. It was too dangerous. I was already getting too close to being irreversibly attached to him.

I'd never been with a man for more than one night, and I should have known better than to let last night happen. I couldn't even blame my wolf, because as much as she'd enjoyed it, she hadn't pushed for it. No, that had been all me. It couldn't happen again. I couldn't deal with a broken heart on top of the hunters. And let's face it, Ridge was way out of my league, and he'd eventually be done with me. He only had to snap his talented fingers, and the next bitch in heat would be all too happy to fall into his bed. My heart wouldn't stand that.

I also couldn't forget that I'd very likely committed murder when the wild monster had been on the loose. Not to mention the fact that the hunters could pick up my trail, and I'd have to leave without notice at any moment.

The happily-ever-afters in novels didn't play into my future, not if I wanted to survive. But I couldn't deny that I'd thought more about my happily-ever-after since arriving here than I'd ever done before Blackwood Creek. Before Ridge.

The town was lively this morning, and all the shops were beginning to open. I passed the library, where Mrs. Marrow was getting ready to start the day.

I watched her momentarily, feeling a sense of gratitude toward the woman. The older librarian was one of the few people in town to politely give me space since the murder and the engagement announcement. I also couldn't forget how she'd stuck up for me when one of the Magpies and the Greenthornes accused me of killing the deputy.

Figuring the charming library would probably be a safe place at the moment, a place where I'd be left alone, I wandered over. Since the library was directly across the street from The Topsy Tavern, it made sense that the librarian had shown up at the bar so quickly.

“Good morning, Mrs. Marrow. How are you?”

The library was empty of patrons but full of books. The small building was crammed with as many books as possible, with not one place that wasn't

utilized to hold a book. Even the tables had books lined down the middle, and the comfortable sitting chairs had side tables stacked with them.

“I’m well, thank you. Are you looking for anything in particular? If you want a romance on the spicier side, I have my favorites hidden by the front desk. Just let me know, and you can take a peek to see if any catch your attention.”

The sheepish smile and glint in her eye made her look adorable. She acted as if she had done something wrong but wanted to share her guilty pleasure, anyway.

I chuckled. “No, thanks. Maybe next time.”

“Okay, dear. There are some good ones, though.” She bounced her shoulders playfully.

I laughed harder. She was a little kooky, and I liked that. “Mrs. Marrow, you must have a great view of the bar from here.” I glanced out the windows from the front counter where we stood. “I hope it isn’t rude for me to ask, but were you here the morning the deputy was killed?”

Sadness washed over her face, and I kicked myself for bringing it up. She sighed as she leaned against the desk, as if the mere thought of the incident had sapped her of strength.

“I do have a great view of the shenanigans that go on over there,” she said. “I’ve always tried not to pay it too much mind. A lot of it happens after the library is closed, so I don’t catch everything, but I could just kick myself because I didn’t see a darn thing that morning. I was out back refilling my bird feeder when I heard Audrey scream. I didn’t know what to make of it. I’m ashamed to say I thought the poor, spoiled brat was throwing another one of her temper tantrums after someone told her no or something.”

I snorted. Audrey was well-known for her spoiled little rich girl act, and her temper tantrums, it seemed, were common.

“Believe me when I tell you I was shocked it wasn’t just one of her episodes. The whole thing is just so...well, shocking. Phil was such a little rascal growing up. He always ran in here and nicked all the taffy.” She pointed to a bowl at the corner of her desk, full of taffy. A sign next to it said, “Help yourself,” then in smaller letters beneath, “Please be considerate.”

“He came in every day after school. I always tried to stop him, but he was such a smart boy. The only way to stop him would have been to not have it out for people anymore. I didn’t want to do that, so I played along. I ended up buying extra, still do after all these years. When he did his rounds, he’d come

in and pocket several. Pretending that I didn't know what he was doing." Mrs. Marrow sniffled as her eyes strayed to the bowl and stayed there for a moment. "I guess I don't need to buy extra anymore."

I stiffened at Mrs. Marrow's sadness. I wasn't particularly good with the whole comforting thing and didn't know what to do. I could only be thankful that she wasn't crying. Then I really wouldn't know what to do.

"I'm positive everything will get figured out and justice will be served," I said.

Mrs. Marrow started and looked back at me as if she had forgotten I was there. She grabbed a tissue and wiped her nose. "I'm so sorry, Tori. This is your first visit to our library, and here I am, being a proper Debbie Downer first thing in the morning. Especially to someone who just announced such wonderful news."

I waved my hand in dismissal, but she ignored it.

"You and Ridge are a gorgeous couple. You suit each other well. If you want to look at old bridal magazines for a vintage wedding, let me know. There are quite a few of them in the records room in the back."

And that was my cue to leave. I could tell people I was engaged and pretend Ridge and I were still figuring out a wedding date, but there was no way I would actually be doing things that looked like I was planning a wedding. That was going too far.

"Thank you, Mrs. Marrow. I'll think about it, but I'll pass on it for now. We don't know yet what kind of wedding we want. We're still trying to nail down a date."

"Very well, dear. Let me know if you need help with anything."

I smiled, thanked her, and headed out. A sigh of relief shuddered out of me as I left the library. I hadn't expected the conversation to turn to the wedding that would never happen.

As I passed Lola's office on the way out, we spotted each other and waved. Another twinge shocked my heart. People were getting familiar here. Routines were being made. All of this was making it harder for me to want to leave. I'd still do it, but it would be something I'd ache over for quite a long time.

I wandered over to the diner to start my shift. I was a little early, but that meant more tips. The faster I accrued good savings, the sooner I could leave and cut these ties before they knotted up.

Work was monotonous—taking orders, serving food, cleaning the tables.

Rinse, wash, and repeat. So far, the customers were people who'd already satisfied their curiosity about me. They were only here to order food and get on with their day.

I was happy to oblige them, and it gave me time to think over the case and everything I knew about the murder. Itemizing the facts in my head, I concluded that at the moment, I was most suspicious of either Audrey or Mateo, despite how much I liked the latter.

Phil Hill being at the bar so early in the morning still niggled at my brain. Why had he been there? I'd need to figure that out before getting caught up in any possible secrets lurking in Blackwood Creek that would serve as a motive to kill the deputy. Once it was known why he'd been at The Topsy Tavern, it would help narrow down the gossip. A town full of shifters was bound to have more than its fair share of secrets.

What secrets were tied to Deputy Hill, though? That was another major question.

I worked steadily for a couple of hours until the ever-present customer lull inevitably occurred. I studied the Magpies in their assigned corner booth, gabbing away like usual. Biting the bullet, I fell on my sword and approached them for more information.

"Is it all right if I join you ladies for a moment?"

Both Magpies tittered and welcomed me excitedly. "Why, of course! To have the mayor's fiancée joining us is a privilege."

My cheeks flushed, which wasn't part of the act. It was a natural reaction to the embarrassment of having a title I hadn't rightfully earned but made into a farce.

Before I could ask any questions, the older women yammered on about national news, old movies, and a bunch of other insignificant facts. Lost in their back and forth, I could only get a word in here or there. For older women, they were spritely in their conversation. They could run circles around me before I even considered how to respond.

Suddenly, they threw a curveball at me and caught me off-track. "How are you doing after the dreadful murder?"

Both women had huge grins and tittered at me again. One of them lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. An average person's hearing wouldn't have made out what she said, but I heard her just fine.

"We know you two probably got carried away off on your own together. It was the Full Moon Howl, after all."

I stiffened, my eyes darting back and forth between the two. They kept their smiles while my wolf and I inhaled their scent as subtly as possible. I moved in closer and sniffed again, sitting back as a bombshell settled into my mind.

One of the Magpies was a shifter, while the other clearly knew about shifters. I sagged into my seat and smiled at the ladies.

“Thank God.” I chuckled, and the women joined me. “It’s so hard to keep up the front all the time. I’m relieved I can relax with you. That’s exactly what happened.”

The ladies nodded, but something bothered me, so I frowned at them. “If you know all that, then why did you point the finger at me if you knew where we’d been?”

The women shrugged and were so blasé about the whole thing, my wolf grumbled, irritating me.

“We were just being objective,” one said.

“You did get awfully snappy with the deputy in here not long before his death.”

As if that would be enough to make me *murder* him. “Right, because anytime somebody has a tiff with somebody, they obviously start killing,” I said, eyeing them coldly. To their credit, they looked a little sheepish. “I was just nervous that someone would figure out that Ridge and I were secretly engaged, and then he put his hands on me. I didn’t like that a stranger, and a deputy at that, grabbed my arm. So, of course I got snippy.”

Both women appeared chastised.

“Do you know why the deputy was in the bar in the first place?” I asked.

The Magpies shared a look, then Maggie Hill leaned closer to me and lowered her voice. “We don’t know specifically, but if we had to make a bet, it would have something to do with the Greenthornes or that friend of yours.”

I scrunched my nose and cocked my head. “Which friend are you talking about?” It wasn’t like I had a lot of them.

“Everyone knows Margo went through that nasty breakup with Phil just a few weeks before his death. Who knows what could have happened with all the drama there?”

Margo and Deputy Hill? Seriously? That was news to me. Margo hadn’t said anything about dating him, but I didn’t believe for one minute that she’d hurt him, let alone kill him. Margo was too kind and sweet for that. There was absolutely no possibility.

And now that I'd discovered people thought Margo could have done this, I had an even bigger resolve to find out who committed the crime. I wouldn't let anyone think it was Margo. I made a mental note to talk to her later and get to the bottom of what had happened there.

Not wanting any more focus on Margo, I switched up the conversation. "Audrey showed up when I did, and Mr. Greenthorne appeared shortly after. Do you think any of the Greenthornes could have done it? Which one?"

Both women snickered, then Mrs. Hill spoke up. "Take your pick, Tori. The sordid secrets concerning that family and the bar would make reality TV salivate for the rights to their lives."

I was about to ask about the secrets, but the other Maggie intervened.

"It's hardly anything we should share, but it's no wonder why that family is in counseling with the skinny, freckled psychiatrist girl. That girl would have to pull off a miracle to even remotely aid that family. There's not enough money and time in the world for them to work through their issues."

That only intrigued me more. What secrets did that family have? And what did it have to do with the bar and Deputy Hill?

The diner started getting busier again, and my time to question the Magpies was over—for now, at least. The Magpies left before I could get another chance to talk with them. The good thing was that I knew where to find them easily. Even if I had to come into the diner on my day off, I would. Anything to get more information from them.

For the rest of my shift, I thought about Margo and why she never told me she'd dated the deputy. Margo liked to poke into my relationship with Ridge, so it was only fair for me to poke into hers with the murder victim. It would have been nice to know he was her ex.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to face Margo first or snoop around town for more information about the Greenthornes and their secrets. If the breakup had been recent, then Margo was grieving, and there would be a lot to unpack. Not being the best person to offer comfort, I decided to give her some space.

It was still light out when my shift ended. I didn't want to return to the manor in case Ridge happened to be there in all his annoyingly compelling ways. My skin wasn't thick enough yet to resist him, and it would be easier to stay away for a bit since we were alone in that colossal mansion.

I couldn't believe I'd wished he was a little more pompous and had staff so I could have interference. But of course, he was down-to-earth and self-sufficient, another sexy attribute that infuriated me.



Out of nowhere, an arm slung around my shoulders, and my wolf growled loudly inside my head. This wasn't Ridge; my wolf and I were always well-aware of him when he was close. I looked to the side, and my throat dropped into my stomach and coiled into disgust.

Zander Elkins held me with way too much familiarity. His breath smelled strongly of alcohol, so much so that I was afraid I'd get drunk off the fumes. I struggled to escape his hold, but he tightened his embrace and lowered his head until his mouth was mere inches from mine.

"You want to go for that run now?"

I gagged, fighting a wave of nausea. My wolf growled again, wanting to get her claws into him. His touch made me physically sick. I jabbed my shoulder into his underarm, hoping to shove him off me, but he just laughed and gripped me even tighter.

"If you didn't grasp how not interested I was while you were sober, you sure as hell won't pick up on it now when you're shit-faced. Get lost before you really piss me off."

I had the bravado and the anger to rage, but I was tired of this wolf thinking he could have a piece of me, that I was just to be the little woman. Zander swayed and laughed simultaneously, so drunk he couldn't stand up straight.

"If you're so worried about ruining your engagement to the mayor, you shouldn't be. None of that human engagement fluff holds water with us shifters. Shifters are either mated or they aren't, and right now, you and Mr. Mayor aren't. So, far as I'm concerned, you're fair game and can run around with whoever you want."

As if I would choose to be with this sloppy drunk.

He wrapped his other arm around my waist and pulled me against his chest, ignoring my squirming. I was sickened that he wasn't trying to be quiet about it, either.

The people walking around were eyeing us. I didn't want to embarrass Ridge and cause him more problems, and this sorry excuse for a man was doing exactly that. Ridge was right, as always. Zander kept trying to stir up drama and trouble between humans and shifters.

"Get your fucking paws off me," I gritted out between my teeth, pushing at his chest, but he hugged me so tight that I couldn't get the leverage I needed. Even though he was two sheets to the wind, he was still bigger and stronger.

I wouldn't let panic set in because we were still in the middle of town in a public place, and I did not want the wolf to take control. I couldn't shift here. I didn't want to shift, period, but I didn't have the right amount of control when I was angry and scared. I tried to rationalize to myself that I shouldn't be afraid.

*We're in public. People can see. He can't hurt me.*

I pushed him back and snapped at him again.

Suddenly, Ridge appeared out of nowhere, grabbed Zander by the neck, and shoved him away from me. He did it with such force that Zander slammed into the side of the Moonlight Café. Ridge moved in front of me, his hand at my waist. His thumb stroked me back and forth soothingly, but he never took his eyes off Zander.

His touch and scent calmed me down enough that I could bring my wolf under control. She still wanted Zander's blood, but we both wanted Ridge's comfort.

Then anger bubbled up at the surface of my mind. What the fuck was wrong with me? I was more than capable of handling situations like this on my own. I'd done it for years. I didn't need a man to swoop in and save the day.

And yet, I couldn't ignore the part of me that acknowledged that now I'd tasted what could be, I'd be a liar if I denied I wanted more.

## Chapter 20

# Ridge

I couldn't hold back the shit-eating grin gracing my face as I left the town hall. I had just finished talking to an important investor who could really make a difference to my business, and I was elated. The money would bring in the necessary cash flow to hire more employees. I'd be able to delegate and take a step back, meaning less work for me in the long run.

On top of that, flashes of Tori and the most incredible night crept into my thoughts throughout the day. I couldn't help but play them over and over. At times, I was so engrossed in my thoughts that several people had to call my name more than once to get my attention, but I didn't care. Today was turning out to be a wonderful day, and I hoped I'd be lucky enough for a repeat performance or two tonight.

Heading down the steps of the front hall, I caught Tori's scent and it stopped me in my tracks. Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply, taking in her fragrance. She was so tempting, a siren in my midst, and I wrestled with the call. She was down the street, and it was a struggle to not go to her, but she was so adamant about needing her space. I didn't want to push her too hard, especially when she'd made it clear that she had one foot out of town and was just biding her time.

I needed that to change. I wanted her to want me close to her, and not because I'd barged in and started making demands that would only drive her away.

As I reached my car, her scent teased me again. I tried not to look over at her and fought with my wolf to leave her be, but I caved. Smiling, I glanced over my shoulder in the direction her scent had drifted from.

The world stopped and my vision turned red. My claws slowly

descended, and I launched myself toward Tori. She was angry and appeared to be pushing at Zander fucking Elkins, who was practically drooling over her as he wound his arm around her waist—the same waist I was positive still had markings from my teeth. She should only have my scent on her skin, and now this disgusting wolf was overpowering my temporary claim.

I didn't remember ever moving so fast in my life. Typically, my wolf and I were perfectly in sync. He allowed me control in human form just as I let him have control in our wolf form. We had a balance, a kinship. But now, anger was raging inside me, and I didn't know what I was doing until it was too late.

As soon as Tori and Zander were within my reach, I shoved the arrogant troublemaker away and pulled my little wolf behind me.

Once Zander was away from Tori, I began to calm down and felt I could breathe again. I never took my eyes off the drunk, but Tori wasn't impressed with my presence. I could sense her death glare on me, but I didn't care. Nobody was to touch her, ever. She was under my protection, and that wasn't an oath I made lightly.

Several people were muttering around us as I kept one eye on Zander and skimmed the area as best I could. Townsfolk were openly staring in shock. The humans were, at least.

There were no shifters around. They'd understand my display and would probably try to get Zander away from me since this was a delicate issue, and we wouldn't want our shifter actions to be made aware. Even in the shifter community, nobody messed with another's mate. Tori and I may not be mated according to shifter standards, but we were still engaged, and living among humans made that stand for something.

At least, they all *believed* we were engaged.

Zander scowled and staggered from the wall before falling back against it.

“We should try that fight again, Ridge, now that I have both of my legs working.” His words were slurred, and he smelled like a liquor store.

God, this fucker disgusted me. He'd been getting this drunk way more often lately. I craved the fight, especially with him for touching Tori, but it wouldn't be fair. The drunk could hardly stand up or form a coherent sentence.

My alpha instincts took over, and I issued a warning that if there were a next time, I wouldn't worry about what was fair or who was watching. “If you touch or even look at Tori again, I'll make sure your legs are the least of

your worries. Back off and go dry yourself out. You're too drunk to be out in public."

Zander tried to clap back at me, but he couldn't balance well, and since I didn't want to deal with him anymore, I wrapped my arm around Tori and started to lead her away as she scowled at me.

"What're you doing?" Her muttered question was laced with ire. She didn't understand my wolf's reaction to Zander. I didn't really understand it myself. I always looked after the shifters in my care, but how I was caring for Tori was beyond just looking after. My aggression and possessiveness were out of character for me, as were my wolf's heated reactions before I could rein it in.

Guiding her behind the diner seemed a reasonable option. In her current frame of mind, there was no way she'd get in the car with me, but I needed to speak to her and make sure she hadn't been hurt.

Convincing my wolf his assistance wasn't necessary was no easy feat. He was freaking out that another male had touched her. I had to admit that I wasn't fond of it, either. She smelled wrong now, and it needed to be remedied.

Unable to fully control myself, I studied her angered face, reached out, and rubbed off the makeup covering the now-faded love bites I'd left on her skin. My wolf and I both needed to reaffirm that they were still there. If they weren't, we would give her new ones.

Since they appeared darker and more robust without makeup, my wolf and I settled down, and I stepped closer to her. I wanted to wrap her up tight and get my scent all over her. I didn't want Zander's scent lingering on her skin or her clothes.

She smacked my hand away and fumed up at me. "What the hell is wrong with you? You had no right to go all caveman like that. I can handle jerks like that just fine." She slammed her hands on her hips, her nostrils flaring.

God, but she was the sexiest creature I'd ever seen. The fight in her was something I loved to battle with. It was exasperating, but if she was a meek little thing, I wouldn't get to witness her in her glory. And what a sight she was to behold.

"And if you're trying to show off your handiwork as some kind of weird, wolfish, primitive show of claiming me, I'm going to deck you so hard and leave town," she continued.

I stilled at the threat. That was the one thing she could use that would

always keep me in line. The thought of her leaving had me in a tailspin.

Huffing at her, I said, “I had to step in because Zander was all over you and you hadn’t decked him yet.”

She balled her fists at her sides, straightening her spine to get as close to my face as her short stature would allow.

Her action made me inhale deeply. I could only smell her and me. Nothing of Zander’s scent remained on her, and I couldn’t have been more thankful. Because I didn’t think I’d be able to restrain myself if his scent was still on her. I’d need to climb all over her.

Even now, I struggled with the urge. I wanted the skin of her neck between my teeth, to be all the way inside her, her screams of pleasure in my ear as she tightened her hold on me and convulsed her completion.

My chest vibrated with a slight growl, infuriating my beautiful little wolf even more as she jabbed a finger against my chest and hissed, “It shouldn’t matter to you who is or isn’t all over me. We both know the engagement isn’t real, and what happened between us last night was me appeasing the psychotic monster trying to crawl its way out of me. You have absolutely no claim on me, no matter how we have to act in public.”

There was no way for me to justify how I’d acted. Coming in with guns blazing wasn’t my thing. I was the mayor, after all. But when it came to shifters, I’d always be the alpha first, and that meant I had to have full control over myself and my actions. But I didn’t exactly want to admit to Tori how out of sorts she made me.

“Well, it wouldn’t look good for our backstory or your alibi if you were fine with some other guy feeling you up right outside the diner when we’re supposed to be engaged.”

Tori threw her hands in the air, turned around, and paced a couple of steps before backtracking and returning to me. “We never should have started this whole charade to begin with. You’re going to get yourself into trouble doing something stupid if you really think I can’t handle some drunk guy.”

“I don’t know what you can and can’t handle since you refuse to tell me a damn thing about your past.” I hadn’t realized just how frustrated that had been making me, but this whole situation was bringing too many emotions to the surface. “Zander might be a dumb, drunk idiot half the time, but he’s still a strong alpha, and the next time he or some other jerk gets too close, you need to fend them off faster, or I’ll do it for you. I’ll never be sorry for doing that. No matter what kind of hot water it will put me in.”

Tori's eyes flashed with passion, and she gave me one of her deceptive sweet smiles. "Fine. I *will* do it faster this time."

She thrust out her arms and shoved me hard in the chest to push me away. I didn't expect the strength, which was far greater than I'd anticipated. With my fast reflexes, I grabbed her shoulders and fell backward with her in my arms. I quickly wrapped them tightly around her body so she'd land on me and I'd take the brunt of the fall. She landed on top of me, forcing my breath out of me.

Instincts kicked in fast and hard. I wasn't wasting the opportunity to have her in my embrace this way, so I rolled and pinned her under me.

"Submit," I said, growling heavily. My teeth went for her throat.

Tori being Tori, she surprised me yet again. She twisted her body just right and kneed me hard in the gut, forcing me to relax my hold and give her the maneuverability to roll us again until she was on top of me.

My cock stiffened and I growled for more. Her eyes darkened and her cheeks flushed. The scent of her arousal slammed into me. I needed more of her, and she answered in kind.

Her head swooped down and she attacked my mouth. Pushing my tongue into her mouth and intertwining it with hers, I cupped her ass with both hands and lifted her up, gently pushing her legs apart as I brought her core down to meet my cock.

We groaned at the friction. I gripped her hips and slid her over the bulge in my trousers. She wrapped her hands around my head and swayed her pelvis, increasing the friction and pushing us toward release.

I wanted to plunge myself inside her and bite down on her neck so badly that I let our scent consume us. It was exactly what I needed. Zander was no longer lingering on her or in the air. All I could smell was our combined arousal, and I hungered for it and more. She moved over me, and I steered my hands to squeeze and tease anywhere I could touch.

We nipped at each other's lips and tongue and then soothed with soft exploration. We made each other bleed, but it only inflamed our raw need. We would invade and retreat into each other's mouths, our kisses so much more than an intimate gesture. We were overtaking each other, staking a claim.

I didn't hesitate. I wanted her to accept my mark, and I wanted her to mark me. I wanted her to be equally possessive and take no shit from any other female who came too close to me. My wolf and I yearned for it.

She groaned into my mouth while I growled. My hands found their way under the hem of her shirt, caressing the familiar soft skin I'd never tire of. I craved to hold her bountiful flesh in my palms. I wanted to have her rock-solid nipples scraping against my palms and sucking them inside my mouth, to engulf her nipples in the warm heat of my mouth, to nibble and bite and lave at her breasts. I sucked her tongue deep into my mouth, imagining her exquisite tits.

A throat cleared, dousing us in figurative freezing water. I fought back a frustrated moan.

My cock throbbed and ached as Tori gasped and leaped away from me. Her face was bright red, mortification making her close in on herself again.

I tried to catch my breath and hold in my frustration and annoyance that we'd been interrupted. I knew I shouldn't be angry. We were in a public space, and I'd almost exposed Tori's body to anybody coming out behind the diner. If someone ever saw her in such an intimate position with me, I'd have to tear their eyes out. Fuck, I was an idiot.

I rubbed my hands down my face, sat up, and rested my arms over my knees, giving myself time to calm down before I stood up. I saw that it was Margo who I regretfully and irritatingly needed to thank. Out of anyone to have caught us, I was glad it was her. Tori considered her a friend, and Margo was loyal and protective of her friends.

Margo laughed, taking way too much pleasure in catching us the way she did. "Clawson came into the café urgently looking for the mayor, who apparently isn't answering his phone." She smirked at us, and Tori's face went a brighter shade of red. "And now I can see why."

Margo wagged her eyes at Tori and skipped back to the café's back door, turning her head and giving us one last smirk before slipping back inside.

I huffed and stood up, swiping dirt off my clothes. Tori stood with her head in her hands, embarrassment oozing off her.

After adjusting myself, I went to her and wrapped my arms around her, then kissed her temple, working my way down to her lips. She took a slight step back, breaking the contact. The hand she flattened on my chest stopped my lips from moving downward, and then she pushed me back.

"You heard Margo. Clawson's looking for you." Her voice was soft. "You should get your ass in there to find out what he needs. You also need to tell me the details of this murder case as they come in, so I can actually be of some use instead of awkwardly nosing around town," she added.



I dropped my arms and stepped back, putting my hands in my pockets as I studied her. She crossed her arms and wouldn't look me in the eye. She nervously tucked her loose hair behind her ear, then returned her arm to a defensive posture in front of her.

Tori didn't let me witness her unguarded side often, but her interaction with Zander and what happened after, then having Margo come upon us, obviously had her out of sorts. I wasn't too fond of it. I loved the fiery, infuriating side of her. When she displayed this vulnerability, I wanted to slay her demons and carry her to a place nobody could ever reach her. It brought out a primal urge in me.

If only she'd stop fighting what was going on between us. We had something, and I wanted to explore it with her because it had the potential to be something epic and remarkable that would be the envy of many. I believed that to the very root of my soul.

This wasn't something I'd ever experienced before. Indeed, I was willing to bet Tori hadn't been in a situation like this, either.

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "From now on, I'll tell you absolutely everything I know about the murder. Including all the details I kept from you out of my loyalty to Clawson's strict investigation policies. I'll also tell you anything new that we find out."

Her eyes lit up, and the vulnerability started shedding from her body. "What's the other end of the deal?"

"Go running with me tonight. In your wolf form." That was more than a fair trade. It was more in Tori's favor than my own. I didn't care, though. I wanted to be with her wolf. I wanted to be with her all the time and in both forms.

"Hell, no," she burst out, flinching. "I'm not shifting ever again, so you can just forget it."

I staggered back a step as if she'd pushed me. She was open about how much she disliked her wolf, and I knew she hadn't shifted often, but *never again*? What the fuck?

"How often do you shift if you think you can keep fighting it indefinitely?" What shifter never wants to shift again? I'd never heard of it.

Bowing her head, she lifted her arms across her chest, and the vulnerability popped up its ugly head once again. I had to strain my ears to hear what she said. "The other night was only the second time."

*Twice ever?* I stepped back, dropping my jaw. I was speechless. This

determination was the unhealthiest thing I'd ever heard of. I'd never witnessed a shifter fighting their wolf so hard that they never let them out. No wonder she was going feral.

The pain and anguish she and her wolf endured must be immense. Why in the world was she doing it to herself? She was making herself go mad.

I hardened my resolve. I'd do anything to protect her, even from herself. This wasn't normal. Something significant had happened to force her to repress her wolf so fiercely. What trauma had caused this? Who'd hurt her so irreparably that she wouldn't do one of the most natural things in the world for her to do?

Moving closer to her slowly, since I was inevitably approaching a wounded animal, I swept my hands from her shoulders down her arms, finally taking her hands in mine and entwining our fingers. I leaned down and rested my forehead against hers. Relief softened me as she allowed me to touch her. She kept her eyes closed, but I waited for them to open.

"Tori, I want to change the deal."

She slowly opened her eyes, and we stared at each other. The pain and fear buried deep in her gaze made me physically ache. I wanted to take it all away.

Squeezing her hands, I said, "I'll tell you everything about the case from now on. I'll give you access to whatever you want, if you tell me what's made you fear shifters this badly." I kept my voice soft and even, careful not to fuel her desire to run, which was her initial reaction to everything.

She sucked in a breath but didn't move away from me. Her eyes danced with mine. I could see she was torn. She bit her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth as her breathing grew heavier.

Shutting her eyes, she said, "Can I get back to you? You really should go and talk to the sheriff before anyone else finds us back here."

I didn't want to leave her. She was in a fragile place at the moment, and I didn't want anything to happen to her. But the fact that she was willing to think it over was a huge step forward in my book. A couple of days ago, she would have told me it was none of my business and to go to hell. The fact that she had her guard down, considering the idea of opening up to me, meant a lot to me.

Gaining her trust and being a confidante for this little wolf would be the best accomplishment of my life. Something to be cherished, as she was somebody to be cherished. And I wanted to be the one to do that.

But this was a significant leap for her, and I didn't want to push her too hard. "Okay, I'll let you think about it. I'll talk to the sheriff."

She opened her eyes and nodded. I kissed her forehead before I stepped back and untangled our fingers. I hated not touching her.

"I'll see you back at the manor later. I noticed you didn't take the car. Do you need a ride?"

"No, I've got it covered."

I hesitated but decided I'd pick my battles. Giving her a quick nod, I headed inside. I prayed I'd get more answers from her because no matter how hard she fought our connection, there was a connection, and I wanted more of it.

I wanted more of *her*.

## Chapter 21

# Tori

Running my fingers through my hair, I tried to straighten it as best I could without a mirror. I patted my clothes, hoping to get rid of as much of the loose dirt as possible. Rolling around on the ground behind the diner hadn't been my finest moment, even though I'd ached for Ridge's touch and wanted more.

I had to get away from him as soon as possible. I had no control over myself when I was near him. The temptation was too great. What if I couldn't hold back, and we got carried away and had sex where someone could stumble upon us?

What in the world had I been thinking? I was losing too much control here in Blackwood Creek. It didn't help that this place bolstered my inner monster and made it harder to keep her separate from the rest of me.

Straightening my clothes, I couldn't stop shaking at the embarrassment of Margo finding me lip-locked and straddling Ridge. Everything I'd been doing with him had been so out of character, and for whatever crazy reason, I couldn't stop.

Waiting to catch my breath, I watched Ridge enter the café while I tried to work out what had just happened, ignoring the deal he wanted to strike. I needed to distance myself from that proposal, because giving over that much of myself to him was a big ask. One I didn't know if I was ready to share with anybody, ever, and most certainly not with another shifter.

I stepped toward the door to make my way inside. I still needed to talk to Margo about her relationship and supposedly bad breakup with Deputy Hill, but I faltered. I couldn't approach guns blazing in public. She'd been crying only yesterday over his death, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I also

didn't want to sound accusatory toward her because I didn't believe for one second that she'd killed him.

With everything we'd talked about since I met her, why hadn't she mentioned her relationship with him? Especially after my first meeting with him and how he'd treated me.

Dropping my hand from the door handle, I figured Margo would have to wait. She'd be on shift right now, and I wanted her undivided attention when we talked. So, next on the agenda? I would poke around and ask questions about the Greenthornes. If anything, it would give me time to decide whether I could trust Ridge with my history.

I walked down the side street to get to the town square. Thankfully, when I appeared from the side of the building, nobody stood around gossiping about what they had seen between Zander, Ridge, and me. It was bad enough that the little show would probably be all people would ask me about over the next couple of days. Which meant I'd have to come up with yet another script for the inevitable questions.

Did everyone in small towns have to create scripts to keep nosy people at bay?

This town was thirsty for drama like I'd never seen before, but to be fair, I had generally avoided small towns. Maybe this was a common theme among them. I'd only recently ventured into smaller towns after a particularly close call with the hunters. It'd been harder to get back to the larger cities, where it was easier to be invisible. People didn't pay you much mind and were concerned only about themselves in cities. Most of the time, they didn't even look you in the eye.

My wolf hated cities because her senses were always overwhelmed, but it made it that much easier to keep her under lock and key. She hated being around that many people.

I studied the town as the sun started to escape in the west, painting the sky with deep reds and purples. The streetlights turned on. The dusky hue showed the town in a new light that still portrayed an elegant charm. I'd be surprised if this place wasn't fodder for Hollywood types and romance authors.

Laughter eased its way down the street to my ears. I turned to my left, seeing the tavern doors open and close with the foot traffic. I figured Mateo would be the best person to question about the Greenthornes. He was the bartender, and bartenders always knew what was what. They counseled

people and listened to every dramatic detail of their problems, whether they wanted to or not. I also didn't want to ask the Greenthornes questions directly. The more I could avoid them, the better. Not that they'd actually answer any of *my* questions.

I also happened to like Mateo. He'd been open to my questions before, so I couldn't think of any reason he wouldn't be open to them now.

When I entered The Topsy Tavern, I couldn't believe how busy it was. Mateo was behind the bar while a couple of waitresses I hadn't seen before dashed to tables with trays piled high with drinks and typical bar foods.

My gut squeezed when I spotted Zander in the corner. No sooner had he noticed me than he started catcalling and summoning me over. I sneered at him, growing more disgusted when I saw he already had a scantily clad woman seated in his lap.

The female glared at Zander before turning her hostile gaze at me, but her face changed and softened when she got a look at me. I didn't know who she was, but I got the impression she knew who I was and that I was engaged to Ridge; I wasn't a threat to taking Zander from her. Like I'd ever want to.

I wanted to warn her to get as far away from him as possible, but I couldn't help everybody. I'd had to instill that in myself in the early days of setting out on my own.

This place, this town...the longer I stayed here, the more I felt I was reverting to the girl who wanted to help. But becoming that girl again would only get me hurt or caught by hunters when I inevitably had to leave, so I had to shake it off pronto.

I ignored the pair and made it to the bar. Mateo was slammed, pouring drink after drink. He didn't bother doing any of his fancy pours and dance moves; there was no time for that. He gave me the typical nod of acknowledgment that men seemed to pull off easily. After handing some drinks to a patron, he looked over at me.

"When you have a minute, can we talk?" I asked.

"Yeah." He glanced back at Zander and huffed. "Why don't you hang out in the back room until this dies down and I can leave the bar?"

I laughed, thanked him, and headed to the back room, grateful he gave me a place to get a reprieve from the creep.

People waved to me and said hello. I waved in return, but I didn't want to sit and chat with anyone. This wasn't a social visit, and I'd done enough socializing today to last at least a month. So, I zig-zagged around everybody.

Once in the back room, I noticed a staircase that led upstairs to a living area. After that horrible morning, I'd learned Mateo lived up there.

The partition door dimmed the noise from the bar. As I stood in the slim hallway, I could hear a woman talking upstairs. I glanced around, and when I didn't see anyone nearby, I weighed the pros and cons of snooping while I had the chance. I'd never pried into anyone's life while on the run. The less I knew, the better. You stayed safer when you didn't know anything. Now I wasn't awarded that luxury.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I crept up the stairs as the woman's voice got clearer. Nobody was talking back, so it was safe to assume she was on the phone.

I made it to the landing at the top of the stairs. Two doors stood at opposite ends of the hall, but only one was open, and the voice was coming from that direction. I inched closer to take a peek inside the apartment, and I couldn't hold back the curse as I made direct eye contact with Christie Greenthorne, Audrey's mother.

She hung up the phone without warning and whipped the door open. "What the hell are you up to?" Every word dripped with fury.

I sputtered, shocked at seeing her up here alone. My brain rattled, trying to find an excuse for why I was there, but it was blank.

Mrs. Greenthorne's face pinched, making her look more like a ferret than the wolf I knew her to be. A realization came over her face as she asked, "Are you in cahoots with that useless, nosy wallflower?"

"Huh?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were." She sneered, appraising me as she looked me up and down.

"I have no idea what you mean."

What the hell was she talking about? Who was she talking about? Which wallflower?

The older woman stood tall. "Lola, I'm talking about Lola. I want to know if you're discussing my family and me with her. I want to know if I need to sue that girl for breaking confidentiality."

The glint in her eyes was cold and calculating. Nothing about this woman suggested she was even remotely maternal. No wonder Audrey was the way she was—an ice queen had raised her. This woman was all about herself and her needs.

Wanting to avoid further eye contact, I peeped around the room, my eyes

widening when I saw that the bed most definitely had a fresh, tumbled look about it. I also realized Mrs. Greenthorne wasn't entirely dressed. Her blouse wasn't buttoned properly, and I could see her silk slip. She only wore one earring, her hair was tangled and disheveled, and her makeup needed freshening. She looked a far cry from the elegant, put-together look I associated with her.

Finally, I caught on to the reek of sex.

I flashed back to the morning of the murder, when Audrey came out of Mateo's quarters. I couldn't believe Mateo had been with both Greenthorne women within the last week.

I softened my features and composed myself enough to feign my confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about. I came up here looking for Mateo's washing machine. The bar is packed, and there are a bunch of dirty rags. I thought I'd help out."

Mrs. Greenthorne reached for the door. "The machines are downstairs."

*Bang.*

She slammed the door in my face, and then I heard her calling out to someone on the other side of the door.

I stood stock still, trying to wrap my head around what I'd just discovered. What the hell was up with that? Audrey's mother was either having an affair with Mateo, or this was the first time she'd slept with him. Either way, Mrs. Greenthorne and Mateo had been together.

It was public knowledge that Audrey and Mateo sometimes hooked up, but now her mother had been caught having an affair. That was a massive scandal. Then compound that with the mother having an affair with the same man her daughter was hooking up with...

Holy shit.

This was huge. The Greenthornes were big on their standing in Blackwood Creek. They wouldn't want anybody staining their name in any capacity. Also, they were in counseling with Lola, and Mrs. Greenthorne was worried that Lola had disclosed something to me, which was why she thought I was there.

She was worried about getting caught.

The Magpies were right. If Deputy Hill had somehow found out about this, it would have given each of the Greenthornes a motive to kill him. What wouldn't they do to keep somebody's mouth shut about such shady family secrets? And was it a coincidence that the murder had happened in this very



bar?

I rushed down the stairs and out the rear door I'd entered the morning of the murder. I couldn't wait to tell Ridge and get his take on this revelation. It was bound to be a huge step forward in the case.

I'd confront Mateo another time; I couldn't wait around for him. I was starting to understand Ridge's adamant objections that I not do this on my own. My heart raced as I sprinted toward the rear of the building and rounded the corner. Pulse pounding in my ears, I nearly plowed right into Audrey.

She gave me a dark scowl. "Watch where you're going."

I rolled my eyes. "Watch who you accuse."

Moving to step around her, I paused. Audrey was going to the back entrance of The Topsy Tavern and possibly headed upstairs. I contemplated what to do. She could stumble upon her mother, and then the town would end up with another murder on its hands. I couldn't let that happen.

I planted my feet firmly once again, and Audrey almost walked into me a second time. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm just worried we got off on the wrong foot, and I don't love that you keep telling people that you saw me kill Phil Hill." What the hell was I saying? I didn't care that we were on the wrong foot. I wouldn't stay around long enough for it to be an issue. But I didn't like her telling everybody I had killed the man. That was a truthful statement.

Audrey snorted and stood back, holding her purse straps over her shoulder. "Well, duh, I obviously don't think that now. What with you and the mayor off gallivanting in the woods." She rolled her eyes and acted bored. "I only pointed to you as the possible killer because you weren't screaming. You weren't reacting at all. It was suspicious. Honestly, even if you did kill that obnoxious human deputy, I'd still be trying to keep you out of jail now that I know you're engaged to Ridge Blackwood."

I cocked my head at her. "Seriously? Because I'm engaged to Ridge, you'd help me get away with murder?" I stared at her like she'd grown a second head. "Also, I want to be clear that I didn't kill the deputy."

"Uh, *duh*. I already told you I know you didn't kill him." The woman rolled her eyes at me again.

"Okay. So, why?"

Audrey moaned. She was irritated with me and this conversation and had no qualms with me knowing. "For as long as I can remember, my parents have pushed me to make the best mate match possible. There is no better

match than with a Blackwood. Their name has so much influence, power, and money that my parents constantly pushed me at Ridge. He and I never hit it off, and constantly getting rejected—even though I rejected him, too—is hard on the ego. But now that he’s taken, my parents have stopped their incessant needling and I’ve gotten a much-needed break. So, I’m thrilled. I get to party and have fun. Well, until another high-quality mate who meets my parents’ standards becomes available.”

She looked at me as if I was doing her a favor. She was happy and felt free. I couldn’t fathom being rejected by the same person over and over. It must severely damage a woman’s self-esteem, yet her parents had subjected her to it, anyway.

I ached, actually ached, for the young woman. Was she so happy now because she thought she could be with Mateo freely?

Audrey obviously thought our conversation was done and moved to step around me, but without thinking, I blocked her once again. I couldn’t believe I wanted to protect her from seeing her mother in Mateo’s room, the bedsheets freshly sexed up.

“Okay, really, move already. We had our little talk.” She waved her hand at me like I was an annoying gnat.

But I couldn’t do it. Audrey wasn’t nearly as bitchy as I’d thought. She’d just been dealt a shitty hand like everyone else. She didn’t need to see that her mom was shacking up with the same man she was happy with.

As much as I liked Mateo, I couldn’t hold much favor with him over this situation. Soon, I’d chat with him about what he was doing.

“Audrey, don’t give your whole heart to Mateo—you’ll just get hurt.” I cringed. I’d never been someone who gave advice or had heart-to-heart conversations. This situation was more suitable for Margo or Diane, but I was the one standing in front of her.

She was about to walk into a situation that could break her heart, and I didn’t want that for her.

Audrey blinked at me several times, then a loud, hysterical laugh flew out of her mouth.

I stared at her with my mouth agape. What kind of reaction was that? I must be even worse at these heart-to-heart things than I thought.

Tears of laughter started leaking from the corner of Audrey’s eyes, and she slowly wiped them away as she got herself back under control. “Is Mother Dear holed up in Mateo’s room right now?”

I lifted a brow and slowly exhaled. “Yes.”

Audrey let out a few last chuckles. “I assure you, Mateo is just a friends-with-benefits situation for me. I know my mother is having an affair with him. That’s why I suggested my parents start marriage counseling with that new psychiatrist, Lola—for all the good it appears to be having if Mother has just rolled out of Mateo’s bed.”

I swallowed. Audrey willingly slept with a man who was also sleeping with her mother. Just how fucked up was this family?

Audrey patted my shoulder. “It’d be sweet that you were trying to spare my feelings, Tori, if you hadn’t wasted so much of my time. I’ve been dying to get wasted, and you interrupted that.” She slipped past me. “Good talk.”

I slumped against the wall, my face burning. My stomach churned at the idea of a mother and daughter sharing a lover. That had been an embarrassing conversation. I didn’t need to know that about the Greenthornes...about anybody.

Mateo was just another gross male. Lola had her work cut out for her, and I didn’t foresee anything resolving with that family. They were way too fucked up.

As I walked back to the manor, I figured I could rule out Audrey as the murderer, but that didn’t mean the other two Greenthornes were innocent. As much as their family dynamic gave me the major ick, I needed to dig deeper. Mr. Greenthorne could hate that Mateo was sleeping with both the women in his life, and if Deputy Hill had found out, it made sense that he’d want to shut him up.

Who was to say he hadn’t caught the deputy spying, killed him, cleaned up quickly, and then left the tavern? Maybe he lured the deputy there with stories of an emergency that needed his special touch. I was sure Martin Greenthorne was capable of anything to keep his name proper within the town.

Christie Greenthorne was no different. Just because she was screwing around with her daughter’s friend-with-benefits didn’t mean she wanted others to know about it. She placed high importance on the Greenthorne name and savored lording over others. It was her bread and butter.

Either way, I wanted to get to the bottom of this murder. I wanted a clear answer, and I wanted to know why, so much so that I was willing to tell Ridge enough so he’d understand why I didn’t want to be a shifter. If giving him a piece of my past helped me move forward to my future, then solving

this case was what would help. Having Ridge know more about me would be the key to doing that.

Contemplating my wants and needs had me antsy, and I couldn't keep my fingers from fidgeting. Would it be so bad? So far, Ridge had been good to me. He'd given me no reason not to trust him, even though I'd kept him on his toes time and again.

Watching Margo and Diane in town made me desire that kind of closeness again. I missed my mother, and I still mourned for her to this day. Everyone in town was extra nosy, but their hearts were in the right place. They cared as a community, which was new and strange to me. I had Ridge constantly at my back, guarding me, protecting me, and though I wouldn't admit it to him, it was amazing.

Blackwood Creek was a memorable place, and I'd be blessed beyond measure to belong here. To make that possible, I'd need to lower my defenses some. Ridge was the safest bet for me right now. This could all blow up in my face, I realized that, but did I really want to be so closed off that I had nothing at the end of my life? Would that be living? What was the point of me surviving by then?

My mind wandered over all the scenarios of the outcome, the fear of vulnerability grasping me tightly. At the end of it all, was Ridge worth the risk? Was he the one I could trust, when I'd been proven time and again that trust was never guaranteed?

## Chapter 22

# Ridge

As much as I hated that Tori and I had been interrupted, I couldn't deny that location was not the best place for romancing. And I'd needed to hear what Clawson had to say.

My mind was reeling as I walked into the manor. Following up on the town's safety, Tori's safety, was a never-ending task. There were too many what-ifs and not enough calls to action. I couldn't pinpoint where the threats were coming from, and that worried me more than anything. It made me feel we were vulnerable, and I wasn't too fond of that.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Tori's voice jerked me from my thoughts. She stood in the kitchen doorway, holding a large spoon and wearing an apron smeared with food. I held back a laugh. It appeared she was a messy cook. It was a pleasant sight, though, coming home after dinner to find her cooking dinner. I was used to a dark house and dinner for one. Her presence gave the place a hominess I hadn't realized I'd been missing. I could get used to this. If only I could convince her to stay longer.

"Hey, Miss Chef, just digesting everything I heard and saw today. Working through the list." I sniffed the air. "Are you really cooking?"

Tori smirked, turned, and headed back into the kitchen. "No, I thought I would light a scented candle, dirty some pots and plates, and rub some food on an apron and spoon to give you a little thrill." Exasperation fueled her voice, and I loved her sass. "I can cook, you know."

I smiled at her annoyed tone, but instant disgust tore through me as I entered the kitchen. "No, don't do that. You're going to ruin it."

She rolled her eyes as she continued to put diced Spam into the macaroni

and cheese. Dismayed, I looked around the counters. There was nothing else, just the macaroni cheese with the gross Spam casserole, no salad or steamed vegetables in sight.

“Please tell me you snuck in some cauliflower or something nutritious into that thing. You can’t possibly eat that. It’s not a balanced meal.” Plus, it was plain gross.

“Watch it. Your rich, only-child syndrome is showing.” She picked up a piece of Spam, popped it in her mouth with a bubbly smile, and chewed. “Grab a plate because I’ve decided to accept your proposal.”

I was so shocked, so elated, I found I could slightly ignore the grotesque concoction that was invading my kitchen. I was also willing to accept it if it meant I would learn more about Tori. Notably, why she repressed her wolf so strongly.

My wolf wasn’t too happy with the arrangement and told me not to eat, convinced the food was poisoned, but I ignored him. I sat at the counter, eagerly awaiting her story, only to frown when she put a plate of the gross, gooey ensemble she was passing off as food in front of me.

She patted me on the shoulder. “Voila.”

I sniffed the steaming meal, and my wolf and I stuck our noses up at it. How could she eat this? Willingly?

“I’m all ears.” I pushed it aside and gave the little wolf my undivided attention. A devilish smile crowned her lips, and I groaned inwardly. She was going to make me suffer.

“Turnabout is fair play. If you want me to start talking, you have to at least give this a try. You’ve eaten bunny food for way too long. You need to broaden your horizons, Lassie.”

Aw, we were back to the dog names. At first, she’d meant them as insults, but now they were almost terms of endearment. Either way, I loved it when she got more playful. It meant she was comfortable in my presence, that we were making progress.

“I spent a small part of my first paycheck to buy the ingredients for this. It was one of my childhood favorites.” She looked down at her plate, ensuring we couldn’t make eye contact.

My heart melted a little for her. She was trying, and this was her way of bringing me in. I still saw the bit of guilt and manipulation, but I accepted it for the peace offering it was.

After such a short time, Tori knew me well enough to know I’d do

practically anything for her at this point. This was how she got something she wanted. The way she was digging into her meal made me wonder if she'd been able to enjoy it recently or not. I couldn't imagine she'd stayed in too many places with a kitchen or even a kitchenette that allowed her to make this disgustingly unhealthy meal for herself that reminded her of home.

This dish was comfort food in its purest sense, which meant the story she was about to tell me would not be easy on her.

Grumbling, I grabbed the fork and picked around the food before stabbing at a couple of noodles and a square piece of Spam. I took a bite, and as soon as it hit my taste buds, I pulled a face as I forced myself to chew and swallow. Was this seriously comfort food for her?

Tori's melodic laugh seized my heart. I knew I'd keep making ridiculous faces if it meant she'd do that again. Her laughter was the most fantastic sound in the world, and I'd never tire of hearing it.

I wiped my mouth with my napkin as I poked around the plate, hoping she would begin her story and I would no longer have to suffer from this meal.

She sat silently for several beats, working up the courage to divulge. I left her alone to get the story out in her own time. "I grew up in Colorado. I loved it there. We were a normal family—my parents, my older brother Kyle, and I. I was a normal kid. A human kid with a fantastic childhood."

Now, she was the one playing with her food.

"I worked hard in school and took art classes when I discovered I was not only good at art but loved it. I was captain of the track team as a junior in high school and went to every school event imaginable. I was even in line to qualify for an art scholarship to a good school, a dream school not too far away from my family so I could still see them whenever I wanted."

Placing the fork on her plate, Tori leaned back, her appetite forgotten. She lifted her head, sadness marring her features. I flexed my hands to stop myself from reaching for her.

Softly, her voice broke the silence. "Then all of it went away in an instant." She snapped her fingers. "My mother was killed by a shifter."

I froze. It wasn't too common for a shifter to kill a human. Throughout our history, we worked to stay away from them. Cohabitation was a recent occurrence, and even then, most humans didn't know about us.

With the pain emanating from Tori, I couldn't hold back, so I stood up and went to her. I wrapped my arm around her and sat on the stool closest to

her, pulling her into my side. I didn't want her to think she was alone. I didn't want her to be alone ever again.

"Before I had the chance to mourn my mom, my entire life changed in ways that I could never imagine." She stiffened, and I suspected she was keeping this part vague on purpose. She was holding something back.

I wanted all the answers, but she was too stubborn, and I had to accept what she gave in her own time. That was the key to Tori. This story, her story, wasn't something she often gave, if at all, and this was extremely difficult for her, so I kept my mouth shut and continued to listen. That was what she needed.

"Once the shifter killed my mom, my world shattered. Not only did I lose my best friend and biggest supporter, I learned monsters were real and out there. They were no longer the imaginings I had hiding in my closet or under my bed when I was a little girl, when my screams would have my dad run in and scare them away so I could go back to sleep. That was no more. The innocence was gone. Monsters were flesh and blood and could do horrible things, and they did do horrible things. Because one of them took my mom.

"And then it became worse, and my world fell out from under my feet again. I turned *into* one of those monsters. I turned into the very thing that killed my mom. I almost killed someone. It was the worst thing I could ever have imagined myself becoming. I had to run from the hunters to survive. I had to leave everything I had ever known behind. My normal, mundane life changed so quickly, and I had no option but to leave."

She started shaking.

"I was lost and angry. I still am. My entire happy, blessed childhood was swiped away and ruined by shifters." She pulled back her shoulders, her voice hardening. "I refuse to be one. I refuse to destroy another family the way mine was."

I pulled her in as close to me as I could. A few sniffles hit my ears, and the scent of her tears had my wolf anxious. I wished on every source of power imaginable that I could make her past easier for her, but I was more frustrated with how scared she'd been and how long she'd endured that fear. She didn't deserve to be so afraid.

"Even if you didn't know what you were at the time, it didn't mean your entire childhood was a lie. The happiness you felt was real. It was a true feeling for you. True moments. Those memories are still yours. The laughter, the happiness, and the joy, everything you experienced in those moments was



as real as you and I are now.”

I stopped talking to let my words sink in, even though I was dying to talk more about her family and how they had reacted. Did she know whether humans had adopted her, because why wouldn't she have been raised as a shifter? Those questions were challenging, and this was clearly a sensitive topic for her. I only refrained from asking because of the way she shook in my arms.

“What did you mean when you said you nearly killed someone when you shifted for the first time?” Rubbing her back, I worked at soothing her.

She leaned in closer to me and sniffled some more. “Because of all the chaos in my life, my relationship with my boyfriend at the time went downhill. I couldn't deal with it all. It became too much, and I had to let some things go. I was only a teenager, and all these responsibilities fell on me after my mom died. I gave up on after-school programs because I didn't have the time or the joy for them anymore. Being around people wasn't easy, and my boyfriend didn't have to grow up as suddenly as I did. He didn't understand the grief or how to deal with a traumatized teenage girl. I broke up with him, and we had a nasty argument. I mean, really bad, and something about the situation triggered my wolf. It exploded out of me.”

My shirt was becoming damp from her tears, and she clutched me so tight that I was ready to pull her into my lap and rock her.

The misery in her voice couldn't be missed, and I wanted to soothe all her worries and fight all her demons. I wanted to be her champion, but how could you correct and fix this sort of heartache? You couldn't. You could only hold the person and listen.

“I didn't know what I was doing. Suddenly, I had these claws and this overwhelming rage and drive to attack, so I attacked him. I clawed him good and deep. God, there was blood everywhere. It coated me as it drained from him. I barely managed to pull myself away before I killed him, then I bolted from the scene. He was alive when I left. I verified he was still alive by calling the hospital and pretending to be his sister. I was mortified, confused, scared, and didn't know what was happening. I had nobody to turn to, nobody to answer any of the questions going through my mind.”

I tamped down the rising anger within me because I'd never been so grateful for her being a shifter than I was now. I needed to get Tori to see it that way, too.

Lifting her softly away from me, I put my finger under the bottom of her

chin and tipped her head to look at me. “Wolves don’t attack without purpose unless they’re feral. If your wolf burst out like that, then it most certainly sensed a serious danger you didn’t comprehend. Make no mistake, teenager or not, that bastard was going to hurt you. When a wolf comes out like that, it’s to protect you, and she did exactly that. I’ve never been as thankful for your little wolf as I am now, given that she protected you like that.”

Scoffing, Tori dropped her gaze. “I could’ve handled him myself. I’m not a weakling. She nearly *killed* him.”

“But she didn’t. Don’t you see? If you controlled your wolf then, even though you had never shifted before, then you’ll have no problem controlling her now. Not only that, you had no idea what was happening, no guidance or instruction on being a shifter, and you got her to stop. You just need to figure out the balance and make peace with her.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes for a while as she pieced together everything I’d said. I hoped she could see my admiration for her showing in my eyes. She was incredible, beautiful, and so strong.

Her nose was red, her eyes swollen and glassy. And she still looked gorgeous to me. More so now that I was aware of what she’d been through, but I wasn’t an idiot. There was more she wasn’t telling me. However, I’d accept what she was willing to give me—for now.

Wiping her face with her hand, she huffed out a choppy breath and sat back again. We were still touching and entwined. Her body heat soothed me enough that my wolf wasn’t demanding to go after this ex-boyfriend of hers and finish the job. She believed she hadn’t been in danger from him, but I knew better.

“I hate doing all the sharing,” she said. “It’s your turn now. Spill.”

I gave her a weak smile and allowed the change in topic. She wanted the details of the murder case, but that could hold off. I wanted to tell her about my first shift instead. If I could lighten the mood a bit, I could hopefully hear that laugh of hers. My soul ached to hear it again.

“I shifted for the first time when I was seven. I ripped apart every single piece of furniture in my parents’ mansion in Hawaii.”

Tori’s brow furrowed. “Were they furious?”

Grinning, I said, “No, they took me out on the yacht to celebrate.”

Tori’s worry vanished and she did exactly what I had hoped. She laughed. “You were spoiled rotten.”

I pushed her hair over her shoulder, stroking a finger along her neck as I

did. “True, I was, until my parents died in a private plane crash. My aunt and uncle raised me for most of my life.”

A gasp escaped her lips, her laughter dying from her eyes. I didn’t want to lose the lightheartedness, but she gave me so much that I wanted to give her something back. So, I’d happily give her a piece of my story, even though I didn’t like reliving the loss of my parents.

“I’m so sorry,” Tori whispered, hugging me.

“Thank you.”

Tori pulled back so we could look at each other, and I instantly missed her warmth. “My parents were wonderful, loving, and, yes, very indulgent. I wanted for nothing. I had everything I needed, and they made sure I was cared for, but they were very materialistic and proud of the Blackwood name. They romanticized it, I think.

“On the other hand, Uncle Vincent saw the failures of our family’s past. He helped me see past the money and power to all the problems shifters around the world were facing. He taught me hard work, how to build my own business, and to get an education. He pushed me to overcome the selfish ways of the past and to always put others first. I couldn’t have asked for a better father figure.”

Tori’s soft hand cupped my cheek. I dropped my head further into her palm, sorrow flowing from me.

“What happened to your uncle?”

I turned my head and kissed her palm before our fingers intertwined.

“I don’t know.” I took a heavy breath. I was about to tell her something I had never told anyone else, but if there was anything I was certain about, it was Tori. Even though she was still keeping things from me, I knew I was safe to share with her.

“A few years ago, my uncle and his wife disappeared. I searched for them tirelessly. I put investigators on it. I traveled to places and questioned people myself. I’d begun to lose hope, then one day, Aunt Lucille resurfaced near Blackwood Creek. I rushed back here and realized she wasn’t fit to be moved, so I moved here to be closer to her. And to be in the town I felt responsible for.

“Given my family’s hand in the town’s establishment and welfare since the 1800s, I needed to follow through on my uncle’s vision for the shifter community as well as the people of this town. Everyone deserves to have a safe place to live and raise a family. My aunt deserves a safe place to receive

care and treatments without being hunted down.”

Our hands played around with each other, the warm flares from her skin making me content even with the heavy conversation we were exchanging. I'd never been this way with anybody before. I didn't want this peacefulness to end.

“You're a very busy man,” Tori remarked. “Or at least it seems that way to me. Do you get many opportunities to visit your aunt?”

Her body was now facing me fully. I kept my arm wrapped around her shoulders, and she linked the fingers of her free hand with mine. I didn't know how to say this to her without worrying her because I wanted her to stay open and not shut down on me.

“When my aunt came back, she wasn't my aunt in the same way she'd been before she disappeared those years before. She was almost completely feral. She's rarely in her right mind, but I make a point of visiting her once or twice a week. I never skip on that. I'd like to see her every day, maybe get more opportunities for her to be in her right mind so I can talk to her and let her know she's not alone, but it's not feasible. Plus, it's rare for her to be lucid. No matter how often I show up, my presence doesn't make that kind of difference.”

My throat went dry. When I thought about what my aunt had gone through and was still going through, all I could think was that I'd failed her. That I was a failure.

“That's also how I recognized some of your panic attacks as you going feral. I've dealt with them more than enough to recognize the signs. I want to make sure no one else has to face that. Especially you. It's scary and can do serious damage. If my aunt wasn't in a care facility, I can't think about what she could do or what would happen to her.” I dropped her hand to brush my thumb over her cheek. “That's why I keep encouraging you to balance things out with your wolf. It's not worth the repercussions. It's not worth your life.”

## Chapter 23

# Tori

Ridge telling me about his childhood had softened the wall I'd solidly built around myself. He was vulnerable and genuine. I couldn't help but feel that from him. This man, a stranger only until recently, was trying hard to help me. He wasn't trying to get anything from me, had no agenda. Ridge was an open book. Like me, he'd been through a lot, except I didn't have to endure and balance all the responsibilities he had. It was ridiculous to keep being suspicious of him. He'd done nothing but repeatedly proven he had my best interests at heart, that he cared about me.

That didn't mean I trusted him fully yet. We hadn't known each other long enough for my guard to come down completely, but he had proven that he was making Blackwood Creek safe for shifters and humans. He wasn't blowing smoke and angling for people to be on his side. He worked hard to listen to people and spent his downtime worrying and caring for me.

His scent wrapped around me. For a moment, I imagined what it'd be like to stay here and live among others like me since I'd started to verify for myself that they were not monstrous creatures. I felt genuine warmth toward three shifters in particular.

Shifters were like ordinary people, with regular drama and loved ones. If I stayed, I'd get closer to Margo, and we could quickly become best friends. I'd have that maternal influence from Diana. I could help the shy and reserved Lola come out of her shell.

With Ridge, I could let myself fall harder than I'd already started to. We could explore the chemistry that had us both tangled up tight.

Sniffing his scent, I let my mind wander and play out all the possibilities of staying in such a picturesque town most would envy. My mind sent out

warning bells as the comfort of the idea started to take root. My ex's petrified face flashed in my mind. What if I did that to someone else but couldn't control myself then? If I lost control and hurt someone, I'd be shattered.

That wasn't all of it, though. I'd had nobody for so long that relying on others was no longer easy. They'd only hurt me in the end; experience had proven that over and over again. Keeping my distance was the only way to shield myself while on the run. How could I accept help from others now?

Ridge's hold on me was true and strong, making me fantasize that he'd never let me go without a fight. Perhaps I mattered to him like I hadn't mattered to anyone else.

From what I'd observed of this haven he'd created, all the other shifters were relaxed about their wolves. They went on monthly Full Moon Howls and united as a community. Jealousy erupted inside me. They were comfortable in their own skin, and I couldn't imagine what that would feel like. To wake up every morning and not loathe who you were. To not have the fear that today was the day you'd prove yourself a monster and kill some innocent bystander.

That was what I confronted daily upon waking, and I was sick of it. It made me believe that I'd never move on and live a life. That I'd only rage against myself until the day I died. I hated it. That was no way to live.

I hesitated to open my mouth because what I'd say next could potentially change the rest of my life forever. No matter how done I was with my past, it didn't make things easier.

Avoiding his eyes and hating the vulnerability in my voice, I said, "I'd like to try to find that balance with my wolf...if you'll help me, please."

An inelegant squeak fell from my lips when I suddenly found myself in Ridge's lap, straddling him. I buried my head into his neck and sighed when he kissed my head several times.

"You have no idea how happy you just made me." He sounded giddy as his hands roved over my back, and my body went slack at his attention.

I licked my lips at the arousal in his scent. Unable to help myself, I rubbed against the bulge in his pants. The desire to curl around him and kiss him was consuming my thoughts. His caresses began to get needier, and my core tightened a little, needing some attention, but I immediately sat back and eyed Ridge. His lust-filled eyes watched me closely.

"I'd like to try to find balance with my wolf, but you still need to tell me more about the murder case before we do that. That was part of the deal."

It was hard to keep restraining myself from ravaging him right there in the kitchen. Ridge ended up being the one with the stronger resolve, as he gripped my outer thighs and lifted me off his lap, placing me firmly back in my seat. His hands trailed over my body longer than necessary, so a thrill spiked up my spine that he also wanted more of the naughtiness we could get into. I loved feeling so desired. So wanted.

“You’re right. It was the deal.”

He pushed away from the counter, went to the fridge, and started pulling out his rabbit food.

“So, what we know so far is that there were no witnesses who saw Phil going into the bar. Most of the humans were asleep, and many of the shifters were still out running. Not too many of them pass up the monthly group run. It’s as essential to a shifter as breathing.”

He grabbed some saucepans and a wok, started cooking veggies he had already cut up, then reheated his rice in the microwave.

I listened intently to what he had to say while I devoured my food and started eating Ridge’s portion, too. I wasn’t offended that he didn’t like it. He’d taken a couple of bites, but the look on his face was priceless enough to make me satisfied he’d at least tried for me. It was a memory I could call on when I needed to laugh.

His grotesque look at watching me eat it was yet another bonus, but it didn’t slow him down.

“The murder was made to seem like it was a shifter who killed him, but there were so many out and about during the night of the Full Moon Howl that it’s difficult to pinpoint who it could be. We shifters are rarely in town during the full moon because the pull to shift and run is far too strong. We wouldn’t be around town because we’d rather be in the woods. It’s second nature for us to be there.”

Ridge pursed his lips as he added shredded chicken to his yummy-smelling stir fry.

“The only other thing I can think of is that it’s a shifter from another pack or a rogue, but Clawson received a nonsensical text from the deputy around the time of his estimated time of death.”

I raised a brow.

“It said to meet him at the bar. There was an emergency, but he didn’t say what was happening. Clawson had no idea what Hill was going to tell him. It was also a strange time for Hill to have texted him because he knew Clawson

would be out running. Both Clawson and I like to be at the runs to keep everything in order.”

“Why do you need to keep things in order?”

He sniffed. “Zander.”

“Ah.” Yeah, enough said.

“Hill knew that Clawson wouldn’t get the text until after he shifted back. It’s not like we manage our cell phones in our wolf forms.”

I smiled at the image of a wolf trying to navigate a cell phone with its paws and snout.

“It does seem strange,” I said. But it was also strange to me that a human was okay with shifters and didn’t worry about one of them being his boss.

Ridge served up his plate after everything was cooked, sitting back next to me. Now was a good time to tell him about my discoveries.

“So, I did a little of my own sleuthing after I left you at the diner.”

Ridge growled, his eyes scoping out my body from top to bottom. A blush cascaded over my cheeks at the memory of our heated moment. He smirked and took a bite of his food. I carried on, hoping my flaming libido would fade.

“The Greenthornes are in therapy with Lola, which, with everything I learned about them, is probably the best thing for them. They’re messed up.”

Ridge huffed but didn’t say anything.

“The sick part is, I ran into Christie Greenthorne in Mateo’s apartment and—”

“What were you doing in Mateo’s apartment?”

My pussy clenched at the dark growl rushing out of Ridge’s chest. His stormy eyes landed heavily on me. There was a possessive nature to his reaction, one that should have infuriated me, but excitement burned through me instead. He was jealous.

Ridge was lucky I wasn’t someone who liked games. He’d be in big trouble if I decided to mess around with him.

“I wanted to ask Mateo some questions, but the bar was packed, and Zander was there being a jerk.”

Ridge growled again, but I ignored it.

“So, Mateo said I could wait in the back room, but it shares the hall with his private quarters. I heard somebody talking on the phone upstairs. So, I did what any self-respecting investigator would do. I eavesdropped.”

A frown etched itself firmly on Ridge’s face, but before he could lecture



me about being careful and watching what I was doing, I steamrolled over him.

“Well, it turned out it was Mrs. Greenthorne, and she was freshly fucked. It was a sight to see, I won’t lie. I’m a little disgusted with Mateo, truth be told.” I narrowed my eyes. “But anyway, she confessed that they were in therapy with Lola because she thought I was spying for Lola, then she slammed the door in my face. I wanted to tell you immediately because I thought if the deputy knew about it, it could be a motive for Mr. Greenthorne. Then I ran into Audrey, and get this—she knows her mom is boinking her friend-with-benefits and doesn’t even care. How sick is that?”

Ridge was about to answer, but I was so excited with all the news I’d found out that I kept on talking, telling him that Audrey had said she’d defend me even if I had killed the deputy because of our “engagement.” I explained why she was happy about it and her rationale for that. He was annoyed but relieved to hear that she believed I didn’t do it.

Ridge continually surprised me. He constantly wanted to be my champion. He wanted people to believe I didn’t do it because he didn’t think it was possible for me.

I finally stopped talking and caught my breath.

“I’m not surprised about the Greenthornes,” Ridge said. “That family has been caught up in enough small scandals that you’d think they’d clean up their act. We knew about the therapy because that’s Mr. Greenthorne’s solid alibi. When the murder happened, he was actually talking with Lola Kipling in her office about therapy stuff, but Clawson has yet to question Lola thoroughly. He confirmed Mr. Greenthorne’s alibi, and now he knows that Lola was in her office with him, but she was awake and in her office pretty early in the morning. He finds that suspicious.”

My excitement at the prospect of Mr. Greenthorne going away for the murder dimmed. I’d been leaning more toward him, thinking he had the strongest motive. I didn’t think it could be Lola because she’d fainted when she saw the body. No one could fake such a visceral reaction.

Waving off the suspicion over Lola, I asked, “Did you know Margo used to date Deputy Hill?”

“I’d heard something about it, but I don’t know much more aside from a couple of passing comments Clawson made.”

Why would Clawson be making comments? “What comments?”

“I really don’t know any details. Just that they were seeing each other,

and then suddenly they weren't."

I nibbled on the inside of my cheek. I'd have to ask Margo directly. It was best to get the details from the horse's mouth, anyway. I didn't want to get my facts wrong.

"Anything else?"

He finished up his plate and stacked all three dirty dishes. "This isn't about the murder, but Clawson has received reports from other scattered packs about more shifters disappearing. It seems to be a pattern making its way across the country."

My heart's steady beat jumped out of rhythm.

"I'm more worried than ever about the safety of the shifters in Blackwood Creek," Ridge continued. "We tried to convince one of the larger scattered packs to settle in this area today. Not only would they fortify our defenses, but they'd have a permanent place to live." The skin around his eyes pinched with strain. "The pack turned us down again, and they've warned other groups of shifters away from settling down anywhere because the hunter problem is getting so bad."

His body tensed up, and I hated what this was doing to him. He genuinely cared and wanted to ensure shifters were safe. It made me wonder if staying in Blackwood Creek was a wise decision. Was I going to put these shifters I was growing to care about in danger by inadvertently bringing the hunters here? Was I making Ridge's job harder?

Bloodshed and the lifeless eyes of the people in this town invaded my thoughts, and my breathing started to ratchet up. My wolf began to writhe inside me, itching to run.

Ridge had gotten up to put the plates in the sink, but he turned around and put them on the counter before wrapping me up.

"Breathe, Tori. You're hyperventilating. Breathe slowly."

I couldn't catch my breath. My blood rushed in my ears and my heart threatened to burst out of my chest.

Ridge placed my face into his neck. "Breathe in my scent, Tori. Take a deep breath in. You're safe, I have you, you're okay."

His rich, bold scent started to leak into my senses, and my wolf rolled in closer to it. My mind slowed down and my thoughts cleared up, not the garbled mess they had been seconds before.

Ridge stroked my skin, and I didn't want him to stop. The skin-on-skin contact was heaven, and I was back in my own body, not some mental

wormhole I couldn't get out of.

I was calm enough now and had enough of my bearings, but I didn't want Ridge to let go. Our breathing matched up; I inhaled when he did and exhaled when he exhaled. We stayed like that for quite some time. While I was relieved that Ridge could help me calm down, it made it harder to face what I had to do.

"I think I need to leave town. Soon."

Ridge went stone-cold stiff in my embrace. He had a hard edge to his tone as he said, "You're not going anywhere until these waves of going feral are completely gone. You're staying here."

There was no arguing when he used that firm tone. Usually, that'd have me up in arms, but his safety and that of everyone else here wore heavy on my heart. If anything happened to them, I'd never forgive myself.

"Ridge, it's the smart thing to do. The hunters have been after me specifically for some time. I can't risk bringing them to Blackwood Creek. I can't risk bringing them to you."

Ridge didn't say anything, but I felt the ripple of his muscles as he tensed. He knew I was right. He had to protect this town. That was his primary purpose. He'd told me that himself. I was honored that he wanted to shelter me, but the risk wasn't worth it.

"Why?" His voice was hesitant. I could tell he expected another brush-off, and I was afraid I'd disappoint him again because he couldn't know the truth. "Why are they after you specifically? What was it you didn't tell me earlier? I can tell you left something out."

I held back the tears and buried my face deeper into his neck, taking in several hits of his scent like he was a drug and I was a junkie. For once, I wanted to tell him everything. I wanted someone, especially him, to know everything about me.

However, I wouldn't talk about this. He didn't need to know I was so unwanted that my own father was hunting me down.

"Maybe if you can teach me how to calm my wolf down, I can get out of here and still not go completely feral. That way, I can make sure I don't accidentally lead them here." I spoke softly because saying it out loud made me realize the more I was forced to leave, the more I wanted to stay. I snuggled tighter into Ridge's arms. He gave me such peace, something I had craved and been denied too many times to count.

Ridge's chest heaved. I figured he hated this talk, but he couldn't deny

that I was right.

“I want to help you free your wolf so you can live in harmony with it, and if this is the only way you’ll accept my help, then I’ll help you.”

My body relaxed so fast, I hadn’t realized I was wound up so tight.

“We’ll go running tonight and try to get your wolf to give up some control after your shift.”

The tension crept back in immediately.

“Don’t worry,” he soothed. “I’ll be with you the whole time. I won’t let anything happen.”

I never thought I’d see the day when I put so much faith in someone else, but today was that day. I truly believed Ridge wouldn’t let anything happen.

I was a bundle of nerves as we waited for it to be late enough to minimize the chances of humans in the woods. I hated that we had to wait so long. I would have rather just gotten it over and done with, but it’d be stupid to shift and run around where any human could come across us.

I couldn’t stop seeing my ex’s face when he watched me shift and attack him that first time, and I struggled to wrap my mind around the fact that I’d be shifting, willingly, into an animal. It was like a sci-fi movie, but if I truly wanted to stop running from something that lived inside me, I had to shift. More importantly, I wanted to avoid leading hunters to safe, charming little Blackwood Creek. The only way I stood a chance of eventually running away without going feral was by facing my wolf head-on and getting it out of the way.

When the clock struck midnight, we made our way out of the manor. Ridge held my hand as we left and made our way into the thick woods near his property. As we pushed ourselves deeper into the forest, the scents and sounds of the night were everywhere, heightened by my emotional state. It seemed like we had walked for a long time when Ridge stopped in a clearing of trees.

“This is where I like to shift because it’s a great starting and end point. Why don’t you try shifting?”

I tried to hide my fear, but second thoughts swarmed my head, and I started to freeze. My body shook, and my teeth began chattering a bit. “Maybe we should try this some other time. Maybe we should figure out the murder first or something.”

Stepping back toward the manor, I gasped at his soft hold of my hands. He pulled me closer to him.

“Tori, you’re going to be fine. I promise. We’ll take it slow, okay?”

His syrupy-sweet voice made me want to please him because he was so kind and generous. What the hell happened to the cranky me who’d give him shit? Why couldn’t I bring her back? This softer version was causing me nothing but problems.

Ridge stepped back and maintained eyesight with me while he bent and took off his shoes.

“Take your shoes off, Tori.”

Hesitantly, I bent over and did as instructed, and when I stood up, my mouth went dry and my pussy clenched, desire flooding my body. Ridge had unbuttoned his shirt, slowly peeling it away from his body. His masculine frame stood before me as he undid his pants.

“It’s better to shift naked. That way, you won’t ruin your clothes.”

I worked my mouth a few times and finally croaked, “I’m not going to get naked in the forest. I’m not even sure I *can* shift.”

Ridge’s loud, sensuous laughter coated my skin in goosebumps. “Shifters aren’t shy about nudity. Come on. I know you can do it. I dare you.”

“You first.”

I didn’t know why I said that. He was already happily in the process of getting naked, with no qualms about it. But my anxiety was battling hard against my defenses.

He smirked and slowly stripped in front of me, and I couldn’t help but enjoy the little show. My core clenched at the memory of having him deep inside me, and any moment now, I would be drooling. My wolf started batting at me, wanting more.

Before I could say anything, Ridge bent over, and black fur rose on his skin. He shifted slowly and elegantly, like he was performing an interpretive dance. The transition didn’t take more than a few seconds, but it would probably have been faster if he wasn’t easing me into shifting. It was fascinating to watch. Elegant. Peaceful.

I stared at the massive black wolf with shining silvery gray eyes and a luscious coat that made my hands itch to pet and stroke. He was the most exquisite creature I had ever seen.

The beauty in which he’d shifted stumped me. Due to how painful my two shifts had been, I’d thought it was hideous and violent, but Ridge made it look anything but that. It was flawless.

The wolf got playful and nipped at the corner of my shirt, and his tail

stood tall and bushy as he bounced his front paws at me. The playfulness had me giggling. Envy trickled in me when I looked into his eyes and saw Ridge was fully present within the wolf. There was no way I'd have that kind of control, but Ridge did.

He stepped forward and nuzzled his head into my stomach, and I petted him. His fur was the softest thing I'd ever touched. I wanted to curl up in it.

My heart slowed down, and my courage won its battle over anxiety. Ridge had succeeded in slaking my panic. Now I wanted to give it a try.

I stepped back and slowly took off my clothes. Ridge sat and watched me, and it was Ridge watching me, not some unthinking monster. The nerves I'd had at the thought of stripping in the woods melted away. I was comfortable and concentrated on bringing my wolf to the forefront of my mind.

Nothing happened. I called out to my wolf, asking her to come out, but she wouldn't respond. She was nowhere to be found. Disheartened, my shoulders slumped. I'd pushed her down and locked her away for so long that I didn't know how to communicate with her.

Anger and frustration with myself had me throwing on my clothes as I held in the tears that I couldn't believe wanted to be shed.

"This was stupid. I'm done. This was such a mistake. I'm a broken mess and will always be that way. I don't even know why I wanted to try this."

Ridge growled sharply, raising the hackles on the back of my neck.

My wolf launched herself from out of nowhere, leaping painfully to the surface, and she took complete control of my mind and body. Panic ate away at me before darkness overtook me once again.

I groggily became conscious as a wet tongue licked my face. Fear jolted me, and I became fully present. I was curled beside Ridge's wolf, and he licked me again. I glanced down, and my hands were paws, and the woods were brighter—I could see clearer than before. I heard movement rustling in the trees. The night air brushed against my fur. Ridge's scent was potent and consuming.

I was in wolf form, and I was there with her.

Excitement bubbled inside me and formed a massive ball of energy.

Ridge leaned down and licked at me again, and then he took off running. My wolf and I rushed after him. There was no way we were going to let him get away.

I chased after him, and we ran for a while. I had no idea how far, but it was an exhilarating experience. I wanted to feel more of it. The way my

senses cataloged and absorbed everything was incredible.

The wolf still held most of the control. She was still bloodthirsty, and there was a violence that crackled beneath the surface. I feared it. And then it dawned on me... my wolf wouldn't be like this if I'd treated her right from the beginning.

My heart keened with despair, and I wanted to apologize, but I didn't know how. I didn't know what I could do to fix this significant injustice to such a divine and beautiful creature.

Ridge came back to me and licked my face, then turned us around. After some self-reflection, I realized he'd guided us back to the clearing, where he shifted easily and beautifully.

My wolf was annoyed, and I found I couldn't shift back. Ridge spoke to my wolf and me with his soothing voice as he softly petted my pelt. With his coaxing, the wolf finally relinquished her hold after I promised we'd do this again, that I'd make sure she'd run and be free again.

It wasn't painful to shift back, but it wasn't smooth and fluid like Ridge's shift, either. As soon as I was entirely in my body, I was racked with tears and gasping.

Ridge let me cry all over him. I hated myself for thinking my wolf was a monster and that she was something to be caged.

"Ridge, I was cruel. I was so cruel. I've been treating her so badly. I turned her into something angry and broken. I stole her chances of being free. I caged her. I'm so horrible."

Ridge soothed and cuddled me, saying all the right things as always. My energy drained out of me, all the fighting, struggling, and running finally catching up to me.

After some time, Ridge covered me with his shirt since my clothes were torn, then he carried me back to the manor.

I was so done that I didn't fight his hold, letting myself be cared for as he nuzzled my neck and kissed me.

## Chapter 24

# Ridge

Having Tori in my arms always felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be. Even with her crying and working through her pain, it was the best experience in the world. Comforting her and helping her through what had to be a cathartic release showed me we had a true connection. Something singular and special.

I was still buzzed from our run. No matter how much I wanted to wipe away the tears streaking down her cheeks, I knew they were desperately needed. They were freeing her to become the shifter she was meant to be.

Not for the first time, I wondered if my connection with this little wolf was more substantial than anything else I'd ever felt. I wanted so much for her. Watching her finally shift and maintain some control of the wolf, at least part of the time, had been breathtaking. She'd taken a massive step in preventing the feral side from taking over. The more she shifted, the more that feral side would disappear, but at least I could take care of her now. Hopefully, she'd stay around for me to care for her even longer.

In the manor, I went up the stairs to her bedroom. I probably could have put her down, but neither of us mentioned it, and I didn't want to. I'd hold her for as long as she'd let me.

Bypassing the bed, I went straight to the en suite bathroom and juggled her in my arms so I could turn on the water in the shower. The hot water would soothe her aching bones, and I was sure she'd want to get rid of the dirt and the leaves.

Wanting to ensure she was comforted, I dropped kisses onto her head, her cheeks, her eyelids. I was relieved that the tears had finally stopped, but even more relieved that she held me tight around the neck.



The steam started coiling from the shower. I only wanted to comfort her, so I challenged myself to stay on task and not think about her in the shower. That got shot to hell when her scent started to get a little muskier, and my cock responded instantly to that little bit of arousal enveloping me.

Clearing my throat, I slowly lowered her feet to the ground. I wanted to respect her space, so I started to untangle my arms around her waist. A much-needed cold shower was in order.

“I’ll leave you so you can clean up. I’m sorry if my wolf’s growl rushed you into shifting. It had to have been a surprise.”

My cock swelled some more when she kept her eyes on mine as she peeled my shirt from her body. I curled my fingers into my palms, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her.

Tori rolled her eyes and huskily said, “Just get in the shower, Ridge. I want you now.”

“Oh, thank fuck.”

I stripped down, picked her up again, and stepped under the spray. Tori giggled the whole time.

I caught her lips with mine, swallowing her laughter. My hands roamed over her soft curves, and I knew I’d never get enough of touching her. She fit me so perfectly, I couldn’t help but admit that I’d always want more of her.

Our tongues slipped and slid together as we explored each other’s bodies. One of my hands cupped her breast and I tweaked her nipple. She jerked against me. I wrapped my other hand around her neck, holding it in place so she couldn’t move her lips from mine. The dominant action had the alpha in me hard and ravenous for her.

Tori’s hands roamed down my chest and abs, her fingers teasing my thighs. My cock throbbed at how close her touch was, and it drove me insane.

I flattened her back against the shower wall and pushed my erection against her stomach. She smiled against my lips. I’d never imagined how sexy that would be; I’d never kissed someone who smiled against my mouth before. It made everything more playful.

I lifted my head and swept my tongue over her lips before rising to my full height. She was so tiny compared to me that the instinct to protect her and look after her was intense and demanding.

Reaching for the shampoo, I squirted some in my hand.

“Turn around.”

She chuckled. “You’re really going to wash my hair?”

“I want to take care of you. So, turn around.”

Her face slackened into a serious gaze. She swallowed and nodded as she turned around.

I stepped closer, surrounded her body with my own, and said, “Lay your head back.”

She did it without any sass or argument, which was refreshing since she seemed to like to fight me over everything.

I lathered my hands and started massaging her scalp. The moans that left her lips had me hardening even more, which I hadn't thought possible. I dug my fingertips into her head, scraping my nails against her scalp. Another time, I could convince her to lay on the bed and massage every inch of her tempting body. Since our very first night, the need to touch her—to let her know she was safe, cared for, and wanted—had increased.

Pulling her back underneath the spray, I let the water wash away the shampoo, put the conditioner in my hands, lathered them up, and moved her outside of the spray to run my hands through her locks. Seeing the strands coiled around my fingers, I imagined her kneeling before me with my cock between those divine lips of hers, my hands tangled in her curls as she worked me over.

Sensual sighs constantly left her lips, and her body swayed.

“This is amazing,” she groaned.

I chuckled and kissed her shoulder. My cock rubbed against her butt, and I couldn't hold back my guttural groan. I was sensitive to some attention but wouldn't cut this intimate moment with Tori for anything. I wanted her to remember how good everything could be.

She tortured me by rolling her hips, her ass caressing my hardness. I bit my bottom lip to bite off the growl trying to escape me, knowing it would slow down the sensations she was invoking.

Tori snuck her hand between us and grabbed hold of my shaft. She tightened her grip around my base and stroked upward, swiping her thumb over the leaking head. I rose to my toes briefly at the blast of pleasure that raked down my body.

“Fuck, Tori, that feels good.” I buried my head in her neck, sucking on her skin.

“I bet I can make it feel even better.”

She turned around and dropped to her knees. Her eyes stayed trapped with mine as she stroked me and licked her lips. My cock was only

centimeters away from those luscious lips. Was she a mind reader? Or had I telegraphed my want when I grasped her hair?

I moaned at the anticipation, and my cock jumped in her hand.

She winked, then opened her mouth and let her tongue come out as she held onto my base, guided the head over her tongue, and licked the seam.

“Oh, shit,” I hissed, unable to keep myself calm.

She licked me a few more times, and my palms itched to bury my hands in her hair, hold her still, and thrust into her mouth, fucking her mouth to my desire. I stood firm and leaned over her body, planting my hands firmly on the shower wall behind her.

Her eyes never left mine, and I found that so fucking sexy, but I was close to begging. I needed more. I’d never begged a day in my life, but this woman had me close.

Without warning, she closed her mouth and sucked hard on my head. I groaned, stiffening to stop myself from thrusting forward.

Her cheeks hollowed out as she sucked and licked. My cock slowly went in deeper with each suck.

I fisted my palms against the wall as my balls tightened, then Tori dropped her jaw and took me in as deep as she could, her head bobbing with the act.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head. She enthusiastically swallowed me as much as possible, making me grit my teeth and hold off from thrusting down her throat.

I wouldn’t last. She was too good, and it felt too good.

“Tori, stop. I’m gonna come. Stop.”

She kept going, even when I tugged a little on her hair. My wolf and I howled. We wanted to be deep inside her when we came, not down her throat.

I grabbed her arms and yanked her up my body, and she wrapped her legs around my waist.

“What are you doing? I wasn’t done.”

I plunged a finger inside her, pleased that sucking me off had her nice and wet for me. She moaned at the quick intrusion.

I pulled her legs wider. I was so hard that I didn’t need to guide my way in. I thrust hard and buried myself deep, her soaked curls tickling my skin.

“Ah!” She clung to my shoulders, wrapping her body around mine.

I was going mad with my lust and need, pounding hard and fast into her.

“Ridge, yes, like that! God, Ridge.”

I wouldn't last much longer. “Touch yourself. Now. I'm close.”

Tori's hand stroked down my chest and abs, then she started stroking her clit furiously. I was too far gone into the sensations. I only knew that I needed a release.

I dropped my mouth to hers and nipped her bottom lip, taking in her gasp and kissing her with everything I had. I couldn't hold back anymore. My balls were filled to the brim and ready to explode. They tightened and sucked further up into my body.

I came hard, releasing copious amounts of my seed into Tori's delicate body. My cum unleashed her orgasm, and she screamed into my mouth as she convulsed.

Her walls clamped down on my shaft until I was spent. It took willpower and the fear of hurting Tori not to collapse.

The water had cooled, and Tori's skin pricked with tiny bumps. “Whoa,” she panted.

I smiled and kissed her neck, resting my head there as she stroked my shoulders and back.

“You can say that again.”

“All right. Whoa.”

I chuckled and lifted my head. She looked thoroughly fucked and blissed out. A sight I jealously wanted to be the only person to see.

I leaned down and gave her a couple of quick kisses before slowly pulling out of her, causing both of us to sigh. Easing her shaking legs down, I held her steady until she could stand alone, then we both got under the shower spray and rinsed off under the fast-cooling water, smiling and touching each other.

No words needed to be said between us. We just wanted to bask in the afterglow.

I shut off the water and reached for a towel, which I wrapped around Tori. Grabbing another one, I dried her hair. She sighed and was putty in my hands. I loved this side of her.

When I thought she was dry enough, I grabbed a towel for myself, patted the water from my body, then wrapped it around my waist. Tori started finger-combing her curly hair as I watched her. This domestic feeling was something I found very peaceful, and like everything where Tori was concerned, I wanted more of it. I couldn't imagine doing this with another

woman. More importantly, I didn't want to.

None of this could last long, though. I had work to get back to, like solving a murder. It didn't help that there were stacks of files on my desk right now that I needed to comb over and decide on business transactions. It'd be another long night.

Tori stopped brushing her hair and glared at me from the mirror. "Don't even think about it, Mister."

I stared back at her reflection. "What are you talking about?"

"You're stressed, you've been working your butt off for this town, and I know you don't get enough sleep. What just happened was a great release for you, but it's not remotely enough."

I opened my mouth to argue about my responsibilities, but once again, she steamrolled right over me.

It was sexy. I liked it.

"You push yourself too hard and need to take better care of yourself besides just eating that rabbit food of yours." She put down the brush. Grabbing my hand, she led me to the bed, where she pulled back the covers, pulled the towel from my body, and quirked a brow at my already half-hard cock.

"Later," she said with a smirk, then sat me down and guided me to lie down. She crawled over my body and curled under the covers next to me.

"You're sleeping right here next to me all night, and if you try to get up and be a busy mayor in the middle of the night, I'll use my considerable art skills to draw old man lines on your face in permanent marker to teach you a lesson."

I laughed hard. It amazed me that she wanted to take care of me like this. I couldn't remember the last time someone had been concerned about my well-being. It was always the other way around.

She snuggled into my side and lifted my arm so I could hold her. Neither of us said another word, and it didn't take long before I became dead to the world. The exhaustion and her heavy scent in my lungs made me feel at peace. This was something I could get used to.

My phone screeched, startling me awake. Tori rolled over, grumbling in her sleep. I quickly disentangled myself from her and grabbed the phone on the bedside table before the ringing woke her. The landline didn't get used much, and if it was ringing this early in the morning, that meant there was an emergency.

“Hello,” I croaked, still half-asleep.

“Mr. Blackwood, it’s Nurse Rainey. It’s your aunt.”

That launched me awake, and I sat up. “What’s going on?”

“Your aunt went wild again and injured one of her caretakers. She escaped the premises again. We’re looking for her now. I’m sorry to wake you, but I felt you should know.”

“No, no. Thank you for calling. Will the caretaker be okay?”

“Yes. Luckily, he was able to get out of her hold fast enough. With shifter healing, he should be back to normal by the end of the day tomorrow.”

I sighed in relief and peeked at Tori. She was still dead to the world.

“Thank you for calling. I’m on my way. I’ll help with the search.”

I hung up. Thankfully, other shifters ran the care facility, so my aunt couldn’t do severe damage. Even though she was an older woman, she was still feral, and a feral shifter had strength like no other. It could be hard to subdue one of them because they had no balance, no compass, and nothing to lose. That made them highly volatile.

Getting up, I wrapped the blankets tighter around Tori so she wouldn’t get cold and kissed her forehead. I dressed, then texted Tori’s phone, letting her know that an emergency had come up and I’d explain everything later.

I took one last look at her, and my heart twinged at how beautiful she looked sleeping in one of my beds. Hopefully, I could make it to where she would sleep in the master bedroom with me. That would make everything not exactly perfect, but definitely better.

Quickly, I drove to the remote care facility several miles outside Blackwood Creek. A large expanse of woods surrounded the area, which was beneficial to situations like these so the patients weren’t instantly a danger to humans.

I parked my car at the far corner of the woods on the opposite side of the facility. That way, my aunt would be looked for on opposing ends. Hopefully, we’d catch her before she made it into town.

I stripped and shifted, sniffing the air for my aunt’s scent. When I got nothing, I ran into the woods. I kept a steady pace, but her scent evaded me. It wasn’t until dawn was fast approaching that I finally got a whiff of her scent. She was headed straight to town.

I double-timed it, worried about what would happen if she made it to the town before I could cut her off.

Her scent became stronger, and I caught sight of her from the north side

of town. She was in wolf form, frothing at the mouth from the abundant scent of humans.

I approached her cautiously, but rabid and violent creature that she was, she attacked me. It didn't matter that I was her alpha and three times her size. She was feral, vicious, and unpredictable.

She bit down hard wherever she could, drawing blood. I struggled not to retaliate, afraid I'd kill her. She was my aunt, and she didn't know what she was doing.

I slammed her into a tree, stunning her momentarily. Quickly, I leaped onto her, determined to make her surrender, but feral creatures lost touch with their natural instincts. It was nothing like me forcing any other shifter into submission. She lunged at me, biting hard into my shoulder. I responded by howling and growling right back at her.

Clawson ran up in wolf form, launched himself into the fray, and helped me pin her down. We stayed in that state until sunlight lightened the forest floor.

Aunt Lucille's feral fit finally passed, and she shifted back into her human form, now unconscious. My heart felt heavy when I saw the bruises popping up on her body.

If Tori didn't connect with the wolf, she'd end up like this. I didn't think my heart would be able to handle that.

Clawson and I stepped away from my aunt and returned to our human forms.

"Thanks, Clawson. I appreciate the help."

"No problem. I heard there was a wolf nearby. Figured it had to be shifters. I brought a bunch of blankets for cover."

Clawson opened a large bag he'd set behind a tree, pulling out blankets and his sheriff's uniform.

I wrapped up my aunt and myself while Clawson got dressed.

"My car is just over there. Why don't I drive you two back to the care facility?" he offered.

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"This was another bad one. She's not getting any better, is she?"

I carried my aunt to Clawson's police cruiser. "It's like she doesn't want to get better since my uncle died. They were true fated mates, not just chosen mates. She'd rather keep being feral to forget whatever happened to them."

"Fated mates do make things different. It's like half of her soul was

ripped away from her. How could anybody feel complete after that?” Clawson said.

We were silent as he drove us to the facility. We took a detour, and he dropped us off at my car so I could get dressed. I settled my aunt in the back seat and made sure she was comfortable.

“Thanks again for the assist, Clawson.”

“You bet. Oh, I’ll be naming a couple of prime suspects in the deputy’s murder case. When you have all this settled, come get me and I’ll tell you more about it.”

I sighed and nodded. There was so much going on in this town, and with me right now. Tori was right. I was stressed and needed to take better care of myself, but that was near impossible when I was wanted and needed in every direction.

“Okay. Let me get my aunt settled and get changed, then I’ll drop by your office.”

I dressed and drove my aunt back to the facility. She was still asleep when I carried her inside. Nurse Rainey and a few other caretakers helped me get her settled, thanking me for finding her—as if there was anything else I’d do.

One of the caretakers brought in a chair for me, so I sat by her bed and watched her. I worried about her, especially when incidents like this occurred. She could hurt herself or someone else one day, and there would be nothing I could do to protect her if that happened.

I hoped to speak with her, hoped she’d have a lucid moment, but those were few and far between. It’d be better if I returned to the manor and got going with my day. Once again, it’d be another long one.

I squeezed my aunt’s hand and kissed it. Just as I got up to leave, Aunt Lucille opened her eyes and smiled at me. “Ridge.”

She was coherent. I returned her smile and sat back down, clasping her hand again.

“Hi, Aunt Lucille.” I tried to keep my emotions from my voice. She wasn’t lucid most of the time, so for me to be here when she was with it was a true gift I didn’t want to waste.

She lifted her hand and stroked my cheek. “You look terribly tired. And you have blood on you. That’s no way to represent the family name.”

I laughed. My aunt had married into the Blackwood family and never once cared about the name, so it was a running joke between us.



“Aunt Lucille, you had another feral episode,” I said gently. “You hurt a caretaker and got out again.”

Her eyes shimmered with tears, and her lip quivered.

“I know you don’t want to talk about things, but it’d be good if you tried therapy. Your wolf needs to relax. And being around so many shifters hasn’t helped.”

A tear leaked down her cheek, and I wiped it away.

“My wolf misses your uncle as terribly as I do,” she said. “It’s an unbearable loss. She has big blanks in her memory, as I do, about when we disappeared. We don’t know what happened to him. Those blanks make it harder for either of us to cope.” She patted my hand. “Ridge, sweetheart, I don’t think I’ll get better. You’ll understand why I want to give up and let my wolf run the show when you meet your own true match. I pray you won’t ever lose her, because then you’d feel exactly what I feel now. There is no word for this. Grief and mourning don’t even begin to describe what it feels like to lose a fated mate.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and gave it another kiss. She was broken and lost. I could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice, sense it in her energy. She didn’t want to fight anymore.

Tori came to mind, and I couldn’t help but think of how intense my protective instincts toward her were. They were a little overwhelming. I constantly thought of her all day. The idea of her leaving had both my wolf and me on high alert. I didn’t just want her sexually. I wanted to laugh with her, run with her, converse with her. I wanted everything with her.

“Aunt Lucille, how did you and Uncle Vincent know you were fated mates? Was it some big moment of just knowing?”

Aunt Lucille laughed. “We were childhood friends and grew up together, constantly needling each other, and never thought anything more of our relationship until I went on my first date with another shifter. Oh, boy, your Uncle Vincent snapped and just about killed the poor boy, but everybody understood. The easiest way of knowing another shifter is your true mate is by knowing you wouldn’t be able to live without them.” A sadness came over my aunt. “Or you’d just rather let your wolf take control to take the pain away. My wolf helps take my pain away.”

The room grew heavy with sorrow, and I wanted to ask her more questions because I wondered if Tori might be my true mate. The true mate I never thought I’d find because finding one was rare.

But I couldn't ask more questions. Aunt Lucille had slipped back into her mad ramblings.

I couldn't get close enough to kiss her, which hurt me. I wondered if this was the last conversation I'd have with my aunt. I prayed it wasn't.

I spoke with Nurse Rainey and let her know that my aunt was no longer lucid. She promised that she'd take care of her.

As I left the facility, I thought more about what my aunt had said and how I'd lost it when Zander touched Tori. I had been ready to kill the bastard and had no second thoughts about it. I wanted to look more into this, and I wondered if Tori and I were meant to be because I had already tried to protect and care for her in a way I'd never experienced with anyone else.

It felt like our relationship was bigger than both of us. For me, it was more than just protecting Tori, but I wasn't sure yet where it was taking us.

## Chapter 25

# Tori

The bed sheets were still warm. Curling into them further and inhaling deeply, I found comfort in being surrounded by Ridge's scent. Contentment eased through me.

I reached out to wrap my arm around Ridge, but I hit nothing. I swayed my arm back and forth, but there was nothing but sheets. I lifted my head to find Ridge's side of the bed vacant. The side of the bed where he'd slept was empty and the sheets were cold. He'd been gone a while.

"Ugh. I swear if he went to work, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna use that pen on his face."

Dropping my head against the pillow, I took in the morning light and stretched out. My toes curled into the blankets at the pleasant soreness invading my body.

My cell phone pinged with a message notification. Grabbing my phone, I found I had a text message from Ridge that he'd sent a few hours ago and another from Margo.

**Ridge: *Didn't want to wake you. An emergency came up, I'll explain later. Have a good day. I'll be thinking about last night. ;)***

Somersaults assaulted my belly at the reminder of last night. It was a great night, one I wanted to repeat soon. I couldn't help smiling when he told me he had left and would explain himself later. He cared about me, respected me enough to do that.

Itching to text him back, I ended up not doing so. If he was dealing with an emergency, I didn't want to distract him. He'd had the courtesy to tell me something had come up, so I could give him the courtesy of waiting to speak to him about it.

**Margo: *Want to do a little shopping with me today? I'm off and could use some retail therapy.***

Worry infused me. Retail therapy seemed to be an issue for Margo. She would only be doing it if she was going through something.

I'd need to it with her, along with her past relationship with Phil Hill. Now would be the perfect time to get some answers and tell her she had a friend in me. Plus, girl time wasn't something I currently had in droves, and I'd love to have that with Margo. She was too much fun not to go shopping with. Well, as long as she got it under control.

**Me: *Sounds great. I'll shower and meet you in an hour.***

An hour later, we were wandering around the town's local boutique. Margo kept lifting clothes against me, never hesitating to say yay or nay.

"Have you looked at wedding dresses yet?" she asked, wrinkling her nose when a salmon-colored top clashed with my coloring. She put it back on the rack.

"No, we haven't set a date yet. We're not really in a rush."

Margo let out a tittering laugh and stopped in her tracks. "You should definitely be in a rush. You need to hurry up and claim Mayor Blackwood while you're at it because human engagements and weddings don't hold much weight in the shifter world. Claiming does, however. You don't want another bitch swooping in and having to fight her. It gets messy."

Brushing off her words, I walked past her. I had no clue what claiming entailed, and I didn't want her to see my ignorance. It was a vulnerability I hated to showcase, and Ridge had been the only one to witness that side of me. I only wanted him to answer my questions.

"Zander, for sure, doesn't care about my engagement. He made that abundantly clear." Just saying his name pissed me off.

"I've known Zander my whole life, and he's always been sort of a punk. One time in grade school, he pulled a horrible prank on me by using wolfsbane to try to bring out my wolf so I'd have to shift in a class full of young human kids."

Anger and revulsion flowed through my veins, and I had to choke down the tirade I wanted to unleash. What sick kid would do such a thing? No wonder he was the way he was now.

"Did you kick his teeth in like you should have? I'll happily seek him out now and do it."

Margo smiled, but I was being serious. That was no joke, and it sickened

me that she'd had to suffer so severely for that jerk's amusement.

She fidgeted before she spoke again. "Actually, Birch Clawson—he was three years ahead of me—got to Zander first. He was suspended for a few days for beating him up, though he always said it was worth it. I don't think he even got in trouble with his parents for that one."

Finally, a natural segue. "Aw, that's sort of sweet."

Margo laughed.

"So, does this mean I'm old enough now to hear about whatever happened between you and the sheriff?" I danced my eyebrows at her.

Margo swiftly turned her attention to an ugly-ass dress. "I'd rather not talk about Clawson at all right now."

Her voice was a little stilted and had me concerned. Margo was always bubbly and ready for a good laugh, but now she was acting anything but.

I couldn't stand this. I took the clothes from her and set them on a table, grabbed her hand, and yanked her out of the boutique. I guided us to a private street corner with a bench under a tree where we could sit and relax while I pried the answers I wanted out of her.

"Margo, I'm worried about you. You seemed to take Phil Hill's death really hard, and then your mom told me she's worried about your online shopping. Now you won't talk about the sheriff."

Leaning her head back, Margo made a face. "I never shop online."

Pausing, I studied her face. She was telling the truth. Diana must've wanted to give me something nice to wear but knew I wouldn't accept it. Shaking my head, I told myself I'd discuss that with Diana later. Right now, Margo deserved my full attention.

"Never mind the shopping. Margo, you can trust me. I want to know what you're going through. I want to help in any way I can."

Cars bustled by on the street, and people were walking around, soaking up the rays, but we were pretty secluded in our little corner.

I watched as she let out a deep sigh. "Okay. I've been dying to talk to someone about this for days, but I wasn't ready to get into it all."

Nodding, I encouraged her to keep talking.

"Five years ago, when I was fresh out of high school and didn't know what I wanted to do with my life yet, I got into an intense, whirlwind romance with Birch Clawson."

My eyes widened, but I kept my mouth shut. If I interrupted her, the moment would pass and she wouldn't tell me more.

“At the time, it was incredible, unique, and magical because he was practically obsessed with me. But as it continued, I started to worry that I didn’t know who I was or what I wanted out of life and felt I shouldn’t be in something so intense yet. I was young and wanted to have different experiences, and the intensity of the relationship became overwhelming. Not knowing what else to do, I broke things off with him, which hurt the both of us a lot.

“It was the hardest thing I ever did, but he was amazing about the whole thing. And even though I hurt him deeply, he still made sure I was taken care of.

“We kept the entire thing a secret from the town in the first place.” Margo eyed me with a cocked head. “You’ve seen what this town does with new couples, especially with the shifter community. Neither of us wanted that. He’d given me the space I’d asked for all those years until a few months ago when I started dating Phil. Then he changed. He got incredibly jealous and was constantly checking on me. It affected his friendship with Phil. They stopped getting along, which made it difficult for them to work together. It became a mess.”

Margo quieted down and took a breath, checking to see if I was paying attention. I was. I was very interested in her story.

“A little over two weeks ago, I found Phil cheating on me. I actually walked in on them.” She lowered her gaze as if she had something to be ashamed of. If the man wasn’t already dead, I’d have a few choice words with him. “I laid into him. I couldn’t believe it. I was so humiliated, and I ended it on the spot. The breakup was messy, nasty. He was cold, expected me to be forgiving of his mistakes. I couldn’t believe it, and I told him once a cheater, always a cheater. There was no trust anymore. I walked away.

“I wanted to keep the awful breakup a secret, especially from Clawson.” Margo stared down at her hands, twirling a piece of nonexistent thread between her fingers. “That’s why I’ve been avoiding him all the time. I’d never be able to not tell him what happened with Phil. He always knows when I’m upset or hurting. He’s a shifter with a bone when it comes to fixing things, especially for the people he cares about. After all this time, he still cares about me.”

Margo suddenly grabbed hold of my arm. “Promise me you won’t judge me for this next part, Tori.”

“I promise. I won’t judge you. Tell me what happened.” I gripped

Margo's hand. The worry that ate at her features had me struggling to stay calm. She was turning into my closest friend; I would never hold judgment against her. I hoped one day, she would return the sentiment.

Gazing at our hands, Margo whispered, "The night of the Full Moon Howl, halfway through the run, I caught Birch's scent, and I needed him at that moment. I can't explain it, only that it often occurred since we had been together, but I'd always fought it. I ran in one direction, away from the other wolves, and he followed. Shortly after that, Birch and I ran off alone and hooked up again." Her eyes peeked at me. When I didn't give her anything to be nervous about, she lifted her head and faced me. "I don't know if it was because I needed a rebound or something, but I couldn't seem to help myself, I wanted him so much. But he stopped it from going any further because he's honorable. He yelled at me about being with somebody else, and I told him we'd broken up. I told him everything, Tori. How Phil had humiliated me and cheated on me. Every sordid detail.

"Clawson was livid at Phil. He paced and yelled some more, and then he stopped and kissed me hard. He was giving me what I needed." She sighed. "He made me feel beautiful and wanted. After we hooked up, he said he'd have a word with his deputy. Since then, I've been avoiding him because I'm still a little freaked out by how intense everything with Clawson is. He makes me feel things I can't explain, and I constantly want more from him, but it was too soon after I was hurting so much. Then now, with Phil gone and the way he died, I don't know what I'm feeling anymore."

I soaked up all the information Margo spewed out. The only thing I clung to was that Clawson may have been much angrier than he'd let on. I worried about Margo's heart, but if Clawson had been obsessed with Margo for years...well, wasn't that a motive? What wouldn't a shifter do to protect a woman he cared for from a human?

Ridge and I had never questioned the sheriff's alibi, yet he'd also arrived at the crime scene pretty quickly. He'd told Ridge that Phil had texted him to meet at the bar, but that could easily be a lie he'd concocted in case somebody happened upon him around the area. All this was too much of a coincidence for it not to be a solid line of questioning.

Not wanting to worry Margo, I kept my thoughts to myself. I would only confide in Ridge. Great, exactly what we needed in this fake relationship of ours—another complicated conversation. From what I'd witnessed, I'd say that Clawson was Ridge's best friend. He wouldn't like me asking around

about his best friend, the sheriff. Would he even listen to what I had to tell him? It'd be like when people had suspected me. Ridge was loyal, and this would be hard for him to swallow. He had more reason to be dedicated to Clawson than to me.

For the first time in forever, I initiated a hug. I'd missed it. "Thank you for telling me. I'm glad you did. And you can always talk to me."

Margo's shoulders lowered, and she didn't appear to be wound up as tight. It seemed she'd needed to get all that off her chest. Could it be that she was a lot like me and needed a good friend? Why wouldn't she have confided in someone else about this?

I had been on the run and forced to shut myself off. She had lived in the same town all her life, surrounded by others, but hadn't clicked with anyone. It took all kinds of situations to make friendships; I was slowly starting to learn that. In the end, all I could think was how happy I was to have found her when we needed each other.

"Okay, that's enough of a stressful subject. Let's lighten this up." Margo clapped her hands a couple of times, shaking them as if flicking away the bad vibes. "Let's finish shopping because, girlfriend, you need some clothes. You're engaged to the mayor, for freak's sake. You need to look the part. Like majorly." Her bubbly laugh made its reappearance.

Just like that, the Margo I'd grown to know and love was back. She dragged me back to the boutique, chatting away about clothes, wedding dresses, bridesmaids dresses—not so subtly hinting that yellow was not her color—ideas for venues, and, in her words, most important of all, the honeymoon.

Through all the laughter, I couldn't help feeling sad, too. Margo was so excited about our wedding, I'd even got caught up in it for a bit—it was hard not to with her. She was easily the closest friend I'd ever had, despite the short time we'd known each other. The reality, though, was that our friendship was all fake, and sooner or later, it would end. I'd leave, and Blackwood Creek and all its people would move on without me. I only hoped I could go on without them.

The rest of the morning flew by. Even though I disappointed Margo with how little I bought and the practicality of those items, she let it slide. She even jokingly commented that she was now absolutely, positively sure I wasn't a gold-digger. If I'd overheard anybody else saying those words, it would've pissed me off and probably made me lash out inappropriately,



which would have meant more damage control for Ridge. But coming from Margo, I thought it was hilarious.

Carrying bags and chatting, we walked down the street to Margo's car when I accidentally bumped into Elliot Elkins, who I'd waited on at the diner a couple of times.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Elkins. Please excuse me, I didn't mean to bump into you," I said.

The grumpy old town coot lived up to his name and narrowed his eyes at me. "Watch where you're going." He moved in closer and stared at me as he'd done repeatedly since he first met me. He nodded to himself and huffed out, "You look just like your father." He sneered, turned around, and walked away.

My world imploded around me, my vision blackening with dread. My wolf started clawing to take control as she growled at me, wanting to take care of everything. I raged against her, against the stress of my tight lungs and heavy breathing.

Sweat slicked my body. Shifting was not an option; I was in public. Getting away was the only thing I needed to do. Run. I had to run.

Panicking, I yelled at Margo that I had to go, and I ran as hard and as fast as I could to the Range Rover and pleaded with the wolf to stay contained. It was too public to shift and unsafe to shift while driving.

Pain battered my skull as I pleaded with the wolf to remain in control. My eyelids were squinting as I winced against the penetrating light.

"Don't shift. Please don't shift."

Booking it down the street outside of the store and then hauling ass down the manor's driveway, I stopped the car in the middle of the driveway in front of the place, ran upstairs to my room, and locked myself in.

Pacing the room, I stroked my hand aggressively through my hair, pulling it to reduce the pain with added pain. I did everything I could to ease it all. The questions wouldn't stop. How did he know? When did he meet my dad? Why hadn't he said anything before? Was he going to? I couldn't understand how he knew my father.

"Grrrr." The wolf became more lively beneath the surface of my skin.

"No. You can't come out. Not right now. Tonight. You can come out tonight," I pleaded with her.

She slowly retreated. Growling at me again, she paced and kept diligent but stopped fighting me so hard. She was still ready to launch and take over,

but being in Ridge's home, enveloped by his scent and safely locked inside my room, seemed to settle her.

"What am I going to do? That crazy man might know I was raised by a hunter. Trained to be a hunter." I slammed my palm against my head. "That was before I shifted for the first time." I sat against my bed on the floor and wrapped myself into a ball. "What am I going to do?"

Tears streaked down my face as every horrible scenario battered my brain. "Elliot Elkins isn't a shifter, but his son is. That means in order to protect his son, he'll tell someone who I am, or he's going to accuse me of leading the hunters here."

Reasoning aloud made it so I didn't believe myself to be as crazy, to talk some sense into myself, hopefully.

Who was I kidding? It was true—I was crazy. I had to be. To start thinking I could make a life here, that I could have friends, that I could have a committed relationship.

I was fucking nuts to believe any of it.

There was no way to hide it. I would eventually lead the hunters here, because no matter how I looked at it, they would never stop trying to find me. I was an abomination, and I knew too much.

Tears kept streaming out of me, and I rocked myself to try to self-soothe—something I'd done as a child that had resurfaced when my mother died.

Ridge had helped me with the shifting, and it wasn't as horrible as I had imagined it to be. I needed more practice. The wolf nodded in agreement. I'd be able to run again.

"Grrrrr."

"What would you have us do? We need to protect this town. We need to protect Ridge."

The wolf eased up at that. I had to think. I needed to get my stuff together and then...

But I couldn't leave without seeing Ridge. My wolf chuffed her agreement. We would see him one last time. I'd tell him what I suspected about Clawson, head to the diner to collect the earnings still due to me, and I would do what I did best: run.

Bile rose up my throat, and my heart slammed against my ribcage when I thought about leaving Ridge. Last night, I was content, at peace, falling asleep in his arms, and now I had to run from him to protect him.

"Why the hell did you have to get so attached to him? I know better than

that. Relationships are not for the likes of me.” I smacked my head and wept into my knees.

The wolf pushed up against my chest, and my heart cracked. I didn't think I could stay away if he were close to me. It might be too late for my heart. It wouldn't be possible for me to hold off. None of that would stop me, though. I had to go. To protect him and Blackwood Creek, I had to go.

For once, my wolf and I were on the same wavelength.

Protect Ridge.

But first, I needed some information.

## Chapter 26

# Ridge

Tired and wanting everything to be over with, I headed over to the town hall to speak with Clawson. I wondered who he thought was the leading suspect. The faster we resolved this, the faster things could return to normal.

“How’s your aunt?” Clawson asked as I entered his office. The nursing home must have contacted him when she escaped and again when I returned her.

I heaved myself into the chair. “She became lucid for a short time, so I got to speak with her, but it didn’t last long.”

“I’m sorry, man. At least you got to speak with her. You haven’t been able to do that in a few months.”

True, it’d been a while since she was last lucid when I was around. The nurses and caretakers had moments with her, which gave me something to hold onto. It also helped to provide me with hope for Tori and how she could deal with her feral wolf. This illness didn’t have to be a death sentence. With Tori in the beginning stages, I was certain it could be reversed.

I changed the subject. “Okay, tell me what you’ve got. I’m ready for this to end.”

Sheriff Clawson huffed in agreement. “You and me both, brother.” He leaned forward in his chair. “I went back to the crime scene and checked everything over again. We had to be missing something. Why didn’t the killer leave any evidence of shifting behind inside the bar? It’s impossible for there not to be something another shifter wouldn’t have sniffed out. There was no fur, no ripped clothing, nothing at all. The crime techs and deputies scoured the bar inside and out, so I went and did another search outside, behind the bar. I searched deeper behind all the buildings near and around the

tavern. I'm sure I've found something pretty damning."

My interest was piqued. Could he have found evidence? That would be a Hail Mary. Up until now, Birch had been working off pretty much rumors and accusations.

He reached down beside him and picked up an enormous evidence box. When he opened it, I saw a massive knife inside it. My eyes widened. An enormous wolf's claw made up the blade of the knife.

I grabbed the box from him and studied the knife. It was old. Owing to its size, the claw had to have belonged to an alpha. The claw was cast inside a gold base with an intricate design etched in. I couldn't place the engravings, but the craftsmanship was exquisite, professional. It certainly wasn't a recent piece. A leather cord bound around the handle in a crossing pattern appeared to maintain a grip when used.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"My uncle showed one to me when I was younger, but there weren't many of them out there. This one is more of a showpiece than the one my uncle had me look at. That one was more of a makeshift defense weapon and was cast in silver, so a shifter couldn't touch it. This is in gold. A shifter made it?"

"I know. I've never seen a piece in person before now. We don't need anything like this; we have our own inbuilt. But it would make for a formidable weapon against our kind. I can't think of any reason a shifter would make one. It's odd. Hunters have created these for as long as they've formed groups to fight us, but they use silver and dip the claw in wolfsbane. Why would they not use silver to make this knife? I can only conclude a shifter made it."

"Do you think it could have been to honor a family member after their passing?" I asked.

"I don't know. I haven't gotten the history on it. All I know is that it was buried behind the psychiatric office and belongs to Lola Kipling. When she moved into town, I helped her move some of her furniture and saw it in her apartment. It's pretty distinctive, Ridge. It's definitely hers."

The damning evidence presented was monumental and ingenious. We'd been looking for a shifter this entire time because Phil's corpse showed damage that could only have been done by a shifter. But this claw could easily replicate a shifter's claw, and after an investigation, it'd pass the inspection. All the experts had looked closely at the body, and sure enough,

they all believed a shifter had done it.

“Did you get any DNA off it?”

Nodding, the sheriff put the evidence back in his bag. “I did. The only DNA match on it is a bit of blood, confirming to be Phil’s. This is definitely the murder weapon.”

My muscles relaxed. This was as close as we had gotten to solving this crime. Without a doubt, it absolved the shifters of this town, which made a large piece of me calm down. I hated thinking that a shifter would’ve done this when we tried so hard to make this place safe for shifters and humans alike. It wouldn’t bode well if shifters were killing humans.

Now, I had solid evidence, proof that I could physically show Tori, and she would have to believe now that she wasn’t a killer. I couldn’t wait to watch her face light up, and hopefully, she’d drop her shields a little more. This nonsense talk of hers about leaving would come to an end because she’d see she was completely safe to be around, especially now that she was working with her wolf rather than constantly fighting it.

“Since Lola Kipling was meeting with Martin Greenthorne so early that morning, she would have been awake and waiting for him. She must’ve seen the deputy going into the bar,” I said.

It was possible that Christie Greenthorne paid the therapist well to keep everyone else’s noses out of their drama. A lot of money could’ve made Lola do something drastic, even disgraceful. It didn’t help that no one had a real relationship with the woman in this town. She’d been reclusive since she’d first moved here. I didn’t think I’d spoken more than a few words to the woman myself, and I never saw her around much.

With the knife found behind her place, no real alibi, and this possible motive, I couldn’t help but think this wasn’t a good look for the therapist. I agreed with Clawson that she was currently our number-one suspect until proven otherwise.

Clawson and I spoke for a while about the case and other town details requiring my attention. Neither of us could wait for this murder to be solved. The sensationalism would be over with. And the workload would ease up, because a serious crime such as murder didn’t mean that other essential issues got swept away or minor, petty crimes couldn’t still occur.

After the meeting ended, I made a few phone calls and signed some papers. I didn’t leave the office for a few more hours, but I was eager to get home.

I smiled to myself. I couldn't remember a time when I'd actually been eager to get back home. Normally, I didn't mind staying at the office until late into the night or even the early morning. I couldn't even remember when I'd last thought of the manor as home, or if I ever had thought of it as home.

Tori. That was why I wanted to head home so badly. Even more of a reason I needed to mull over our potential connection, another reason she needed to stay in Blackwood Creek. It was purely selfish on my part, but when did I ever ask for something I wanted for myself? Hardly. If ever.

With the murder weapon and Lola Kipling on my mind, I arrived back at the manor and instantly sought out Tori to tell her the great news. Despite all the work, she was still the main thing I'd thought about all day. Thanks to our running together last night and the phenomenal shower sex I was eager to repeat soon, it seemed she invaded my mind with no effort at all.

I was hopeful we'd soon have this murder solved and Blackwood Creek could return to its typical peacefulness. Once everything was back to normal, I could slow down with work, give more of my time to Tori to help her understand her wolf, and convince her to stay with me. Then, I'd focus on whether or not she was my fated mate.

Without this murder case hanging over her head, my wolf and I could help her become one with her wolf. That would stop her from going feral, and in time, the feral side would vanish completely. I was optimistic that figuring out our mate status would be easier if she wasn't slightly feral anymore.

Shouting her name, I searched the manor and found her in my library. She was studying the old books and the family portraits. Her fingers trailed the spines of the books when her head lifted toward me, and she gave me one of her beaming smiles. Once, that had once been so rare, but now I got to witness it more often.

But slowly, her smile faded and the light in her eyes dimmed, and I wondered why.

"I've been brushing up on your family and the town's history," she said. "I gathered from the town name that your family had a hand in establishing it, but I didn't realize how big your family name actually is. Not only is it prominent in this town but in the whole shifter community. You're like royalty." She smirked at me. "Do I need to bow and call you Your Majesty?"

Shaking my head, I smiled and leaned against the door frame. I loved her silly side, but something was a little off with her. Everything felt forced. She

seemed more closed-off compared to her demeanor last night.

The trauma she'd endured, and living her life always running, was bound to make her a bit rocky. I had to take her ease as it came and went. She was worth the patience on my end. She was worth everything to me. Did that confirm we were fated mates?

"How did your family get so wealthy?" she asked.

My shoulders tensed, even though her tone was still playful. I hated this aspect most about my ancestors and my family legacy, but to earn her trust, I had to give her mine. And discussing topics that pained and shamed me was what I needed to do.

I put my hands in my pockets and stepped into the room. "My family comes from old money. When the hunters started coming about at the end of the 1800s, the Blackwood family showed their true colors and how cutthroat in business and self-preservation they were by selling out shifter families and other paranormal creatures in exchange for protection and money."

Shame blackened my soul, and I avoided Tori's eyes.

"Entire packs and many bloodlines ended because of the Blackwoods' betrayal, and yet we're still a big name in the shifter world because my family lorded their money and status over the others and were shown mercy by the shifter families by paying them off with whatever and whenever they could. They repurchased their position in the shifter world, and most ignored it and swept it under the rug. The other alphas hold reticence with the Blackwoods, but not the elite. Not the influential families, since they believe they can gain notoriety and profitable business deals."

Every word I spoke made me feel more disgusted with my ancestors. I worried that Tori would feel the same toward me. I wouldn't blame her if she did. If I couldn't get over it, how did I expect a shifter to, one whose family line could have been snuffed out because of my ancestors? How could the shifter world hold any esteem for the Blackwood name?

Tori stepped closer to me. "It seems like you blame yourself for bad things your ancestors did." She cocked her head and connected our eyes, and she wouldn't let me look away. "It's not up to you to fix everything. You need to give yourself a break."

I met her eyes and caught Tori's compassionate gaze. "I might not have done the damage, but I come from a long line of alphas who were supposed to protect and defend their kind. Instead, they failed them badly. My ancestors willingly sold out their own kind, and not because they were



tortured and imprisoned and couldn't fight any longer. No, they did it for money and not having to worry about defending themselves. They were greedy cowards."

Tori grabbed my hand as she stepped closer to me. "What they did is not your fault. You must stop overworking yourself to pay for someone else's sins. The burdens of your past kin are not yours. Despite them, you're a good man, a great alpha, and a strong leader. You're repairing the Blackwood name and restoring the family's honor by doing the right thing now. You don't need to bury yourself with it, though."

As we gazed into each other's eyes, I couldn't help but be touched by her stubborn insistence. I laughed. "Maybe I do have a hero complex, after all."

"You have an alpha complex."

Only Tori could get me to smile during a conversation of this magnitude.

"What emergency took you out of my bed this morning?" She inspected my hands. Dirt was caked under my nails and bits of dried blood were smudged on my from when I'd fought with Aunt Lucille's feral wolf.

If I had noticed earlier, I'd have cleaned up at the office. But I'd become distracted by Clawson's news and healed quickly from the minor injuries I'd sustained. I was relieved I wouldn't have to explain them to Tori. If I'd been seriously hurt, there would have been no getting out of that conversation.

Not wanting to share anything more about my aunt's failing mental health, suspecting it would frighten her, I redirected her with the case. At the very least, it should make her happy that the case was even closer to being solved and reassure her that she was not the murderer.

"It was mostly business, but I talked with Clawson. We have a major lead in the case. Lola Kipling is the prime suspect in the deputy's murder."

Tori instantly dropped my hands and stepped back, frowning. "I don't believe it's Lola. That poor girl fainted the second she saw all the blood."

Surprising me with her reaction, I responded calmly. "It's easy to fake a faint if it adds to her believability. Add in that the murder weapon was discovered behind her office...it's a distinctive claw knife, made from an alpha wolf's claw. And she does have a possible motive, and she was apparently awake when the crime was committed. Let's also add that she came to town weeks ago, claiming to be looking at the area's rich history, and hasn't connected or befriended anyone besides working with the Greenthornes. That all makes her the strongest possible suspect. It makes sense to Clawson and me, and I trust his judgment on this."

Tori started huffing and posturing as her eyes flared in outrage. “Lola is shy. Anyone can see that if they actually took the time to talk to her. You’re just taking Clawson at his word that he found a weapon behind the psychiatrist’s place when maybe he’s trying to cover his own fucking tracks.”

I stiffened at her accusation. Where did that come from? “What the hell are you talking about? There’s no way you’re accusing the sheriff—*my friend*—of killing his own deputy.”

I couldn’t believe she had gone there. I was flabbergasted and didn’t know where to begin on how to wrap my head around the accusation.

“You’re biased. You’ve known the guy for so long that you can’t see what’s right in front of you. Did you know that Clawson was obsessed with Margo and prone to jealousy?”

I dropped my jaw in shock.

“Did you know Clawson found out that Phil Hill was cheating on Margo right before the deputy was murdered?”

Closing my jaw, I grit my teeth.

“Getting attached to someone and falling in love can make people do wild, insane things even the people closest to them don’t understand. I’m less surprised because he’s a shifter, and shifters still seem pretty volatile to me.”

Shaking my head at this outlandish theory, I worked hard to keep my anger and annoyance out of my voice. “Your theory is ridiculous. I trust Clawson with my life. I trust him with the life of every person in this town, including yours.”

Narrowing her eyes at me, she didn’t let up. “Did you know that Clawson was obsessed with Margo, or even that they dated? Did you know? Yes or no?”

“No, I didn’t know.” Exasperation heaved out of me. “But it’s not like we share every tiny detail of our dating life with each other.”

“If the sheriff kept his relationship a secret from you, and you kept our fake engagement a secret from him, then who’s to say the guy couldn’t be keeping a bigger secret about getting wild with jealousy and killing the guy who wronged the girl he’s obsessed with?”

I blew up. “There’s no way in hell that happened.”

“You went all caveman when Zander merely touched me. *Touched* me.” Her voice rose to match mine. “Maybe the same thing happened with Clawson. Remember, the deputy physically slept with somebody else, hurting Margo. If you ask me, that’s a big fucking motive for Clawson to want Hill

dead.”

I paused. I couldn't deny that I had lost my shit for a split second when I was jealous, and it could be possible for me to do something wildly reckless in that state. I still saw red when I thought about Zander's arm around Tori's waist.

Clawson was as much of a shifter, a dominant male, as I was. It was logical and made sense that something similar might have happened with Clawson, but I couldn't believe it. There was too much pointing at Lola Kipling. That was where we needed to start.

“I still don't think he did it,” I said. “It doesn't matter if he was capable. He didn't do it. Lola Kipling is the best suspect. That's where the focus of the investigation needs to be right now.”

“You won't even take what I said into account? We should at least put him up as a potential suspect as well.”

“No, I won't. He's the fucking sheriff.”

“And Lola is fucking shy, not a killer.”

We glared daggers at each other, the warm, soft feelings between us going up in ash.

Tori threw her hands up in the air and stopped yelling. “You know what? I'll figure this out myself if you're so blinded by loyalty. You really need to learn not to trust anyone. I've seen firsthand how everything in my life was a lie, and that might be the case between you and Clawson.”

Snapping back, I said, “Just because you have trust issues doesn't mean I need to. You can't just figure this entire thing out for yourself. You need to learn to rely on others, including me. *Especially* me.”

She pulled her back straight and scowled at me. “I don't want to rely on you any longer. The second this murder case is solved, I'm leaving town. I'm gone.”

Without another word, she stormed out of the room, not looking back. I heard the front door slam.

Grimacing, I heaved out a breath and sank into one of the reading chairs. I rubbed a hand over my heart. I couldn't believe how much it had hurt when she said she didn't want to rely on me. It was like she'd fractured me, and now I was struggling to piece myself together.

Frustration mounted, easing the ache enough to let me function, but not enough to ease the hurt emotions swarming within me. All I wanted was to keep her here in Blackwood Creek with me, where she would be safe, but

that wouldn't happen if she kept running away.

This fight had taken me by surprise. She'd only said that to lash out; she must have. Because if she genuinely believed what she'd said, then I was screwed, and I couldn't accept that yet.

I needed a shower to get rid of the grime and help me settle down. It would also give Tori time to cool off. Then I'd track her down and tell her what I suspected was going on between her and me. Our connection had to be something more, and if she left, we'd face bigger problems.

I'd ask her to stay in town so we could pursue our relationship further. I'd beg her to stay if I had to, because if I was hurting this much from what she'd said, what would happen if she left? I wouldn't know what was happening with her. A hunter could trap her, torture her, kill her.

Another man would touch her at some point, and she'd accept that touch. Growling rumbled in my chest. This time, it wasn't from the wolf.

## Chapter 27

# Tori

My frustration and anger fueled me as I stomped back into town. It hurt me that Ridge wasn't listening, but it was also a little freeing. I had finally found a fault in him for being so blindly loyal and trusting of a friend. That was a dangerous trait and would get someone killed.

The minute I'd sensed Ridge's presence in the manor, I had lost the resolve to distance myself from him because I was so happy to see him. When he walked in, it was like everything else had ceased to exist, and it was only the two of us in the world. It took a while for me to remember what I had to do, but then he told me about his family and how he felt responsible, and I started weakening again. My heart ached for him. It was nice not to have selfish feelings, to be free to care for somebody else—Ridge in particular.

The connection between us was growing with an intensity I didn't know how to stop. Part of me was appeased that we'd fought because he was the perfect outlet for the rage stewing inside me. It was precisely what I needed to leave town, the push that helped me to do the right thing.

Confronting Clawson and solving this murder was my first order of business. Then I was out of here without a word to anyone. That was cold and callous, but it was the only way I could do it.

I was heading toward the sheriff's office, thinking that might be where I'd find Clawson. My first question would be what he'd done after leaving Margo that night because everything stemmed from there. I needed to be prepared before I confronted him, though. He was the sheriff, after all, and more experienced in this than me.

If he did get difficult, I'd turn up the heat and drive him to confess by

talking about Phil Hill and Margo together. That should boil him over. If what I'd noticed from Ridge at the mere mention of Zander's name—the way his eye twitched and his hands instantly curled into fists—talking to Clawson about the physical acts between Margo and another man would send him over the edge. It might cause him to go apocalyptic, but that was a risk I'd have to take.

Working out all the questions in my head and the order I would ask him, I got lost in thought until I bumped into a distracted Lola Kipling. We both laughed at our absent-mindedness. With this much open space, it was amazing that we'd collided.

“Are you doing one of your regular hikes?” I asked.

“Yup, it's the only way I can clear my head. Plus, I don't have to be around so many people this way.” Lola smiled shyly, tucking her longer bangs behind her ear. “I've been meaning to ask, but I haven't seen you around. How are you doing? I know firsthand this town can be a little like a fishbowl, and they're extra nosy about newcomers. I started worrying that they might be adding to your stress. After all, you're planning a wedding, and then there's that horrible murder in the town, not to mention your fiancé is the mayor, so you're bound to be even more scrutinized. Are you holding up okay?” Her soft eyes studied me with no judgment or condemnation, just concern and compassion.

How Ridge could think for one second that this woman was a murderer astounded me.

I was not a person to open up about my feelings, even before living my life on the run. I surprised myself with my answer. “You know, honestly, it's been pretty stressful.” So much was happening, and I struggled with it all. Too many changes occurred, and she was easy to open up to. She didn't give off an air of being judgmental, so I figured she was well-suited to her profession.

I didn't want to discuss it all with her because the more I kept to myself, the safer people would be. That was a lesson I'd learned early on from my father, and I adhered to it. It didn't mean I couldn't take the opportunity to put Ridge's theory to the test. Maybe by mentioning the knife, I could get a read on her. She didn't seem like someone who could lie easily, or she could be a sensational actress and should be in Hollywood because she'd make a killing in the movies. I didn't foresee any of it, though. She was too pure of heart. Nobody could fake that sincerity. Her mask was bound to slip up at

some point.

“I’m sorry, Lola, what brought you to Blackwood Creek again?”

Lola’s face lit up. “My ancestors lived here a long time ago, in the 1800s. I love the town’s rich history. There’s so much here to learn and discover. I’m a psychiatrist by trade and a historian by heart—especially my family’s history. Genealogy is fascinating and can teach us so much about ourselves, our cultures, and what can be avoided in the future. I find it thrilling. When the opportunity arose to open my practice here, I had to take it. I’ve counseled too many people who had regrets, and I didn’t want this as one of mine.”

Could she be talking about shifter history? Her interest in her family and moving to the area made me wonder if she wanted to integrate herself with the paranormal side of her potential heritage.

Still, it would be stupid to bring up shifters if she didn’t have a clue what I was talking about. I hedged my bets and went with a different tactic.

“It is an interesting place, certainly, with all the wolves in the area and how long-standing they are here. It’s amazing to think we could see one at any moment.”

Lola steamrolled right over the clue, but she got excited for a completely innocent reason. “I’m so glad there are so many wildlife reserves in this area because it’s tragic how many wolves have been hunted throughout history. Did you know that some populations dwindled so much they became endangered? It’s disgusting what people are capable of. Such beautiful creatures were created for a purpose, not to be snuffed out by humans. No animal should be endangered because of us. I’m perfectly content with having the wolves nearby to howl sometimes because it reminds me how important it is to conserve wildlife. This is their home, just as much as it is for anybody else.”

Yeah, Ridge had every right to believe she was a killer through and through. I wanted to roll my eyes so badly and prove my point to him right now.

Figuring that the line of questioning would only reinforce my opinion, it was pointless to keep going with it. It was time to move on. I decided to ask outright about the knife. The sooner I solved this, the sooner Lola would be free to live life normally and I would get what I needed.

“I was wondering, you had a wolf claw knife, right? Where did you get it?”

Stopping in place, Lola looked straight at me with questions in her eyes and massive confusion. “How did you know about that? It was misplaced while I was moving in.” Her lips turned down. “It was a family heirloom passed down by my great-great-grandfather. I’ve searched everywhere for it; I can’t believe it vanished the way it did. It makes my heart sick that I was that careless with it. My father gave it to me and said I needed to be extra careful with it.”

I didn’t sense any subterfuge or fakeness in her story. She was truly upset about losing the family heirloom and the connection to her ancestors. Someone must have stolen it. She was new to town and made for an easy mark to frame. With no friends or roots here, people could easily dismiss her. If it weren’t for Ridge and our fake engagement, I’d be in the same position as her.

I cautiously prepared to ask my next question, not wanting to rattle her, already feeling a little sleazy going there with her. Deep down, I didn’t want to snoop around with her. The Greenthornes were no problem because I downright didn’t like them, but I respected Lola, so it made me feel grimy.

“Why were you awake so early the day Phil Hill died?”

Her shoulders dropped and she let out a long sigh. “I had a meeting with Mr. Greenthorne, but it’s not just because of that. I haven’t slept well since I accidentally became a cheater.” Shame and sorrow tainted her face, her words leaving her in a rush and making it sound like one word. She couldn’t look me in the eye.

It took me a moment to replay what she’d said in my head, and I was confused.

“What are you talking about?”

How does anyone accidentally become a cheater? She hadn’t mentioned having a boyfriend. How was she a cheater? She had to have been in some kind of relationship in order for her to be a cheater—accidental or otherwise.

Tears slowly spilled down her cheeks. “When I was first new in town and had no idea who was who, let alone who was dating who, I met someone. I got swept up in a one-night stand with Phil Hill.”

My eyes widened in shock while Lola took a steadying breath.

“It ended horribly when Margo Bogford walked in on us. I couldn’t believe it. I was mortified and ashamed. If I had known they were together, I would’ve never gone there with him. He made me into a cheater. I spent the rest of the night throwing up because I was so sickened by what I had



accidentally done. I did so much damage to a person who didn't deserve it. That's why I've secluded myself from people. I've been scared to talk to Margo ever since. Then after Phil was killed, I worried Margo might've thought I killed him out of jealousy or something insane like that, but I was more concerned about her. The pain and trust that had to have shattered her when she walked in on her boyfriend with me...it's inexcusable."

My heart went out to her because this wasn't a situation of her making. It was all on Deputy Hill, and he wasn't here for me to tear him to pieces for the hurt he'd caused my friends. I wanted to let her know that technically, she wasn't a cheater—technically, she would be a home wrecker—but looking at her, I didn't think that would be a wise thing to say. I didn't actually believe it made her a home wrecker, either, because she hadn't been aware she was being used to wreck a relationship.

Lola continued to sniffle and wipe away the tears from her cheeks. There was no way she wasn't being genuine. But if Ridge heard this, he'd view it as another motive for her murdering the deputy. I didn't. My suspicions were still leveled on Clawson.

Deputy Hill outweighed Lola by at least sixty pounds. How would she have been able to get the drop on him with a wolf-claw knife without him getting a few good hits in? I'd seen Lola that morning and days after. She had no bruises, cuts, or anything to indicate she'd been in a fight with somebody. It was possible he could have underestimated her as a foe, and she could have gotten close enough to get in the first hit, but wouldn't he have defended himself against her? She didn't look like she could put up a fight.

"Lola, you did nothing wrong. Phil Hill was the one at fault here. He caused this. I bet if you talked to Margo and explained, she'd understand. Margo isn't the kind of person to hold a grudge, especially when you're just as much a victim in this, too."

Trying to soothe her worries, I walked with her back to her office. She'd unpacked a lot, and I had already disliked the deputy, but now he went to an even deeper low for me. I didn't care that he was dead. I wouldn't have wished death on him, but it didn't change his character and how I would've viewed him if he were still alive.

"I don't know how to say this, but I want you to be prepared for what could be coming down the grapevine."

Lola's tear-stained face looked back at me. "What?"

"I want to warn you that a few people in town are already suspicious of

you for his murder. Knowing now about what he did with you doesn't help, either. It would be good if we could figure out how the wolf-claw knife ended up missing because it might lead us to the real culprit."

She got quiet for a moment, and I thought I'd maybe upset her, that she wouldn't want anything more to do with me, but then she spoke.

"I really don't know where it could have gone, but several people did help me move into the office and the adjoining apartment."

Lightbulbs went off in my mind. They could've easily seen the knife and thought it would be the perfect murder weapon, making the murder easier to pin on the newbie in town. "Who helped you move in?"

"Um, let's see, there were the Ashworths and Mrs. Marrow because we're neighbors. Sheriff Clawson showed up, introduced himself, and moved in several boxes and some furniture. Mateo helped the sheriff with the large furniture, and the Magpies stopped by to introduce themselves and bring a welcoming casserole and dessert so I didn't have to worry about cooking my first night. It was great how people pitched in to help me settle in and say hi. At least, I thought it was until now." Her voice quieted at the end. I hated hearing that because I knew most had been there to be friendly and kind.

"Hey, don't think like that, okay? The people here are nosy but kind and want to help where they can. Don't let one person ruin the way you feel about the town."

Lola nodded and gave me a weak smile.

I mentally reviewed who was there, and it was a good list. It helped that my suspicions of Clawson were validated again. I was also still hesitant about Mateo. I hated to admit it, but I still couldn't help but think he could have done it.

Lola was most definitely the wrong suspect. She was nervous and nauseated just talking about the murder. How in the world could she have gone through with it?

"We'll figure this out. I promise everything will be fine and we'll get your name cleared. Take it easy, and I'll figure out who stole your knife."

Lola hugged me tightly, fresh tears pouring out of the sweet woman. "I'm really, really glad you came to town because I've been horrible at making friends. Audrey is...well, she's scary, and the entire ordeal with Margo made being friends with her impossible, but I feel like you and I get along great. It might help me feel like I finally have someone to connect with in town. It has been lonely."

My heart twinged. Yet another person I was bound to upset when I moved on from here.

“I hope you and the mayor are planning on sticking around Blackwood Creek for a long time,” she continued. “I’d hate to lose out on a friendship with you.”

Lola stepped back from our embrace, and guilt swaddled me. My plan to leave was already in motion, and I’d decided not to tell anyone when I was taking off. The fake engagement only complicated things.

I was glad I’d gotten to meet Lola, though, because she was sweet. She gave me hope for people I had lost along the way.

“I’m happy we met, too,” I said.

As I left through the back door of her office, I realized it came out behind the offices and the library. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look around. Though I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, I was certain Lola was innocent. There had been no reason for her to go for Hill. Maybe I could get an idea of how someone got into her office.

I scanned the back of the connecting library, not expecting to find anything in the bare space. Frowning, I checked the whole area. I was missing something, but what, exactly?

Then I heard birds in the park outside the front of the library.

The bird feeder.

Mrs. Marrow had told me she was refilling the bird feeder when she heard Audrey scream. Where was it? There was no bird feeder back here.

“Hey, do you know what happened to the bird feeder?” I called out to Lola.

Lola looked around and shook her head. “There’s never been one, or at least I don’t remember ever seeing one. Why?”

A spasm hit my gut, and I smiled at Lola. I needed to talk to the librarian again to get her story straight.

“Never mind, I must have misunderstood.” I waved it off and put my focus back on the other woman. “You going to be okay?”

Lola nodded. “I am now, thanks to you. It really does help to have someone to talk to. I want you to know I am also here for you, and I won’t charge you by the hour.” She winked.

We said our goodbyes, and Lola went back inside. I felt sure I was going to get some answers, though part of me—my wolf part—didn’t want answers yet. Answers meant we’d be leaving town. Leaving Ridge.

I scanned the area again, and the nagging sensation had me heading inside the library, looking for Mrs. Marrow. Something didn't seem right, and the woman was bound to straighten everything out for me.

"Mrs. Marrow, you here?" I asked, peeking into each door. None of the doors was locked.

I came upon the records room in the back of the building the old woman had mentioned to me. Filing cabinets filled up all the wall space, with neatly handwritten dates on the labels going all the way back to the 1800s. Old newspaper clippings and papers were strewn over several of the desks in the center of the room.

I was surprised to see the disorder of everything. With this being a library and how organized the shelves and magazines were, I didn't think Mrs. Marrow would appreciate a mess of this caliber.

One desk had a surprisingly sleek computer system. It was more tech-savvy than I'd have expected of a small-town library.

Giddiness rose inside my chest. I could possibly find something here. Not having seen or caught the librarian anywhere, I figured it wouldn't hurt to snoop, mainly since papers were strewn everywhere. It wasn't like I was digging through files, and this was a public library, after all. Everything here was public information.

I couldn't wrap my head around the mess, though. Shouldn't the papers have been put away?

Clawson was still my number-one suspect. The older woman must've mentioned the bird feeder out of confusion or something, but I would still do the due diligence and ensure that everything got investigated. It wouldn't be good to pin all my doubts on the sheriff, or else I wouldn't be any better than Ridge.

I spent a good ten minutes perusing the room, grabbing hold of certain articles, but I was surprised to find medical records of births in the county going all the way back to the town's founding. What was so important about birth records?

I wanted to have more time, but I didn't know when the librarian would be back. I considered jumping onto the computer and seeing if any files were saved there. It was a long shot, but with the archives held on a library computer, there could be something. Perhaps the search history hadn't been properly deleted. These documents thrown all over the place didn't point to a normal search by any means.

Pulling out the chair to the computer desk, I skimmed over ripped-up paper that hadn't made it into the trash can. Curious, I picked up the pieces and pulled other scraps from the scan.

It was a ripped-up check. I put the scraps together like a jigsaw puzzle. Who would be sending the old librarian checks through the mail?

My blood ran cold and my feet itched to run before I finished piecing it all together. Fight-or-flight kicked in, and in this scenario, flight was winning. I struggled to swallow, and my breath hitched as if I had finished running a mile at full speed.

I stared at the name, at the familiar signature.

William Summers.

Why was my father sending Mrs. Marrow a check? A very healthy-sized check?

Blood drained from my face, dread gluing me to my seat. I looked around me in panic. This room had a ton of information about the town's history and the familial lineages that showcased the birth records of every citizen—shifters included. My father wanted genealogy, of course. What easier way than to study the shifter lines? What better way than to destroy whole lineages to save the human race—as he liked to put it?

Knowing my father, he'd decimate this whole town. Not just because of the shifters but because of the abundance of humans who protected them. According to my father, humans who protected shifters were worse than the monsters themselves because they were traitors.

Fighting back the urge to be sick, I tried to gather certain documents to take to Ridge. Maybe we could piece some information together and figure out what the angle would be for the hunters to come into town.

The edges of my vision were fiery flames as I pictured my father and what he had done. He'd infiltrated this safe and loving community. Worse, Ridge and the other shifters seemed to think Mrs. Marrow had no idea about shifters and paranormal creatures. But if my father was paying her, then she was a mole, leaking information to him and the other hunters.

Speedily grabbing files, all my fears came to life. I could only think about getting to Ridge. He needed to be warned, and I needed to apologize. Why hadn't I told him everything? He needed to know this to keep his town safe. He could've been better warned had I not been so self-involved. Who knew how much time we'd have to set up proper defenses?

Files in hand, I turned to leave, but then a sharp, debilitating pain struck

my stomach.

Blood soaked my shirt as I stared at the supposedly kindly old librarian nobody thought to question.

Mrs. Marrow had stabbed me with a silver knife. The shock was instantaneous but fleeting as I tried to stagger back and get away from my attacker, the papers in my hands raining over us. I didn't get far before the woman sprayed me with a wolfbane aerosol.

Screams echoed in my ears as panic bloomed in my mind. My father had trained me to be a hunter. This wasn't going to end well for me.

My skin burned and sizzled, the stench making me retch. My wolf, in a murderous rage, forced herself to the surface.

I struggled against the pain, against the wolf trying to take over. Mrs. Marrow, the unassuming librarian, stared at me with cold eyes. In a calm, creepy, evil voice, she said, "Give in, Miss Summers. Give in."

I swallowed the sickness that wanted to rise, but the coppery tang told me blood was rushing into my mouth.

In a flash, everything lined into place, and I trembled at the realization that this woman had probably already told my father I was here, meaning Blackwood Creek was in far more danger than I realized. The people I wanted to protect were already in his line of sight.

My vision started going in and out as I staggered and fell to the ground, and I lost the fight against my wolf.

A howl tore through the air just as I blacked out.

## Chapter 28

# Ridge

Tori's scent was faint, but it was enough for me to follow her route from the manor. She hadn't taken a vehicle, so I followed her scent on foot. I wasn't in too big of a rush after our explosive argument. We both needed to cool down, but I was determined to convince her to stick around. We disagreed on who the suspect was, but that didn't mean we couldn't work through everything else. Our argument was the driving force to ensure we were good and would get to solid ground.

Tori's scent started to strengthen on the outskirts of the central part of town. She was nearby. I always became more rational when I scented her. It was new, and only since she came into town had I recognized what a difference it made. It helped me to understand the connection my aunt and uncle had shared and why my aunt was so broken by his loss.

A wolf's pained howl rang through the air, rupturing my musings as panic, fear, and dread lashed through me.

That howl belonged to my Tori.

Battling my inner wolf tooth and claw for control, I raced as hard and as fast as I could toward the direction of her pained howl. It was Tori, and whoever was making her howl like that wouldn't receive an ounce of mercy from me.

My blood pumped hard as my legs worked fast. The library came into sight. My wolf clawed and snarled to come out, insisting that he'd be the faster option. He was right. Wolves were faster, but as much as it pained me to hold him back, I couldn't shift in the middle of town.

Clawson came running from the town hall steps at the cry of a wolf in trouble.

“Ridge, what’s going on?”

I ignored him. I couldn’t waste a second that would get me to Tori sooner. The tunnel vision she evoked had me sailing through town in a blind panic. I always had control and kept a cool head during chaos, but this whole experience was forcing me out of my element.

Bursting into the library, I cringed at the scent of Tori’s blood. She hadn’t suffered a mere cut. The blood engulfed my senses and had my wolf frothing at the mouth for retribution.

Mrs. Marrow stood in the middle of the room with a manic smile. Shock lit into me at seeing the old woman with a fancy gun, and then she started firing. The smell of silver accompanying the sulfuric stench of the gun’s discharge had me dodging out of the way, but not before pain lanced through my shoulder as the bullet sliced through me.

Without any thought, my wolf emerged defiantly and in outrage as he charged the older woman and tackled her to the ground. Snarling, I bared my teeth in her face and swiped the gun out of her reach. The woman fought back, but without the weapon, she was no match against my large wolf. He was fighting out of fear for Tori.

Struggling against the wolf to not go for the librarian’s throat was a battle he didn’t understand. I needed the woman alive. If I didn’t, then yes, she would have been all his, but I’d be left with questions, and I needed answers.

My wolf overpowered me. Tori’s face was the only thing he could envision, and he forced our jaw to open wide as he went for her throat.

Clawson’s wolf slammed into us, nudging us to the side. I couldn’t hold back my snapping jaw from the other wolf. He had taken our right to the kill. Our right to avenge our mate.

The surprise attack had me snarling and off-balance, but Clawson didn’t back down. He hovered his impressive body over the woman, protecting her from me while I wrangled control of my wolf.

Several of Clawson’s deputies appeared inside the building. They must have heard the howl and followed us. They’d taken control of the scene, swiftly securing the area of the attack and shielding us shifters from being discovered by those who didn’t know about our kind.

Clawson quickly shifted back into his human form and barked orders to his men while restraining the old librarian.

I needed to get to Tori. Trusting Birch to keep the woman secure, I followed Tori’s scent, bolting toward the back of the building and rushing



into the records room. We howled in disbelief at the sight of Tori curled in on herself, motionless in her wolf form. Blood poured out of her from where a silver knife poked out of her stomach. Her fur was matted around the wound.

Quickly, I shifted back into human form. “Clawson, get a medical team in here now!” I screamed while fighting my wolf, who desperately tried to reemerge, but I couldn’t let him. I needed to help Tori, and I couldn’t do that as a wolf. If she died, however, then no man or wolf would stop us from killing the old bitch.

I stroked Tori’s face and kissed her. “Open your eyes, Tori. Open your eyes.”

Clawson came in. “Shit. Get that medical team here now!” His voice faded as he left the room.

“Please, baby, open your eyes. You need to shift back. They need to look at the wound.” I begged and pleaded for her, but she didn’t budge. Her breathing was shallow. Fear had my heart in its clutches.

My wolf growled and tried to shift. It was uncharacteristic of him to vie for control like this.

“Tori! Wake up, now. You need to shift, baby. Wake up!” Desperation laced my words, but she wasn’t responding.

Clawson and the shifter medics ran into the room, and they joined me in shouting at her to shift back.

My mind went off in a million different directions. She could die. My Tori could die. She was losing too much blood and had burns from what looked like wolfsbane.

Every fearful and hateful emotion I could muster shook me beyond my control. I couldn’t lose her. I wouldn’t be able to survive it.

Aunt Lucille was right. The best way to know if someone was your true mate was to know that you couldn’t live without them. Tori was that for me. I couldn’t live without her. I wouldn’t accept her death.

Burying my face into her furry neck, I pleaded. “Tori, shift now. I can’t go on without you. Please, little wolf, shift back for me. I need you.”

Clawson’s hand rested on my shoulder as I cried and pleaded for my mate to do what I asked. There was no getting through to her.

My wolf snarled and forced his way out. I fell away, trusting my infuriated wolf’s instincts, and shifted the fastest I ever had. I wasn’t fully wolf before the saddest and most desperate howl ripped from my lungs. It was a mated cry as I’d never heard before, let alone executed myself.

At once, Tori startled and responded to the desperate cry, and she cried out in pain herself. Her wolf was feral, and she didn't want to lose the control she had. She snapped at the medics and Clawson as she lay hurt and immobile. The wolf's panic-stricken eyes ate at me as I shifted back and stroked her head to calm her down.

"It's okay, Tori. It's okay. They're here to help you, little wolf. You need to shift now. Please, shift for me so we can take care of you. They can't fix you in wolf form. Please shift."

Tori licked at my hand, her eyes regarded me, and a little huff escaped her muzzle. Then, slowly, she shifted back into human form. Her tears and cries as she turned made me want to gut the librarian with my claws and fangs until nothing was left.

"Ridge?"

"That's it, baby. You're doing great. We'll get you to the hospital, and everything will be all right."

Her breathing was shallow as she panted.

"Ridge, it's the librarian. I tried—"

"Shh, baby. We know. We have her in custody. Don't worry about anything, okay? Let's get you fixed up and resting."

The medic handed me a medical gown from his pack, and I covered Tori in it as Birch and the other medic brought in the gurney.

The knife couldn't be taken out of her yet, which had me gritting my teeth as she continued to whimper. The human medic held the blade in place so it wouldn't cause more damage as I lifted my little wolf and placed her on the gurney. I didn't want to let her out of my arms. She closed her eyes and rested as best she could.

Once she was settled, the medic started prepping her for transport.

Clawson gave me a pair of spare pants, and I tugged them on without taking my eyes off Tori. Instantly, her own eyes launched open as she frantically scanned the room.

"Ridge?" That one word was filled with fear.

"Here, baby. I'm right here." I moved around the medic, grabbed her hand, and our eyes connected. She calmed down and tightened her hold on my hand. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm here with you. Don't worry, just relax as best as you can. They're getting you ready to transport you to the hospital."

She nodded and rubbed her cheek against my hand. My heart fisted in my

chest. We weren't out of the woods yet.

"Okay, let's get her out of here," the shifter medic said.

They started moving her, but she wouldn't let go of my hand, and I wouldn't do anything she didn't want me to do. I squeezed her hand tight as we shuffled through the library. All the deputies looked at her with concern, then shifted their anger toward Mrs. Marrow, who sat handcuffed in a chair, smiling calmly at Tori's battered body.

Working to control my rage, I thought about Tori's impact on the men and women around us. She had no idea of the impression she'd already made on the people of this town. There were others who wanted her here, not just me.

The three of us ran her gurney toward the ambulance as I held her hand, not sparing a glance at the onlookers or responding to any of the concerned shouts.

We settled into the ambulance, and the shifter medic didn't ask me to move. He worked around me as I clung to her. There was nothing more reassuring and helpful for a wounded wolf than the presence of their mate. This medic knew that, so he didn't force me away from her. My scent and touch were the only things keeping her calm and stopping her from lashing out at what she might perceive as potential threats.

A mate was a godsend during times like these. We all knew that.

The driver rushed to the hospital with the lights and siren blaring. Nothing would stop us from getting her the help she needed.

It didn't take long before she lost consciousness again. I struggled with the sight, but the medic assured me that her vitals were good. "Don't worry, Mayor, she's a fighter. She'll get through this."

I nodded, my gaze never wavering from her face. In my peripheral vision, I caught the medic's determined face.

I admired his dedication and appreciated what he was doing for me. Being a shifter himself, he knew that two lives were on the line, not just one. If she was lost, so was I. That was the way of mates.

The ambulance stopped at the Blackwood Creek emergency room. The doors blasted open as an army of doctors and nurses rushed to grab the gurney and speed Tori straight into surgery.

The whole medical team working on Tori were all shifters or people who knew about our kind. They knew my staying was the safest and best bet for her to recover and not shift in the middle of surgery because she felt

threatened or needed to look for me. No one told me to leave.

A nurse outfitted me with scrubs, a mask, and gloves, and positioned me at Tori's head. I stroked her face so she could scent me and know I was there.

They sedated her and got to work extracting the silver knife. One of the nurses had to handle the knife, as the doctor was a shifter; it would have burned him had he tried. As soon as the blade cleared her body, I'd never seen anyone work so diligently at flushing out the wound and stitching it up from the inside out.

"Mayor, she has nicks against her intestines and stomach," the doctor said. "I'm stitching that up now, and we will clean the area of any leakage from the open wounds."

The doctor's words were soothing, but I couldn't hold in the rumbling growls. Mentally, I was aware of what he was doing, but my wolf instincts could only see danger to my mate.

Nodding, I stared at my beautiful wolf and watched as the oxygen mask gave her the air she needed. I wondered what was going on in that mind of hers, because her eyes were sporadically dashing around underneath her lids.

"Clamps."

"Suction."

"Needle."

Words were tossed around, but I wasn't fully paying attention. The doctor and nurses were a well-oiled machine as they went about saving my mate's life. I'd never be able to thank them enough.

My life was in their hands, and they treated it with such care, I was humbled.

I stroked Tori's face and hair, careful to avoid the areas of her face that had been burned by the wolfsbane. I didn't know if she could hear me, but it didn't stop me from talking to her.

"You're so strong, my little wolf. You're gonna make it through this, and we'll be back to arguing and making up in no time, you hear me? You're a survivor. The strongest person I've ever met."

"Start the blood infusion," the doctor said.

I glanced up to see an IV stand with two bags of blood pouring in the life-giving fluids my mate desperately needed.

After a couple of moments, Tori's pale, grayish tone started to pink up, and she didn't look so close to death's door anymore.

That had my wolf lessening his grip and easing down a bit.

The doctor finished stitching her up, and a nurse began carefully cleaning the wounds on her face, placing some cooling gel over the worst of the burns. Once the life-threatening wounds had been dealt with, they all stopped and studied the machines as her blood pressure slowly rose and her heart rate balanced out. The atmosphere in the room relaxed as the medical staff celebrated.

“Mayor, your fiancée is stable,” the doctor said. “We need to let the infusion do its job and let her recuperate.”

My body eased as relief whooshed out of me. I wouldn’t wholly celebrate until Tori’s eyes were open and I could watch her be the stubborn, feisty, sexy woman she was. But I’d take this small victory.

“Okay,” the doctor said. “Let me wash up, and I’ll look at that shoulder while she’s getting the infusion.”

I glanced down at my shoulder, forgetting I’d been shot. I was about to decline when the doctor interrupted me and explained that Tori wouldn’t be going anywhere for the time being and he could look at it here. Knowing I wouldn’t have to leave her side calmed me enough to allow it.

“Thank you, Doctor, and all you nurses. You have no idea what you just did for me.”

Their eyes crinkled at the corners, their smiles hidden behind their surgical masks.

The doctor chuckled. “I think we have an idea.” I appreciated that he headed to the adjoining room to clean himself up. I hated seeing Tori’s blood on his hands and clothes. It reminded me of the heart-stopping moment when I’d first caught sight of her on the library floor.

Several hours later, my shoulder was patched up and I still hadn’t left Tori’s side. She’d been unconscious and resting the whole time, but I refused to leave. Nobody could convince me otherwise. I left once to use the restroom, but other than that, my ass was firmly in the chair beside her bed. With her hand securely held in mine, I kept a close watch. I felt the weight of responsibility settle heavily on my shoulders. Something had happened to her once under my watch. I was determined it wouldn’t happen again.

My responsibility to keep this town safe had flooded in and out of my mind for the last couple of hours. The townsfolk were bound to be afraid and confused, especially hearing wolves in the middle of the day, gunshots, and who knew what else at this point. I was the mayor. It was my job to ease their fears.

I also needed to find out why the hell Tori had been harmed like this. I wondered whether I'd injured Mrs. Marrow when my wolf tackled her and tried to get my head around the whole situation. What the fuck had gone down in that library? Where did that meek little old lady get that strange-looking gun that fired silver, and why was she using it in the first place? It was like a twisted game of Clue.

Obviously, there was more to the woman than we knew. I hated that our due diligence hadn't been enough. Hated that my mate had almost been killed because of it.

*Mate. My mate.* That was the primary stunner that had my mind working overtime. Gazing down at this most beautiful creature had my heart doing the race and quake it had been doing since I first saw her. Now it was clear that this was the first sign I had met my mate and, I thought with a wry grin, my match.

Dread hit hard when I realized I'd almost lost my mate when I only just found her. If I hadn't gotten to her in time, she'd be gone. My soul cried out at the thought of losing her, at those memories of her prone in her wolf form, a knife sticking out of her as blood pooled around her. It had been too fucking close.

All I could do was beat myself up. I should've followed directly after her when she stormed out of the house. Just because we'd argued didn't mean she should have left me in such a huff. If we hadn't fought, she wouldn't have had that brush with death because she wouldn't have stormed out. Again, if I'd followed her, she wouldn't have been alone. I could've protected her.

Lifting her palm, I kissed her hand before laying it against my cheek. I inhaled deeply. Her scent calmed me like nothing else could. I was in full animal-instinct mode and figured this reaction was common, especially where Tori was concerned.

A couple of knocks came from the doorframe, and I lifted my head. Clawson stood there, his sheriff's hat in his hands as he studied Tori.

"How's she doing?" He stepped into the room when I nodded for him to come in. Never move toward a wounded mate without the mate's permission. Not unless you wanted a fight on your hands.

"She's a fighter. She'll be up and around telling me what's what soon enough."

Clawson chuckled and walked slowly to the end of the bed. "Yeah, she's

a fighter. It turns out she was onto the real murderer.”

My head snapped to Clawson. “What?”

“Mrs. Marrow is a little roughed up, but as she was detained, she said enough to implicate herself as the one who killed Phil. She’s not outright confessing and is obviously tight-lipped about why she attacked Tori and her motives for killing my deputy, but we’ll get her to talk eventually. We’re going to get to the bottom of this. I promise you.”

Clawson eyed me with determination, and I believed him.

My mind was working in circles, but I couldn’t gather the strength to go anywhere with it. I glanced back at Tori and watched over her.

“I almost lost her today. Man, I don’t know what I’d do if I lost her. I’d go mad. I’d follow her.”

Clawson’s heavy exhale thundered in the room.

“Seeing her the way we found her, it’s burned into my skull. I won’t ever be able to unsee that. It’s the nightmare of all nightmares.”

“You got to her in time, and she is safe now. You’re watching over her. That’s your job right now. Don’t worry about the town’s rumor mill or any of the bullshit going down. We’ve got everything covered. Focus on being with your fiancée while she recovers. There’ll be plenty of time to work everything else out.”

I thanked him and returned to giving Tori my undivided attention. Right now, I couldn’t worry about the town or my mayoral or alpha duties. My mate was hurt, and I’d spend every second of my time, every ounce of my energy with her until she was well enough to kick me out of this room.

And let’s face it, she would kick me out once she was out of the woods. I adored that about her. She was a fiercely independent and strong individual. She was born to be a luna of the highest caliber.

A nurse came in an hour later and told me several visitors were here to check in on Tori.

I stroked her cheek. “You hear that, baby? I told you, you’re loved here.”

The nurse said that Diana and Margo, along with Lola Kipling, the Ashworths, the Magpies, and several other patrons from the Moonlight Café were in the waiting room. She added that they wouldn’t leave until they were assured she was okay, but the hospital couldn’t give out that information.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Please let them know she’s recovering, and as soon as she can see visitors, I’ll let them know.”

“Will do, Mayor.”

The nurse started to leave the room when I thought for a second about it. “Actually, Nurse, can you please bring Diana and Margo Bogford here? They’re the closest Tori has to family, and she’d appreciate hearing their voices.”

To be fair, I could use Diana as well. Her maternal manner would be nice and help settle Tori and me. She’d always been close to me, more so after my parents died, so she should also be a part of this. She was family to both of us.

The two women quietly entered the room, holding back their tears as they trailed their gazes over all the tubes and machines Tori was hooked up to.

Margo stepped closer to Tori on the other side of the bed, hesitating to reach out and touch her.

“It’s okay, Margo,” I said. “You can touch her.”

A tear dripped from her cheek as she grabbed Tori’s hand. Diana stood beside me and wrapped her arm around my shoulder, aware of the bandages. I slumped against her and let her take some of the heaviness I’d been holding.

“Oh, Tori, you’re going to be fine,” Margo said. “I know it. You’re the toughest chick I know. You’ll be up and around before you know it, and we’ll plan the sickest wedding. I can’t wait to see what kind of wedding dress you’ll get. You’re going to be so beautiful.”

My lips turned up in a weak smile.

Margo leaned down and kissed Tori’s forehead. “You’re a fighter, my friend.”

My eyes welled up, but I didn’t let any tears fall, even though now would have been a good time to do it. I was safe with these women, and no one would judge me for losing it.

Diana squeezed my shoulders. “Don’t worry about Tori, Ridge. She’s a particularly strong wolf. She’ll heal quickly.”

“You can’t know that. She was stabbed with silver and sprayed with wolfsbane.” My voice broke. “That’s a lot to recover from.”

Both women gasped. Margo sobbed and Diana finally let some tears spill over her lids.

“Even so, she’ll soon be up and around, being her sassy self. It’s a delay, that’s all.” Diana sniffled. “It’s just a delay. Our girl is going to be up before you know it.”

The Bogfords sat with me and Tori for another hour before they left. The nurse understood that I wouldn’t be going anywhere and didn’t even try to



get me to leave. Both women kissed Tori and hugged me, telling me they'd be by in the morning to check in on her.

The hospital settled down and quieted as people went home and shifts changed. There were a couple of law enforcement bodies around to keep an eye on things, and the hospital security had also doubled. I appreciated the care everyone was taking to ensure Tori's safety.

Startled, I jumped up from my seat when Audrey stepped in. I glanced at the clock. It was close to ten at night. Visiting hours were over, and I wondered how she'd gotten in there. Then again, it was Audrey Greenthorne. When had rules ever applied to a Greenthorne?

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I wanted to see how she was doing." Audrey took Tori in, her face softening with something that looked like sadness. I couldn't be sure, though. "She's going to be okay, right? Were the doctors able to repair the damage?"

Annoyance edged my thoughts. Audrey and I weren't on the best of terms. Her parents were mostly at fault for that, but it still didn't mean I'd lessen my resolve or lower my guard with her.

"Do you really care about her recovery, or are you trying to impress someone in town by looking altruistic?" I couldn't help but let the question come out with a bit of a bite. I had no patience to deal with her games.

Rolling her eyes, she stepped further into the room. "For your information, I decided that I actually like Tori and want her to recover fully."

"Why?"

"If you must know...I'd like to try to become her friend. I think she'd make a decent friend because the rest of my friends are mostly those my parents chose for me. I don't even like most of them, and I tolerate the others."

I couldn't believe she'd admitted to any of that, even though it was clear what her parents had been doing to her all her life.

"Tired doesn't even describe how over I am with my parents' controlling nature," she continued. "Nothing in my life is mine. Not one thing. Not a friend, not a lover...nothing. They've orchestrated everything." A spark of mischief lit up her eyes as she gazed down at Tori, sleeping. "It'd be fun to have a fiery wolf like Tori around. I'm sure that'd piss them off."

It astounded me that I could burst into laughter at a time like this, but I did. Imagining the Greenthornes dealing with Tori being Audrey's friend was entertaining. Tori would befriend Audrey to rub that in to the Greenthornes,

and she'd relish every second.

Audrey smiled, then turned serious. "Tori will be okay. I know it. The whole town knows it. She'll return to her normal feisty self in no time, and I look forward to causing some chaos with her."

I nodded at Audrey. "Thanks, Audrey."

She stepped toward the door but turned around at the last second. "Please let me know if you or Tori need anything."

It was interesting being on the receiving end of Audrey's care. I was well-aware that it was all Tori's doing. She made allies out of the most interesting people.

Just as Audrey made to step out of the room, my little wolf spoke.

## Chapter 29

# Tori

“You know...” My voice was a hoarse, scratchy croak. “I’ll be the best damn friend you ever had. To piss your parents off, I’d probably do too good of a job, and you’ll fall in love with me madly.”

Hearing Audrey say she wanted to be my friend was a turn of events that I would never have bet on. This town never ceased to surprise me.

Before I could get anything else out, Ridge’s lips covered mine in such a passionate kiss that I was lost to the emotions it invoked in me. The pain even vanished. His emotions were tied into our kiss, and I wanted to weep with what they stirred within me.

After an inappropriately long kiss in front of Audrey, Ridge lifted his head, gazed into my eyes, and framed my face with his hands. “You had me worried sick. You can’t ever leave me again. Not in any way, because I’ll lose my mind, you understand? I need you.” Desperately, he repeated himself. “I need you, Tori.”

His lips descended again and kissed me with every piece of him, and I couldn’t help but crave more. I couldn’t get enough of his kisses. I wanted more from him. He made me believe I was cherished and wanted, that he was lost without me. I could die in the heady intensity.

A feminine groan interrupted us, forcing us to stop when we both remembered there was someone else in the room.

“I’m going to give you two lovebirds some space,” Audrey said. “I’m glad you didn’t die.”

Burying my head into Ridge’s neck so she didn’t catch me blushing, I chuckled at the blatant statement. With my nose so close to his pulse, I inhaled his heady scent.

“I’ll guard the door so you guys can have some alone time. It’s an act of goodwill for starting this unlikely friendship.” Audrey winked at me and left the room, shutting the door.

I chuckled, coughing at the pain in my chest, and then Ridge was holding me. His lips stole my breath while his hands roamed over my body, cautious of my wounds. His tongue sought mine, and we ravished each other’s mouths as a reminder that I was alive.

My stab wound ached, but the burns from the wolfsbane were almost completely gone. My skin was itchy, which only proved that it was healing.

“You scared me.”

Kiss.

“Don’t do that to me again.”

Kiss.

“I can’t lose you.”

Kiss.

His worried whispers and heated caresses made me ache for him, and the taste of his kisses made me so glad to have him in my arms. I could smell him and touch him when I wanted. My hands stroked down his shoulders, and I grasped onto his biceps. My body was weak, and I was exhausted, but my pussy came alive for him as I began to overheat.

The lust and attraction shared between us lit up and ignited so quickly that nothing would keep it at bay. The frightening ordeal only strengthened that need between us.

His scent got muskier, and my wolf whimpered for more. Regardless of how much I caressed and moaned, Ridge’s hands never strayed where I wanted them, needed them. They stayed on my face and wrapped around my neck. Only his mouth plundered me, the way my body burned for him to do.

It didn’t help that his emotional confessions made me crave more from him, but as my mind worked out what had happened, fear made my happy moment disintegrate instantly.

My wolf hissed at the fire dampening within us. She needed Ridge as acutely as I did, but his safety was more important to me.

Ridge slowly lifted his head, nuzzling his nose against mine. “What is it? Are you hurting? Do you need some painkillers?”

His sensitivity to my physical and emotional cues was overwhelming and hard to ignore. I had to warn him about the hunters and what was coming. It pained me that we couldn’t enjoy this moment for what it was, a reconnection

after such an ordeal.

We worked to catch our breaths, and I lifted my hand and brushed my fingers through his hair. His long lashes fluttered closed as he took in my caress. He slowly opened them to look at me, and I gasped at what looked back at me—devotion as I'd never seen before. His need for me was written all over his face, weakening me. My barriers were crumbling within his gaze. If I wasn't careful, it wouldn't be long before there wouldn't be anything I wouldn't do for him. That included leaving. No matter how much risk it'd put us in, I was close to the breaking point of no return. I'd never be able to run from him. The realization was daunting.

Clearing my throat, I moved to get more comfortable and winced at the pain in my stomach.

“What do you need?” Ridge was seconds away from reaching for the call button.

I waved off his concern, grabbed hold of his hand, and watched him as he sat on the side of the bed, touching me wherever he could. Settling in, I kept my gaze on him and calmed my heart because the beeping from the machine was a little embarrassing, though Ridge didn't seem to notice it. His attention was focused on me and only me. That was quite the power to hold.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I went looking for you after our argument.” His face twisted at the mention of our fight, which I figured we had to discuss at some point, but now wasn't the time. “When I heard your wolf howl, I ran into the library and subdued Mrs. Marrow until Clawson showed up, then I went looking for you. You were...” He got choked up and coughed. “You were on the floor, a silver knife sticking out of your stomach. We were able to get you here in time. Thank the moon for that, but you'd lost a lot of blood, and we struggled to get your wolf to turn back so we could treat you.”

Leaning down, he kissed the top of my head, the side of it, then my cheeks. He kissed me several times wherever his lips could reach while playing with my fingers. I was getting spoiled by his affections, and I didn't want them to stop.

Satisfied he got enough touches and kisses in that time, he continued. “Clawson found out that Mrs. Marrow killed Deputy Hill, but we still don't know why. She's lived here for so long, been such a big part of the community, that she was innocent in our eyes. Honestly, though, I haven't given it much thought because you've been the only thing I've been able to

think about since I found you. Everything else is a blur, but we have time to work it out. You just need to rest, and we'll get you home as soon as the doctors release you. Then we can figure out the whys of it all. I'm relieved she can't get to you now."

I nuzzled into Ridge's side. I was in a lot of pain, and I wanted to hold onto this comfort as long as possible.

Softly, I told Ridge about my talk with Lola that morning and what we'd discussed. He listened patiently, his thumb stroking the hand he was holding against my cheek that his other arm rested on the pillow. His body hovered over me in a protective stance. I didn't think he knew he was doing it, but I appreciated the gesture.

"Mrs. Marrow must've taken the claw bone knife from Lola's place when she helped her move in. When I spoke with Lola, she mentioned that the librarian helped her move in and unpack some boxes. It would've been easy to take it then, or at least notice that she had it and then go back to retrieve it." I paused. "Mrs. Marrow must've killed Deputy Hill during the blackout. That would have been the only way she could've gotten the drop on him. I mean, she wasn't the largest woman. She could have done to him what she did to me. I never saw her coming."

Ridge stiffened, but he calmed down and continued playing with my hair as he rested his cheek on my head.

Silence fell over us as I luxuriated in Ridge's touch and attention, giving him time to mull over what I had told him before he spoke again.

"With what I witnessed, I don't doubt it, not at all. It would help to know why, though. I don't understand the motive, but Mrs. Marrow as the killer is what it all seems to be. I don't doubt that for a second. I still want to get my hands on her. My wolf and I want to handle this as an alpha, not a mayor."

His confusion had me closing my eyes, and my gut clenched. He wanted shifter justice, and I ached for him. Because I was now seeing it all with open eyes, and the shifter way wasn't wrong. It was different, but his need to make this town a fair community made me admire him all the more. He didn't want to be driven by basic animal instincts, which, I had to admit, weren't wrong at times. They were just and instinctual but not cruel. Not like how the hunters tortured and tormented. The so-called human way was more barbaric and brutal.

Memories of my training with my father haunted me, all the more so now that I'd endured what I did. I still didn't want Ridge to know everything, but

I'd let him in enough so he could learn what I could teach him about the hunters and why it wasn't safe here after all the hard work he had done.

How much had I ruined that for him?

Cupping his cheek in my palm, I held him close. "I know why. Deputy Hill knew about shifters and worked with us, protected us. He must've stumbled upon the fact that Mrs. Marrow had been working as a mole in Blackwood Creek and feeding information to a group of hunters."

Stiffening in my hold, Ridge lifted his head and looked me in the eyes. "How do you know this?"

"When I was in the library, I recognized the name of a top hunter who's been paying Mrs. Marrow. I think she's been feeding him information about the shifters here. It's the only thing that makes sense why this hunter would be paying her.

"I've been trying to understand why the hunters have yet to attack. This place would be a major boon for them, especially since they had a mole on the inside, but I'm positive they're biding their time for when the moment is right to strike."

Ridge's brows furrowed, his forehead wrinkling as he put on his thinking face. The idea of a mole in his town was killing him, I could tell. That he hadn't been able to stop it and I'd gotten hurt was not something he'd forgive himself for. This man really was too good for me in every sense.

Biting my bottom lip, I hated what I had to say next, but I kept his gaze because I couldn't stop looking at him. His worry and care had me tied up in knots. He stayed with me every step of the way, and I could look him in the eye for what I had to tell him next.

"Ridge, I think it's time for me to leave Blackwood Creek. Mrs. Marrow made it sound like she told the hunters I was here, and they want me. I could lead them away from here. Lead them away from you."

Ridge stood so suddenly, his chair screeched. "Why are they after you specifically?" His voice was soft and gentle. He must've sensed I was uneasy.

I didn't want to tell him about my family. I didn't want him to know I had trained to become a hunter for a year before I turned. I didn't want him to know any of the twisted things I'd been taught how to do. If he looked at me differently than how he did now, I wouldn't be able to handle it. I'd rather get caught and die than have him know these things about me. If I had to witness his disgust, I'd never be the same.

“Could I have some water or something to eat?” I asked. “If we’re going to stay up and come up with a plan for how we’re to protect Blackwood Creek, I’m going to need some sustenance.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, baby, of course. I’ll be right back.” He kissed my head and rushed out of the room.

*Baby.* I smiled at the endearment. I could get used to hearing that from him.

Laying my head back against the pillow, I took several deep breaths. I tried not to get worked up over the idea of my father and the other hunters knowing where I was. If I let that panic take over, who was to say it wouldn’t induce another feral awakening? I needed to stay calm. My head needed to be in the game so I could figure out how to keep the hunters away from Blackwood Creek. Away from Ridge.

After today, there was no more denying it or lying to myself. I was falling hard for him. I’d already fallen, and if I’d walked on the scene he’d walked in with me, I’d be lost. The idea of losing him had my heart near shattering. I’d die along with him, I was sure of it. I couldn’t explain it, but the feeling was there, gripping me.

Waiting wasn’t my best virtue, and it was worse when Ridge wasn’t within arm’s reach. For the first time, I was needy and allowed myself to roll with emotion. Today had been too much of a close call. I’d allow myself to take what I needed, and right now, I needed Ridge. I wouldn’t deny myself. After tonight and in the light of a new day, it would probably be different, but I wouldn’t think about that for now. I wanted him back here with me. I wanted him to hold me, kiss me, take care of me. I needed to be soothed because my wolf and I were in this limbo of chaos, and Ridge was our center. He grounded us.

A rough grunt and a soft thunk hitting the wall outside of my room had me lifting my shoulders off the bed. There was a scream from a woman, but it died off quickly.

As my nerves awakened, my heart monitor went wild, sounding like a siren beeping into the room.

Wiggling to the side of the bed, I tried to get off the bed. The door opened, and a man stepped inside. A man who wasn’t Ridge.

All my blood flowed into my face and my heart accelerated to the max. Fear punched me in the gut as I tried to make sense of who I was seeing.

“Kyle.”



I exhaled at the sight of my brother dressed in the whole hunter get-up, weapons strapped all over his body. There was blood on his arm, but I could see no open wounds.

His body stiffened and he locked his jaw as he searched me over. A flash of worry sparked in his eyes as he looked at the wound in my side and all the monitors, but his ever-present mask of neutrality locked back into place. His enclosed persona took hold as fast as it had dropped when he first saw me.

He was where I had learned it from. Don't talk, never share. What was private was private, at least with strangers, not with us. That had all changed, and it hurt. I didn't know this man anymore. He was hard and calculating. He wasn't my protector, my best friend, my big brother anymore.

"What are you doing?" I whispered angrily. My heart monitors jumped all over the place, and I cursed them. Before, it was embarrassing. Now, it was life-threatening.

Kyle stared at me, then his eyes darted to the hall. He worked his jaw like he always did when trying to work something out.

The pause gave me enough time for my senses to re-engage. I scented Ridge's blood on my brother's arm.

The heart monitor went berserk. "Please, I beg you, don't do this. Please don't do this." I fought to get out of the bed, but the pain forced me back.

My brother stepped forward, fear lancing his eyes before the shield slipped back into place. "Keep quiet." Popping his head outside the door, he said, "It's just an injured human in here. We have enough for the extraction. Load 'em up."

*No. No. No.* They couldn't take him. They had Ridge. They couldn't take him.

As I struggled, my stitches split open. Blood seeped through the gauze and gown. Kyle stepped further into the room and pushed me back onto the bed.

"Stop it. Be quiet, or they'll hear you. You were lucky I was the one who intercepted the old woman's message about you being in this town. Dad doesn't know you're here." He glared down at me. "You're a monster. I should be killing you right now, but I can't. Once upon a time, you were my little sister, and I loved you."

Loved, not love. It hurt to hear it, even though I'd known all along. All this time, I'd hoped he'd still love me, but now that was done.

I struggled to sit up again, but he pushed me back down and covered my

mouth with his hand.

“I’m warning you, don’t come after us or the shifters we’re taking. Keep quiet, keep your head down, and run from this place as soon as possible.” His jaw ticked. “The next time I see you, I’ll have no choice. I’ll have to bring you in.”

Swiping at his arms, I tried to push him, tried to argue. My body was too weak and wouldn’t cooperate.

I needed to get to Ridge because there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that they weren’t taking him.

“Stop it, Tori.” He didn’t break a sweat as he manhandled me, and then he injected something into my neck.

I swiveled my head and noticed it was the hunters’ sedative for shifters. Panic overwhelmed me. I would be out immediately.

Glaring at my brother, I vowed retribution.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, turning away.

Screaming every foul word I could imagine, I spewed rage at him with my eyes as the sedative trapped my vocals.

Never before had I hated my brother. We were only products of our environment. But taking Ridge from me was an act of war I couldn’t walk away from. I was going to do absolutely everything I could to get Ridge Blackwood back if it was the last thing I did.

My heart pulsed with fiery anger, and then everything went black.

## Chapter 30

# Tori

I woke up groggy, my nose itching and a foggy haze at the edges of my vision. My hands seemed to swim through the astringent odor of antiseptic as I raised them to my face. The air was thick like molasses, and movement was slow and difficult.

Carefully, because everything at the moment was hard, I used the heel of my hand to remove the grit from my eyes. The incessant beeping of monitors forced my eyes to open because I wanted to get rid of the irritating noise in any way I could. I managed to turn my head to look at the various machines.

A bank of monitors stood to my right. I couldn't tell which one was beeping, but oh, how I wanted it to stop. Cables coiled across the bed and beneath the sheets, linking me to the beeping sound I couldn't escape. Apart from that, the sterile room was devoid of anyone other than me, at least from what I could see through the darkness.

Thank goodness for my wolf sight. The thought took me by surprise. I'd never considered my shifter abilities an asset before I arrived in Blackwood Creek, but as I lay here in the dark, being able to see as if the light was switched on, I couldn't help but be grateful. In the glow from the equipment to the side of me, a glint of something caught my eye, and I tried to turn my head more fully toward it. Red and blue lights flashed behind the blinds covering the window. With the amount of color sneaking in, there had to be a trail of emergency response vehicles outside. If the blinds were open, the room would have lit as if a Christmas tree with flickering lights stood next to my bed.

When I lifted and moved my head, I felt like there were weights strapped to my forehead and the back of my scalp. I stopped trying and lay back. The

beginnings of panic stirred deep in my gut. Why was I in the hospital? I closed my eyes again and tried to piece the puzzle together of what the hell was going on and why I felt like I was missing something important.

Fumbling one hand—the other didn't move so well—across my body and on the mattress on either side of me, I located the controls for the bed and held the button, raising the head of the bed to a more upright position. I was still disoriented, my memory still fuzzy. What I did remember didn't add up to the condition I found myself in.

Mrs. Marrow, the librarian, had stabbed me, but that didn't explain why the doctors had drugged me so deeply. I knew being stabbed with silver significantly slowed my shifter healing—another ability to be grateful for—but I wouldn't have thought my injuries warranted such enforced rest.

As my wolf began to wake, her apprehension became mine, rolling in the pit of my belly. Her disorientation and fear mounted as she struggled to regain full consciousness. Up until recently, I'd fought against my wolf, convinced she was a monster, but we'd managed to come to a sort of truce. Hopefully, the tentative truce would be enough to convince her to listen to me, and I could control her escalating panic and keep her from forcing me to shift.

I sniffed the air. Through the pungent cleanliness, the stale aroma of my brother's scent slammed into me.

Adrenaline flooded my system, and I struggled to sit upright and crawl out of bed. They'd found me. Here. In Blackwood Creek.

I had to get out of here and warn Ridge. He wasn't safe. Hell, nobody in town was safe. This was all my fault. I'd brought them here.

Then, all at once, memories of the past day's events rushed through me. But I wasn't certain I could trust my own memories. There were too many holes, too many things that didn't make sense. And I remembered very little of Kyle's visit.

What I did know was that Kyle had been in this room with me, and I was weakened when he'd found me. I was still here, still alive, when he'd had a perfect chance to change that. Instead, he'd warned me away.

The biggest stumper of the whole ordeal was: if he'd traced me here, why warn me off? Why hadn't he captured me and dragged me back to our father when he'd had the chance? Was it the thrill of the chase or some new, twisted hunter technique? A fact-finding exercise, maybe. Scare me, then let me go and see where I run—who I run to—before apprehending me *and* anyone

assisting me.

I kicked at the blankets tangled around my legs, clenching my jaw to avoid yelping at the sharp, shooting pain in my stomach. The stitches from my stab wound throbbed. That fucking psychotic librarian with her wolfsbane, silver knife, and bullets—a veritable arsenal against shifters—apparently had ties to my father.

When I finally managed to lower my feet to the ground, the cold tile floor sent little shockwaves of shivers through me. Fortunately, though, the cold chased away some of the drug-induced fog, making me more alert. Using the bed as an anchor, I stood on leaden legs and tried to make my way through the thick, gelatinous feeling induced by the sedative Kyle had given me. Because I had no way of knowing how long I'd been unconscious, I could only hope he hadn't had too much of a head start. I needed to get to Ridge before my father got to him.

My father preferred to take his work home, avoiding setting up shop outside his compound whenever possible. Solitude was essential to his work. He didn't want anyone muscling their way into his operation; he wanted complete control of his prisoners and needed the shifters to be incapacitated before they were brought to his workshop, where he could work undisturbed and unchecked.

Thinking of my father made my blood run cold. He might be evil, but he wasn't stupid. No, he was a tactician—he'd never send just one hunter into a situation, and if his in-town spy had given him accurate information about Blackwood Creek and its citizens, there was no way in hell he'd have sent Kyle into a shifter town alone. I may have only seen Kyle, but there would be other hunters here. They might still be here, and no one would know.

In a sudden frenzy to get out, I ripped off all the patches, tubes, and wires that attached me to the monitors. I ignored the shrill alarm that squealed loud enough to do some damage to my ears. I smacked the power button, and the racket died down. Hopefully, I'd gotten to it before the noise prompted any medical personnel to come check up on me.

Wearing nothing more than the hospital gown I'd woken in, I scrambled out of the room, using furniture and arm rails for support as I hobbled and struggled to the exit. I didn't make it four full steps out of the room before a deputy standing beside the door called out. A nurse looked up from the nursing station, her eyes wide with alarm as she rushed around her counter and demanded that I get back into bed. The deputy joined her, and they tried

to manhandle me back to the room. His fingers curled around my biceps, and the nurse moved to stand between me and the way out as I pulled and used my body weight to try to break free.

I could hear them speaking, but the pounding in my skull and the foggy haze in my brain made it impossible to make out the words. The bright lights in the hall exacerbated the throbbing pain in my head, and I had to narrow my eyes at the deputy and the nurse.

My wolf growled inside me, but due to the wolfsbane, silver, and drugs, she was incapable of building enough strength to take over. The last thing I needed was her running free in the hospital. I sure as fuck wasn't strong enough to handle her right now.

I scanned the hospital corridors for the exit and tugged free of the deputy's firm hold. With the sudden freedom and the inertia, I almost tripped on a gurney before the nurse caught me.

"Please, miss, you need to get back into bed. You're injured."

No shit. I'd been stabbed. But that didn't matter when the real danger was here. And I wasn't the only one in danger.

I shook my head. I had to get to Ridge, had to warn him.

It took a few seconds for me to get a good grasp of my surroundings. The ER was destroyed. I blinked several times, trying to clear my mind. What I was seeing couldn't be right. The once-gleaming floors were now marred by scuff marks. Torn curtains hung haphazardly from their rails. A stethoscope left abandoned on an examination table beside a crumpled medical chart showed how quickly the attack had occurred.

Shards of shattered glass and broken equipment lay scattered in pieces. Antiseptic pooled on the floor, and my nose twitched and burned from the scent. Half the beds in the small ER had been tipped over, every drawer and cupboard ransacked, their contents left strewn across counters and floors.

A sheriff's deputy worked with the nurses to restore order to the chaos. People were clearly terrified. In one corner, a woman tried to comfort her traumatized child.

I silently fumed at my brother's callousness. Children had no place in this fight. No one in Blackwood Creek did. The only mindless monsters I could see here, in what was left of the ER, were the hunters.

I worked hard to get my head on straight and piece together everything I knew. Kyle, a top hunter, had brought a team with him. They'd ransacked the place like it was nothing, as if they weren't in a town of heavy-hitting shifters

who were capable of doing them severe damage, and humans who might get hurt in the crossfire.

I was missing something. Why would Kyle be here, in the same room as me, then leave? The hunters had been chasing me for four years. Why not grab me when he had the chance? Adrenaline flooded my system, burning off a little more of the drug-induced haze as I remembered Kyle being in my room. Just before he'd knocked me out, I'd scented...

Blood. Ridge's blood.

Now that I was in the hallway, the smell flooded my senses. Had Kyle hurt Ridge? Had he taken him? No...no, Ridge had to be nearby. After all, why would Kyle leave me and take Ridge? It didn't make any sense.

Fear overtook my rationality, and my wolf frothed to gain control and tear this place apart until she found him. I had an inexplicable need for him. It went right to my very soul, and there'd be no convincing me or my wolf otherwise.

I shrugged away from everyone who grasped at me or held me, and then I limped as fast as possible—which wasn't fast at all—out of the hospital, using the walls to support myself. Need pushed me, drove me forward. I had to find Ridge. I was resolute, and nothing would sway me or my wolf. We were determined to keep going.

Before I came to Blackwood Creek and met my fake fiancé, there had been no "we" because my wolf and I didn't work together. She was the stuff of nightmares, a creature to be avoided. But thanks to Ridge, I was learning everything was not as black and white as I'd been taught. I wasn't sure my wolf and I would ever be besties and painting each other's nails—claws?—anytime soon, but thanks to this man, I was learning that maybe my wolf wasn't something to be afraid of and that we could co-exist.

I choked back a sob. Ridge had taught me so much in the short time we'd known one another, not least that my wolf was not something to be feared. She was as much a part of me as my left leg, as the blood in my veins.

As I fell against the glass doors of the emergency room, they burst open, and the cold night air greeted me. The cluster of law enforcement vehicles and personnel talking into their radios and phones, each more frantic and furious than the one before, was hard to miss.

Sheriff Birch Clawson, Ridge's best friend and second, stood at the center of the circular drive.

Drawing on the strength of my wolf, I plowed toward the sheriff as

quickly as I could, yelling frantically to him and anyone else who'd listen.

"Birch! Birch Clawson!" When he turned to look at me, my stomach dropped. "It's Ridge. They took Ridge! He's gone. Why the hell are you just standing around? Find him. Get him back!"

I let out a scream. It pushed from my lungs, and the strength of it strained my throat. I needed to be heard over the cacophony of sirens, engines, and people talking.

I couldn't tell how loud I was because my head still seemed to be in a vacuum. It sounded like I was leagues under the sea. Mouths were moving, but the noise mingled and sounded like murmurs.

Clawson's head snapped in my direction, and his eyes widened as he raced over to me. All his men, all the other deputies and law enforcement staff, turned and gaped at me. A few turned away, unable to even look me in the eye. Like if they looked at me, my pain might become theirs.

I didn't care if I looked crazy. All I needed was for them to do their damn job and get Ridge back.

"What are you doing out of bed? There's no way a doctor cleared you to be out of bed, not with your wounds." Birch gripped my shoulders. "It's been over twenty-four hours, Tori. When we couldn't wake you, they ran blood tests and found an unknown substance in your system. The doctors had no idea what it was but ascertained it was some kind of sedative. We weren't even sure you'd wake up." He shook his head and my shoulders in short little bursts. "You should be in bed."

"Like hell am I going back to bed now. I have to find Ridge. No one is doing anything. You have to bring him home to me." Something churned in my belly, and I didn't know if it was the pain from my injury or the desperation in my soul.

Clawson let go of my shoulders but kept his hands raised around me as if afraid I'd fall. "Tori, calm down. We're doing everything possible, but you getting all worked up isn't going to help."

My wolf growled and prowled inside me. She was growing stronger by the second, healing faster than I was, and she was about ready to snap at the sheriff, to take off and go after Ridge. Reasoning wasn't part of the equation for either of us at that point.

The drugs were slowly leaving my system, so I wasn't feeling the effects as much. The blossoming headache from clamping down on my wolf grew fierce as she became angrier and more alert. If she kept pushing me, I would



soon lose control, and there wasn't a fucking thing I could do.

Swaying, I stepped forward to stop myself from falling but misjudged. The ground rushed toward me. Clawson caught me, then carried me back into the hospital. He'd done it with such little effort, too.

"No, no, don't put me back in there!" I protested. "We need to go after Ridge. They're going to torture him. I can't let that happen."

I needed to make him understand the danger Ridge was in, but how could I when he wouldn't listen to me? I was the best resource he had, the key to finding them and bringing them back, the best tool in his toolbox. He just didn't know it yet.

"In your state, you're not going anywhere right now except back to bed, where you can heal properly." His voice was stern, as if I had no choice.

The effects of the tranquilizer and the befuddling cloud I'd been forced under delayed my comprehension, and it took some time for me to grasp what he'd said. I couldn't tell if it was an order or a threat, and by the time I was ready to argue some more, we were back in the hospital room.

"Stop, Sheriff Clawson. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. We need to get Ridge back before it's too late. We have to go now and get him back."

He gently deposited me on the bed as if I was made of the finest china, then turned away. I opened my mouth to call him back, but he shut the door and turned to face me.

"This is an ongoing inquiry. We're doing everything we can to get him back, but we need to investigate first."

His calm voice made me want to punch him in the throat. I didn't understand how he could be so restrained. He should have been mad as hell and ready to tear the state apart to bring his alpha back. Wasn't that the shifter way? Shifters were a pack, which was nothing more than an extended family. Obviously, there was always the crazy uncle no one wanted to talk about, but that wasn't Ridge. Ridge was the alpha, and he needed his pack right now. It'd be impossible for him to escape with no help.

Gripping the sheets in my fists, I fought to keep my wolf in check. She was seeing red, ready to go through anybody and anything who got in our way to bring Ridge home. Right now, that was Birch Clawson.

It was a lot harder than it should have been to hold her back, but my reactions were still dulled. I breathed hard and heavy from the effort of keeping her at bay. Now that she'd shaken off the last remnants of the tranquilizers my brother had used on me, she was much stronger than I was.

My breaths came harder still, in short, angry puffs. I was hyperventilating even as I fought an internal battle with her. I wasn't above begging, but I was weak from the hunter's drugs and the stab wound, so my conniving wolf prevailed. Clawson's shocked face was the last thing I saw as the circle of light dimmed and darkness overtook me. My wolf emerged triumphant.

I struggled for control, but she was powerful and it took a lot more strength than I'd thought to drag myself back to consciousness. My mind was heavy and hazy, and I imagined wrestling a boulder up a hill. When I finally made it to the top and gained a foothold within my psyche, I was able to make sense of what was going on.

My wolf snapped and snarled at the sheriff. Shit, this was bad.

Clawson had shifted along with me, planting himself in front of the door as if he sensed it wouldn't be pretty if I got free. There would be damage. He was an alpha in his own right but chose to be Ridge's beta, and his size alone was enough to make a regular shifter back down.

My wolf, though, was anything but regular. She was slowly going feral, and because of the desperate circumstances, she had nothing to lose. An animal with nothing to lose was dangerous, one to be feared. She wouldn't play fair.

I tried to get around Clawson by leaping and snapping at him, but he reared up and pushed me away. He acted with restraint, not hurting me, even though he could. My wolf wasn't holding anything back. She was driven and only had one purpose—find Ridge and help him. Until she did, neither one of us would rest. As long as Ridge was in danger, chances were my wolf was going to be in control, whether I liked it or not.

Clawson growled at me, using his size to subdue me, but I paced, moved side to side, growled, and paced some more. Without warning, my wolf attacked. Fangs and claws sliced his coat, leaving small blood trails behind, but just as quickly, they healed. Unlike the blood that had slicked from the wound the librarian had inflicted on me, her silver knife nullifying shifter healing.

I wrestled for control before my wolf made matters worse. Still in shifter form, I finally managed to push my wolf to the back, gaining a foothold in our shared consciousness and putting a stop to the pacing and growling.

The shift had torn the stitches in my stomach. Shit.

My rational thinking had come back, but my wolf was still battling tooth and claw with me. She was frantic about Ridge being gone and in grave

danger. The hunters wouldn't hold back or take it easy on him. He was an alpha, a prime target in their eyes—a trophy to be hung on the wall. They'd work him until he broke, and then the real torture would begin.

I shuddered. I couldn't stand by and let it happen.

Ever since I'd discovered what I was, I'd believed that all shifters were monsters, that I was a monster. But I was wrong. Sure, some shifters were monsters. Some weren't. Ridge wasn't. But hunters who couldn't just live and let live were the things that went bump in the night. Anyone who justified using torture against another was a true beast.

Slowly, I shifted back to my human form. The change took an inordinate amount of time without Ridge there to help me. I was weak, and changing forms hurt, especially with a fresh knife wound with torn-out stitches.

As I came back into myself, I fell against the bed, gasping for breath. I fumbled for the sheet to cover my naked body. My hospital gown had been turned into confetti when I'd shifted.

Clawson hesitated, waiting to be certain I had complete control before he shifted and grabbed a sheet to cover himself.

Cautiously, he watched me, eventually sighing as he scrubbed his hand up and down his face. "Lie down. You need to get that laceration looked at and restitched."

He made to leave, but I couldn't let him go yet. Channeling my best approximation of Christie Greenthorne's entitled attitude, I called out, "Sheriff, you're not going anywhere until you tell me what you're doing to find my fiancé."

Using the title amped up my desperation and, I hoped, provided justification for my intense behavior, which I couldn't fully understand myself.

Stiffening, Clawson straightened and slowly turned to shoot a full-on glare at me. I finally got a proper look at him. The adrenaline from shifting had burned a lot of the drug out of my system, and I didn't feel its effects as potently anymore. Now, I felt weaker than before. The pain from the aftermath of shifting and re-opening my wound was staggering.

Now that I was really looking at him, the stress and the worry Clawson had for his friend and alpha were all over his face. His eyes were heavy, his typical good-natured smile nowhere to be seen. But no matter how fatigued he was, he wasn't the kind of man who would let me walk over him or tell him how to do his job.

His voice was even and stern as he said, “If anyone gets to ask questions, it’s going to be me.”

I nodded because I didn’t have another choice in the matter, and he cocked his head to one side. “Why the fuck did you or Ridge fail to tell me how close to feral you are?”

I was about to defend Ridge, to say he hadn’t known and that this had nothing to do with the matter at hand—Ridge’s kidnapping. But before I could speak, Clawson held up his hand. “Don’t give me any fucking bullshit. Ridge has to know, because right now, it’s as obvious as the stab wound in your gut.”

“Birch...” I didn’t know what I could say to calm this situation, especially while bleeding through my sheet.

But Clawson wasn’t finished. “He should have told me, especially since a feral wolf poses a significant risk to other people. People in my damn town, the one I’m charged with serving and protecting.” His nostrils flared as he fumed and stared at me. “And I’m warning you”—his warning sounded an awful lot like the prelude to a threat—“don’t bother trying to deny that you’re halfway to feral. I’ve seen it before with Ridge’s aunt, and I was just unlucky enough to have an up-close-and-personal moment with your wolf when she tried to rip my throat out. And nearly succeeded, I might add.”

He seemed like the kind of guy who planned to hold a grudge.

As I eyed his face, it took everything in me not to fight against him. Being stubborn was in my nature, but Birch was right. He’d just gotten a front-row seat to my wolf losing her shit. Also, he wasn’t wrong about me being a danger to others. It had taken so much time to get control of my wolf; she was capable of wreaking unspeakable havoc. That didn’t mean I had to take everything he said lying down, though.

Anger flowed hotly through my veins. Until I had Ridge back, I wasn’t going to take any crap from anybody. Not in this form or as a wolf.

“The only people I pose a threat to are the hunters who took my fiancé.” I matched the darkness in Clawson’s low tone with a steel of my own. “We can hash out the rest later, but I demand to know what happened and what you’re doing to look for your mayor, your alpha, your friend.”

I needed him to remember how important Ridge was and stir him into action. Until I healed, there wasn’t a lot I could do on my own, so Birch would have to figure it out. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to get Ridge back.

“Birch, these hunters are skilled,” I continued when he didn’t respond. “There’s no way they scoped out this town and left with only one shifter, even if they did capture the alpha. You need to find out if anyone else was hurt or taken.”

So much of this was my fault, and the guilt was a heavy weight on my heart. It was my brother who’d come here, my father’s crew. They’d hunted me for years, and I’d led them straight to the one place they never should have found.

I could imagine their glee when they fucking discovered it was a shifter town. My father and brother were charming men. It probably hadn’t taken much convincing to get Mrs. Marrow to cooperate with them. I’d overstayed my welcome in this wonderful town, and as a result, I’d inadvertently made every shifter in this town a target.

Clawson clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, probably trying to flex his irritation away. He stood there, gaze locked on mine. I didn’t know what he thought, if he was worried I was about to snap. He certainly wasn’t convinced I was safe to be left alone in a hospital I’d already tried to escape from. Plus, I’d shifted here, in a place where there were people who couldn’t fight back.

There was no question in my mind that as soon as Ridge was safe, Birch would let his displeasure at being kept in the dark be known in very certain terms. But there was comfort in knowing it was a conversation that was going to happen because, one way or another, I was bringing Ridge home.

I’d make fucking sure of it.

Not for the first time in the last few minutes, thinking about Ridge pushed my wolf’s emotions over the edge. She didn’t deal well with angst. Neither did I, so she wasn’t the only one ready to topple over the cliff.

My heart seized, my gut clenched. I didn’t know if it would always be this way when I thought of him while we were apart, or if it was specific to this situation. It reminded me of a song I’d once heard. It was about not knowing what you’ve got till it was gone. Well, now he was gone, and I knew: I needed him the same way I needed oxygen.

But I couldn’t think about that too deeply now. At this moment, I needed to hold it together. If Clawson saw me as a liability, there was no way he’d let me help bring Ridge home. And if I tried to do it on my own, he would be so focused on stopping me that he’d forget the ultimate objective. Hopefully, he would realize what was important and find a way to keep his anger out of

it.

“The hunters’ attack was stealthy,” Clawson said. “Planned. Carried out by a small team that struck hard and fast.” He pursed his lips as if unsure whether or not he wanted to continue.

I shook my head and raised an eyebrow. “Yes?” I needed him to tell me all of it. Knowledge was power, and I needed all the power I could get.

“They took not only Ridge but three other shifters as well—Audrey Greenthorne, because she was here in the ER. If they left her behind, she could have ID’d them and would have had their scent, so she could have led us right to them. They grabbed her along with Ridge.” He paused again. “They also took Diana Bogford. She was returning to her inn after leaving the Moonlight Café. And they snapped up Zander Elkins on their way out of town.”

“Fuck!” This wasn’t the wolf in me being feral; it was just me. They’d taken Diana, who, in the short time I’d known her, had become a close friend and a caring mother figure. Audrey and I would probably never be best friends, but we’d managed to set our differences aside and come to a place of mutual respect.

During my hunter training, I’d seen just how terribly shifters were treated upon capture. My stomach tumbled, making the ache around my wound throb harder. The torture they would be subjected to was enough to make the strongest shifter go mad. Determined hunters didn’t stop until the shifter was dead. They prolonged the process until they got whatever they wanted from the shifter. Regardless, the shifter’s life was already forfeit.

Bile churned in my stomach as I imagined my kind, smiling, thoughtful, fake fiancé alpha in the hands of the people who’d trained me. I couldn’t imagine my father and brother getting their hands on Audrey and Diana. The idea made my head spin. It went against the way my father operated.

During the brainwashing—they called it “training”—I’d been subjected to growing up after my mother’s murder, and as a part of the “family,” we focused solely on the men. I couldn’t figure out why my father would start taking women. Perhaps it was part of some grand master plan, or maybe Diana and Audrey had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That I’d ever been a part of such an organization shamed me now, and my skin burned with heat. I would never be able to forgive myself if they didn’t come home whole and unharmed.

“I don’t know why the hunters didn’t take more shifters,” Clawson said.

“The ones they took, except for Ridge, seem to be victims of opportunity. They didn’t go hunting for anyone else despite having a solid grasp of the layout of Blackwood Creek. They hunted for Ridge, found him, took him.” He shook his head and lifted his head to look me in the eye. “Right now, the town’s in mayhem.”

Obviously. We had a murdered deputy and a murderous librarian, and the mayor was kidnapped. This would not entice tourists to visit the town.

Clawson ran a hand through his hair in frustration. When he lowered it, his hair was pointing in all directions as he continued staring at me. “I’m withholding all the information about town residents going missing overnight, but Ridge is the mayor and unaccounted for. It’s only a matter of time before people start noticing and realize something happened.” He looked even more haggard than he had a moment ago. “But when they discover hunters are behind it, chaos will erupt in Blackwood Creek.”

And there wouldn’t be a damn thing anyone could do to stop it.

He stood in front of me, waiting for me to reestablish eye contact. His voice was low and deep, purposeful, adamant.

“I’m going after Ridge and the others alone. We can’t afford to send a task force or any of my men. We’re stretched thin after Hill’s death, and now that the hunters know this place the way they do, we need to make sure there’s as much security here as possible in case they strike again while they think we’re weakened.” He looked at me hard and pledged, “I *will* return your fiancé to you. I’m bringing everybody back.”

I nodded. “Damn straight you are, because I’m going with you.”

Clawson blinked like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Are you out of your fucking mind? You’re not going anywhere. You still need to heal, not to mention Ridge will kill me if I let you tag along.”

He was probably right, but I needed to do this. I had to. “I’m going. Period.” The finality in my tone should’ve ended the whole discussion.

Clawson scoffed. “You *are* out of your mind, aren’t you? He’ll kill me. Probably rip my head off and keep it as a trophy. I like my head. I particularly like my head on my body.” He held up the hand not holding the sheet. “No fucking way am I bringing the alpha’s mate into a potentially fatal situation.”

But I was a shifter, too, and my wolf wanted vengeance. She wanted retribution. She wanted Ridge, and there was no fucking way she would be talked down.

“Listen, Sheriff,” I spoke with as much venom as I could muster. “Since you don’t have enough men to protect a pissant if the hunters decide to come back for me, I’m in just as much danger here as out there. So your reasoning means shit. I’m going.” I could be stubborn when I had to be.

“Dammit, Tori, you’re…”

I pushed out a frustrated sigh. “Clawson, let me put it a different way.” My voice sounded deceptively calm. The next part wasn’t exactly true since I was injured, but I didn’t care. I’d make it work however I needed to. “I don’t need you. I’m perfectly capable of tracking Ridge myself, whether you give me permission or not. But I think we’ll work much better as a team, so you might as well accept my help.”

He didn’t seem convinced, but I still had an ace to play.

“I know where the hunters are taking them.”

His eyes widened. I had him now.

“I’m your best bet of not wasting time and returning them home quickly and in one piece.”

There was no way I’d stay back while people I cared about were in the hands of the hunters. Whenever I closed my eyes, I pictured what they’d do to them, imagined their cries and bloody faces. There wasn’t a hope in hell of me staying back, not when they’d been kidnapped because of me.

Clawson gaped at me. “How the hell do you know where they’re taking them?”

His disbelief was another entity in the room, but it didn’t worry me or make me retreat. I met his furious gaze.

“I’m semi-feral for a reason.”

He blinked as if he didn’t understand, but then it clicked and his mouth dropped open.

“Yeah, so I don’t think any further explanation is necessary, do you?”

I wasn’t lying, just being a little economical with the truth. I’d learned a long time ago not to tell people things they didn’t need to know, things that didn’t matter until they *did* matter. Ridge was the first and only person I’d even remotely considered telling my story to, and I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to tell him everything.

Clawson pushed his chest out as if I couldn’t already see how broad it was, how determined he was to win this argument. But then he shook his head and cursed. He wasn’t an idiot. He expected I’d do as I claimed about leaving because it was true.



Pointing his finger at me, he snarled, “You get restitched by the shifter doctor. When the doc’s done, you rest until first light. We’ll leave then.”

Without another word, he stormed out of the room, muttering about stubborn mates and how he was too tired for all this bullshit.

Relief surged through me. We had a plan. Of course, it meant I’d have to accept his help going after Ridge, so I wouldn’t be bringing them all home on my own. I could live with it. The goal was getting them back safely and as unharmed as possible.

The prospect of never seeing Ridge again was unacceptable. It made me ready and more than willing to go into battle with people I’d previously thought of as family and friends.

One way or another, I was going to bring him and the others home. I didn’t think I’d survive if I didn’t.

## Chapter 31

# Ridge

Opening my eyes took every ounce of strength I had, and after struggling for a while, I finally managed it. Even the dim light made the slow, rhythmic pounding in my head intensify.

Through narrowed eyes, I tried to make sense of my surroundings, of everything I could see and feel. The concrete floor beneath me was cold and hard, and with every muscle and bone in my body aching as if I'd been run over by a bus, I must have been lying on it for some time.

My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt like cotton against the roof of my mouth as I worked to produce enough saliva to get rid of the strange aftertaste that was making me nauseous.

I attempted to sit up, but it felt like lead had been pumped through my veins, making my limbs awkward and unwieldy. I allowed myself a second to regroup, to try to get my bearings, and then tried to sit up again. With all the grace of a newborn fawn, I staggered into a sitting position and looked around.

It took a moment for my mind to clear so I could fully appreciate—though that was probably the wrong word—the cell. This was no small-town lock-up. From what I sensed, the bars were made of a hundred percent silver, which was more than enough to keep any shifter caged.

Whoever they were, these captors of mine were playing for keeps and obviously knew how to use our weaknesses.

They also had heavy-duty tranquilizers, badass enough to put a shifter down. And not just any shifter, but an alpha. That meant I was dealing with hunters who were well-trained, smart, and determined. Not a good combination.

I coughed to clear my throat, then sniffed, hoping to entice my wolf's senses into gear. I needed to focus, to see if I could pin down where I was. But all the unfamiliar scents assaulting me confused and enraged my wolf.

I rolled forward on all fours, keeping my breathing slow and measured as I waited for the room to stop spinning, for the contents of my stomach to stop trying to rise up my throat.

Closing my eyes, I took several deep breaths and analyzed each scent. Panic edged to the forefront of my mind when I noticed Tori's scent wasn't in the mix. The panic quickly turned to relief. Maybe she'd broken free. Then the panic came back. I'd seen the hunter enter her room at the hospital. I knew what that meant for her. Or I thought I did.

Suddenly, my wolf was fully awake, wanting to tear the place apart to find her. Until I knew she was safe, I wouldn't be able to breathe freely.

Memories of almost losing Tori in the library plagued my mind, and my wolf frantically paced. Her injuries had been severe, and my gut ached because I didn't know if she was okay or where she might be. It was torture not knowing what had happened. All I knew with absolute certainty was that I hadn't been near enough to protect her. And it was killing me.

Our fated mate bond was new. I wasn't even sure if she was familiar with the idea of a fated mate or if she realized what that meant for me. For *us*. Without question, she was mine. Fate had brought her to Blackwood Creek. To me. Already, the need to get to her consumed me. I knew what to expect, how this need became overwhelming and all-encompassing, but there was no way to comprehend the thoughts that would be running through her mind as she attempted to locate my whereabouts and ensure that I was safe.

She was so close to becoming completely feral already, this could send her toppling over the edge.

I should've been thinking of a way out, but my mind couldn't let go of everything that had happened. I'd been heading to the ER's small cafeteria to grab food and water for Tori because she needed to keep her strength up, and I was going to do whatever it took to make sure of that.

She'd been sprayed with wolfsbane and stabbed by silver. Even with her shifter healing, she needed time to recover. I'd been on my way back to her room when something hard smashed against my head. I'd stumbled, and the water pitcher had skittered in a puddle across the floor. A minute later, I felt a sting and then the cold injection of fluid into my neck.

My wolf and I had wanted to battle it out, but before I could even

contemplate shifting, my body had seized and stiffened into a rigid position. My limbs weren't cooperating with me, and I hit the floor hard as I blacked out. As darkness consumed me, my last thought was of my beautiful mate and her safety.

Growling now, I staggered to my feet, taking extra care not to grab the bars for support. The silver wasn't safe for me to touch and could cause irreparable harm. I was already a walking bruise, and I suspected healthcare wasn't included with the accommodations here.

My shoulder pulsed with painful awareness. The wound from the silver bullet Mrs. Marrow shot at me had obviously reopened when I was unconscious. Looking down, I saw a pool of blood spreading across my shirt and darkening the cell floor. Apparently, I'd been bleeding for a while. Dried blood flaked off my chest and the edges of the wound where fresh blood still oozed slightly.

I lifted my opposite hand to inspect the wound. It wasn't a steady pour, just a small flow. It had clotted enough for now, but it wouldn't take much to reopen the wound again, especially if I had to battle my way out of here. Which I planned to do at the very first opportunity.

Controlling my anger at getting caught and taken by hunters wasn't easy. My thoughts continually turned to Tori and her whereabouts.

It took some time before my senses cleared enough to take in the details of my surroundings and work out an escape plan. I got no farther than the cell directly beside mine. Because when I turned to look, I spotted Diana Bogford sprawled on the floor. I moved as close as I dared without touching the silver.

Keeping my voice to a low whisper because I didn't want to draw attention if anyone happened to be listening, I called out, "Diana? Diana?"

Her cheeks were a healthy color, but her breathing was shallow. She was lying unconscious on the cold concrete. The cruel bastards hadn't even given her a blanket.

I was desperately worried about Tori's absence, but seeing Diana here, a woman who was a maternal figure to both Tori and me, flipped something else inside me. I was enraged. More so because I couldn't get to her, couldn't check on her, couldn't save her.

"Diana, wake up. Can you hear me? Diana?" This time, my voice was a little louder, a little firmer.

"She's alive, Ridge," a soft voice whispered behind me. "She's just heavily drugged because she was being extra combative with the hunters and

kept causing a ruckus.”

I didn't register whose voice it was because I couldn't stop looking at Diana, fear churning in my gut as I tried to see if her chest was rising and falling. I didn't know what kind of drugs they'd given her or if her system could handle it.

When I could finally look away, I swiveled my head to the cell across from mine. Audrey Greenthorne was sitting on the concrete in the middle of her cell, her back hunched, her shoulders curled in, and her arms hugging her knees.

Her usually perfect makeup was smeared around her eyes in a raccoon-like mask, and her clothes were wrinkled and torn. On a normal day, Audrey wore her clothes like armor—she was always so put together. Here, she seemed so small and defenseless. Seeing her like this was odd, and it worried me.

“Audrey?” I whispered, and then the self-loathing set in and took over. I was the alpha, yet I had no idea how many shifters from my pack had been taken. I hadn't done anything to protect them, hadn't set up safeguards or a way to keep track of them.

Then I noticed Zander Elkins standing in the cell next to Audrey, glaring at me.

Okay. So that meant four of us that I knew of. Dread coated my stomach. Were there more?

“If I was the alpha, no fucking way would a hunter have been able to get the jump on me,” Zander crowed. “And sure as fuck not on two poor, helpless females under my protection.”

I wasn't sure *helpless* was fair, but Zander's words were like daggers twisting in my gut.

I opened my mouth, ready to have my say, but Audrey beat me to it. She stood and returned his glare, her nostrils flaring.

“First off, no one has ever described me as *poor*.” That was true. Audrey was healthy, strong, and rich. Not poor in any sense. “Second, I'm pretty sure we're all *helpless* in this situation, including you, Elkins.” True enough, although I hated it. “And third, if you think for one minute you'd be a better alpha than Ridge, why are you locked up here? You were also caught.”

She arched a well-groomed brow at Zander, which shut him down. He was nothing but the town drunk, so nothing he said carried any weight with me. I wasn't going to waste time harping on anything he had to say.

After sparing another glance at Diana's unconscious form, I looked at the other two, trying to assess the situation. "Are either of you hurt?"

They shook their heads.

Audrey sighed as she sank back down to the floor. "I've been awake for a while, but I can't figure out where we are or what they have planned for us. The hunters are waiting for something, but obviously, they only see us as animals." She nodded to the cage bars that split the large room into four separate cells. A walkway ran through the middle of the room with two cages on either side, leading from the only door I assumed led to the exit.

The door opened, and through the silver bars, we watched as two beefy hunters in full tactical gear—tattoos inked on their wrists, the rest hidden by sleeves—and equipment came into the room. Built like redwood trees, they sneered at us while they rested their hands on the top of their belts, pulling off the consummate asshole pose to emphasize their imposing size. They were acting like they had nothing to worry about, being around a group of shifters.

I snarled, wondering how confident these assholes would be if we weren't secured behind silver bars. I bet their display would have been a lot less cocky.

My wolf and I struggled to hold back the rage that fueled us when one of those pieces of shit looked Audrey up and down. It was the taller, blond hunter. He licked his lips as he approached Audrey and gave her a lecherous wink. My stomach rolled.

"If you're not ready to talk yet, we'll gladly take you to an interrogation room where we can get started on the real fun—making monsters cry."

Fortunately, Audrey didn't rise to the bait, which was completely out of character. Instead, she remained seated, almost what I would've called passive, staring at their feet as she held herself still and pressed her lips into a thin line. With how hard she was biting the inside of her cheek, I was surprised I didn't smell her blood. For Audrey, not telling this asshole to go fuck himself had to be a trial of epic proportions.

He was taunting her to act out. "Oh, now, come on, you pathetic monster. Don't you want to come and play with us? I'm positive we can show you a real good time."

The darker-haired one cooed and chuckled, enjoying the show before he started in, too. "Don't you monsters like pain with pleasure? I'll happily give it to you. I'll have you screaming in no time."

Both assholes sneered as they laughed, but Audrey continued to sit, her shoulders stiff, not giving them any reaction. Clearly, they were itching for one.

My wolf growled low, the sound escaping from my throat. I bared my teeth, hoping to draw their attention from her to me, but these fucking sorry excuses for humans merely laughed at me. If we were on an even playing field, they wouldn't be laughing for long. But I'd bide my time. I'd get my opportunity.

"What're you gonna do behind that silver cage, you filthy beast?" The dark-haired one smirked at me. "Nothing. Stop trying to act like you're some hot shit. If you were so badass, we wouldn't have caught you so easily."

"Hey, mutt. If you sit and beg, I'll give you a treat," the blond one taunted me, and they burst into laughter again.

"I thought you monsters were supposed to be such tough shit," the blond continued, "but look at you. You're fucking nothing. It was so fucking easy to snatch you up."

If I ever got a hold of that little prick, I was going to tear him apart, limb from limb.

"Oh, look. The big guy is getting mad. You gonna bark at me, mutt?" He stepped closer. "Just wait for it, puppy. This is just the start. I can't wait to watch you break. We have some special shit planned for you."

The growl reverberated deep in my gut as my wolf took stock of the two hunters. I made sure to imprint them and their scents in our memory because when we got out of here—and we would be getting out of here—we were going to find them and kill them without a moment's hesitation.

I bared my teeth and snarled as the hunters continued laughing. It was a lot to take from these pieces of shit, but I'd heard worse over the years. Bad threats. Ridiculous men acting like children on a playground. It'd been done before. Over and over.

The door opened again, and another hunter walked in. I kept one eye on the two imbeciles and the other on the newcomer. Something about his scent was familiar, and the feeling that I knew him from somewhere caused the hair on the back of my neck to rise. I struggled to place his scent, but I needed to figure it out.

He was younger than the other two, but from the way they instantly shut up and stood to attention, their smiles vanishing as they gave the hunter a nod, told me he was of a higher rank.

“Knock it off and stop acting like morons.” He stared them both down until each man lowered his head. “Go to the dining hall.”

They nodded and quietly left the room. Oh, yeah. Whoever this fuck was, he was definitely of a higher rank. If the hunters had rankings, this guy was probably a lieutenant.

I didn't know and didn't really care. All I could think of was his scent and why the hell it was so familiar.

When the door clicked shut, the tool made his way to my cell, his hands clasped behind his back. I looked him up and down while he looked me up and down. I was going to kill him. There was no fucking doubt about that. He continued to stare as I stood rigidly in front of him. Neither of us showed any sign of backing down as we stood our ground.

It wasn't just his scent that was familiar; it was his dark eyes and hair as well. It bothered me that I couldn't place him, but I didn't let it show. It would come to me.

From the way he carried himself and demanded submission with nothing more than a cock of his brow or a tilt of his head, I had no doubt if he'd been born a shifter and not a hunter, he would have been an alpha.

Alphas, I understood. I'd come across a few alphas in my time, and my gut instincts urged me to treat him in the same manner. The same respect, the same rules and codes still applied. It didn't matter what species we were—an alpha recognized an alpha. Even though I had no idea if he was going to extend the same courtesy, I figured it wouldn't hurt to show a modicum of respect.

But treating this hunter as a fellow alpha also meant not backing down or capitulating, so our glaring contest continued. As much as I wanted to issue threats and demand to know what they'd done with Tori, I didn't. Not yet. But if he touched one hair on her head, he'd have to answer to me. There was no doubt about that. I'd have my answers in due time. I always did, so I waited.

The hunter scoffed as he either tired of our battle of wills or didn't want to afford me the same respect I was willing to give him. He looked away, tossing a roll of bandages into my cell. “Wrap your injury before you bleed out. You're useless to me if you're dead.”

I didn't look at the bandages. Instead, I watched him, my gaze locked on his every move. I couldn't get past the idea that I knew him somehow.

Without waiting to check if I'd comply, he stalked across the room and



observed the others as closely as he could without opening the bars.

“Why is that one not awake yet?” He jabbed a finger toward Diana but wasn’t harsh or demanding in his question. His voice didn’t raise in volume, his tone didn’t change, and he didn’t appear annoyed. His face remained carefully blank, hiding whatever he was feeling or thinking.

Leave it to Audrey to sass him, though. “According to your men, we’re just beasts, so how on earth do you expect us to know? You’re the one running this archaic operation of murderers, so maybe you should tell us what the fuck you did to her.”

She stood up, lifted a brow, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. Now she was the one scoffing at him. I watched him for a reaction, surprised when none came.

“You’re not a very effective leader if your men are double-drugging captives without your knowledge and then not reporting back to you. You really need to discipline your soldiers better and instill more fear in them to win their obedience. Of course, they probably don’t respect you because you’re what, twenty? Twenty-one? You’re far too young to really intimidate anyone.”

She cocked her head and smirked. No fear. She’d done so well biting her tongue with the two Neanderthal idiots, but any sense of self-preservation had deserted her. She’d made a mistake by opening her mouth to taunt the one she should’ve feared the most.

I stifled a groan and prayed that her act of rebellion, however well-intentioned, hadn’t moved her to a higher rung on this guy’s shit list. But he ignored her as he pulled a tablet from a cabinet between my cell and Diana’s and flicked through several screens, typing out what I would have guessed were notes on our conditions. Between bursts of typing, he lifted his gaze and studied each of us briefly before dropping his head and continuing to type.

Audrey continued needling him, but the hunter paid her no mind as he focused on his task. I caught her eye, but she only smiled at me and shrugged. I swore the woman was fearless. Being raised as a rich brat had its disadvantages in situations like this.

The dark-haired asshat from earlier reentered the room, holding out a phone.

“Kyle, it’s for you.”

Kyle? There were probably millions of Kyles in the world, but something about this one was familiar. And I’d heard the name recently. For the life of

me, though, I couldn't remember where.

He grunted and took the phone from the guy's outstretched hand, but waited to speak until his lackey hurried out of the room like he had somewhere important to be and very little time to get there.

I continued to sift through my memories to remember where his name fit in, but with the drug still in my system, my thoughts were a jumbled mess of images and voices. Although I was still alert and standing, the drug was affecting me. I was groggy, my reflexes sluggish.

It also didn't help that my shoulder was aching. Because the wound was from a silver bullet, it would take longer to heal. I did everything that was mentally possible to redirect myself from thinking about the pain, trying to recall everything from the bylaws of Blackwood Creek to multiplication tables. No way was I going to wince, even though my skin, which was normally ten or so degrees hotter than everyone else's, was on fire. I would rather die than show these bastards any kind of weakness.

I picked up the bandages from the cold concrete floor and did my best to wrap my injury. A doctor would have to stitch it up properly, but the bandages would do for now.

Kyle put the phone to his ear. I was surprised he didn't leave the holding area. He had to know shifter hearing meant we'd easily hear both sides of the conversation. But he stood as though he didn't give a fuck what we overheard.

"Yeah?" he snapped, his voice less than reverent.

"I heard the extraction of the Blackwood alpha was a success." The glee in the voice on the other end of the line chilled me to the bone. As did the fact that they had specifically targeted me, not just any shifter.

"Yeah, it was. He's here in holding." Kyle's voice remained flat and uninterested.

"Was Victoria there?"

At the mention of her name, every cell in my body froze. I lifted my gaze to Audrey's, whose eyes were wide. The hunters not only wanted me but Tori, too.

It was telling. But until I figured out why they wanted us, I wouldn't know what it meant.

One thing was now certain. I needed to figure it out, then somehow get word to Tori.

That they had mentioned her on this call and made sure I heard it put me

on high alert—especially since Audrey and Tori didn't have the most solid relationship. What if she threw my mate under the bus?

My heart pounded at the possibility, and the fear had me in a viselike grip.

The fear dissipated when Audrey narrowed her eyes at Kyle and snapped her lips firmly shut. I could feel anger and confusion flowing from her in rippling waves.

"No, she wasn't there," Kyle said. There was a pause, silence from the other man. "Is that all?"

While Kyle's voice sounded bored, his body told a very different story. At the mention of Tori, his shoulders had stiffened for a fraction of a second before relaxing. If I hadn't been watching him closely, I would have missed it, but I wasn't the kind of guy who missed much. And right now, I needed to know as much about what was going on as I could find out. Nothing was going to escape my notice.

"Giselle will be arriving at the compound soon," the voice on the other line said. "Make sure you have one of those shifters selected and prepared before she arrives. Keep the monsters in line until I can return to the States. I plan to be back by the end of the week." Kyle remained silent. "I'm sure you can manage till then."

"Got it." With nothing more to discuss, Kyle ended the call.

I didn't like the sound of that. And Tori hadn't been paranoid. She was right. These hunters were after her specifically. What I couldn't understand was *why*.

I had quietly hoped it'd all been in Tori's head, that the hunters weren't actually after her. That she'd eluded them once, maybe twice. I'd thought her paranoia had taken hold, a symptom of her being on the wrong edge of feral, which was why she'd been on the run for so long.

After all, it wasn't typical for hunters to target a specific shifter. They didn't care which shifter they caught and took whoever they got their hands on.

So, what was it about my little mate that had them going after her and terrorizing her? My mind raced as I tried to piece things together, but nothing I came up with could explain why they wanted her.

Fury coiled through my veins. It was harder to keep it leashed now that I knew Tori had been frightened, alone, and on the run from these people for years. She'd been forced to leave home at seventeen because of them. She

should have had friends, gone to college, traveled—whatever she'd wanted to live a carefree life. She shouldn't have lived a solitary life, fearing capture and torture.

Worse, they had made her afraid of a part of herself. These fuckers were the reason she was damn near feral.

I growled at Kyle. It was becoming increasingly difficult to hold back my wolf. When it came to Tori, I had no sense of control. It was not only my job but my privilege to protect her, love her, fight for her. Being this close to such a threat to her had me and my wolf seeing red.

Kyle turned his head toward me, sighed, and rolled his eyes as if he had no fear that when I got my hands on him, I would kill him.

That action stopped me in my tracks. It was so strikingly familiar. This fucking guy had Tori's eye-roll, her exact sigh, her stance when she was exasperated.

*Fuck. Me.* I knew who he was, why he was so familiar. Kyle was Tori's brother. And his name was familiar because she'd told me her older brother's name was Kyle.

I studied him closely, but I wasn't quite prepared to face the answer. I pushed that idea away in a quick second because no way could I believe that this Kyle was the same one she'd told me about. What kind of fucked-up family dynamic did they have if he was hunting his sister? That took some sheer evil.

Her brother should have been *shielding* her, even if it meant putting his own life in danger. Having such a remarkable little sister to care for was a privilege. It didn't make sense to put her life at risk. I couldn't fathom why he'd do such a thing just because she'd been born a shifter. That was her only crime.

Zander got Kyle's attention, dragging me out of my spiraling thoughts. I stared at him, not liking the look he had on his face when he spoke. "You know, if you're looking for a Victoria, I can certainly volunteer some information if we can come to a gentleman's agreement of sorts. You get the information you want, and we both forget I was ever here."

The ground fell out from beneath my feet. If I ever got my hands on him again, I'd kill the little fucker for trying to sell out Tori and acting so selfishly. He didn't give a fuck about Tori, only about saving his own hide. It was unacceptable and punishable by death.

"Shut the fuck up, Zander!" Audrey screamed.

I stomped closer to the cell, burning my skin on the silver bars. I wanted to eradicate Zander, and it didn't matter if it killed me to get to him.

But Kyle moved quickly—faster than it should've been possible for any human to move—to Zander's cell. He yanked the door open and pinned Zander against the wall, wrapping a meaty hand around Zander's neck.

I was jealous. I wanted it to be my hand holding Zander until his feet were dangling above the ground, his heels kicking at the wall behind him.

Zander struggled to breathe and clawed at Kyle's hand, trying to loosen the hold, but he couldn't shift or fight. He wasn't in the physical condition to be much of a threat to Kyle.

I stepped back from the bars, forcing myself to calm down and let my body work to heal the skin from the instantaneous silver burns while I watched the unreasonably angry hunter snap at Zander.

“Well, if you really want to volunteer for something, then great, you'll go first.” Kyle's voice lowered to a deadly growl as he stood rigidly against Zander, keeping him pinned to the wall.

Zander tried to fight back, but the hunter tranquilizer, coupled with the alcohol that was likely still in his system, was slowing him. He didn't stand a chance against the power of this strong, skilled hunter.

Kyle dragged Zander out of the holding cell like he was pulling a child's rag doll. Tori hadn't been mistaken about the hunters being infused with shifter speed and strength. They'd obviously had the help of witches at some point.

Neither Kyle nor Zander glanced at me or Audrey as they left.

“Dammit to hell,” I sputtered, pacing from corner to corner in my cell, careful to avoid the silver. As badly as I wanted to throttle Zander for trying to give up my fated mate for his own freedom, the alpha in me was concerned about what they were going to do to one of my pack members. Once he was safely back in the fold, I would punish him for not respecting Tori as his future luna, but it would be me, not a hunter, delivering the death blow. If I decided death was what he deserved.

Every second Diana remained unconscious, every second Zander was gone, my concern grew. I checked on Diana again. She hadn't moved during any of our interactions with the heavy-handed hunters or Kyle. What if they'd given her too much of whatever the fuck had knocked us out and she never woke up? The thought caused an ache in my gut. She meant too much to me. She'd been there after my mom was killed and my aunt went feral.

I couldn't be—didn't want to be—the one who had to tell Margo I hadn't been strong enough to save her mom. My blood turned to ice at picturing how Diana's death would affect her.

It wouldn't happen. I'd get Diana out. I'd get us all out, even Zander.

Audrey huffed and puffed, and I turned to look at her. She was looking at me, her eyes wide and her mouth drawn in a tight line. I'd never seen Audrey look alarmed before. I didn't like it.

She always put up a tough front, but there was no mistaking the panic and fear in her expression. We were in trouble, but I couldn't have her thinking the worst, thinking that this was all over. Because it wasn't. I had a fated mate to get to, a life to live.

"Pull it together, Audrey. I'm going to find a way out for all of us." I stared at her with conviction while praying deep down that we were the only shifters who had been taken and that Tori had somehow managed to elude the hunters once again.

"That bastard!" Audrey shrieked. "Why would he do that? Fucking Zander. How the fuck could he just give Tori up like that? That little fucker is a worse monster than the hunters." Tears shone brightly in her big brown eyes as she clenched her fists at her sides.

Her outrage on Tori's behalf warmed my heart. I knew the two women weren't exactly the best of friends, so to hear her anger at Zander's betrayal, well, I agreed with her one hundred percent. That's why I fought so hard against what my ancestors had done and what they'd stood for. I'd worked so hard to rectify the history and cleanse the Blackwood name.

Aching for Tori and fearing what Zander might disclose without us there to intervene, I closed my eyes. I envisioned my beautiful girl peacefully asleep and recovering in the hospital where I'd last seen her, her wound healing nicely. I couldn't think of the panic she'd go through when she found out I'd been abducted. She'd lay all the guilt at her own feet for the hunters getting me.

Determination surged through me, fueling me to get back to her and hold her in my arms. However, as alpha, I needed to take care of my pack mates here, and I'd do everything possible to ensure they all got home.

Everyone.

## Chapter 32

# Tori

I remained at the hospital and allowed the shifter doctor to restitch my wound. It hurt twice as much the second time around. But then, I'd barely felt them stitching me up the first time, having been damn near knocking on death's door when I'd been admitted. Wolfsbane and a silver knife were known to do that to a shifter, but I didn't think too hard on it.

There were more important things to worry about than a little pain. My father had taught me that, and it was one of the few lessons I'd taken with me when I left. Feeling pain was a good thing. Dead men don't feel pain.

"Can you make the stitches more secure? I'm going after my fiancé, so I need them to be as robust as possible." Maybe I should have asked for staples.

The doctor eyed me as he continued working meticulously. "As a doctor, my professional advice is that you should stay here in the hospital and rest and recuperate properly." When I opened my mouth to protest, he held up a hand to stop me from interrupting him. "For legal purposes, I needed to say it. But yes, knowing that's not going to happen, I've made them smaller and am giving you more stitches than usually required to bolster their stability. It's important that you are cautious about shifting. You need to heal, and every time you shift, healing becomes pointless."

Even though I was annoyed by the warning, I nodded. There was no way I would be able to stop myself from shifting if I needed to get Ridge out of the compound. I wouldn't let anything stop me from bringing him home or the others.

Hating that I was struggling to heal as fast as I usually did, I asked, "Is there any way to speed up the healing? Some kind of magical shifter aid? A

drug?” I kept my frustration behind a wall of determination. After all, my situation was hardly the doctor’s fault.

I knew exactly who to blame for everything that had gone down: the double-crossing librarian with the weapons that could take shifters down.

The thought that this injury would slow me down fed my impatience. Since waking up from the drug-induced sleep my brother had oh-so-kindly put me in and realizing they’d taken Ridge, the desperate need to have him back had become all-consuming.

All my anxious energy crawled just beneath the top layer of my skin. I’d given my word to wait till morning, and not being able to take off on my own only amped up my frustration. I hated waiting around and having to rely on others.

In the years I’d been on the run, I’d quickly learned that the only person I could ever count on was myself. Depending on others was not something I was accustomed to, and I hated that I needed to do that now. I’d only just started to really let Ridge behind the walls I’d built to shield myself, and now I’d have to trust Clawson.

With nothing else to focus on, the antsy feeling that Sheriff Clawson had somehow tricked me and already left town kept running through my head. I was battling hard against my long history of mistrust, but I trusted Ridge, so I held onto his belief in his longtime friend. At the same time, I kept my fingers crossed that Clawson hadn’t duped me out of some misguided misogynistic belief that he was saving me.

If it turned out he had, I’d catch up with him and, with no qualms about doing so, would do everything in my power to make his life a living hell.

“Well, we don’t have rapid healing of any sort for silver,” the doctor said. “Now, if we had a witch on hand, they’d probably be able to whip up a spell. But since we don’t have any witches, this is one of those times when shifters have to learn a little patience and recover from the wound like a regular human.”

I frowned, wishing I had access to the witches the hunters kept on hand. But I needed to drop that useless line of thinking and focus on what was in front of me.

It didn’t take the doctor much longer to finish his diligent stitching, dress the wound, and leave. His explicit instructions were for me to get the rest my body desperately needed, especially since I was heading out first thing in the morning.



I wanted to laugh. The guy had to be joking. Rest was a lovely thought, a worthy concept, but not something I could do. While Ridge, Diana, Audrey, and Zander were missing, there was no way I'd be getting any rest. At least he hadn't tried to talk me into staying past the morning. He'd have a better chance of a snowball fight in hell than me staying longer than absolutely necessary.

My wolf yearned for Ridge, and it took all the control I could muster to keep her in check. I tried reasoning with her and assuring her that I was doing everything possible, but since we weren't actively doing anything, she fought me constantly. Her growling and constant tug-of-war with our control made me afraid to rest. Once I let my guard down, she might take over, force a shift, and set out on her own to find Ridge.

At this point, there was no reasoning with her. It had to be the feral part of her sneaking through. I'd been terrified that this exact scenario would happen, and that I wouldn't come back from it.

Settling down in the room where I had last been with Ridge, I tried to let his waning scent calm me. The room was dark. I'd convinced the doctor I'd recovered enough not to need all the machines hooked up to me again. I wanted to lie here in silence, but my mind kept churning and refused to calm down. Unsurprisingly, given that Kyle's stench was newer, and therefore stronger, the time I'd trained as a hunter came flooding back to me.

I'd repressed those memories for many years. It had been a grueling period in my life because not only had I been forced into twelve months of hard training, but it had happened the first year after my mom's murder. The heartache never healed and still upset me. At the time, I hadn't grieved because I'd been instantly forced into becoming a hunter of the highest caliber. But that hadn't happened. It wasn't a natural fit for me.

Add on my father, William, who had drastically changed after losing my mom. My father had always been a hard man, but after my mom was killed, he'd become positively merciless—toward everyone, not only his children. He'd changed so much, she would never have recognized him. He'd become a tyrant, demanding so much from everyone around him, but he'd expected so much more from my brother and me, particularly during training.

“Victoria, what the fuck are you doing out there? Keep track of your surroundings. In the past twenty minutes, you'd have been dead at least a dozen times. Use your fucking head.” My father snarled at me from the side of the clearing as I staggered to my feet, holding back my wincing. If he

caught sight of that, I'd for sure have to run several more laps. His motto was to beat the weakness out of me.

Getting back into position with my fists guarding my chest, I took the proper boxing stance and willed myself to stop swaying, banishing the dizziness occupying my head.

Three of the hunters who were assigned to train me didn't break a sweat, attacking me in rotations while I had to maintain a steady defense. Two of them looked at me with pity, though they made sure my father never witnessed it. Otherwise, we'd all be punished.

The third hunter took far too much pleasure in my pain. His kicks to my solar plexus were dead-on, and he never held back like the others did. A part of me wished they didn't because I feared the repercussions if my father were to catch on. Sometimes, from the way he watched our sparring, I figured he was clued in and waiting to bring it out in some horrifying fashion.

"This is for your survival, Victoria. I don't enjoy this. I need to know that you'll survive. Do you think for one minute those monsters will stop because you broke a fucking nail? Get your shit together."

Panting, I cracked my neck from side to side, resisting the urge to roll my eyes in defiance. My teenage angst beckoned strongly, but let's be honest, I hadn't been a teenager in a long time. If my father really cared, then he wouldn't have had me training as a hunter so young. He'd have let it be my decision.

The moment slowly ticked by, and without warning, I ran and launched myself at the closest hunter, getting in a couple of strong hits. I jumped over a low kick, extending my leg and popping him in the shoulder. He fell back but regained his balance, and without warning, the hunter who took pleasure in kicking my ass grabbed me from behind and flipped me face-first onto the ground. Dirt flew into my eyes, nose, and mouth.

"For God's sake, Victoria, be aware of your fucking surroundings! Shifters aren't going to attack one at a time!" my dad yelled.

Lying still, I caught my breath, my head threatening to split in two.

Anger simmered in my gut as I raised my head and caught the smirk of the asshole who couldn't wait to drop in on the fight. Gritting my teeth, I held back my groans and tears as I got onto my knees and looked across the long field of the desert landscape that spanned for miles all around us.

Kyle was beating the shit out of four hunters with little problem. One second, he was taking an upper-cut fist to the jaw, and the next, he had the

other guy in a chokehold while forcing the other hunters back with fast and precise kicks to the knees and throat. He was impressive in a fight. Watching him in hand-to-hand combat made me cringe for the other guy every time.

Many of the hunters volunteered to spar with him because they didn't have to hold back and risk my father's wrath. They'd rather take a beating from Kyle than deal with my father's repercussions.

Now, didn't that say something?

Loud, heavy claps bounded through the air as my father watched my brother. "That's it, Kyle. You got it. Keep it up."

For a moment, my heart dropped at the praise he was giving my brother, but it vanished as fast as it sprung.

"Victoria, what the fuck are you doing? Knitting a sweater? Get back at."

Cursing him out in my mind, I eased back up to my feet as every bone, muscle, and tissue in my body screamed in protest. The pain soaked into my soul, but I used it to accept another round of torture disguised as survival training. If only my opponents were human, then I'd be fine...

Training session after training session, my father never let up. Whatever I gave, he took and demanded more. It was never enough. If I didn't run fast enough, if I didn't pin my sparring partner, if I didn't ace the weapons, he screamed and punished me for not doing better, then pushed me that much harder. Limits weren't to be respected; they were to be broken. Even then, my father worked and broke me beyond my capabilities.

Over my training, my father became ever colder and angrier. Without Kyle, I never would have survived my father's rage. When he was at his worst, Kyle stepped in and took the brunt of it. Kyle was his star pupil, the one I couldn't live up to no matter how hard I pushed myself. To him, I'd never be enough.

My father's constant disappointment only served to break my spirit further. I was no longer the Victoria of before. I had become nothing more than a shadow of my former self. All at the hands of the one man I should have been able to trust and know he'd have my back—my dad.

For the longest time, I hated myself more for envying my older brother. After all, his transition into a hunter had been so much smoother than mine. He'd progressed in training faster than anybody my father had ever seen. He was proud of his son and had no qualms about using it as a stick to beat me with, constantly comparing my "lackluster performance" with Kyle's accomplishments.

It took the entire first year of living life on the run to realize the problem wasn't mine but my father's. He was an egocentric, manipulative control freak. Whatever good my mother had seen in him had died along with her. I hated him, and if I passed my father on the street and he was on fire, I would one hundred percent walk on by, not even deigning to stop and piss on him.

That didn't mean I loved my brother any less, though.

During that year of hell, only one person understood what I was going through, and that was Kyle. It wasn't Kyle's fault that nothing I did pleased our father, so I never blamed him for my father's preferential treatment of him. He was doing what he was great at, fulfilling our father's every demand with flying colors. I was even grateful Kyle was hunter material because with how nasty our dad was with me, I couldn't bear thinking how he'd have reacted, what he'd have done, if neither of his children fulfilled the family legacy.

I missed my brother deeply, so much so that I had to force myself to forget him and bury my memories of us in a box in my mind. Otherwise, it hurt too much to think about him.

We'd always been close as siblings, but we'd grown even closer during that last year. My brother stayed at my side, working through drills with me or quizzing me. He battled it out with our father on my behalf more times than I cared to count, particularly when I was injured and our father demanded I work through the pain. Kyle didn't stand for that and would interfere, even though it often meant he'd have to endure his own suffering at the hands of our dad.

Through all that, I had my brother. My hero.

Then the worst possible thing happened, outside of our mother's murder. My first nightmare of a shift shattered my entire world, and I lost the last connection to my family.

While on the run, I did everything possible to not think about my brother. That's when I created the little box in my mind that had my brother's name all over it. I figured he'd probably hate me for being what I was, even though I had no control over it. I had been born that way. It was the only explanation.

After our brief reunion in this very room a handful of hours ago, I knew I was right. My loving, devoted brother thought I was a monster.

It hurt so much more than I'd thought possible, which surprised me because I'd expected it. It hurt even more because I didn't think of my wolf

as a monster anymore. Sure, we were still in the very early stages of getting to know and understand each other. Pushing her down and isolating her from other shifters had only damaged us both. The stunt back at the hospital had shown me a frightening version of my future. I had to work with her and find a balance instead of constantly fighting her every step of the way, or I really would be a monster.

As I struggled through the memories, I realized I also needed to mourn the once-solid relationship I'd had with Kyle. Yes, he'd technically spared me last night, but he'd committed a cardinal sin, one I wasn't sure I'd ever forgive: he'd taken Ridge. In the depths of my soul, I'd never be able to forgive Kyle if he or any other hunter killed him. If my father even looked in Ridge's direction...the very thought riled my wolf up. She was desperate to track him and every hunter involved. It took what little strength I had to compel her submission and not force another shift on us again.

As the minutes ticked by, it became clear that no matter how tight I thought I'd shut the mental door labeled "Kyle," it wasn't locked. A conversation flashed into my mind from when I'd been nearing the end of hunter training, when it was almost time for me to take the pledge and officially become a hunter. I hadn't thought of it in years.

My body stiffened as the memory bubbled to the surface...

"Tor, you can't say anything. I'm not supposed to tell you, but you're about to be sworn in, so what does it matter whether you know this sooner rather than later, right?" Kyle looked at me with his usual crooked smile and that cocky tilt of his head.

Cocking my head back at him, I fiddled with my water bottle, then set it aside. We eased ourselves into muscle stretches after the training run we'd just completed. I was trying to get my heart rate back under control.

A grin spread across my face as I looked at my big brother. He didn't always adhere to all the rules the hunters enforced. I wasn't wholly sure if it was because he was a rebel when it came to rules or if he just didn't like being told what to do. It didn't matter. His getting in trouble over it was a constant worry for me, but no matter how many times I pleaded with him, he didn't stop.

"The big secret is that hunters still work with witches." For it being such a secret, he hadn't lowered his voice. "The factions, especially ours, pay the covens a ton of money. Dad's adamant about using them. He's convinced it's the leg-up we need to beat the monsters."

As I tried to wrap my head around the idea that witches weren't a myth, I gasped and asked, "Witches are still around? We were told they were extinct."

*Hocus pocus* and *bippity boppity boo* were a bit beyond the realm of believability for me. Although, believing in watches wasn't much stranger than believing in shifters. But I'd *seen* a shifter, so it was hard to deny they existed.

Nodding, Kyle answered, "True, there aren't a lot of them out there, but there's still some. These witches have been helping hunters from the beginning. They're from the same family line. Once you've made your pledge, you'll be able to practice with the weapons they create. Wait till you see all the crazy gadgets they've come up with to help us subdue the shifters. They use magic to create it all, and get paid a pretty amount to do it."

My eyes widened at that. It took a lot to give the hunters the edge they needed. I hadn't yet faced a shifter—I'd only seen video footage—but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't worried about how I'd cope when I faced one.

"They even create these powerful concoctions to help with healing whenever one of us gets maimed by a beast or vampire."

I'd spent years studying Kyle, trying to be like him. I'd never managed, and right then I struggled not to show my skepticism at the existence of magic and witches in modern times. "Why are you telling me this now and not waiting until I'm pledged?"

He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal, but he had to know exactly what would happen if our father found out he'd told me. "Because you're my little sister, and I want you to know that I'll always have your back. Once you're out in the field with me, I want you to understand that there will be times you'll get hurt. It's inevitable." He exhaled, showing that he hated the idea of me being out there as much as I did. "But we have tools to mitigate the damage. I won't let anything happen to you, Tor. I'll never survive losing you." His voice cracked and rose an octave, thickening as if he had trouble getting the words out.

My throat tightened. There was no way I would survive losing him, either. We were all each other had, really. Our father certainly hadn't been there for us on an emotional level. On any level.

I leaped into my brother's arms and hugged him tight. "Same with me, Kyle. I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you."

“It’s a good thing you won’t ever have to know what that’s like. You’re stuck with me, kid.” He squeezed me tighter and tugged on my sweaty ponytail.

It was the last time we were...friendly. Not long after that, I shifted for the first time. And then I ran.

When I’d shifted back to human and recovered from the shock, I knew I’d have to run before my family set out to kill me. It’s what I’d have done, what my father had taught us to do. I’d been under no illusions about my brother’s feelings towards me. He believed me to be a monster better dead than alive...

My eyes misted at the memory as I lay in the hospital bed, a tear trickling down my cheek as it hit me harder than I wanted it to. Furiously wiping it away, I let the emotion fade, but I held on tight to the possibility of magic.

I’d always been so skeptical about witches, preferring to believe Kyle had been pulling my leg, but now I wondered if it was possible to find a witch who’d sympathize with the shifters of Blackwood Creek and help Ridge with his dream of making it a haven for shifters. It certainly wouldn’t hurt to try. Once Ridge was back, I’d discuss it with him.

After everything that had happened—Deputy Hill’s murder and hunters infiltrating the town, using the town’s own people to spy and report to them—I wanted to make this dream a reality for him.

Though morning had taken its sweet time, it finally arrived. I launched out of bed, being extra cautious because of my injury, and dressed in clothes the nurse had found in the ER’s lost and found. I might not have been as put together as a Greenthorne—I looked forward to hearing Audrey’s assessment of my outfit when I saved her—but nothing was holding me back now that I was going after Ridge.

Standing in the sterile room and watching the clock tick ever forward, I fiddled mindlessly with the antique engagement ring Ridge had given me. I twirled it around my finger and pulled it off, staring at the beautiful heirloom. I went to the bag Diana and Margo had left when I’d first been admitted and placed the ring safely in the side pocket. It would be awful if anything happened to it. I sure as hell couldn’t take the risk of losing something so precious to Ridge and so important to the Blackwood family on a rescue mission.

Not wanting to waste another moment, I headed to the nurse’s station and asked if they’d watch over my bag. After a couple of missteps—I was still

aching from the silver—I made it to the door. Clawson wasn't waiting for me, and I instantly worried he'd left without me.

I had information he didn't, and my plan was to reach the hunters' compound with or without the sheriff. But I'd prefer to have him by my side on this mission.

Just as the sun's rays of reds and yellow started gracing the sky, my fears that Clawson had left without me dissipated when he pulled up in his personal vehicle. He'd arrived at first light, just as he'd promised. The tight bands around my chest loosened and I breathed easier, relieved to see that he was a man of word.

I scurried into the passenger seat, and as soon as the seatbelt clicked into place, Clawson peeled away from the hospital, and we headed through the still-sleeping town of Blackwood Creek in silence.

For the first time since she'd woken up and realized hunters had taken Ridge, my wolf finally settled enough for me to ease the rigid control I'd had to maintain. She was easier to control now that we were going after Ridge and bringing him home.

The sound of the vehicle eating up the miles on the road was broken when Clawson turned to me with a sigh. "Just so we're clear, I'm only bringing you along because you claim to know where the hunters have taken the other shifters. Could you at least tell me the town's name? I could get shifters in the area to do some recon for us, see what we're up against."

I swallowed a laugh at his not-so-subtle interrogation technique. If I gave him anything, he'd find a way to go off on his own and leave me behind. I needed to know for sure where they'd taken Ridge, so we'd have to do some detective work first. Having the sheriff along would make that the easy part.

"Sheriff, I assure you, I know where they are. I wouldn't lie about that when their lives are at stake. But it's not as simple as a town or a point on a map; otherwise, I would have told you as soon as I woke up. There are no marked roads or signs saying: 'Hunter Camp This Way.' Their camps are always off the beaten track, but I'll know how to get there."

Truth be told, whether healed one hundred percent or not, I was our best chance at saving Ridge and the others. I was the bargaining chip.

Clawson kept his eyes on the road, but his attention stayed on me. "How do you know this?"

I couldn't tell him everything. Not now. Not before I finished this and ended the threat. But I had to give him something. Sighing, I said, "I crossed



paths with hunters several times when I was on my own before meeting Ridge.”

“I knew it.” Scoffing, Clawson gripped the wheel tighter. “I knew you were a lone wolf before you arrived in town. It’s the only explanation for you going feral.”

Oh, if only he knew.

“Shifters are meant to be around other shifters,” he continued. “It’s the nature of the beast, if you’ll forgive the pun.”

I hadn’t been afraid of being alone. In fact, I’d enjoyed the solitude. What I had been afraid of was what I was and what it meant for others. Clawson didn’t know my story, and I wasn’t obliged to enlighten him now—or ever. It was my business and mine alone. I’d never planned to share my history with anyone.

Someday, I would tell Ridge. He was the only one I’d ever trust enough to tell it to, and I felt I owed him the full truth after I’d led the hunters into his town. If he didn’t want me after that, my heart would be shattered, but Ridge deserved the truth.

It didn’t stop me from rolling my eyes, though. Being snarky was ingrained in my DNA.

“You sound like Ridge.” *And not in a good way*, I wanted to add.

Before I could say anything more, a stabbing ache in my heart stopped me. We’d been apart for mere hours, but Ridge’s absence consumed me, a loss I was made acutely aware of due to the constant stinging pain. The ache was damaging, and I couldn’t put it into words, but it was very real. I craved his smile, his kisses, his warm embrace. All I wanted was for him to return to his hometown safe and whole.

Guilt’s chokehold on my heart tightened. I should’ve kept moving, shouldn’t have settled in Blackwood for the short time I did.

Kyle’s face also kept popping into my mind. It was like seeing him again had lifted the lid off the box I’d locked away when it became clear my family wanted me dead. And now, no amount of hot glue or sealing compounds would ever close it again.

I hated everything about this situation. Kyle didn’t see me as his sister anymore, which hurt, but I didn’t know how I could ever treat him like an enemy. But if I had no other option, I’d fight my brother to the death to get Ridge back. Ridge had protected me when I was a stranger, a hitchhiker who rolled into town and was then suspected of murdering one of the town’s

deputies. He could've turned his back on me, and there had been no need for him to protect me until the truth had come out. It felt like every part of me had to honor his loyalty, no matter who I went up against.

“Umph.” I suddenly went flying forward, but the seatbelt and Clawson’s beefy arm restrained me as he hit the brakes. The tires squealed as we came to a stop in front of the sign that said: “Thank You for Visiting Blackwood Creek. Please Come Again.”

“What the hell, Clawson?”

He didn’t reply. He was staring out the windshield, and if he clenched his jaw any tighter, I feared it would shatter. I wondered what had caused him to stop so suddenly. Had he decided not to take me? Did he think I was too much of a liability?

Before I asked, I followed his gaze out the windshield. A wolf, a shifter, sat in the middle of the highway, patiently staring the sheriff down and unwilling to budge.

Clawson started cursing as he slammed the gearshift into park and shoved his door open. He slid out of the vehicle, the door banging shut behind him. I watched the wolf and Clawson as they stomped over to meet each other.

My curiosity had me focusing on the wolf. Who was it?

Clawson wanted to know, too. He was standing with one hand on his hip, one on his pistol. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. You could’ve gotten run over and killed. What the fuck do you think you’re doing? You want to act like a dumb mutt, someone will run you the fuck over. What if I hadn’t seen you? Huh? Answer me, dammit!”

The sheriff’s tirade seemed a bit over the top, but when I looked at his face more closely, I saw fear in his eyes. I glanced back at the wolf, and its defiant expression was one I’d seen before.

I shook my head. Clawson’s reaction wasn’t so disproportionate, after all. The wolf standing toe-to-claw with the sheriff was my new friend, Margo Bogford.

She was magnificent. I’d never seen her in wolf form before, and the sight of her made me regret my beliefs about shifters—the ones from before, anyway—and made me question myself again. How could I have ever thought someone so kind, generous, and amazing was a monster? Margo and her mother Diana were anything but the nightmares hunters were taught to believe shifters were.

This situation was begging to be defused, so I undid the seatbelt and got

out of the car. If she was guarding the only road out of town, she must have discovered that the hunters had taken her mom. Why else would she have been sitting in the middle of the street?

Another spear of guilt hit me right in the heart. I made a silent vow to bring Diana back; I cared deeply for the woman. She'd offered the maternal touch I'd been missing desperately and had never shied away from giving me affection. Until I'd met her, I hadn't realized I'd been missing that.

In a fast second, Margo shifted. She showed no shame in her nakedness as she stood in the middle of the road, the sun barely cracking through the horizon.

"I don't care what you have to say, Birch. I'm going with you." Her voice cracked. "I've got to go with you to find my mother."

"Like hell you are." Clawson cursed some more as he took off his jacket and wrapped it around Margo. "You're staying here. It's absolutely not happening. It's not safe out there."

The sheriff's overprotectiveness toward Margo was hard to miss. He was heated and angry, yes, but he was treating her with care.

Margo, however, seemed insulted. If looks could kill, Clawson would be dead twice over at the daggers she was glaring his way.

"You're taking my friend with you, and she's injured and needs to rest," Margo said. "She's the last person who should be going, so why can't I come along to help? Or do you think I'm some weakling bimbo who can't protect her own mother?" Her voice rose an octave as she yelled at Clawson.

Figuring this had gone far enough, I stepped forward and tried to interject, but they ignored me.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Margo?" Clawson shouted back. "You can't think that's a good idea. I'd never think of you as weak—never—but you can't come. I'm bringing your mother back while you stay safe here in Blackwood Creek. I won't hear another word about it." He held up both hands to stop her from speaking.

Margo's face puffed up and went bright red. If I looked at her just the right way, I could have sworn steam billowed out of her ears. She growled, "I don't want to be safe, Birch. I want to be helpful."

"The best way for you to be helpful would be to stop throwing a childish hissy fit in the middle of the fucking road at the ass-crack of dawn. All you're doing is adding time to the clock. The time spent arguing with you could've been better used recovering them." He pointed at her, cutting her off before

she started to reply. “You’re doing more harm than good right now.”

Margo looked like he’d slapped her. Angry tears trailed down her cheeks. I wanted to go to her—I hated seeing my friend hurting—but Diana had been taken because of my actions, and that made it hard to look Margo in the eye. She would rightfully hate me if she knew the truth.

It took a bit more arguing at full volume before they exhausted themselves. The silence that followed allowed me to be heard.

“Margo,” I said, stepping forward. “We’ll do everything possible to get Diana home safely.” I needed to reassure her, or no way were we getting past her. “Ridge is with her—he’s with them all. And you know Ridge. He’ll be protecting her, Audrey—hell, he’ll even protect Zander—regardless of whether or not they want it. You know that.” Margo wasn’t a woman easily convinced.

“I have to go with you,” Margo said, shaking her head at me. “Don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“I know how this is for you, but Blackwood Creek is in more danger than anyone realizes. If the hunters discover they left shifters behind in their search, you can be sure as shit they’ll return to finish the job. The town needs to be protected, and having as many shifters here as possible is one way to keep it safe.”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, but I could see I was winning the battle. “Margo, you’re one of only a handful of people who know the truth about what’s going on, besides the police, and they need someone to help them keep everyone level-headed. Especially if word gets out about the kidnappings.” I gripped her hands and gazed into her eyes, pleading with her to listen to me and do what was needed. “This is where you’ll be the most helpful. Clawson needs to know things are running smoothly here so we can concentrate on bringing everyone back.”

She huffed, obviously still unhappy about everything, but she finally backed down and nodded. Without another word, Margo shifted with speed and grace. I doubted I’d ever be accomplished enough to shift so seamlessly. Without so much as a backward glance at either of us, she took off into the woods surrounding Blackwood Creek.

The longing in Clawson’s eyes was plain to see as he watched her graceful form until she disappeared from view.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Clawson stooped and picked up the jacket Margo had discarded.

## Chapter 33

# Tori

We got back in the car, with Clawson even more miserable than when he'd lectured me on the dangers of being a lone wolf. His eyes never left the road, and he punched the accelerator so hard that the velocity threw me back against the seat.

He gripped the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles were white, and I feared the circle of metal and leather would bend under his hands. The tension in the truck was palpable, the silence uncomfortable, but as I opened my mouth to talk about Margo, the sheriff interrupted me.

"Don't even think about it. Don't say a word. None of this is your business." He never turned to look at me, glaring at the road instead. But the glare was meant for me, and I didn't pretend it wasn't.

I leaned back in the seat, huffing and crossing my arms. "To be clear, I'm not trying to be chummy with you or become best buds. I'd much rather mind my own business one hundred percent of the time. But I care about Margo. I consider her one of my closest friends." And I didn't have a lot of those. "Since Ridge cares about you and you two are the best of friends, it'll probably become my business whether either of us likes it or not."

I glanced over at him. His lips were pressed into a strained line, and he clearly had nothing further to say. I wasn't surprised. It wasn't like I was rushing to tell him that my engagement to Ridge was fake, or that the hunter we were tracking was my older brother.

I could accept his silence on the matter for now because there was so much at stake, but I wouldn't tolerate my friend being hurt. Margo had confessed some of her history with Birch Clawson to me, and she'd made it clear that she was confused about her feelings for him.

She'd been through so much, not least the hunters capturing her mother. Her sleazeball ex, Deputy Phil Hill, had cheated on her and broken her heart. Of course, the same librarian who'd stabbed me had murdered the deputy.

Ironically, it was being a suspect in Hill's murder that'd forced my stay in Blackwood Creek and my fake engagement to Ridge. Having friends was fairly new to me since I'd attended a hunter-run high school and never quite felt like I fit in. I'd had a boyfriend, though. One night, after one of his football games, we snuck into the gym. That was where I planned to break up with him in private. It was also where I'd shifted for the first time.

Any friends I'd had back then were within the hunter faction, and living on the run was not conducive to establishing or keeping any relationship. That was why I planned on caring for the ones I had now, no matter how messy it'd get with those who orbited them.

Clawson pulled me out of my thoughts. "How are we tracking down these hunters? You said you knew where they were, so where are we going?" His voice was still quiet and gravelly, with an emotional undercurrent, but he'd shift gears once we got to the compound. He would be Birch Clawson, Badass. With or without a gun.

"Go to the nearest private airport. When the hunters were in my room before the drug took effect, I overheard them talking about getting the shifters packed up and off to the airport. A plane was ready for take-off when they got there." The fib flowed easily from my mouth. Kyle was the only hunter I'd seen, but I didn't need to tell the sheriff how I knew exactly where we needed to be. All he needed was directions to get us there.

As I squirmed in my seat, I played it off as needing to get more comfortable because of my wound, when in reality, it was knowing we were that much closer to getting Ridge and the others. My stomach was tied up in knots as I mentally prepared for the potential complications and who we might encounter when we entered their compound.

With all their fortune, hunters traveled in style and were outfitted as if an actual government agency employed them. Once they subdued and extracted the monsters—their words—the team had to swiftly transport the prisoners to one of their three hidden facilities across the country to prevent any disturbance from the waking beasts.

My father had once told me about a shifter who'd woken mid-flight. It hadn't been a happy ending for anyone involved.

And what better way than to travel than by private jet? When I'd been in

training, I'd been transferred to each of the three depots here in the U.S.; there were many more worldwide. Each compound had its own plane and set of pilots, so the organization was always ready to transport a new capture.

I crossed my fingers. "If I can get a look at the flight plans and fuel records, I'll be able to determine where they were taken."

The drive to the private airport only took twenty minutes, which surprised me. I'd figured it would be a ways out from the small town of Blackwood Creek. Or maybe Clawson had just driven fast all the way here.

We walked inside, and Clawson went straight to a woman seated behind a desk. He pulled out his badge and showed it to her. With Clawson flashing his badge, utilizing his skills as sheriff, and using a careful line of questioning, we were scanning the record database within ten minutes of entering the airport.

I was happy that the sheriff had listened to me and helped me get the answers I needed. After picking out the pertinent flight, relief flooded me. The hunters were using the Colorado compound. I knew that place well enough that I'd once called it home. Kyle and I had grown up near it. After our mother's murder, Dad moved us onto the base.

I pushed those memories down and got my head back on track. I had a fake fiancé to save.

"You're sure they're in Colorado?" Clawson asked as he scanned the list, frowning. "There're several planes on this list. What makes you positive that's the right one?"

Keeping my eye-rolling to a minimum, I sighed instead. It wasn't surprising that he was questioning me, but it still irritated me. "Look, I know you have no reason to trust me, but trust that I'd do anything to get Ridge back. You have to know that much, at least. There's no way I'd take us on a wild goose chase. This is the plane, and that's the location."

Frustration mounted inside me. Clawson was second-guessing me, and we'd need another private charter plane, which took a lot of time to schedule. Not to mention the cost; I certainly didn't have the funds for that. I ran my fingers through my hair and tried not to let the hiccups in the planning get me down.

"You're right. You wouldn't lead us in the wrong direction. Not when Ridge was involved." Clawson grabbed his phone and made a quick call, confirming somebody's location. "Good, we'll be there soon. Get everything set." He hung up and looked at me. "Follow me."

We went back into his SUV. He sped through the lot and made his way to the tarmac.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he stopped the car at the entrance to the airfield. He opened the car door to leave.

“I need to check the tires and make sure there are no rocks or debris in them. I’ll be quick.”

He launched himself out of the vehicle before I could question him further and headed to the front driver’s side tire, where he leaned down. Within moments, he was back up and did the same thing to the other three wheels, then hopped back in and drove off.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I cocked my head and looked at him. Maybe he was looking for tracking devices, but I doubted it. Time was of the essence. We didn’t have a lot to spare.

“Before a vehicle can get onto the field, we need to ensure there are no rocks, screws, nails, or anything else in the tires. If debris from the vehicle drops on the runway and a plane starts to take off, the force can turn it into a weapon or suck it into the engine, which can cause a catastrophe.”

I appreciated his conscientiousness, but again, we didn’t have time to waste.

We pulled up in front of a hangar, and Clawson got out and waited for me. Once I was out, he locked the doors, and we made our way inside the large hangar, where a private plane was taxiing toward the flight line.

“Wait here,” Clawson commanded before jogging into the hangar.

I watched him closely, still half-expecting him to try to lose me so he could leave me behind, but he just walked toward a little black box fixed to the wall. He opened the lid, which was more like a hatch, and hung his keys inside. When he finished, he ran back to me.

“Sheriff, we’re ready,” a male voice said behind me.

I spun around to see the man who’d spoken. The fast movement made my stitches twinge, and I winced. I’d better screw my head on the right way before we reached the compound. I couldn’t afford for a hunter to get the drop on me because I wasn’t situationally aware. Stupidity like that would put me on the fast track to death.

The sheriff nodded and looked at the tall, dark guy. I could see he was a Blackwood shifter. “Thank you, Brady. We’re heading to Lamar, Colorado. We need to get there as quickly as possible. It’s an emergency.”

Brady nodded. “Yes, sir. The plane’s ready for you two to board. It’ll take



me a few minutes to file the flight plan and get clearance, but then we're off."

Clawson nodded, and we boarded the private plane. I wasn't aware of how large the shifter population was in Blackwood, but right now, I was thankful for it.

The plane was opulent, with its cream-colored leather seats and gleaming wood accents. It was one of those *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* planes that few people rarely saw, and I certainly didn't belong in.

"Care to explain?" I waved my hands as I continued looking at the plane. It was a twelve-seater with a little galley and two couches spacious enough for me to stretch out on them. The hunters' planes were shabby in comparison.

Clawson stopped buckling himself in for a second to raise his brow at me like I had grown a second head. "This is Blackwood Enterprises' private jet. Ridge uses it for business trips. I would have thought you'd know that by now." He eyed me closely, like if he stared hard enough, he'd uncover all my secrets.

*Think again, pal.*

I ignored him with extreme focus and continued assessing the plane, letting my uneasiness settle down. I had forgotten that my fake fiancé had an inheritance the size of a small country. He'd probably inherited this plane.

I kept my face blank as I settled in the seat across from Clawson and said, "Sorry, I'm still a little off from the mixture of the hunters' tranquilizer and the painkillers the doctors gave me. My fiancé is missing, and I just want to get to him."

Clawson didn't reply with more than a grunt, so I didn't know whether he bought it. He kept his eyes on me for a moment longer than I liked, but I kept quiet. I'd said all I was going to say.

There were more important things to stress over than the sheriff learning the truth about Ridge and me. That can of worms could explode once Ridge and the others were home and safe in Blackwood Creek.

I nestled into the seat, reveling in the plush leather against my skin and grateful that my fake fiancé was a billionaire with his own plane. Under normal circumstances, I would have thought a private jet for only a couple of people sounded like a ridiculous waste of fuel, but this transportation was a godsend. I couldn't imagine having to deal with other passengers while feeling so keyed up and on edge. One thing was for certain: I was never going to stick my nose up at it ever again.

“We’re ready to take off. Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened during take-off and landing.” The pilot’s announcement over the intercom settled my stomach, and I let out a relieved breath. Finally, we were getting closer to Ridge.

Even though I was in a tremendous amount of pain—which I’d never admit to Clawson—my mind whirled with thoughts of Ridge and the others. I had a thousand worst-case scenarios in my head of how the hunters might be torturing them.

A twinge of fiery pain lit my wound like a live wire, and I bit back a hiss. My inner wolf was pacing, feeling claustrophobic and hating being caged in a moving metal tube. She thought we were trapped in the air with no way out. The intensity of her fear induced a massive headache, and my vision faded in and out, going dark, then light, then dark again.

Before I could get a handle on her and the feral side effects, my breathing quickened. I couldn’t rein myself in. I clawed at the seatbelt as my breathing sharpened to short, shallow puffs. My wolf was convinced the plane was spinning, and I had a fleeting moment of terror when I believed we were going down.

My wolf wouldn’t see reason, no matter how hard I tried to keep her under control and convince her not to shift. It was damn near impossible to control her fears. She’d gone mad, ready to take over and control everything. This was a dangerous place to shift, and if my stitches tore, there was no doctor on board to close them up again.

“Tori, take in a deep breath and let it out slowly,” Clawson said softly.

I nodded, trying to focus on the soothing tone of his voice.

“Just breathe in through your nose and out your mouth. Come on. You can do it.”

I wasn’t so sure.

“I’ll do it with you. Come on. Look at me.”

The snapping of a seatbelt coming undone distracted me for a second, and then Clawson was kneeling in front of me. True to his word, he was doing the breathing exercises with me.

“Tori, keep your eyes on me.” When I tried to turn away, he took my face in his hands and twisted me back. “You can control the shift. Just keep breathing.”

As I followed along with his breaths, I started to feel the vice-like grip of my wolf ease slowly.

“That’s it. You’ve got this.” He nodded, still holding my face between his palms. “Deep inhale through your nose, slow exhale out your mouth. In, two, three. Out, two, three. That’s right. Slow and easy.”

His calm, patient voice helped ratchet down the panic until my inner beast settled into a peaceful quiet.

He was treating me more like a friend than the no-nonsense sheriff I’d been dealing with. And I was grateful. Without his help, there was no telling what would have happened or if we’d even made it on that plane, much less made it to Colorado in one piece.

“You’ll be with Ridge soon, and then everything will be okay. You just need to hold on a little bit longer.” He smiled. “You can’t give up now. I need you to keep him in line for me.”

I could smile now, so we were making progress.

“Because once he finds out I let you come along, he’s going to have my head. I’m probably going to need you to step in and protect me.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. The danger had passed, and we could laugh now. The thought of the big bad sheriff hiding behind me while Ridge tried to apprehend him was too amusing, and despite the gravity of the situation, I found myself grinning.

The headache began to fade, and my vision returned to normal as the blinking stars and tunnel vision dissipated.

“You should know that Ridge and I’ve been good friends since he returned to town.” He smiled as if his words inspired a memory, but he didn’t share it with me. “He might seem all nice and diplomatic, but that’s only one side of him. He’s one hell of a tough alpha and doesn’t take shit from anybody. If anyone can handle what’s happening, he can. Ridge will do whatever it takes to protect everybody with him and for damn sure get back to you. He just found you. He’s not going to let anything separate you guys now.” He shrugged. “That’s not how it works with mates.”

Hearing how strong Ridge was and that Clawson had such ultimate confidence in him—especially since it came from a man Ridge considered to be his best friend, a man who knew him so well—was something I desperately needed at the moment. So did my wolf, because she eased off and became more settled.

I also liked the idea that Clawson believed Ridge would fight to return to me, even though deep down, a part of me I really wanted to ignore knew it wasn’t the truth. We were only pretending to be engaged, but the certainty in

Clawson's tone helped me keep my shit together.

Closing my eyes, I let myself relax a little more, and when I opened my eyes, the sheriff was still crouched in front of me, looking at me with concern. I appreciated that he wasn't cold, angry, or annoyed. He actually appeared to care. That meant a lot to me. I was using every weapon in my arsenal to keep my wolf in check and the feral at bay.

"Thank you," I whispered. As hard as it had to have been for Clawson to admit he was wrong, it was doubly hard for me and my stupid pride. I swallowed, even though my throat was parched. "I really didn't want to pop my stupid stitches all over again. Especially on a private plane. That could've been a disaster."

Nodding, he said, "You're welcome. I'm just glad I could help." He stood and went back to his seat.

After the terror passed, and I knew he wasn't looking at me anymore, I took a second to study him. His eyelids were heavy, and the bags under his eyes were deep and purple. He needed a few solid weeks of sleep. He'd been going full steam since Phil Hill had been murdered and Mrs. Marrow had stabbed me. And then his best friend had been abducted.

It was a safe bet that Clawson hadn't gotten any rest since this all started. If he wasn't careful, he'd crash and burn hard.

I hated for something to happen to him. And not because of what he'd just done for me, but for Ridge and Margo, and certainly for Blackwood Creek. He was a fantastic sheriff. Keeping that town and all its citizens safe was something he took seriously. Every traffic stop, every investigation, and every time he helped at the summer flings and winter festivals, he showed that.

Straightening my shoulders and sitting taller in my seat, I gathered the courage to say what I needed to say, though I was hardly any good at it. "I owe you an apology."

That must have surprised the hell out of him because he snapped his head and gave me his undivided attention. "What for?"

Leaning back against the headrest, I confessed, "I suspected you of Phil Hill's murder after learning about everything that had happened between Margo and him. When she told me about your history, I had no trouble suspecting you were the killer."

I turned my head and eyed him. His face was blank, and he didn't seem angry or stressed. He simply watched me, waiting for me to continue.

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t hurt your deputy. You’re like the poster boy for law and order. No one I’ve ever met adheres to the law the way you do. Committing a murder might actually kill you.”

Chuckling, he rubbed his face. “No, it probably wouldn’t kill me, but... you know, it might.”

All I could do was hope that he’d accept my apology and forgive me. We sat in silence for a moment, and I wondered what thoughts were spinning around in his head.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what I would have done if I’d found Phil alive and well that morning. I was furious, and the idea of anyone cheating on Margo and hurting her made me feel pretty damn murderous. That’s no lie.” His face changed into a mask of what I could only believe was anger. His eyes narrowed as if he was seeing Phil in front of him.

His candor surprised me.

“Yeah, well, there’s a difference between feeling that way and acting it out,” I said. Even I had a conscience. “It’s what differentiates us from the true monsters.” Of course, I didn’t have to explain that to him.

“True. In the end, I probably wouldn’t have killed him, but I might have done some serious damage to him, which wouldn’t have been right, either. He was human, and I’m a shifter. There’s no contest there. I have control, but I’ve found when it comes to Margo, that control can easily be lost.”

He really cared for Margo. Good. She deserved someone who cared for her, and Clawson was a great guy. I wondered if they’d ever work out.

“Someone told me you got suspended from school for defending Margo years ago,” I declared, trying to gauge the temperature of this conversation.

He didn’t react, so I continued. “You seemed to be extra protective of her. Still are.”

Clawson leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “I don’t like being away from her right now. Not when she’s so mad at me, and probably scared to death for her mother.” He sighed, and the sound seemed to come straight from his soul—or so my romantic heart thought. “I need to focus on getting everybody back, but it doesn’t stop me from wondering how she’s doing and what she’s doing.” He paused, and in a softer voice, he said, “And if she might be thinking about me.”

It was impossible to ignore how lost he sounded, and my heart went out to him. He spoke so quietly yet so emotionally about her, and I’d seen the way he always looked at her, even if I hadn’t realized it at the time. He was a

goner.

And maybe I recognized that in him because his feelings for Margo mirrored mine for Ridge. And I was finding it harder to deal with Ridge's absence than I'd ever thought possible.

"As soon as we get back to town, I'll smooth things over with her," Clawson said. I wasn't even sure if he was still talking to me or if he'd started talking to himself. "Then, I'll give her all the space in the world again if that's what she really wants. I'd do anything for my fated mate to be happy, even if it's not with me."

I quirked my head in question at the words "fated mate," but his eyes were still closed. That was new information. I was touched by how much this stoic sheriff loved my friend, but what was a fated mate?

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open, and he leveled a dark look at me. "I'll protect Margo from anything that's a threat to her. Including you, if you get any more feral." He cocked a brow, and I didn't miss the challenge in his tone. "I've seen Ridge's aunt more than enough times to know what kind of risk you pose. If you weren't engaged to my friend and alpha, and if I didn't need you to take me to where they are being held, I'd have you under house arrest until Ridge returned and your wolf calmed the fuck down, because your feral wolf would just cause more chaos in Blackwood Creek. God forbid you lost control of yourself and shifted in public."

And we'd been having such a pleasant conversation. Ugh. I got where he was coming from, but it didn't make it any easier to hear. Until I'd met Ridge, I had no inkling about lone wolves and going feral. I hadn't willingly taken this path, and I'd fought tooth and nail to keep my wolf under control. So much so that I'd only shifted a handful of times in the past four years. That had to count for something.

"You should also take the backseat once we reach the compound. There's no way you can go charging in without losing control and popping your stitches all over again. No one needs that, and it'll make our objective that much harder to achieve."

Irritation crawled up my spine. I wanted to smack the sheriff upside the head, but I didn't want to cross the line. Slapping the sheriff would probably be frowned upon.

Clawson had no clue what I was capable of, and it was best to keep it that way.

"Sheriff, your *ego* can take a backseat. I can handle myself, thank you

very much.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “And why the hell do you think we’d be charging into a hunter compound? Are you trying to get us killed? We need to come up with a plan. We can’t afford to go in there blind or stupid.”

And in case he was wondering...

“I sure as hell didn’t get by this long on my own by being stupid,” I added.

## Chapter 34

# Ridge

It had been hours since Kyle had dragged Zander out of the holding area. Diana was still out cold, which concerned me, and Audrey and I sat quietly in our cells, waiting for whoever or whatever was coming our way.

My frustration was a tight-coiled snake in the pit of my stomach. I hated being useless in any situation. I was ready to pull my hair out and do something stupid. The only thing that kept me in check was my worry for my pack members.

I tried brainstorming how to get us all out of there, but we were weak, and the silver cells made escape near impossible. There weren't enough opportunities, and we would be far too easy to catch if we attempted to leave.

Because of the heavy doses of the drugs still pumping through our systems, Audrey and I took shifts to ensure one of us always stayed conscious, even though it would have been very easy to lie down and nap. The building had no windows or clocks, which I supposed was all the better to keep their prisoners disoriented, but since werewolves were tied to the moon, I instinctively knew the time. Maybe not down to the minutes and seconds, but I had a keen idea of the time of day, which weirdly helped me tolerate the captivity.

They'd come in earlier, caught Audrey and me unawares, and administered a drug through a blowpipe like we were wild animals in captivity. The drug prevented us from shifting. I knew because I'd tried. Plus, the prick who'd done the job had taken great pleasure in boasting about what he was doing.

Shifters had so much more to fear these days. The more science



advanced, the more danger we were in. I didn't know why anyone would help create such a destructive, dangerous serum. And who the fuck knew what side effects we'd suffer in the short and long term? What else had they designed to keep shifters from their natural state of being? What would this do to our species? My head was filled with questions I'd likely never know the answers to. The hunters were clearly afraid of our beasts; otherwise, why the sedated separation?

Zander had yet to return, and the hours passed much slower than I'd have liked. I was an alpha, used to taking action, being in charge of the situation. Right now, I was useless. All the different possibilities of what they were doing to him—a wolf under my protection, no less—kept playing out like my own private nightmare.

It was strange, experiencing the drug in my system. Even though my wolf was hampered by the poison those bastards had pumped into my veins, I could still sense him, was still aware of his anger at not knowing where Zander was. I couldn't help thinking that Zander had been gone for far too long, and it stressed me out that I didn't know exactly what we were up against.

Thankfully, I still hadn't caught Tori's or any other shifter's scent since we arrived here—wherever "here" was. Every time the door opened, I paid close attention to what was out there. Either they didn't have a large crew of hunters, or only a small team occupied this facility. Not knowing their numbers made it harder to devise a plan.

This was war, but there were too many unknowns. When I got out of here, I needed to convince the alphas of other packs exactly how at risk our species was and educate them on the hunters' capabilities. Then, I'd try to get them to join us in Blackwood Creek, where we'd form a haven with a defense force strong enough to halt the hunters.

I'd underestimated the hunters. They were far better equipped than I had originally given them credit for.

The door popped open, and the blond, burly hunter strolled into the room and approached Audrey's cell. He stood still as he eyed her closely. Attempting to gauge what he was playing at was nigh on impossible. He was disgusted by her because she was a shifter, but it was also plain to see he was attracted to her—Audrey was a beautiful woman—and that conflict had to be eating away at him.

He couldn't hide it from us because, unfortunately, the smell of his

arousal filled the room whenever he looked at her. I feared he'd lash out at her because he desired her, but in the end, you couldn't control who you were attracted to. Rage and disgust lit my every cell. I wanted to set this monster straight. He wasn't worthy enough for the likes of Audrey Greenthorne, or any other woman in my pack.

He taunted her, dangling bottled water and a sandwich in front of her. It gave the fucker too much pleasure.

"Do you want something to eat?" He thrust his pelvis in her direction, standing between the silver bars of her cell and laughing. "You must be hungry," he cooed, actually cooed at her as if he expected her to do a trick for a treat like a trained dog. He acted like she'd be so lucky to suck him off.

A soft snarl rumbled from my throat. Had I not been in this cell, I never would have tolerated his innuendos. He'd pay for that comment.

We hadn't eaten or had any water the whole time we'd been here, and my wolf thought he looked mighty tasty. We'd give the hunters a run for their money if we weren't drugged and caged in silver. They relied too heavily on their weapons and gadgets to even come close to being a match for a shifter if we were on an even playing field. I'd like to see what this hunter do if we were alone and I was at full strength. It'd be an intense battle, but it'd feel damn fucking good to clamp down on his throat and rip it out.

Harnessing the princess persona that she'd been raised to cultivate, Audrey ignored him completely. She stayed seated on the floor, examining her expensive manicure, tscking from time to time at a chip in her polish, and treating him like he was the shit beneath her shoe. I suppressed a laugh at the obvious annoyance plastered all over the asshole's face. He struck me as the type of boy who thought women owed him something and didn't handle rejection very well, if at all. Even if he weren't a hunter, I'd have him on my radar.

The more I watched Audrey, the more I found myself in awe of her courage and fearless spirit. I hated that I'd never appreciated her before, that I'd tarred her with the same brush as her entitled parents. But she was nothing like them. They'd never have had the poise she'd shown in this situation. And they'd have sold Tori out if it meant they'd be free.

I knew Audrey and Tori had come to an understanding, even though it had baffled me when Audrey had told me. To the outside world, they were very different women from completely different social backgrounds with little in common. But despite that, they were quite similar in some ways.

Both Tori and Audrey were tenacious and stubborn, strong women. I was happy to acknowledge the error of my ways and give Audrey my due.

The longer Audrey ignored the hunter, the darker his smile became, as if he was fantasizing about hurting her. I wasn't too fond of the attention he was heaping on her. I didn't want to know what was rattling around in his warped mind because I knew it wasn't anything good. In our current situation, I couldn't do much, but I prayed Kyle had a tight enough hold on his men that nothing unsavory would happen to Audrey while the plan I'd come up with to get his attention came to fruition.

Glancing at Diana in the cage beside me, I worried about both women for different reasons. Audrey because she was young and beautiful, and Diana because she was older and had been unconscious for far longer than was healthy.

I was done waiting for her to wake up. I wanted answers, and I wanted them now.

Slowly, I stood, careful to avoid the silver and doing my best to ignore the throbbing pain in my shoulder. Blood was seeping through the bandages and my shirt. Was that a side effect of the drugs, or because the wound was from a silver bullet and hadn't been cared for properly? It wasn't clotting like it should have been, but that was the least of my worries now. I wanted to get the hunter's attention. If I got him focusing on Diana and me, he'd stop leering at Audrey for a while.

"Hey, guard, you need to check on the lady in the other cell. She's been out cold since we arrived. You need to check her vitals."

The guard grunted. "Shut up. I don't need to do anything. I don't take orders from animals." He sneered at me over his shoulder before turning his gaze back to Audrey.

It was unlikely that I'd get this guy to do anything in Diana's favor. If I caused too much of a stir, I'd be the next one dragged out of here. I couldn't afford to rock the boat too much because I didn't dare leave the women alone. Not that I was doing much for them now, but if I wasn't here, I couldn't run interference between Audrey and the guards. And if something happened to either her or Diana, I'd never be able to live with myself.

Having already lost my mother, and then an aunt to the feral disease, losing another mother figure in my life was more than I could stand to think about. I was determined to get Diana help, or checked over at the very least.

Watching the hunter closely in case he turned around again, I lowered to

the ground and grabbed what was left over of the bandages Kyle had given me earlier. I gritted my jaw to contain the pain in my shoulder, and with all the shifter strength I could muster through the drugs in my system, I hurled the bandages through the bars, hitting the hunter in the back of the head.

The hunter's head snapped to me, and in a flash, his temper erupted as he gunned for my cell. He was inside before I could blink. No way were these hunters ordinary humans. Humans didn't move with the same speed and agility as shifters.

I raised my arm to block the hunter's attack. Though I was in no shape to give him my all, I had enough in me to hold my own and get a few shots in. I'd expected a hunter to be an experienced opponent with a repertoire of techniques. This guy had to be a rookie. He was a lazy fighter and made stupid mistakes, relying only on his brute strength. If he was going after shifters, he needed to hone his other skills; strength matched against strength wasn't enough. I'd learned long ago to never rely solely on my shifter abilities; it took training and discipline. If I depended on my shifter strength alone, I'd have been out cold with the drugs coursing through me because I wouldn't have been able to withstand his punches and kicks.

Then, as any asshole did when they couldn't gain the upper hand, he cheated and grabbed for a canister on his belt. The next second, I was gritting my teeth to stop from screaming in agony as he sprayed wolfsbane in my face. I staggered back and tried to stay upright so I'd fall on the floor and not against the bars. The skin on my face felt like it was melting off the bone.

Audrey's screams reverberated through the room as she flung profanities at the hunter and threatened him with unspeakable pain. I didn't know she was such a bloodthirsty little thing. She was creative with her vocabulary.

The door flew open, and the uproar I'd caused got the attention of Kyle, which had been my end goal all along. He wasn't the good guy by any means, but he didn't have the same douchebag complex and didn't rise to any of the bait.

Kyle hadn't been back here since dragging Zander away earlier, but he must have run a tight ship because the second Kyle walked into the room, Blondie hurried out of my cell, rushing to explain himself and tripping over his words. Before he'd gotten a sound out, Kyle lifted a hand and the putz shut his mouth.

"Go clean up Giselle's mess. She's done with the shifter and has left the compound."

Kyle looked around the room, showing the other hunter he was dismissed. Blondie looked uncomfortable, giving Kyle a wide berth as he left without a word.

The marks from the beating were already healing, but my shoulder was worse off, and the pain was lancing me from head to toe. It didn't matter. I was too focused on what Kyle had said. Who was this Giselle? And what did she do to cause a mess? I wouldn't be much of an alpha if I didn't worry that Zander might be dead.

Staggering a little on my feet, I used my most commanding alpha voice. "What happened to Zander? Did you kill him?"

Ignoring me, Kyle entered Diana's cage and checked her vitals. "She's still alive, for now. She's just having a severe reaction to our drug. It's not the first time it's happened, and it won't be the last. She'll sleep it off and be fine, so calm your alpha ass down."

Happy that Diana was okay, I took the time to really examine Kyle, and the more I watched and listened to him, the more I noticed so many familiar little things. He shared the same mannerisms with my mate. There was no denying it any longer. This top hunter was her older brother. How in the world had he chosen to become a shifter hunter if he'd known what Tori was? Shouldn't he have been protecting her? My stomach swirled, and I wanted to be sick.

Tori had her secrets. Who knew if she'd told her family anything after she'd first shifted? She'd told me she ran and never looked back. Had she been afraid of what Kyle would think, or was there something bigger going on that I hadn't figured out yet? If Tori had confided in me, I could've helped her sooner.

I wished we were together at the manor right now. Preferably curled up in my bed or in the kitchen while I fed Tori and then feasted on her.

I stopped myself from getting carried away with thoughts of Tori's body and forced my mind back to the present. I'd studied this room closely, but I still had no plan that would allow us to escape. The room was a fortress. Any spot we could possibly muscle through was corked with silver. The hunters hadn't wasted an inch of this place.

These hunters knew what they were dealing with, which made them even more dangerous. Because what was more dangerous than an enemy who knew their opponent forward and backward? I'd been trying to figure out the hunters for years, but without stooping to their levels, we'd never had the

chance to get the inside hook.

Suddenly, Audrey screamed at the top of her lungs and curled into the fetal position. My heart thrummed, and sweat slicked my palms.

“Audrey?! Audrey, what’s wrong?” I was seething at the hunters. Was it the drug? Had they given her something else? “Talk to me, Audrey!”

She didn’t stop screaming.

Kyle hurried over to her and stopped in front of her cage. He knelt on the floor. As soon as his knee touched the floor, Audrey jumped up and reached through the bars. She wrapped her hand around Kyle’s neck and slammed him against the bars. Once she had him in a chokehold, she grabbed the gun from his waist holster and aimed it at his head. Her movements were so fast and stealthy that my jaw dropped in surprise.

Before the gun was cocked and pulled, hunters piled into the room, their weapons drawn and aimed in Audrey’s direction. Luckily, she was smart enough to place Kyle in their line of sight. With how quickly the hunters had responded, the room must have had cameras all over.

Audrey trembled as she held Kyle by the throat, the gun wavering in her hand as she held the barrel pressed against his temple. For all her bravery, I was willing to bet the spoiled daughter of the Greenthornes had never handled a weapon, and it scared the crap out of me. So many scenarios played out in my head, and if she was shot and killed, I didn’t think I’d ever recover. The guilt would eat me alive.

“You’re going to let us go, or I’m going to kill your captain.” Her body shook, but her voice was steady and didn’t waver.

Kyle laughed. “Ignore her. She’s bluffing. She won’t do it.”

She pushed the barrel harder against his head. “Watch it. I’m not fucking bluffing. I’ll do it. I have nothing to lose now.”

With hatred in his tone, he scolded Audrey. “I’m sure you will because you’re a monster. Killing is second nature to you. It’s what you do.”

Every muscle in my body stiffened. That was the exact same way Tori had spoken about shifters when we’d first met. I ached, knowing my beautiful mate had been brainwashed into this garbage. Anger simmered under the surface of my skin. The most strikingly beautiful and determined woman I’d ever set eyes on—an innocent shifter—had been raised to hate herself so profoundly.

The hunters were torn about what to do, wavering back and forth between Kyle and Audrey. Watching the scene closely, I only envisioned one

outcome: Audrey's blood spilling on the ground, and it'd be on my hands because I couldn't protect her.

I refused to let that happen. We'd find another way to get out of here. I wouldn't hesitate. Furthermore, the hunters were trigger-happy and would take the first smidgen of an opportunity to make the shot.

"Let him go, Audrey." My tone was soft, my eyes trained on her, making promises that I prayed I'd be able to keep.

Slowly, her trembling hands lowered, and she dropped the gun. She listened to her alpha like she was supposed to, and for that, I was grateful. Having her blood on my hands was unacceptable.

A deafening ringing punctured the air. With my shifter-heightened senses, the sound shook my brain. The lights flickered, then the room was plunged into complete darkness.

The hunters were caught unawares and muttered among themselves as they tried to work out what was happening. My shifter sight allowed me to see that all the cell doors were unlocked. The doors must've been connected to a system command.

Without wasting another second, I pounced on the nearest hunter and knocked him out before he could run from the room. *Coward.* I whirled around, pinned Kyle back to the bars, and hit him square in the chin with all the strength I could muster to stop him from reaching for the gun.

The other hunters were storming out of the room, preparing themselves for the incoming attack. I slammed my foot against the unconscious hunter's head one more time to make sure he'd be out for a long while.

Audrey picked up the gun she'd dropped and handed it to me before running into Diana's cell, picking her up, and tossing her over her shoulder fireman-style.

Holding Kyle in front of me, the barrel of the gun pressed to his temple, I led us out of the room. We moved quickly, utilizing all our senses to guide us through the building and out into the open. Once the sunlight hit our eyes, it took a second to take in where we were—in the center of a small compound with modern facilities. I did a three-sixty look. This place was in the middle of nowhere. Beyond the fence surrounding the buildings, a sagebrush-filled desert went on for miles and miles.

The dry desert heat assaulted me as I scanned the area and tried to figure out where Zander was.

We stayed to the side of the building. I kept my hand firmly planted over

Kyle's mouth so he didn't alert anyone. Several hunters roamed the area, their weapons drawn. It made sense that there weren't many hunters milling about the place—that would only draw attention to the site—but I'd expected to see more than a handful of them. It seemed the hunters thought they were infallible.

Their organization didn't have the numbers I'd initially expected, at this site at least. Certainly not enough to equal the shifter population. I had to remember that so I could act accordingly.

"They're escaping!" a loud voice bellowed across the way.

Every hunter in the vicinity stopped, stood tall, and aimed their weapons at us. Audrey, still carrying Diana, fell in behind me, but before one round was shot, a massive gray wolf the size of a horse plowed into them, tearing the hunters apart with his sharp teeth. Their screams overtook the airwaves as blood pooled at the wolf's feet.

I'd never been so happy to see Clawson. I was seriously impressed that he'd managed to track us down and do all this in such a short amount of time.

Elation soared through me when Tori's scent hit me. My mate was nearby. But that elation quickly vanished, and I clenched my jaw as blood rushed into my ears. How could she put herself in such danger? I'd die if anything happened to her. As relieved as I was that Clawson had come to our rescue, I was going to lay into him the first chance I got. How dare he endanger my mate?

Dragging Kyle along with me, I followed Tori's scent. I needed her in my arms, needed to know she was okay. She was wounded, and I'd already almost lost her. This field trip of hers was too much excitement for someone who needed to heal.



## Chapter 35

# Tori

I was thrilled, relieved, and a little surprised by how easy it was to break into the Colorado faction. Fortunately for our mission, I'd spent the last year of my old life training here, so I was familiar with the compound. Normally, pledges weren't allowed to know exact locations in case they didn't pass the training, but Kyle and I had been an exception because of our dad.

It'd been fortunate that Kyle had brought Ridge and the others here—it saved time searching for them on the other bases. It wasn't hard to read between the lines and figure out where the compounds were located. I'd sought out most of them years ago during training, when I'd learned about the paranormals who existed unknown and unseen in the world, but who knew what changes my father had made in the four years I'd been gone? It was a relief to know Ridge and the others were somewhere I knew well. We wouldn't have to lay waste to every camp until we found them.

But I'd have done it for Ridge. I'd do anything and everything to find him.

We'd parked well out of sight of the compound and hid the rental car in a brush. We were silent as we moved closer, using the small bushes and boulders for cover. Hunter factions had always relied on their magically enhanced firepower and strength that they honed with intense training, not so much on their numbers. However, I was still shocked to find that the compound had far fewer hunters stationed there than I'd expected.

They were currently detaining four shifters we knew, and possibly prisoners from other packs. With such valuable assets, I'd expected the place to be outfitted with many hunters and even additional patrols marching the outside perimeter. During my training, they'd been known to hire private

defense contractors who knew nothing about paranormal creatures for the menial task of guard duty while people in the know were inside, doing what needed to be done. I saw none of that here.

Clawson and I had waited and observed for an hour before the patrolling hunters suddenly ran across the lot into a larger building in the middle of the property. There seemed to be a lot of commotion happening inside the largest windowless building. The hunters patrolling the fence even deserted their posts to assist, leaving it wide open for us to make our move and sneak in. We walked past the front gate unobserved and made it into the security room, where we got the drop on two hunters who hadn't seen us coming. They'd been too enthralled with what was happening on the bank of monitors before them, leaving their backs unprotected—a dereliction of duty that my father would have punished severely.

Clawson snuck in on light feet. For a man of his size, he was pussycat-quiet. He punched the first guard so hard that he was out cold. Before the second guard even reacted, Clawson had him in a sleeper hold, and within seconds, the guard passed out. While I hacked into the security system, which was a little too easy, Clawson used the hunters' own handcuffs to secure them and locked them in the closet.

Either I'd been trained exceptionally well, or these hunters had become lax in their security. I hated to admit it, but if we had to embark on another rescue mission in the future, it'd never be as easy as this—they'd regroup and retaliate. Hunters learned from their mistakes. They had to, because as much as it pained me to say, their mistakes caused lives. They spouted vitriol that shifters and vampires were nothing more than senseless beasts that needed to be eradicated, but I'd seen the truth now. They were the true monsters. I wanted the hunters to cease to exist.

“Are you getting anywhere?” Clawson asked as he hovered over my shoulder.

My fingers flew over the keys as I quickly read the code. “Almost there. This system is ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous, how?”

“Well, this is a highly secure facility with paranormal secrets that the majority of the world isn't privy to, yet their system is vulnerable to hacking as long as someone knows what they're doing and where they're going. It's flimsy.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you're just good at this shit?”

Laughing, I said. “Yeah, I’m sure. And I am good. I know where I’m going, but I’m not a natural hacker. This is all from rudimentary training.”

Finally, I discovered the code I needed and found all the cameras, lights, alarms, and mechanisms for the cells. Bingo.

“You better prepare yourself,” I said. “There’s going to be some noise.”

Clawson went to the door and prepared to launch at anyone coming our way. “I’m ready.”

Furiously typing away, I had everything shut off within seconds and the alarms blaring like it was the Fourth of July.

Taking a few extra seconds, I placed a lock on the system, then shut everything off. That would lock them out of the servers for a while. They’d have to enter through some back doors, but it gave us time to put space between us and this place while they tried to figure out what had happened.

“Head over to that building everyone hauled ass to,” I said. “I bet that’s where they’re probably keeping everybody. I’ll check the other buildings and make sure we don’t miss anything,” I told Clawson before I took off in the opposite direction.

Behind me, Clawson was cursing and naming all the reasons why separating was a terrible idea, but I ignored him and moved as fast as I could with my injury. I wasn’t going to be an idiot and do anything to endanger myself more, but I knew the smaller building held the special prisoners. That was where the hunters liked to do their experiments and break the strong-willed. With Ridge being an alpha, I figured that was where they were holding him.

I needed to see him. I couldn’t wait any longer. I needed him now. My wolf had caught his scent, and knowing he was near but not at our side had her going wild.

I didn’t encounter anyone as I skulked around the area, but that didn’t stop me from poking my head into each unlocked room I passed. Who knew what the hunters had here, or what would be of use to Ridge and all of us shifters?

My tension had me on edge just enough that my side was hurting, but I ignored the pain as much as possible. I had to hold my side and pray that the stitches stayed put because I was well-aware Ridge would have something to say when he discovered I’d had to get stitched a second time. I couldn’t imagine the conniption he’d have if I needed to get it done a third time.

Wishing to have that argument with him, I worked steadily, trying to get

to him. That was how desperate I was to get him back. I'd rather fight with him than be without him any day.

The commotion on the other side of the property made this part of the compound a ghost town, making the surroundings a little eerie. Without incident, I made it to the last building and cautiously moved through the rooms until I reached the back room.

My heart pounded, and my stomach had jumped up into my throat. For a split second, I thought it was Ridge lying motionless on the slab, but the shirtless man strapped onto the metal table was Zander. Every surface of the room was plastered with what I recognized as witch markings. The same witch markings had been painted over Zander's body. He was unconscious, and his sickly gray complexion worried me. He was close to death. The only sign of life was the shallow rising and falling of his chest.

Rushing over to Zander, I grabbed the constraints to loosen them. My skin sizzled, and I hissed. Fuck, the things were laced with silver. His skin was marked with burns. I grabbed a nearby rag, using it to cover the straps as I unfastened the buckles. When everything was undone, I moved the straps far away from both of us.

"Zander, can you hear me? We need to get out of here. Wake up." I smacked at his cheeks, but there was no response. "Zander, come on, wake up."

It was no secret that I wasn't particularly fond of this shifter. He was a nasty drunk, but dread still sat in the pit of my stomach. He looked like death was about to come knocking any minute now. The burns on his skin had blistered and weren't healing. I struggled to contain my panic and breathe normally. Silver and wolfsbane burns healed quickly if they were merely surface wounds. Typically, as soon as the irritant was removed, they'd look marginally better, with only some faint scarring until the wounds healed completely. A puncture wound with silver took longer to heal as the poison entered the system. But that wasn't the case here.

"Zander. Zander. Wake up. You gotta wake up. I can't carry you. Come on." I smacked his cheeks again and tried to shake him awake, but got no response.

The door slammed open and banged against the wall. I jumped and twirled my body in a defensive posture in front of Zander's prone form, preparing for the hunters to grab me. My wolf snarled, ready to unleash hell on whoever stood in my way of getting to Ridge.

But standing in the doorway, in all his gorgeous glory, was Ridge. Joy leaped from both me and my wolf.

Ridge glared at me, his eyes flashing with ire. He was seriously pissed off, but I didn't care. I'd known he'd be angry with me for being here on this rescue mission when he'd been adamant that I stayed in the hospital. He wouldn't be *my* Ridge if he weren't angry about it, and his presence was all I needed to calm down. I hadn't deluded myself into thinking he'd be happy to see me here. Ridge's protective instincts were too potent, but I was more than happy to deal with his anger.

In fact, I looked forward to it. The make-up sex would be fucking amazing. I was counting on it.

I watched his eyes intently. It was only when I moved to launch myself at him that I realized he was holding a hostage. And of course, it was my brother.

My anger at Kyle boiled up to the surface, the hurt my family had caused me simmering wildly beneath that anger. I couldn't hold back the emotions directed at my brother, but they were forced from my mind when Ridge started snarling at me.

Normally, I'd bristle at his high-handed alpha showboating, but I was too ecstatic to see him.

"Little wolf, you'd better get your sweet ass out of this compound like it's on fire. You're supposed to be healing in a hospital bed, not traipsing around like a hero, giving me a heart attack by putting yourself in further danger."

Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of scolding me, even though he could probably scent precisely how happy I was to see him, I scoffed, "You're very welcome, Fido. I'm glad to see you breathing."

As the initial reality of our reunion soaked in, I raked my eyes over his body. A whimper escaped me when I saw the faint burns marring his beautiful skin and the bloody bandages wrapped around his shoulder. His face was bruised and puffy, and his left eye was nearly swollen shut. Blood spilled from his nose and lip, and his knuckles were cracked and bleeding. White-hot rage burned in my chest, and my wolf snapped and scurried inside me.

Falling back against the table, I gripped the sides and tried to focus on my breathing the way Clawson had shown me. I warred with my wolf over control. Ridge's injuries had triggered her to break free.

But the breathing wasn't helping. I began to hyperventilate, and the room

spun around me. My temples threatened to burst, and everything around me started to fade into darkness.

The feral part of my wolf was trying to take over, even though Ridge was alive and standing in front of me. That wasn't enough. Ridge had been hurt, could have been killed. My wolf wanted justice and revenge, and there was no reasoning with her.

"Tori, baby, deep breaths. Everything's going to be okay." Ridge's concerned voice was a beacon, calling me back to the forefront of my mind.

Ridge curled his hand around the back of my neck, his thumb tracing circles on my skin. I inhaled deeply and let his scent overtake me. Kyle's scent was also in the mix because Ridge couldn't let him go while he tried to soothe me.

"What the fuck's wrong with her?" Kyle's tone held a trace of concern, but his wording pissed Ridge off.

"There's nothing wrong with her," Ridge snarled at him. "She's perfect."

Sensing the brewing argument, I focused on Ridge's scent, on the sound of his beating heart, and I jumped in, not wanting a battle to begin between the two men while I had such a tentative grasp on my wolf.

"We don't have time for this," I panted. "The hunters might've called in for reinforcements. We need to get out quickly because we'll have less than an hour's head start."

Steadying my hold and thanking my wolf for calming down, I staggered back up to Zander and tried waking him again, but nothing I did worked. He was unconscious and needed medical attention ASAP.

Audrey rushed into the room behind Ridge, Diana lying limp over her shoulder.

I rushed across the room. "Oh my God! Diana?"

"She's okay, she's breathing. They gave her too much of the sedative. The shitbag Ridge is holding onto says it's some kind of reaction, but she'll wake up," Audrey explained. "We need to get her out of here. Clawson has locked the hunters in the cells they kept us in." Audrey eyed my brother and sneered. "Maybe we should lock up the cute one, too." She lifted her lip in disdain, looking like she was ready to take a bite out of him.

Ridge looked at me and cocked his head, allowing me to decide. He eyed me closely, and I wondered if he realized who Kyle was to me. I dreaded having that conversation with him, but I'd have to deal with that later.

Bringing myself back to the present, I studied my brother. I didn't know

him the way I used to. It'd be easier for us to leave him here at the compound, but what he'd said in the hospital wouldn't stop playing out in my head. He'd warned me that he wouldn't let me go next time. If we took him now, maybe I wouldn't have to deal with that potential outcome.

Essentially, he was the one who'd made it about him or me, and when it came to me, that meant Ridge, Diana, Margo, Audrey, and all of Blackwood Creek. It was about all of them.

"We should hang onto him as insurance against the hunters if they do come after us." I glared at my brother with disgust. "They won't want to lose this one."

I hoped to God that Kyle and I weren't so disconnected that he couldn't read that I was telling him to keep his mouth shut. I wasn't ready for everyone to learn of my parentage. Once they realized I was a hunter leader's kid, I'd no longer be welcomed in Blackwood Creek, and it was imperative right now to defend that town. They'd need me, or rather, they needed the knowledge I could bring to the town defenses. When they didn't need me anymore, I'd disappear—no matter how much it would hurt me.

Clawson, wearing hunter clothing, came into the room. He took one look at Zander and slung him over his shoulder. "Let's go."

Not needing to be told twice, we moved out of the building like a unit, making our way back through the front entrance to get to the hidden SUV.

Scanning the deserted area, I caught sight of a building with a sign over the door labeled SUPPLIES.

"You guys keep going. I'll be right behind you." I clutched my side and slowly jogged off toward the building.

"Dammit, Tori, get back here," Ridge ordered.

Looking over my shoulder, I said, "Trust me." Then I blew him a kiss while he cursed and tightened his hold on my brother.

Without looking back, I went into the building and raided it for all its worth. The building had rows and rows of shelves with various clothing and rations, and when I spied a wall filled with tactical gear, weapons, tranquilizers, and shifter drugs, I nearly gave a decidedly girly squeal.

Glancing around, I found a bag and started filling it with weapons. We needed to learn exactly what the hunters had to use against us, so I grabbed one of each. Once the bag was full, I checked out the pills marked "Spelled Capsules." I paid attention to the shape, size, and color of what was labeled, ensuring I kept them from getting mixed up later. Then I found the injections

used to knock shifters out. That'd be a great formula to have. I grabbed a bunch of them. It wouldn't hurt to use them against the hunters if needed.

"Ahh." Wincing, I lifted the heavy bag and put the strap over my shoulder. My side throbbed as I tried to maintain my balance with the heavy weight. Placing my hand over my side, I exited the building and stopped when I noticed everybody was still waiting for me.

They started moving as soon as they spotted me, and I hurried to catch up.

Clawson and I had concealed the car well, so it took a little longer than I would've liked to get back to it. Once there, we loaded Diana and Zander in the back.

Pulling out one of the pre-loaded syringes, I turned to Kyle. "Sit down."

He glanced at the syringe and sat down without a fight, knowing what was coming. I injected him in the neck, and he was out cold within seconds.

"Aren't you worried the drug might hurt a regular human?" Ridge asked as Clawson and Audrey watched me.

"Hunters aren't regular humans," I explained. "They're enhanced through witch magic to match shifters' strength, speed, and power. He'll be fine. He'll wake up groggy and possibly with a headache. Plus, after what he did to you? To us? No, I'm not worried."

Ridge accepted that, but Clawson and Audrey looked dumbfounded to hear my knowledge. I wouldn't have been surprised if they started demanding some answers once we were out of here. I fucking would.

"We need to get moving," I urged, putting the bag of weapons in the trunk. I held onto the small bag of pills, not wanting them out of my sight. "Clawson, I'm handling the getaway. I'm the one who knows how to throw the hunters off our trail."

I had my reasoning at the ready, expecting him to argue with me, so I was pleasantly surprised when he nodded and sat in the back.

Yup, I'd have a lot of explaining to do.

Closing the back door, I moved toward the driver's side when Ridge grabbed my wrist and pulled me against him. His mouth landed hard on mine, giving me the most desperate kiss we'd ever shared. There was no hesitation on either part. This was not a gentle, schmaltzy romantic kiss. As soon as his lips touched mine, he demanded entry, and I gave him easy access.

I circled my arms around his neck as he gripped my waist and pulled me in tight, being extra careful of my wounds. The world around us faded away



until it was just Ridge and I trapped in a bubble.

My inner wolf was at peace for the first time since I'd woken in the hospital, and we both felt like we could breathe again. Having Ridge by our side made the world right and reasonable again.

Ridge eased off the kiss, lifted his lips from mine, then rested his forehead against mine as he gazed into my eyes. "I'm absolutely furious with you for bringing yourself right to the hunter's doorstep when you've been running from them for so long. You should still be resting and healing."

Exasperated, I opened my mouth to argue, but he nipped my bottom lip. Then he flicked his tongue out to soothe it.

"But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy to be holding you right now," he went on. "No matter what they did or were going to do to me, being apart from you and not knowing if you were okay was the worst torture. I'd never survive it again." He gave me one more passionate kiss before untangling us, and we headed into the car.

Joy and relief fueled me. I'd succeeded, at least for now. Ridge was alive, and we'd get back to Blackwood Creek if I could throw off the hunters long enough. We'd get everybody checked out and figure out what they'd done to Zander.

Then, we'd start fortifying the town against the hunters. There was no way in hell they'd stay away from a town of shifters, especially after we'd thwarted them and rescued their prisoner. Especially not when we'd taken Kyle and my father knew I was living there.

My heart clenched at the thought of more people getting hurt because of me, but there was nothing I could do about it for now. What I could do was get everyone in this car back home safely and prepare them for what was coming. Focus on what I could control and prepare for whatever came our way.

Hope for the best, expect the worst.

## Chapter 36

# Ridge

Now that I was this close to my mate, I couldn't stop watching her. Being separated from her had been a killer, and when I'd caught her scent, my wolf had started to rage. He was ready to tear the place apart until we had Tori and she was safe with me. When I'd laid eyes on her, my breath had left me in a gush, and my wolf and I calmed.

She was alive and well, but that didn't mean I wanted her here. Tori had been through a traumatic ordeal, and with her already being somewhat feral, we couldn't risk the chance of her shifting in a town full of innocents and witnesses. She needed to be resting peacefully in Blackwood Creek. It was safest for everyone involved.

But every time I closed my eyes, the image of her lying motionless and bleeding out on the library floor had me losing my mind. That sight would plague me for the rest of my life. Now that we were seated next to each other in the car on our way back home, I'd loosen up. Anytime I got to be with my little wolf was heaven after the hell I'd been tormented with for several of the longest hours of my life.

I kept my gaze on her as she drove to get us out of danger. Everything I'd learned about Tori amazed me, and the more she showed me, the more I admired everything about her. She was a warrior, and the way she showed the skills she'd had to gain over the years of running on her own from the hunters made me joyful and sad at the same time. I kept reminding myself that if I wasn't around, she could take care of herself because, at the end of it all, I didn't want to think what it'd do to me if I had to live without her in this world. She'd slipped into my life and become the center of my universe. I couldn't—wouldn't—lose that.

“Where are we heading, little wolf?” I asked.

Without taking her eyes off the road, she answered, “We’re not flying out of the airport we flew into. The hunters would be expecting that. They’ll be scoping out all the nearby private airports.”

She maneuvered the vehicle like a racecar driver, keeping her attention on our surroundings with little effort. Watching her take control had to be one of the sexiest things I’d ever seen. Even Clawson eyed me and lifted a brow while she got us away from the compound with speed and ease. She was a true pro.

“We’re staying in a cheap hotel near Denver for the night and leaving in the morning. It’ll muddle the timeline for the hunters. They wouldn’t expect us to stay so close longer than we’d need to.”

She glanced over at me and gave me a soft smile, a little twinkle flashing in her eye. But then she frowned when she looked at the mess that was my shoulder.

“We need time to rest,” she said. “Can one of you call the pilot and get him to take the plane to the Denver airport without filing paperwork? It’ll prevent them from tracking. The hunters won’t expect us to use such a public place, which is why we’ll leave from there.”

Clawson took out his phone and made the call. After he hung up, we all sat in silence.

My eyes never strayed from Tori. She was always the center of my attention whenever we were in the same room. Her brow wrinkled as she thought, and I’d put money on her thinking about all kinds of hunter-escape strategies, sifting through that brain of hers, picking over everything she had learned and done in the past.

She’d been conditioned to be on the go constantly. She could never stop, never take a break. To keep breathing, she had to be firing on all cylinders 24/7. No wonder she’d struggled so hard to stay with me in Blackwood Creek.

My heart spasmed at that thought. My little wolf had been through too much, and I wanted to make everything better for her. Make her safe, for once in her life.

The need for her, the fated bond, was becoming more intense. My mate looked gorgeous and irresistible, even with how tired and hurt she was. She tried to hide her pain, but she couldn’t mask the tension around her mouth and the strain of her muscles. Not from me.

I couldn't wait to be alone with her. Pampering her, loving her, and being one with her was something we desperately needed right now. My wolf was all in favor of that plan.

Reaching my arm over the center console, I cupped my hand around her neck and stroked the soft skin just visible there. She gave a slight shiver, goosebumps appearing on her flesh. My head filled with a victorious roar at her instant reaction to my touch.

"Little wolf, why don't I drive?" I said. "You've been going on steam for a while now. I'm worried you're pushing yourself too hard."

Her ever-present eye-roll, coupled with a look of complete disdain, was the response I got after suggesting doing something for her. It'd take forever for her to allow me to take care of her the way we both needed me to.

"Right, because your shoulder is doing so well over there, hotshot," she scoffed. "If you want to make yourself useful, get the witch pills out of the bag." She nodded in the direction of the bag she'd stashed in the car.

Witch pills? What were witch pills? Confused but intrigued, I reached for the bag and got out the pills.

Tori glanced at the haul in front of me. "The big capsules, Ridge."

They were huge and looked like horse tranquilizers. The pills looked like they'd been filled by hand, not by a factory.

"What exactly are witch pills?"

She glanced at me from the corner of her eye. "They're pills made by witches. Obviously." The line was delivered with another ubiquitous eye-roll and a sarcastic laugh. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

Even in the current situation, it was good to hear my mate's snark.

"When hunters first began to go after shifters, they worked with witches. The witches granted them extra powers to make them more powerful, on par with the shifters they were chasing. But those powers didn't include shifter healing. The pills were created to heal wounds quickly. They will heal anything from a paper cut to a potentially lethal bullet wound. As long as you're still breathing, the pills should be able to heal you."

"Are you sure they are safe to take?" I knew Tori would never put me in danger—not on purpose, anyway. But this could be a poison, or if witches were involved, a hex.

"I swear, Ridge, they're safe. Those will heal the wounds from the silver faster than we naturally can."

Tori was so earnest, I had no reason not to believe her.

I decided to try them first. I was the alpha, and it was my responsibility to protect everyone. I wasn't willing to let anyone else be the guinea pig, especially not my mate.

We didn't have any water, so I had to dry-swallow the large pill. It wasn't easy to get down, but as soon as I did, a tingling started in my arm, then a soft burn emanated from the wound. The pain vanished almost immediately, and a massive itch plagued the injury site as my skin started to knit back together. It now looked exactly how a regular, non-silver wound healed.

Clawson and Audrey gasped as my wound vanished. Within a minute, I could move my arm and rotate my shoulder quickly, pain-free. Everything about me livened up. I wasn't as exhausted as I'd felt just moments before, and my body was healed, my shoulder back to normal.

"That's insane," Audrey said, her voice hushed.

"That's why hunters aren't frightened to take on shifters and vampires," Tori said. "They have these little magic pills that fix them up. No need for medics or hospitals, and they're back to being battle-ready immediately."

I wanted to mumble that the pills weren't so little, but that wasn't important.

"Jesus. How are we supposed to compete with that?" Clawson asked.

Everybody knew that was a rhetorical question. We silently contemplated what we were up against. Tori had explained some of the hunters' history to me already, but it was another ballgame for the others. Even with my heads-up from Tori, I still struggled to wrap my head around it all.

In the silence of the packed vehicle, I waited another minute to make sure nothing bad came from taking the pill. I was relieved when everything remained the same. As fast as my shifter abilities allowed, I grabbed a pill and fed it to my mate. If we could get her stab wound healed as quickly as mine, that would be at least one major weight off my shoulders. Watching her in pain, even though she thought she was hiding it from me, was worse than any of my injuries combined.

As I watched her closely, her face gradually relaxed as the pain subsided.

"How are you feeling, baby?"

Tori stretched in her seat and moved from side to side. She gave me the biggest, toothiest smile. "I'm good. As good as new."

It wasn't easy to check on Audrey and Clawson from the front seat, but they both assured me they were uninjured. I worried that Diana or Zander could choke on the pill while unconscious, so we decided to check them once

they woke. If they needed a pill, then they could have it.

Kyle was passed out between Clawson and Audrey, his head lolling on her shoulder. Tori's information that the hunters had been spelled to be a fighting match against shifters meant I wanted him to stay unconscious until we returned to Blackwood Creek. I wondered how often we'd have to dose him to make that work. Only time would tell.

It took a couple of hours to reach the hotel, which was located in a backwoods area outside of Denver. It shouldn't have taken us so long to reach our destination—even with the stop at a drive-thru where we ordered enough food to feed four hungry shifters—but Tori had taken several back roads. She'd even gone back over routes we'd already traversed, so if we were being tracked, the hunters would have found it difficult to follow the trail.

My little wolf was innovative and intelligent, and watching her strategize our escape was a privilege. I was seeing her in a whole new light, and she was even more of an attractive package than before—and she'd already been perfect. I needed to be alone with her. Even more so now that we were both fully healed.

After I checked us in, Audrey was left to watch over Diana. Clawson bunked up with Zander and Kyle, both still unconscious.

We carefully settled Zander on a bed. His breathing was even, but his skin was still gray, and he had painted marks all over his body. Kyle was still knocked out, but as we weren't sure how long it'd take for him to metabolize the drug, we made quick work of tying him up. I should have shared a room with Clawson, taking turns to watch over our charges, but I needed to be alone with Tori.

The desperation of being close to her, but not close enough, was eating at me. Thanks to my superior sense of smell, her scent—both delicious and tortuous—told me she was feeling the same. No way could I hold out until we got back home. My wolf was just as needy, and Tori's wolf called to mine. I was not going to deny my mate anything she needed, not after everything she'd been through. It was my job and privilege to take care of her, and it was no hardship for me to oblige.

Not only that, but I needed to hold her to calm down properly after all the recent near-misses that had befallen us since we met. It felt like I'd only just found her, and we'd already been through heavy trials. Taking a moment to breathe her in was a small ask in the main scheme of things.

Once Tori and I ensured everyone was settled, we entered our room. Tori was wound up tight. She constantly checked the windows and triple-checked the locks, only to resume pacing the room.

It must've been harder for her to face the hunters than she'd let on. She'd hidden it well, which further proved how courageous she was. Now that I knew her brother was a hunter, it made me wonder how deep her family connections went within the hunters' organization. No wonder they were going after her specifically. She knew way too much and could cause them some serious problems. It didn't matter to them that she was a young girl on the run and that she'd stayed away.

As she went back to checking the locks on the windows, I wrapped my arms around her and pressed my lips against the back of her head. At first, she stiffened, but then she relaxed against me. My wolf and I wanted to howl at the moon in triumph at her submission. It was hard-earned, and I cherished it deeply. I'd fight tooth and nail to keep it.

"Come on. There's no use in stressing out completely right now," I said, nuzzling her ear. "You need to relax a little." I turned her around and pulled on her hand as I led us into the bathroom.

She stopped us halfway inside the room. "No, Ridge, we need to stay vigilant. It's too risky."

"Little wolf, you've done an amazing job of hiding our trail, and Clawson's already keeping an eye out. We don't need two of you on guard duty. If there's a problem, he'll let us know."

Tori bit her bottom lip and furrowed her brow like she did when mulling over a decision. She glanced at the window and door again, slowly letting her shoulders relax and squeezing my hand.

Smiling at her, I led her into the bathroom. My sole focus was to help my mate relax and rest. She wasn't a machine and shouldn't have to act like one.

I pulled her close to me and began kissing her forehead, cheeks, eyes, jaw, and finally, her lips. I kept to gentle, tender pecks as I slowly undressed her. My lips grazed her hot skin as I unwrapped her like the gift she was. This moment was about reconnection and admiring the woman I'd fallen head over heels for.

When she was gloriously naked, I made fast work of ridding myself of my clothes. This wasn't about me; it was about my need to care for her. I couldn't help but stroke my fingers lightly over her stab wound that had healed and now only looked like a harsh bruise—even that was slowly

fading. I sank to my knees and kissed the wound several times, as if I could kiss everything better.

Her soft hands glided over my shoulders, her delicate fingers tenderly running through my hair. I surrendered to the sensations, closing my eyes and reveling in the tenderness of her touch. My wolf whimpered in pleasure. I'd wage wars to keep this little wolf at my side for the rest of my life and beyond.

Rising to my feet, I went to start the shower. When the water was just right, I picked up my mate and carried her inside. She let out the most beautiful gasp and tightened her arms around my neck. I never wanted her to let go.

Easing her to her feet, I started lathering her with soap. Cleaning her was something I'd never tire of. My cock was certainly not hiding its enjoyment of the task. Watching the soap lathered all over her curves made me imagine getting her dirty all over again. My cock twitched and aimed itself directly toward Tori.

I tamped down that train of thought. This wasn't the time for that. This was about caring for my mate and giving her what she needed. Even if she didn't know what she needed, I did.

I couldn't believe how amazing those magic pills were. I softened my touch over the unblemished skin where bruises had painted her skin vivid purples and greens just a few hours ago. I wanted to kick myself for not raiding the supply building with her. We could've brought more back with us, but I couldn't live by "coulda, woulda, and shoulda" when my priority was to ensure my mate's safety and keep her out of the lion's den that had been hunting her for years.

My heart still seized at the thought that they could have captured her while she tried to pull off a rescue. I'd have been lost if that had happened. I would never have rested. I'd have burned the fucking world to the ground until I had Tori in my arms again, or had rightfully avenged her and then willingly followed her into the beyond.

"Hey, what's going on in that head of yours?" Tori reached up to guide my head until I met her gaze. She roamed her hands down my shoulders and arms, massaging gently as she went, trying to loosen my tense muscles.

Dropping my forehead to hers, I gazed into her eyes. "You mean everything to me. I don't know how I'd go on without you. Seeing you in that compound, knowing hunters were around... it scared the ever-living shit out



of me, Tori. I couldn't breathe. If they'd gotten a hold of you, I'd have burned the world to the ground to get you back. Life as I know it would cease to exist if anything ever happened to you."

Her eyes softened and she gasped. "Ridge?"

Leaning down, I kissed her. It wasn't forceful or passionate like our kisses tended to be. This kiss was reverent and fearful and full of longing. When I came up for air, her eyes were glassy, and my stomach flipped at the tender look she bestowed upon me.

"I have a confession."

I lifted my brow at her.

"I went feral and shifted when I woke up at the hospital and realized you were gone. I couldn't fight it. I tried, Ridge. But I went mad and became so afraid. Hunters had you." Sadness and fear flicked in her eyes just for a nanosecond, but I caught it. "But here with you now, my wolf and I feel a thousand times better."

Closing her eyes, she nuzzled her face against mine like a purring cat caressing her owner for affection. Panic threatened to take hold of me. Anything could've happened when she'd shifted. I willed myself to let it go since she was in my arms now.

"How did you get her under control, little wolf?"

"Clawson. He locked himself in the hospital room with me."

Oh, when Clawson and I were alone, we'd be having an interesting conversation. But I didn't want to think about him. Not when my mate and I were naked in the shower.

Thinking about how my presence had altered her wolf and the feral inside her for the better brought me happiness. Despite that, I bit my tongue. I wanted to tell her why her wolf had calmed upon seeing me. I wanted to talk to her about fated mates and what that meant. Specifically, what it meant for the two of us together. But as I played the potential conversations in my head, I wasn't sure how she'd take the news.

My brave Tori already had enough on her mind, what with trying to get away from the hunters and making sure we all got back to Blackwood Creek safely.

Tori's soapy hands caressed every inch of skin she could reach as we clung to each other under the luxurious hot water. Surprisingly, the water hadn't run cold yet.

Holding her chin, I guided her mouth up to mine, pouring every ounce of

emotion I had for her into the kiss, showing her everything I couldn't express with words. She wriggled against me, moaning, and my cock went hard as iron. The enticing natural perfume of her arousal filled my nostrils. Knowing she needed me made me abandon the pampering I'd planned. I'd help her unwind in more pleasurable ways.

Dropping my hands to her ass, I cupped the firm cheeks and pulled her flush against me. My hard, pulsing cock was trapped against the soft skin of her stomach, showing her exactly how desperately I needed her.

Swallowing her gasp, I pushed her back against the shower wall without breaking the kiss. I slipped my tongue into her mouth, plundering the riches of her. She was all I needed in my life, and I wanted her to understand how important she was to me. Nothing was of more value to me than her.

Rotating my hips, I rubbed my cock along her lower belly, kissing her until she became drunk with lust. Her whimpers and pants had my cock hardening even more until it was painful.

Her nails dug in and slid down my arms as she tried to hold on and keep up with my intoxicating kisses.

“Ridge.” She pulled her mouth from mine. “More. Please.”

Catching her lips with mine again, I sensed the desperation pouring out of her. I kept kneading one ass cheek as I trailed my other hand between our bodies, moving it between her legs. She was dripping with desire. Had her scent not already given away her lust, the wetness I found there proved exactly how much she wanted me.

“Fuck, you're so wet for me.” I ran my fingers between her hot, swollen lips. I swirled my digits around her hole and collected her juices, using them to stroke her clit, to entice the little bundle of nerves to engorge and come out and play.

Feeling the bud swell beneath my fingers, I pressed my thumb against it with a steady pressure. Her sensual moans filled the shower and had me dying to be inside her tight heat. Her body started shaking as I dipped a finger inside her, increasing the pressure on her clit with my thumb. At her gasp, another finger entered her, and I curled them forward, stimulating the sensitive inside of her all while my thumb circled her clit.

“Fuck, yes. Ridge, yes.”

I cupped her breast while I worked her to the edge. I wanted her to leap in my arms as pleasure overtook her. Watching her come apart was the most magnificent thing to see.

“Come on, Tori. You can do it, little wolf. Come for me.”

She was on the precipice as I slipped in a third finger, plunging hard and fast. She collapsed in my arms as a scream ripped out of her, her face contorting with rapture. Her cream soaked my hand.

Fuck, she was so gorgeous. I’d never get enough of this.

My cock throbbed with the pain of denying myself, but this was about her. It was essential for me to know that she was relaxed, that her mind was not focused on the shitshow we’d found ourselves in.

Her mouth found my neck, and she started nipping at my ear. She closed her teeth over my earlobe, and I hissed. Her tongue dipped in and out, and she licked the tip around the shell before whispering, “I need you. I need to feel you. You were gone, Ridge. You were gone.”

The pleading and fear in her voice speared right into my heart, and my wolf howled for retribution against the hunters. Our mate had been aching with fear for us. That was inexcusable, and I would exact revenge for it.

Her hand snaked down and grabbed hold of me. She squeezed, forcing my body to stiffen and push her harder against the wall as she guided me toward her velvet heat. “Please. Now. I need you now.”

Her pleas were agonized, and I couldn’t deny her any longer. I growled and tore her hand away from me. With one swift thrust, I was deep inside her. There was no gentle, sweet ease. We didn’t need sweet. What we needed was to know that the other was alive, and the only way to do that was to be deeply joined as one.

“Fuck, you’re so tight, baby.”

“I’m so full. Don’t stop. Fuck me, Ridge. Fuck me hard. Don’t take it easy.”

She bit down on my shoulder, and I roared as I thrust hard and fast into her hot sheath. This wasn’t sweet and beautiful lovemaking but animalistic and raw, and I couldn’t hide my emotions from her.

I caged her in with my hands on the tiles around her head, pinning her against the surface. We locked eyes and stared at each other as we let our walls down and shared our vulnerabilities, fears, relief, and hopes with each other. The harder and faster I moved inside her, the more my mate let me see, and I felt every emotion under the sun with her.

I bottomed out inside her. At first, I was afraid I’d split her in half, but she wasn’t accepting anything less. I didn’t *want* to give her anything less.

The water had cooled, but it only fueled me more. I could have sworn

steam rose off the both of us as the cold water hit our lust-fevered bodies.

Leaning over, I crashed my mouth against hers, our eyes still locked and the rest of my body owning her. The contrast had us both reaching for the epic orgasm I'd only ever experienced with her and would only ever share with her.

“Oh, Ridge, I'm close.” Her pussy clenched my cock.

With the tingle in my balls and how they lifted closer to my body, I was ready to go over, but not without my mate.

Lowering my head, I took a nipple into my starving mouth. I bit down hard, sucked, and licked furiously as Tori splintered and screamed the roof down as her tight channel clamped down on my raging cock, demanding my release. I roared along with her as she expertly milked me for everything I had.

I jerked inside her, pushing my cum as deep into her as I could. Marking her was a demand that I couldn't ignore. My scent needed to permeate her every pore.

Tori went pliant in my arms. Kissing her, I brought us both down. I poured all my gratitude for her being alive and well and in my arms into the kiss, and she returned it.

Heaven. It was all heaven, and my wolf was fully sated now that we'd dominated her and had our essence leaking out of her. Once again, she smelled like me, and I was in bliss.

## Chapter 37

# Tori

I woke with a start, my heart pounding in my ears. Relief washed over me as I looked over and saw Ridge sleeping peacefully beside me. It hadn't been a dream. He was here with me. He was safe. Everything was right in the world.

After giving myself over to him in the shower last night, I'd slept deeply for the first time in what felt like forever. Ridge seemed to be the only person who could help me let my guard down and relax for a little while, to stop looking over my shoulder every damn second. We weren't out of the woods yet, probably never would be, but when I was with him, I could enjoy the moments of peace.

I felt a bit like a creepy stalker as I watched him sleep, but I couldn't get over how gorgeous he was. I was a lucky girl to have such an appealing fiancé, fake or not. In retrospect, I could've had a doozy of a guy wanting to be my alibi, and they'd have blackmailed me or constantly reminded me that I was indebted to them, forcing me to pay a price I didn't want to settle. But Ridge wasn't like that. Not only was he handsome, but his heart was in the right place. I'd struck gold by falling into his path.

I was glad his cuts and bruises had healed. The witch pill had repaired most of his wounds right away, but the remainder of the little blemishes had disappeared overnight. It had hurt to see him so injured. Something inside me had snapped and seen nothing but red. I wanted to go back to the compound and go after those who'd mistreated him...and I wouldn't be leaving them alive in their cells. My wolf wanted to maim and kill them for even looking at Ridge.

I'd always been protective of the people I cared about, but I'd never had such an extreme reaction before. It was a strange feeling.

The wounds and the ordeal he'd been put through hadn't stopped him from taking me to heaven last night. I blushed and pressed my thighs together to ease the intimate ache that arose at the memories. It had been well beyond typical sex, but it had always been that way with Ridge. It was like the moment we touched, we were on course to ignite a bomb of longing, passion, and desire that had to be quenched.

The way he'd stared into my eyes as he'd thrust into me made me think we had a cord between us that tightened, making us reach for the highest peaks of release until we snapped into bliss. It made all these desires, wants, and wishes pour out of me. It made me want to believe in fairytales and happily-ever-afters like I had as a little girl.

I'd love to wake up beside this man every morning because with him, I was safe, sheltered, and wanted without a shadow of a doubt. This man *wanted* me. There was no way to deny that. It wasn't an act or a ploy, and I sensed it to my very core. I couldn't explain why, but I believed and trusted it.

Snapping myself out of the fairytale I'd briefly allowed myself to indulge in, I scolded my brain and my wolf for tempting me. We were all in a life-or-death situation, what with the deputy's murder, the hunters pursuing us, and the need to fortify Blackwood Creek. Now was not the time to analyze my growing feelings for the mayor.

Ultimately, he'd only offered the fake fiancé ruse to give me an alibi. We were simply having fun while we were at it. I needed to remind myself that I couldn't blur the lines. Our closeness helped sell our fake relationship since we weren't uncomfortable kissing or touching each other. It probably didn't hurt that we'd been caught a few times, though I could do without the memory of Margo catching us just about to go at it in the dirt at the back of the diner. We didn't need to be quite that authentic.

It was fun to live in the brief fantasy upon waking, after I'd inhabited the cozy in-between state of sleep and wakefulness. But now that I was fully awake, everything was unclear again. The desperation in Ridge's voice when I was stabbed had been genuine, as was the relief I'd felt when his voice had penetrated through the pain. Despite being shot by the double-crossing librarian, he'd been scared for my life, not his own. He'd begged me not to leave him over and over.

It hadn't felt like a fake relationship then, and it felt so real to imagine a future by Ridge's side. I was so confused. The fake engagement had been a

means to an end, but I now wasn't so sure I wanted it to end.

Now, with hindsight providing me with 20/20 vision, I understood it for the reaction it was: shock. Shock at seeing me bleed out, and concern for how the town would react to another violent attack so soon after Deputy Hill's murder. I'd be naïve to believe in a future with Ridge, especially given my history. As soon as he discovered my presence in Blackwood Creek had led the hunters into town, he'd want me gone, wouldn't want anything more to do with me—and rightfully so. I was clearly a danger to everything he was trying to build.

Softly rolling out of bed so I didn't disturb Ridge, I dressed quickly and went to check on the others. My first stop was Diana. I needed to be sure she woke up and didn't need to see a doctor or anything. What if something had happened to her brain after she'd been unconscious for long? Could the pills fix that, or were they only for more surface-level ailments? I didn't know enough about them to be certain.

I knocked on the door, praying she was awake and not suffering from any severe side effects.

It excited and pained me to know I was beginning to have strong connections with people from Blackwood Creek. How could I keep them safe? I'd already failed them. People I cared about had been kidnapped and hurt, but I was damn sure taking them home. Thank heavens I'd found them.

The door opened, and emotion clogged my throat when I saw it was Diana. Not wasting a second to get my arms around her, I hugged her close, my muscles easing as she gripped me tight. Seeing her moving around had my heart beating overtime in joy.

"I'm okay, Tori. I'm okay." Diana soothed, running her hand up and down my back.

My eyes misted over, and nothing more was said between us as we clung to each other. Ridge may have been the driving force for me to run to the rescue, but I'd have gone after this woman, too. She was too kind, innocent, and pure to be left in the hands of those monsters.

It should have surprised me how quickly and easily my perspective had changed. I'd been so hell-bent on believing I was a monster because of the wolf inside, but I'd been proven wrong many times over. This woman had been crucial in altering that thought process.

I stepped back and took a good look at her. She was red in the face and a little unsteady on her feet. I placed my hands on her forehead and cheeks. She

was feverish, likely a bad reaction to the drug they'd pumped into her.

I guided her back inside her room, and we sat on one of the beds. I didn't want her to strain herself any more than she had to, so I hurried to reassure her. "First off, Margo's okay. She's back home holding down the fort until I bring you back to her."

A mother's love brought life back to Diana's eyes. She was still feverish and appeared exhausted, but knowing that her only child was safe at home was doing her a world of good.

"Second, I would like to give you a witch pill. Ridge and I took them yesterday, and there haven't been any side effects. It'll make you feel better, and hopefully eliminate the drugged feeling you must be experiencing." Pulling a pill out of the bag, I got a glass of water and handed it to her.

"What is a witch pill? Where did it come from?"

"Trust me, it's amazing. You'll feel like new in no time. See?" I lifted my shirt and showed her where I'd been stabbed. Her eyes widened in shock to see the healed skin.

I hoped she wouldn't ask too many questions about where the pills came from. I wasn't sure she'd take them after knowing I'd liberated the meds from the hunters' compound.

She traced her finger over where my wound should've been. "Oh, Tori, that's incredible." She seemed more at ease now that she knew I was no longer wounded and in pain. "Oh, sweet girl, I'm so happy you're okay. You scared me. You're never to get stabbed, maimed, or hurt in any capacity ever again, okay?" She cupped my cheeks, placing a motherly kiss on my forehead. Those maternal actions meant the world to me.

Wrapping my hands around hers on my cheeks, I stifled my laughter. "I'll do everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen again."

She was about to argue, but I stopped her by saying, "Now it's your turn to get better."

Diana popped the pill into her mouth and swallowed it down with a gulp of water. Her trust in me was awe-inspiring and a relief.

In a jiff, the flush faded from her face, and her cheeks took on a healthier glow. Her body didn't slump with exhaustion anymore. Diana reached down and rubbed at her hip, then stood and rotated her hips in a loop.

"That's a miracle. It's like I'm good as new, even ten years younger. You need to patent that."

I got a big kick out of her excitement. She laughed out loud and danced



around, and I couldn't help but join in.

"I'm so happy you're okay. We're going to head back to Blackwood Creek in a little while. We'll get you back to Margo."

Diana opened her arms and embraced me again. "Thank you for coming for me, sweetie. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you."

"You don't owe me anything. I'm happy we got you out of there. That's all that matters to me." Our emotions were running wild, and I couldn't let this distract me further. "Where did Audrey go?"

"Oh, she said since I was okay and awake, she'd head into Clawson's room to see if he needed a break since he has a couple of people to watch over."

"Okay. Why don't you rest a little more before we go? I'll go and check in with them."

"Rest. Who needs rest? I could run a marathon right now." She giggled as I walked out of the room.

Clawson must have been watching out because he opened the door before I could knock. Zander was lying in the far bed, still out cold, and my brother was still knocked out by the drugs on the floor between the beds, tied up securely with the rope I'd taken from the hunters' armory. There was no way he was getting out of those knots.

After greeting Clawson, I checked on Zander. He was pale, his skin gray under a sheen of sweat. He appeared to be in a coma. Apart from his chest, which rose and fell slowly and steadily, he was eerily still. His eyes didn't even move under the lids.

"Since you're here, I need to have a word with Ridge," Clawson said. "Please excuse me."

I spared a glance at Audrey as he left. Suddenly, the air was stiff and the mood turned awkward. She and I weren't exactly from the same background, and our first meeting had been more than a little icy. Then there was the fact that she'd accused me of murdering Deputy Hill. But in our last conversation, Audrey had claimed to want to be my friend, which seemed highly unlikely. With parents like the Greenthornes, their daughter seriously wanted to be friends with me?

"It's nice to see you in a not-stabbed condition. Do you think you could keep it that way? You gave all of us a freaking heart attack," Audrey said.

The anxiety of being alone with her vanished, and I smiled. This friendship might have started on the wrong foot, but it had the potential to

take wing.

“Your brother’s extremely attractive, but he’s a complete douchebag. Just saying.”

Maybe I’d hoped too soon.

My heart leaped to my throat as my stomach dropped to my feet. I didn’t know how I should respond because she was correct. Kyle was my brother. If she’d so easily put two and two together, there was no doubt in my mind that Ridge and Clawson had done the same thing.

Worrying my bottom lip between my teeth, I knew I couldn’t deny it—that would only insult her. It made me realize I’d need to leave as quickly as possible. There was no way they’d want a hunter’s daughter living in their town. I didn’t blame them, and I’d planned to leave from the very moment I’d arrived, but it hurt that it wouldn’t be my choice any longer.

“Kyle can’t help that he was raised to be this way.” I stared at her, defending my brother, even though I wasn’t completely sure he deserved it. God, I missed him, and that broke my heart.

“Does Ridge know that *you* were raised as a hunter?” Audrey wasn’t being accusatory or cruel but was genuinely interested. Her head was cocked and her eyes were soft as she watched me, then she seemed sorry to have asked. Something I’d never have expected from her.

“To be fair, I wasn’t raised like that my entire life. It’s complicated.” I looked toward the door and then back at Audrey. “But no, I haven’t told Ridge. And I’d prefer it if you kept this quiet for now. Please. You know whose side I’m on.”

I never thought I’d come to the day I’d be pleading with Audrey Greenthorne to keep my secrets, but here I was.

“I will. But even if he is your brother, if he even poses a single threat of any kind to the people I care about, I won’t hesitate to take him out this time.”

Relief had me nodding furiously.

“That includes you, Tori. If he hurts you, I’ll end him.”

I blinked, not believing what I’d heard. I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. It was my family who had Blackwood Creek in their sights, and Audrey didn’t know what I’d been through or that I’d been on the run from them. Forty-eight hours ago, she’d despised me, had been the first person to point the finger at me when tragedy had struck. Luckily, that mess had been cleared up, but her saying she had my back was throwing me for a loop.

Clearing my throat, I said, "I just want to use him as leverage against the hunters and get some answers from him. We might learn something that could help protect Blackwood Creek from future attacks."

I looked her square in the eye and hoped she didn't catch my lie. Seeing Kyle after spending years alone had opened something in me that I'd locked away. I missed having my brother in my life. If I could prove to Kyle that shifters weren't anything like we'd been brainwashed to think, maybe I could get my brother back.

"Audrey, I want to apologize to you."

It was my turn to stun her, and her face went blank. "What the heck for?"

"For the hunters taking you in the first place. I've been on the run from them for so long, and I'm worried I put a target on every citizen in Blackwood Creek. That was never my intention. I never wanted that." Shame spilled out with my words. I didn't think I'd ever rest easy after the hunters had infiltrated the town. "I'm so sorry you went through this."

"Girl, you have nothing to apologize for. Blackwood Creek would've been on their target list eventually, given all the shifters living there. So stop being a martyr and go get us some of that complimentary breakfast."

The sincerity in her words struck a chord, and I believed her. Despite my preconceived notions of her being a spoiled rich kid, Audrey surprised me with her unexpected actions at every turn.

"I could eat," I said with a shrug.

"I'll accept fresh fruit and Greek yogurt options only. None of those pathetic muffins or stale cereal." Audrey scrunched up her nose at the idea of less-than-stellar food options.

Laughing as I left to get us some food, I couldn't help but think how strange it felt to befriend the young woman. I couldn't deny my sense that I could trust her, and trust wasn't an easy feat for me. But I liked it. I liked it a lot.

It wasn't much later when we piled back in the rental and I administered another dose of the sedative to keep my brother passed out. There was no suspicion that the hunters had found our trail yet, so I drove directly to the Denver airport where Ridge's plane was ready and waiting for us. The motel where we'd spent the night was a little outside of Denver, so it was a long drive to get to the airport, but nobody questioned me driving after witnessing my skills the day before.

Now that Diana was awake, there was more chatter, as she had several

questions about what had happened. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on the way one looked at it—she’d been out from the drug most of the time.

“Does anyone want to tell me what happened? Who were those people? How did we get out of there?” Diana’s questions tumbled out of her, and her fear was palpable. “I vaguely remember being in a cell and my wolf panicking when I couldn’t smell Margo...” She shuddered. “Oh my goodness, when I couldn’t smell Margo, I thought the worst. I thank the gods it was me they took and not Margo. If people think an alpha is their worst nightmare, they’ve clearly never come up against a mother on the rampage. Has anyone let her know where we are? She’ll be so worried.”

“She’s fine,” I assured her. “Ridge texted her and told her we were all safe and on our way back.” From the rearview mirror, I saw the tension leaving Diana’s body. “You should have seen her going up against Clawson and demanding he bring her with us. She wasn’t overly enamored that we’d left her behind, but she’s at the B&B waiting for you to come home.”

Clawson muttered something under his breath about willful women. Though Diana visibly relaxed at hearing Margo was safe, she still wanted someone to answer her questions.

Audrey was watching me, and despite our moment earlier, the thought crossed my mind that she might spill my secrets after all. She turned to Diana. “Hunters. They came into town and grabbed us, drugged us, and moved us to their compound.” She continued filling Diana in, leaving out some of the more harmful bits.

Yet another stab of guilt to my gut. I’d done this. I’d placed these people—people I’d come to care for—in danger. I’d been surprised by Audrey’s reaction to my past and her not outing me. But realistically, my continued presence in town posed a danger, and once they knew the truth, most of Blackwood Creek’s residents wouldn’t share Audrey’s sentiment. I’d be asked, under no uncertain terms, to leave.

It might be better to go of my own volition rather than wait for the inevitable.

That thought left a strange ache in my chest. My wolf bristled at the very idea of leaving Ridge. She’d have to accept it, though. I couldn’t let these people be hurt any more than they already had.

Another glance in the rearview mirror showed that Clawson was watching me, like he was trying to figure out a difficult math equation. He’d been slightly

off with me since he'd spoken with Ridge alone, but I didn't know what they'd discussed. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if I'd been the chief topic of conversation.

After all, Ridge wasn't talking much, either. He was more subdued than usual, but he kept smiling at me. His hand was on my thigh, and he leaned over periodically to kiss my cheek or brush my hair out of my face. The constant affection was wonderful, but it didn't stop the nerves from vibrating through my system.

I wanted to know what the men had discussed about me, and how long I had before having to leave the small, charming town they so dearly loved and needed to protect.

My conversation with Audrey had convinced me that this group knew I was associated with the hunters. They might not know the extent of it, as Audrey did, but with Kyle coming back with us, it wouldn't be long before others connected the dots.

At the airport, we turned in the rental car and boarded Ridge's plane without incident. I couldn't have been more relieved. Even though I'd taken the magic pill, I had yet to have a moment to breathe.

The flight to Pennsylvania was standard and unexciting. It helped that we had the plane to ourselves and didn't need to answer questions about the two unconscious men in our care.

I curled up under Ridge's arm and napped. It was the first time I'd ever let my guard down while traveling, the first time I felt safe enough to do so before I'd first shifted. I was under no illusions, though. Once my role in the hunters' infiltration of the town became common knowledge, they'd have no choice but to expel me. Then I'd be back on the run.

Until that happened, I'd help by giving Ridge as much information as possible about the hunters and their methods so he could fortify the town against any future attacks. Before I had to leave, I wanted as much time with Ridge as I could to create as many happy memories with him as possible. I'd cherish those memories of us for the rest of my life.

Not wanting to risk a run-in with any hunters, we arrived at a different small private airport than the one Clawson and I'd departed from the day before. It meant another rental car and a long drive back to the off-the-path town, but given the circumstances, it was better to be safe than sorry.

As I drove through the Pennsylvania countryside, I realized that for the first time in five years, I was excited to head back to a place. Blackwood

Creek was so inviting, and I wanted to stay. I wanted somewhere I could call home.

Mentally scolding myself for the foolish daydreams, I moved around in my seat and frowned. As much as I wanted that, it could never be. It was best to get everyone settled, and then, to protect the people I cared about, I'd have to be on my way before I brought more heartache to the town. Now that I knew the risks of becoming feral, I'd stop and meet with shifters when the urge and opportunity arose. That was the best I could hope for.

A pang throbbed in my heart at the thought of leaving, but I would do it if it meant everyone would be safe.

"You okay, little wolf?"

"Hmm?" I glanced at Ridge, then turned my eyes back to the road.

"I asked if you're okay."

"Oh, yeah. I'm good." I plastered on a smile, trying to make it as believable as possible because who was I kidding? Ridge could read me like a book, but he didn't need to be so clued into me that he'd figure out my plans.

Hesitantly, he tightened his grip on my thigh, then kissed my temple before settling back down in his seat. "Okay."

That reaction didn't sound very believable, but there was nothing to discuss. He'd only try to convince me otherwise, and we had an audience.

As we rolled into the idyllic town of Blackwood Creek, it was like everyone in the car exhaled a sigh of relief and all the tension vanished. It was clear the town hadn't weathered any more surprise attacks from the hunters, which had been on all our minds while we were away. The hunters had infiltrated once, so why wouldn't they attack again? Especially when they were aware we'd been weakened? It would've been a smart move on their part—it's what I would have done—but the town was the same as we'd left it.

However, it wasn't all rainbows. The town was restless, and a large group of police officers and townsfolk were gathered outside the town hall, engaged in heated discussions. It looked like law enforcement was trying to keep everybody calm, but people weren't stupid. They knew something had happened the night before last, and they were scared. And with the mayor and sheriff gone, they weren't getting any answers.

"It's no surprise that the town's in disarray after everything that's happened. I just wished we could settle in first," Ridge said with a sigh as we

drove by the town hall.

Audrey huffed. “I’d like to add that I’m sure my parents have been throwing civil lawsuits at departments and divisions everywhere they can to make this more interesting. Not that they give a shit about my safe return. They just thrive on drama and causing chaos.”

Everyone looked at Audrey, and I caught her eye in the rearview mirror.

“Okay, fine.” She rolled her eyes. “I admit, not unlike myself. I like a little flair to situations, but not when it’s something like this. People’s lives are at stake. They don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

We all couldn’t help but smirk a little at her statement. Who knew Audrey Greenthorne would be the tension-easer of the bunch?

Ridge turned to me. “Tori, why don’t you head to the Bogford Bed and Breakfast? We can drop you, Diana, and Audrey off. Birch and I will take Zander to the hospital, then head to the town hall.”

I wanted to argue with him about being separated, but I kept my mouth shut. He had to do his mayoral duties, and he’d get more done and be more effective if I wasn’t trailing after him. The town was still divided about welcoming me, and the events that had taken place since my arrival had not gone unnoticed, so I wasn’t sure how the residents would receive me in this tense situation. To most of them, I was still an outsider.

As I approached the B&B and pulled on the parking brake, Margo appeared at the door, her expression a mix of hope and fear as she looked out at the unfamiliar vehicle. Peering into the car, she let out a small gasp of recognition. Before we’d even gotten out of the car, Margo was rushing down the walkway and launching herself at her mom.

They cried openly and held each other tight. It didn’t take long for Margo to open her arms and pull me into the embrace. My heart squeezed at the bittersweet moment, reminding me of the love and connection I’d missed for so long.

Soon, I’d have to give this all up.

Stopping the pity party before it could take hold of me completely, I basked in the happy moment.

Margo graced Clawson with a stern “thank you,” but wouldn’t look at him or say more.

I wondered if I should butt in and say something to my friend about how Clawson was obviously super in love with her or mention the term he’d used when he’d spoken about her—“fated mate.” The way he’d said it, and the

pained look on his face... it had to mean something significant. The timing wasn't right, however, so I made a mental note to bring it up at a more appropriate time.

Once I was freed from Margo and Diana's hold, Ridge's strong arms enveloped me. The sense of comfort and safety overwhelmed me. He was quickly becoming my happy place, and I sensed he wasn't keen on parting with me, either. The way we'd been torn apart from each other had made us more than a little clingy.

My wolf and I felt a twinge of sadness at his imminent departure. She'd just gotten him back and was dying for us to shift and go for a run in the woods, just him and me. Nobody was more surprised than me when I found myself agreeing with her. Romping around in the woods sounded like a great way for us and our wolves to reconnect. I'd never thought I'd want to shift after fighting against it for so many years.

Recognizing that I was being a little selfish, I turned in Ridge's arms and gave him a shy, chaste kiss before pushing him to the car.

Ridge and Clawson needed to square away some necessities before moving on. Clawson needed to head to the jail to get Kyle locked away before he came to. We'd decided not to administer another dose of the tranquilizer when it was due since we planned to question him. If we'd drugged him again, it would have taken longer for him to regain consciousness and for us to get the information we needed.

More importantly, Zander needed to get to the hospital and have one of the shifter doctors look at him. He was still unconscious, and none of us could figure out what had happened to him. The sooner we could get answers, the better chance we had of him waking and healing properly.

Before Ridge left, he said, "I need to call a town meeting." He looked over at Clawson. "What do you think, Clawson? Two hours from now?"

Clawson nodded.

"Can you meet us then?" Ridge asked me and the other women. "It looks like most of the town is already there, so getting an alert out won't be difficult. But they need some answers, and I can't put it off much longer. I need to find out what the town has pieced together and what rumors are floating around."

Ridge looked beat. The pill may have done him wonders, but he still looked like he desperately needed to rest and decompress for a while. We both did, but his responsibilities couldn't wait.



“Yeah, that works for us,” I answered. “I’ll stay here at the B&B, and we’ll meet up with you at the town hall.”

Giving me one last kiss, Ridge got in the car and headed toward the jail at the rear of the sheriff’s office.

As we made our way toward the B&B’s door, Diana held us both tightly, one arm around Margo’s waist and the other around mine. Audrey trailed nervously behind as if unsure of her welcome, her usual entitled attitude noticeably absent.

I sensed she was getting ready to make her excuses and leave, but once again, the Bogford ladies blew me away with their kindness. Diana turned to Audrey, giving her a gentle smile. “Don’t think you’re walking away, young lady. We’re in this together. I’m sure Margo has questions. I know I do.”

Margo’s expression was not quite as welcoming as her mom’s, but she nodded in agreement. It was still more than Audrey might have expected, considering their history. Her jaw dropped and her eyes nearly bugged out of her head, disbelief etched all over her face.

I wasn’t surprised, however. I already knew these ladies were special, and if Audrey truly wanted to be my friend, she’d have to play nice with those close to me.

The B&B’s red door loomed ominously in front of me. How would Margo react when her questions were answered? Dread sat like a heavy boulder in my gut. They’d been the first people, outside of Ridge, to make me feel welcome in Blackwood Creek. Margo had persuaded the Magpies to hire me, even though she hadn’t known me. Diana had welcomed me into her home before Ridge had insisted I live at the manor to convince people of our fake relationship.

Ridge looked to Diana as a mother figure, and she’d extended her motherly role to include me. I’d seen firsthand the depth of his feelings for Diana after I’d helped rescue them from the compound where Diana had been comatose. We’d both been so relieved when she’d regained consciousness with no adverse side effects. She was an exceptional woman—she and Margo both were—and I truly dreaded the fallout of the conversation we were about to undertake,

When we entered the building, the pungent odor of bleach nearly stole my breath. The hardwood floors had been shined to a high gloss, and the little standing reception desk opposite the front door had been tidied. There was not a speck of dust to be seen. In the kitchen, every surface sparkled.

Margo blushed. “I tidied up a little.”

Diana looked around in amazement. “A little? Margo, I don’t think the place has been this clean in, well, forever.”

Margo’s face was now as red as the front door. “I may have gotten carried away, but when I got back after Clawson refused to let me go with him and Tori, I didn’t know what to do. There was no way I was going to just sit and wait it out. Not knowing where you were or if you were hurt, I kept thinking about what I’d do if I lost...” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I just needed to stop thinking. I needed to keep busy, so I cleaned the guest rooms and kept going until I got the call that you were on your way home.”

She stopped, pulled the cuffs of her jumper over her hands, and furiously wiped away the tears. Margo glanced briefly at Audrey, probably to see if she had a smart remark about being above something as menial as cleaning. Instead, she gave Margo a look of pure compassion.

Margo faced the three of us again, but she was still far from the feisty Margo I knew and adored. “What the fuck happened? I know it was hunters, so don’t bullshit me, but how are you free? How did Clawson know where to find you? Why did you go, Tori?”

I didn’t want to lie to her, but I had to judge how much to tell her to keep her safe. Before I opened my mouth to tell my upset friend what I knew, Diana reassured her distressed daughter. “Oh, honey, I’m fine, I promise. I was on my way home from the Moonlight Café. I’d picked up dinner for you and me since I’d been at the hospital waiting to hear about Tori.”

More guilt pooled in my gut. She’d been visiting me—proof again that I was a danger to people in my orbit.

Diana continued, “I heard nothing, no voices or commotion. Just felt a sharp thing in my neck, then darkness. I woke in the hunters’ silver jail cell with Ridge, Audrey, and Zander. Ridge was in the cell next to me, unconscious, and I didn’t know if you or Tori had been picked up. I couldn’t smell either of you, but I needed to be sure you were safe.”

Hearing Ridge had been unconscious had my wolf pacing. She wanted to hunt Kyle down and hurt him the way Ridge had been hurt.

I begged her to listen to me. *Ridge is safe. We just saw him. He’s with Clawson, and he’s fine.* She settled somewhat, so I focused on Diana, who kept speaking.

“I started shouting, demanding to know where you were and for Ridge to wake. I was so worried about Ridge and you. All I wanted was some answers,

but then the hunters came in and demanded I shut up.” She snorted. “Well, that wasn’t happening till I knew you were safe, so they used a blowpipe to re-inject me. Next thing I knew, I woke in the hotel with Audrey looking after me.”

Margo turned to Audrey. “Thank you.”

Audrey’s face glowed from Margo’s genuine gratitude. “Hey, don’t thank me. Tori, Ridge, and Clawson got us out of there. All I did was carry your mom out to the car and watch her sleep at the hotel. You should be proud of her. She was fierce. They were too scared to enter her cell to subdue her and had to do it from a distance. All she wanted to know was that you, Tori, and Ridge were safe.” She paused for a moment and snorted. “My mom would’ve never done that. She’d have sold me out for her own freedom.”

There was a hint of sadness in her voice. She wasn’t wrong. Christie Greenthorne wasn’t capable of being selfless or caring about anyone other than herself.

“Are you injured, Mom? Do we need to go to the hospital for a check-up?” Margo pulled Diana into her arms and held her, swaying from side to side.

“I’m fine. Tori fixed me up with some hunter super-medication. I’m not injured, I promise.” Diana caught my gaze and frowned. “Don’t you dare be stewing that this is your fault. The only people at fault are the hunters. You don’t need to worry about me. I’m good.”

Margo stepped out of her mom’s embrace, and there was a hardness in her eyes that hadn’t been there before the kidnappings. She scoffed. “After the last few days, I think I’m always going to worry, especially now that hunters know about Blackwood Creek. Anyone could disappear, thanks to those bastards. I’m going to make sure they never get close to you or anyone I care about. If the hunters were frightened of you, wait till they meet me.”

I couldn’t stop my thoughts from wandering to Clawson and his newest prisoner. How would Margo react when she discovered there was a hunter in the jail, and he was my brother? I wasn’t even sure how I felt about him being here. Thankfully, I wasn’t at risk of bumping into him in the diner or wherever, but I’d have to face him eventually.

The idea of Margo going into battle with the hunters terrified me. Not because I didn’t think she was capable. She’d put up a fierce fight, but hunters fought dirty. Thoughts of them hurting anyone in the town we cared about strengthened my resolve to ensure Ridge was equipped with all the

information I could give him.

The stress of everything going on, combined with Ridge, our fake engagement, and my brother's presence, befuddled my brain. I was tired, and my wolf was restless. She wanted to be with Ridge. His sudden disappearance after we finally had him back had thrown her, and she was making me nervous. When we'd finally fallen asleep in the hotel the night before, in his arms, my wolf had been more settled than since I'd smelled his blood at the hospital.

I needed to distance myself from him. My wolf and I needed to learn to be calm without him. He wouldn't always be around, and when the time came for me to leave town, I'd have to no longer pose a danger to others without him by my side.

Despite that, she was fighting me tooth and claw to go seek him out.

I reminded my wolf we'd see him at the town hall. But she had to see him before she'd believe it.

## Chapter 38

# Ridge

It was tough to walk away from Tori after we'd been reunited. I wouldn't have been surprised if it took me decades to manage to be apart from her without constant worry gnawing at me. It didn't help that Clawson's conversation from earlier kept playing in my mind like a song stuck on repeat.

Last night had been intense. Waking up without her this morning was very disappointing, especially when I wanted another opportunity to be inside her and make her scream my name. I should've felt bad about waking her up to selfishly whet my appetite a couple of times throughout the night—not that I'd heard Tori complain, only scream or whimper my name in ecstasy—but the driving need to be connected with her had me in a tailspin, and there was no getting out of it.

That morning, it hadn't taken me long to panic over her whereabouts. But before I could look for her, there was a knock on the door.

Opening it, I saw Clawson's uneasy face staring back at me. Why the hell was he here?

"Tori?"

"She's fine. She's with Audrey, watching over Zander and Kyle."

The tension in my body loosened. My mate was safe. She was right next door.

"If Audrey's in your room with the other two, does that mean Diana's awake?"

Clawson nodded, and insurmountable relief flooded through me.

I pulled on my clothes. "Okay, spill it."

With all the shit we had to deal with and our solid friendship, there wasn't

much we couldn't take from each other. Well, except for my fake engagement and his having been with Margo. But those things aside, we were solid.

Clawson paced the room, his hands planted firmly on his hips. "Look, I don't want to cause problems with your engagement, but at the expense of our friendship for the safety of others, I have to say this."

I stopped in the midst of tying my shoe and looked up at my friend, schooling my face into a neutral expression.

"Shit, man, it's pretty fucking clear that Tori's involved with the hunters somehow," Clawson began. "She knew exactly where to go and what to expect when we got there. I take no pleasure in saying this, but there's a possibility that she can't be trusted." He threw his hands up in the air and dropped them. "There, I said it, but it needed to be done."

My wolf snarled, wanting to rip out the sheriff's throat for accusing my fated mate of being in league with the hunters. We trusted her more than anybody else in this world. She'd been put through shit, lived on the road alone, and had faced her worst fear by coming to our rescue while recovering from a near-fatal wound.

My body thrummed as I waited to hear what else he had to say and wondered what he'd do. I was about ready to attack Clawson if he issued a threat toward my mate.

"Ah, shit." Clawson exhaled and leaned against the wall, his eyes intent on me. "She's your fated mate, isn't she?"

Taken aback by his question, I didn't know how to answer. Tori knew nothing about fated mates. Though she needed to know, her education on shifters had been skewed by her upbringing. I'd need to educate her on what the bond meant. She had such a hard time trusting people, and though I'd managed to scale some of the walls she'd erected around herself, this life was still so new to her.

She'd barely come to an agreement with her wolf and still teetered on the edge of feral. Would she comprehend what it meant to be a fated mate? While I understood how amazing this gift was, would she see it the same way? Or would it be too much for her? I hated that I hadn't had the opportunity to explain everything to Tori before somebody else had figured out our connection, but it was too late.

Then there was the other side of me that appreciated that someone else was taking it out of my hands, that I could own up to our connection and

claim her. This wasn't an ideal way of claiming since I ached to mark her permanently, but this was the hand I'd been dealt, and I'd take anything I could. That was how important she was to me.

"It wasn't obvious right away, like we've been told about fated mates," I said. "I've wondered if that's because she fought her inner wolf for so long and has a bit of the feral inside her. That must've made it harder for my wolf to sense the connection, but I'm positive she's my fated mate. Better yet, I can guarantee it." I rubbed my hand at the back of my neck, stood taller, and narrowed my gaze at my friend. "I won't tolerate anybody questioning her loyalty."

Clawson lifted his hands. "That's all I needed to hear, man. Of course, I won't question you if you're sure of her. I trust your alpha judgment, and after I've seen what she's capable of, I don't doubt that she'd make a good luna once she's not struggling with the feral stuff anymore."

If only my little wolf would believe the same thing about herself.

I appreciated that Clawson hadn't mentioned anything to Tori about his suspicions or the fated mate thing. I didn't want to have to explain her history to everyone in the car on the drive back to Blackwood Creek. Her past was traumatic for her, and it was her story to tell, but for a wolf not to know about fated mates? It was a major red flag for other shifters, signifying that she hadn't been educated as a shifter. We were all taught about fated mates, how rare they were and what it meant to be one.

Now, as I pulled up to the back entrance of the sheriff's office, I turned to Clawson. "Thanks for everything you've done. You went above and beyond, and I can't thank you enough. You should know that Tori admitted to me she lost control with you at the hospital. I apologize for not telling you, but there are mitigating factors. I'm trying to help my mate keep her wolf from going feral. She's strong and willful, and I know we'll get it under control, but I'd appreciate it if you helped to keep it under wraps."

"I'm not an amateur, Ridge." Clawson snorted, acting offended. "I'll help my future luna and my alpha in any way I can."

He jumped out of the car, pulled Kyle into a fireman's carry, and headed inside. I watched for a while, thanking my lucky stars that I had a devoted friend and wolf on my side. Few men were made like Birch Clawson.

Seeing Zander was still out cold, I sighed. What could the hunters have possibly done to him to keep him under for so long? Even though it made a nice change from hearing the asshole spout off snide comments, I prayed the

doctors would get us some answers. Whatever had weakened Zander, it could be something the hunters planned to use on all their prisoners.

It didn't take long to get Zander admitted to the hospital with complete discretion. Nobody was informed about the exact situation. I figured when his primary doctor was assigned, I'd tell the doctor what I knew. For now, I said we'd found him after another of his drinking binges and that I thought he must have hit his head. It wasn't like that exact scenario hadn't occurred repeatedly over the years, so it was easier for everybody to accept that story.

Although I'd been kidnapped here in the hospital, Clawson had assured me they were keeping the specifics under wraps as best as possible. The last thing we needed was for the town to go into a full-blown panic.

Being the mayor had its perks. Being an alpha was more absolute, though I couldn't pull that weight on the humans. Luckily, several staff members at the hospital were shifters, so they spread out the rotation so that there was always someone in the know and available. They confirmed that only a select few people knew the truth of what had happened.

The staff at Blackwood General stepped up and kept quiet. I'd have to find a way to show my gratitude.

"You don't need to call his father," I said to Zander's assigned doctor. "I'm heading over there now to explain what happened."

After pulling up in front of Mr. Elkins' house, I sat in the car for a while to gather my thoughts. I'd tell Elliot Elkins precisely what had happened to his son. He was human but also plenty aware of shifters and what his son was. The old coot had the right to know what he was dealing with since his son had been out cold for days now.

I got out of the car, walked up to the front door, then rapped my fist hard against the door.

The door opened, but the town grump left the screen door shut. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the illustrious mayor. Glad to see that you're around to show your face in town again. Did you go on one of your impromptu business trips? You know, you have a town to run. If you can't run your business and the town at the same time, then maybe you should think about giving up on one of them."

Taking a deep breath, I suppressed my frustration with him, something I'd been doing for as long as I'd known him. But this time was proving more of a struggle. I was tired, I had a shitload of work to do, and I needed to take care of my mate.



“Mr. Elkins, I wasn’t on a business trip.” I stared him straight in the eye, deciding not to beat around the bush. “Hunters came into town and managed to kidnap me, Audrey Greenthorne, Diana Bogford, and your son.”

The displeased look on the old man’s face vanished at the mention of the kidnappings, and fear crumpled his face at the mention of his son.

“Now, obviously, we were rescued, and Zander’s back in town, but he’s been admitted into the hospital. The hunters took him from the cell next to mine, and when we finally got to him, he was unconscious. Despite our best efforts, we haven’t been able to wake him. He’s still unresponsive.”

Mr. Elkins started shaking as he opened the screen door, his voice wobbling when he asked, “But he’s alive?”

“Yes, sir, he is. But I don’t want to give you any false hope. We have the shifter doctors looking into what happened, and they are putting him through a litany of tests right now.”

The man wiped his face as he leaned against the doorframe for support. I cursed myself for how I’d broken the news to him. I should’ve been kinder, gentler. I should have insisted we go inside so he could sit down.

Over the years, it had become clear to me that the man worried about his son and the choices he’d made. He wasn’t the easiest person to be around, but in the end, Zander was this man’s only son and he loved him. He’d raised a shifter on his own, even when he wasn’t one himself and hadn’t known shifters existed until he had one for a son.

“Mr. Elkins, sir?” I tried getting his attention, but worry had him zoning out. “Sir?”

“Huh?”

“I can give you a ride to the hospital. Would you like that?”

He nodded slowly for a second, then his gaze met mine. “Yes, please. I’d appreciate that. Let me grab my wallet.”

The old man scurried into the house, moving faster than I’d ever seen him move. He wasn’t known for much more than his crankiness and surliness toward the townsfolk.

We were loaded up in the vehicle and on our way when he broke the silence. “Everyone else that was taken, are they okay?”

I smiled at him. “Yes, sir. We were rescued before they could do to us what they did to Zander.”

He gazed out the window as I drove him to the hospital to sit at his unconscious son’s bedside. I couldn’t imagine what was going through the

man's mind.

When Tori and I had cubs, that would become one of my greatest fears. I stiffened in my seat as images of little girls looking like Tori and little boys looking like me—but with their mother's eyes—flashed into my mind. My wolf rumbled his happiness at the thought.

Forcing myself to focus on the road and give up on those images, I shook my head. I couldn't afford to think that way right now. Too much needed to be squared away before I could give that potential future another thought. First off, Tori needed to know she was my fated mate, and she needed to know what that meant. Nothing else could happen until that was handled. But I could file the images of our future children away to savor at a more appropriate time.

After dropping off Elliot and checking with the doctor for any updates on Zander's condition—no updates—I went to the town hall. No rest for the wicked, apparently.

Again, I stayed in the car for a while, watching the people mill around in the town square. Once I set foot out of the rental, I wouldn't have a moment of peace, so I basked in the silence for a moment. I'd been on the go for three of the most harrowing days of my life, and I needed time to just appreciate that we were home and had made it.

Several minutes passed, and I snuck out of the car and into the back entrance to my office. Only my secretary caught sight of me, and she didn't say a word as I entered my office and started calling all the town community heads to inform them of the impromptu town meeting.

As I responded to several emails, I noted people I'd have to call back. Then, I made my way to the meeting hall. All the seats were full, and it now looked like standing room only. Everyone was eager to find out what was happening.

Calmly, I headed toward the podium. Usually, I was invested in my mayoral duties and took pride in them, but I wasn't looking forward to hashing out the unrest. Dealing with people and their complaints took a lot of energy, something I did not have in abundance at the moment.

The crowd was louder than normal, making their opinions known, but I ignored them. When Tori came in with Audrey, Diana, and Margo, the tightness in my body loosened. It was incredible what having a mate did to soothe the nerves.

My wolf was still anxious, wanting to grab Tori and take her to the manor

where we could be alone. Better yet, we could get back on my private jet and fly anywhere in the world where nobody knew us and few souls were around. An island, maybe.

Smiling at me, Tori and the other women stood at the back. Nope, not happening. Striding over to her, I grabbed her hand and pulled her behind me, planting her firmly in the seat I'd reserved for her in the front row. Before stepping back, I kissed her forehead and chuckled at her ever-present eye-roll. I didn't know what I'd do if she ever stopped rolling her eyes at me.

"It settles me when you're where I can easily see you and get to you, little wolf," I murmured in her ear.

This time, her eye-roll was playful, as was the little smirk she gave me. I gave her a toothy grin.

The attendees were getting a lot louder, and the noise was becoming chaotic. Needing to get this over and done with, I reluctantly left Tori and went back to the podium. Before I could call the meeting into session, questions flew at me.

"What's the latest on Deputy Hill's murder?"

"I heard you have a suspect?"

"Was it really Mrs. Marrow who killed the deputy?"

"Why would she kill him?"

"Are you sure it wasn't an animal? Mrs. Marrow's such a sweet old lady."

I held in my growl at the last question. Mrs. Marrow stabbing my mate and leaving her for dead made the old woman anything but sweet. It took everything in me not to sneak into her jail cell and tear her limb from limb.

"Where have you been, Mayor Blackwood?"

"You and the sheriff were gone?"

"You've disappeared for a couple of days. Do we have something to be concerned about?"

Christie Greenthorne's voice rang out, drowning out everybody else when she said, "Your soon-to-be trophy wife was hauled away in an ambulance the other day, and now she looks perfectly fine. How is that possible?"

Her lips curled into a broad smile as she stood so everyone could see her. The woman would never shy away from drama. Attention whore that she was, if there wasn't any drama to heighten, she was more than happy to create it.

"I heard that Zander Elkins is in the hospital. It's no secret that the poor

young man has always rubbed the rich mayor the wrong way,” Martin Greenthorne, Christie’s husband, said.

Tori looked ready to snap at the obnoxious couple. Having seen her in action against the unpleasant pair, I knew it would be entertaining to watch them spar, but it would only cause more problems in the long run.

I quickly raised my voice to be heard over all the mutters and murmurs. “Zander’s being attended to after an unfortunate incident, but that is his own business. As he’s not here to talk about it, I’d rather not speculate, but please be assured that the staff at the hospital are caring for him.”

I scanned the crowd, making eye contact with each person in the hope of reassuring them. My eyes locked onto the Greenthornes, and I stared them down, my wolf peeking through my glare. He wanted to see them surrender and show their throats in submission, but now was not the time to indulge him. I had a town to assuage.

“Thank you, Mrs. Greenthorne, for noticing my fiancée’s quick recovery. We appreciate your concern. Unfortunately, Tori isn’t out of the woods yet.” I sent Tori a loving look, the corner of my mouth twitching. “But she’s doing much better after we took an emergency trip to a specialist in Philadelphia. We’ve been told to expect a full recovery.”

Most of the crowd cheered for Tori, and the blush that graced her cheeks didn’t escape my notice. The Greenthornes, though, were not as enthused.

“Sheriff Clawson left town on official police business that cannot be discussed at present,” I continued. “We will release more details about the murder case after the investigation has been completed. We need to do this by the book if we want justice for Deputy Hill, but for now, it seems we do have the offender behind bars. I want you all to know that we’re doing everything we can to ensure the safety of every Blackwood Creek citizen.”

The energy in the room eased up, and the chaos that had reigned earlier seemed to fall by the wayside. I wanted to think that as the mayor and the alpha, I had put everyone’s minds at rest. It was my duty in both leadership positions to make that happen.

James Ashworth stood and said, “I’d like to say something if I may, Mayor Blackwood?”

“Go ahead, James. What’s on your mind?”

“I want to thank you, the sheriff, and all the law enforcement personnel for the way things have been handled. I appreciate how cautiously and seriously you took this matter and that you’re working diligently to get the

justice and peace Phil Hill's family deserves. It makes me proud to be a part of this community."

Most of those in attendance started clapping and shouting their agreement.

For a moment, the praise made me uncomfortable, but then I saw Tori's smile and the pride in her expression. I wasn't holding this meeting to get the town's gratitude, but I liked that Tori was witnessing it. I liked her being proud of me.

And if it happened that the Greenthornes and a few others looked like they were sucking on sour lemons... well, that was a pleasant bonus.

"Thank you, James. I really appreciate you saying that. I'm happy that we're getting a great outcome." My cheeks were flaming, and I had to clear my throat several times. I didn't take praise well.

I wanted to step away from the podium and plant a big, smacking kiss on Diana's lips when she called out, "This is all wonderful news. We need to celebrate and get back to business as usual, which means we need to prepare for the End of Summer Town Fundraiser. It's a tradition, and it's only a few days away. We're not nearly as ready as we normally are by now."

The fundraiser had barely crossed my mind in the last four days. In all honesty, I'd forgotten all about it. Tori had that effect on me. When she was beside me, she was all I could think about. When we were apart, I only thought about her whereabouts and whether she was safe. She was becoming my favorite obsession.

Fortunately, I had hardly any responsibilities tied to the fundraiser. The Magpies headed a committee that met throughout the year to arrange all the permits and for local businesses to run stalls and donate prizes. I just showed up and did as the Magpies told me, shook some hands, and kissed some babies—general small-town mayoral duties. It was for a good cause, and anything that supported the town had my full backing. I'd be the dutiful mayor once again this year, but this time, my fated mate would be at my side.

The crowd nodded and murmured in agreement with Diana.

"It's more important than ever to feel that sense of community and togetherness that drew most of us to Blackwood Creek in the first place. We need to honor that."

"It would be nice to get things back to normal."

"We haven't missed a year since the festival started. It'd be a shame to do that now."

“Getting back to the town’s roots is what we need now.”

“Don’t forget, we also have a big wedding to look forward to, and we’re all excited to receive our invitations,” one of the Magpies piped up from her seat, a wicked twinkle gleaming in her eyes.

Tori turned ten shades of red at the public reminder of our fake engagement, making me want to do unspeakable things to her. She fidgeted with her hands, and I froze when I caught sight of her ring finger.

My grandmother’s engagement ring wasn’t in its designated spot.

I growled a little, and Tori cocked her head at me.

I didn’t like that I couldn’t claim her the way I craved to do with every cell in my body. It’d be wrong to do that to her when she didn’t understand shifters’ mating rituals, let alone what it meant to be a fated mate. We needed to claim each other. Until the fated mate bond was explained to her, the only way I could claim Tori was with the ring I had given her. That marked her as mine, which I wanted more than anything. With Tori, I’d always take all I could get while subtly inching for more, and I’d been grateful that she was giving in after a little bit of patience and effort on my part.

As the town discussed what kind of wedding we’d have and how fun it would be, Tori squirmed in her seat. I rushed through the rest of the meeting so I could get her alone and find out why she wasn’t wearing the engagement ring.

“Everyone, please listen to Diana Bogford. She’s right. This town needs to get back to business as usual. At the moment, there are no more items on the agenda, and I have no more that needs to be discussed. I promise any updates will be passed on as soon as I get them. If anyone has any other concerns, please call my secretary to make an appointment.”

With a wave at the room, I jumped down from the podium and grabbed Tori’s hand. We booked it out the side door. If we stayed even a minute longer, we’d get swarmed by too many people, and it’d be hours of answering the same questions repeatedly before I could get my mate alone again. And I desperately wanted that right now.

Tori giggled at my tunnel-vision attitude as I dragged her to the rental car. Thankfully, people only smirked and laughed at my antics. Our upcoming nuptials probably had them thinking I was desperate to get my fiancée alone. They’d be surprised to learn why I really wanted alone time with her.

“Ridge, slow down,” she said as we approached the car.

I lifted a brow in question. “Are you sure? If we stay, people will want to

chat about the wedding.”

Shoving me to the side, she hissed, “Get us out of here. Burn some rubber.”

I shut the door, chuckling at how quickly she had changed her mind. I rushed to the driver’s side and soon had us on the road back to Blackwood Manor.

Grabbing her hand over the center console, I twirled my thumb over her ring finger as I tried to broach the subject of the missing ring.

“Little wolf?” I stroked her finger as if I had just realized the ring wasn’t there.

“Yeah?” She turned her head away from the window and looked back at me.

“I was just wondering where the ring is.” I was going for casual, but wasn’t sure I was successful. “It’s okay if it got lost in all the upheaval,” I said, trying my best not to sound hurt.

It was ridiculous. She’d been fatally wounded, and here I was, questioning her about a ring.

If the ring had gotten lost, I’d have a new one made for her. I didn’t know if she’d even liked my grandmother’s ring, but we needed one to sell our fake engagement. Now, I wanted her to have a ring that she truly wanted.

Tori glanced down at her hand. If the way she squeezed my hand was any indication, she was enjoying my soft caress. “The ring’s fine, I promise. I didn’t want anything happening to it since it’s been in your family for so long. As promised, I plan to return it to you totally unscathed.”

Return it to me unscathed? I wanted to lash out and tell her that she would never return the ring to me, that she’d wear it and pass it down to one of our children one day. But like a good fake fiancé, I kept my trap shut.

The smile she gave me didn’t quite reach her eyes. I wondered what she was thinking that made her look so sad.

I wanted us to talk after the uncertainty of the last few days, but it was still too soon to broach the fated mate conversation with her. I wanted to put us on the path of our happily ever after, but she’d just started accepting her wolf and shifters in general. Talking to her about fated mates and everything that connection entailed, then telling her she was my fated mate, would definitely scare her off.

Not only did I not want her on the run because I wanted her for myself, *needed* her for myself, but with the hunter climate as it was, she’d need more

help to stay safe.

I was also determined to understand my mate's connection with the hunters, especially since her brother was one. I knew there was more to it.

Either way, I wanted to ensure that the hunters would never threaten her life again. That'd be the only way she'd agree to make our engagement real. Tori had the backbone to be out on her own and believed she didn't need anybody, but I desperately wanted to prove to her that she needed me, now and always.

When we arrived back at Blackwood Manor, Tori went inside without saying a word to me. When I followed her, she was already in the kitchen. "Little wolf, what are you doing?"

She looked up from the recipe books on the counter in front of her and arched an eyebrow. "What does it look like?"

I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms. "I'm not sure, if I'm being honest. Maybe looking to cook?"

She looked at me as if I'd grown three heads. "Well, obviously, I'm going to cook. We need to eat, and you need to rest. You've just been drugged, dragged across the country, fought with hunters, been saved, dealt with the town... have I forgotten anything?"

Her tirade amused me, and I was touched that she cared enough to want to look after me. My wolf wasn't on the same page, though. He was pacing and ill at ease after being separated from his mate so soon when we'd nearly lost her. He still pictured her bleeding out on the library floor, still scented the silver in the air. I wanted her close to me, to care for her. She'd been through some shit in the last three days.

I should have been looking after her, not the other way around. "Why don't you take a shower? I'll cook dinner."

Tori pointed to the cookbooks. "I'm not really in the mood for rabbit food, and seeing as that's all you know how to make, I need to cook if I want a full belly. I wasn't taken by hunters; you were. You need to recuperate."

I laughed at her remark about rabbit food, which I was sure had been her intention, but I wasn't backing down. I pushed myself off the wall and stalked toward her. Stopping in front of her, I trailed a finger down her cheek.

"Did you forget the spelled pill you gave me, little wolf? I have nothing to recuperate from. Go take a shower. I promise there'll be no rabbit food on either of our plates. How does a chicken burger with chili fries sound?"

I could see her resolve was wavering, so I pushed a little more. "Tori, I



need to do this—to be normal and forget about everything for the evening. No hunters, no mayor, no town tonight. Just you, me, and a good meal.”

Tori looked up into my eyes to make sure I was telling the truth—as if I’d lie to my mate. Okay, I’d lied by omission, but it wasn’t lying if it was for the good of one’s mate. I needed to tell her she was my fated mate and explain the implications, but she needed calm and simplicity now. I’d do everything in my power to provide that for her.

“All right, I’ll go shower.” She’d obviously appraised my condition and believed I was uninjured. “If there is even a whiff of lettuce or any vegetable that isn’t a potato on my plate, I’ll make the hunters look like kittens.”

She left, and I got busy with the meal. Not a leaf of lettuce was shredded.

We sat down to eat at the breakfast nook a little while later, Tori with dripping wet hair. Tori chattered away about her conversation with Diana, Margo, and Audrey. That the Bogford ladies had remained loyal to Tori was reassuring. I’d expected it, but until I heard it from Tori’s mouth, I’d had a smidgen of doubt. Diana had been astonished when we told her the hunter with us was Tori’s brother, but lying would have been futile—Tori and Kyle were similar in the way only siblings could be. Diana had sworn she wouldn’t tell anyone, and I trusted her implicitly.

Tori had stopped speaking and was now pushing her food around her plate instead of eating it. A deep line marred the space between her eyebrows, and her nose was scrunched up in thought. I could sense her pulling away.

“Are you done?” I picked up my empty plate and rinsed it before loading it into the dishwasher.

“No, I’ll be a while. You go on up to bed. I’ll be up later.”

Oh, no, not happening. She’d be sleeping with me, not distancing herself. If my wolf was unsettled by recent events, I hated to think how her near-feral wolf was coping. The need to be near her was an itch that never seemed sated, and the idea of her sleeping in another bed was nearly too much for me. We needed to be in each other’s presence to calm our wolves.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart. In the last three days, I’ve seen you stabbed, almost bleed to death, come racing into the enemy’s den, and even worse, go toe to claw with the Greenthornes. I need to be with you. I need to know we’re alive and here. I need comfort.” So did my wolf, but without explaining fated mates to her, I’d go with what I’d said.

Tori glanced up and rolled her eyes. “Exactly. I need sleep, not you pawing at me all night long.”

I hadn't heard her complaining about that last time, nor the time before, but okay. "It's not about sex, Tori; it's about just being next to you. I'll be a complete gentleman, and I promise I'll keep to my side of the bed. I just need to know you're close. It'll ease the tension I feel every time you leave the room and I think a hunter has picked you off."

My words seemed to resonate with her because she rose from the table and put her plate away. Together, we went upstairs. I let her lead the way, and when she climbed into my bed, I nearly whooped with joy. Being a grown man, I managed to hold it together.

As promised, we slept on opposite sides of the bed. It was tough being so close but not holding my mate. I kept reminding myself to take small steps. One day, she'd be mine completely, and we'd have every night of the rest of our lives.

I hadn't lied to Tori—I needed the comfort. Everything we'd been through played in my mind like a horror movie. I wasn't sure I'd sleep, but with the scent of my mate and the softness of the sheets enveloping me, I soon drifted off into slumber.

It was dark, the room silent save for the clock on the bedside table ticking softly. Something had woken me. I felt heat next to me, and I was thrilled to realize that my bedmate had made her way over to me. Her delicate hand was stroking my hair.

Once Tori knew I was awake, she asked sleepily, "Does cuddling count as pawing at each other?"

Definitely not. I pulled her snugly beside me, and she settled her head on my chest.

"No, it definitely, most assuredly, is not classified as pawing," I answered.

Her breathing eased back into sleep, and I wasn't far behind her, my final thoughts being the need to broach the subject of fated mates with Tori soon.

## Chapter 39

# Tori

Ridge's body was coiled around mine like a spoon, and for a flash of a second, my daydream tried to take over and have me imagine all my future mornings starting with some variation of this. With the sleepy haze fading, reality came flooding back, and sadly, I let go of the daydreams and tried to get out of bed. No such luck.

Ridge pulled me tighter to his body and grumbled, "You're supposed to be recovering from a knife wound. That's earned us the right to stay in bed for a few more hours." His scruff tickled the back of my neck as he burrowed his head there, placing soft kisses along the nape of my neck.

He was adorable when he was all sleepy and cuddly. It was a drastic change from his usual driven and controlled lifestyle. People would probably be shocked to learn of this side of him. It was my little secret.

Well, mine and his future wife's.

My heart plummeted at the thought of the woman who would one day be his wife. It stung. For selfish reasons, I wanted to stay in this bed and cuddle him for as long as possible, and another part of me wanted to run because I was already going to be heartbroken when I had to leave. Why make it even harder on myself?

Self-preservation spoke up. "I took the witch pill, too. Remember, I feel completely better. I could take on the world."

That dampened the mood as Ridge uncurled himself. I bit back a whimper at the loss of his warmth, but he merely turned me around to look me in the eyes, his hand splayed on my hip. "What are the witch pills exactly, and how did you know about them?"

There was no judgment or skepticism on his face as he moved his hand

up my body to twirl a strand of hair around his fingers.

His easy-going manner reminded me that he didn't know everything about my background, and I still wasn't ready to share it with him. Whatever we were doing wouldn't last forever. I got that, but it didn't mean I wanted it to end any sooner. Once Ridge knew the truth, he would tell me to walk as soon as I finished my story, and I wouldn't blame him.

His responsibility was to his pack and this town, not to me. I was a soul in need, and his good heart desired to help, so he did.

Knowing the inevitable end to my relationship with Ridge had me hanging on by a thread, and it didn't help that my brother, the person I'd been closest to in the world at one point, hated me and was in the town jail. He was probably getting grilled by Sheriff Clawson at that very moment, and Kyle would have no reason to keep our relationship a secret.

Two of the most influential people in the town knew I was related to hunters. There was no shielding me from the consequences of that. I understood.

Pack first, and as I wasn't pack, I wasn't included in it. Unless, of course, I was the danger, then the pack would see me out of town, with Ridge and Clawson in the lead.

Crossing my fingers, I hoped they'd give me enough time to talk with my brother. I didn't want to face him, let alone be in the same room as him, but if I could get him to answer some questions, then maybe I could figure out what the hunters knew about Blackwood Creek and what needed to be done to fortify it before I'd be forced to leave.

Besides, Ridge and Clawson needed to know what information Mrs. Marrow had fed to the hunters. That knowledge would be a game-changer and help them determine how best to utilize their resources. Kyle would have been privy to that information, even if he wasn't clued into the bigger picture. My father was a paranoid asshole who didn't trust anybody, not even his own son, and especially not the daughter he had written off years ago when she'd turned into a wolf at no fault of her own.

Anger and anguish fought to rise to the surface, but I settled myself. I couldn't change the past. I could only help shape the future.

The countless worries and to-do lists in my head must've had me wandering off in my own little world for too long because Ridge sat up in the bed, letting the sheet fall from his naked body and showcasing the chiseled Adonis perfection that was Ridge Blackwood. Temptation had me desiring to

pull the sheet off the rest of the way and soak him up in all his glory, but his concerned expression stopped everything from progressing to a more pleasurable activity.

I sighed. We both could have used the distraction.

“Little wolf, what has your mind running full speed in a hamster wheel?” He paused, and when I didn’t reply right away, he said, “Come on, you can tell me. Whatever it is, I’ll fix it immediately.”

An unladylike snort came out of me as I rolled my eyes. “Your hero complex is showing again, Fido.” I bumped my shoulder into his before sitting back up. “I was thinking of stopping by the jail to see Mrs. Marrow.”

Really, I wanted to see Kyle, but I didn’t want that to be so obvious. Mrs. Marrow was a solid cover story. After all, maybe I wanted to face my attempted murderer now that I was out of danger.

Ridge’s calm façade vanished, and he became solid as stone as he scowled at me. “I don’t like that idea, not one bit.” I opened my mouth to start arguing, but he held up a hand to stop me. “Why don’t you wait a day or two?”

Annoyed, I went into defense mode. “I don’t want to wait. I want to figure out how to protect Blackwood Creek better. The sooner I have the answers I need, the sooner we can implement things and prepare.”

Ridge’s bedroom smile graced his lips, and his cuddly side returned as he pulled me close to his chest and snuggled me. Joy laced his voice and lit up his eyes. “I’m so glad you’re thinking about a future here.”

I tensed, playing my words over in my head. Shit. I’d said *we*. It made it sound like I was trying to claim this place as my home, but that hadn’t been my intention. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to defend this place because I wanted to live here. This wasn’t for me; it was for Ridge, the Bogfords, the Ashworths—fuck, even the Greenthornes. They all deserved to have a safe place to live, and to shelter any shifters needing their aid. I didn’t belong here. The past few days had done nothing to disprove that.

“No, Ridge, you’re mistaken.” I had to say it quickly, like pulling off a Band-Aid. “I’m not thinking about my future here. This place can’t be my home. I won’t ever have a home. No, I’m talking about fixing everything I messed up by coming here. I have to make things right and ensure this place is safe for all the shifters here now and in the future.”

Ridge’s eyes darkened. “If you think it’s your fault the hunters showed up, you’re dead wrong, little wolf. You’ve gotta stop blaming yourself. I

won't tolerate you thinking that bullshit. From what Clawson's found out, it's clear that Marrow's been working as a mole for some time. Who knows what information she was feeding them? She knows a lot about this town and its people.

"Hunters would've come to Blackwood Creek whether you were here or not. You're a blessing, little wolf, don't you see that? I wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for you and Clawson. Even though I'm far from thrilled that you put yourself in harm's way." He pinned me with a firm look.

Flustered, I felt warmth spread into my lower body. Not knowing what to do with all the conflicting emotions percolating inside me, I joked to lighten the mood and save my sanity.

"You sound so protective, Mr. Mayor, but I have one question for you. What makes you think I was there for you at all?" I shrugged nonchalantly. "Maybe I'm just head over heels for Zander and saved you because you happened to be there."

Snarling, Ridge tackled me to the side and started tickling me. Either his sense of humor wasn't awake yet, or he didn't appreciate my joke.

Giggling, I said, "You must be craving your bunny food because you're taking things too seriously."

Ridge dropped his head to take control of my mouth, apparently wanting to silence me in any way he could. I wasn't about to complain about his methods. We spent the next while kissing, tickling, and wrestling each other on the bed. It was the most carefree I'd felt in ages. I couldn't even remember the last time I had a lazy, fun morning like this. It must've been a long time before my mother died.

Finally, after my mouth was swollen from his attention, I managed to disentangle myself and get out of bed. Ridge lay back against the pillows with his hands behind his head, watching me as I got ready. He had no shame in his nudity. Or his growing erection that showed me how much he was enjoying watching me dress.

His laid-back attitude and the hunger in his eyes made me want to drop everything, get naked, and crawl back into that bed with him, where we could forget about everything outside of this room.

"You know, right now, there are a few people in town—mostly spurred on by the wonderful Greenthornes—who will be watching us closely to see if our stories add up," Ridge said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they have a group of people keeping tabs on us."

Pausing, I looked at Ridge through the reflection in the mirror. “You really think so?”

He cocked his head and lifted a brow at me.

“Okay, yeah, you’re probably right.”

“It’ll be expected that you go to the hospital for a check-up, not hurrying your luscious ass straight to the jail right after we returned from an emergency medical trip. Plus, it wouldn’t hurt for the doctors to examine you. We need to make sure those mysterious witch pills worked properly since you won’t tell me more about them yet.”

His nonchalance didn’t fool me, but he didn’t push me. There were times he’d asked for more, but he hadn’t lately. He wanted me to come to him on my own. It made him even more of a safe place for me, which scared me to death. Because how far would that safety net hold?

Ridge was right about going to the hospital, though. He was always right, which had irritated me when we’d first met, but now I’d grown accustomed to it and even learned to appreciate it. It only proved how well he knew his people, especially those who were out to embarrass or hurt him.

I would head to the hospital for a check-up first thing. I also needed to collect the bag I had stored at the nurse’s station to get the engagement ring back.

“Okay, I’ll go to the hospital. You’re right. If I left the house, it would be strange for me not to go there first. Maybe I’ll go to the jail tomorrow.”

I carefully watched his reflection in the mirror. When he clenched his jaw, I turned around. He was rolling his tongue around inside his mouth, clearly itching to say something.

“Oh, just spit it out already.”

“I can check on the hunter, see how he’s doing. Update you, if you want.” His voice was soft, like he didn’t want to spook me.

He’d figured out what Kyle was to me.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t given him enough information to piece bits together. Ridge wasn’t a stupid man. Kyle and I had similar features, and Ridge had gotten up very close and personal with my brother during his time at the compound.

I struggled to swallow. Was this where things would inevitably go belly-up? Since Ridge knew the hunter in custody was my brother, and I had close ties to the hunters, did he think that somehow I wasn’t to be trusted because of those connections?

Moving to the dresser, I leaned against it. I needed something to support me. I didn't want to have this conversation. This was a turning point in our relationship. Or our friendship? Whatever the hell it was, I didn't want to tell him. For all that I'd told myself that I didn't care, I certainly feared the outcome.

"Okay, you've probably figured it out. The hunter is my brother Kyle. I admit it,"

My wolf was prowling around in agitation, also fearing the outcome. But the words came tumbling out of my mouth. "But Ridge, I swear to you I won't let my familial connection to the hunters put this town or you in danger. I promise you." Lowering my head so I didn't have to see his fury at my deceit, I continued, "I've already been thinking about leaving soon, just after I help you guys fortify this town against another attack. I wouldn't put you all through any additional risk."

I wouldn't put *Ridge* at further risk.

I heard Ridge move around on the bed, but I didn't dare look up. I tensed, waiting for his demand that I leave.

"I never wanted anything bad to happen here. I never even knew it was a shifter town, and I never planned on coming here. I swear, Ridge, I'll do everything in my power to make this a safe haven for shifters like you've envisioned it to be. I want that dream to come true for you so much. Then I'll go so it can stay that way. I'll put as much distance between me and Blackwood Creek as I can."

Ridge's feet appeared in my line of sight, then he lifted my chin with a finger.

"Please stop thinking and talking about running away." His voice cracked, and his eyes were sad. He seemed genuinely upset. "I'm not questioning your loyalties or your backstory, little wolf, not at all. I only want to make sure that you're okay and if you want to know what's going on with him. If you're worried about your brother."

He cupped my cheek and moved in close, wrapping his arms around me. I sank into his embrace, breathing in the natural woody scent that was all Ridge.

Huffing, I spoke, my voice muffled against Ridge's chest. "My relationship with Kyle is complicated."

I paused. Was I really going to do this? Could I really tell him everything? Ridge seemed so sure of me and my loyalty; I would never be



able to express how much that meant to me. Despite that, what I was about to reveal could change everything. Hell, I might end up being my brother's cellmate. But Ridge was placing his loyalty in me. I had to reciprocate. My heart was beating so hard, I was sure he could see my pulse points pounding.

"The witch pills are legit and don't have side effects. The reason I know this is because I was trained for a year to become a hunter along with my brother. I didn't take the pledge for obvious reasons. Now Kyle hates me for what I am."

Letting so much out frightened me, but it felt like a weight had been lifted off me at the same time.

Ridge moved his head back and looked down at me. His surprise was evident, and for a split second, I thought the worst. That what I'd said was too much for him to accept.

Without a word, he pulled me in tight and held me, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin under my ear. "Oh, little wolf, no wonder you're so terrified of being a shifter. It makes sense now. You were taught to hate them and yourself. Even if just for one year, that crap was brainwashed into you. I hate that this was done to you. If I could maim or hurt every single one of the fuckers, you need only ask."

We stood in his bedroom, me fully clothed and him still naked, simply holding each other close. I mentally scolded myself for thinking of the worst-case scenario when I knew better. I should've had more faith in Ridge because he'd never given me a reason to doubt him.

Yet, I couldn't deny that the speed at which he'd accepted my admission surprised and scared me. When he took more time to think about it, what if he concluded I wasn't to be trusted and escorted me to the town limits? I wasn't sure I could survive that. He needed to be certain, not just for his sake but for the town's.

And if I was really honest with myself, he needed to be certain for my sake, too.

"Ridge, are you sure? This isn't me telling you I've been a lone wolf since my first shift. I'm telling you I was raised by the enemy, raised to be a hunter, born into a high-ranking hunter family. I trained with them before I turned into the very thing I was learning to hunt. I understand if you need time to think about what I've told you, and I'll answer any questions you have as honestly as I can. But you need to be sure." I wasn't exactly selling myself, but I needed him to see the good, the bad, and the ugly.

His only reply was to tighten his arms around me. Sighing with relief, I relaxed in his arms, his trust humbling me.

“I’ll check in with Kyle and let you know how he’s doing. You can hash out whatever you need to with him later, but you shouldn’t put the weight of everything regarding the hunters on your shoulders. None of this is your fault—none of it. You were put in situations that forced you to do whatever you could to survive, and you did that. Do you hear me? I’m forever grateful for that.”

Raising onto my tiptoes, I kissed the hell out of the world’s most wonderful man. I dominated the kiss, nearly laughing that he let me do it. His alpha nature didn’t allow that very often. Usually, he instantly dominated me—and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it.

We moved apart, and Ridge smacked my butt. “You should wear your engagement ring to avoid prying questions.”

“Yet another reason to get to the hospital,” I said. “I didn’t want to risk the ring getting damaged or lost, so it’s wrapped up safely in the bag I left at the nurse’s station. I’ll put it on as soon as I have it.”

Nerves twinged at the recesses of my mind. Perhaps it was best to drop the fake engagement act. I no longer needed the alibi if Mrs. Marrow was guilty. After all, this had all gone longer than Ridge had predicted.

The negative voice in my head jumped at the chance to feed my insecurities. And surely Ridge would be relieved to end the charade once and for all. He’d only proposed the arrangement as a quick solution immediately following the deputy’s murder. Time had been a significant crunch factor then.

After things had settled down more, I’d broach the subject with him, then we could plan how we’d call off our fake engagement so neither of us looked bad. I’d sacrifice myself and be the villain in the breakup if needed. It’d make it easier on Ridge since he had to stay here. With everything going on, he couldn’t afford to be seen in a bad light. It felt like the people here were on a knife’s edge, and the slightest thing could tip the balance. Ridge was their leader, and as such, he needed to be here for them. I was a nobody, an out-of-towner with no ties to this community. But as much as it pained me, I’d leave town. It’s what would be best in the long run.

Ridge and I kissed again, and I wanted to weep at the idea of giving up my daydreams of actually being in a relationship with him. I wasn’t an idiot—I wasn’t a suitable match for the likes of a man like him. He was the alpha

and the mayor, and his future wife should be someone who could hold him up, have his back, and know exactly what to do in both a political role and shifter pack life. I could never be that woman.

It'd be best if I left town permanently as soon as the engagement ended. That way, he could move on and find the right woman without me hanging around like a shadow.

Not to mention, it'd be too hard to stay and watch him fall in love with and marry another woman. Watching him with another woman would shatter my heart.

When you cared for someone so profoundly and selflessly, you had to do what was right for them.

In Ridge's case, he would always come first, and I'd always do right by him.

## Chapter 40

# Ridge

Knowing that Tori was going to the hospital to get the engagement ring and put it back where it belonged—her finger—appeased me and my wolf. We weren't entirely satisfied yet, but that symbol would hold us over until we could actually claim her.

I glanced down at my hard-on and wished I didn't have to wait until tonight to relieve it with Tori, but she needed a break from me pouncing all over her. Not too long of a break, though.

I had a long, grueling day ahead. That had never bothered me in the past. In fact, I usually relished the challenge, embracing such days with open arms because the work kept me busy and distracted. Now that I had Tori in my life, however, things were different. I wanted nothing more than to hole away in the manor with her for a few days and shut out the world, but my responsibilities prevented that.

After jumping in the shower, I checked on my business and ensured everything was running smoothly. Luckily, I worked remotely and had a reliable team executing the day-to-day operations. I reported in occasionally and stayed updated with all the contracts. Still, that team had been working longer than I'd been alive, as it was a family business. That could be a pain, but having it in my back pocket was nice whenever I needed to call in a favor or pull some strings.

Then, to top it off, I had the regular mayoral duties that had to be tended to each day. There was no slacking off in that position, and I had much to make up for since being gone. It didn't matter that I had pack responsibilities that were more important at this time. Most of the citizens of Blackwood Creek didn't know anything about the shifters in town, so they wouldn't

understand me dropping the ball on other town affairs.

I had to juggle all these balls in the air, but I'd signed on for that when I first decided to run for mayor.

I tried to think of the best ways of protecting the shifter population against the potential hunter danger lurking over every shifter's head. Discovering I'd had a mole in town had been a gut-wrenching blow, and I needed to construct and execute plans without the secrets of the paranormal world leaking out to the humans. Once I became fully aware of the hunters' tactics and potential plans to battle against us, I could develop adequate protective measures. The best defense was knowing your offense.

The fridge needed to be stocked again. I sighed—yet another thing to add to my never-ending to-do list. I gathered what I needed to make a quick breakfast smoothie. Tori had refused my offer to make her one, saying she needed sustenance, not a detox.

Shaking my head, I laughed at her antics even as I tried to wrap my head around her confession. Tori had trained as a hunter, but then she'd shifted, becoming the very thing she and her brother had been taught to hate. She'd managed to get out, go on the run, and stay out of the hunter's reach. Thank the moon for that. It still pissed me off to think of her alone and afraid, doing whatever she could to survive. I wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be okay now, but would it?

Tori was still a major target and liability to the hunters, and now she lived in a town that was heavily on their radar. Thanks to Mrs. Marrow, they'd had enough information to infiltrate the town without going in blind. Coupled with Tori's history, there would be some in the town—the Greenthornes and their followers for sure—who would mark her as a traitor. They would find it hard to trust her, fearing she'd sold us out to the very people who wanted her dead for the secrets she'd divulged.

She didn't have to prove herself to me. Even before she'd risked her life and freedom to go to the hunter compound to save us, I knew she was worthy. Now she was going against everything she'd been taught to help protect Blackwood Creek from future attacks.

All of that made it harder for Tori to settle here. That was why I needed to work harder to get safeguards in place to protect my mate. I wasn't alone; others in town would champion Tori, Clawson among them. I know he worried about her feral side, but her skills and tenacity had impressed him, and he'd admitted that he'd never have found us—and certainly not that fast

—if she hadn't been with him.

Chugging my green smoothie, I uncharacteristically put the dirty dishes in the sink without rinsing them and charged for the door. No way would I be able to focus on business or household chores until I understood why my mate was being explicitly targeted.

I needed to talk to Kyle. He was the only one who could give me the answers I needed since Tori wasn't ready to. Heading to the jail was a two-bird-one-stone deal.

I also had to check in with Clawson. Shifters weren't my only responsibility. The fact that there had been a murder in town meant we had to ensure it didn't happen again.

When I arrived at the station, one of the deputies informed me that Clawson was already interrogating Kyle. I headed into the adjoining office to watch through the one-way glass.

“Come on, Kyle, tell me. How long has Mrs. Marrow been a mole for the hunters?” Clawson sat back in his chair with his arms crossed, his voice tinged with annoyance. Clawson didn't rile up that easily, so he must have been at it for some time.

Kyle looked bored and didn't answer.

The questions went round and round, with no reaction from Kyle. I'd been watching for a good hour, but Clawson was getting nowhere with the hunter.

“How many shifters do the hunters think are in town? Who's leading their archaic hunting vendetta?”

With each question, Clawson's voice got louder and angrier. None of it fazed the other man.

Clawson slammed his hands on the table, got up, and towered over the hunter. “What the fuck did you guys do to Zander Elkins in that room at the compound?”

Nothing.

A vein popped out on the sheriff's scarlet face. “Answer me!”

Kyle didn't flinch. He only lifted his gaze toward the sheriff and leaned back in the chair to get more comfortable. Well, as comfortable as a criminal could while being handcuffed to a table with his feet shackled together.

He was a hunter, and there was no way we'd risk him getting out and hurting other people, so treating him like he was already on death row was no hardship.

Kyle still wouldn't talk, though. He was a steel trap; he had no fear. It suited his personality, and I desperately wanted to keep my mate far away from this very detached individual. It didn't matter that they were siblings. He'd already hurt her deeply, and I wouldn't allow that to happen again.

Having had enough of the silent treatment, I barged into the interrogation room. Knowing Clawson now knew everything, I didn't hold back.

"Why the fuck are you hunting down your own damn sister? What makes you think it was okay to desert her? To have her fear for her life for so long?" A little spit flew out of my mouth as I shouted at Kyle. I wanted a reaction, any kind of reaction.

Bingo. At the mention of Tori, his mask slipped slightly. Not a lot, but enough for him to show something. It happened so fast that I couldn't study what he was hiding, but it was a start.

There was something there that wasn't cold and calculating. I just had to figure out what that was, because I damn sure wasn't going to risk Tori coming in here until I was confident he wouldn't harm her further—physically or emotionally.

Usually, I'd be impressed by someone who'd kept their mouth shut for as long as he had. I could respect someone who stayed quiet to protect their loved ones. But without understanding the dynamic between the two siblings, I could only lean on the fact that she was a shifter and he was a hunter. He'd come to the very town she was residing in and kidnapped four shifters. In my eyes, he was out to capture and torture her.

The throbbing ache of anger had me shaking and showing my wolfish side. I snarled, "If I find out Tori was ever hurt by you blindly following the barbaric hunter agenda, I'll make sure you wished Tori was born an only child." I'd happily tear him to shreds and bathe in his blood. Tori didn't deserve any more pain, especially not at the hands of her kin.

Kyle's eyes narrowed, and he clenched his jaw before gritting out, "You need to stay away from my sister. It's bad enough she's been burdened with turning into a monster. The last thing she needs is an obsessive, raving wolf slobbering after her like a lovesick puppy. Back off of her."

The protective undertone in Kyle's voice threw me for a loop. It had me mentally scratching my head at the conundrum that was Hunter Kyle. What was the nature of their relationship? Had Tori run from her brother prematurely? Or should she have left sooner, so he never discovered she'd turned into a wolf?

“Watch your mouth when talking to the alpha,” Clawson snapped.

Kyle rolled his eyes, and if I hadn't known who he was, that little trait would have given it away. The gesture was identical to my mate's. There was no hiding the fact that they were siblings; their mannerisms were spot-on. Nobody could be in the same room as either of them and not pick up on every similarity.

I'd learned it all, or at least what Tori had willingly given to me. That was what happened when you became obsessed with your mate. Nothing went unnoticed for long.

“Sheriff, you wanted me to start talking, so here I am talking. But I'll gladly shut up again. No, it'll be a privilege.” Kyle's sarcasm poured out of his mouth like maple syrup.

Standing taller, I stared down at Kyle in his seat. We weren't going to get much more out of him. The progress had stalled when it had yet to begin. “Clawson, it's a waste to be here right now. Please update me about Mrs. Marrow later.”

The sheriff nodded, and I didn't bother to give the hunter one last look as I went to the door. I stopped in my tracks when Kyle asked a question out of left field.

“Did Tori find the spelled capsules?” A hint of worry and sadness tinged his rough voice.

Turning around, I pierced Kyle with my stare. He was obviously talking about the witch pills. “She did, and she took one.”

It wasn't a drastic change, but Kyle's body eased slightly enough that he didn't look as tense. He must've known that Tori had suffered a silver wound because his relief overtook his form for a quick second before his façade of boredom returned.

As much as I disliked him for Tori's sake, and for having kidnapped me and others, I decided to update Tori on her brother later. When I did, I would mention his concerns over her dating me and making sure she took the spelled pills. As much as I wanted him far away from her, I wanted her to have peace of mind more than anything. She'd lived with enough torment to last a few lifetimes, and I wanted her to think about her relationship with her brother. I was beginning to believe that Kyle didn't hate Tori the way she thought.

If that information would help her stop torturing herself, I'd gladly give it to her.



I lifted my chin at Clawson and went on my way. I was surprised to see Audrey standing outside the sheriff's office.

"Hey, Audrey."

"Mayor."

Silence enveloped us, and I scanned our surroundings to ensure nobody was listening. "How are you doing? Did you tell your parents the truth about our abduction?"

Audrey shook her head and scoffed loudly, "I'd sooner buy dollar-store box hair dye and touch up my roots myself than give them an ounce of reason to see me as weak." She flicked her long hair over her shoulder. "Would like to see one of them get captured and see how weak they are," she muttered.

I held back my chuckle, feigning that I hadn't heard a word.

"I simply told them I left town for a fling. I've done that a few times, though between you and me, several of those times were just so I could escape them. One time, I spent a luxurious weekend in peace and quiet at a spa."

I couldn't hold back my laugh. I didn't blame the woman. Her parents were a lot, though at the end of my day, I could wash my hands of them. Audrey, not so much.

Audrey looked at the jail and asked, "On a completely different note, how is the town's newest jailbird doing? Has he given us any useful information?"

Cocking my head at her, I studied her expression. She was genuinely curious. There were more layers to Audrey than what she had presented to the world for all the years I'd known her. It was interesting to watch them unfold.

"I didn't realize you were interested in defending the town from hunters." Not that I was opposed to Audrey's help; I'd take whatever help I could get. It was just that she'd never been interested before, preferring to spend her time shopping, flirting, and having a good time. And if she could do all three at the same time, well, so much the better.

She blushed a little. "Honestly, I wasn't. Not until they drugged me and kept me in a grimy camp for hours with the threat of torture looming over my head."

Audrey tried to keep up the bravado, but I caught the fear before she could hide it. Anger reignited inside me. This woman shouldn't have to face that threat, shouldn't have to constantly be looking over her shoulder. She had a right to live her life without the fear of being captured and tortured.

“Look, Ridge, we’ve never been very fond of each other. Mostly because of my parents, and I don’t fault you in any way for that. But I want to change. I’ve gotten tired of my life and want to turn over a new leaf. I figured assisting with the hunters and the town could be my way of helping. So, if I can help, please let me.”

Audrey wasn’t blowing smoke up my ass. She genuinely wanted to help. Being imprisoned by people who were skilled at killing you could change a person. In Audrey’s case, I was thrilled her change was for the better.

“I’ll let you know if you can help in any way,” I said. “We could use any and all help, and the fewer people who know what exactly is going on, the better.”

Audrey gave me a sincere smile.

“Need a ride home?”

She shook her head. “No, but thanks. I’m feeling tangled up in knots. I’m going to head into the woods and let my wolf roam for a bit. It’ll get rid of the tension for a while.”

I was a little envious that she could head off for a run right now. I’d have given anything to do the same thing with Tori by my side. It was out of the question for now, though. My duties were calling, and I had to take them seriously.

“Have a good run. Be safe.”

Audrey turned in the direction of the woods. “Will do.”

“Oh, Audrey?”

“Yeah?”

“Keep an eye out, will you? Note if anything seems odd or out of place out there.”

“Got it, Mayor Blackwood.”

As I walked over to my office in the town hall, I noted that the citizens of Blackwood weren’t out in droves like usual, but I didn’t think too much about it. It helped me to have a semblance of quiet as I prepared for a long day of business—and pining for my mate. Our separation from each other was a constant annoyance, but it was stronger and harder to ignore since she’d been injured and we’d been forcibly separated.

If I was having this sort of trouble, how was Tori handling it?

My pocket buzzed. I pulled out my phone, and the number for the local care facility lit up the screen. The facility was where my Aunt Lucille lived, so I never ignored that number. Something could’ve happened to my aunt, or,

on the bright side, my aunt was lucid and had called to chat.

Those were the best calls.

“Hello?”

“Hello, sweetheart.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Aunt Lucille, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, dear. Perfectly fine. I’m calling to see when you’re coming to see me again. You’ve been a naughty boy, not visiting me in months. I miss you and want to have a nice long chat with my favorite nephew.”

Forcing out a chuckle, I shut my eyes at the cruel way her feral state left her mind. I visited her every week, sometimes two or three times when my schedule allowed, but time didn’t compute the same for her as it did for the rest of us. More often than not, she remained feral for weeks or months on end. Her coherence now was a gift and a heartbreak all at the same time.

Arguing with her was pointless, though. To be fair, I hadn’t visited her in the last couple of weeks as much as I usually did. Too much had been going on. It didn’t mean she wasn’t in my thoughts and that I didn’t worry about her, but the care facility she lived in was top-notch. It was a shifter-run facility, so I was confident that she had the best support she could.

With how much I paid for her to be cared for and catered to, she’d better be getting the best support. If not, then the staff would have to answer to me.

That wouldn’t be the case, though. I was there often enough to keep an eye on things. I also never visited on a schedule, popping in whenever I had a spare moment. That helped to ensure the employees weren’t putting on an act for my benefit. I’d heard of too many places that didn’t care for their patients, and I wouldn’t allow that to happen to my aunt.

“I’ll be there tomorrow, I promise. We’ll have that long talk you always go on about since you moved in there.”

Whenever my aunt was lucid, she always griped about how we never had long chats like we always did when I was younger—discussing everything and anything under the sun. I missed those chats because they were few and far between now, but I took advantage of each one when it presented itself. Aunt Lucille had always been so full of life and had a way of teaching valuable life lessons without forcing them down my throat. She was the best person to talk to whenever I had a problem because she never judged or took anything personally. She always genuinely wanted to help, even if it was just to sit and listen.

“Oh, good boy, I can’t wait to see you. Tomorrow won’t come fast

enough now, will it?”

“No, Aunt Lucille, it won’t, but we now have something wonderful to look forward to.” Well, I hoped we did, but I didn’t say that out loud. My aunt was lucid now, but who was to say that she’d be the same five minutes from now, let alone tomorrow? Either way, I would visit her.

It didn’t matter if she remembered our conversation or even remembered me. It was important that I kept my promises to the people I loved, and Aunt Lucille was someone I loved fiercely.

We said our goodbyes. My aunt was my last remaining family member, and I would love it if she and Tori could meet. Having the two most important people in my life in the same room would mean the world to me.

Aunt Lucille might not be all there tomorrow, but I still wanted to invite Tori to come. Seeing Lucille would show her why I was so desperate to help her better understand her wolf and recover from her feral side effects. If she witnessed what could happen to her firsthand, she might be more motivated to get her feral side under better control—and hopefully banished from her psyche for good. It was worth a shot, and I’d try anything as long as it was in my mate’s best interest.

Especially if it helped convince her to stay in Blackwood Creek.

## Chapter 41

# Tori

“Excuse me, I left a bag here the other morning. I’m here to pick it up,” I said to the nurse in the ER.

“Right. Let me get it for you.”

“Thank you.”

The older lady got up and went into a back room. As I waited for her to return, I looked around the waiting area. With its rows of plastic chairs and end tables with old magazines, it looked every inch a waiting room, but I was surprised that nobody was there. That was what happened in a small town like this: the hospital wasn’t bustling out the door.

I was fortunate that no one was there to accost me. I wasn’t prepared to talk about the ordeal yet.

“Here you go,” the nurse said.

I grabbed the bag from her hand and started hunting for the engagement ring. I could see it was important to Ridge that I wear it. He didn’t make it sound like a big deal, but the constant talk about it and the ruse we had to keep up had me wanting to put the ring back on ASAP.

It also wasn’t all about Ridge. I wanted to wear it, just for a little while longer. It’d probably be the only time I wore such an elaborate engagement ring—or any engagement ring at all.

Sheepishly, I smiled at the nurse, who was grinning at me as she watched me rummage through the bag. She gasped when I pulled out the ring from the tissue wrapping and slipped it on my finger.

I was certainly creating the illusion of a desperate fiancée looking for her engagement ring.

“Um, I was wondering if the doctor who cared for me was available to

give me a check-up,” I said. “He told me to come in when I got back into town.”

“Let me check, Ms. Summers.” The nurse turned away from me to look at her computer and input my details into the system. “There’s a note to get him when you come in.”

“Thank you.”

A short while later, I was in an exam room with the shifter doctor who had done everything to save me when I’d been rushed in with a silver knife sticking out of my belly. He’d also had the pleasure of restitching me when I had lost my cool with Clawson and shifted.

“Can you rotate from side to side?”

I did as he asked, keeping my shirt bunched up to show my belly. I wanted to laugh at the flabbergasted look on his face.

He asked me to lie down while he palpated my stomach and side. “None of this hurts when I touch you or apply steady pressure?”

“Well, it’s a little uncomfortable. And with the bruising, it’s not my favorite sensation. But no, Doc, it doesn’t hurt.”

“That’s good. If it’s okay with you, I’d still like to do some scans of the wound site and get some blood drawn. I’ve never seen a shifter heal like this when silver’s been involved. It’s a complete miracle.”

Chuckling, I lowered my shirt and sat on the exam table. “Doc, it’s less of a miracle and more to do with the magic you mentioned when you stitched me up the second time. I was able to get a hold of some witch pills, and this is the result.”

“Okay. But because we’re dealing with an unknown, I still want to do some tests now. I want to ensure you’re good, and then down the road, I wouldn’t mind getting more tests and scans just to be safe.”

“Sounds fair to me, but I wanted to thank you and the other doctors for everything you did for me. Whether I took the witch pills or not, without you and your team’s efforts, I’d be dead. I’m grateful to you for saving my life, and I cannot thank you enough.”

The doctor got a little bashful, and I chuckled a little as he stammered. “Thank you, Ms. Summers, but the staff and I were merely doing our jobs.” He rushed along to get me scanned and blood drawn, not liking the gratitude. I would have to keep that in mind for the future.

When the tests were complete and we were back in the exam room, the doctor checked the results. He was amazed at how well everything had

healed. “Once the bruising fades, you’ll be good as new. There won’t even be a scar. It’ll be as if you’d never been stabbed.”

Smiling, I clapped my hands at the good news. “Thanks again, Doc. It’s great to be on my feet and moving around so easily again.”

“Now, if something’s off or feels wrong, or if there’s any discomfort, I want you to rush here immediately so we can check you and ensure there are no side effects.”

After agreeing to his request, I collected my stuff and headed out. While I had been aware of the healing pills for years, I had never personally experienced or witnessed their effectiveness until now. I was pleased that they did the job. I’d have been a mess if I’d had to stay in bed and take it easy for weeks on end. Shifters weren’t good at staying down for long.

Before I left the hospital, I decided to look in on Zander. After asking the front desk where to locate him, I found Elliot Elkins sitting outside Zander’s room, apparently taking a breather. The cantankerous man looked downtrodden and defeated. Having seen Zander’s condition myself, I could only imagine what was going through his father’s head, knowing his son had been captured and tortured.

My last run-in with the older man had spooked me enough to have me running away. I couldn’t connect this man and how he knew my father. My father was a hunter, and most shifters and supportive humans in the know would have run in the opposite direction if they saw me coming. I wondered how Mr. Elkins had met my father and if he’d revealed the connection to anyone.

Pulling my shoulders back, I approached the older man. I may not have liked Zander, but he didn’t deserve this. Nor did his father deserve to sit alone for hours on end.

“Mr. Elkins, I wanted to check and see how Zander’s doing. Do you have any news?”

Elliot Elkins lifted his head. His eyes were glossy, and he’d aged even more since I last encountered him. Wearily, he said, “You can go in and check on my boy yourself if you’d like. Zander hasn’t stirred or anything since he was brought in.”

Nodding, I walked into the room. Zander was lying still in the bed, with various tubes and cords attached to him. A soft beeping sound chirped in the background, proving his heart was still beating.

His coloring hadn’t improved, and I worried that whatever the hunters

had done was irreversible and he'd never come back from it.

Sparing a glance at Zander's father, my heart cracked a little for the man. It had to be torture not knowing whether your child would live or die.

"Ms. Summers, I wanted... I wanted to thank you. I'm so grateful to you for bringing my son back to me."

I waved off his thanks. I didn't know how to handle it and was a little confused by it. I'd been certain that because Mr. Elkins knew who and what my father was, he would be the first to point the finger at me for bringing the hunters to Blackwood Creek. Rather than thanking me, I'd expected him to petition to have me hanged in the town square.

Now, though, he appeared fragile to me. I didn't want to remind him that he knew my father, not only for my sake but for his. I wanted things to get better, not worse.

"Mr. Elkins, Zander seems like a spirited guy, and I'm sure he'll pull through. He's a fighter."

The older man nodded, but I didn't know if he'd heard me. It was like he was going along with the motions and not absorbing anything else besides his son.

I wondered if I should get the healing pills from Ridge's manor and try to force-feed them to Zander. Would that help? Or would it worsen whatever Zander was going through now?

Elliot stepped closer to the bed and patted Zander's leg. "I didn't know a single thing about paranormal stuff or wolf shifters until after I was married and found out my wife was one."

My brows rose so high, they disappeared into my hairline. Being pulled into this world like that must have been a massive shock.

"I was frightened at first. Who wouldn't be, right? You live your whole life knowing one thing and discover there's something else, and so much more. But I loved my wife, and she let me into her world. It was amazing how I actually became comfortable with the shifters and their traditions. Soon, wolves were no different from humans to me, and their world became my world, too. My wife was a beautiful spitfire of a wolf. She was part of the Everwood Pack, like your father."

He looked over his shoulder and gave me a sad smile. At the same time, my entire world crumbled at my feet.

Wait, what? *What did he say?*

"I'm sorry, but can you repeat that?" I stuttered.



A dry chuckle escaped Elliot, and he turned to face me. “You look just like him, you know. According to my late wife, Jaxon Hyde was the strongest alpha in the world.” His eyes dropped to the floor. “That is, until hunters took him. It’s going on twenty-three years now. The Everwood Pack, including my wife, was wiped out by hunters. By the fate of the moon goddess, I managed to escape with Zander.”

He stopped talking and returned to staring at his son. Despite the fact that he’d just pulled the rug out from my world, I caught the love, devotion, and fear in Elliot’s eyes.

“I was alone and unsure of how to raise a son, let alone a shifter. What did I know about wolves? I didn’t give up, though. I tried my best to raise a willful young alpha, but it was grueling, and I blame myself a lot for my son’s aimless ways. I didn’t know how to guide him properly, how to teach him to relieve his frustrations and urges the way wolves needed.”

This man was sharing his hardships, and I tried to listen, but I was reeling from this unexpected revelation about my past. Could it be true? In my heart, I knew it must be. Clearly, one of my parents had been a shifter. It wasn’t my mom, or my brother would have been a shifter, too. And if my resemblance to this Jaxon Hyde was so strong that this near-stranger had felt confident enough to comment on it... well, that seemed pretty significant. After all, I had the sense that the shifter world was smaller than the human world.

Now I wanted to know more. I wanted to know everything. Had my father been killed, too? Was he the shifter who killed my mother? Were there any wolves left from the Everwood Pack? Who could I ask about this? Why didn’t I know about any of this? Why didn’t my mother tell me anything, or at least leave me a clue that would have led me to more answers?

My mind was reeling. The questions just kept coming, but I had no one to answer them.

Before I bombarded the worried and grieving father with all my questions, I decided I’d talk to Kyle. Perhaps he knew about this, or perhaps he’d kept me in the dark along with our mother and father... well, I guess I could call my “father” William now.

It made sense that William wasn’t my birth father. I may have looked like my brother in many ways, but I could never find any resemblance to my father in my features. The fact that I was a shifter wolf, which neither my parents nor brother were, should also have been a clue that William wasn’t my actual father.

It'd take time to unpack all that, but at the moment, an increasing chirping sound snapped me out of my thoughts. A glance at the heart monitor showed Zander's heart rate was increasing. My eyes landed on Zander as he started shifting and moving around.

Zander's eyes slowly opened, then he squinted against the light. He looked around the room, and when his gaze landed on his dad and me, there was nothing there except confusion. He cocked his head when his attention focused on his dad, who was crying in relief and rushing over to hug his son.

Frantically, I moved to the open door to shout at the nurses. "Come quick, Zander's awake! He's awake!"

Returning to the bedside, I watched father and son. Elliot wouldn't let his son go, but something was off because Zander wasn't responding to his dad. He didn't push him away, but kept staring at him in confusion.

Two nurses rushed into the room, pulling Elliot away from his son so they could check Zander over. As I started to go back to the door, I couldn't have been more surprised when the older man reached out and held onto my hand.

The nurses allowed us to stay in the room as they did a preliminary examination while waiting for the doctor to arrive. We stood and watched what was quickly becoming inevitable.

"How are you feeling?" a nurse asked Zander.

"Okay, I guess," he answered.

"What day is today?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know who the president is?"

He shook his head.

"Do you know where you are?"

Zander looked around. "I'm assuming a hospital."

"That's right. Do you know why you're here?"

He scrunched his nose and rubbed at his forehead as if he was trying to think really hard. "I'm sorry, I don't."

"That's okay."

"Do you know these two people here?" The nurse pointed at Elliot and me.

Zander looked us over slowly. I'd expected to see the usual sneer on his face, but he had a blank expression. "No. Should I?"

Elliot choked back a breath, trying to keep his distraught reaction under

wraps.

I was aching for the father beside me and for Zander at having his memories taken from him. The blame for this lay firmly at the feet of the hunters, and I feared it happening all over the country to other shifters. How many were out there now, completely unaware of who they were?

The doctor ran in and took over some last-minute examinations before the team rolled Zander out of the room. They told Elliot they were going to carry out more in-depth tests and scans to see whether Zander's memory loss was temporary.

As Zander's bed rolled down the hallway, I took Elliot's hand. "Come on, Mr. Elkins, this will take a while. Why don't we go to the cafeteria and get some coffee? It'll be better than waiting here on your own the whole time."

It took a moment to convince him to come with me, but he finally conceded. We worked our way through the maze of hospital hallways to the small cafeteria, where we were served a surprisingly decent coffee.

"If he's lost his memories, Mr. Elkins, we'll just have to remind him of who he is. The town will pitch in and help in any way possible."

I tried hard to cheer him up. Knowing the town would be here to support them seemed to bring Elliot some comfort, even though his son's memory loss was clearly putting a lot of strain on him.

"Thank you, Tori. You're a good girl. I appreciate you staying with me."

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. We fell quiet, drinking our hot coffees. We waited as long as we dared before returning to the hospital room.

The room was still empty, so I made sure Elliot was seated before grabbing another chair from the seating area outside and putting it next to him. I wasn't about to let this man stress and worry alone while Zander was getting tests.

Eventually, the nurses returned Zander to the room and got him situated. The doctor studied Zander's chart. When he finished writing some notes, he lowered the chart, looked at Mr. Elkins, then looked at Zander.

"Okay, so we did the scans and I studied what I could. So far, we haven't found anything. We're waiting on the blood tests to see if any drugs in his system could have caused temporary amnesia, but I doubt it since we tested his blood earlier. I did broaden the test, just in case. We went through a litany of questions instead of just the basics you witnessed before, and he has complete retrograde amnesia and can't seem to recall anything. Not one memory wants to come forward."

Rubbing the older man's arm as he heard the news, I tried to imagine what was going through his head. Zander watched the doctor as he spoke, then glanced at his father and at me, but there was still nothing there. He didn't seem panicked by his lack of recall. He just looked lost.

"It's possible this might reverse slowly with time," the doctor continued. "That has been known to happen, but it might help him to talk to a specialist. Maybe it can help bring back memories or light a fuse to dislodge something."

Elliot leaned back in his seat, looking disheartened.

Not wanting him or his son to give up, I said, "Lola Kipling, the new psychiatrist in town, she might be able to help. She's very sweet, and I'm sure she'd love to help however she can."

"Are you okay with that, son?" Elliot asked Zander.

Zander looked at his dad, but only shrugged.

"Thank you for the suggestion," Elliot told me. "I'll call her and have her come in to talk to Zander. Hopefully, she can help us get an idea of what needs to be done."

Zander was getting tired, and they didn't need me hanging around. "Mr. Elkins, I need to go, but I'll be back to check on you both. Please call me or Ridge if you need anything."

Mr. Elkins stood and hugged me before I left, shocking me to my core. I had a feeling the crotchety man would be a little softer with me from now on. Still, I hoped he didn't change too much, because then he wouldn't be the same man everyone knew.

Leaving the hospital later than I'd anticipated, I headed to the Bogford B&B to check on Diana and Margo. After what I'd just witnessed with Zander, I needed to reassure myself that Diana was okay.

I caught Margo at the front desk, but she was alone. As soon as she saw me step inside, she moved to the side of the counter and gave me a ridiculous curtsy. "All hail the Mother Savior."

I rolled my eyes. "Cut it out."

She walked over to me and hugged me, her voice serious now. "Tori, I can't thank you enough. I owe you more than I can even express for bringing my mom back home."

"Stop it. You don't owe me anything."

"As if. You're in the Bogford Book of Good Graces, and it's a lifetime membership, never to be stricken."

Shaking my head, I stepped back from Margo and looked for Diana. “Where’s your mom?”

“She’s upstairs. I told her I’d handle the front desk today and let her regroup.”

I straightened. “Is she okay? Do we need to take her to the hospital?”

Margo smiled at me and waved me off. “No, she’s fine. Just relaxing.”

Deflating a little, I let out a breath of relief. I studied my goofy friend, and as I did, I couldn’t help but picture Clawson and how miserable he’d looked, knowing Margo was angry at him. I couldn’t stop playing over what he’d said and how he’d talked about Margo.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I didn’t want to stick my nose in Margo’s love life, but I didn’t want either of them to be unhappy. Figuring I could be subtle about it, I said, “Clawson did most of the work getting everyone out of the hunters’ clutches. I mostly drove the getaway car and made sure everyone popped witch pills.”

Margo frowned and moved back behind the desk, but I didn’t miss the blush that tinged her cheeks.

“I don’t think he’d mind if you thanked him, too, Margo. It couldn’t hurt, could it?”

Margo flushed a deeper shade of pink. “I’m sure he knows how heroic he is, and I’m definitely not going to inflate his ego any more than it already is.”

Sighing, I shook my head. This woman was stubborn, which made me laugh a little because I knew all too well that I was possibly even more stubborn than her. Now I felt bad for people who had to deal with me.

Well, I didn’t feel bad enough to change, but bad enough to acknowledge it.

The sheriff’s mention of fated mates nagged at the back of my mind, but I hesitated to bring it up. A mental tug of war battled it out, and finally, my curiosity got the better of me.

“Hey, what are fated mates?”

Margo, hopeless romantic that she was, swooned and clasped her hands over her heart. Her face took on a dreamy look as she gushed, “Fated mates are two halves of the same soul. They’re shifters made to complete each other. Isn’t that romantic?”

She clearly didn’t expect me to answer because she steamrolled along. “Fated mate connections are unmistakable and super powerful. When true fated mates have claimed each other, they can communicate

telepathically and sense each other's feelings. It's been said that it's supposed to be like nothing else in the world. Once you have one, you'll never want for anything, because you'll have everything you could ever need."

It sounded a lot like a fairytale to me. Something shifter girls told each other at sleepovers while they did each other's nails and hair.

"Can you imagine a connection like that?" Margo asked. "A love like that? It's not very common. I've only seen a few fated mates, but watching them has given me so much hope that I might find mine someday. At least, I hope to. It's a long shot, but it's possible."

Margo's swoony, starry-eyed gaze made her look like a cartoon rabbit. I wanted to laugh, but I refrained because the idea of fated mates obviously meant a lot to her.

Suddenly, Margo gasped, grabbed my shoulders, and shook me.

"Are you asking because that's what you have with Ridge?" She squealed so loudly, I was surprised she didn't burst my eardrums.

Desperately wanting to nip that idea in the bud, I said, "If fated mate connections are as unmistakable as you say, then that's not the case between Ridge and me. I wanted nothing to do with him when we met."

Margo blanched. "Ridge is the nicest alpha ever. He's honest and fair, and he's not lacking in looks, so how is that even possible? Women are always throwing themselves at him and slipping him their numbers."

She must've caught my distaste because she blurted, "You have nothing to worry about. He only has eyes for you and would never do anything to jeopardize what he has with you. Again, nicest alpha ever. You only need to look at him when he watches you. You're it for him. I know it."

I didn't want to hear all that, so I shook my head and got back to the topic at hand. "I technically did like him at first, enough to have a one-night stand." I chuckled. "But that changed completely by the next morning."

Snickering, Margo crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. "Hopefully, the sex has gotten better since then if you were so ready to bolt after the first time."

I groaned. I was done with that part of the conversation and didn't wish to go deeper into it. After all, I certainly didn't think poorly of Ridge now. He was the person I felt safest around, the only one with whom I could lower my guard. Because of him, I felt far more important and worthy of good things than I ever had before.

I wanted to repay him for his kindness somehow. The wheels started

turning in my head as I tried to come up with something. I didn't have the funds to give a material gift, but Ridge wasn't about that, anyway. Why would he be when he had everything he could possibly want?

What could I possibly offer the man? Mentally snapping my fingers, I knew what I'd give him. It was something he'd asked for the morning after we met. He'd be surprised, but deep in the marrow of my bones, I knew it would make him happy.

Even as nervousness sizzled through my veins, I couldn't help but feel good about it.

## Chapter 42

# Ridge

I parked my car in the garage, thrilled to be home after an exhausting day. As anticipated, the day had been a mess. Patience was something I usually had in spades when dealing with bureaucratic stuff, but now that I had a fated mate who was trying to make her way in the world and accept herself for who she was, she was a constant presence in my mind. All day, my wolf and I had been constantly itching to get to her and be by her side.

It had proven much harder than I'd bargained for to have her out of my sight. No matter how much I tried to shut off my mind, I still heard her howling in pain in the library. Still felt the massive spike of fear when I'd seen her in the hunter compound. Anything could've gone wrong.

But I didn't want to bring my worries into my home, knowing Tori would sniff them out in a heartbeat. I wiped my hand down my face and started changing my mindset. I wouldn't worry much about it tonight because she'd be next to me the whole time. When she was around, it was easier to filter my thoughts. It was only when we were apart that I turned into a glass-half-empty guy, which I despised.

Once I'd collected myself, I went inside and my body came alive at Tori's scent. The manor no longer just smelled like me, but of our intermingled scents. My wolf approved, as did I.

It didn't take me long to hunt her down. I found her leaning over the kitchen counter, swaying her ass back and forth to a rhythm in her head as she rifled through one of my cookbooks, mumbling about rabbit food and that she'd starve here.

I stifled my chuckles. This woman was irresistibly adorable and sexy as all get out. Needing to taste her now, I rushed with shifter speed to her side



and turned her toward me, pinning her hips between mine and the island. I kissed her like I needed her to breathe, because it was true. She was the only thing that could get me through each day.

Grinding my raging erection into her soft belly, I slid my hand up her back, grabbing a fistful of hair and angling her head so I could dominate every inch of her smart mouth.

Her erotic moans set my blood on fire, and I growled when she clutched my ass and curled one leg around me, trying to line me up exactly where she needed me.

Heaven. I was at the gates of Heaven, and Tori was my key to entering paradise.

Her tongue dueled with mine as our hands roamed, squeezed, and caressed each other. Our arousal permeated the air, and I wanted to toss her over my shoulder like a caveman and take her to my bed. She could wipe my mind of the terrible memories plaguing me all day and fill them with new ones of her soft body melding with mine, her moans enticing me to lay her out before me and feast on her pussy till she couldn't see straight. Then, and only then, would I sink into her tight sheath and bring us both to completion, her heat joining mine to combustible degrees.

We could have it all now if I could get her in my bed as quickly as possible.

I lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around my hips. A loud moan rumbled through my throat as she ground her core into my heavy erection, forcing a bit of pre-cum to leak out of the head. Damn. I wanted to be inside her so badly, but at this rate, I'd embarrass myself and explode like a teenage boy.

"Ridge, hold on." She reached for the counter, grasping it so I'd stop moving us toward the stairs.

I pouted, fearing she'd back off again. She was good at giving and taking in the moment, which was great—until she had time away from me to listen to the voices in her head and overthink everything. Then she pulled the brakes on us. I was getting familiar with her push and pull, but it fucking hurt.

I'd do anything to make her comfortable and happy—except sleeping in separate beds. That was no longer permitted. We didn't have to do anything, but she wouldn't sleep apart from me again. My heart and mind and wolf couldn't take that separation.

She caressed my hair and kissed the corner of my mouth. “I’ve been thinking, and I’d like to take you up on that run now.”

My arms tightened around her in sudden fear of dropping her. Running with my mate was exactly what I wanted to do, but I’d never pushed her on it after discovering her hatred for that part of herself. Allowing her wolf to come out and find balance with her was crucial to stopping her from turning completely feral. I wanted Tori to enjoy that part of being a shifter, but nobody could enjoy something if they were constantly forced into it.

“You asked if I wanted to run as wolves together the morning after we met,” she said shyly. “It was fun when I let my wolf out to play, with your help. This time, I want to do it again, but I want to enjoy it with you and not stress about hurting someone or whether I’m a monster.”

She dropped her gaze, but then worked up the courage to look me in the eye again. “I’m still wary of my wolf because of how feral she is and how little control I feel when she comes out. But with you around, I have more control. You soothe me. I want to accept that I’m a shifter because that’s what I am, and I can get there with you by my side. I feel like I can do anything when you’re by my side.”

Tori let out a little puff of air. My little wolf was nervous, but I was over the moon that she wanted to do this. Several miles out of Blackwood Creek in the surrounding woods was a beautiful area that was my favorite place to go running. I’d been excited to take her there, and I wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity that she’d so graciously given me.

“Do you want to eat first or head out?” I asked.

For Tori to have acknowledged her wolf and shown her vulnerable side was a huge deal, but she wouldn’t appreciate me pointing that out or fussing over her. I figured it was best to move right along.

“Um... let’s leave the rabbit food behind, shall we?”

I threw my head back and laughed, then kissed her with such emotion, I hoped it spoke to her of things to come. The kiss ended far too quickly, but much as I’d fantasized all day about all the delicious things I’d planned for Tori, I didn’t want to wait for the run. She’d offered, and I wanted to head out at once.

As I lowered her onto her feet, she rubbed against my erection, and I hissed. Tori looked a little sheepish, but I still caught the hungry look in her eyes. I could already tell tonight would be the best night.

I let the town budget, disciplinary action, and the standard operating

procedures of my company fade away to the back of my mind, slowly calming enough so I could walk out to the woods more comfortably. Grabbing my mate's hand, I led her out the back door and guided her to the familiar clearing in the woods on my property that we'd used before.

Dropping her hand, I removed my shirt, unbuttoned my pants, and kicked off my shoes. I got out of my clothes much faster than Tori, so I was rewarded with watching her strip, revealing her pale, creamy skin one delightful section at a time.

All my hard work—pun intended—of getting rid of my earlier erection was useless.

Tori chucked her bra, and it smacked me in the chest. “Better watch it, wolf-man. You’ll want to cash in on this running thing before I change my mind. Who knows when I’ll suggest we do this again?” She winked at me.

Smirking at her, I dropped to all fours and shifted.

Tori did the same, but it took her a little longer to shift. But she did it faster than she'd ever done before, so there was an improvement.

I got closer to her and licked her muzzle. When she locked her gaze on mine, I was pleased to see that she and her wolf had merged equally, though Tori was taking the lead. Not having the wolf be solely in charge and letting the feral side of her take control was a massive win.

Tori was such a strong woman. I'd lucked out in having such a powerful mate. The fates had picked well for me.

Nuzzling her neck and licking her face, I turned and ran in the opposite direction of my manor. Tori was quickly on my heels, following close behind. We played and ran at full speed underneath the canopy of trees and the bright moonlight that snaked through any openings.

Tori howled when she spotted a few rabbits, chasing them until they found cover. She rushed back over to me, jumping around me, nipping and licking me. She was playful, and I reveled in every moment of it. Her wolf was blossoming, which was the most precious thing to experience. Because we were mates, and because of our wolves' easygoing natures, the experience was that much more intimate for us.

I'd been on many runs in my life, but always as part of the pack. The run I'd done with Tori before had been awesome, but there was something about this time that had every other run in my life beat. It had everything to do with the joy and pleasure Tori was taking from it. She wasn't fighting her nature but embracing it. Best of all, she was sharing the moment with me.

All the fear she'd held onto since discovering she was a shifter seemed to have vanished from her as the moon highlighted her through the darkness, shining the light on a living star that was too magnificent for this world but had been gifted to it, anyway.

And I was the lucky bastard who got to have her as my mate.

It took longer than usual to get to my special place, but my little wolf was having too much fun and I didn't want to interrupt her.

She explored the private clearing and the stream that ran through it. I reveled in the pleasure she was clearly finding in the beauty of the place. The high, bright moon lit up the area perfectly, making Tori's fur glow.

I shifted back into my human form, unable to keep my eyes off Tori. She finally turned around and saw that I'd shifted back, and she pranced back toward me, leaning against me and letting me pet her fur. She closed her eyes and moved her body closer to me. Several moments passed before she stepped away and prepared to shift back. I saw the fear in her eyes as she began struggling.

"It's okay, little wolf, don't force it. Allow it to be a natural transition. Remind your wolf that this won't be the last time she'll come out to play. That there are plenty more runs in our future."

Slowly, Tori's bones and joints snapped as they reconfigured into a human body, her fur fading into the pale pink of her skin. As she gained confidence and learned to transition faster, the popping would diminish and she wouldn't feel it so acutely.

Standing tall, she opened her arms to me for me to hold her, and I practically leaped into them. Anytime she instigated touch, I couldn't hold back, always fearful that she wouldn't ask it of me again.

"Come lie in the grass with me. The stars in this spot are unbeatable," I said.

Wordlessly, she followed me, and we cuddled in the middle of the clearing by the stream and watched the sky. I'd done this exact thing a hundred times before, always alone. Sharing this with Tori was the best thing in the world.

"This is amazing," she marveled. "Look at all those stars."

I ran my fingers lazily up and down her arm, watching her as she watched the stars. Tori was more beautiful and radiant to me than all the stars in the sky. As I kissed the top of her head, she looked up at me with a soft smile.

"What's that look for?" she asked.

“What look?”

“I don’t know. You’re just giving me a look. I like it, just wondering what it is.”

Leaning down, I kissed her lips. “I’m just thanking my lucky stars that we came on this run together and that I finally got to show you my favorite spot. I’ve been dying to share it with you. I’ve never shared this place with anybody before.”

“Nobody?”

“Nope, only you.”

Softening in my arms, Tori reached up and pulled my head closer. She kissed me sweetly until I deepened it with my need. There wouldn’t ever be a time in my life when I didn’t need this woman.

Rolling her naked form under me, I nudged her legs open so I could nestle myself in the cradle of her hips. Her sweet gasps egged me on as my cock slicked along her slit. I groaned in her mouth. God, she was already so wet for me. Her body was a miracle that I’d never tire of.

Desperate to taste her everywhere, I trailed my lips down her neck to her pert breasts and sucked in one hard nipple, grazing it with my teeth as I pinched the other with my fingers.

“*Ridge.*” Her beckoning moans had me going wild for her already. I’d wanted to be inside her since I woke up this morning. It took all of my control not to thrust inside her until she was fully ready for me, and I had to battle with my wolf to make sure this was just as good for Tori as it was for us.

I nipped at her nipple, and she hissed from the sting as I licked and suckled the tender bud. I moved to her other nipple, sucking it in deep as I pinched the first one and rolled it between my fingers.

Tori gave a low moan and opened her legs wider, inviting me in with a tilt of her hips. I moved against her, teasing my cock against her heat. The action only had me panting to be inside her tight pussy.

I nipped and kissed my way down her torso, her fingers clenched in my hair. When my lips reached the soft skin above her mound, I lowered my nose and inhaled deeply. My mouth salivated at my mate’s scent, and her desire for me had me ready to howl at the moon. I brushed my lips over her clit, making her rasp in pleasure.

Wrapping my arms around her thighs, I used my thumbs to open her pussy lips and expose her intimate flesh to me. Lost in her sweet scent, I

latched onto her clit and ravished her. Her screams echoed out into the night air, but only the moon and stars were witnesses to my loving torture. Using my broad shoulders, I pushed her thighs still wider apart so I could have better access to her honey pot. I started lapping at her roughly and quickly, carefully scuffing her clit with my teeth, needing her to come for me. Wanting to rip her orgasm out of her.

She squirmed and tugged at my hair as she rode my tongue. “Yes. Yes. Yes! Almost there, almost! God!”

Her loud cries made my cock ache and filled me with the need to thrust inside her, to sink my teeth deep into her neck to claim her as if it was my right.

According to the laws of the animal kingdom, it was.

My dick was so hard, I was surprised I wasn't lightheaded. Pre-cum dripped from me like a faucet, my balls filled to capacity. I dropped one hand, tightened a fist around my base, and started stroking myself fast and hard as I watched my luna unravel. I started fucking her pussy with my tongue in earnest, demonstrating what I was about to do to her with my cock.

It only took three firm thrusts of my tongue before she screamed out and convulsed as I licked up every part of her release as if it were ambrosia.

When she finally quieted down, I sat on my heels, stroking myself at the disheveled sight before me. She'd never looked more beautiful.

Tori tried to catch her breath and licked her lips, her eyes locked on my hand as I stroked my cock. Her teeth left little indentations on her bottom lip as one hand traced her nipples and the other skated down to circle her clit. She mewled at the sensitivity, and I squeezed myself tight as I fucked my hand and watched her pleasure herself.

“Good girl. Just like that. Show me how you get yourself off when I'm not around. Fuck, it's so hot.”

Tori stopped long enough to dip one finger, then two inside herself. My cock jerked in my hand and my wolf growled, urging me to mount her, own her. Claim her.

My teeth hurt from the need to bite and seal us together once and for all.

“Ridge, oh, Ridge. I need you inside me now. Please, inside me now.” Her pleas were thick with lust.

Roaring, I landed on top of her and then rolled us so she was straddling me. My cock brushed against her wet thighs, and we both groaned loudly.

“Ride me, little wolf. Let me feel those hips in action and watch those tits

bounce for me.”

This was the only way I could be inside her without doing something I’d later regret. I couldn’t claim her, no matter how badly I needed to or how much I craved the mating bond with her. The intimacy of a fated mate went far beyond what we were doing now. She didn’t know anything about fated mates, and she might not want to claim me back. As much as that pained me, I wouldn’t destroy her for my momentary pleasure.

Her lips stretched into a gorgeous grin. She reached for my cock, which jumped in her hand as she lined us up and lowered herself onto me. I gripped her hips as her wet heat slowly clamped down on me. She didn’t stop until I was fully seated inside her and her ass cheeks rested on my thighs.

“Fuck yeah, baby,” I growled. “You feel so fucking good.”

“You fill me up just right, Ridge. I’m so full.” The moonlight cascading over her skin was a dazzling sight. Sweat shimmered over her body, and her hair was a wild tangle.

She leaned forward so she could plant her palms on my chest, then rose until only the tip of me remained inside her. She dropped her hips hard and fast enough that her ass smacked against my balls. The pleasure was so intense that my breath left me in pants as she sped up.

I was in blissful torture as her breasts swayed, bouncing so close to my face that it would be no effort to take her breast in my mouth and bite. I gritted my teeth hard. The veins in my neck had to be bulging from my restraint.

Tori was losing momentum, so I tightened my hold on her hips, planted my feet in the dirt, and thrust up when she dropped herself down.

“Oh, fuck! Yes, Ridge, yes, like that.”

We lasted for a few more thrusts before she couldn’t do the work anymore, so I held her up and fucked her hard and deep. The slapping of skin against skin echoed in the clearing. Tori choked out several shouts as I rammed up inside her as deep as I could, her juices dripping down my dick and balls. This was no sensual love-making; this was dirty and primal, and I thrust deeper, imagining fucking her tits that swayed heavily in front of me and placing the tip of my cock into her hot little mouth.

I roared at the intensity of her tight grip on my shaft, at the fantastic sight of her pleased, luscious body.

My teeth sharpened into points as if I were shifting. That was how badly the desire to bite her, to claim her, burned. But I couldn’t do it, not until Tori

knew everything it meant and what it entailed.

I moved with my shifter speed, needing her to drop over the edge. I had to get her to come all over my cock so I could come inside her before doing something I'd regret.

She came with a scream, squirting all over my cock, balls, and thighs. I maintained the pace to wring out as many of the aftershocks from her orgasm as I could. I never wanted her to forget what I could do to her body.

Tori collapsed onto my chest, and I moved my hands to her ass and spread her cheeks wide, opening her up further to give me more room. I got in a little bit deeper, then I shot my load and painted her cervix with my cum until she milked my cock for everything it was worth.

Panting, both of us a sweaty mess, I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her close. "There'll never be a time with you that isn't fucking out of this world," I mumbled.

Tori's chuckle vibrated against my chest, and she burrowed in closer to me, burying her face in my neck.

We stayed like that for a while, letting our hearts and breaths return to normal.

"I'm glad you're starting to understand your wolf better. It'll help you become much more peaceful."

Tori squirmed on top of me, making my dick flex inside her. "I feel a lot better now, and it's probably not just from the mind-blowing sex we just had, either. Although, that certainly helps things."

"Happy to oblige, ma'am," I said, causing her to let out a girly giggle that made me ache again. I couldn't help the smugness that enveloped me.

I roamed my hands up and down her back as I stared up at the sky. This moment couldn't have been more perfect if I'd tried.

"I went by the jail earlier," I said.

Tori stiffened for a second. After a couple of silent beats, she asked, "How'd it go?"

Fuck, I shouldn't have brought it up now, but we had to talk about it. Since it was out there now, I tried to lighten the mood. "You and your brother are so similar in some ways, not the least of which are your sharp tongues and stubbornness. But the eye-rolls are a dead ringer." I chuckled.

Tori elbowed me, and I let out a very masculine *humph* before continuing. "I won't pretend to understand your relationship, but baby, your brother might be more worried about your welfare than you realize."



She was silent for a moment, then cleared her throat. “I saw Kyle at the hospital before he drugged me and took all of you.” Her voice softened, and my heart ached for her. She was trying so hard not to show that she was hurting. “He gave me a warning and made it perfectly clear that no matter how close we once were, he didn’t see me as his sister anymore. It’s just something I need to get over.” She trembled in my arms, and a small teardrop landed on my shoulder.

I could tear Kyle’s heart out for the pain he was causing my mate. I hated her being upset in any way. She was filled with so much light and love; she shouldn’t have to touch this world’s darker, negative emotions. I’d more than happily do that for her.

Wanting to take her mind off her brother and her sadness, I changed the subject. “I spoke with my aunt today. She was having a lucid moment, and I promised her I’d visit her tomorrow. I was wondering if you wanted to go with me.” Worried I might be pushing for things Tori wasn’t ready for, I hastily added, “You can absolutely turn me down. Sadly, Aunt Lucille is far more feral and isn’t likely to be rational, which doesn’t make for great company. I don’t want you feeling obligated or pressured to go if you don’t want to.”

I didn’t know if taking her with me to meet my only family member would be too much for her, but I hoped she would say yes because I wanted Tori to meet my aunt. Family meant the world to me, and I wanted Tori to be a part of it all.

“Of course I’ll go with you. I’d love to meet your aunt.”

A shit-eating grin split my face, and my heart swelled. Her coming to meet my aunt meant we were taking another step in the right direction. Soon, I’d be able to convince Tori of what we had, which was far more real than the fake engagement I’d initially proposed.

I wanted to officially propose to her sooner rather than later, but I had to show her how deep my feelings went for her. It had to be done slowly. I was too afraid of scaring her off and never finding her again, or worse, scaring her off so much that she wouldn’t pay close enough attention and get caught by a fucking hunter.

I’d never lived with so much fear until I met my mate. Remembering the shy way she’d asked if I wanted to go for a run and then seeing her in balance with her wolf had helped alleviate some of the fears gnawing at me since she’d admitted to losing control in front of Clawson. Now, I wasn’t as

concerned as when I first saw the feral nature in her wolf. They were communicating better with each other, now that she'd had time to process the fact that she was a shifter.

Knowing Tori had been taught that shifters were monsters—however wrong those beliefs were—helped me understand her fears better. It took years to overcome that kind of gaslighting. The longer she was with other shifters, the easier it would become. We weren't meant to be solitary nomads. We needed a pack. Seeing for herself that we weren't to be feared helped her understand that. Margo, Diana—hell, even Audrey—were far from the villains she'd expected.

I traced the tattoo under Tori's left breast—a cage formed from the light of a crescent moon with wolf tracks leading into it. The symbolization of it made my wolf growl, but I reminded him how far she'd come. I ached at the knowledge that she'd been disconnected, alone, and frightened. That was changing, and I was so fucking proud of her, of both of them. She and her wolf were bonding and attempting to work together to form the balance that was so important for us shifters.

Balance and pack—she had both now, and me. Tori would always have me.

Her wolf was stunning, and I'd savor the memory of us running together for as long as I was hungry for her.

I kissed the top of her head, and she tilted her face to mine, a small smile on her lips. I wanted to kick myself for making the night turn in a depressing direction. I didn't want her to associate running free with her wolf with anything that'd upset the shaky foundation she and her wolf were building.

“Come on, little wolf, let's shift again and get back to the manor. Our wolves need to have some fun. I'll even let you win.” My words had an immediate effect, just not what I'd hoped for.

She jerked away from my arms, her eyes wide. “You mean like play-fighting? Are you for fucking real? Do you remember the last time I ‘played’ as a wolf, Ridge? I woke covered in blood, found Deputy Hill's body, and because I had no memories of my time in the woods, I thought I killed him. So, no thanks. I don't want to play with you.”

Fuck, how did I forget? She hadn't been in control of her shift or her wolf that night, and her feral side had taken over. When Zander had tried to get between us, she'd turned on him. It had been his own fault. The ass knew better than to get between an alpha and his mate, but Zander thrived on

pushing boundaries. It had backfired spectacularly when Tori's wolf had laid into him.

She was right. She'd woken alone, naked, and covered in blood. It hadn't played out in her favor when she was found standing over Hill's body.

Oddly, I owed this closeness between us to Zander. The result of that night had been Tori agreeing to be my fiancée to have an alibi. I'd confirmed her innocence, even if she didn't remember. People here were quick to cast blame on a stranger in town, but when they learned she was the alpha's mate and the mayor's fiancée, they'd backed down. Save for a few outliers.

She tried to stand, but I kept my hold on her. If I let her go, she'd run away from me. Again.

"That wasn't your fault, Tori. Zander paid for his own stupidity. He was being a jerk, and your wolf deservedly put him in his place. It's irrelevant now. You've better control now, and every time you work with her, you become more in sync." I spoke quickly, trying to quell her unease. "There is so much more to being a wolf. Sometimes it means indulging in their playful side. While running is great, you might find you enjoy goofing off and experiencing things as a wolf. It'll also hone her instincts. You've got nothing to lose but everything to gain."

Tori's troubled gaze nearly choked me. "I'm still fighting the feral side. You didn't see the way I acted at the hospital with Clawson. I'm grateful he stopped me from hurting anyone, and I'm happy that my wolf is calmer, but this run with you tonight was a huge step. I'm not sure I'm ready to dive in further than this. What if my feral side takes over, and you can't stop me?"

Her unmistakable fear had me dropping the subject. I'd pick my battles. She was trying, and that was enough.

I released her, then stood and offered my hand to help her up. When she got to her feet, she allowed me to embrace her. I buried my nose in her hair and let her scent wash over me. The night air chilled our skin as we held each other.

"Come on, let's head back to the manor."

I waited for her to initiate the shift before following suit. She pushed ahead of me, turning her head often to ensure I was behind, but there was a teasing quality to it. Chancing my luck, I playfully nipped her hind legs. To my surprise and utter delight, she circled and reciprocated.

Our wolves enjoyed playing with each other. Tori had a mischievous side I'd glimpsed only briefly on our first run, and it was amazing to see it emerge

again.

At the back door, we shifted again, but her face was full of disapproval. For a split second, I worried I'd pushed too far too soon, but when I looked closely, I saw that the dour expression was a cover. A glint of glee shone in her eyes.

As we made our way up the stairs, I thought she was going to go to the guest room. I wouldn't force her to sleep in my bedroom. I'd prefer it, of course, but I'd leave the choice up to her. To my relief and gratification, though, she followed me into my room and slipped between the sheets, exactly where she belonged.

## Chapter 43

# Tori

I was in Ridge's bathroom, combing my hair. I'd slept in his bed again, with him curled around me. All the way up the stairs last night, I'd argued with myself that I should sleep in the guest room. Ridge had to be getting sick of me taking over his space, so he should be able to sleep in his own bed without me being attached to his hip—or more accurately, his cock. But after everything that had happened, I needed the extra comfort, at least for a while longer.

I slept much better when I was the little spoon to his big spoon, but I couldn't be selfish for much longer. I'd grab a few more nights of deep sleep at his side, and then I'd redraw the boundaries. Ridge was too nice of a guy to enforce them, but I couldn't keep doing this to us anymore.

I was falling for him. I couldn't deny it any longer. I'd have been an idiot not to fall for him. He was everything I hadn't known I'd needed in a man: he was kind, handsome, a fantastic alpha, and the sex was freaking awesome. But I couldn't afford to fall any harder because we'd need to cut off our fake engagement soon. The longer we kept up the ruse, the harder it would be to answer the townspeople when we broke up. Otherwise, Ridge would have to shell out a shit-ton of money for a wedding that would never take place just to avoid suspicion. The townspeople were already waiting for the wedding invitations.

Realistically, though, my sleeping in another room and separating us sooner rather than later was more about self-preservation than anything else. Protecting my heart and mind. It would hurt a lot more if I allowed myself to fall entirely head over heels for Ridge because I already believed there'd be no other man for me. I wasn't the right woman for him, though my wolf

didn't agree with that. She bristled and grumbled that he was all we needed and didn't understand my rationale. Ridge needed someone who could be an alpha's mate, a mayor's wife, and that wasn't me.

I took longer with the eyeliner and eyeshadow than usual, wanting to look my best when I met Ridge's aunt. Even though we weren't really engaged, I still wanted to make a good impression on her, and a little extra primping helped settle my nerves. I kept telling myself I shouldn't be so nervous, that this wasn't anything important or meaningful to Ridge. He wasn't taking me there to meet his family. He wanted to show me what a feral shifter looked like when they didn't keep the balance between themselves and their inner wolf.

I needed to see it for myself. I could be in the same boat in the near future if I wasn't careful. Ridge was always doing things that would help me grow. He was preparing me for life as a shifter without him.

The thought stung—and my wolf yowled so loudly, I flinched—but I had to remind myself that we were just playing house, that this wasn't real. No matter how badly I wished it to be.

Ridge knocked on the door and strolled into the bathroom, looking suave and hot as always. His sexy smirk was plastered across his face, and he looked like a cat that ate the canary. His smirk turned into a warm smile when he spotted the ring on my finger and lifted my hand to his mouth so he could kiss it. Since we'd returned from our run last night, he'd been smiling and eyeing the ring nonstop.

"You look ravishing, but that's nothing new." He twirled me and pulled me into his arms for a deep, sensual kiss.

His touch, kisses, and anything involving him were more intense and exciting than they had a right to be. Our relationship felt like the farthest thing from a fake one. I'd never experienced this before, and something deep inside me said I'd never experience it again—only with Ridge.

The kiss deepened, and Ridge's hands started roaming in places that would stop us from leaving the house at a reasonable time. I'd also have to redo my carefully applied makeup, so I broke the kiss despite my wolf snarling at me to continue.

"The shower glass is still broken." I pointed at his shower.

My face heated as I remembered why the glass was broken. Pushing him through the glass wasn't my proudest moment, but it had been fair play. He'd surprised me by mentioning my wolf when I hadn't realized he was a shifter.

I'd still been so scared of my wolf, believing that part of me to be a monster. Lacking any balance, my feral side had exerted much more control. Panicked and believing he was a threat, I'd pushed him off me and through the shower glass.

Maybe he shouldn't have brought up my wolf when I was naked and vulnerable in a stranger's shower. Yes, we'd had amazing sex the night before, but I hadn't known more about him than his name and that he was the mayor.

Laughing, Ridge leaned back and put his arm across my shoulders, pulling me into him as he studied my handiwork. "I'll move bathroom renovations up on my to-do list because it does look bad. You're a fierce she-wolf."

Blushing, I elbowed him in the side. He kissed my temple. "Are you ready?"

Taking one last look in the mirror, I shrugged. "As I'll ever be, I guess."

My palms were damp with nerves. I wanted to make a great first impression, and I wanted her to like me.

I didn't question why I wanted Ridge's only family to like me so badly.

"You're beautiful. Everything will be fine." He kissed me again and led me out of the bathroom and then the manor.

We passed several family portraits on our way to the front door, and a thought popped into my mind. "Ridge, do you think the hunters know your family history?"

Ridge's smile dampened, and the atmosphere changed drastically. He struggled with his ancestral history and was doing everything he could to make amends for it, to right the Blackwoods' wrongs like it was his mission in life when he shouldn't have felt so beholden to the task. He'd worked himself to the bone to rectify his family's history when he had done nothing wrong. They weren't his crimes, but his work demonstrated the character of a great man.

Learning about his mission had been a turning point for me and how I looked at him. He was a fantastic man who, for a short time, I was fortunate to call my own.

"I'm sure that's part of the reason I was targeted by the hunters," he said. "They probably want me to help them repeat history. I refuse to do that. I'd never sacrifice shifters or any other paranormal being for my own gain."

We stopped walking for a second, and I cupped his jaw in the palm of my

hand and made him look at me.

His eyes held the torment of his family's actions, and the responsibility of the lives lost for their greed and poor decisions was buried deep. I wanted to fix it all for him, but knowing that wasn't possible, I could at least make him not think about it so much. I guided his jaw down till I could meet his lips in a slow, sweet kiss meant to soothe, not arouse.

When we broke apart, he rested his forehead on mine and smiled into my hair. "Thank you, little wolf."

My wolf preened that I'd lifted some of the sadness from him. Ready to change the subject, I jokingly asked, "Do the Magpies have bad tempers?"

Ridge cocked his head. "Not that I know of. Why do you ask?"

I started walking again so we could be on our way. "I haven't shown up for the last two shifts at the Moonlight Café and kind of forgot I was working there, with everything going on. I need to know if I should beg them for their forgiveness to keep my job."

Ridge laced our fingers together as he spoke. "They'll probably show you mercy, considering you were attacked, stabbed, in the hospital, and then went on a rescue mission within twenty-four hours."

"Ah, but they don't know I went on a rescue mission. Only that I went out of town."

"Please, you're talking about the Magpies. They know you rescued us."

We laughed because it was true. I wouldn't be surprised if those two knew all the secrets of the universe but loved to watch us mere peons struggle with day-to-day living.

"And you know, you don't have to keep working at the Moonlight Café. I really think you should pursue something artistic." His fingers skimmed the heather flower tattoo on my wrist. "You're extremely talented, Tori, and I think you should pursue that."

My body got all warm and fuzzy at his compliment. I was touched that he'd even remembered how much I loved doing art. Drawing and tattooing were things that called to me, but those hobbies weren't easy to pursue when on the run. I'd trained myself to tattoo and done my own—the heather flowers on my wrist in memory of my mom, a dreamcatcher on my leg intended to help the nightmares that had started after my first shift, and a larger piece on my side that saddened me now, as it depicted my previous feelings about my wolf.

Amazing, how much this man had changed everything for me.



But it wasn't easy to make money as a tattoo artist without a reputation, and the only way to get a reputation would have meant staying in one place and advertising. It also didn't help that my father and brother knew about my love of drawing. It was safer to avoid my hobby so they couldn't track me through the artistic community.

We were quiet on the drive to the care facility, but Ridge had given me something to think about. These days, I kept getting these moments of excitement until I remembered that staying here in Blackwood Creek wasn't an option. I couldn't pursue the artistic lifestyle I wanted, but it was a gracious gesture on Ridge's part. He didn't mean to get my hopes up, only for reality to set in and break my heart. He only wanted me to be happy. It showed in everything he did.

The upside of all that thinking was that it eased my nerves about meeting his aunt. When we parked at the care center, the overwhelming scent of shifters surprised me.

"Ridge, is this a care facility for shifters? I've never heard of anything like this."

He winked at me. "There is now. I told you how my Uncle Vincent and Aunt Lucille went missing a couple of years ago, right?" I nodded, remembering the conversation. "Vincent has never been found, but Lucille was discovered wandering near Blackwood Creek." Ridge stared out the window, not focusing on anything. "Lucille was broken. I thought at first I could look after her. She'd done it for me. I wanted to be there for her the way she was for me after my parents died."

I reached over and squeezed his hand. "That couldn't have been easy for you... losing them, not knowing what happened, only to have Lucille return but still not have answers."

"She was feral, and as it took hold, she became more and more out of control. I couldn't look after her myself. If I left her alone in the house, she either destroyed everything or got out. When that happened, we had to find her, hoping she hadn't harmed anyone or shifted in front of some unsuspecting human. I needed help."

No wonder he was so keen on helping me find balance with my wolf. He'd seen firsthand what it meant for a wolf to be feral and how it affected those around them. Seeing this care home that this wonderful man had built and staffed with shifters and humans who were in the know, all so his aunt would be safe and cared for, only increased my pride in him.

Would I ever cease to be amazed by this man and his selfless nature?

We signed in and went to Lucille's spacious, high-end room. Ridge must have spent an absolute fortune for her to maintain this style in a care facility.

An older woman, looking anywhere between her late forties and somewhere in her fifties, stood before bay windows that let the sun pour into the room. She was working on a watercolor painting with a woman who looked a few years younger. The other woman kept commenting on Lucille's artwork, so I figured she was probably a recreational therapist.

The therapist's head popped up when she noticed we'd entered, and she gave us a pleasant smile. "Lucille, you have guests. I'm going to give you some time to visit."

"Okay, dear," Aunt Lucille said. Her voice was hazy, and she didn't sound completely present.

When the therapist approached us, Ridge asked, "Are you seeing any improvements with the different therapies?"

"Art therapy is new to Lucille, but she likes it and it keeps her distracted. These things take time." The therapist glanced at me and held out her hand. "I'm Grace."

"Tori," I said, shaking her hand.

"Has anything been effective?" Ridge asked, keeping one eye on his aunt, who was still quietly absorbed in her watercolor.

Grace looked at Ridge, and I was pleased when she didn't bat her eyes or try to flirt with him. She was completely professional. Ridge speaking with other females agitated my wolf. That agitation was never directed at Ridge—my wolf and I trusted him—but at the women.

"Sometimes, it seems we're making progress. We'll see slight improvements. She'll have more lucid periods that seem to last longer, then something sets her off and she's lost to the feral side. When she recovers, we're back where we started. She certainly keeps us on our toes, but we'll keep trying, Ridge. There are many different options for us to work with, and when we see those improvements, however small, it gives us hope. She seems to enjoy the art therapy, though some of her paintings are troubling."

Ridge frowned. "How so?"

Grace went to a cupboard and pulled out several paintings. Lucille had used mostly black and gray, but it was obvious what we were seeing. The paintings depicted a cell or dungeon of some kind.

"Do you think these are based on a memory of a real place or her

imagination?” Ridge’s voice had a tremor to it.

“It’s entirely possible, Ridge, that it’s real,” Grace said somberly. “I asked her once when she was having a more rational period, but as soon as she saw the painting, it sent her into a shift, so I’ve not forced the issue. Given her reaction, I’d say that yes, this is a memory and it haunts her, but she’s not ready to face it yet. But don’t give up on her. We haven’t.”

While Grace and Ridge spoke, I turned my attention to Lucille. She was still engrossed in her painting, so I took the opportunity to examine her. If you didn’t look too close or didn’t know what to look for, she just looked like an older lady enjoying her hobby. However, when I studied her closer, there was a vacancy in her eyes and a slackness in her demeanor.

Ridge had warned me on our way over that despite her non-threatening appearance, Lucille might shift unpredictably and put up a fierce struggle to escape due to her feral nature. If I hadn’t been at the gas station that day and accepted a ride with the Ashworths—a wholesome human family who knew nothing of the shifters in town—how long would it have been before I’d have snapped and gone completely feral? How long if this amazing, generous, fake fiancé of mine—who’d helped me so much in the short time I’d known him—hadn’t come into my life?

Thinking that hunters may have damaged this woman who meant so much to Ridge made my wolf ache for her, fueling her anger all the more.

Grace and Ridge finished their conversation, and the therapist left. Lucille’s attention drifted from her painting to Ridge. A flicker of recognition shone in her eyes, only to vanish quickly. But she remained focused on him.

“Hi, Aunt Lucille, it’s Ridge. Your painting’s beautiful.”

She gave him a coy smile and nodded.

“I’ve missed you, and I want you to meet someone. Aunt Lucille, this is Tori. She is my—” he broke off, clearly unsure how to introduce me.

Our relationship—or non-relationship—status was obvious here. He had no qualms telling everyone else that I was his fiancée, but he couldn’t lie to his aunt. I understood that, but I hated not hearing him say that I was his fiancée. I’d grown accustomed to it, something I started realizing I wanted more than anything.

Letting my emotions simmer down, I jumped in and finished the sentence for Ridge. “I’m his partner in crime at the moment. I’m really happy to meet you, Lucille.”

Snapping to stiff attention, Lucille studied me intently. She scanned me

from head to toe, then snarled and bared her teeth at me. In a matter of a second, she went from a sweet older woman to a completely feral wolf.

The change was so fast, and I was too shocked to react in time. Ridge's large black wolf leaped in front of me, responding fast enough to pin his aunt while her wolf squirmed on the ground, frothing at the mouth and clawing him all over.

Chaos erupted as the feral wolf battled Ridge for longer than I'd have thought possible, but he held his own. He placed himself between his aunt and the door, preventing her from leaving the room. I kept myself as far back as possible, not wanting to distract him from the fight.

He may have more than tripled her in size, but her ferocity to get to the door was astounding. She wanted out and didn't care who stood in her way. She threw herself at him, snarling and biting, spittle flying from her mouth as she fought to get past. Ridge didn't fight back, merely defended himself, and though their blood splashed the walls, I knew they were both healing as quickly as they were getting injured.

Suddenly, Lucille got Ridge into a vulnerable position and went for his throat.

A gasp escaped my lips. Ridge looked over at me, and Lucille took the opportunity to clamp her teeth into him. Screaming penetrated my brain, and I realized it was coming from me.

With a shake of Ridge's massive wolf head, he flung her off him and tossed her against the wall. The sound of the smaller wolf hitting the wall reverberated astonishingly loud in the quiet room, and I was surprised the staff didn't come running in from all directions.

Much to my amazement, Lucille got back up and went for him again, despite having damaged the drywall. But she was tiring. Ridge used his body weight to knock her down and keep her pinned. She'd put up a hell of a fight, and I wasn't sure if she was finished.

Shock had me paralyzed, and it wasn't until Lucille stopped fighting and slowly calmed down that I could function properly again. Was that what I looked like when I was feral? Could I be as bad as that?

If that was how I acted, people were even less safe around me than I'd thought.

Ridge eased off his aunt and released her when she no longer appeared to be a threat. He stayed in his wolf form as he moved backward, never taking his eyes off his aunt while shielding me behind him. But he didn't have to

worry about me moving out from behind the shield of his body. I wouldn't risk getting close to his aunt for my safety and her sanity. When she became lucid, I could only imagine the guilt that would plague her. If our roles were reversed, the guilt would eat me alive.

Lucille shifted into human form as she lay prone on the floor. When she was done, Ridge quickly shifted, then covered her with a blanket from the bed. He scooped her up and settled her on the bed before turning to a box by the door and grabbing a spare pair of pants from it, which he pulled on.

I hadn't noticed the box when we'd entered, but having backup clothes was smart for situations like this.

Not moving from my spot, I watched Aunt Lucille, and my heart broke at the lost look on her face. Confusion clouded her eyes as she scanned the room, then her gaze landed on me again.

I struggled for something to say. She was important to Ridge, and I wanted her to like me, but after witnessing her outburst, I wasn't sure what to say. So I went with polite.

"How are you, Lucille?"

With no warning, the older woman started crying. Her whole body shook, her eyes never leaving my face. "You look just like your father."

My head swam and my knees threatened to give out. The floor under me no longer seemed to exist.

Ridge eyed me worriedly before running to his aunt. Mumbblings and blubbers came out of her mouth, but neither of us could make out exactly what she was saying. No matter what Ridge did, there was no consoling her. However, everything we could make out was coherent, not the ravings of a madwoman.

After several moments, the words started clearing up, and she kept repeating that "she couldn't go back" and "couldn't face him." At one point, I was certain I heard her say, "Jaxon Hyde." She repeated the other two phrases until her whole body began to shut down from the adrenaline of shifting and apparent shock at seeing me.

My blood chilled as I tried to work out what she'd said. That was another mention of me looking like my father, some shifter named Jaxon Hyde. I didn't know how to wrap my head around all this and didn't think now was the best time to do it.

Ridge held his aunt but watched me, perplexed. I didn't want to cause more problems, so I shrugged at him and mouthed, "Later."

“Aunt Lucille, do you want me to come back later? When you’re feeling more up to having company?”

Not in the state to have company, Aunt Lucille happily agreed as she closed her eyes and instantly entered dreamland. She was wiped out and desperately needed the rest.

Ridge made sure she was comfortable and placed a loving kiss on her forehead as he tucked her in. My heart squeezed at how he cared for her. What he did to save her from herself was wonderful, and I couldn’t help but admire him even more. I hadn’t thought that possible.

He came over to me and put his arm around my shoulders, then guided me out of the room. We stopped at the nurse’s station, and Ridge relayed what had happened and that they’d need to check in on her shortly, but she was currently resting peacefully.

Ridge settled me in the car, and we sat in silence as we headed back to Blackwood Creek. My mind was reeling. Lucille had mentioned my father and said I looked like him. I could only assume she meant Jaxon Hyde—the same name Elliot Elkins had mentioned.

“Little wolf, I apologize for you getting frightened during the visit. That was the last thing I wanted, but with her condition, some days are much better than others.”

I put my hand on his thigh, and he covered it with his.

“It’s fine, Ridge. You warned me she might not be lucid today. These things happen. I’m fine, I swear.” I didn’t want him to think I was angry or upset, but I was confused. I was desperately trying to put all the pieces together, but it was a giant jumble.

The facts started listing themselves in my head, and I reviewed what I knew. Ridge’s aunt and uncle had gone missing before his aunt had turned up again, wholly feral. She’d been missing for a long time, so it wasn’t a stretch to believe that from her anguished reaction and how she’d mentioned I looked like my father, Lucille had met Jaxon Hyde during that time. However, I didn’t know a thing about the man. I’d never even heard his name until yesterday, and it made me wonder if he’d played some nefarious part in what had happened to Ridge’s aunt and uncle.

Why else would she react to me in such a manner? What had caused such tremendous fear for her to shift and go full-on feral on me? I didn’t think I could have fended her off if I’d been alone. If it hadn’t been for Ridge preventing her from reaching me... I shuddered at the thought.

It seemed like no matter where I went, my existence caused problems for others.

I looked out the window, watching the world pass me by. Maybe it was time for me to leave. Save the heartache my presence brought to this town.

“Hey, beautiful,” Ridge said, bringing my hand to his lips. “What’s wrong? What’s going through that magnificent mind of yours?”

Leaning back against the seat, I turned toward Ridge. “We didn’t talk much last night, so I didn’t have the opportunity to tell you what happened at the hospital.”

“Are you okay? Did the pills not work?” His eyes scanned my face, his brow furrowed in panic.

“No, no, Ridge. I’m fine. The doctor cleared me and said I was good. He’d like to run some more tests and scans at a later date so he can follow up, but other than that, I’m good.”

Noticeable relief eased over him as he settled back in his seat. “Okay, phew. Don’t scare me like that.”

I squeezed his hand. My heart ached for making him worry, but I was overjoyed that he cared that much for me.

“I went to look in on Zander and spent time with Elliot Elkins,” I said. “We chatted, and then Zander woke with complete memory loss. There’s a lot to unpack there, but anyway, Elliot mentioned a Jaxon Hyde, the alpha of the now-gone Everwood Pack. He said I looked exactly like him and that he was my father. Well, he doesn’t know for sure if he’s my father, but apparently it’s not a hard conclusion to arrive at if I look so much like him.”

And now, Ridge’s aunt had said the same thing. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

Ridge did a double take but turned his attention back to the road. “I’ve heard of the Everwood Pack. My uncle was affiliated with it at one point. They were a small but powerful nomadic pack known for their altruistic efforts on behalf of all paranormal creatures, not just shifters. From what I’ve gathered, the pack had particularly strong alphas, so if your father was one of them, it could explain your strength as a shifter. Your ability to repress your wolf so fiercely and for so long is rare. I’ve seen shifters go completely feral in the first year of trying to make it alone. When you told me how long you’d been alone, I was surprised you hadn’t gone full feral ages ago.”

Wow, that was a lot to unpack. Could I finally get some answers to why I was a shifter wolf when nobody else in my family was? Could this be a piece

of my heritage? There were so many questions I needed answers to, and I was determined to get them.

Starting with my brother. He had to know something.

“Can you drop me off at the jail?” I asked.

Ridge sighed but nodded. He didn’t mask his look of concern but agreed without questioning me. His trust meant the world to me.

“Do the doctors have any thoughts about Zander’s memory loss?” he asked. “Do they think it’s only a temporary thing because of trauma, or do they think it might be permanent?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I felt bad for him and Mr. Elkins, but since he’d just woken up, there weren’t any details. I’m sure they’re testing him to get more answers, but at the moment, there’s nothing more to say. I hope it’s not permanent. I couldn’t imagine not remembering my life.”

More importantly, I didn’t want to imagine not remembering Ridge. The mere thought of it had me in a tailspin, so I forced myself to drop the topic.

“I’ll talk to the doctors and Mr. Elkins and see what’s happening,” Ridge said.

We remained quiet for the rest of the car ride, trying to soak in all the information thrown at us.

“Would you like me to go in with you?” Ridge asked when we pulled up outside the building.

Giving him a sweet kiss, I said, “No, thank you. I need to talk to Kyle alone.”

Ridge kissed me again. “Okay, call me if you need me. I’ll be right over.”

Smiling, I gave him several more pecks before hopping out of the car.

Inside, the deputy at the counter greeted me pleasantly when I asked for Sheriff Clawson. The sheriff must’ve heard me ask for him because he came right out.

“Tori? Is everything all right?”

“Hi, Sheriff. I need to talk to Kyle. Can that be arranged?”

The sheriff glanced at me, then asked, “Ridge aware of this?”

“Come on, Sheriff. He doesn’t need to give permission, but yes, he does know. He just dropped me off. Call him if it’ll make you feel better.” I struggled to keep the frustration out of my voice. It wouldn’t do to piss Clawson off when I was asking for a favor.

“All right. Give me a moment to set him up in an interrogation room.”

“Thank you.”



I sat in one of the chairs in the waiting area, not wanting to get in the way. Ten minutes later, the sheriff opened the small door marked “Staff” and guided me into the depths of the station.

After leading me down a hallway, Clawson stopped in front of one of the doors. “He’s in heavy-duty silver handcuffs and ankle cuffs. He could easily break through the regular ones, but I’ll be in the other room.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the sheriff lifted his hand to silence me.

“Don’t worry, I won’t have the intercom on, but I will watch you guys. Make sure nothing happens to you, okay? That’s the arrangement. I won’t compromise on that.”

Figuring he had already compromised by letting me talk to my brother, I agreed. “Fair enough, Sheriff.”

“Well, that was a lot easier than I expected,” Clawson remarked.

## Chapter 44

# Tori

The atmosphere in the small interrogation room was heavy when I walked in and closed the door. Every stress and worry from the past four years came to the surface, and the desire to run burned at my heels.

I studied my brother's face, one that I'd been more familiar with than my own at one time in my life. The fear of his hatred that I'd worked up in my mind made me realize I couldn't do this. I could handle others not liking me and wanting to hurt me, but I couldn't take it from my brother.

He had been the one person I'd had in my life who I thought would always have my back and never turn against me. While on the run, I hadn't gone to him for help. It would've killed me if he'd looked at me with disgust, if he'd spoken the cruel words he'd said to me at the hospital.

Four years later, he'd confirmed my fears. My brother saw me as a monster, no longer his little sister. He couldn't see past the wolf inside me, though she hadn't changed me or made me any different from the person I'd been before the truth was revealed.

The anger and hurt I'd harbored so deeply for someone I'd admired and looked up to for so long was something else that. Being alone with him dredged up the past, and I struggled with all the reminders. The reminder that he hated me as much as I'd hated myself at one time reinforced that my childhood had been a big sham. There was no unconditional love there, which pained me in ways I wasn't sure I'd ever get over.

Without saying a word, I turned to leave when Kyle broke the silence. "Your tattoo of the heather flowers is a nice tribute to Mom. You must've done it yourself because it's good. You always had exceptional talent."

His voice was soft and approachable. He made it sound like he didn't

want me to leave without actually saying the words—another character trait I'd never had to endure from him before. Kyle always used to tell me exactly what he wanted, never beating around the bush, but we were in unfamiliar territory now. No longer beloved siblings but on separate sides, a place I never once imagined would be the case.

My hand was still on the door handle, but I couldn't bring myself to turn it. I swallowed hard and heaved in a breath before turning around and facing my brother. As he eyed me closely, I took a moment to study him. There wasn't hatred pouring out of him. He simply looked weary.

This was my only chance to get what I needed from him, so I built up my courage and became the badass I'd pretended to be for the past four years in order to survive.

I sat across from him and intertwined my fingers in front of me. Kyle's eyes drifted to my hands. He frowned when he noticed the engagement ring, but didn't say anything about it.

We both sat, appraising each other. It was surreal to see how much he'd changed and matured over the last four years. Kyle had an ever-present five o'clock shadow and an unnatural hardness to his jaw. His once easy-going smile was long gone. It was the look that seemed to wear heavily on hunters after a time.

He looked older than his years, and I realized he was doing everything he could to survive at this point, just as I was. I hated that we were at odds with each other. He was still the same older brother who'd taught me how to tie my shoes and skip stones and let me play beauty salon with him. It had never mattered how many barrettes I put in his hair. He'd smiled and let me.

He'd been my hero.

Now, I knew nothing about him. I was realizing just as the Tori who sat before him was a totally different person, the Kyle I'd known was long gone. There was no going back to how and who we were. Our time as siblings was gone and buried.

He spoke first. "Are you okay?"

Was I okay? What kind of question was that? Of course, I wasn't okay—I'd been on the run for four years. I'd needed my big brother, and instead, he'd hunted me. Seriously, what kind of question was that?

I must've looked at him, dumbfounded and irritated, because he jerked his shackled hands to where I'd been stabbed.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Where your mole friend, the bitchy old librarian,

stabbed me.”

Kyle clenched his jaw, but the rest of him remained motionless.

“Yeah, I’m fine now, thanks to the witch pills. They did what they were supposed to do.”

He noticeably lightened at that statement and nodded.

“Are the hunters still in business with witches? Why would you guys do that if you despise paranormal beings so much?” I hoped to get as much out of him as possible, but when my brother didn’t want to discuss something, he wasn’t letting anyone get it out of him. He was stubborn, good at only giving away what he wanted.

I’d found that trait infuriating when we were kids, especially since I was curious and fascinated by everything he did. I wanted to be just like him. I used to steal his clothes and dress like him, would eat all the things he did, watch the same movies, play the same games. My brother had been everything to me.

“Come on, Kyle, are the hunters still in business with the witches? There aren’t very many out there, are there? Do they help you out willingly? Or do you hunt them and force them to do whatever you want? Do you take away their free will? Come on, give me something.”

I hoped I could get him angry enough to answer, react, anything.

Kyle sat with his head cocked and watched me, looking bored. There wasn’t any getting through to him. He knew how to control himself, and that made him an excellent hunter. His patience and ability to compartmentalize were second to none.

He cleared his throat. “I often wondered about you over the last four years, my little sister out in the world all alone, despite trying not to. Because everything changed when you did. I couldn’t help wondering if you were alive or out killing everything in your path. If you were hurt.” He watched me with sad eyes, and there was a hint of wistfulness in his voice.

Telling him I’d also thought about him wasn’t a good idea. There was no changing the past, so why talk about my longing for my big brother, how desperately I’d missed him, and how I’d shut myself off so the pain wouldn’t overwhelm me? How I’d taken a page from his book and built up my tolerance for compartmentalization? How I’d secluded myself from friendships, a home, and a life?

“Everything did change, and nothing’s going to fix that,” I said.

“When you left, you put your idiot boyfriend in the hospital for quite a

while.”

Shame had me lowering my head, and the hatred I'd felt for myself tried to resurface. It didn't matter that I'd been fighting so hard to accept myself and my wolf. That horrendous day would always plague me.

“I'm sorry about that,” I whispered. There were never enough apologies for what I did back then. “I didn't mean to go after him. It was my first shift, and I didn't know what was happening to me. But he shouldn't have touched me.”

Scoffing, Kyle's eyes heated, but he sat back and got more comfortable in his seat, trying to show me he didn't care as much as he did. “I'm not sorry. That asshole got what was coming to him. That prick was a jerk to you, and you put up with his gaslighting for too long. If you hadn't mauled him as a monster, I'd have done it myself with my bare hands.”

Emotions warred inside me. The sentiment of his words touched me, but the fact that he'd called me a monster was a knife to my heart. I didn't like hearing that, nor did my wolf. Especially now that I'd realized I wasn't a monster but a shifter born into this world who didn't naturally want to harm anyone. My wolf craved peace and acceptance, just like most humans did. Being able to shift didn't make me a monster, a villain, or an abomination. It made me more. It was something I was grasping onto, thanks to Ridge and all the shifters of Blackwood Creek, and I was finally accepting it as the truth.

I wasn't here for a trip down memory lane, though. I had to get some answers. I could see that getting reacquainted with each other was a waste of time. Kyle would never accept me for what I was, and I couldn't keep trying to convince him. It'd be too exhausting and pointless.

“I'm not here to chitchat. I need to know if you heard anything about Mom and a shifter named Jaxon Hyde?”

“I heard a lot of things, but I don't know what to believe anymore, and haven't for a long time.”

There was a weariness in his voice, and I started to feel sad for him. There was no doubt in my mind that my brother had taken the full force of William's intense, vengeful streak since I'd left. Knowing William, he was probably brutal to Kyle.

My brother's peaceful childhood had ended the day our mother died, just like mine. I didn't think I'd ever seen him struggle, not once, but now I felt sorry for him because he was a shell of the loving, happy-go-lucky brother I once knew. He was withdrawn and conflicted. There was a hardness to him

that ate at me because that wasn't his nature.

"Do you enjoy being one of them?" Kyle asked.

His question hit me out of left field and immediately put me on edge. It had to mean our brief moment of reconnecting was coming to an end, but there wasn't anger in his voice or his posture; he seemed genuinely curious.

I wondered how to answer, but figured honesty was always best. I had nothing to hide, not anymore. Ridge had shown me that.

"I was terrified of what was inside me the entire time I was on the run," I began. "So much so that I only shifted for the second time recently. My first shift, attacking my ex, made me so afraid, and after everything we were taught in training—the lies, the brainwashing—I became terrified of my own shadow. I didn't want to be a monster. After all, that was what had been jammed down our throats. The thing is, though, my wolf isn't a monster. She's a part of me, and I'm a part of her. As long as I'm accepting her and maintaining balance with her, there's no way I could be a monster."

Every word I said was true, and peace settled over me. My wolf was content. For a long time, I'd needed to embrace her, and here I was, telling a hunter—my brother—that I wasn't a monster and believing every word I said. It was freeing.

"If you could be rid of your wolf, wouldn't you want to?"

Rid of my wolf? What the hell was he talking about?

I shook my head. He didn't get it; he never could. "Who cares? I am what I am, and I'm not going to run from it anymore. I didn't come here to discuss my choices or lack thereof with you. I wanted to find out about my past, and if you know anything about it, now would be the time to share it."

Kyle locked his jaw for a split second, then loosened it while he rolled his tongue around as if contemplating what to do. Part of the strict oaths that hunters took when they pledged and became full-fledged hunters included not revealing sworn secrets. We both knew that if he broke and told me something he shouldn't, he'd be banishing himself from our family's hunter faction.

While we'd trained, Kyle had constantly bent the rules and asked too many questions. He'd never strayed from the path where our father was concerned, but he'd often told me things beforehand, which was a big no-no. Now that I was far removed from the situation, I wondered if that was proof of Kyle not really believing in the hunters' mission to rid the world of shifters. If he wasn't as on board as I'd thought. He wasn't acting like a man

fighting for the cause. He seemed to be going through the motions of what was expected of him.

A deafening silence fell over the room, and Kyle looked conflicted. I held out hope, because he wasn't treating me like a monster in the way I'd expected. His concern for me wasn't fake. I might not know my brother as well as I once had, but that wasn't something I'd mistake.

"Okay, then answer me this. What happened to Zander?"

Kyle rolled his eyes. "Your fiancé already went for this line of questioning, so why don't the two of you compare notes?" Shaking his head, he continued as if he were disappointed in me. "I don't get you, Tori. Just because you have the same curse as these other shifters doesn't mean you can't find a normal human guy somewhere out there. You don't need to be stuck with a bloodthirsty monster parading around as a rich, cocky, egotistical mayor. You could live a more normal life."

The mention of Ridge and the way Kyle spoke about him instantly had my hackles up, and my wolf was ready to do some damage. There had been no hesitation, and my feral side was taking root. Stabbing pains and lightning bolts rocketed through my head as I battled tooth and nail with my wolf to calm down.

I slumped in my chair, holding my head to keep it from hitting the table. I was quick enough to get a hold of my wolf and started breathing through the chaos, but it didn't stop my brother from shouting in alarm.

"Tori? Tori? You okay? Sheriff? Sheriff, get in here! Something's wrong with Tori. Tori, are you okay?"

The exhaustion of my mental battle zapped my bones of any energy. I stared at my brother, my surprise at his reaction evident.

Clawson barreled into the room and put his arms around my shoulders. "Breathe, Tori. Calm down and breathe."

I followed his instructions and breathed with him. After a few moments, I started seeing clearer. "I'm okay, Clawson. I caught it fast enough. It was just a lapse. I promise I'm okay."

"You sure? Do I need to call Ridge?"

I shook my head. The last thing I needed was a worried alpha barging in here and having words with my brother for upsetting me. "No, please don't call Ridge. I'm okay. I'm in control."

Clawson looked me over and nodded in satisfaction.

Kyle, on the other hand, was demanding answers. "What the fuck does

she mean by that? What the fuck was going on? Does she need to go and see a doctor?"

Clawson growled at my brother. "Surely, you hunters have put together by now that shifters go feral when they aren't in a pack or are forced to go off as lone wolves? Something Tori clearly had to do."

Baffled, Kyle said, "The wolves I've seen are always feral."

Clawson snapped, "That's because the hunters have probably driven them to that point by the time you see them. Shifters weren't meant to be loners. We're not geared for it. But with all you hunters on our asses, shifters have been forced to go on the run, leaving their support systems behind, or their pack members are taken from them. You're creating your own vicious cycle of ferals, then holding them up as being the norm when they are the outliers."

That shut Kyle up, and the sheriff returned to giving me his full attention. "You should go take a seat outside before she accidentally attacks your brother. I don't want you living with that guilt on your shoulders."

Softening at the sheriff's concern for me, I nodded. He was right.

"It's useless to try getting information out of him, anyway." The sheriff glared at my brother as he continued, "He's a blindly obedient hunter who would riddle you with silver bullets the moment he could if he escaped."

Fuming, Kyle bolted upright, snapped the silver chains apart, and let them fall to the floor.

I gaped at him, and Clawson readied himself to shift. Neither of us could believe his strength. He was stronger than most shifters, and that worried me. If he was like that, did that mean all hunters were that strong? What would the weaker shifters like Diana and the elderly do against a hunter with this kind of super-powered strength?

"I could have gotten out of this pathetic, outdated jail and returned to my faction immediately after being brought in, but I haven't bothered because I wanted to talk with my sister. I've been trying to track her down for four years, so you can butt out and get lost. Now that I know Tori's okay, I'd like to continue speaking with her alone."

The surprises kept coming. I was stunned by my brother's revelation. He'd been looking for me?

I couldn't let hope rise. If he had been looking for me, it probably wasn't for a warm family reunion.

"What were you going to do when you found me? Was it only to get me to the hunters, or for something else?" I hated how small my voice sounded,



and Clawson must have heard it because he moved protectively in front of me.

“I would’ve brought you back with me to the compound, but only because it’d give you a chance not to be a monster anymore,” Kyle said. “I would’ve set you free.”

I physically jolted as my wolf started howling in my mind. Clawson stiffened before me, his muscles tensing. His wolf was probably reacting the same as mine. What Kyle was saying was wrong on so many levels.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Clawson hissed. “Explain.”

Kyle’s stubborn streak returned, and he clamped his mouth shut. He watched me as closely as I watched him.

Frustration and exhaustion from the emotional rollercoaster that only family could invoke had won out, and I was throwing in the towel for this round. I needed to regroup and recharge to have the mental capacity to have another conversation with my brother.

“I’m tired and need to rest,” I said. “I’ll come back later when you decide to stop beating around the bush and can hold a reasonable conversation with me. And stop hinting at things that don’t make any sense.”

“Tori?” Kyle said, pleading.

“No. I’ll be back later.”

As I marched out the door, I heard Clawson ask Kyle if putting him in the cell would even be worth it. I didn’t hear Kyle’s reply. A part of me was hopeful that my brother did still care for me as his little sister. In his mind, if he was trying to fix me, even though I didn’t need fixing, did that mean he still loved me?

But what were the hunters doing? Kyle wouldn’t have wanted to take me back to the compound unless he was sure he could “fix me.” I doubted he would’ve put me in harm’s way if he hadn’t had a good reason.

Of course, I wouldn’t have believed any of that before this conversation. There was more to it, I was certain of that, and my brother keeping his mouth shut or only feeding me morsels of information would not answer my questions.

Frustration was controlling me at the moment, and I needed to get my mind off it for a while so I didn’t go mad.

## Chapter 45

# Ridge

Needing to catch up on work, I decided to work from the manor. What was the point of being the boss if you couldn't make the rules for yourself? More importantly, I couldn't afford for people to keep coming and going as they pleased and distracting me while I tried to get things accomplished. In the end, however, I should've gone into my office because I was preoccupied.

Tori confronting her brother without me by her side had my insides roiling with anxiety.

Tori had only recently accepted that she was a shifter, not a monster. I worried her brother might try to make her fear her inner wolf and be wary of shifters all over again. The balance between Tori and her wolf was still so tenuous, and she was still at risk of becoming entirely feral.

I scrubbed at my face as I scolded myself. I needed to have more faith in my little wolf. She'd suggested the wolf run last night on her own, and had been so joyous and carefree while doing it. However, everything about shifters was still so new to her that she could still get indecisive. Even more so because of her previous indoctrination.

From the way she spoke about her brother, she clearly still loved him. She was so beautifully expressive that her features betrayed her pain whenever she looked at him. Sure, she'd tried to hide it, said things she thought I'd wanted to hear. He'd hurt her, but I feared she would attempt to seek his approval again and listen to the trash the hunters had been force-fed. Which would only cause her to panic and run off again.

There were too many "what ifs" in this scenario, and my worried mind only exacerbated them. I supported that she needed to talk to him alone, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

I chided myself that I should've snuck into the observation room. My wolf agreed with my thought process, but that wouldn't have ended well for us. No, Tori would've been furious, and any trust we'd built between us would have been shattered, putting distance between us again—distance I was fighting to close off permanently if she'd let me. I had to continue playing the waiting game, but I had faith we'd get there eventually.

Shuffling some papers around, I hoped if I pretended to do some work, then maybe I'd be inspired to jump in and get something done. No such luck, though, since this morning's events refused to let me concentrate.

The visit with my aunt wasn't what I'd expected or hoped. I hadn't foreseen her shifting so suddenly and attacking my mate, and it'd been a while since I'd witnessed her shift so drastically.

One minute, she'd been calm and painting. The next, she was feral and snarling. That wasn't usually like her. In the past, agitation was already brewing by the time she was ready to shift, so we were normally better prepared. Today had thrown me for a loop, and I didn't understand what it meant.

Being feral, my aunt wasn't the easiest or the calmest to be around. She often went into feral states and said some of the craziest things, but she'd been completely lucid when she'd cried about Tori's resemblance to her father. It grated at me that the two most important women in my life were connected somehow, and I couldn't figure out how.

Wanting to learn everything I could about the Everwood Pack and Jaxon Hyde, I'd decided to send out some feelers in the shifter community. It killed me to rely on others and not just get the answers myself, but with the climate we were in, it wasn't safe for me to leave my post—especially since I had Tori now. It was imperative I stayed close to her.

Yet, there still wasn't any evidence of a connection between my aunt and uncle's disappearance and Jaxon Hyde. Still, this was the first clue to my aunt's missing history that I'd been dying to get, and I was determined to find out more. The sooner I could figure out this puzzle piece, the better understanding we'd have about what was going on in the shifter community.

We were so separate and disconnected from one pack to the next that the hunters could infiltrate our communities and do whatever they wanted. We were never notified soon enough, if at all, to stop an attack on a different pack. We had no time to devise a defense strategy or implement a search and rescue. Packs didn't want to coordinate with other packs because alphas

struggled to play nice with each other.

We were lucky to have Tori here with us. Without her inside knowledge of the hunters, Clawson would've been on his own. The chances that he'd have found us were slim to none, and he himself could've been abducted or killed.

The current climate made me think it was time to organize a meeting with the shifters in Blackwood Creek. As alpha, I was responsible for letting the shifters in my pack, and those who lived in town but didn't submit to my pack, know about the dangers they faced from the hunters. Keeping them in the dark only put them at risk.

However, I was wary of telling them anything before we figured out how to deal with the hunters. What if none of the shifters wanted to hang around town to see if the hunters would strike again? What if they left and went on the run on their own? There weren't only the usual worries of turning feral; Clawson and I'd gotten too many reports of shifters getting caught, killed, or disappearing from other packs. I didn't want my pack to splinter and be in considerably more danger because we hadn't had each other's backs.

After witnessing the hunters in action, I knew there was no way a couple of shifters could adequately protect themselves. The hunters were organized like an elite military unit. They had too much weaponry, and were far too strong and fast to go head-to-head with a tired, scared wolf who relied only on their natural shifter abilities.

The fear of losing wolves and the responsibility of what was best for everyone weighed heavily on my shoulders. I had no clue what would be the right thing to do.

My phone buzzed on my desk. I hesitated to answer, but once I saw it was the hospital calling, I picked up immediately.

"Hello?"

"Mayor Blackwood?"

"Yeah, that's me." Getting a call from a hospital was never a good thing.

"This is Dr. Whitlock. Sir, you need to come to the hospital. As soon as possible."

Air rushed out of my lungs. My adrenaline skyrocketed, making my heart race.

Tori.

"What happened? Is she okay? Did the pills not work? Did he hurt her?" Every worst-case scenario flashed into my head. Images of her bleeding out

on the library floor, her breathing shallow, crushed me as I struggled to get out of my chair so I could reach my car and break every traffic violation possible.

“Oh, no, Mayor. Tori’s fine. She’s not here, and she’s not admitted. This call is about Zander Elkins. This is pack business, and it’s important that you come.”

The instant relief had my bones turning to jelly and my heart slowing to a steadier pace. My mate being in danger again was my worst fear, and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to think straight and not overreact if I was told otherwise.

“Right. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Again, I’m sorry, Mayor. I should’ve started by mentioning Zander Elkins.”

“Yeah.” I chuckled. “I about had a heart attack.”

I ended the call and took a moment to collect myself before driving to the hospital.

Elliot Elkins was pacing in front of his son’s room and talking with one of the shifter doctors. The second Mr. Elkins saw me, he stopped dead. His face was pale, the bags heavy under his eyes, and it looked like he’d been swiping his hand through his hair for several days. His shoulders were tense, hunched around his ears. I’d already clued in that there wouldn’t be the greatest news awaiting me, but the older man’s actions had me more worried than before.

“What’s going on?”

“My son’s wolf is missing.”

What? What did he mean that his wolf was missing?

“I’m sorry, come again?”

“Zander’s wolf is missing. He’s no longer a shifter.”

Was I hearing him correctly? How was that possible?

The doctor put his hand on Elliot’s shoulder to pause his pacing. Then he looked at me. “Mayor, when Zander was first brought in, his scent was strange, but we thought it was from being held captive by the hunters. We thought that once he rested and recovered, everything would return to normal. Now that he’s been lucid and we’ve been around him, talking with him, it’s become clear that whatever happened to Zander... well, it changed him significantly.

“He smells, acts, and is essentially like a human since he woke up. He

doesn't recollect anything about shifters or anything paranormal. Since that's been the case, we have said nothing to him about it. We don't want to induce panic or make him any more uncomfortable or angry than he already is at his memory loss. We felt it warranted your attention. This is dangerous territory that we don't know how to approach. We have no idea if this is safe or if there'll be serious repercussions."

Human. Zander Elkins, a born alpha shifter, was now *human*. Holy fuck.

Staring at the doctor and then Zander's father, I tried to wrap my head around this information. I'd never heard of a shifter losing their wolf. The hunters had obviously done something unnatural to Zander.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," I managed. "This is gravely serious. I'm assuming you're keeping him closely monitored?"

"Yes. At the moment, that's all we're capable of doing, unfortunately, until we're given some answers or until we collect enough data."

Mr. Elkins resumed pacing, looking lost and withdrawn. "Mayor, what're we going to do? That's my boy in there. He doesn't know any other way than to be a wolf. What's that going to do to him when his memories return? How will he be able to protect himself? He's never been weaker, and with his drinking, he needed to be stronger for all the scrapes he found himself in. What's going to happen to him?"

"I don't know, but we'll figure it out," I tried to reassure. "I'll work night and day to get answers for you and Zander. To get answers for all shifters."

This was wrong on all accounts, and I couldn't fathom how it was even possible. I started putting all the pieces together. The hunters' healing pills had some sort of connection to a witch. The room Zander had been found in had spell markings etched all over, and he'd had those marks on his body. Kyle had also mentioned someone named Giselle and that she was arriving soon.

That was where they'd taken Zander. She must've been a powerful witch who had done something to Zander's wolf. That was the only explanation I could come up with.

Those pills had potent healing properties. They had literally restored us to brand new, as if nothing had happened.

Could a witch be that powerful? Strong enough to remove a wolf from a man?

Was that what had been happening when people said wolves were disappearing? They weren't being killed, but made human. Was the memory

loss all part of the hunters' experiments? To ensure the packs could never find their people and figure out what the hunters were doing?

"Can I see Zander?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"Of course. Follow me," the doctor said.

Lola Kipling was in the room with Zander. He was making googly eyes at her while she kept up an easygoing conversation.

I watched them for a moment and reminded myself that Lola didn't know anything about shifters. I kept a running tally of every human who did and didn't know of the supernatural world. All the shifters in town did, as it wouldn't be wise to slip up in front of the wrong human.

The shy psychiatrist wasn't one of them. A newcomer in town, she seemed to keep to herself. Despite my mate's efforts to befriend and protect her, she appeared to be struggling to build connections.

"Hello, Dr. Kipling," I greeted. "I'm sorry to butt in, but would you mind if I cut into your session for a moment and speak with Zander alone?"

"Yes, of course, Mayor Blackwood. I'll head to the cafeteria and grab myself a coffee." She turned to Zander and smiled. "I'll be back shortly, and we can finish talking."

Zander gave her a goofy grin, and then, as soon as she closed the door behind her, he glared at us and started complaining, "You know, I'd appreciate it if people stopped interrupting whenever the pretty doctor and I are trying to make a breakthrough in my memory loss. The interruptions hinder the process."

For a moment, I wanted to chuckle at the major lie I was scenting off the man. He was more concerned about not having alone time with the pretty doctor than regaining his memory. I was all for that, because then he might leave my mate alone. Zander had been attempting to mess around with Tori since she'd arrived in town. It didn't matter that my mate could handle herself. My wolf and I still wanted to go at his throat every time we witnessed it.

"Stop hitting on your psychiatrist. It's not what a good patient would do, son," Mr. Elkins grouched.

"Oh, come on. It's not a crime to flirt and try to get my memories back at the same time."

Before the two could start quarreling, I interjected, "Hey, Zander, how is the memory recall coming along? Do you remember me?"

Zander looked at me, but there was no recognition. "I don't, not at all."

But Dr. Kipling is slowly helping me remember small things from my life, little core memories from when I was young. She says that sometimes the little things bring up bigger memories, so we've been chatting about those times in my life. We haven't made much progress, but I'm excited that I'm remembering some things."

He did seem excited about what he was remembering. I couldn't imagine what it was like not remembering who I was, where I came from, or the people in my life. It would be scary to face the world when everything was unknown. Who would an amnesiac know who to trust?

"Do you remember anything about having a childhood pet? An affinity for any wild animals?"

It would be a strange question to anybody else, but I figured it was a good way to segue into finding out if the former alpha recalled anything about shifting.

"I had a pet turtle named Franklin in second grade." Zander's eyes lit up at that. He looked very proud of himself for remembering that piece of useless information.

I was probably being too hard on him. For him, that wasn't useless information, but a memory he'd uncovered on his own. It was a significant accomplishment, but not what I needed.

I sat down in the chair Lola had vacated and took a stealthy whiff of Zander. What the doctor had said was true. Zander was human now, plain and simple. There was no hint of a wolf in his scent.

He'd also allowed me to get closer to him without grumbling, and there was none of his usual aggression in his demeanor. When he'd been shifter, his wolf was always on full display. He'd never eased off his wolf, allowing himself to be fully merged with his wolf at all times. It had caused problems because he was an alpha, and the alpha wanted to control everything and be the dominant one. It had been the cause of a lot of friction between us.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" Zander asked me.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm Ridge Blackwood."

"Ridge. Well, good to see you again, I guess."

Chuckling, I couldn't help but think that if he only knew who I was, I'd be one of the last people he'd ever want to see.

"So why are you here, Ridge Blackwood?" he asked.

"Well, I'm the mayor, and I wanted to see if you were feeling okay or if you needed anything."



Mostly, I was here for pack business as we'd never been friends, but I hated what had happened to him. I wanted to say that, but I wasn't about to kick somebody while they were down. Who knew if he'd ever become a wolf again? I prayed to the moon goddess that this wouldn't be permanent. Taking this man's wolf was wrong. It was a crime akin to murder.

"Mayor, I feel great. I'm not under the weather or tired or anything like that. But I'd feel much better if you sent that pretty Dr. Kipling back in." He waggled his eyebrows at me, and I laughed. Apparently, being a horndog was a natural part of him and had nothing to do with being a dominant alpha wolf. He was just more playful about it now.

Since I couldn't do anything more, I said my goodbyes and told everyone I'd be in touch soon. I was ready to get out of there. Zander had no memories of his inner wolf, and no longer carried the scent of his wolf or the scent that marked him as part of my pack.

Not stopping to talk to anyone, I left the hospital feeling deeply disturbed and wondering what the hell I was supposed to do now. This was new territory. I didn't know where to begin. I only knew so much about witches—they were very rare beings and usually drew their magic from nature. Dark witches existed because that was how humans became hunters in the 1800s. They'd appealed to the witches, and after some discussion, they'd worked out an arrangement that had puzzled shifters ever since. At least, no shifter ever confessed to knowing why witches decided to help the humans.

While Zander seemed physically fine right now, in my gut, I knew his condition couldn't be natural and would have terrible repercussions. When nature wanted something to be, she'd fight to the bloody end to get what she wanted. There was no beating Mother Nature.

Getting behind the wheel of my SUV, I slammed the door harder than intended and slumped in the seat. There was no way around it now—I'd have to call a meeting among the Blackwood Creek shifters sooner than I'd wanted. The danger we faced was far greater than I'd initially thought. I couldn't keep them in the dark any longer.

They deserved to know that getting captured by the hunters might result in them losing their wolves entirely. I hoped that having this knowledge wouldn't force them to make a break for it. We needed to rely on being a pack more than anything. It was the only way to survive the hunters.

As I drove past the Moonlight Café, I was surprised to see Clawson sitting on a bench across the café, his big Stetson in hand, his eyes on the

diner's window. The guy looked troubled.

I pulled over, undid my seatbelt, then hurried over to my oldest friend.

“What’s going on, Clawson? Your newest resident giving you headaches?”

Clawson started. He hadn’t heard me coming. Interesting. Birch Clawson was the ubiquitous boy scout, always prepared, so catching him unaware had me intrigued.

“Headache?” he replied. “Do you remember when we fell into poison oak? Well, that’s how I’m feeling about our hunter ‘friend’ right now. Like I want to scratch my skin off.”

“Has he given you anything at all? Any information about numbers? Plans? Anything?”

Clawson shook his head. “Not to me.”

I frowned at his choice of words. “What do you mean, not to you?”

“Your mate came to see him.” Clawson kept his eyes on mine, waiting for a reaction. When I nodded, he continued, “Man hasn’t said a word to me since we got here. I tried every technique I know to get him to speak—zero, zilch, nada. Tori walks in, and his whole expression changes. The damnedest thing I’ve ever seen, like he was glad to see her.”

As if summoned by the mention of her name, Tori’s scent wafted past me. She couldn’t be far away. I wanted to be with her, to soothe my inner wolf, but Clawson clearly needed to talk.

“Did you believe him? Do you think he was happy to see her, or was he stringing her along to hurt her?” I gritted my teeth at the idea.

“It seemed genuine, Ridge, but then he snapped off the cuffs and shackles as if they were made of paper. He could have left at any time, but he didn’t.”

I relaxed my white-knuckled fist. It didn’t seem like Kyle was here to hurt Tori or the town. What were his motivations, then? Could he truly want to reconnect with his sister?

I was about to ask Clawson for his opinion when his eyes strayed back to the café’s front door.

“Are you trying to drum up courage to face the Magpies?” I teased.

“Have you spoken with Margo or Diana since we got back?” Clawson asked.

I hadn’t seen them at the town meeting, but I hadn’t even thought of going to the B&B to see them. Diana, especially. I winced in shame. “No. Between Zander and protecting the town, the businesses, and Tori, I haven’t

had the chance.”

The look Clawson gave me heaped on the guilt.

“Nothing stopping you from going there, old friend,” I pointed out. “You’ve known them just as long as I have, if not longer. You went to school with Margo, didn’t you?”

I couldn’t decipher the expression that passed over his face, but I suspected it had something to do with Margo. Not wanting to butt into my friend’s private life but also not willing to let the opportunity slide, I said, “You’re the sheriff. Maybe you should check on her?”

If looks could kill, the hunters would have nothing on Clawson.

I quickly changed the subject to something neutral. “We need to call a shifter meeting. Let them know what’s happening. We need to be prepared for whatever the hunters might throw at us, because we both know this is far from over.”

Clawson agreed. I stood to leave, but he remained seated, his eyes once again fixed on the door of the establishment.

Growling deeply at my growing headache, I started my car. I needed to go home and hit the journals and books to see if I could find anything on shifters being stripped of their animals. Hopefully, something was noted somewhere in our history.

No matter how powerful, a witch couldn’t have come up with this all on her own. It had to have been a suicide mission, or a coercion.

## Chapter 46

# Tori

The Magpies were in their regular booth at The Moonlight Café, watching me closely as I explained the situation.

“And I promise you I won’t be late to my shifts or miss any more. I just had a run of bad luck over the past few days.”

That was the understatement of the century, but I couldn’t explain everything that had gone down, even though I was sure they knew exactly what had happened. These two women had their noses and ears in everything, but I was okay with apologizing to them. Surely they’d give me my job back after everything that had happened.

I should’ve called them, though. That had been irresponsible of me, but to be fair, I’d had more important things on my mind. Anyone would’ve forgotten to call when the lives of the people they cared about were on the line.

The older women watched me closely, not saying anything, and I started to squirm under their gaze. I scanned the café. Thankfully, it wasn’t packed. This was the time of day when the café had a lull between the lunch and dinner rush. Some tables were occupied by customers, who chatted amongst themselves, not paying us any attention.

The peaceful small-town vibe was alive and strong here. When I’d first arrived in town, it had been a lot less daunting than after I became the mayor’s fiancée. Once Ridge had announced our engagement, I’d had all eyes on me, and a million questions asked. But today, the place was back to its easygoing nature.

It made me happy to see it. I’d been a little worried that the unrest in town caused by the deputy’s murder had caused many irreparable issues and fears,

but those had calmed down. The Mayberry-like town was back to its original charm and idealism, and I was a little smitten with it all.

Margo popped out of the swinging door to the kitchen, carrying several plates as she loaded up a table with tasty-smelling goodness. Her bubbly laughter echoed throughout the place, and her personality had others smiling with her. At the same time, she regaled the customers with outlandish stories. She should have been a soap opera writer, with how much flair she put into everything she described.

Who knew a shopping trip could be so dramatic?

I was relieved that she was back to her old self, now that her mother was home safe.

“Tori, you may have your job back once I get an invitation to your wedding,” Maggie Hill said. “I’ll be damned if I’m the last person in town to get one.” She smacked her hand on the table for emphasis.

The crowd looked our way, Margo tilting her head at me as she tried to figure out what was going on.

The other Maggie piped up, “Unless you want terrible last-minute presents and disgruntled guests, you should give everyone plenty of time to plan and prepare for what will no doubt be the biggest, most expensive, and most luxurious wedding this small town has ever seen.”

Nearly choking on my spit, I stared wide-eyed at the two women. What in the world was happening? I couldn’t believe they were going on about my wedding when I was trying to get my job back. Plus, why in the world would I have such an elaborate wedding? It was ridiculous. It didn’t help that this engagement was fake, so I obviously hadn’t given wedding planning any thought whatsoever.

Swinging my head back and forth between the two town gossips, I stammered, “I haven’t really been focusing on the wedding planning. With everything happening in town and the hospital stays, it hasn’t been the highest priority. Surely I can have my job back if I promise to be at every shift on time.”

The Magpies looked scandalized by my statement.

“Stopped your wedding planning? Are you nuts, girl? Why would you go and do a crazy thing like that?”

I opened my mouth to answer but shut it again. I didn’t have an answer for them.

“Never mind that, we can get this back on track in no time,” Maggie Hill

said. “I have a niece who’s a dream wedding planner. She’s the perfect person to plan your wedding.”

“That’s right,” the other Magpie said with a nod. “There’s no reason to be dragging your feet now, no matter what was going on around here. When you have a catch like Ridge Blackwood, you must hold on tight and seal the deal.” She looked aghast that I wasn’t being the quintessential ‘50s housewife, and at my age, no less, because I was already an old maid and should’ve been popping out my second kid by now. “He was a wildly eligible man before your engagement, with every family in town trying to get him to notice their daughters. And not just in this town, either. He’s known all over for his name, looks, and money.”

The Magpie reached over the counter and patted my hand. “You need to tie him down while you still have his attention. A man like that won’t stay around for long.”

My jaw dropped in mortification. These women fully believed that Ridge would leave me if I didn’t marry him ASAP, that he’d find someone else. Forget the fact that we weren’t actually engaged—what they believed about Ridge was appalling. Ridge was the most loyal man, and I knew he would never go sniffing around elsewhere. And it was very backwards to think that I had to secure a man in this day and age.

The shifter Magpie, Maggie Peters, leaned in close to me and dramatically lowered her voice, looking around the café like a sleuth from a black-and-white noir film. “You need to claim your mate. None of the shifters in town can understand how an alpha like Ridge hasn’t given in to his impulses to mark you as his mate by this point. It’s making people talk and express doubts about Ridge’s words, both as mayor and alpha. It’s not looking good for him.”

I fell back in my seat as if she’d slapped me. Ridge did everything for this town, and just because I hadn’t sent out wedding invitations or claimed him—whatever that meant—they were questioning him as a leader. How could they say or think anything like that?

Frustrated and furious, I had to bite my tongue to keep from blurting out the truth and ending the entire charade. What they were saying was utterly ridiculous. However, I didn’t want to make things worse for Ridge by bringing his character into question. He’d only offered the fake engagement ruse to protect me. That was how amazing of a guy he was, and everyone here should be honored that he was their alpha and mayor.

My inner wolf was agitated, and I worried she would cause some problems, but she didn't try to take over. The talk of claiming had her acting strange. It also didn't help that we'd imagined other women drooling over Ridge. I wasn't proud of the jealousy boiling my blood, but my wolf didn't give a damn. She didn't want women looking at Ridge at all; in her eyes, he was off-limits. As soon as we ended the charade, however, he'd be dating others, and there was nothing we could do about it.

I shouldn't have thought that. My wolf snapped her jaws at me like a bratty dog.

It didn't help that when I separated our feelings about things, many of them were my own distaste at picturing anyone else touching Ridge. My animalistic response to the idea stopped me cold. I figured that should only be my wolf's reaction since she was the animal, but there was no denying I had just as much of a possessive streak when it came to Ridge.

Unhinging my jaw, I firmly stated, "I don't need a wedding planner, and everything between me and the mayor is fine, thank you. Things have been complicated lately, and it's not your or anybody else's business. I only came in because I want my job back."

I couldn't believe they were holding this job for ransom and telling me what to do in my fake relationship. I never would've tolerated this if my relationship were real, so why the hell would I tolerate it when it was fake?

Both Magpies huffed and bristled at me. "When couples let complications into their relationships, that's when affairs happen," one of them said.

"Ridge could have his pick of any female in town or any pack, for that matter, since he's a Blackwood. It'd be good for you to remember that."

Everything went red as my wolf's fury skyrocketed, and my head started to get the dull headache that meant trouble was brewing. It would fully erupt soon. I didn't want to struggle with my wolf and keep her under control anymore today. Earlier at the jail had exhausted me, and if I had to do it again, I'd be wiped out and unable to function for the rest of the day.

The best solution for everyone was for me to leave and cool off.

Scowling, I hurried out of the booth and said, "Since you two appear to make business decisions based on your nosiness, not qualifications, this place is inappropriate for me. I'll find a job elsewhere."

Without turning back or listening to anything else the town's busybodies had to say, I marched out of the diner as if my tail were on fire. I couldn't stick around much longer before my wolf forced a shift and made it perfectly

clear what she thought about the Magpies' relationship advice and petty manners.

Once outside, I stomped away, stopping once the two Magpies could no longer see me through the windows. I shut my eyes and raised my head to soak in the sun, letting the heat wrap around me. It had a soothing effect. My head suddenly stopped pounding, and my wolf, while still disgruntled, no longer wanted to make an example of the two gossipy women.

Feet pounding toward me had me sighing and opening an eye. Relieved to see it was Margo, I gave her my attention.

“Hey, I heard something about wedding planning.” She plastered an enormous smile on her face, reaching for my arm as she bounced on the balls of her feet. “If you need help with your wedding, I’d be honored. I mean, I’m obviously not some super-qualified professional wedding planner like Maggie Hill’s niece, but I’ve got, like, ten thousand Pinterest boards full of wedding ideas and have been studying wedding magazines for as long as I can remember. Please let me help you plan yours. I’d love to help.”

A hopeful look came over Margo as she stepped back and gestured wildly in front of her as if she were setting the scene. “I swear we could make it perfect for you. It’ll be low-key, not too expensive, outdoors, and still beautiful and intimate, exactly how you and Ridge are together. I can pull it off for you.”

Dumbfounded, I stared at Margo. I didn’t know what to say. The thought of planning my faux wedding delighted her so much, I couldn’t bring myself to disappoint her. She had been my first friend in so long. I wanted to tell her the truth about Ridge and me, but in the end, it would be best to do a clean break and make people believe that I’d broken the mayor’s heart. Knowing Margo, she’d probably come after me. She didn’t take friendship lightly and would try to drag me back.

I couldn’t let that happen; it’d be too much for me. So, once again, I bit my tongue.

“Margo, I appreciate you wanting to help. I really do, but I’m not sure about it. Ridge and I haven’t even set a date yet, and that’s kind of important. Never mind discussing the finer details.”

Margo’s enthusiasm burst like a popped balloon. Watching the air deflate from her left me feeling like a real bitch, but I figured my excuse was solid. Ridge and I didn’t have a date picked out, and it wasn’t something that could get pushed on us, so that was a brilliant way to help keep people away.



Margo was about to say something when Audrey approached, laughing. She scoffed. “That’s no excuse, Tori. Ridge looks at you like you hung the moon and like you’re the air he breathes. I’m pretty sure you could tell him to marry you tomorrow, wearing a sack for a wedding dress, and he’d bend over backward to make it happen.”

I glared at Audrey, wishing I suddenly had some superpower that would make her trip or sew her mouth shut. It didn’t work. What was the point of being a shifter if you didn’t get any added superpowers?

Giggling, Margo crossed her arms. “She’s so right. The two of you are like a fairytale.” I lifted a brow at her like she was crazy, and she laughed. “It’s so true. You have your mate wrapped around your paw, and everyone can see it.”

My cheeks flamed. “That’s not true.”

Smooth. When did I revert to being a ten-year-old? Honestly, I wondered if I really had Ridge so enamored. He fought me on many things, but only about my safety, leaving town, and if something was better for me, such as his bunny food. Apart from that, we didn’t fight. He smiled at me as if he thought I was adorable, which could be very irritating, and he kissed me senselessly.

“You should’ve seen how desperate Ridge was to get Tori alone after the rescue,” Audrey said. “It’s a miracle the two came out of the motel room the next morning. I thought for sure we would have stayed there another night.”

Blushing, I glared at Audrey, telling her to shut up with my eyes.

“Oh, my moon goddess, tell me everything. Spare no details. Was it hot? Did he ravish you? I bet he ravished her.” Margo swooned and spoke fast, like she always did when feeling gossipy. Before she’d finished talking, she turned to Audrey, figuring I wouldn’t answer her. She was right.

I couldn’t stop myself from turning every shade of red under the sun as the two bantered back and forth. What Ridge and I did alone was very private, and I disliked the idea of people knowing any of those details or speculating on them. It was for me to cherish, because soon, all I’d have would be the memories. I wanted them only for myself.

Plus, if I talked about it, it would only make distinguishing between what was fake in my relationship with Ridge harder. Lines were slowly blurring as it was. We had a fake engagement, but the heat and passion were real. The sex was most certainly not faked, so if I spoke about it out loud, I’d be speaking the truth, which would only make it more impossible to step away

when the time came. I was holding onto anything I could to protect myself.

Trying to shift the conversation away from my internal turmoil and the duo's romantic notions, I mentioned the town's woes. "Speaking of the rescue, both of you know that the town's facing a lot, so now isn't the time for anyone to focus on romance or an elaborate wedding. We should be focusing on the citizens and how to secure the town."

They both rolled their eyes.

"Fine." Margo sighed. "My love life is roadkill right now, anyway."

A little lightbulb started blinking in my mind. Let's see how much Margo liked it. If she wanted to talk about romance, we could talk about hers.

"It's none of my business, but have you had time to thank Clawson for helping get Diana back?"

She groaned at me, but she had to know he should be thanked.

"You're pissed at him about making you stay when you tried to go with us," I said. "I get that, but he had good intentions. I know that much."

Audrey's attention was piqued, and she studied Margo. I schooled my face into an expression of innocence.

Margo rolled her eyes at me and grumbled, "Touché." Then she huffed, "The sheriff has been too busy with the mysterious captive in the town's jail for me to discuss anything with him."

"Do you mean Tori's wildly hot brother?" Audrey stood up straighter, sounding a little too eager, in my opinion.

Margo's head swiveled toward me, her expression appalled.

"What do you mean, Tori's *brother*? Do you have a brother? Why is he in jail? What did he do? Is it the sheriff's fault that he's in there? And why would you bring your brother back after a rescue mission? How was he involved in all of that?"

I fought the temptation to strangle Audrey as Margo fired off her questions. I had no idea how to answer them. Settling for a dirty look in Audrey's direction, I flapped my arms to get Margo to settle down.

Audrey lowered her eyes sheepishly, and I figured I couldn't be mad at her. I hadn't told her not to mention Kyle to Margo. I'd only been specific about not spilling the beans to Ridge and the sheriff until I could tell them, even though they'd already known.

"It's nothing, Margo," I said. "No need to be worried about what's going on with my brother. It'll get sorted out."

I wasn't in the mood to discuss my brother, my past, or field any of the

million other questions she'd ask. After my talk with Kyle, I wanted to hold back on everything and not have to think at all.

"I need to get going. I have a lot to get done. I'll talk to you two later." I gave them my best fake smile that showed everything was sunshine and rainbows.

Margo hesitated and sighed. Though we hadn't known each other long, she understood "Tori-speak" fluently by now and knew not to push. I couldn't express how much I appreciated that.

She gave me a quick hug, then went back into the café. I said a quick goodbye to Audrey. She followed me for a moment before hesitantly putting her hand on my arm to stop me.

"Tori, I'm so sorry for letting the cat out of the bag. I figured you would've told Margo since the two of you are so close."

"It's fine." It wasn't, but what was done was done.

Audrey fiddled nervously with her purse and chewed on her bottom lip. "That sounds like a lie to me. I don't want you to be mad at me. I really regret it. If I'd known beforehand, I wouldn't have said anything. I truly am sorry. This sounds crazy, but you're the first person I've *wanted* to be friends with. My parents picked my friends out for me based on what their families were worth or what they could do for them. So I'm used to fake, annoying friendships with fake, annoying friends who weren't friends at all." She looked at me pleadingly. "I don't want that with you. I want a genuine friendship where we can be honest with each other."

Taken aback by the sincerity and sadness, I couldn't do anything but forgive her. In actuality, there was nothing to forgive. I should've told her not to mention my brother to anyone.

I hugged her. She stiffened, but then tentatively hugged me back.

"We're good, Audrey, I promise. I'm just annoyed with myself for not being clear that I didn't want him mentioned at all. It's not that I'm worried Margo will say anything, because I know she won't. It's just the questions she's going to ask. She's determined, and I'm not ready to have that conversation."

Nodding vigorously, Audrey said, "I get it. Really, I do. I wasn't thinking. I really am sorry."

"I know you are, but there's nothing to be sorry about." I gave her one of my genuine smiles.

Who knew that Audrey and I would put in the effort needed to have a

solid friendship? The idea was crazy, but welcome.

Of course, having another friendship would make it that much harder for me to leave.

“I’m also not apologizing because your hunter brother is insanely gorgeous or anything. I truly want us to have a full-out, genuine friendship.” She giggled.

My eye-roll was so hard, I was amazed my eyeballs didn’t get stuck in the back of my head like my mother used to warn me about when I was a child. What was with this woman and my brother? She was a wolf shifter, and he was a hunter. They were oil and vinegar.

I’d never understand, but maybe Audrey had been under her parents’ thumbs for so long that she wanted to rebel in every possible way to piss them off. Nothing would do the trick more than being my friend and getting close to my hunter brother. I highly doubted anything would come of it, but she seemed to enjoy playing around with the idea.

“That is the third time you’ve mentioned Kyle’s looks, and that’s three times too many,” I warned.

Smirking, Audrey mimed the zipping her lips, locking them, and throwing away the key. “I hear you loud and clear. We’ll have to chat more later because I’m about to miss my hair appointment. After the past few days, I’m in desperate need of a blowout.”

Audrey gave me a quick hug, then ran off to the salon. I shook my head and chuckled. She was something else.

Margo and Audrey were so different, but they brought an energy to me. Knowing I’d be losing that soon broke off another shard of my heart. When I was on the run, I’d never thought much about friendships or the loneliness I endured. It was all about surviving and making it to the next day, to the next meal. But now I had the sense that it’d be even harder to go on the run again because I’d know what I was missing out on from good friends, amazing sex, and Ridge. It always came back to Ridge.

Steadying my breathing, I rolled my neck and set off in the direction of Blackwood Manor. I decided against calling Ridge and having him get me. I needed a long walk to clear my head, settle my emotional resolve, and get a much-needed break from the insanity that was Blackwood Creek.

I couldn’t deny that I enjoyed being a part of the town now—craziness and all. It drove me nuts some days and made me want to strangle people left, right, and center, but the place had a certain charm. It was because people

cared. I'd never admit that—I wasn't crazy—but the town infused me with more determination to help Ridge make Blackwood Creek a safe place for shifters and humans alike.

## Chapter 47

# Ridge

Journals of the Blackwood family alphas and historical records of my ancestors kept during the 1800s were piled high in front of me on my desk. Ever since I'd come home from my visit with the very human Zander, my ass had been glued to my chair, trying to find any morsel of information I could get my hands on.

Starting with my ancestors, associating or knowing anything about the dark witches the hunters worked with to increase their hunter capabilities. I spent several hours reviewing each book quickly to see if anything popped out. When nothing did, I contacted alphas of other packs to ask if anyone had heard about the whereabouts of witches in recent years or if they had any thoughts of the dark witches of the past.

It was a long shot, but if they knew about current witches, maybe we could find some light witches willing to help us. Witches couldn't be all bad—at least, I hoped not. We didn't deal with witches because they were a rarity, and I was ashamed to say that I didn't know much about them. I worried that, like shifters, witches had slowly been snuffed out by the likes of people like Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled witch finder general in the UK in the 1600s, similar to what the hunters were doing with us.

I was desperate to fix whatever this Giselle witch had done, so I was willing to track down every lead I could if it might lead to a light witch. Hopefully, I could convince said witch to help Blackwood Creek as a whole because I had no doubt that the hunters would strike again, and soon.

With as high a rank as Kyle held in the organization, the hunters would be coming for him one way or the other. After what I'd seen at the compound, I was sure they'd arrive with full artillery. We couldn't match that firepower

ourselves. Not yet, at least. Shifters and humans alike would be in danger.

I left messages for several alphas and hoped they'd get back to me with some answers. I was determined to get to the bottom of Zander's mysterious missing wolf. Since I had nothing to report yet on that matter, I hadn't told the other packs what had occurred. I wanted to figure out some theory or reasoning before panicking over the hunters. We needed a plan and solid knowledge of the hunters if we were to defeat them, or the lives lost would be an even bigger tragedy.

After I finished with the calls, I got as comfortable as I could and started reading through everything again, slowly and meticulously this time.

I was a quarter way through the second journal when Tori came in through the front door. A glance at the clock had me wondering why she hadn't called me to pick her up.

Dropping everything at once, I went to hunt down my mate, my heart beating a nervous rhythm. What state of mind would she be in after spending time with her brother? It'd been several hours, and who knew what sick ideas he'd planted in her head and what doubts about her wolf he'd brought back to the forefront?

Catching her scent heading upstairs, I frowned when she didn't head into my room but the guest room. That wasn't a good sign.

Tori had left the bedroom door open and was sitting on the bed, looking flustered. I didn't want to startle her or invade her space, knowing she didn't like when people, situations, or things were thrust into her orbit. She wanted to be the one to invite you in.

Tapping my knuckles on the door frame, I leaned against it. "Hey, little wolf."

She frowned at me, her mind obviously still working through something. "Hi."

"Are you all right?"

Her shoulders hunched, then she dropped them and shook her head. "Even in the wake of a shocking murder, this town seems way too concerned about sticking its nose into people's personal lives."

Putting my hands in my pockets, I laughed. "I warned you the town would be hyper-interested in our relationship, even more so with a wedding."

"Fake. *Fake* relationship."

My heart stuttered at how quickly she corrected me, even though there was nothing to correct. In my book, we'd crossed the line from fake to real

from day one. I was trying my best to open her eyes to that without putting too much pressure on her and scaring her off.

“We’re not really mates, either,” she continued. “So it’s ridiculous that shifters expect us to bite each other or claim each other or whatever it is shifters do. People need to butt out and mind their own business.”

She crossed her arms and actually pouted. Despite what she was saying, I couldn’t resist the cuteness of my mate.

Reining in my wolf was challenging since her mention of biting and claiming had him going nuts and wanting to take care of that right now. Fuck, I wanted to do that right now, but my little wolf hadn’t grown up knowing the intricacies of shifter relationships. She didn’t understand mates, let alone fated mates and the pull between them. How could somebody not raised as a shifter instantly accept such a strong bond? It would be one thing once the bond was sealed. Then she’d know without a doubt what we were to each other. But to explain it beforehand would be near impossible.

Watching her closely, I wondered if now was the right time to tell her about our connection. We were alone, so now couldn’t be a better time. Struggling to find the right words to say, I stopped when a heavy sigh left my mate.

“It didn’t help that visiting my brother was emotionally exhausting. I wasn’t up for the battle with the nosy town, and I guess I’m being a little more sensitive than usual.”

I strode over to her and sat down on the bed, taking her hand and stroking her palm with my thumb. Touching her was a need I couldn’t deny, especially when she was hurting.

“How so, little wolf?” I let my scent surround her and help her calm down. She’d lie and say it did nothing, but wolves relied heavily on scents, especially those of their mates, to ease them when they felt strained and disconnected from the world.

That was how I viewed Tori at that very moment: disconnected and trying to make sense of everything. I wanted to fix all that and make her see that she belonged here with me and that I’d take care of anything coming our way. She only had to be happy.

Tori was quiet for a moment and then rested her head on my shoulder. “First of all, you should know that Kyle and I were close. I mean, extremely close. We got along better than most siblings. Even though he’s older than me, he was my best friend from the day I was born. We were glued to each



other. He practically raised me since our parents were always busy with work.”

She sneered when she mentioned their work but continued.

“He helped take care of me. I turned to him for everything first because he was the one who raised me. Losing our mom was brutal for both of us. We were closer to her than to our father. She made an effort to be home more and not let work take her away all the time.”

Sadness coated her voice. I hated hearing it, but she needed this conversation to heal.

“If it wasn’t for Kyle, I don’t think I could’ve handled her death as well as I did.”

Kissing her head and afraid of ruining the moment, but wanting her to get everything off her chest, I asked cautiously, “What about your father?”

Having recently learned that her biological father might be Jaxon Hyde, I wanted to know more about the one who had raised her. Her family was always a touchy subject, and her father even more so.

She peered up at me from under her lashes. As I looked into her eyes, I saw how weary her soul was. This wasn’t just physical exhaustion; her mind, body, and soul needed a complete reboot. What Tori needed was to get away from everything and fully relax and recharge. I desperately wanted to make that happen for her, but as long as the hunters were still looking for her, she’d never get what she needed.

Tori blinked rapidly and chewed on her lip. Whatever she wanted to tell me was obviously difficult to get out. I waited patiently. When it came to Tori, I had all the time in the world, which was just as well. My little wolf didn’t enjoy being the center of attention, and she only gave what she thought needed to be said.

“My dad, the man who raised me, is William Summers, the leader of the shifter-hunting faction.”

The world fell out from under me as I watched this beautiful wolf, my mate, stare at me with trepidation. I finally grasped that she was expecting me to kick her out of my bed, out of my home, out of my town. It killed me that she believed I would do that, but what other reasoning would she have? Her only family had cast her aside and hunted her because she was a shifter. Why wouldn’t she believe that I’d force her out as well?

My wolf and I wanted to weep for the lost girl beside me. She’d been raised by the very man who now hunted her. No wonder she was afraid of

bringing danger to the town. What father, real or not, wouldn't do everything to find his child? It didn't matter if it was out of love or spite. William wouldn't give up.

"He's the one hunting me," she said. "Things got personal for him after a shifter killed my mother. He went off the deep end and turned into someone I didn't recognize. He has this vicious, vengeful vendetta against shifters.

"The day after my mother's funeral, he pulled Kyle out of college and took me out of high school, sold the house and all our belongings, and moved us to the hunter base—the same one where you were held. I went to a hunter school there with Kyle, where we started training as hunters. My dad told us everything. All my life, I'd been sheltered from the reality of the world, and then a monster killed my mom and everything changed. If my father wasn't speaking about training, he was telling us we had to kill all the monsters. We had to get vengeance for our mother. That was our duty, our mission, our sole purpose.

"It never dawned on me that I wasn't his child, not until Elliot Elkins mentioned another shifter being my biological dad. My father must have realized I wasn't his child once I shifted. He's had the hunters hot on my tail for the last four years. He never gives up. I'm terrified of what he'll do if he ever catches me because he doesn't see me as his daughter. Not anymore. To him, I'm another monster who has to pay for my mother's death."

I listened to her sad tale and how disengaged she sounded, trying to separate her emotions from her words. Despite her emotionless tone, her eyes were wild with fear. The dichotomy broke my heart.

Now that I knew her background, I understood her better. It explained why the hunters were after her specifically. Before, I couldn't figure out why they'd waste so many resources on her when they could've easily captured other shifters.

I put my arms around her, rocking her back and forth, trying to soothe her in any way I could.

"How old were you when you shifted?" I'd been dying to ask, but it was a personal question, especially for somebody like her.

"Seventeen."

Not wanting to voice my hatred for her father and brother, I bit my tongue. My upset feelings wouldn't do her any good, but I wanted to have a few words with William Summers. Tori had practically been a child when she'd run; she'd known what the hunters were capable of. What made it even

more frightening was that she was running from her family, the very people who should have offered her comfort and protection. She'd had nothing but the clothes on her back.

Except she told me she'd run straight after shifting, so she hadn't had clothes on her back.

"I thought my brother and father hated me, especially after what Kyle said to me when he found me in the hospital." Tori extricated herself from my arms. "But I think you might be right about Kyle. He might not hate me the way I thought he did. Like you said, he's concerned about me. He didn't really bring up my shifting, but he asked if I'd prefer to be rid of my wolf. Crazy, right?"

A ringing sounded in my ears. Be rid of her wolf? I now knew what Kyle meant by that. The fear of something happening to my mate had me shaking in fury. A sheen of red coated my vision.

Tori's brow furrowed with concern. "What's wrong?"

I told her about Zander, despising myself for adding yet another worry to her already full plate.

"Zander's human? He's no longer a wolf?" Tori asked breathlessly.

Nodding, I stroked her arm. "When we were held captive, I heard Kyle mention a woman named Giselle. I think she's a dark witch. Does that name sound familiar to you?"

Tori's eyes moved back and forth in contemplation, then she said, "No, it doesn't ring a bell."

"She's used magic to somehow separate the shifter from their wolf. It explains all the magic symbols we found Zander doused in and painted all over that room."

I gave Tori time to process. I'd had plenty of time to let the information sink in after leaving the hospital; I could afford to shut my mouth and give Tori some to do the same.

"So, it's possible there's a cure for shifting?"

I growled. "It's not a *cure*. Shifting isn't a disease. What they're doing is unnatural, and I can't explain why, but my instincts tell me this is bad. I'm worried about Zander. Who knows what's going to happen to him? I told the doctor to keep him under close observation until we get some answers."

Tori licked her lips. Since I could read her so well now, I knew she was weighing her words. "Maybe it's a good thing if shifters had a choice about whether or not they want to have an inner wolf in the first place. If I'd had a

choice after I first shifted, I would've absolutely separated myself from my wolf. I wanted to be human, Ridge. I thought my wolf was a monster, and I didn't want anything to do with it."

Fear raked up my spine, forcing my wolf to awaken to his full strength. It took everything in me to keep him in check. He wanted to claim her there and then so we could track her and know exactly what was going on with her at all times.

The idea of her being human had me trembling. As fated mates, we would no longer have that connection if she wasn't a shifter. I'd lose her before I'd even officially had her. That was unacceptable.

While I hadn't been actively searching for my fated mate when meeting Tori, I'd always known there was a possibility that she existed. All my life, I'd wished I could find her, but I'd focused on fixing my ancestors' mistakes instead of pining for her. I secretly knew that the universe would bring her to me when it was time, because we were fated to be together.

Now that Tori was mine and we'd spent so much time together, I'd do anything and everything to keep her and make her see how real it all was between us—none of this curing-shifter bullshit. Once we officially claimed each other, the fated mate connection would be unlike anything else. She'd see how magical and rare it was, and that she was lucky to have been blessed with it.

I desperately wanted that connection with Tori. It was all I thought about, even with everything else going on. The only surety was knowing I had my fated mate, and soon we'd have it all. The possibility of losing all of that—losing her—put me and my wolf in fight-or-flight mode. I wasn't above kidnapping and taking her far away until our bond was sealed and she could never leave me.

My wolf also had something to say about Tori's idea of being cured, and I couldn't keep him reined in. I didn't shift, but he slipped out enough that it wasn't me talking anymore, but my wolf.

Grabbing Tori by her shoulders and dragging her onto our lap, we snarled at her as we pinned her to our chest. "You're not a fucking monster. I don't care what anybody says. You're perfect, and you're going to be rid of this ridiculous idea of a cure. You were born a wolf. You were made to be a wolf, and you're absolutely not going to keep running from your wolf."

Tori's eyes bugged out wide. She squirmed in my lap so she wouldn't fall, but we'd never let that happen to our mate. She was always safe with us.

No matter how aggressive my wolf could be, she never had anything to fear from us.

She knew that, because someone who feared us wouldn't get snippy while we manhandled her. "I never said I would have made that same choice now, Cujo. I said I'd have gone for it back then."

I sniffed her neck and licked her. My wolf was so tempted to bite her. I fought him off, but the pull to claim her was eating away at the both of us.

She swatted me away from her. "You know what? Maybe I should try to free myself from being a wolf now. My inner wolf's still half-feral most of the time. There's no controlling her. I never want to end up losing it like your aunt, and I don't want to hurt someone I care about. What would I do if I hurt Margo or Diana? What if I hurt you? That would destroy me."

Her chest was heaving from the sudden outpouring of emotion, and I grew more aroused by her sassy spirit. Nothing could eliminate my fear of losing my fated mate more than Tori admitting she cared about me. It made me ecstatic and stunned my wolf enough that I could pull him back. I must have had the dopest smile on my face.

Tori took one look at me, and her eyes widened. Quickly, she started backpedaling and sputtering nonsense. "I mean, I care about a lot of people. Platonically. It's not a big deal, so you don't need to look so freaking smug about it."

I let my hands roam over her body. My dick hardened and begged to get inside my mate because for once, she'd admitted that she cared about me.

"Oh, little wolf, I'm not smug. I'm just so fucking happy that you're returning my sentiments." I crushed my lips to hers, pouring every inch of my being into the kiss. My soul already belonged to her, and I was ready for her to take ownership of it. "I care about you more than anything in this world."

Tori backed away, sucking in a breath and searching my eyes to see if what I said was true. I could sense she was holding something back, so I didn't push. I didn't tell her I was falling in love with her—forget the falling, I was in love—and that I dreamed about our future together and everything it entailed. I didn't tell her we were fated to be together.

It was better to soak in the moment, and I latched back onto her lips as our eyes stayed locked on each other. I didn't say the words, but I made sure she saw them and felt them as I stroked her tongue with mine.

Within seconds, she was kissing me back fervently, and we got swept away inside each other. It was heaven, and I never wanted it to end.

## Chapter 48

# Tori

The kisses were electric. Keeping eye contact made it all the more intimate and turned me on like I'd never believed possible.

Seeing how happy I'd made Ridge when I let it slip that I cared about him formed the most profound connection I'd ever experienced. It still made me uncomfortable to think about our inevitable ending, but I refused to lose out on my remaining time with him.

When he'd followed it up by saying he cared for me, too, my heart had soared. I couldn't resist getting caught up in the moment. I wasn't used to being cared about by anyone—I'd only had myself for so long—but having this gorgeous, wonderful alpha want *me*, be interested in *me*, even after I'd shared my past with him, had me flying to the moon.

It didn't stop the Magpies' words from lurking in my thoughts. Ridge *could* have anyone he wanted, and that realization made me ache because I couldn't deny that I wanted him to want only me. I wanted this daydream of being with him to never end.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know he'd tire of me eventually and that this fake relationship would get old and die out. I no longer needed the protection the alibi had afforded me.

I resolved to take everything I could before Ridge came to the same conclusion and called off our engagement.

Him telling me he cared for me had me needing him to care for me enthusiastically and, preferably, inside of me. Once again, I allowed myself to fall into my desire for the gorgeous alpha. It was better to seize every opportunity that came. Who knew if he'd wake up tomorrow morning and decide he was done with me? After all, he had cures, dark witches, and

hunters to worry about.

I pushed all thoughts and worries into the background and focused purely on the man beneath me and the sensations we invoked in each other. Never taking my lips from his, I maneuvered my body to straddle him. I tugged on his hair to pull his head back so I could control more of the kiss, and he growled inside my mouth as his hands moved to my ass, squeezing each globe tightly, forcing me to squirm in his hold and grind against his erection that was as solid as steel. It astounded me how he was always ready for me. I shivered at the feel of his cock grinding against my pussy, soaking my panties with the evidence of my desire. Even with several layers between us, the feeling had me working my hips faster to get a proper rhythm going.

Ridge's hands left my ass and roamed under my shirt, all over my back. His soft caresses became harder until he forced my back to arch, pushing my breasts closer to him. My breasts, heavy with desire, were bared as he expertly unsnapped my bra and moved his hands to the front, snaking his hands beneath the bra and cupping my flesh, his thumbs stroking my nipples.

Jerking, I pushed harder into his hands, inviting more of his touch. Ridge obliged, trailing kisses down the column of my neck that had me burning for him. I ground harder against his covered shaft. He growled at the sensation as I bit hard on my bottom lip.

"Fuck, Tori, like that. You feel so good. I'll never get enough of your body and touching you."

I let his words soak into me, then washed them away. There was too much potential for hope in them, and at that moment, I wanted the excitement of the here and now, not the worries of tomorrow.

Ridge lifted his head from my neck, and he quickly shucked his shirt off as I devoured the exquisite body before me. I kissed my way along his collarbone, briefly grazing my teeth over his nipples. The sounds that left his mouth had my core clenching and flooding with desire. He didn't have to do anything but show me his body to bring me to my knees.

Ridge nudged me back slightly, pulling my shirt and bra over my head. My hair tickled my back when it fell across my skin. My nipples puckered into pebbles at the heated gaze Ridge devoured them with.

I couldn't help but mirror Ridge as he licked his lips. He stared at me lustfully, soaking me in as if taking a mental picture. I could probably get off on his expressive eyes alone. I could envision what he wanted to do to me.

Fingers at the waistband of my jeans, then the pop of the button and the

sound of the zipper being pulled down, brought me out of my reverie. Ridge smirked when he realized how dazed I was and how much I needed him. He patted my hip and said, “Up.”

Standing before him, I let him drag my pants and panties down as his mouth hovered close over my skin, never touching but caressing me with his breath. My center coiled tightly, creating a cord of desire that tugged at my nipples. The hard peaks tingled in anticipation, making my breasts ache gloriously.

When he had me naked, I bent over, locked my knees, and kept my ass high in the air. I cupped his heavy bulge in my hand, eliciting the sexiest hiss from his lips. Knowing I could make this man mad with lust was a power trip. My hand danced upward and undid Ridge’s pants before sneaking inside and wrapping firmly around his hot cock. The whole time, I never took my gaze off his.

He growled and rolled his hips so I could get more of him in my hand as I pulled him free. I rubbed my thumb over the tip, capturing a bead of pre-cum that seeped out of him. I used it to lubricate the dark, blood-engorged mushroom head, running my thumb along the slit at the tip, then slid my hand down to the base. With my other hand, I lightly massaged his balls, rolling them and squeezing them gently as I began a slow stroke from root to tip, bringing him to the edge of sanity and wanting him to fall over into madness like he had done to me so many times.

Watching him watch me, I licked my lips and lowered my mouth to taste him. As I sucked him into my mouth, he jerked me up, making me release my hold on his cock.

“Ridge?”

“No, I need you too much. I’m so close. I’m not ready to blow yet. I want to be inside you when I do.” He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, pulled me into his mouth, and kissed me fiercely as he shed his clothing. He sat back down and had me straddle him again.

Moaning and squirming, I let his cock rub against my swollen lips, allowing my cream to soak him so he could thrust into me. I needed him inside me and couldn’t hold back much longer. Electricity pulsed around us, and the atmosphere in the room was all sex, scenting everything in our combined scent. My wolf was going crazy with the need to be mounted and taken roughly.

Grabbing hold of my hips, Ridge positioned me better over his lap so he



could push me back and forth, letting my slit ride his cock. Every movement had his tip nudging my clit, coating my thighs and his with our intermingled essences.

Ridge cupped my breasts and sucked one nipple into his mouth, almost inhaling the whole breast. I mewled and heaved at the action while more wetness leaked from me over Ridge's cock.

Cupping and pushing my breasts together, Ridge jumped to the other nipple and did the same thing. I started rolling my hips faster as he dined on my tits.

"You have the most fantastic tits. I want to come all over them and have you soaked in my scent."

I moaned at the image his dirty words painted for me. I wanted the same thing, but I couldn't get the words out.

"Ridge..." I squeaked as he kept attacking my chest and his cock kept slipping in between my lower lips, stimulating me into torture. I needed him inside me desperately.

"Sweetheart?" he said with a teasing lilt to his voice.

I dug my nails into his shoulders and threw my head back, luxuriating in the passion he was invoking in me. "In me. In me now. Need you," I panted in short, elevated gasps.

He dropped one of his hands, groaning as he grabbed his cock and flicked the flared head against my sensitive clit.

Letting out the most inelegant grunt, I cursed, "Fuck, Ridge."

"Does that feel good, baby?"

Biting my lip, I rolled my hips. "Yes, more. Give me more."

Ridge nipped the skin where my shoulder met my neck, causing me to jerk. "You're a greedy little thing, aren't you?"

His teeth were near my throat, and my mouth watered for him to bite me. I wanted his teeth and cock inside me at the same time. My wolf howled for it, and my body ached for it.

"For you. Only you. More."

He growled as he slotted the head inside my passage. I was in a frenzy. My body vibrated and needed a release, or I would combust. I dropped my body down and sheathed him to the hilt, screaming at how his girth stretched me, but it felt so right and so damn good.

I buried my face in his neck and inhaled his rich scent. My mouth watered as I opened my mouth and flicked my tongue over his skin, even though my

body and wolf wanted to bite him hard. I wanted him marked by me to show everyone that he was mine.

I was dizzy, confused by this need I had never felt before. I pulled my mouth away, removing the temptation.

Wiggling my hips slightly to have him balls-deep inside me, I took his girth and length, reveling at how he filled me, how we fit together so perfectly.

“Fuck, Tori. Dammit, you’re so fucking tight and wetter than sin.”

Neither of us moved as I got accustomed to him. Before, he’d always worked me with his fingers, mouth, or both, but not this time.

I looked down at his cock where it was spearing my body, covered in our combined juices, connecting us. The intensity had me ready to go, and I slowly lifted myself and lowered myself down. He was so deep in me like this, and it was amazing.

“Yes, baby, ride me.” Ridge was breathing like a racehorse, and I was thrilled at his reaction. I would never tire of it. “Bounce on my cock. Let me see those titties jiggle.”

He dropped his hands and wrapped them around my hips, but he let me have control. I didn’t know how long he’d allow it, so I took advantage of it.

Raising myself until only his tip was inside me, I dropped myself down, forcing a loud groan out of his mouth. It made me feel so powerful to have him in the palm of my hand.

Placing my hands on his shoulders to steady himself, I began bouncing up and down at a rapid pace that had the both of us gasping, moaning, and hissing at the intense sensations. Riding him like this was so good, and I craved harder and faster. Working my hips and using my thighs, I did precisely that.

My breasts bounced in his face, and Ridge couldn’t keep his eyes off them.

“That’s it, baby, you’re so damn sexy. Keep bouncing.” His groans were more like animalistic snarls. The veins in his arms and neck were tense and bulging. I could see he was fighting the urge to take control back from me, but for now, he was happy to let me do what I wanted. It was so fucking hot.

The friction from rolling and rotating my hips had my bundle of nerves tingling, tugging at an invisible cord for release. My body was overheating, sweat poured down my back, and my thighs were on fire, but I kept chasing down my release.

I was almost there, but I was losing stamina. I needed more. I needed it harder and faster. More force with each thrust.

“Ridge?”

He kissed down my sweaty neck and then snagged a nipple, forcing me to cry out at the top of my lungs. Every nerve in my body was heightened and ready to be sprung.

“What do you need, baby?” He lifted his head and trapped the other nipple in his mouth, giving it a nibble that had my pussy clenching tighter.

“Help. Help me.”

His large hands gripped my hips tighter, his finger digging into my ass as he spread the cheeks apart.

“Tell me what to do.”

“Fuck me!” I screamed. “I need you to fuck me fast and hard.”

Ridge mumbled something along the lines of, “Never wanting to deny my mate a damn thing,” but I was too lost in the swirling chaos of passionate need to focus on his words. He planted his feet firmly against the floor, making sure he had a good hold on me while I still rode him as best as I could.

“Hold on to me tightly, baby.”

The growl had my cunt dripping more in anticipation of a thorough fucking. Waiting for the bliss to override me, I wrapped my arms firmly around his neck while placing my mouth over his and staring at him directly in the eyes.

Without saying another word, Ridge pulled me up, thrust his hips, and slammed me onto him. His balls smacked against me repeatedly as he moved at shifter speed, never giving my pussy a moment of reprieve. The room was full of our combined scent and the chorus of our heavy breathing, pounding hearts, and slapping skin.

It was phenomenal.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I held on to Ridge for dear life as he fucked the life out of me. I couldn’t contain my screams as he thrust and rotated his hips enough that he kept hitting that particular spot inside. With each thrust, my clit grazed against his skin.

The bed squeaked, though I wondered if the sound was actually coming from me. Ridge was bringing out another side of me as he pushed me higher and wound me up super tight.

“So close,” I moaned breathlessly. “Almost.”

“Come for me, Tori. Come on, baby. I want it. Give it to me. Come all over my cock.”

His speed went up a notch, which should've been impossible, but he again amazed me. All air left my lungs.

“Fuck, I'm about to come,” he growled. “I need you to do it before me, baby.”

I had the urge to bite down on his skin again, but he dropped his mouth and kissed me like the hounds of hell were on his ass and he would never taste me again. Then he nipped my bottom lip and thrust hard.

I unraveled and fell to earth from the high rise of heaven he'd taken me to. I screamed my throat raw as the world faded into black, and I collapsed against Ridge's chest as he roared and pumped his hot seed inside me. He pulled out quickly, ropes of hot cum streaming over my stomach, thighs, and pussy.

Wrapping me in his arms, he fell on the bed, keeping me clutched to his chest as we panted.

“Holy fuck, little wolf.”

I didn't have the strength to laugh, so the sound that left me was more of a choked breath. “You're telling me.” I patted his shoulder. “You can do that again to me anytime.”

Ridge laughed as he rubbed his hands up and down my back. His cum started to leak out of me and onto him and the bedspread, but neither of us could move. We were wiped.

Finally, Ridge picked me up and carried me into the shower. He cleaned me with reverent attention, washing every inch of my skin, even shampooing and conditioning my hair. After the bone-jelly-inducing sex, having my body rubbed down was another stop on the heaven train.

But I could tell that even though Ridge had relaxed after the sex, he was still a little on edge. What I had said about choosing to take the cure had made him blend with his wolf, something I hadn't seen before. He was only Ridge or his wolf, never a blend of the two. And while it had been fascinating and exciting to see, it worried me to think I'd caused him any distress.

Ridge scrubbed the soapy loofah down my back, and even with his body heat and the hot water from the shower, my skin pebbled from his attentions.

I figured it was best to let him out of his misery.

“Ridge, I want you to know... while I'm not exactly besties with my wolf like you are with yours, you don't need to go all alpha and worry that I'll try

to track down some dark witch and cure myself of the animal.”

He froze in place but waited for me to finish.

“The worst part about being a shifter, at least so far, is how I sometimes lose control. But once I stop being half-feral, I enjoy being what she is. I think I’d be more open to everything when the feral goes away because the crippling fear that I’d hurt someone won’t be at the forefront of my thoughts. I already feel like I’m not struggling as much with the feral side effects as when I first came to town. So please don’t worry that I’ll do anything to harm my wolf.”

A heavy sigh left him, and he kissed my shoulder, turned me around, and kissed me thoroughly. “Little wolf, you have no idea how happy I am to hear that.” He leaned his forehead against mine. “I’m not thrilled that your brother mentioned this option in the first place.” He tensed at the mention of my brother, and I figured he would be defensive of me no matter what when my family was involved.

Old habits were hard to break, and I defended my brother before I could second-guess myself. “Kyle was taught to be afraid of and disgusted by shifters, just like I was. It’s not his fault that William was so hard on him and forced him into the family business.”

I believed that because it had been the same with me. I wouldn’t be here now if I wasn’t a shifter. If I had found this town as a non-shifter, I’d have been hunting them down whether I wanted to or not.

“When I spoke to Kyle, it seemed like he wasn’t truly devoted to the shifter cause. He said that the only reason he helped search for me was because he wanted to give me the option not to be a shifter anymore if that’s what I wanted.”

Ridge couldn’t suppress his growl, but it was instinct, nothing more. I let it slide.

“I think I should talk to him about it again. Now that I know what he was talking about, I can get more out of him. I could ask him what happens to shifters once they lose their wolves and find out if he knows anything more about it. He still might have something on Jaxon Hyde, too. He avoided those questions before, which makes me think he knows more than he was saying.”

After moving me under the spray to rinse the soap, Ridge shut off the water, grabbed a towel, and dried me off. My body heat rose as he saw to every inch of me, and he smirked. He wrapped me in the towel and kissed my

nose before drying himself off.

“After I saw Zander, I contacted other packs,” he said. “I’ve been doing it a lot lately because I’m still determined to bring as many of them here as I can to bulk up our numbers and build a solid defense. However, this time I reached out to them to learn more about dark witches. I expect several of them to call me back. I’ll try and get some details about the Everwood Pack and Jaxon Hyde, too. See if any of them know more than what we do. It couldn’t hurt.”

A weight lifted off me. Ridge might be able to get me some information about what could possibly be my past and heritage.

“Thank you. That would be wonderful.”

As I dressed for bed, I debated telling Ridge that we should sleep in separate beds. It would be better if we stopped sleeping together. It was too intimate, and we needed to keep our fling in the right perspective. It was getting more complex with each passing day.

My wolf whined and bared her teeth at me at the idea, but I drowned her out. There were certain decisions I couldn’t let her make. Not when it involved our heart.

Watching Ridge stand naked as he wiped himself dry, my belly flipped. I couldn’t bring myself to do it, especially after the intimacy we’d just shared.

The evening was fantastic, and the glow he’d evoked in me lingered. So when he reached for my hand with that sweet smile of his, then led me to his bed, tucked me in, and wrapped himself closely around me, I let him do it all without complaint.

Relishing each moment—the feelings, the touch, the sounds, the smells—I filed them all away to look back on when I needed them to get through the lonely nights of my future.

“Did you have luck speaking with the Magpies about keeping your job?” Ridge whispered in my ear as he nuzzled my wet hair and kissed the back of my neck.

“No, those two nosy birds were more interested in a wedding invitation than a good employee. It’s fine, I’ll find work elsewhere.”

I needed a job. Even if the hourly wage sucked, I’d made good tips as a waitress, so at least I could accumulate enough cash if I had to run suddenly.

“I also need to get another laptop so I can find some freelance graphic design work. That pays well. I can do it anywhere, and it would allow me to stop mooching off you.”

I heard the frustration in Ridge's voice when he said, "You're not mooching. I'll buy you a hundred laptops if you want, or an art studio if you prefer. Anything you need or want, I'll get for you right away."

Irritated, I snapped at Ridge, "Stop throwing your money around. You've already done way too much for me. That is your money, and you should do what you want with it."

Some people had too much money and not enough sense.

"You're right." He curled around me tighter, and I could feel the smile on the back of my neck.

I huffed, satisfied he was seeing things my way now.

"I can do whatever I want with it because it's my money, and I want to spoil you. That's what'll make me happy."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"I have a brilliant idea." He sounded as giddy as a little boy on Christmas morning. "Do you want your own tattoo parlor?"

I choked, my breath sputtering out of me.

What was he talking about? My own tattoo parlor?

A thrill ran through me. Having my own tattoo parlor was something I'd never even allowed myself to dream about—it hurt too much to know I couldn't have it.

After a moment of insanity, I brought myself back to reality. I rolled my eyes at Ridge as I got defensive and practical, rebuilding my much-needed walls of security.

"I can fend for myself, thank you very much. The money should be put to better use, such as fortifying the town's security, or funding the building of new homes and facilities for the packs you're determined to bring here. Those shifters will need places to live, and they might be more inclined to uproot their lives and relocate if they knew they had houses ready and waiting for them when they join your pack."

"I already spoke with Clawson about more funding for law enforcement and security, but you're absolutely right about more housing for packs that might come to Blackwood Creek." He kissed my cheek, and I heard the smile in his voice when he spoke. "Little wolf, you're a genius. I can't believe I didn't think about that sooner. I'll set that in motion tomorrow. That'll make a big difference for shifters deciding whether they want to come here. It'll show them that I'm serious about this."

Happy for the darkness concealing my face, I beamed at how seriously

he'd taken my advice and that he wanted to start implementing it immediately. My father—or, rather, William—had never really listened to me, so it amazed me to have this leader, this alpha, take something I'd said in passing and deem it worthy and applicable.

Snuggling in closer to him, I enjoyed how natural it felt to be with him like this. Ridge made everything easier, and I'd take it and absorb it all for the night.

Later, I'd worry about that strange need to bite him, how to leave Blackwood Creek, and how to protect him and this town. For now, I was basking in him, and it was never easier for me to fall asleep than when I was wrapped in his arms.



## Chapter 49

# Ridge

Waking up wrapped tightly around Tori was incredible, but when I looked at the clock, I didn't think I could go back to sleep. I held her for a bit longer, but all my responsibilities and duties weighed heavily on my mind, and I needed to take care of them.

At the top of my list was checking in with Clawson. We needed to discuss the town's security. After that, I needed to work on my regular business, then I'd gather the shifters and discuss the dangers Blackwood Creek would soon face.

Sneaking out of bed so I didn't disturb Tori, I dressed for the day and hit the ground running in my office. Figuring that the sheriff would still be asleep, I decided to work through the mountain of emails waiting for me.

The sun started to rise, sending muted rays through my office windows, and I was relieved to have already accomplished quite a bit of work. I wasn't completely caught up, but I could now see the light at the end of the tunnel and feel almost certain it was the exit, not a train racing toward me from the opposite direction.

Draining another cup of coffee, I refilled it in the kitchen and decided to call Clawson. He should be up and about by now, and we had a lot to get settled.

"Good morning," I said when he answered.

"It's too early to be a good morning," he griped.

I chuckled. "What, did I wake you?"

"No, I've been up for a couple of hours now, but it's just been several long days in a row."

"You can say that again."

“What’s going on, Blackwood?”

“I was calling to get an update on the security measures. Also, I need to get the word out about an emergency shifter meeting. It’s time to start letting shifters know what’s going on and what risks there are now. Tell everyone to meet at the clearing at eleven tonight.” I leaned back in my chair and watched the colors in the sky shift and meld.

“I’ll spread the word about the meeting. As for security, luckily, more shifters have signed up and started doing the police training. Getting enough trainees who don’t even join the force would be remarkable because more would be prepared. I also hired a new deputy, and they’ll be starting soon, so that will help lessen my patrol time so I can get on the horn more with the other packs.

“I also followed up with my guy on the cybersecurity measures we discussed, and he reassured me that they were already in place and running smoothly. He’s been doing quarterly-hour sweeps to ensure there are no glitches. There have been no signs of bugs on the phones, emails, or anything like that.” He sighed. “We’re outnumbered, Ridge. If we had more shifters on board, that would tip the balance in our favor. If we could get border patrols set up on the outskirts of town and through the woods, that would alleviate a lot of worries since we’d have another pre-warning system set in place.”

That all sounded good. Clawson had managed to accomplish so much, and I breathed a sigh of relief. He must have been working non-stop since we’d gotten back from Colorado. Granted, much of the groundwork had been implemented before the hunters had invaded our town.

“That all sounds great,” I said. “You’re right, though. If we could convince more shifters to relocate, we’d have a far better chance. What about Mrs. Marrow? Anything?”

Clawson groaned. “That’s a clusterfuck. It disgusts me that I let it get as far as it did.”

“Fuck off, Birch. That’s not on you, man, and you fucking know it. None of us were aware of what the old bitch was up to, but we’ve learned a lesson. Now we’re better prepared for next time.”

“My team and I finished going through the library and her personal affairs. She was indeed working with William Summers for at least a couple of months. We tracked down a list of everyone she figured was a shifter. Your name is numero uno, my friend, right at the top of the list. It probably didn’t help that you’re a Blackwood.”

No, it didn't. My last name must have tipped off the hunters. I wouldn't be surprised if all hunters knew about my ancestors selling out whole packs for riches and freedom, though freedom at the price of another's life was never worth it in my book. The hunters would think I was worth my weight in gold, so that alone made me a prime target. I had no doubt that if Clawson and Tori hadn't rescued me, the hunters would've started to haggle, promise, pressure, or even torture me for information on other packs.

"Marrow had a lot of names missing on the shifter list, though, so we can breathe a little easier that the hunters don't know about everybody," Clawson said. "After our investigation and the measures we implemented, I'm certain she was the only mole in town. We're still doing thorough background checks on everybody in town, and that'll take some time, but no red flags so far."

"That's good, even though doing such an invasive check into the citizens feels dirty."

"I'm with you there wholeheartedly, but it's a necessary evil at this point. Just be grateful you're not the one reading all this shit. I now know things I'd prefer not to know. I hope to forget it all soon."

I laughed. I could only imagine what he was discovering.

"Marrow also tried to get close to those she knew for certain were shifters. She was likely digging for information, anything she could sell to the hunters. What I found interesting was that she was deeply researching Lola Kipling's background."

That had me sitting up in my seat, the wheels turning in my head. "Why was she doing that?"

"Marrow left notes scattered in different areas about Lola's ancestry. They're hard to make sense of, but she was paying particular attention to Lola."

That was something that needed further investigation. The shy psychiatrist had been my former prime suspect for Deputy Hill's murder, but once the librarian proved the culprit, there hadn't been reason to look any deeper into her. Now, though, there might be reason to look into her again.

I didn't want anything else catching us off-guard, not when so much was at stake. More specifically, not when Tori was in potential danger. She was insistent on Lola's innocence and had formed a friendship with her. Tori acted like a mother hen toward her.

It'd kill me if their friendship was endangering my mate, or if the

psychiatrist was using her somehow.

“Dig up what you can, and I’ll look into her as well,” I said. “Tori is close to her, and I’ll be damned if she gets hurt in any way by Lola.”

Clawson huffed as if offended that he had to be told. “Already on it. Don’t worry about that.”

We finished discussing trivial topics to discuss at the next town council meeting—a new stop sign that needed to be installed, whether the speed limit should change in a street that no longer served as a school zone. The mundane tasks that I used to find boring were now what I craved.

After making plans to catch up later, we hung up. I felt more at ease after that talk. Clawson’s updates were promising. There were still a couple of things that needed to be hashed out, but for the most part, we had everything handled.

The shifters meeting was now the big thing to mark off my list for the day. I wasn’t looking forward to warning them and clueing them into the dangers and situations affecting Blackwood Creek, but it had to be done. Once Clawson spread the word about the meeting, it would spread through the pack like wildfire. It also helped that today was the annual End of Summer Fundraiser, so I could let every shifter I came across know. Living in a small town had its perks.

With all the recent events, I’d almost forgotten about today’s festivities. I was delighted Tori and I would get to do something *fun*, even if we still had responsibilities to fulfill while we were there. The fundraiser was a beloved tradition in Blackwood Creek, and I’d joined in every year since I’d returned. This year was different and special because Diana Bogford had organized it, so it was sure to be much more fun and successful than when Christie Greenthorne had organized it last year.

Christie had excluded most of the town’s residents, making them feel unwelcome by catering to the wealthier and more influential residents. That had disgusted me, and I hadn’t partaken in the event as much. I’d still given my annual monetary contribution, but had spared just an hour and then hung out at the tavern for the rest of the day, spending time with the less affluent townsfolk. There, we’d enjoyed a far more relaxed and entertaining day.

With Diana at the helm this year, I was confident the fundraiser would bring the town together and not divide us. The afternoon would be filled with carnival games, auctions, and other lighthearted stuff, such as dancing and a craft fair. It was enough to get people’s minds off the recent murder and

subsequent attack on Tori, and the general unpleasantness of having a resident murderer amongst us.

These particular activities included every town citizen, which was essential to keeping the relationship between shifters and humans harmonious. Several trusted humans in town knew about paranormal beings living among them and were excellent at keeping it a secret. This shifter community relied on secrecy to stay safe from hunters, and many shifters were terrified that if humans found out about our existence, they'd turn on us.

I hoped if that ever happened here, Blackwood's human community would remember their positive interactions with shifters and showcase that shifters were people, too. Hopefully, they would recognize that shifters were their neighbors and friends first. Then maybe there would be more support for shifters, and they wouldn't be judged so harshly.

It was a balancing act that had been the leading factor in my decision to run for mayor. I knew if I wanted to fulfill my vision for a shifter haven, it'd be a problem if a human with no knowledge about the paranormal became mayor.

Music startled me out of my thoughts, and I smiled. I'd lived alone for so long that having Tori moving around and making noise in the house made my heart happy and my cock stir. The scent of something delicious wafted into my office, making my stomach growl and my mouth water. Whatever my little wolf was cooking smelled tasty.

Having done enough this morning, and unable to stand the thought that Tori was awake and not in the room with me, I stalked to the kitchen.

Tori danced around the room, singing off-key to the music and shaking that fine ass to the beat. She kept returning to an open cookbook on the counter, and I realized she was cooking of my favorites—I'd marked the page.

My little wolf was making my rabbit food—a frittata, a smoothie, and keto waffles.

My mouth watered at the entire spread before me. The food didn't look bad, either. She was too adorable, and I couldn't stop fantasizing about what life would be like for us here.

She started and stopped dancing, reaching for her chest like the holy ghost was trying to invade her body. "Shit, Ridge, you scared me."

"Sorry, little wolf. Having fun?"

Smirking, she twerked her ass at me like she was a pop star, and I

laughed.

“Don’t get used to this. I woke up hungry and figured with everything else going on, you were probably overwhelmed and deserved what you call a decent breakfast instead of the delectable selection of Pop-Tarts I would’ve preferred any day of the week. How your wolf copes with all this bunny food, I don’t know.” She rolled her eyes at me comically.

Laughing hard again, I watched her as she went about the kitchen as if I wasn’t there.

Getting rid of the hunters had always been the first thing I wanted to take care of, but now that I had Tori in my life, it was a desperate need. I wanted this, right here, to be our forever mornings. She was carefree and happy, and it was an honor that I got to watch and experience it all with her.

All my life, I’d wanted to right my ancestors’ wrongs, but now I also wanted to build a solid, happy life with my mate. My mind was consumed with thoughts of it, and I couldn’t wait for it to start.

Watching her like this settled my resolve, and I was determined to broach the subject of our being fated mates today. She had the right to know, and we both deserved happiness. After she’d shared her hunter past with me, it felt like we had a better understanding of one another. A better footing for a real relationship.

How she’d react to the news still scared me, but I’d convince her it was a good thing. That once we claimed each other, we’d be complete. I only hoped she allowed me to explain it all before deciding to run. Once she knew the truth, I’d have to keep a close eye on her, but I’d follow her to the ends of the earth and beyond if needed.

After last night, however, I really hoped that wouldn’t happen.

Telling her at my favorite star-gazing spot was the best place to do it. She’d opened up to me there, accepted her wolf, and voluntarily gone on a run. We’d also have privacy so we couldn’t be interrupted.

Hopefully, the spot would also remind her of the fantastic connection we shared. It would be an intense conversation, but I knew what we had was priceless.

*Please, Moon Goddess, don’t let her run.*

“Okay, wolfman, breakfast is ready.”

She fixed me a plate, handing it and my smoothie to me. I gratefully took them from her and kissed her cheek. I sniffed the food and moaned loudly, causing her cheeks to flush and her eyes to light up. I watched her the whole

time, and my arousal perked up at the sight of her.

“This’ll be the best breakfast I’ve ever had.” I waited for it.

Tori rolled her eyes right on cue. Who knew I had a fetish for eye-rolling?

She grabbed her plate, and we sat at the breakfast nook, where I gave her another appreciative moan when I took my first bite. She rolled her eyes again, but she couldn’t hide how pleased she was that I enjoyed it. Just another thing that made me extremely happy.

“Little wolf, this is delicious. Thank you so much for making me breakfast.” Leaning over, I pecked her lips, and her mouth twitched.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoy it because I don’t know when or if I’ll make it again. Bunny food is a lot of work.”

Belting out a giant belly laugh, I dug back into my meal.

“You remember it’s the town fundraiser later today?” I asked her. “It’s a big tradition that helps raise money. We do it every year, and this year, Diana organized it. It’d mean a lot to her if we went. And, well, it’s expected of the mayor and his beautiful fiancée to make an appearance.”

She swallowed her food before answering. “That’s fine, and of course I want to support Diana. I’m sure she did a fabulous job, but before we go to that, I want to go back to the jail to ask Kyle what we should expect for Zander. He has to know something about what happens to shifters once they’re cured—I mean, once the dark witch strips them of their animals.”

I appreciated that she didn’t say “cured.” That was the worst thing it could be called. We had nothing to be cured of.

“I’ll go with you,” I said. “Clawson is wrapping things up with Mrs. Marrow, and he might need my help since this is a complicated and fragile case to process. It’ll take some fancy footwork to protect the shifters’ secrets while giving evidence of her crimes. There’s no way that woman wouldn’t gladly spout off about the existence of shifters during her trial.”

Tori got thoughtful as she chewed on her food. “You’re right. That’s messy. Is there anything I can do to help?”

I declined her offer. She already had a lot to worry about, and I didn’t want to add to it.

“Let me clean up the dishes, and we can head out,” I said.

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll clean up.”

Getting up from the seat, I grabbed both our plates and kissed her. “You were the chef, so that gives me clean-up duty.”

“I can help.”

“Nope, I got it.”

With another cute eye-roll, she finally conceded, “Fine.”

After parking my SUV in the mayor’s parking spot at my office, Tori and I got out and headed for the sheriff’s office. I grabbed Tori’s hand and linked our fingers. I loved that it was second nature for us to touch each other, that we naturally gravitated toward one another.

Even with the unpleasant conversations we were both heading toward, we still smiled and spoke about nonsense as we commented on the displays that were being set up on Main Street and the town square. The whole main drag was closed off to traffic to make room for all the different activities and booths. The shops would stay open throughout the day since the extra foot traffic tended to boost sales.

Tori’s smile froze as we made it closer to the sheriff’s building, and I looked ahead to find what had shifted her mood so drastically. In front of us were Martin and Christie Greenthorne, looking more smug than usual. Unfortunately, they headed straight for us.

“Ah, Ridge, we were hoping to run into you. We wanted to inform you that you’re finished in this pack.”

Martin’s haughty voice had me fighting the urge to clench my jaw. He was such a pompous ass, always working at getting digs in any way he could.

Then his equally snobbish wife added, “Since we’re such respected members of the Northeast Pack...” She deliberately snubbed the Blackwood nickname most people called our pack for the official pack name. “I’m going to call a meeting soon among all the shifters to blow the whistle on how reckless you are for bringing a hunter right to our town. You made it that much easier for hunters to find us.”

Keeping a calm demeanor, I dampened every gut reaction to ensure I didn’t fan their flame. They were ruthless. They’d take anything they could to make life hell for me. This wasn’t the first time they’d tried to stir up questions and doubts within the pack regarding my leadership, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last time.

“Greenthorne, you’ve been after my leadership since I took over, and I’ve bested you at every turn. But this is the worst time for any sort of division among our pack. It puts everyone in genuine danger. And you’d be responsible for the consequences.”

Sticking his piggish nose in the air, Martin huffed, “I agree that our



pack's in danger, but I'm not the one who will be held responsible. We just visited the hospital and learned of Zander Elkins's fascinating condition." His evil eyes stared at me as a matching smile formed on the entitled ass's lips. "You'll have a riot on your hands, and shifters all around will find out you're just as bad as your predecessors."

Rage lit my blood. The bastard didn't care one bit about what had happened to Zander and what he was going through. He only appreciated that a wolf could be stripped from a shifter if it fell into his wormy hands for his own gain.

Tori clenched her hand in mine and wrapped her other hand around my bicep, but I stayed firm and gave the Greenthornes no response. Nothing that would show they had gotten to me.

Mentioning my ancestors had been a low blow. The people who knew me knew how much I hated my ancestors for betraying shifters and having them slaughtered for my family's gain. I fought and worked to rectify it every day. The fact that Martin had implied that I was doing the same infuriated me. Still, I kept my best poker face and didn't show my hand.

Calling on my alpha side, I allowed my wolf to overpower the measly wolf who had no strength to do anything about becoming a leader himself. He was nothing but a chew toy to me if I so chose.

Snarling, I hovered over the short man. "I'm warning you that your fear-mongering will only endanger my pack. If you choose to induce a panic right now, when the hunters are out having a heyday everywhere but in Blackwood Creek, I'll gladly banish you both from the Northeast Pack."

Martin's face went so red, I wondered if a vein would burst. He struggled to maintain eye contact with me, but his wolf didn't stand a chance, and he bowed his head and showed me his throat. I was tempted to snap him into submission, but forcing the proud wolf to submit was enough while we were in public.

Surprisingly, Tori bristled beside me and didn't shy away from adding her two cents. "I'm sure the loyal shifters in town, including your own daughter, will vote in favor of your banishment without batting an eye since you can't see past your blind need for power that lives are at stake, that you're willing to risk the destruction of this town for your own personal vendettas. Nobody will back you on that."

Watching my mate's fierceness and protectiveness over my pack and me thrilled me, and my wolf took notice because he loved having a feisty mate.

Tori shined everywhere she went and would be a fantastic luna. I couldn't wait for other shifters to see her in her element because she'd blow their minds.

The Greenthornes started blustering like the blowhards they were, daring to act like they were the victims in this exchange.

"You have no room to talk," Christie Greenthorne spat and sneered. I'd never seen her look uglier. "The hunter we saw in the jail looks like he could be related to you. In light of the deputy's murder and everything else that's happened, it makes your arrival in town that much more suspicious. It'll be easy to make the other shifters see that you two must be working together with hunters to cash in on all the shifters here. In fact, the other shifters will be so angry about being betrayed, they'll be out for blood, and who's to say they won't come to the jail first and kill the hunter who has probably killed so many of our kind? That'll be a sight to behold."

Taking a huge breath, I imagined getting my teeth around the woman's throat for having the audacity to speak to my mate that way. My wolf yearned to come out and show those two who was in charge, but Tori's already angry breathing started picking up, and she clasped my arm.

Worried her wolf would come out because of the perceived threat of the useless wolves, I grabbed Tori and headed up the stairs, ignoring the Greenthornes as they continued to taunt us.

Getting Tori away from them was more important. If they realized her wolf was even a little feral, they'd use that against us to make everything worse. They'd appeal to the other shifters in town and have Tori banished from the pack. I'd let that happen over my dead body. Or once I destroyed them, whichever happened first.

After we entered, Clawson lifted his head, rushed to the partition, and ushered us back into a private room. He could see what was happening to Tori and acted without a word. Once Tori and I were settled in the room, he left us alone, but I could tell he was guarding the door.

I pulled Tori into my arms, placing her face straight into my neck so she could scent me while I soothed her. Her wolf would soon realize that there was no imminent threat and ease up. I sat in one of the plastic chairs and cuddled her while she took big lungfuls of air.

Her feral wave passed faster than before, and I relaxed into her, kissing her head. "Little wolf, you seem to be getting better at gaining the upper hand when your wolf struggles like that. I'm sure it'll keep getting easier until it's

no longer an issue.”

She snuggled against me, holding onto my shirt for dear life as the rest of her body slowly relaxed into me. Thoughts started swirling in my head. If we claimed each other, if we fulfilled the call to fated mates, would that speed up her recovery process?

Hope built inside my chest that it would. It might also help her decide if she wanted to claim me in return. She'd be entirely free to choose if she didn't have the feral side effects to worry about. She'd said as much last night. That was the only thing now that made her hate what she was—the fear of hurting someone. If we could fix that, then there would be no reason for her not to fully embrace everything about her wolf and our life together.

I'd mention that when I told her about fated mates later. I'd use everything to my advantage if it could help me keep her at my side.

## Chapter 50

# Tori

“You’re right. I’m gaining control faster each time.” I turned my head and kissed the bottom of Ridge’s chin, then snuggled closer to his neck while taking deep breaths. He calmed me like nothing else ever could. I would never get enough of his scent. I wanted to bottle it up and keep it with me forever.

The confrontation with the Greenthornes had pissed me off, and my wolf was still making it harder for me to maintain my cool. Them threatening my brother and Ridge had made me want to murder them. My wolf had wanted to hunt, with them as her fresh meat.

“I’m sorry for almost losing it like that,” I said. “I was already getting worked up with their threats of telling the town about you possibly working with hunters. So when they threatened my brother, I saw red for a second. If you hadn’t gotten me away, I might’ve attacked them right there in the middle of town.”

“Little wolf, you never have to apologize to me. You’ve gotten so much better. Trust me, my wolf wanted to go after them as well. Refraining was hard for me, and I’m not battling a feral side.” He lifted my chin with a finger and kissed me. “You’re getting better. Embracing your wolf and letting her out is all great work. You’re finding that balance. Your inner wolf is meant to protect you, and she’s doing what she thinks is best to keep you safe. So if she’s protective of your brother, she probably senses that Kyle isn’t a danger to you.”

I looked into Ridge’s eyes, daring to hope that his statement was true. I was different now and had other priorities, but I didn’t want to run or hide from my brother. I wanted him back, but not at the expense of Ridge or the

shifters of Blackwood Creek.

“I’ll talk to Kyle now and cross my fingers that we can get something out of him.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it right now?”

I sat up straight so Ridge could see that I was okay. “I am. My wolf is settled, and I’m not as drained as I’ve been in the past after battling her because I didn’t have to fight as hard or for as long to gain control.”

“Do you want me to go in with you?”

Biting my lip, I debated if that was a good idea or not. I didn’t know if Kyle would be as open with my alpha wolf fake fiancé were around. He didn’t know that our engagement wasn’t real, and I didn’t know if that would change anything with him, but I didn’t want to have that conversation with him about Ridge. I was okay with him believing I was engaged.

It also didn’t help that I had this heavy desire to introduce Ridge to my older brother. Not the hunter who was threatening to cure me or who’d trapped my fake fiancé, but just having Ridge meet Kyle as my brother. I couldn’t explain why I needed to accept his offer to stay because there wouldn’t be any reason for him to stay. My wolf had relaxed more since Ridge would be near us, which was something that had been happening more as of late. Since we’d been forced apart, she’d been clingy, whiny, and unsettled until we were back in the same place as Ridge.

“I’d like you to stay,” I finally said.

I noticed the slight ease in Ridge’s posture, and the tightness around his eyes and mouth lightened up as well. I should’ve figured that he didn’t want to leave me alone with Kyle. He didn’t care for my brother, but he knew how important he was to me, so he’d let me see him unless my safety was in question.

Ridge never had to tell me that. It was a given. His protective alpha nature wouldn’t have it any other way.

He kissed the tip of my nose, then stood with me still in his arms. I gasped at the sudden movement and tightened my arms around his neck. Ridge smirked at me, sliding me slowly down his body as he lowered me to my feet.

“I’ll get Clawson to bring Kyle in here.”

Ridge opened the door, and Clawson stood rooted at the entry. He looked into the room at me, and I gave him a little wave. With a strained smile, he nodded once, and Ridge asked him to bring Kyle in there.

While we waited for Kyle to be brought in, I thought about the stoic sheriff and wondered if Margo had spoken with him yet. I was curious to ask him, but that would be pushing it. Clawson wouldn't answer me, and Ridge knew nothing about what was happening.

I had to talk to Margo. The town was rubbing off on me—I was getting nosier by the day.

Clawson brought Kyle in sans cuffs, as my brother had proven they were a wasted effort. The department would only have to shell out more money from their budget to replace them.

Kyle looked at me with a small, nervous smile, but a scowl took its place the moment he saw Ridge standing protectively at my side. I didn't say anything, as there wasn't anything to defend. Ridge had my back. He'd repeatedly proven that by going above and beyond for me more than anybody had done in a long time.

Gesturing for Kyle to sit, I sat down and waited for him to sit opposite me. Ridge leaned against the back wall while Clawson shut the door and left us alone.

Kyle dropped his glare from Ridge and took a seat. He was far less hostile when he looked at me. Aware that time was of the essence and that I wanted to build up our once-solid trust, I came out with everything I'd discovered and hoped he would reciprocate.

"I guess I'll just jump in with what I know. Hunters are working with a dark witch who is curing shifters of their wolves." I raised my hands and used air quotes around "curing." Ridge didn't hold back his growl at my terminology, but that didn't faze me from talking to my brother.

Kyle's response wasn't what I expected. His body relaxed and a smile lit up his face. "That's great. I'm glad you know now. I don't have to explain anything, then. It wouldn't be hard for me to get you to Giselle, and we could get you back to being my Tori. It'll be like how it used to be. Well, that is, if you wanted."

Ridge's snarls increased in volume, filling the room. He pushed off from the wall, ready to attack. There was no way he would let me anywhere near that witch, of that I was sure.

Kyle glared at Ridge, tensing as if ready to battle with the alpha.

I snorted. It hadn't even taken a full minute before these two men were at odds. It didn't help that my wolf was anxious and prowling inside me, ready to run.

Shaking my head at Kyle, I spoke firmly but kindly. “I’m not interested in getting rid of my wolf. She’s a part of me. I only want to have balance with her so she doesn’t bite the head off anyone threatening the people we love. I’m a shifter, Kyle. End of discussion. This was who I was born to be.”

Ridge settled down quickly with a contented look on his face, and my wolf took a backseat, satisfied with observing now that she didn’t have to wonder if she had to get the fuck away from Kyle.

I embraced her now. She was pleased with my verbal acceptance of her. It also helped that I felt strongly about it; she could feel that, too.

Kyle frowned. “How do you know it’ll get better? If you can’t control that thing, then maybe instead of endangering people, you should get rid of it and return to being normal, Tori.” There was frustration in his voice, but he wasn’t yelling. If anything, he sounded sad.

Ridge let out another growl, but I lifted my hand and he stopped at once.

“Tori,” Kyle continued, “the moment you changed, both our lives went downhill. If you didn’t have to deal with an uncontrollable monster, we could run away from the hunters and all of this crazy shit forever. Screw what our father demands of us. We’ll be back together like we used to be.”

There was real longing in his voice, and my heart went out to him. Everything *had* changed when I’d shifted and we’d lost each other. Neither of us had ever thought that would happen.

Everything he was saying was upsetting Ridge, and I could sense his tension thickening the air. But I heard my brother’s obvious concerns for me, and I was touched. Kyle wouldn’t let down his walls and say it, but all he wanted was his sister back.

The way he wanted to go about it was wrong, though. He was saying what he thought would bring us back to the way we were four years ago, but that ship had sailed.

Softening my tone, I said, “I’m still normal Tori. I’m still me where everything counts. If I seem different to you now from what I was four years ago, it’s not from the wolf inside me. I’m different because I’ve been running, afraid, and doing whatever it takes to survive. Something I’m now realizing you had to be doing, too. Staying with our father and his need for revenge must have been hell for you.” My voice had fallen into a whisper.

Reaching out, I put my hand on top of his. “I’m so sorry, Kyle. I shouldn’t have run off. I should’ve known that you wouldn’t want to kill me the moment I shifted and became one of them, and I should’ve known you

were looking for me because you've always had my best interests at heart. I'm so sorry for deserting you, but I was scared. I thought of myself as a monster because of what our father had spewed at us over and over and over again. I wasn't thinking; I only reacted, and that was by running as far and as fast as I could.

"But we don't need to run away from this at all. Screw William's need for revenge. We can live our own lives anywhere we choose, even here in Blackwood Creek if we want. Right now, I'm determined to make this town safe. I'm not turning my back on you, no matter what, but I'm not turning my back on the people here who have welcomed me, either."

Knowing my brother as well as I did, I witnessed his emotions trying to get the better of him. It made me feel good that we were reconnecting. He was still keeping his guard so as not to show weakness in front of Ridge, though. There were alphas in every species, and there was no doubt in my mind that if Kyle were a shifter, he'd be an alpha.

Easing up on the emotional pleas and giving my brother a reason to maintain his guard, I turned to Ridge. "If the Greenthornes know what Kyle is and are serious about stirring up unrest with the shifters who might hurt my brother, then I want to get him out of this jail and somewhere safe. It wouldn't be wise to keep him here. It wouldn't just put my brother in danger; it would put everybody in this building in danger."

I was prepared for Ridge to argue, but he didn't hesitate to agree. My lips involuntarily curved upward because Ridge's actions weren't motivated by Kyle. He was doing everything for the safety of the deputies and me. He'd do pretty much anything for me, and that was a heady—and scary—realization.

Ridge looked at Kyle pointedly. "I don't trust him yet, but I trust your wolf. She doesn't view your brother as a threat." He shifted his gaze to me, and instantly, the aggressive look morphed into pure adoration. "Clawson will fight tooth and claw about letting Kyle out of here, but if there's a strong enough shifter keeping an eye on him, it'd be easier to convince him. I agree, little wolf. It's better to be safe than sorry. We can re-evaluate what to do with him after the unrest the Greenthornes stirred up settles down a little."

Leaving me alone with my brother, Ridge went to speak with the sheriff. It didn't take a second after the door closed for Kyle to grumble about him. "That alpha looks at you like you hung the moon specifically for him. You have him whipped."

Rolling my eyes at my brother, I snapped back, "You can judge my love



life once you get one of your own. I'm sure being a busy hunter has probably kept you from getting in with the ladies." I smirked at him as I remembered girls in high school swooning over my brother and how I used to gag at watching them trying to flirt with him.

"Have you even had a proper girlfriend since Marie Polanders broke up with you in your senior year of high school?"

Kyle scowled at me, and I couldn't hold in the laugh when he protested, "I broke up with her."

He tried to hide his amusement, but it leaked a little through his wall of doom and gloom. I was so relieved to see the cracks in his armor. If there were cracks, I wanted to break through the whole damn thing because I hated seeing my brother like this. So cold and calculating. He reminded me too much of William, and that wasn't a compliment.

My brother used to be fun, the life of the party. Everyone wanted to hang out with him. It hurt to see him as this worn-down warrior when he was only in his early twenties. Clearly, he'd seen and done some nasty shit that had changed him forever. I highly doubted that he'd ever be the same Kyle of our youth, but then again, I'd never go back to Tori of old, either.

We could reclaim our relationship, though. That was all I could ever ask for and want.

Kyle lifted a brow and asked what was obviously on his mind since I'd mentioned it. "What do you mean that I'm in possible danger from the shifters in this town?"

Hunter Kyle returned to the forefront. I hesitated about telling him what was happening, but if I was going to trust him again, that meant no secrets and no lies. It was his life, after all, and he deserved to know what was happening.

"This place, this town, is supposed to be a haven for shifters to build families and live in harmony with humans instead of being hunted down, killed, or stripped of their wolves against their will."

I looked at him pointedly, and he squirmed a little in his seat. He looked even slightly ashamed after I'd put it so bluntly, but I wanted him to know exactly where I stood and how wrong it was.

My talk earlier with Ridge had been precisely that—talk. It didn't mean I supported what was being done to shifters, but I was a big supporter of choice.

"The Greenthornes are a snobby couple in this town trying to gain power

and stage some kind of coup against Ridge,” I explained. “They might incite anger against a hunter being kept in the jail here, especially because of Ridge’s family history, which I suspect you already know about.”

Shrugging, he said, “I know one of William’s ancestors worked with Blackwoods to get to other shifters, which was part of why Ridge was targeted. They figured history would repeat itself.”

Glad he was finally willing to talk a little, and relieved Ridge hadn’t been in the room to hear that wonderful snippet, I figured I could start asking some questions.

“If Ridge was the target, why did you take three other shifters? Why not take more since you staged a surprise invasion when everyone was caught unaware? Everyone’s on alert now. It’d be more difficult to repeat.”

Kyle leaned back and thrummed his fingers against the table, something he always did when he had to think something over.

“Giselle gives the hunters very specific instructions about the demographics of the shifters who need to be taken. Her spell for curing a shifter is very complex and requires a lot of power, so she only wants as many as she can handle and within her capability, age ranges, genders, et cetera, that she’s prepared for. She can’t and won’t do the spell if she’s brought the wrong numbers or shifters out of those parameters because it messes with her and the spell.”

Sensing there was more to what he was saying, I stayed quiet and watched him debate what to say next. His fingers were now drumming wildly on the table, and knowing my brother, I patiently waited for him to come to a conclusion. We were similar in that if we felt pushed, we shut down and refused to give anything away. We had to go through things in our own time and way. So I gave that space to my brother, as he had always done with me. We were so in sync that being separated hadn’t changed us enough not to have that shared trait come back instantly.

“Aw, fuck it, I’ve already told you too much. It’s enough to be banned from returning to the faction.” He leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table. “Fuck, I don’t even want to go back there, anyway. Not now that I found you.”

My heart leaped at that. Kyle wanted to stay with me, even though I was still a shifter. He wanted to be with me. I struggled to keep my emotions in check because now wasn’t the time. Not when he was opening up about hunters and what they had planned.

“For some time now, William has had Giselle working on a way to cure shifters in larger numbers instead of one by one,” he said. “It requires a lot of power, and she’s had to build up to it. Honestly, I haven’t been a part of most of the research and have only seen Giselle a couple of times. William doesn’t let hunters into every part of his plans. We’re assigned to specific tasks, and only those tasks. Probably because of situations like this.” He chuckled humorlessly.

Swallowing down my dread, I listened intently to my brother as I tried to tamp down my fear of what could come our way. I reminded myself that I couldn’t control everything. There was nothing I could do about it now except listen to Kyle and relay everything to Ridge and Clawson.

“I don’t know where the cured shifters go or what happens to them later, but I do know that whatever mass magical cure she was working on will be ready soon. There’s a very real chance they decided to scout Blackwood Creek through Mrs. Marrow to determine if this should be the first place to use a spell of that magnitude. They want to hit as many shifters as possible on their first trial run. They don’t care if they kill many in the process. Only that they have a good amount of test subjects.”

Kyle never let his gaze waver from my face, but I could tell by how he looked at me that I’d gone several shades paler than usual. My stomach churned with unease. Every shifter in town was in immense danger, and I had a driving need to protect them.

Margo’s smiling face popped into my head. Diana’s warm, solid motherly hugs. Audrey’s haughty attitude. Clawson’s serious look and devotion to protecting all the citizens.

Lastly, Ridge. Everything about Ridge flooded into my mind—his soft caresses, his rich laugh, his sensuous kisses, his fierce protection of me, his devotion to this town and his people, his good heart. Everything that made him the Ridge I had grown to sincerely care for made me terrified of it being taken away.

The idea of losing any of them sent my emotions into a tornado that couldn’t be controlled.

As soon as I had a moment alone with Ridge, I’d tell him everything Kyle said, but I had to make sure no one would overhear us. This was too sensitive of a subject and would cause mass chaos.

“Thank you for telling me, Kyle.”

Watching me closely, he nodded as he gave me a moment to absorb

everything he'd said.

Taking the moment to appreciate my brother's presence in the same room as me, I studied him closely. Emotion choked my voice when I said, "I'm glad you're not going back there. Now we just need to focus on keeping you and everyone else here alive."

## Chapter 51

# Tori

As if on cue, Ridge and Sheriff Clawson walked back into the room. Clawson didn't look too happy as he glared at Kyle.

"If Kyle is to be loose in the town, I want someone who'll be up close and tight and watch him like a hawk. Someone willful who won't hesitate to take him out if it seems like he's trying something." The sheriff stood by the door with his feet planted and his arms crossed, trying to be intimidating. It was working.

He was actually being more lenient than I'd expected. Having Ridge as the alpha had probably changed things. If I'd been the one to request it, the outcome probably would have been very different.

A glance at my brother showed me the sheriff's words hadn't affected him. In fact, he looked amused. Then it hit me. I knew the perfect person to keep an eye on my brother and appease the sheriff, and I couldn't stop chuckling.

"I know the perfect person."

The three men looked at me as I tried to get my mirth under control. Only Ridge looked amused while the other two frowned at me. I guess to them, I wasn't as cute as Ridge thought I was.

"Audrey Greenthorne."

Ridge smirked and winked at me while Kyle balked. "Didn't you just tell me the Greenthornes were the ones who might get people to kill me? Why would you have one of them watch me?"

I shook my head, still laughing. "Their daughter, Audrey, she's a female shifter about my age. You might remember her; she was taken hostage along with Ridge. Well, she won't be gunning for your death."

Kyle narrowed his eyes at me. “That manicured hellion literally tried to gun for me when she was in the compound. This is a horrible idea. The moment I turn my head from her, she’s gonna shoot me.”

Ridge and the sheriff didn’t look too perturbed by that idea, making me want to smack them both upside the head.

Surprisingly, it was Ridge who said, “I agree, little wolf. Audrey might be the right call. She’s a strong shifter. And when she finds out what her parents are planning, she’ll be extremely against their motives. She proved herself more than capable when we were in the compound, and she can handle herself if things go sideways. She wants to do whatever she can to help, and this is a big help.”

I appreciated that Ridge had my back on this. I’d figured he and Clawson would argue that they needed a big powerful male to do this task, which I was ready to fight tooth and claw over. But I’d built up the steam for nothing.

Clawson rubbed his brow and agreed. “We’ll have Audrey keep an eye on Kyle somewhere secure in town that isn’t the jail. Do either of you have any ideas on where that should be? Because I don’t.”

That question had me stumped, but only because I wasn’t as familiar with this town and the places that could potentially hide a hunter.

Ridge rubbed the back of his neck, not looking excited about what he was going to suggest. “Christie and Martin probably won’t expect the hunter to be staying at the manor. It would make sense to them that I’d want to keep him far away from me. They’d think I’d be afraid to have him around in case people saw him. I don’t know how long the Greenthornes will float this threat over our heads. They like the idea of lording their supposed power over me, hoping I’ll squirm. It could be days before they follow through on trying to pull a stunt. Those bastards don’t care about the lives they’re playing with.”

As he spoke, Ridge’s body tensed, and his voice got deeper as his anger slipped out a little. The idea of his pack being in danger already had him on edge, but add into the mix those two dastardly excuses for people who were only greedy and power-hungry? It had to make Ridge think they were no better than his ancestors, and here they were, in his pack.

“The manor has plenty of guest rooms,” Ridge said. “Audrey can keep an eye on Kyle there for now.”

I grinned at Ridge. It looked like he’d lightened up some. On the other hand, Kyle hadn’t stopped glaring. I could read him well, and he was trying

to show that he wasn't a threat to the shifters, or at least not anymore. He'd gotten what he wanted—to be reunited with me.

I had a lot of emotions and thoughts to unpack with that realization, but it still had me bubbling up with all the good, happy feelings. The two of us had a long way to go to return to a semblance of normal. I'd be really naïve to think we'd ever get back what we'd lost, but I was hopeful enough that we'd have a tighter, stronger bond because we chose it for ourselves. Not because we were raised to have it.

“The manor sounds good to me,” Clawson said. “I'll get in touch with Audrey and take her and Kyle to your place. It's best if you two hit the town and fulfill your mayoral and fiancée duties. Make sure the Greenthornes see you. That way, they won't get suspicious of what's happening.”

Ridge clapped Clawson on the back. “Thanks for the help.”

Clawson grunted as he left. Ridge winked at me and held out his hand. “The End of Summer Town Fundraiser is starting in the town square, little wolf. We need to make our appearances.”

Nodding without hesitation, I took his hand as he helped me out of my seat. He turned and gave Kyle a last warning look before he guided me out the door.

Looking over my shoulder, I smiled at my brother. “Don't worry. We'll get this all squared away. I'm glad to have you back.”

Kyle glared at my and Ridge's intertwined fingers, but when he looked at me, his eyes softened. “I'm glad I found you.”

I gave him an enormous grin and followed Ridge out the door.

Outside, we peered down the street. It was a beautiful day with everything in full swing: the sun shone bright, the birds sang, and the atmosphere was vibrant. As we walked, the smiling faces of people of all ages warmed me. Children ran around and played games, and the sounds of pure laughter and joy delighted my heart. It was like straight out of a movie.

The colors, the sounds, and the emotions all came together so perfectly, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for being alive and being here to experience it all. The high sun cast a golden glow over everything. Cementing the movie-like moment, a flock of birds burst into the sky, soaring and dancing in the air. It took my breath away.

My brother's warnings of William and Giselle's plan had terrified me. There was so much to lose. Many of the people milling around here were shifters who didn't know how precarious of a situation they were in. They

didn't know that their very existence was in question, which, now that I knew better, they'd hate to lose. Being a shifter was part of their identity, and if it was stolen from them, what would happen? Sure, Zander didn't have his memories, but was that permanent? What if he never got his memories back? Would he eventually start to realize that he wasn't whole, that a part of him was missing? There were too many what-ifs, and it was scary.

Ridge guided me along, but when he noticed my hesitation, he diverted and walked me over to a bench under a tree, away from everyone.

"What's going on, little wolf?" he asked when we sat down.

My emotions regarding Ridge were all over the place. A part of me hated that he could gauge me so well, and another part was thrilled by it. My wolf didn't help with my confusion, either; Ridge and his wolf enthralled her. There was no swaying her, and the idea of our leaving still had her up in arms.

It had slowly been trickling through that I also hated the idea, but what choice did I have? Once everyone was aware of my past, it wouldn't matter what I wanted. No one in town would want me around, knowing I'd been involved with the hunters in some capacity.

It also wouldn't be fair to Ridge. He might trust me, but that trust would put him at odds with the shifters in the town, the people he was trying so hard to protect. There were many more of them than there were of me.

"Look at them over there," I said. "The happy and carefree atmosphere has me anxious about the Greenthornes' threats and what dangers are lurking just beyond this town. This is supposed to be a safe place, yet it's on the brink of war. Hell, shifters could potentially go extinct, thanks to that dark witch and the hunters. I can't stop playing out all the what-ifs in my head."

Rubbing my thigh and kissing my temple, Ridge soothed me as best he could. "Little wolf, the Greenthornes make threats all the time. I can't tell you how many times they've tried to sue me since I moved into town. They cause problems. That's who they are."

Lifting my head, I frowned at him and he chuckled.

"They're a piece of work, I don't deny that, but I can control them," he said. "We've taken precautions to protect your brother. Right now, we need to realize we can't control anything else. We've taken care of what we can, and we need to roll with the punches as they come. Especially since right now, the thing you need to be the most prepared for is lots of questions about our relationship."



“How did we meet? How did I propose? How long did we date before I popped the question? That sort of thing. People come to town functions like this to chat, and I bet you we’ll be the hot topic of the evening, just as you’ve been since our engagement was announced.”

Groaning, I dropped my head into Ridge’s chest. “Small towns need more entertainment,” I muttered.

Ridge chuckled, kissed the top of my head, and rubbed my back. “Sorry, but that’s how it’s done around here and in every small town in America. But you’ll do great because you care for this town and its people. You wouldn’t have such a strong need to protect it if you didn’t.”

I nuzzled Ridge’s chest, inhaling his scent deeply and reveling in his warmth. He was right. I did care, and it sucked because it made everything that much harder. I could’ve been on the run with my brother by now if I didn’t feel so tied to this place. And particularly to this man.

Lifting my head as a thought occurred to me, I asked, “Do people from other towns come to this event?”

Trying to hide his smile, Ridge nodded, “Yes, and it seems to get bigger every year.”

Loudly, I groaned and buried my head in his chest again.

“Clawson has his officers on high alert to vet all visitors as an extra precaution, but we’re not going to stop running our town because we’re scared. We still have to keep living and thriving.”

I glowered at him. “I’m not worried about that. The town is in excellent hands. All I’m getting at is that if more people passive-aggressively ask me for a wedding invitation, I’m going to lose my ever-loving mind. There are only so many ways I can make it clear that we haven’t set a date. People need to hold their horses. Plus, it’s just plain rude.” I shrugged off Ridge’s arm and huffed out my annoyance.

My irritation increased when I saw that Ridge was still wearing an amused expression and playing with my hair as he sat back, looking like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Ridge, it’s not funny.” I elbowed him.

“I never said it was, little wolf. I can’t help it if I find you adorable and cute and sexy when you’re flustered.”

“Ugh.” I shoved at him again, which only made him laugh. He put his arms around my shoulders again. “Okay, how about this? We set a date for the wedding.”

Lifting my eyes, I saw he wasn't smiling or joking, so I stopped to think it over and realized the idea had merits. It wasn't like our wedding had to be next week. If I finally had an answer for people, maybe they'd give us a little peace so we could focus on things that mattered.

"Yeah, okay," I conceded. "For the sake of talking to people at the fundraiser and not losing my shit, we could give them a fictional day. That could work."

The tension in my shoulders eased. I'd have something to say to people, and hopefully, that'd buy us more time.

Ridge sighed. "If you had to pick a date for a real wedding, what would it be? Did you ever daydream about what your dream wedding would be like? What season and day would it be? What time of day?"

Scrunching my nose, I tried to remember if I'd ever imagined those things. I was coming up empty. "I haven't fantasized about a dream wedding since I was about six years old. I'm pretty sure back then I wanted to fight Princess Buttercup and get married to Westley in Wonderland while it snowed cotton candy, and we could ride off into the sunset to a castle in the sky on a unicorn."

Ridge threw his head back and laughed. Watching him had my belly clenching. He was the most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on.

He settled down and became thoughtful. "I never thought about a wedding date or a wedding until now. It makes me wonder, what do you think about a winter wedding?"

A winter wedding? It was the end of August now, and we wouldn't be expected to have a wedding this soon. That would give us a lot of time to "plan" a wedding.

"A winter wedding is perfect," I said. "We could tell everybody we decided on next winter, making it over a year away. It'll keep people from nagging us about invitations, and it wouldn't surprise people if we had a long engagement. This could work."

I gave Ridge my best smile, but he didn't seem as thrilled.

"No, I meant this winter," he said.

Floored, I stared at him, waiting for him to crack a smile because he had to be joking. "Why would you want to pretend it would be so soon? That's only a little over four months away!"

"We could even tell people a sooner date, say before Thanksgiving. It'd make a lot of people very excited." He nudged my shoulder. "The Magpies

might even give you your job back if we announced the wedding was so soon. They'd want to be around you all the time to offer you wedding planning advice."

My jaw dropped as I stared at him. He couldn't be serious. What was he thinking?

"If we're going to go all in pretending to plan a wedding, I'm going to act like the biggest Bridezilla ever to discourage people from wanting to come. I'll be so ridiculous, we wouldn't have to plan a damn thing, and nobody would even know about it because they wouldn't be there."

As he laughed again, I figured Ridge was getting enough amusement from me. He reached out and clasped my hand.

"We haven't settled on the right date." He looked into my eyes, and he came off as so earnest about it that my heart couldn't help but flutter.

Needing a minute to collect my thoughts, I moved my gaze toward the town and away from Ridge's beautiful eyes. And whatever he was trying to mask inside them, because he wasn't doing as good of a job of that as he thought he was.

The little carnival with the kids running around had me smiling, and the scent of the food booths had my stomach growling. It was another picture-perfect scene that felt like a 1950s sitcom, not the middle of a horror movie.

"Okay, we'll arbitrarily tell everyone that we're getting married on the fifth of December. That way, we can have a Christmas honeymoon in Hawaii on one of your golden yachts or something like that." I waved my hands around as I tried to make light of things.

But Ridge looked a little too satisfied, and he seemed to puff out his chest a bit more.

Naturally, I rolled my eyes at him.

"Fifth of December it is, little wolf." He kissed my cheek. "But Hawaii's an overrated honeymoon destination, and I'd much rather take you somewhere with space to run our wolves. For example... a private island named after you."

Now it was my turn to burst out laughing. What a ludicrous idea. Only he could come up with that as a joke. "Your rich only-childness is once again on display."

Shaking my head, I stood and prepared to play the role of happy fiancée of the most prominent figure in town. There was no way I'd disappoint Ridge, and I'd weather this small-town event and get back to reality—

protecting the unsuspecting small town from the hunters.

## Chapter 52

# Ridge

The sun was up high, making the day hotter as it moved into the afternoon. I wished Tori and I could've skipped the town fundraiser altogether and put everything on hold. I wanted to get her alone and tell her about us and our fated mate connection. I hated having it hanging over my head when I wanted to shout from the top of my lungs that she was mine and I was hers. I craved to be officially claimed and have her wearing my mark. I ached for it so deeply that the tension coiled beneath my skin.

While I had no desire to pressure Tori into a human marriage if she didn't want it, I wasn't joking about planning our future together. The human marriage didn't hold as much significance to me, but claiming and marking her was something I had to do. I'd do it in a heartbeat if she let me. Nothing would stop me.

It was clear that Tori was winging it about picking a wedding date. She saw a wedding as entirely unrealistic, only something to sell to the town's residents. It frustrated me because it had become very real to me very quickly—not so much a future wedding, but my future with her.

It was also harder now because there was a night-and-day difference between the Tori I'd first met and the Tori of now, especially how she acted and reacted toward me. Gone was the frightened, near-feral little wolf who cowered from my touch and avoided me whenever she could. Now, she accepted my care and returned it. There was no way that my feelings were one-sided, and while I couldn't be more thrilled about that, having her dismiss our future as just another pretense hurt. She talked about saving the town and doing what needed to be done, but it never sounded like staying here was in the cards for her.

When she'd mentioned making a life here to Kyle, I'd wanted to launch my fists into the air. It was a victory, but the talk about our supposed wedding date had made the uncertainty return.

I couldn't get a read on where Tori stood and what she hoped for in the future.

Once again, I reminded myself that I was jumping to conclusions. Later tonight, when we were alone in the woods and I had her to myself, I'd tell her about our fated mate connection. There were things I needed to take care of first so I could give her my undivided attention tonight. With everything the Greenthornes had piled on me, I felt itchy to get things over and done with. Life was different with a mate consuming my every waking thought. I wouldn't have it any other way, but learning how to manage it all was a juggling act.

Right now, I had to compose myself and behave like Mayor Blackwood. Then I'd follow Tori around like a lovesick puppy until she allowed me to claim her.

Who was I kidding, though? Even after we claimed each other, I'd still be obsessed with her and following her everywhere.

Clasping her hand tighter, I lifted it to kiss her knuckles as we entered the town square. Tori smiled and looked at me with stars in her eyes. I'd never tire of that look; I'd wage wars for her to always look at me that way. She'd tried to keep her distance for so long, always holding me at arm's length, but since we'd reconnected after my abduction, she'd stopped hiding herself from me. I doubted she realized she'd even lowered her shields, but I wouldn't mention it because I needed her now.

"You ready?"

"As I'll ever be, I guess," she mumbled.

Smiling at her sarcastic eagerness, I steeled myself for our approach to the event.

As expected, women fawned over Tori's engagement ring, asked about wedding preparations, and offered tips for all levels of planning a wedding.

I was bombarded with questions about menial mayor stuff or business, even though I tried to keep the conversations light and fun. This was an outing—a fundraiser, after all—and I wanted people to enjoy themselves and appreciate all the hard work Diana had put into the event.

Only a few so far had asked about the actual wedding date, and I had to laugh when Tori exaggerated our plans for the wedding. She wasn't kidding

when she said she was going to play up the Bridezilla act. So far, nobody had caught on. They were ecstatic that the wedding would be happening so soon.

It didn't take long for people to start anticipating what our wedding would be like. Many likened it to a fairytale, which had me smothering my laughter at Tori's annoyed look. She hid it as well as she could, but I didn't miss a thing. She was expressive in a way that most people didn't catch, but they weren't her mate.

Tori's smile was anything but enthusiastic, and her wild demands were over the top, such as the certain hairstyles she wanted her bridesmaids to have, even if they had to cut their hair to make it work. I had to cough into my hand to cover my laugh. The woman she was talking to didn't bat an eye and thought it was perfectly reasonable of Tori to demand that on her wedding day. After all, it was her fairytale. The incredulous look on Tori's face when the woman walked away was hilarious.

"People are insane," she hissed in my ear.

To ease her annoyance, we stopped at a food stand and I got her a kebab. She looked as happy as a clam when she bit into the tender meat, or more accurately, tore into it. It was when she started licking the barbecue sauce off her fingers that I began to have an issue. She was so fucking sexy that my cock had started to pitch a tent in my pants.

I growled at Tori. Her head snapped to mine, her eyebrows knitting together as she scanned the area to find the source of my displeasure. When she noticed how my gaze hadn't left her mouth or her fingers, her eyes widened and dropped to my crotch. Smirking, she decided to give me a show by slowly putting her finger in her mouth and twirling her tongue around it.

Wiping my hands down my face, I caught Tori's eyes fixing themselves on the bulge in my pants. Her smile got more prominent, and she winked at me as she licked her lips seductively.

Having had enough of her antics, I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her in close, then kissed the living daylights out of her. I licked all the barbecue sauce off her in the process, but nothing tasted better than her.

We received a few whoops and hollers, enough for me to lift my head and appraise Tori's flushed face. My response had been entirely inappropriate, but Tori's heated look and flushed cheeks told me she didn't mind. She let out a shaky breath that zinged right to my balls.

Mateo, the town's charismatic French bartender, slapped me on the back, laughing his head off and offering up his apartment above the tavern he

owned.

“After all, *mon ami*, it’s right across the street, *non*? Not much travel time.”

Tori choked and glared at Mateo as I shook my head, hiding my grin as best I could. I shouldn’t have mauled Tori in public like that; I was a voted-in public official and had to set a particular example. But the alpha in me wanted to blow that all to pieces and demand to have our mate wherever and whenever. Kissing her was one way to stake my claim.

“Really, Mateo?” Tori groaned.

He grinned like a little boy who just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Now the buzz is going around that a date has been set.” He slapped his hands together and rubbed them back and forth. “So when is it? I’m hoping you’ll have me supply the booze.”

I slapped my hand on his back and agreed that he would supply the drinks. “The wedding is on the fifth of December.”

Mateo’s eyes widened before dropping to Tori’s belly. “So soon? Maybe that’s why I haven’t seen Tori in The Topsy Tavern lately. You guys have a little Blackwood pup in the oven?” He waggled his eyebrows at us.

Choking on my laughter, I watched Tori’s face burn bright red. If she were a cartoon, steam would be pouring out of her ears—along with the collection of colorful curse words that left her mouth and made Mateo blush.

“Keep your mouth shut, Mateo, before a Magpie overhears you. That would add ridiculous fodder to the rumor mills. I swear.”

After hissing at Mateo, Tori scanned the vicinity to see if anybody was running off with his assumptions. She was panicking—the last thing she could handle right now.

Mateo grinned and took it all in stride. “I’m only teasing. I’m thrilled you two are marrying so soon because you are a gorgeous couple. You both shine bright when you’re around each other.” He leaned down, kissed Tori on each cheek, and then gave me the bro hug with a slap on my back.

Tori huffed and rolled her eyes before easing her stance and thanking him for the compliment. I did the same, placing my hand on Tori’s lower back and moving her along. If Mateo made another comment like that, I didn’t think I’d be able to keep Tori from hurting him.

When we were out of Mateo’s earshot, Tori hissed, “We absolutely have to change the fake wedding date because of course people would speculate. Now I’m apparently knocked up with a fake wolf baby. What next? I’m



having a full freaking litter?”

Tori stomped through the crowd while I trailed behind her. I couldn't hold back my amusement, and it didn't gain me any favors when I called out that I liked the December date.

She swiveled around, dropped her jaw, and then shut it quickly before crossing her arms. “Fine,” she grumbled. “It's your funeral.”

“Actually, sweetheart, it's our wedding.” I gave her an enormous grin as I threw my arm over her shoulder and continued mingling.

Ignoring me, Tori smiled at everyone we encountered. I loved having her stew like this. Her feisty nature made her the cutest thing ever. It was like she was a little pup baring her teeth for the first time. I'd never get enough of her.

We made small talk with townsfolk, but I started getting distracted when I noticed we were coming across many more people than expected. The event had increased yearly, but the crowds seemed huge this year. I also didn't recognize many of the people. I started to tense up as I realized something: I'd been so distracted lately with my relationship and the hunters, I'd failed to notice there were new shifters in Blackwood Creek. Shifters I'd never met before.

I started doing double takes when shifters walked by and their scents didn't register with me. It didn't happen often, but the scents overwhelmed me.

I was protective of my pack, as all alphas were, but I was even more irritated that proper customs hadn't been followed. Even though I wanted other packs to move here, I wanted it done right. Alphas of other packs were to give warnings or meet face to face with the alphas of territories they were visiting or passing through. It was an act of goodwill. Wolves were naturally territorial creatures and didn't like when outsiders came in unannounced.

I sniffed the air, trying to get a sense of what was happening around me. This wasn't a good omen. Blackwood Creek was already on thin enough ice as it was. I couldn't be sure if the blatant disrespect wasn't a warning of another pack trying to take over and stake their claim on my land. With the shifter world in unrest, with all the hunters attacking and our numbers dwindling, there couldn't be any certainties.

The Greenthornes were walking around the town square, their noses up in the air as usual. As I watched them speak to other shifters, I couldn't help but wonder if they were spreading all kinds of lies, if they were the instigators in bringing all the other wolves here.

There was so much going on, I had to put out fires everywhere I turned while trying to keep my eyes peeled for anything coming at me from behind.

Tori's delicate hand wrapped around my bicep. I looked at her and saw her eyes were filled with concern.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

Tucking some of her hair behind her ear, I gave her a soft smile. I didn't want to worry her with my concerns. We were in a public place, and if she panicked or struggled with her somewhat feral wolf here, others would notice. Everyone was paying close attention to us since we'd mentioned our wedding date.

I also didn't want anyone making my mate feel bad or guilty about what she was going through with her inner wolf. I'd like to see them try to handle the feral side of their wolves the way she was able to. She was remarkable and so strong, she put everybody else to shame.

Deciding I'd tell her my worries later when we were in a calmer setting, I cupped her cheeks and leaned in for a kiss. She dropped her hands to my waist and moved into the embrace. Her scent and the little bubble we'd formed for ourselves had my wolf and me in bliss. I hadn't realized how much I'd craved this, and now that I had it, I didn't want to let it go.

Tori gave me a little moan, and I had to lift my lips from her. The way we were, we could go from zero to sixty in no time, and that wouldn't be inappropriate for this setting.

"Unfortunately, there's business I need to get out of the way while we're here. Will you be okay if I step away for a bit?"

I hated to ask because I didn't want to leave her alone in a crowd, especially here in Blackwood Creek, because Tori was right. Sometimes, living here was like living under a microscope, and she had been very vocal in her dislike of that. I hated the idea of leaving her alone to deal with nosy people. She'd get bombarded with questions about the wedding and our plans.

Once again, Tori surprised me by swatting at my chest and laughing. "Ridge, it's okay. I can handle myself just fine. In fact, I want to head over to Margo and talk to her about Birch. I need to find out if she spoke with him yet."

Dropping my hands from her cheeks, I wrapped them around her so I could hug her closer while we talked. I hated the pang of jealousy I felt when she'd mentioned Clawson; I didn't understand why she needed to talk about

him. My wolf was only appeased that she'd be discussing Margo's relationship with the sheriff, not her own.

Even though Clawson would be the first person I'd want near my mate if an issue arose, it didn't mean I wouldn't react jealously to his proximity to her. I'd never overcome that jealousy, but as long as I had Tori, I didn't care.

"Is there a problem with Margo and Clawson?" I asked.

"Not really. I'm mostly after girl talk. For some reason, she doesn't want to talk to him, but Clawson told me something about Margo being his fated mate or something like that. I'm trying to get the lay of the land, so to speak."

Nearly choking on air, I tightened my hold on Tori, which she took as me wanting more closeness. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me. I accepted it as an added bonus, but I was stunned to hear those two words come out of her mouth.

Before I could ask any more questions, she gave me another peck, let me know she'd catch up with me shortly, then strode off to seek out her friend.

My head was spinning. Tori had sounded so nonchalant about the concept of fated mates that I wondered if she had any inkling of how significant they were. If she even grasped what a fated mate represented. Did she suspect that we were fated? My head became a whirlwind of wanting to know what she knew.

Then my head began spinning for a whole other reason. Margo was Clawson's fated mate? Clawson had never said a word about it. To my understanding, fated mates immediately stuck to one another like glue after the first connection was made. Nothing could keep them apart.

But that certainly wasn't true for Clawson and Margo. I'd hardly seen them in the same vicinity, and when I did, they rarely spoke. Why weren't they a couple and mated properly if they were fated? Could fated mates fight off the connection for that long? The two of them had known each other pretty much their entire lives.

Watching Tori get lost in the crowd, I figured I'd have to ask my friend about it later. That was a problem for another time. I had to get down to business and search the town square for the alpha who had snuck into my territory.

## Chapter 53

# Tori

“There she is, the future Mrs. Ridge Blackwood,” Margo squealed when I approached her booth.

“Seriously, Margo, you’ve known we’ve been engaged for a while now.” I stepped around the back to get into the booth with her.

“I heard from one of the Magpies that you two finally set a date.”

Shaking my head, I sighed. “Neither Ridge nor I spoke with a Magpie since we started telling people the date, and we literally *just* decided on one. How could they already know?”

Margo shrugged, laughing as she sliced into pies and dished them onto paper plates. “This is Blackwood Creek, Tori, and they’re the Magpies. It shouldn’t be a surprise to you at this point.”

Margo had me there. It was what I’d been complaining about to Ridge. Small towns didn’t need newspapers. The residents only had to talk to somebody, and they’d get all the information they needed.

“December fifth, though? That seems rather soon,” Margo remarked.

I threw my hands up in the air and raised my voice. “It’s not a shotgun wedding!”

Margo froze, her eyes wide, then she burst out laughing. She hunched to clutch a stitch in her side as if I’d told the funniest joke in the world.

“Tori, I didn’t suspect that at all, but now I’m beginning to wonder because you seem a little too defensive.” Margo kept laughing as she tried to get herself under control.

Apparently, my craziness amused her. I scanned the crowds, realizing I’d shouted a little loud and could very well have incited a new piece of gossip about myself all on my own. Who needed the Magpies?

Crossing my arms to disguise my discomfort, I said, “I’m only this defensive because Mateo had to ask with a crowd of people around us if I had a pup in the oven.”

I was also appalled that he would call my fictional baby a pup. I wasn’t pregnant, but calling the baby a pup was rude because I was a shifter. The baby was still a baby.

“Don’t worry about it. If you did have a pup, it wouldn’t matter. We don’t pay attention to those sorts of conventions. It’s fun to see you riled up, though.”

I cocked my head at Margo. I couldn’t believe she’d also used the term “pup” when speaking about a baby. Was that a shifter thing?

Too embarrassed to ask Margo, I filed that question away. I’d ask Ridge when we were alone. There was still so much about the shifter world I didn’t know, and it was very much a baptism-by-fire kind of learning for me.

Shaking her head, Margo continued serving up pies. “Do you want a break from being the mayor’s sought-after fiancée to help me cut up more pies so Mom can hand out slices?” She waved her knife in the air. “You get a sharp, pointy knife. People won’t dare ask about shotgun weddings with that in your hand.” She tried to hide a grin.

“Give me the knife.”

Laughing, she handed it to me and pointed me toward the pies.

Silent in our tasks, I took moments between slicing and dishing up to people-watch. Hidden as I was in the back of the booth, I could do it without being disturbed. The sights were sweet to watch, and I admired how cozy and charming this small town was once again. The strong sense of community wasn’t a game here. Neighbors were always helping neighbors. Residents did their best to shop locally. They had this annual fundraiser to raise money for town projects, or any citizen who needed a helping hand.

Margo had once mentioned that when a house burned down due to faulty wiring, the town used funds raised at this event to help pay for the family to stay at the Bogford B&B, and for any amenities they needed until they could get back on their feet and the insurance paid out. That family wouldn’t have recovered the way they did if the community hadn’t stepped up.

The funds also assisted with school programs, books, and childcare for working parents. Whether shifters resided there or not, this town was magical in its own right.

Returning to the business of dishing up several pies, I started noticing that

there were many more unfamiliar faces than I'd expected. I hadn't lived in Blackwood Creek for long, but between working at the café, attending town meetings, and visiting the shops and The Topsy Tavern, I knew more of the residents. If not by name, then at least by their faces. It helped that this was a small town and a tight-knit community, but it was distracting to see so many new faces.

"Hey, Margo?"

"Yeah?"

I gestured to the crowd gathered around various food and gaming booths. "Who are those people? I don't remember seeing them around before."

Putting her knife down, Margo studied the crowd, frowning as she sniffed the air and looked at me. "I don't know, but they're shifters. Whatever pack they are, I hope their alpha had the good sense to give Ridge a heads-up."

Could that have been what Ridge was worried about? Had he sensed strange shifters in his territory?

"We've only had a few lone wolves or small nomadic packs pass through town a couple of times since he became alpha," Margo said. "That's probably a good thing, given that he's extremely protective of us and goes a little overboard."

Watching the unfamiliar wolves, I silently agreed that was probably a good thing.

Margo continued, "Since Ridge is encouraging other shifters and packs to settle down in Blackwood Creek, we obviously don't want to deal with trouble-causing wolves. Or, goddess forbid, feral wolves."

Guilt and shame instantly ate at me. I was sort of both those things. I wasn't here to cause trouble, but trouble inevitably followed me. I started to believe that was my real curse because I didn't view myself as a monster anymore.

I managed to push down the self-loathing, but nerves started taking over me. I couldn't recall Ridge mentioning anything about speaking with other alphas. I wondered if he would've even told me if he had. It wasn't like he had any obligations to inform me about situations involving the town as mayor or alpha. But since I wanted to help, I figured he would have told me.

Children's laughter brought me out of my thoughts, and then I remembered what Margo had said about Ridge becoming an alpha. Suddenly, I realized I knew nothing about how that had happened. I hadn't even bothered to ask.

I hesitated to ask Margo for that story. Playing Ridge's fiancée meant I should have known about that. Asking her would make me look like a bad partner, but my curiosity got the better of me. I had to know.

"How did Ridge become the alpha of the Blackwood Pack?"

Margo didn't seem appalled by my question as she wiped down the knife and returned to slicing pies. I followed suit, letting the other wolves around us drop from my view because I didn't want them to think I was spying on them. I didn't want any problems if I could avoid them.

"We're actually called the Northeast Pack, and Ridge didn't become alpha in the traditional way. Normally, alphas who are newly accepted into a pack are allowed to challenge the current alpha to a fight. Whoever's wolf is most powerful becomes the alpha."

Surprised, I couldn't help but let out, "That's archaic, isn't it?"

Margo looked over her shoulder at me and shrugged. "It's not like they kill each other. Besides, it's just in wolves' nature to want the strongest wolf as their leader. We like to know that they can protect and provide for us as an alpha. It works out for the packs because there's no monarchy or diplomacy involved. Only the strongest."

Imagining Ridge fighting another wolf and how hurt he could get had me cringing. I couldn't handle that sort of battle, but Margo had said he hadn't become alpha in the normal way.

"What if the alpha was a tyrant but stronger than everybody else? What then?"

"A bad alpha—an alpha who doesn't take care of his pack—wouldn't last long because pack mates wouldn't do much for him. As much power as the alpha holds, he still needs his pack mates to be successful in his role, or he might as well be a lone wolf."

I mulled that over. "But Ridge didn't become alpha that way?"

Margo shook her head. "When Ridge came to town, he didn't challenge the alpha. Instead, the previous alpha, Christie Greenthorne's elderly father —"

My gasp cut her off.

Margo tsked and muttered, "I know, right? She and her husband have had it out for Ridge ever since, even though that wasn't her father's wish. Martin Greenthorne is absolutely not an alpha, and yet they both hated giving up the title of alpha's daughter and son-in-law."

"What happened?"

“Well, the old alpha invited Ridge to challenge him for leadership once Ridge had settled in. Greenthorne cited Ridge’s family heritage as reason enough for him to be in charge. Ridge agreed, and it was a relatively fast and simple fight with neither alpha getting hurt.

“The previous alpha tapped out, and no one else challenged Ridge. But you’ve seen him. Even amongst wolves, he’s huge, and others struggle to fight him when he forces submission. Ridge is a true alpha of legends, and he respects traditions and pack life as an alpha should. He always puts the pack’s safety before anything else. It would be stupid not to have him as our alpha.”

She was right. He was an impressive wolf. His size alone was frightening, but you only had to look into his eyes to know he wasn’t a beast. It had taken me some time to get used to that.

More than that, Ridge was a born leader who cared more about the many and less about himself. It was a sight to behold, and certainly made me want him at the head.

“Then, about a year after Ridge became alpha, he ran for mayor after doing a butt-ton for the community,” Margo continued. “Not only through donations, might I add. Ridge volunteered and showed up when he was needed. He won in a landslide; nobody really wanted to go against him because they knew they wouldn’t win. It was only Martin Greenthorne who tried and failed. He seriously thought he could get people to vote for him when he didn’t care about the town—well, at least, not regular townfolk. He was all about the rich and influential residents.”

None of that surprised me. The Greenthornes were a pain in everyone’s side. It also didn’t surprise me that Ridge had won for mayor. I was impressed that he never had to resort to violence to get what he needed, to show his strength and leadership abilities, but I liked knowing that if he had to, he was capable.

Scanning the crowd, I hoped to get a glimpse of my amazing fake fiancé in the crowd, but I was out of luck. I started getting slightly anxious because I couldn’t scent him, either. Since he’d been taken, we’d been apart too often, though it was only for a few hours at a time. Still, I struggled with not having him nearby. My attachment issues with him must have come from waking up traumatized, scenting his blood, and finding out the hunters had taken him.

I hoped to get over that quickly. It wasn’t reasonable for me to be so anxious to get back to his side.



My wolf argued that it was completely reasonable, which only increased my anxiety.

As I sliced pie after pie, I thought about everything Margo had told me. Soon, Diana arrived, and we were ready to start handing out slices to the crowd. There were still a couple dozen more that needed to be sliced, but we held off for a while. Between the three of us and all the sugar-crazed citizens, the booth was making a really good contribution to the fundraiser.

While we laughed and joked around, I noticed Lola among the townsfolk. She looked lost and uncomfortable. My heart ached at the sight, and I wanted to pull her in and keep her under my wing. She was so small and timid.

I managed to catch her eye and waved her over. A big smile formed on her face, and she hurried toward us. If I hadn't caught her attention, I would've run out and dragged her back here.

When Lola reached the booth, she waved at me. "Hi, Tori."

"Hi, Lola. How's everything going? I'm glad to see you came." I was delighted to see the shy woman attend an event instead of sequestering herself in her office or at the hospital with Zander Elkins.

Shyly, she smiled. "I'm glad I got out."

Her smile dropped and she became even shyer, lowering her eyes when she noticed Margo next to me. She started fidgeting. When I looked at Margo, I realized she looked very uncomfortable, too.

I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. How could I have forgotten? I started to feel uncomfortable as well, only because I remembered the situation. Margo's now-dead ex-boyfriend Phil Hill cheated on her with Lola, who'd had no idea that Phil was in a relationship with Margo. Lola had recently moved to town, didn't know anybody, and had had too much to drink. She'd thought the deputy was a nice single guy until Margo walked in on them—in the act.

For a moment, the three of us stood around, saying nothing. I decided to try to lighten the mood and get some conversation flowing.

"Lola, what's your favorite pie?"

The poor thing was so timid and reserved that she nearly jumped a couple of inches in the air when I spoke. "Oh, um, none for me, thanks. I'm allergic to gluten. I just wanted to say hi, but I should be going."

She gave an awkward wave, and her cheeks pinked as she dropped her hand. It looked like she was about to wilt and run away, either from us or the big social gathering.

My heart went out to her, and I wished she was more comfortable here and would make more friends. She was such a sweet person.

I gave Margo a look. If it hadn't been for Deputy Hill, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Margo would've befriended Lola. They would get along so well, but that stupid jerk had sabotaged a friendship opportunity for a woman who, more often than not, was scared of her shadow and needed all the friends she could get.

Margo sighed at me. "I made a couple of gluten-free apple pies, just in case. Would you like a slice, Lola?"

Lola's eyes went as wide as saucers, and she spastically nodded. "Oh, yes, please. Thank you so much. When I attend functions, I don't normally get to enjoy any treats."

Grabbing the offered plate from Margo, Lola thanked her again as she said her goodbyes and headed toward the auction area.

We watched her walk away, and I couldn't help grinning as I shoulder-bumped Margo. "I'm glad that worked out. Lola's a lovely person and deserves to make some friends here, no matter what happened in the past. She isn't the type to intentionally hurt anyone. I know for a fact she feels awful about what happened and has been giving you space. She doesn't want to make you uncomfortable."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. She hates the situation she feels she put you guys in, even though your slimy ex did that."

Margo's eyes widened.

"What? Just because he's dead doesn't mean he wasn't slimy."

Margo's lip twitched as she stifled her laughter. "You're right. As always. She's so timid that I keep thinking she'll run whenever someone sneezes. The poor thing, it must be exhausting."

Satisfied that Margo was giving Lola a shot, I happily returned to slicing more pies.

"And you're right about another thing," Margo huffed, even though I could tell she wasn't happy about it. "I've been thinking about it a lot and decided it's time to stop giving Clawson the cold shoulder."

I started to sway as if I was about to launch into a happy dance, but Margo pointed at me in warning. "I'm still frustrated with him for calling me childish, and I admit it's one of my biggest hang-ups with him. He's only three years older than me, but he's so mature and has his life so together that

it makes me feel like it's impossible to keep up with that. To top it off, he has a major role in this town. He's the sheriff, and that's more than a little intimidating."

Clawson's words that he'd do anything for Margo rang in my head. He'd called her his fated mate. Then I was confused because I recalled Margo saying the fated mate connection was supposed to be unmistakable. If that was the case, then wouldn't they have known off the bat? Or at least, why would one know and not the other?

"How did you two meet?" I asked her.

A tinge of pink appeared on her cheek. She dropped her head to let her hair cover her face, which told me that what she was about to say was memorable and important to her.

"The first time I saw Birch was in grade school, and this strange feeling came over me. It was like seeing a real-life superhero or some magical fantasy creature. It was confusing, and I didn't understand it. I figured it was some over-the-top schoolgirl crush. So like any little girl with a crush, I avoided him as much as possible." Her face softened as she spoke. "I didn't even realize he knew I existed back then, not until the incident a couple of years later when Zander pranked me to make me nearly shift in class. When Birch beat the crap out of him, it was like Zander had personally offended him. This kid who'd never spoken a single word to me instantly became my champion." She shrugged, and her face lost that softened glow as she returned to the present. "That was my first encounter with him."

The story made me all gooey inside. It was the sweetest way to meet somebody, and I found it immensely romantic.

"Aw, Margo, you really need to talk to Clawson." Grabbing her hand, I pulled her behind me and out of the booth, nudging her forward. "Don't come back here, missy, until you've spoken with him." I shook my finger at her, making her roll her eyes and huff a breath out of her nose.

When I was satisfied enough that she wouldn't sneak back into the booth, I turned around and helped Diana pass out slices.

"Thank you, Tori," she said. "She needed that push."

I winked at her.

"Now, I insist you get going. You should be with Ridge. I can pass these out on my own."

I hated leaving Diana alone, but I couldn't shake my anxiety of not being with Ridge. Even more so now that I was aware of unfamiliar shifters

roaming around Blackwood Creek.

“Are you sure? I can stay. It’s not a problem.” I didn’t want to stay, but I still offered because this was Diana.

“I’m sure. Now, git. Spend time with your fiancé on this beautiful day. Get him to win you a prize.”

Chuckling, I headed to the back of the booth. “Thank you, Diana.”

Skirting out as fast as possible, I hunted for my fake fiancé. My wolf was restless, not liking all the unfamiliar shifters here, either. I needed Ridge to help me stay calm.

More than that, I needed to make sure he was okay.

## Chapter 54

# Ridge

Trying to keep a smile on my face, pleasantly shake hands, and say hello was exhausting and highly annoying. Still, I reminded myself that this was what I'd signed up for. All the while, I scoured the fundraiser, trying to find the alpha of a foreign pack who hadn't introduced himself properly.

It also didn't help that my mate wasn't anywhere near me, which had my wolf on edge since there were so many strange wolves around. My wolf's first priority was ensuring no males sniffed around Tori. It ate at the both of us that she was wandering around here, unclaimed.

Clawson was with one of his deputies on the outskirts of the town square, scanning the crowd. The sheriff never eased up. He was always on constant alert, and I didn't appreciate it more than I did now. He was the best second-in-command an alpha could hope for.

"Deputy." I nodded to the young man, who lifted his chin back. "Sheriff, you have a moment?"

"Yeah." Clawson turned to the deputy and gave him orders. "Why don't you walk around and keep your eyes open? If you need me, you can get me on the radio if it's urgent."

"Will do, Sheriff."

We started talking once we were somewhat alone and no one could eavesdrop on our conversation.

"Did you get them where they needed to go okay?" I asked him, referring to Kyle and Audrey.

In public, we never mentioned names or places as a way to shield the information as much as possible. Shifters had impeccable hearing. If someone wanted to listen in, they could do it if they were creative enough.

“Safe and secure,” Clawson answered. “Now that I have that task handled, I’m keeping an eye on my deputies and any potential problems that could happen at this unexpectedly overcrowded event.”

Clawson stood in his full sheriff gear, his eyes covered by his mirrored aviator sunglasses. His arms were crossed over his chest, giving him a threatening stance. But here was a wolf everybody in this community could count on.

“Yeah, I noticed that, too,” I said. “We have a lot of unfamiliar shifters here, and I have yet to receive any announcements from any alphas. Have you heard anything?”

Shaking his head, Clawson glanced at me before resuming his scan of the crowd. “It might be good news. So far, the ones I’ve talked to are all from the Montana Pack. I haven’t encountered the alpha, but I’m sure something must have happened for them to arrive the way they did.”

That was good news and shocked the hell out of me. I’d been urging the very large and considerably powerful Montana Pack to relocate to Blackwood Creek for a long time, particularly after a high number of shifters had gone missing in that pack’s former territory. They’d had to be relocated a few times over the past couple of years, but they always went to lands that didn’t have shifter communities, making it harder for them to reestablish a livelihood.

It wasn’t entirely selfless that I’d offered Blackwood Creek as a potential home for them. We needed the reinforcements and strength of a large pack. It was hard to merge multiple packs into one territory, and pretty much unheard of, but I’d do anything for my pack. If that meant allowing multiple alphas to converge in our space, then so be it. What was the point if we were only to become extinct due to the hunters?

The Montana Pack alpha Isaac Frost was a stubborn shifter who had consistently rejected and denied my offer, saying that he wouldn’t bring his pack to a town established by the Blackwood family unless it was clear the hunters were stepping up their game. If there were that many from his area here, I could only assume that this was his pack and something serious had happened, which I was genuinely sorry for.

This wasn’t how I’d wanted them to join us. I’d hoped to avoid any more tragedies, but sometimes tragedy was the only motivator.

I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, though. If the Montana Pack joined us, then others would possibly follow. I had been under no illusions

when I'd reached out to the other packs, figuring it'd be a challenging endeavor because of my family history. Still, that didn't mean I wouldn't try, and I was glad I had because we were finally getting a bigger show of strength.

Our pack would also get stronger since I had Tori at my back, and her brother had hers. With their training as hunters, we could use their knowledge to create an even more robust force with better defense measures. It was always best to know your enemy, and what better way than the son and daughter of one of the leaders?

However, I refused to put Tori in danger by any means. I'd worry less if I could keep her hidden away, even though that would never happen. But I could keep her secrets for as long as possible. The way she fought and protected the citizens and shifters of Blackwood Creek showed where her loyalties lay.

"It's a relief that they're here for a safe haven and not likely to cause trouble," I said. "Since there wasn't a formal introduction, I was worried they'd come into town for nefarious reasons. I was mentally preparing myself to battle for our territory."

Clawson grunted but never took his eyes off the crowd. "With the hunter climate now and all the shifters feeling the pressure, it would be pretty damn stupid to start a battle amongst ourselves."

Patting Clawson on the shoulder, I said, "Who said being power-hungry wasn't stupid?"

Clawson grunted again.

"I'm going to mingle and search for Alpha Frost. Hopefully, we can arrange a sit-down. I'll let you know what I find out."

Leaving Clawson standing at his post, I lost myself in the crowd, keeping my eyes open for Frost and for my mate. I assumed she was at the pie booth because the Bogfords manned it every year. I wanted to head in that direction, but I resisted the urge. I'd look for the other alpha first, and if I didn't find him, I'd find Tori and convince her to go on a run with me.

I wanted to claim her desperately. So much so that my mind and wolf were too distracted, and I wasn't alert enough to what was happening in my town. I needed to clear things up with Tori, and the only way to do that was to explain everything to her.

Someone jostled me from behind. I turned and was instantly snagged into a conversation.

“Mayor? Good, I was hoping to run into you here.” Mr. Evanston scooted us away from the other people roaming around. He was an elderly resident who owned an antique shop in town. When I’d first moved to town, he’d welcomed me with open arms. Since then, he’d constantly sung my praises and backed up my visions for this town and its citizens. I always appreciated his support.

“I have a business problem, and I’m not quite sure what to do about it. But I’m sure with all your business acumen, you’ll know how to help me.” He flashed me a toothy grin.

Keeping my frustration in check—this man deserved nothing but my kindness—I smiled and told myself I only needed to give a few minutes of my time. Then I could ditch looking for Frost and seek out my mate instead. My wolf wouldn’t stop grumbling about her not being at our side.

He wanted her with us at all times. He was getting increasingly irritable as we scented more unclaimed male shifters around here, knowing our unclaimed mate was off on her own. We couldn’t be sure that some male wouldn’t try and get close to what was ours.

Hold back my impatience and the urge to show this nice elderly man my alpha energy, I listened to him ramble on about missing his family in Alabama and how he had some kind of problem with his antique shop or something along those lines. I wasn’t quite catching everything until he said several keywords that rang my bell.

“I’d like to sell the place, but I don’t know who’d want it. The location is good, but it’s not big enough to be converted into a store, hair salon, or whatnot. But I would really like to get back with my family.” The older man sounded forlorn, desperately wanting to leave Blackwood Creek. “I’m not getting any younger, and it’s harder and harder for me to manage that shop on my own. I don’t want to drag this out, so I was hoping you might know someone who would be willing to buy the building or take over the business.”

The wheels started turning in my head, and I knew the building Mr. Evanston was talking about. The idea popped into my mind.

It was the perfect size for a tattoo parlor.

I was jumping the gun on this, and Tori had insisted she was fine looking for work somewhere on her own, but I hadn’t missed her excitement when I’d suggested she open her own tattoo parlor. Her excitement always thrilled me to no end, and I wanted to give my mate everything her little heart



desired. She'd fight me on it, but there were some things I'd willingly battle her over, and her happiness was one of them.

"Mr. Evanston, I'll buy your building," I said. "I'll get my lawyer to draft the paperwork, and we'll get this squared away by the end of the week."

I listed off a large amount that turned out to be more than what Mr. Evanston would've asked for, but with his woes, I wanted to set him up on his feet a little sturdier. After all, the amount was still pocket change to what I was worth. When I could help in situations like this, it made me happier.

"The payment will be ready then, too," I continued. "We'll get you back to Alabama as soon as we can."

The older man's legs nearly gave out from under him, and he staggered backward. I reached for him to make sure he didn't fall. I began to worry that I had given him a heart attack or a stroke, but he finally spoke.

"Mayor Blackwood, that's awfully generous of you, but that's way too much. I can't accept that."

"Please, Mr. Evanston, it's no trouble. And I have wonderful plans for the building, so I appreciate you coming to me for help. When I'm able to do things like this, it fills me with joy. Now, why don't you go call your family and tell them you're coming home for good?"

Finding his feet and standing a little taller, Mr. Evanston grasped my hand with both of his, pumping it and thanking me repeatedly.

When I finally left the flabbergasted older man, I couldn't rein in my excitement. Tori might think I was trying to bribe her into staying in Blackwood Creek with me forever—which I wouldn't lie and say wasn't an added incentive—but it wasn't why I'd bought the property for her. I'd bought her that building so she could finally take ownership of something.

It was essential to me that Tori had something she could be proud of and want to build on because it was what she loved. Once she had her tattoo parlor, it'd thrive right along with her. She had already started regaining her confidence while living in Blackwood Creek. Her confidence would be astounding to behold when she had her own business to run.

Wading through the crowd, I was so distracted by all the thoughts roaming in my head that I didn't notice a guy stop ahead of me, making me almost bump into him.

He cleared his throat and looked at me. "Your little village is quaint."

Every hair on the back of my neck stood on end when I heard a voice I'd never forget. I lifted my gaze to Brett Longtail's face.

My childhood nemesis was here in Blackwood Creek.

Sure, it was dramatic, claiming to have had a nemesis as a child, but this wolf ticked all the boxes. Having not seen him in a few years, I counted myself lucky, but it appeared my luck had finally run out. Here he was, standing in my town and looking as smug and pompous as ever.

Brett Longtail came from another wealthy shifter family, and the Longtails had been close friends and business associates of the Blackwoods in the 1800s. As a result of their association with my ancestors, the Longtails hadn't suffered as other shifter families had, and their wealth had grown as healthily as ours had. Eventually, the Longtails had become the leaders of the Ontario Pack.

I'd never liked Brett, but my parents had forced me on playdates with him because they were close with his parents. It didn't matter how much I disliked him; I was told to be friendly and play. But Brett had always been entitled and beyond spoiled. He never settled for anything that wasn't the most expensive, rarest, or best. He was a self-righteous prick to those he deemed below his rank, which, to his inflated ego, were most people.

Eventually, I reached an age where I could refuse the stupid playdates my parents set up, and when they died, my aunt and uncle never forced me to hang out with Brett again—no hardship on my part. When I explained to my uncle what I'd witnessed Brett do when he had a tantrum, he told me that I didn't have to hang out with him again, so I hadn't. He still popped up in conversation from time to time, and I heard about him in business circles. That was now the extent of my acquaintance with him.

Brett always tried to get in my way when it came to business. He was a greedy bastard and made a lot of unsavory deals in order to win. He constantly tried to get a rise out of me, but I never rose to the bait. I'd never needed to.

Until now, when he'd arrived in my town without an introduction. With the way Brett did business, it was right of me to assume he'd come to stake a claim on my territory. I had to play it smart with him, and my surprise at him showing up here had nearly given him the reaction I was sure he'd been hoping for; I could see it in his eyes.

He knew I wasn't pleased about him being in my town, but I remained the bigger man and offered a cold greeting. The sooner he was taken care of, the sooner I could be on my way.

“Ridge Blackwood, the small-town carnival suits you really well,” he

said. “I can see why you chose to settle down in the sleepy little town life. It’s probably easy to get anything you want without any real competition here.” The pompous ass smirked as he scanned the area.

My wolf was growling, but I calmed him and didn’t let anything I wanted to show come to the surface. Brett wasn’t stupid, though. He knew I wanted to run him off my land, but I refrained once more from taking the bait.

“On that note, I heard picky Ridge Blackwood has finally settled on a mate.”

Struggling to keep my livid responses in check, I glared at the other wolf.

“I’m curious to see her. I’ve often heard that no female was good enough for the Blackwood heir. She must be beyond gorgeous to merit some attention from you.” He leaned in close, took a few loud sniffs, and then scoffed. “Wait... that doesn’t smell like a claimed wolf. Is there trouble in paradise with your new mate? So soon? What a pity.”

I barely managed to contain my wolf’s fury at this alpha trying to sniff out our mate. With our history with Longtail, there would be no stopping him from going after Tori and playing his games. My wolf wasn’t about to have that.

I wasn’t a violent alpha most of the time, but the temptation to break Brett’s nose so I could drive the point home that he wasn’t to disrespect me in my own territory... well, it would be so easy to follow through on that urge.

The saving grace at the moment was that we were out in public with humans who were unaware of shifters. Also, as the mayor, I couldn’t go around punching visitors—or anybody, for that matter. Nonetheless, a violent reaction would’ve been tolerated well enough if we were among wolves. He’d arrived unannounced and disrespected me, the alpha of this territory.

Furious with the bastard, I kept myself together but allowed my dominant alpha to lead more than usual. “Brett, if the Ontario Pack is looking for a safe haven in Blackwood Creek, then you can tell your father and tell him where to find me. Otherwise, I’m warning you that this is the worst possible time you could’ve picked to get on my bad side.”

The air around Longtail shifted, and the wolf sobered up. “I’m the alpha of the proud Ontario Pack now. We only have eleven members. A few weeks ago, we were caught off-guard by hunters. My parents and twenty-seven shifters were killed or taken.”

The mood between us became somber, and my heart went out to him for his tragic loss. I didn’t wish that on anybody.

“As alpha, I seek a safe haven in Blackwood Creek for my pack and me. I am aware that you encouraged my father to relocate the Ontario Pack here some time ago. I’m seeking your approval to take up the offer.”

This was the worst news, and I was deeply saddened. I wished the pack had come here sooner. If they had, maybe they wouldn’t have suffered such a tragedy. Such a considerable loss of shifters had hit not only Brett’s pack but the community, and it enraged me enough to seek out the hunters. Without a plan in place, however, that was a suicide mission.

“My deepest condolences, Alpha Longtail.”

Brett bowed his head, and we remained quiet as I absorbed the news and he took a moment of silence for those he’d lost.

I wasn’t keen on having Brett Longtail in Blackwood Creek as the alpha of his pack, especially since he’d taunted me about my mate, but I could rise above it. I could never turn away a pack in need of a safe haven. It would go against everything I’d been striving to accomplish.

Accepting Brett was my first challenge.

“You’re welcome to set up here in town,” I said.

Begrudgingly, the other alpha thanked me. There was no hiding the fact that he was annoyed he had to ask permission at all. I’d have to keep an eye on him, which was another reason why I hated that he’d sought us out. He took whatever he wanted, and now that he no longer had his more established pack, my wolf and I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d eventually try to take mine.

“Ridge, where’s the little mate now?”

With the formalities taken care of, he returned to being the entitled prick he was, not bothering to disguise his interest in my mate. The fact that he was aware Tori and I hadn’t claimed each other posed a new challenge for him, one he wouldn’t be able to pass up. He’d try to take Tori from me only to prove he could, not because he had genuine affection for her.

He hadn’t even met her yet and was ready to take her from me. That was what disgusted me most about him: Brett never appreciated anything or anybody. Everything was a possession to him, and he wanted it all to belong to him.

Clenching my jaw for a second, I eased it when I remembered that my Tori would verbally annihilate this cocky alpha if he tried anything with her. She was no fool and didn’t play games. She’d never tolerate Brett panting after her, not when she shared my bed.

Disloyalty wasn't in her. She'd never hurt me willingly.

The prospect of seeing my fierce mate bare her teeth at this clown excited me to no end. Oh, I had to introduce them to each other.

The broad smile I gave the cocky bastard seemed to make him uneasy.

"I'll introduce the two of you shortly. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Leaving a perplexed Brett behind, I sought out my little wolf.

## Chapter 55

# Tori

My wolf's unease grew as I continued hunting for Ridge. She couldn't stay put, the scents of all the people driving her wild. It got worse when an unknown shifter was near us, and there were quite a lot of them.

I couldn't explain it, but everything was grating on my nerves. I was on more edge than usual. The only conclusion I could come to was that I was reacting viscerally to all the unfamiliar wolves wandering around the place. And there were the Greenthornes, socializing as if they hadn't just threatened us with a mutiny that would destroy everything Ridge was building. Whenever I spotted them around the fundraiser, they were always having animated conversations with other shifters. They were bound to be spreading rumors, laying the groundwork for their attack on me.

Everywhere I looked, I felt like I was under a microscope. Everyone was watching me, discussing things while staring at me. I could tell the gossip was mostly about Ridge and me setting a wedding date, but others looked at me with cold, callous eyes. The Greenthornes must have gotten to them. Shifters were beginning to believe, or at least highly suspect, that what the Greenthornes said was true without knowing all the facts.

It didn't help that people were bumping into me the entire time. It made my wolf antsy, and my temples pulsed with the stirrings of a headache.

The headaches were no longer annoying. They meant the difference between life and death.

Frantically, I scanned the crowd, hoping to spot Ridge. He could help me find my center quicker than I could on my own, but I couldn't find him. With my history at the forefront of my mind, I went into panic mode, thinking the feral side was working to come out. The uneasiness I had been thwarting

made it all the harder to find reason with my wolf.

People greeted me, and I tried to keep a smile on my face. I didn't want to appear crazed despite what was simmering just beneath the surface.

Not wanting to risk having a feral reaction in public, I maneuvered out of the crowd and made my way behind the booths. I ducked into the nearest building, which happened to be Lola Kipling's office beside the library. I couldn't believe she'd left the door unlocked, with all that was happening outside her front door, but I needed a quiet space to refocus.

Taking several deep breaths, I bent over, my hands on my thighs, trying to calm myself and breathe the way Clawson had shown me.

"Are you okay?"

I jumped and growled, clasp my hand to my chest as if I could control the wild beating of my heart.

Lola's face went red. "I'm so sorry for frightening you." She held up her hands. "I got overwhelmed in the crowd, too, so I stopped in here to get a little break."

Now that I didn't think my heart would jump out of my chest, I eased my body into what I thought would seem a comfortable stance. Lola didn't need to catch me having a freak-out moment. With her profession, she would want to talk, and with my problem, I couldn't speak to her about it.

I forced a smile. "I completely understand. It's a bit much out there. So many people came to this thing. I think I'll take off from the fundraiser altogether. I'm not too big on crowds. That's why I like small towns."

Thinking of leaving the fundraiser hadn't been on my mind, but now that I'd said it, the idea was really appealing. Ridge had said we only had to make an appearance, and we had. I wanted to find him, not just because my wolf and I hated being separated from him. Something else was bothering me.

After being so long on the run and on my own, I must have developed some paranoid streak because something was entirely off for me and my wolf. She wouldn't settle, wanting to investigate even though I had no clue where to begin. I didn't think she did, either. It was like there was this itch that she needed to scratch. However, I couldn't risk losing control among so many humans and strangers.

It was safest for everyone if I returned to the manor and checked on Kyle and Audrey. Maybe that was what I felt off about. My brother was nearby and being threatened, and now I needed to check on him.

The knot in my stomach wouldn't ease up, so I decided that was what I'd

do. I'd send Ridge a text to let him know where I'd gone.

"I'm going to head back to the manor and get some peace from the crowds," I began, but my phone started ringing, interrupting my goodbye to Lola.

Thinking it was Ridge, I grabbed it from my back pocket, but I didn't recognize the phone number. The area code was from Blackwood Creek, and that funny feeling I was battling intensified.

"Tori, is that you?" my brother yelled into the phone, frantic and out of breath.

"Kyle? What's going on?"

He started shouting. "You're in danger! There are two hunters here!"

With the phone still glued to my ear, I shook when a loud sound blasted into my eardrum from over the phone.

"Fuck! Oh shit! Tori, where are the spelled capsules? I need them now!"

Trying to piece together what I was hearing, I couldn't get my mouth to work until another loud shout blasted through the phone again. I heard a deafening gunshot, and my whole world fell out from under my feet as the line went dead.

I screamed into the phone. "Kyle?! Kyle, are you there?! Kyle?!"

Panic at what could be happening at the manor overshadowed everything else, and my tenuous control snapped. I couldn't command my wolf long enough to get away from Lola. My wolf howled and catapulted out of my body, surging me into a full shift faster than I had ever shifted before.

In wolf form, my hearing was more sensitive, and Lola's frightened screams made me cringe. Then, silence hit as she fainted and fell onto the floor.

I couldn't do anything about that right now, but I was relieved that I was in control enough to be aware of my surroundings. I'd shifted and stayed conscious the whole time.

Harsh banging on the door had me quickly looking at Lola. I couldn't afford to be found like this. I needed to get to my brother pronto—that was the driving force for my change. Whoever was on the other side of that door would only delay me further.

Quickly, I sniffed Lola. She was still breathing, and she hadn't hit her head. In a flash, I raced to the back door of Lola's place, and without hesitation, I rammed myself through it, splintering the door right off its hinges.



I was shocked at my wolf's strength. Never having taken the time to learn what my wolf could do, I told myself that soon I'd shift more and find out what we were capable of. Now was not the time for that, but I would go all out to get to my brother.

I launched myself into the woods and ran as hard and fast as I could, the sound of the gunshot playing over in my mind.

As my wolf and I raced to the manor, it dawned on me that we were in sync with each other for the first time. Neither of us was battling for control because we had the same purpose right now: getting to Kyle and making sure he was okay. With our cohesion, we could move faster. We were stronger. Together, we could accomplish anything.

Despite the danger to my brother and Audrey looming over me, I finally understood the peace of balancing with my wolf that Ridge always talked about. It was remarkable.

An angry howl came from behind me, and I instantly recognized it as Ridge's wolf. He must have been looking for me, and by the sounds of it, he was worried. But I couldn't appease him yet. The yelling and gunshots over the phone worried me more, and I couldn't stop for him. I had to get to my brother.

The manor wasn't too far now. I dodged trees and fallen logs, my paws sending dirt and grass into the air. When it appeared in the distance, my wolf and I maintained a high speed, never slowing or getting winded.

The heavy oak front door was wide open, and I didn't hesitate to enter. It didn't matter what I came upon. Nothing would stop me from doing what I needed to do.

The inside was a mess. Furniture was trampled and busted up all over the place, the walls were riddled with holes, and shattered plaster littered the ground. Blood coated the floors.

At the foot of the stairs lay Audrey, motionless in her human form. Blood pooled around her, spilling from her wounds. The scent of silver stung my nose. Panic flared within me, and I feared she was dead.

"Tori, run!" Kyle shouted as he struggled with a hunter trying to get the upper hand.

My brother looked exhausted, but he kept attacking, never letting up. Another hunter lay unconscious on the floor. I wanted to restrain him and make sure he didn't get up, but Kyle was breathing too heavily. He was too covered in blood for me to tell how injured he was.

The two battled for the hunter's gun. He fired off several shots that missed Kyle, but the bullets flew wildly through the air. I crouched, praying I wouldn't get hit.

The feral inside me was gaining in bloodthirst, making me panic. I didn't want to kill anyone, but I wouldn't let that fucker hurt my brother. When Kyle slammed the hunter's wrist a few times to loosen his hold on the gun, I waited until Kyle ducked away, then launched myself and tackled the hunter off my brother. I clawed at the hunter as he screamed, swiping into deep layers of his skin. Blood splattered around us. All I could see was red as I gouged his chest with my claws. Blood started leaking from his mouth.

My bloodlust rose in flames, and I snarled in delight. The hunter's blood was so enticing. I went for it, imagining the blood coating me in my kill, my victory.

A heavy body crashed into me hard and rolled me over, preventing me from killing the man. I fought it, thinking it was the other hunter. But then I caught the scent. Ridge's wolf was pinning me to keep me from losing control and murdering the hunter I'd severely injured.

Who could say what would happen to my feral nature if I killed a man? Would I ever come back from that?

Ridge growled and nuzzled my neck, forcing me to smell him. Gradually, my wolf and I came back from the red haze that had been overtaking us.

Kyle and Audrey materialized in my mind, and I was able to rationalize again. I needed to check on them. Without effort, I shifted back, kissed Ridge's muzzle, and slipped out from under him. I hurried over to my brother and Audrey, Ridge slinking along behind me.

"Oh my god! Audrey?" My voice trembled with fear. There was no denying my terror that she wouldn't make it. She was losing so much blood. It didn't matter how much pressure Kyle applied. The blood just kept pouring out.

"The damn manicured hellion jumped in front of me and took the fucking bullets!" Kyle yelled as he desperately tried to stop the bleeding. "Where are the spelled capsules? I need one in her now, and tweezers to get the bullets out."

"On it." I ran past them and flew up the stairs to the guest room, where I grabbed the bag from where I'd hidden it. I tore the bathroom apart for the tweezers in my toiletry bag. Grabbing the robe from the door, I pulled it on to cover my naked body for my brother's sake.

When I made it back to Kyle, he ignored his own injuries and forced a pill into Audrey's mouth, rubbing her throat to get her to swallow it. When he was satisfied, he grabbed the tweezers and worked on getting the silver bullets out of her. The faster they were removed, the quicker she'd heal.

Every time I attempted to help my brother, he hissed at me. "I've got it under control."

Worry ate at me as I watched him work on her. Ridge grabbed me by the arms and pulled me aside once the hunters were contained and couldn't attack us while we were distracted. The adrenaline rush started to dwindle, and I vibrated from the shock.

"Little wolf, are you hurt? Is any of this blood yours?" Ridge frantically checked over my body, roaming his hands over my skin.

"Um, I don't think so," I stuttered as I tried to center myself.

Ridge's breathing was ragged, and when he was satisfied he hadn't found any injury, he pulled me in tightly and kissed everywhere his lips could touch.

"I heard the gunshots and I almost lost it. I was running as fast as I could, and all I could think was that I'd lose my fated mate all over again. That I'd find your bloody body on the floor like last time, but that this time, you wouldn't wake up." His hands stroked up and down my back as he tried to get his breathing under control, his throat thick with emotion.

Inhaling his scent and using his warmth to help calm the shakes, I relished his hold as I watched Kyle work on Audrey. Tears stung my eyes.

"From now on, you're not leaving my side. I need you to be safe more than I need anything else in this world. I can't lose you, Tori, not ever. You got that? I can't lose you."

Squeezing Ridge tighter, I said, "Ridge, I'm perfectly fine. We have to focus on Audrey right now. And on Kyle." I hiccupped, and a couple of tears leaked down my face. "Oh, and I screwed up. I screwed up so badly."

He leaned back and watched my face. "Little wolf, what got screwed up? We'll fix it."

"I shifted in front of Lola Kipling in her office. I couldn't control it. I got the call, heard the shots, and then the line went dead and I lost it. I shifted in front of her."

Ridge let out a heavy breath and wiped the tears from my face. He dragged me back into his warmth, resting his head on top of mine. "Don't worry about that right now. We'll take care of that. As long as you're okay,

we can take care of everything later.”

Believing him and letting him take the lead, I slumped in his arms and let him hold and comfort me.

A couple of moments went by, and he let me go. “Stay right here, baby. Don’t move. I’m going to get something to cover you up.”

I crossed my arms over my chest to hold the robe in place—not that Kyle would have noticed if I was still nude, because his focus was entirely on Audrey. I watched as my brother worked on her, and tears burned my eyes again as Ridge ran upstairs to get me clothes.

As I stood alone, my ears still ringing and everything still catching up to me, Ridge’s words finally sank in.

I gasped.

Did Ridge just call me his fated mate?

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**Never Trust An Alpha**

# **Wolves Of Blackwood: Book 1**

Sadie Sears

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