

# PACK

WOLVES OF  WINTER CREEK

BOOK TWO

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH SPADE

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# CLAWS AND FANGS UNIVERSE



*\*the series can be  
read in any order*

## CLAWS AND FANGS:

LEAVE JANELLE  
NEVER HIS MATE  
ALWAYS HER MATE  
FOREVER MATES  
HINT OF HER BLOOD  
TASTE OF HIS SKIN  
STAY WITH ME

## STOLEN MATES:

THE ALPHA'S HEART  
THE FERAL'S CAPTIVE  
THE BETA'S BRIDE

## WOLVES OF WINTER CREEK:

PREY  
PACK  
PREDATOR



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# FOREWORD

Thanks for checking out *Pack*!

This is the second of three books that feature Fallon Witt as the POV character. An unsuspecting human woman navigating her way through the secretive world of supes, she arrived in the hidden supernatural town of Winter Creek for a supposed week-long vacation with her estranged grandmother, only to learn the truth: Marie Bordeaux is the head of a witch coven, and she had her own reasons to inviting Fallon to Winter Creek.

Of course, by the end of the first book, Fallon learns that witches aren't the only supes ruling the small town. A pack of wolf shifters have named themselves the protectors, standing up to the witch coven—and saving Fallon when her grandmother tried to sacrifice her to the beast in the woods.

This book picks up right after the cliffhanger ending of *Prey*. When we last left Fallon, she was falling off of the rope bridge leading out of town, crashing beneath it the raging river below it. She survives, of course, but that's the inciting action that will lead to the second installment in Fallon's story.

Enjoy!

xoxo,  
*Sarah*

# PROLOGUE



If anyone ever asked me how I thought I would die, I don't know if I ever would've picked *this* as an option.

I mean, passing away at ninety, going in my sleep... I would've probably picked that. Hitting my head on the ground because I got dizzy after seeing someone's blood and fainted? That would've been a very *Fallon*-way to die.

But drowning? I wouldn't have had that in my top ten.

I haven't given up yet. I would still prefer to get out of this terrible situation in one piece, no dying required.

God knows that drowning in the dark would be a terrible way to leave this world, but with the Winter Creek raging beneath me, the water slamming ominously into boulders, the rickety bridge swaying under my weight as I try to escape my fate... my panicked brain suddenly supplies even worse ones.

Being eaten by a feral wolf shifter with a twisted jaw, overgrown fangs, and Lucas's eyes?

Being captured by a male witch who stood there as my grandmother spilled my blood, leaving me for the beast of Winter Creek, hoping I'd survive because then he could "have" me?

Falling to my death, the boulders below breaking me into a hundred different shards of Fallon, destroyed before the river could swallow me whole?

As I stumble forward, desperate to reach the train platform on the other side of the bridge, any and all of those terrible outcomes could be my fate—and all because I thought it was a brilliant idea to take my two-week vacation

to visit a grandmother I never knew in a small town I never heard of.

The rope bridge sways. In the dark, I tighten my grip around the nearest knot. The fibers from the rope burn my palm. I can't let go, inching the top of my borrowed sandal from one wooden flat beneath me to the next.

My breath catches as I miss, my big toe slipping through the gap. I gasp, the soft sound disappearing in the roar of the river below. The space between isn't big enough that I'll fall, but my queasy stomach drops the first time I lose my balance.

It's the new moon. Without any light shining down on me, and few stars to guide me forward, I can't see anything at all. I don't have to. On the other edge of the bridge is the train platform that will lead me out of Winter Creek, one way or another. The train rarely stops here at all. It won't be rolling through this late at night, and I'm prepared to hop on the tracks and run if that's what it takes to get away from the monsters on my heels.

I can still hear the echo of the wolf shifter's baying howl, chasing after me. The unexpected shout from my grandmother's henchman, shouting for me to join him instead of just abandoning the wolves of Winter Creek.

More than that, Lucas's pained cry, his order for me to *run*... it's been on repeat from the moment I left the broken, mangled *beast* behind in the Alpha's hunting cabin.

*Run*, he said.

I did—until I reached the rope bridge and I needed to be more careful. One wrong step and I could be crashing down below.

Go, Fallon. I release the rope long enough to right myself, sliding the sole of the sandal along the too-smooth wood. Go—

*No*.

The rope bridge didn't just sway. It bounced, the weight of someone else stepping onto it causing me to jolt and nearly lose my balance a second time.

Snatching the rope again, my head darts over my shoulder.

It's too pitch-black to make out any features. I can't even tell if the person who joined me on the bridge is even a person at all. Two-legged or four, supe or human, all I can sense is that I'm not alone anymore, and the platform is still a good twenty feet away from me.

I have to make it. There is no *if*. I've boiled down my frantic escape to that finish line. The curse on Winter Creek affects all of the supes. They would be risking time catching up to them—*seventy years* coming for them—if they leave the borders of the supernatural hamlet. If I reach the train



platform, they won't come after me.

They won't... right?

Only one way to find out. Praying like hell that I won't lose my footing again, I do exactly what my last lover warned me to do.

I run.

I'm still running when I slam face-first into an invisible, immovable wall that seems to appear in the dead center of the rope bridge. I never saw it. Never felt it, either, until I hit it and an electric shock as powerful as a lightning strike sends me flying backward.

There's not even time to scream. I hit the wooden boards, the force of it knocking all of the air out of me as I bounce and roll and, in the pitch darkness, abandon any sense of where I am or what exactly happened as the bridge tips and then... well, it doesn't matter anymore does it?

It doesn't matter that I left my apartment and my job behind in New York.

It doesn't matter that I found my estranged grandmother only for her to betray me.

It doesn't matter that, since I arrived in Winter Creek, I caught the attention of three gorgeous guys—or that I somehow managed to fall for one in no time at all.

Because I'm falling for real, and I'm not sure I'll survive it... just like last time.

On the edge of blacking out, I have one final thought that comes from nowhere, and disappears just as quickly seconds before I hit the water:

At least drowning is a better fate than being left for dead, your beloved mate finding your savaged body covered in blood as he howls for vengeance, begging, pleading, promising everything for your return...

*Eh, mon chiot?*

# CHAPTER 1

# ANSWERS



I'm warm.

Comfortable.

Cozy...

And I shouldn't be.

The last thing I remember is an electric shock that short-circuited my body. I'd been running on the rope bridge, trying like hell to get to the train platform on the other side, but I never made it. Instead, I hit something that shouldn't exist—like an invisible wall or something—and went flying.

I don't recall hitting the river. It was the inevitable outcome, though, because flopping off of the bridge and falling before I passed out is something that I can't forget.

I don't hurt. Does that mean I'm dead? Something fuzzy is weighing down on me—

My eyes spring open.

Why? Because the second-to-last thing I remember is following Jade's advice, tromping through the woods in order to find Lucas's hunting cabin, and discovering that the guy I recently slept with is the monster in the woods I was convinced wanted to eat me.

So sue me if my first, terrifying thought when I realize I'm warm and fuzzy and miraculously still *alive* is that the furry beast is laying on top of me.

Ridiculous? Oh, yeah. But that doesn't make the relief I feel when I see that I'm wrapped up in a plush bathrobe any less.

Then I blink because, um, how the hell did I get in a bathrobe?

Shifting my body, trying to pull myself into a seated position in the bed I

was laying on, I'm so distracted by checking if I'm naked beneath the white bathrobe that I don't even notice that the bed is in a familiar room—or that there's someone sitting on the chair nestled in the corner of my room, hidden in the shadows beneath the dark, moonless sky.

At least, not until I'm yanking the material of the robe away from my chest, *eep*-ing when I see I'm wearing my opal on its golden chain and nothing else, and a male voice says, "I was beginning to think you'd never wake up again."

My next *eep* is a lot louder. You might even be able to call it a scream.

Okay. That's because it was.

The shadows shift, leaning forward in the seat. "It's okay, Fallon. It's me. It's Tristan."

*Tristan.*

For a split second there, when I saw the male figure in the seat, I was thrown back to the last time I woke up in a similar situation. It was when my lovely grandmother tied me to a tree, leaving me as a sacrifice for the beast in the woods—for *Lucas*, my mind shouts at me unnecessarily—and she used my own blood as a lure for him. And while I managed to come face to face with that monster without freaking out too badly, when Lucas appeared—and I never once put two and two together that he did because *he's the freaking beast*—and set me free, it was slipping in the pile of blood that had me passing out.

Hemophobia for the win, am I right?

Anyway, even though it wasn't my fear of blood that had me going unconscious this time, I think part of me expected the male to be Lucas. After all, it was the least he could do after telling me to 'run' and chasing me through the woods to the point that I finally had enough of Winter Creek and tried to escape.

Well, no. If I'm being honest with myself right now, the least he could do was jump into the water after me and pull me out, but since it's *Tristan* here and not Lucas, how much do you want to bet that it was the Beta on patrol who saved me?

I want to ask. It's the first thing on the tip of my tongue, but then I think about the fact that I'm butt-naked beneath this robe and I kind of want to know that answer to that question first.

But that's not what I say.

"What are you doing? You're in my—"

*Territory.*

The word almost popped out of my mouth. I have no idea why that was what I was reaching for, though I strangle it back in time to gulp and finish my sentence with, “*room.*”

He nods. “It’s been about twenty-four hours. The pack agreed that someone had to sit with you while you recovered. I volunteered.”

*Recovered?* “Recovered from what?”

My eyes are adjusting better to the dark. I’m not so sure why Tristan was sitting in my room without any light on overhead—not to disturb me, I guess—but, as a wolf shifter, maybe he doesn’t need as much light as I do. Luckily, I’m finally growing used to the shadows. Instead of a big, black blob in the corner, I can kind of make out his features.

He looks as apprehensive as he sounds when he asks me, “What do you remember?”

Isn’t that a loaded question?

Scooting backward, I reach behind me, grabbing one of my pillows. I moved it so that it’s in front, something I can squeeze at the same time as giving me a shield between Tristan’s unblinking stare and my robe-covered body.

“Well, I went looking for Lucas...”

“It’s the full moon,” he points out.

Yeah. I know.

Nodding, I tell him, “So I guess you know what state I found him in, huh?”

Tristan exhales. “I told him. I told Luc that he shouldn’t keep the truth of the curse from you. Not when...”

“Now when *what?*”

He shakes his head. I hear the whisper of his clothes as he moves. “It’s not important.” To him, maybe. “So you saw the feral side of Luc, huh?”

He can say that again. “Yeah.”

“I figured. It explains a lot.”

“Like what?”

If I thought Tristan would answer that, I’m sorely mistaken. “So you ran from him. That’s why I caught your scent dashing through the woods. I thought I was wrong at first since Jade was supposed to keep you in the pack house during the full moon...”

Hmm... do I tell Tristan that Jade was the one who told me where to find

Lucas in the first place?

I open my mouth. Close it. Decide that Tristan must expect it already—because how else would I have slipped away without my wolfy babysitter otherwise—and wait for him to continue.

He does.

“I followed your scent and I saw you fall into the river,” he says after a moment. “I saw Gauthier on the bridge above you and thought he was why you fell.”

Gauthier.

*Remy.*

At least now I know who it was who chased me onto the bridge. In my panic, I only saw a silhouette, never a face, and there was no chance after I slammed into that invisible wall.

To be fair, I never saw the face of anyone pursuing me. When Lucas told me to ‘run’, I slammed the door of the cabin before he could change back to his beast and chase me. I assumed he would, and when I heard the wolf howl coming from the side of me, I figured that had to be another pack member.

As for Remy... I knew he was there because the witch had the nerve to call out to me. He wanted me to believe that he could keep me safe from the wolves when, in reality, if he hadn’t followed me up the stairs and onto the bridge, maybe I wouldn’t have taken my tumble.

Then again, that doesn’t explain what kept me from crossing to the other side...

“Did he hit you with a spell? Because then I—”

Spell? Shit. Did he? I don’t know. “Could he have?” I don’t know enough about witches at all. “Is that something he can do?”

Marie had waved her hand once, using her magic to keep me still and in one place. Apart from being frozen, I didn’t feel a thing. With Remy at my back, I didn’t feel anything there, either. It was my front as I ran into something I couldn’t see, and I try my best to explain that to him.

When I finish, Tristan straightens up. “A blood ward.”

Excuse me? “What did you say?”

“A blood ward,” he echoes. “It’s something witches do. If a witch has your blood, they can hex it. They can take you under control in some cases, or tie it into a ward. When you ran into it, did it feel like a shock?”

“A zap,” I agree. “It was like something zapped me the same time as I couldn’t get past the invisible wall.”

“Lucas told me they cut you. I remember seeing the scab on your arm. But that was after you crossed into Winter Creek, wasn’t it? I’m not an expert on blood wards, but they need to be triggered once you cross over them in order to block you from going past them again.”

He’s right—but that’s not the only time someone took some of my blood recently.

“Are you saying that, if my grandmother had some of my blood even before I arrived her, she could... what? *Trap* me here?”

“If it’s a blood ward, then yes. But she would have had to leave Winter Creek to get it and, with the curse, Marie Boudreaux would never dare.” Tristan makes a soft noise in the back of his throat. “Not with the years catching up to her the way they would.”

He’s right again.

Marie didn’t go—but she sent Armand, one of her male witches, to come to New York, cut me, and sop up my blood with his hanky.

“How would I know that’s what happened to me?” I try to keep the hysteria out of my voice the best I can. I’m not so sure I pulled it off, and while anyone who’s known me for a while would think it’s because of my blood phobia, but it’s more than that.

He said something about keeping me from going past this blood ward. If that’s what stopped me short, zapping me and sending me falling backward onto the rope bridge, then *off* of it, I’m fucked. Forget the fact that the train that would lead me out of Winter Creek comes bi-monthly at most. As far as I know, the bridge is the *only* way to even try to leave the small town, and if I’m blocked from passing it, that means I’m stuck here.

I’ve already been here for more than two weeks. I have no family left, except for an estranged grandmother who didn’t care if I survived meeting the beast in the woods or not; I have no idea if Marie knew Lucas would rather keep me than eat me, and no way to ask. My boss probably has me down as job abandonment at this point, and I stupidly forgot to tell the one person—and her twin sister—who might miss me that I was coming to Winter Creek in the first place.

All that is out of my hands now. There’s no television, telephone, or internet here so it’s not like I can call any of them. Considering my grandmother first made contact with me with a telegram of all things, unless I can do the same, it’s like I up and disappeared.

And if a blood ward is keeping me here, I’m going to have to do the one

thing I'm not looking forward to right now: come face to face with Lucas again.

I'll have to. I know I will. I'm a little hurt that he wasn't the one to rescue me or sit with me while I slept off my near-fatal incident—because there's no doubt in my mind that, without Tristan being there to witness my fall, I'd be dead now. Sure, he probably doesn't want to hear all my hundreds of questions—

*Why didn't you tell me you were the beast?*

*Why are you cursed like this?*

*What happened to you and how do you fix it?*

*Why would Jade give up your secret when she's supposed to respect the Alpha?*

*What were you thinking the night in the woods when you found me tied to the tree?*

*And, most importantly, am I really your fated mate?*

If Eleanor and Kirk can be believed, I'm supposed to be. The one woman meant for Lucas and his wolf. Kind of like his soulmate, and his happy-ever-after if I felt the same and agreed to let him bite me... or something like that. I'm a little hazy on the details, and I still can't believe that Lucas would ever want *me* for his forever partner, especially since last night... Tristan said twenty four hours so, yeah, *last night*... proved that he'd rather tell me to get away than explain anything.

At least Tristan doesn't mind answering my questions. Blondie, the golden-haired Beta of the shifter pack, seems more than willing to tell me everything I want to know.

I'm going to hold him to it, too, for as long as I can.

“So that must explain why I fell. I get how I got pulled from the water before I drowned and how I got back here. But... um...” I lower the pillow. “Wanna explain how I got changed from my wet clothes to this robe?”

The Tristan I first met... the guy who was as flirty as he was gorgeous... would've taken the opportunity to make a teasing comment. The Beta who respects that I kind of, sort of had a fling going with Lucas? He doesn't even try.

And, okay. There's *no kind of, sort of* about it. I slept with him a couple of nights ago, and if I'm being honest with myself? If it didn't stop me from fucking him when I found out he could change into a big, black wolf, I highly doubt learning that he's a broken feral during the full moon is going to



dampen much of my attraction to him.

If only he'd told me before...

Should he have? I would've appreciated it. Still, I've known him for such a short amount of time. I should be grateful that he took me in when I had nowhere else to go, instead of being bitter that he's keeping secrets from an almost stranger.

Even if it's never once felt like he was one to *me*.

Tristan clears his throat. In a careful tone, he says, "I stayed out of the room while Eleanor and Jade got you settled in. The robe is Eleanor's, but she didn't have the strength to carry you into bed or maneuver your unconscious body to change you." His voice develops an apologetic edge. "Jade had to do it."

No surprise why he'd think hearing that would bother me. Jade hasn't been a fan of me since I first came to stay, and I can't say the feeling isn't mutual.

But I'm okay with hearing she's the one who helped Eleanor get me dressed. In the long run, I guess that's fair. I got to see Jade's boobs and she got to see mine, and I didn't have to worry about explaining to Lucas that his Beta got a peek.

Because I would have to. I totally would.

Too bad I don't have any idea where he is.

That's it. I can't keep myself from asking any long. "Hey. Where's..."

"Lucas?" he provides, as though he knew exactly where my thoughts had gone.

No denying it. "Yeah."

Another moment's pause. "He wants to be here, Fallon. I... that's all I can say."

He wants to be—but he isn't.

And that's all Tristan has to say.

## CHAPTER 2

## LET'S GO



Is it cowardly to turn in early to avoid Tristan?

Possibly, but that doesn't stop me.

I use nearly freaking *dying* to my advantage. Once he realized that I'm okay and, surprisingly, no worse for the wear considering I got zapped, fell off of a bridge, landed in a raging river, and was presumably dragged out of it by a giant wolf, he offered to get me something to eat.

I should be starving by now. I was unconscious for a whole day, but just the thought of having Tristan go down to the kitchen and bring up food specifically for me has my stomach flip-flopping. So, hoping I won't regret it later, I refused him gently, told him I was going back to sleep—and, no, I didn't need anyone watching over me any longer.

He didn't push. Murmuring that he would be a floor below if I needed him, he made his escape. So that I wasn't a liar—and because I didn't hurt, but man was I *drained*—I adjusted my robe and passed the hell back out.

I would deal with the incident on the bridge later. I would go get something to eat later.

I would track down Lucas and get his side of the story later...

Later, it turns out, means a few hours later... and the middle of the night.

There aren't any clocks in my borrowed room. Since I lost my phone when I left it at Boudreaux Manor the night I started out for the nonexistent "soiree", I've gotten used to running on a sort of internal clock. Right now it could be two am or four, but it's not time to wake up... even though I have.

Peering through my window, I can see it's still dark outside. It takes me a second to figure out why I woke up so suddenly. My stomach feels empty and ready to eat, but while that seems like my first choice, I realize what it

really is when I shove my covers back and sense that—somehow—Lucas is near.

Later, I'll think I was still half asleep when I decided it was a good idea to leave my room in the plush bathrobe in order to wander around the house, searching for him.

I can't explain why I'm so sure he's close. I'm not a shifter. Apart from this strange tug I've felt toward Lucas since I first met him, I don't have any senses that should help me track him down. I don't smell him. I can't peer through the darkness and see him lurking around the corner. I don't hear him

—

But I hear something.

The music is soft as it filters through the eerie silence of a house asleep. It doesn't reach me until I've stepped onto the landing of the second floor, and while every door down the hall seems to be closed, I swear I... I *hear* it.

Piano music, I think, tightening the belt on my robe. That's piano music.

*Lucas.*

Dashing down the hall on my bare feet, I stop when I make it to the door to the piano room.

The fact that the volume of the music didn't increase the closer I got should've been a clue that something wasn't right. That it didn't stop at all once the supernatural player caught the scent of an interloper should've been another.

Half-dazed, I push in the door and grin like an idiot when Lucas's head lifts up from the keys.

Only... *wait*. Is that Lucas?

I do a double-take, peering through the darkness.

He looks different. His hair... it's not the tousled curls I remember. He looks a little younger, too, not as stoic or haunted. He's smiling—something the Lucas I know rarely does—but he doesn't seem to see me.

Do I see *him*?

I rub my eyes quickly, and when I drop my hands, there's nothing there.

What the...

My heart racing as an uneasy pit forms in my stomach, I circle the room—and that's when my gaze lands on the portrait on the wall. The portrait of Lucas from the 1950s, back before the curse put him and the rest of the supes in Winter Creek in stasis.

The Lucas I swore I just saw looks exactly the same as the picture.

I can't explain it. I know what I saw, but I can't explain it, and I'm not sure I'd want to even if I could.

Which is why, closing the door behind me, I race down the hall and for the stairs, hoping like hell that that was just some strange side effect from what happened to me on the rope bridge.

I TRY TO EXPLAIN AWAY MY STRANGE NIGHTTIME TRIP AS A DREAM. A WEIRD, vivid dream, and when I finally find the nerve to get some breakfast, the fact that I see the library door open when I peer down the hall has me letting out a sigh of relief.

The library door is *always* open. That's how Jade and Tristan were able to walk in on me and Lucas during our first kiss without me noticing. In the pack house, an open door is an invitation to enter and that one room is available to any and all of us.

It was closed when I looked last night. All of the doors were.

It had to have been a dream.

Right?

If it wasn't, I expect the first wolf I stumble across to call me out for wandering around the house in the middle of the night. My impressions of my recent roommates make it so that I'm sure they will. At the very least, Tristan would be concerned, Jade would bitch at me for sneaking around, and Kirk... well, I get the vibe that, if it doesn't concern his mate, he couldn't care less.

As for Lucas, it's another point in the "it was all a dream" column when I check that feeling in my gut and admit to myself that I don't sense him. Odds are that he still hasn't returned home yet, and Tristan telling me that Lucas *wants* to be here was just the pretty Beta's way of sparing my emotions.

I don't run into anyone until I make it to the kitchen and find Eleanor sitting at the table—and no one else.

"I made some toast and bacon. Fresh-squeezed orange juice, too," she says after nodding at me in greeting. "It's just us so I didn't go crazy, but I'm sure you gotta be starving by now so help yourself to whatever you want."

She's not wrong. I'm ready to eat, and since the toast and bacon are done and I don't have to wait for them to cook, I drift over to the counter where the

food is waiting for me.

“How are you feeling?”

Honestly? “Hungry,” I admitted, grabbing two pieces of toast and a handful of crisp bacon. Laying them on my plate, I take a glass and pour out some juice. Grabbing the plate and my glass, I turn to join Eleanor at the table. “Other than that, I feel alright. Thanks for the robe, by the way. That sucker’s super soft.”

I’d brought it down to the laundry room with the rest of the few clothes I’ve been wearing so that I could wash it, but I almost didn’t.

“Keep it. I’ve got another one upstairs.”

“Really?” Sitting down, I shove the first piece of bacon in my mouth. It’s so good, I eat another two before I say, “I’ll borrow it for as long as I’m here. But when I can finally leave, I’ll give it back.”

She winces, and I’m betting that Tristan probably came downstairs last night and gave the rest of the pack a rundown of what happened to me. Why else would she react like that unless she knows that me leaving is going to happen anytime soon?

I don’t ask. Instead, while Eleanor nurses her cup of tea, I chow down on my breakfast.

Somewhere between finishing my bacon and starting on my toast, she speaks up again.

“So, what would you like to do today?”

My piece of toast halfway to my lips, I look across the table at Eleanor.

She shrugs. “I’m supposed to keep an eye on you. Way I figure it, I could be dominant like the wolves and tell you”—she drops her voice, mimicking Lucas when he goes all Alpha—“you better sit there and let me protect you’. I could be sneaky and follow you around the house. Or, human to human, I can let you know what’s up and we can have some fun while I keep you company today.”

“Really? You don’t mind being on baby-sitting duty?”

She waves her hand at me. “I’m not thinking of it like that.”

“Yeah?” I ask. “What are you thinking of it like then?”

“Put it this way,” the cheery woman says, “I spent seven decades putting up with Jade’s surly ass. It’s nice to have another female around who won’t threaten to bite me when she gets annoyed with me.”

Grinning at Eleanor’s response, I tap my canine tooth with my tongue. “I mean, I could try.”

She giggles. “Thanks, but I’m happily mated, remember?”

I do. And while I was only teasing—I might be bi, but I never poach—I do mean it when I say, “Kirk’s a lucky guy.”

“He is. He knows it, too. Just like Luc will be happy to have you.”

Oof. Eleanor means well, but she has no idea her off-handed compliment is like a sucker punch to the gut. For some reason, she seems to think that I’m meant for Lucas the same way she was meant for Kirk. Part of me wishes she was right, while the other part is disappointed that there’s no way she can be.

Time for a change of subject.

I quickly polish off the last of my toast, then take a few sips of my orange juice. I can’t stop thinking about Eleanor’s reaction to me mentioning going home. Whether Tristan told her about his suspicions that a blood ward is keeping me here or not, she doesn’t seem to think I’ll be leaving any time soon.

And I won’t know unless I get a better look at the rope bridge and see that I’m trapped for real.

I’ve been obsessing over the idea of a blood ward since Tristan first mentioned it. There’s no denying I felt a shock of electricity rushing through me the other night, but maybe that was, like, static shock or something. It was dark. I was panicking. Who’s to say I really hit an invisible block and didn’t just trip or something?

I want to go check it out. With Eleanor left behind to keep an eye on me, I wouldn’t be surprised if Lucas has decided to pull the entire pack and put them on guard duty. No matter how you slice it, there was a witch on shifter territory the other night *and* I almost died. The Lucas I’ve grown to know would never stand for that.

A quick, almost casual question directed at Eleanor confirms it. Everyone—from the Alpha all the way to Jade—was running the length of the pack’s borders, checking that my grandmother didn’t send any more of her witches onto their land.

I don’t even bother mentioning that I doubt Marie was behind Remy’s appearance that night. Something tells me he came on his own, and that that might not have been the first time he snuck onto pack land, searching for me.

That thought almost has me backing down from my brilliant idea. Only knowing that there are four shifters patrolling outside, only a scream away if we even get that far, has me asking Eleanor, “What do you think about going for a walk?”

Does she suspect what's on my mind? The way her lips curve says 'possibly'.

"Would we be leaving pack territory?" Eleanor asks.

The train platform is technically neutral territory. To get there, though, we won't have to step foot onto the witch's side—which is how I know that Remy was where he didn't belong when he found me running in the woods—and so long as she stayed behind when I went up to the bridge, she wouldn't.

I shake my head.

"I'm really not supposed to go outside of the house without someone to watch over me," Eleanor says. "A chaperone."

Oh. That makes sense. For one, Eleanor came over from England during World War II, living in the United States from the time she was a teenager until she found her way to Winter Creek and met Kirk in the early 1950s. Curse or not, she was raised differently than I was, growing up on the east coast in the twenty-first century. Going out with a chaperone was a thing back then, and even now that it's been seventy years, she's still the only human in the pack.

Well, second now that I'm here which only goes to prove her point. If she's not supposed to go out alone *and* they put her on babysitting duty, I'm definitely not supposed to leave.

Especially after what happened the last time I tried...

"Okay. Never mind. It was just an idea."

She sets down her tea mug. Her hazel eyes seeming to sparkle, she grins over at me. "I'll watch yours if you watch mine then neither one of us is going out with our babysitter. What do you say?"

She sounds so pleased with her solution that I can't help but laugh. "I say, let's go."



# CHAPTER 3

# BLOOD WARD



I was totally ready to just grab the sandals I borrowed from Eleanor already and head on out. Call me impulsive if you want, but I didn't want to give her the chance to change my mind.

That's when I learn something about my new friend. She might not be a dominant wolf shifter, but she's one determined lady. Wearing a smile on her face and an expression that meant she wouldn't back down, she grabs me by my wrist before I can bolt for the back door.

When I give her a curious look of my own, she tells me we have to go upstairs to her room first.

That's not the first time I've had a woman tell me that. However, from past experience, I know she's not trying to proposition me, but she refuses to explain what's going on as she yanks on my hand and leads me to the stairs.

Kirk and Eleanor share a room on the second floor. It's the furthest down the hall, opposite the library. Letting go of my wrist, she opens the door, then waves for me to follow her inside.

I hesitate on the other side of the threshold.

It's been less than a week since I discovered that wolf shifters are real. I wouldn't consider myself an expert on their type of supe—or any, really—but I've picked up a couple of pointers during my stay.

One of them? Is how possessive and territorial the wolves can be.

“Kirk's not gonna mind, is he? That I'm in here?”

Eleanor waves her hand again. “Don't worry about him. If anything, my mate's gonna be a little more pressed that we're sneaking out than that I let you into our territory.”

Whatever way we look at it, that's what we're doing, isn't it?

I don't want to get Eleanor in trouble. This is her pack. Her friends, her mate... her family.

"You don't have to come with me—"

"Oh, I know that. But I want to, so I'm gonna."

Oh. Never mind then.

I tiptoe over the threshold, stepping into their room.

As Eleanor moves toward their closet, I look around. It's set up very similar to my room on the third floor. The only real differences I can pick up on are the sizes of our beds and how much more 'lived in' their space looks. As a mated couple, it makes sense they have a much larger bed than mine. Same thing for how cozy their space is.

After all, they'd had decades to make it their own.

Something rustles. Following the sound, I see that Eleanor has stepped into her closet. One hand on her hip, the other rifling through the clothes hanging up on the rack, she's murmuring something under her breath.

I can't make out exactly what's in there, only that the clothing is a variety of lengths and colors. Weird, when all I've seen her wear are modern tank tops, sleeveless blouses, loose t-shirts, and shorts in all different styles.

Another reason why I never would've guessed that the pack was stuck in time. For the most part, they all have a modern cadence to their speech, and all of their outfits are designs I'd see every day during summer in New York.

The town square and the Coven House were different. Giving off a real Stepford vibe, the rest of the population—witches and humans—definitely looked like they belonged back in the 50s. Oblivious and naive, I just thought it was the style.

Yeah... I was way wrong, wasn't I?

But even though Jade and Eleanor don't wear the vintage-style dresses like all of the other women in Winter Creek, I still can't understand why they treat October like it's July—especially since I see a whole freaking wardrobe in Eleanor's closet.

"I've got a question," I call out to her.

Head still in her closet, she says, "Ask away."

"Why do you wear shorts in cold weather?"

Eleanor peeks her head back out. "What?"

I gesture at her clothes. Today, she has on a pale pink silk tank, matching shorts, and tan slip-on shoes. "It's October." Almost Halloween, though I don't even know if they celebrate the holiday here. Witches and werewolves

—why would they when everyday was Halloween for them? “It’s freaking cold out there and I only ever see the guys in long pants unless it’s sweats.”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought you knew. Shifters run hot, and because of heat, the females get it even worse. Even in winter, I can sweat through an outfit when I’m going into heat.”

I figured that was Jade’s excuse. She’s got a built-in fur coat. And heat... unless I’m wrong, is that a wolf’s fertile period?

“I thought you were human.”

“I am,” Eleanor says impishly. “But this is part of being a shifter’s mate.”

“Don’t tell me that all it takes is bonding to a wolf and you become one, too.”

“Not quite. Shifters are born, not made. I’ll never shift into a wolf, but once I bonded with my mate,” she says, tapping the scar on the side of her neck, “I got a few perks.”

Perks without going furry? That catches my interest. “Like?”

“An extended lifespan for one.” Eleanor dips back into the closet, raising her voice so that I can hear her. “Not just because of the curse, either. Shifters can hit a century easy without losing a step, and now that Kirk’s my male, he’s stuck with me until the end. Being a little faster than an ordinary human is another. Same thing with improved senses. I’m not as powerful as one of the pack, but I can tell you skimped on the deodorant this morning.”

My cheeks flame up because, holy shit, I totally blanked on freshening up after climbing out of bed this morning.

Eleanor reappears, holding two coat-looking pieces of clothing. “Just like I can tell you’re getting embarrassed now. Don’t be, Fallon. You’re fine. And if we run into Luc, he’ll probably get a kick out of it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s another shifter thing. Our males like it when they can smell their women. Remember that, yeah?”

Um. “Sure.” I wait a beat, then nod at what she’s carrying. “I’m sorry, but are those... *cap*es.”

The one in her right hand is black. The other the same dark tan shade as her shoes. She shakes that one out, revealing a swatch of fabric cut into a cape shape with a hood attached.

“Before I met Kirk, I was in my Grace Kelly era,” she explains. “Lots of dresses. Couple of capes. Cloaks, too. I gave that up when I moved to Winter Creek and realized one of my favorite French designers was my new mate’s

mortal enemy.”

She must mean my grandmother.

Handing the black one to me, she takes hers and, in one practiced swirl, situates the tan cape over her shoulders. “Couldn’t bear to get rid of them, though. They come in handy, too. Instant camouflage for our trek through the woods.”

And that’s not all, I realize, glimpsing into Eleanor’s closet and seeing a very familiar shade of red.

I remember thinking it was so strange that one of Lucas’s friends would just so happen to have a red cloak on hand after I jokingly referenced my life as a twisted version of Little Red Riding Hood.

Now that I actually know Eleanor, I totally understand.

YOU KNOW WHAT ANOTHER PERK ABOUT LIVING IN THE SAME WOODS FOR seventy years is?

Eleanor knows all of the shortcuts.

Not only that, but she doesn’t even question it when I propose the train platform as our destination. Giving me a knowing look and just telling me to pull my hood up over my head the same way she did, she leads the way.

I don’t know if we manage to avoid running into any of the pack due to plain dumb luck or because they sense that it’s us and know we’re not a threat. Either way, with her uncanny knack of how to navigate the trees and my determination to get there before Lucas or Kirk or even Tristan stops us, we’re standing on the edge of the packed dirt road where I first met Blondie all those weeks ago.

“Stay here,” I tell Eleanor. “I’ve gotta see something and I’ll be right back.”

It’s not a lie. After everything Lucas and his friends have done for me, I wouldn’t slip out without saying goodbye. And, true, I had every intention of doing that the other night but that was only because I was scared out of my mind. I’m still trying to process it all, but I wouldn’t just leave even if I can.

I really, really *hope* that I can.

By this point, I should’ve known better. I thought that Eleanor guessed what I was up to, so I really should’ve expected that there was no way in hell

she'd let me go up on the stairs alone.

Because she doesn't.

Resettling the cape on her shoulders, making sure her curls are covered so that anyone watching from a distance won't be able to recognize her trademark hairstyle, Eleanor glides right past me without a word.

Cursing under my breath, I scurry after her.

Once we're on the dirt, we're no longer on pack territory. You'd think I wouldn't be able to tell the difference, but the little hairs on the back of my neck seem to stand on end as soon as I move next to Eleanor.

She points up the stairs. "Going up, right?"

What else can I say? "That's the plan."

"Come on. You go first. I'll watch your back."

"You sure? You can stay down here and—"

"What? Explain to Tris that I let you go up alone?"

Hang on... "Tristan?"

She nods. "When Lucas is out of the house, the Beta is in charge. He's the one who told me to watch you. I said I'll do it so I'm gonna. Now go before Kirk searches for me through our bond and figures out what we're up to."

I go up three stairs before I pause.

It's one thing to deal with the disappointment that Lucas still hasn't come around the pack house since my accident, even if I get a small sense of relief knowing that I didn't really imagine him playing the piano last night. It's another to know that Tristan is taking on the role of protector while Lucas is conveniently missing.

But hearing that Kirk can track Eleanor through their bond?

"That's a thing?"

"Oh, yeah." Eleanor is on the step right behind me. When I glance over my shoulder to look at her, she taps her chest. "How do you think I found him in the first place? The goddess might have led me to visit Winter Creek, but from the moment I saw him... I felt him in here. The bond only becomes stronger once you accept it and get the Luna's blessing to finalize it." She gives me a knowing look. "Human or not, you'll be able to track down Lucas too once you accept his claim to you."

Setting aside the way she thinks her Alpha is going to *claim* me, I almost want to point out that I can sense him now... at least, a tiny bit.

What will it be like if I go all-in and believe that I really am Lucas's fated

mate?

Good question and because I don't have the answer to it, I decide to ignore it in favor of focusing on the stairs.

They're a lot easier to tackle when you're not carrying a large rolling suitcase—or running from a handful of predators chasing you. Before I know it, I've reached the top one, ready to step out onto the bridge.

The creek seems deceptively calm today. It could be because it's early afternoon and not late at night, or maybe it's a reaction to my mood. Who knows? It makes my first step onto the bridge that much easier to take.

I've never been afraid of heights before, and I was worried that my fall had done something to mess with my head. I'm happy to say that it didn't, and as long as I took each step across the wooden slats carefully, I was okay.

The other night, I was too frightened to really pay attention to where I was going. The invisible wall hit me—or I hit it—before I had the chance to even look for it.

Now? Even from a distance, I can... I don't know... *feel* it a couple of slats back.

It's a warning. Almost exactly at the halfway mark of the rope bridge, there's a spot that looms in front of me. If I squint my eyes closed and look, it seems hazy. Kind of like when you have the gas on the stove going and you vaguely see lines floating over it.

Keeping it in sight, I move closer to it. The last thing I want to do is stupidly run face-first into it. I got zapped once and almost died because of it. I don't want to risk anything like that happening again.

But I have to know.

Extending my pointer finger, I pause when there's a small amount of resistance a couple of inches away from the hazy lines. It's like, I could keep pushing and possible break through, but as my arm starts to tingle, the warning becomes even more noticeable.

I pull my hand back, think about how stupid what I'm about to do it, then thrust my hand forward.

The plus side? Aside from a small shock that travels up my arm before causing my shoulder to go slightly numb, nothing happens. But that's also the down side because nothing happens. I hit the invisible wall and have to admit that there's no way past it, and if I try to throw my body at it next, I'll be tossed back on my ass again.

Blood ward or not, I don't know what's keeping me from crossing this

particular slat, but I'm stuck. Even if I decided to test my swimming lessons and battle the creek below, how much do I want to bet that the same thing will happen, only it'll happen while I'm in the water?

It's not worth the risk. I have to admit that, for as long as the witches keep that ward up to keep me, I'm not going anywhere.

No wonder my grandmother seems to have let my easy escape from her clutches go without any retaliation. Lucas seemed so sure she'd do anything to get me back after I got away. Why would she if she knew that the furthest I could go was on wolf shifter territory?

Shifting on the slat, switching my hold on the rope railing, I give Eleanor a 'no-go' gesture with the other.

I'd given her a quick rundown about why exactly I wanted to test the bridge while we were walking over to it. She didn't seem to have any more information about blood wards than Tristan did, admitting that, as a human, she'd never heard of them.

Which is probably why she seems so interested to check this one out now...

I never expected her to offer to see if she could pass through until she does. Then, because I naively don't think that it would do any harm to see if the ward affected her, too, I step aside to give Eleanor a shot.

Like me, she doesn't seem too fazed by the slight sway of the rope bridge or just how high up and off of the ground it is. Moving easily over the wooden slats, she only slows down when I warn her that the blood ward is three distinct paces in front of her.

Eleanor screws up her face, staring at the space in front of her. "Are you sure? I don't see anything."

With my free hand, I point. "It's right there. You don't see it?"

She shakes her head. "I don't see anything."

"What about the charge? Do you feel it? It's a little bit like a static shock."

"Nothing," Eleanor confirms. "It doesn't seem like there's anything trying to stop me from leaving."

She takes another stop.

Just in case, I tell her, "Be careful," and then hold my breath as she breezes right past the spot on the bridge that was block for me.

Huh.

Matching my exact though, Eleanor stops and turns before giving me an



apologetic grimace. "I'm sorry, Fallon. I guess it's just you."

Looks that way. "Thanks. It's good to know. Now come back."

I can't explain it. Even though Eleanor had no problem moving a few paces past the invisible wall, my anxiety shot through the roof seeing her on the other side. And maybe I'm just overreacting for no reason, but it seems like the wind's picked up just enough to be noticeable.

Below us, I hear one of the rapids crash into a boulder.

My chest tightens. With one hand on the railing, I reach out the other, offering it to Eleanor.

She never even gets the chance to grab it. Between one step and the next, her eyes widened beneath her hood, her cap fluttering for a split second before Eleanor's whole body just locks up before she keels backward in a mockery of a faint.

But she's not kidding, is she?

My heart just about stops as Eleanor hits the boards before bouncing back an inch or two before going absolutely still.

Only once I'm positive that she's stretched out along the slats, stiff as a board, and that she isn't about to just roll off of the bridge do I find enough breath to finally scream.

WHEN ELEANOR TOLD ME DURING OUR WALK THAT WE'RE ONLY A SCREAM away from one of her fellow packmates, I thought she was teasing me.

As impressive as the wolf shifters' senses are, I didn't honestly expect them to be able to pick up a shriek no matter high-pitched and come running. Wouldn't you know, though, that that is exactly what happened when Eleanor dropped like a sack of potatoes and I began to scream bloody murder?

It was my second instinct. My first instinct was to dive for her so that she didn't tumble over the side of the bridge the same way I did. I managed to stop myself with mere centimeters to spare, remembering at the last moment that I can't make it through the blood ward like Eleanor could.

When I realized that the ward was keeping me from going to her, I screamed before my third instinct took over. As much as shouting out in fright made me feel a smidge better, I immediately went still only moving one arm so that I could grab the rope railing again.

Don't move, Fallon, I told myself. One wrong step, or if the wind gusts a little too strong, Eleanor could fall and then... what?

Tristan might have been in time to save me. If Eleanor falls into the creek, the only thing that'll happen if I dive in after her is that there'll be *two* bodies for the pack to recover...

No. *No*. I can't let that happen, and if I have to stand frozen on this bridge, praying to whatever deity will listen—God, the moon goddess, even freaking Beyonce—that someone comes to help Eleanor in time, then that was exactly what I was going to do.

Here's hoping that one of the wolves finds us before my grandmother's coven... and, wouldn't you know, within seconds of me having that thought, I realize that I can just about make out the dying echo of a wolf's howl.

Are there real wolves lurking in the woods of Winter Creek? Every paw print I stumbled upon during my handful of walks all seemed super-sized, but what do I know? Maybe... maybe there are a few wild ones that can be as dangerous as the witches.

Or bears. I still haven't found out if there are bears—

It's not a bear.

My heart leaping up to my throat a few panicked minutes later when a man-shaped figure comes dashing up the stairs, I know *exactly* who that is.

"Lucas."

It's Lucas.

And he's *naked*.

# CHAPTER 4

# NAKED



**T**hat just shows you how incredibly worried I am about Eleanor that I only take a moment to ogle him as he leaps from about the third stair from the top, landing in a crouch that has his dick flopping before nesting alongside his thigh.

My mouth goes dry. My fingers dig into the old rope.

Lucas straightens. If he has any idea what seeing his naked body out in broad daylight does to me, he doesn't show it.

Instead, with that same, familiar glower pulling on his darkly handsome features, he says, "What happened?"

I'm not a shifter. The slight throb to his voice—full of dominance—doesn't affect me the same way it would one of his pack. However, seeing him again in his human form... seeing him again *naked* without the frantic need spurring me to jump him like a tree... it's doing something to me all right.

In the back of my mind, I know that's not his intention. I've heard from more than a couple of the wolves that nudity isn't as big a deal to shifters as it is humans. So while I'm the modern chick in this scenario, I can't believe that he's just letting it all hang out like this. Of course, he probably has his reasons. When a shifter goes from his animal shape to his human form, they don't come back with their clothes on.

If Lucas was out in the woods, running as a wolf, it would make total sense that he'd shift back to his two-legged shape in order to communicate with me. From my experience, most of the pack keep an emergency pair of pants stowed around the woods so as not to shock the non-supes in Winter Creek. I've seen both Lucas and Tristan appear from seemingly nowhere,

wearing nothing but a cheap pair of sweats.

Reacting to my scream, it looks like Lucas didn't even bother snagging a pair.

Fine. Whatever. It's not like I haven't seen him naked before. I was intimately acquainted with his chest even before I gave in to the attraction I felt for him, and only a few nights ago I had his face in my pussy, then my mostly naked body wrapped around his like a freaking spider monkey.

Then there's the undeniable fact that, the last time I was face to face with Lucas, he was naked then, too. A twisted feral, half-wolf, half-man, he might've had a few patches of fur stretched over his misshapen, beastly body, but he was as bare and as big as he is now.

Only one difference. When I naively listened to Jade and went searching for Lucas to try to learn some of his secrets—and find out if there was any merit in the suspicion that what we did with each other in the piano room was more than just a casual fling—the monster I found was primed and ready to mate.

The Alpha standing in front of me, waiting impatiently for me to answer him, doesn't seem affected by me at all.

That's the kick in the ass I need to remember why the hell I screamed for help in the first place. Naked Lucas answered me, and though the naked bit was entirely unexpected—and, to be fair, so was *Lucas* since I expected Kirk to be the first to sense his mate was in trouble—he's here and I need him.

Still clinging tightly to the rope, I point with my free hand at Eleanor. She hadn't moved an inch save for the rise and fall of her chest. Stuck on this side of the ward, I can't grab her or check for a pulse, but at least I know she's alive.

Small mercies since the set of Lucas's jaw tells me he might just kill us anyway.

Eyes flashing in the sunlight, he has two words for me: "Don't move."

Not a problem. So desperate to keep the rope bridge from swaying any more than it has, I'm basically a statue here.

Once he's sure that I'm not going to defy him, Lucas muscles his big body past me. I can't tell if he senses the blood ward or if he's just being cautious, but he stops right on the other side of it. Then, crouching low again, he reaches out, hooking his hand around Eleanor's ankle.

Like Eleanor, Lucas can cross through the invisible wall that stopped me. Unlike my friend, he doesn't put his entire body on the other side. Instead,

with his impressive strength, he manages to shoot her back across before laying her out in the space between us.

Lucas lowers his head to her chest. He waits a beat—I nearly choke on my worry—before he nods and I feel my whole body go limp with relief.

At least, until he turns his Alpha stare on me.

“What are the two of you doing up here? Ellie knows better than to try to leave Winter Creek until the curse is broken.”

“I was trying to figure out why I couldn’t,” I admit over the continued pounding of my frantic heart. “Oh, Lucas. I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean for anything to hurt her.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t.”

Is he kidding?

“Please don’t try to make me feel better,” I plead with him. I gesture wildly down at Eleanor with my spare hand, pointing out how eerily still she is. “If she’s not hurt, why isn’t she waking up?”

“For the same reason you didn’t two nights ago when you tried to escape, Fallon.”

He says that so matter-of-factly that I have to wonder if Lucas would have cared if I’d been able to make it to the train platform. Obviously, he knows that I *tried*, but if he did care, why did he vanish after I almost died?

I don’t ask. This isn’t the time or place to get into that, and I tell myself that repeatedly, that I should just be grateful that the Alpha came when his packmate needed him.

So I don’t ask, thought I do say, “We weren’t trying to escape.”

“Doesn’t matter. The curse can’t tell the difference, and it doesn’t like to lose its prey all that easily. It knocked you out, but the ward tossed you back at the same time. Since there’s no ward for Ellie, the years started to catch up to her instead.”

Wait a second—

*What?*

No. *No.* She was breathing. I couldn’t see her face because the hood was still up, shielding her from me for the most part, but she was *breathing* so I thought she was okay.

Is she... is she not?

Holy shit.

Holy *shit!*

His flat voice should’ve been enough to keep me from freaking out, but

it's not. Not when his words have had the opposite effect on me as I start to hyperventilate. "Oh my God. I killed her! I killed Eleanor!"

"It's okay. You didn't kill her—"

"She's dead," I moan, clinging to the rope siding of the bridge in a bid to keep my legs from crumpling. "I asked her to help me and now she's *dead*. Holy shit. What am I going to tell Kirk?"

"He's probably on his way—"

Of course. From wherever the other shifter was patrolling, he's probably racing toward the end of Winter Creek to reach his mate.

His mate who still hasn't moved.

"He's gonna kill me. I killed

Leaving Eleanor where she is, Lucas rises up from his crouch. He turns to me. "No one is dying today. You understand?"

I wish I could believe that. But I also saw what happened to Armand when he left Winter Creek to find me in Manhattan. In two weeks, he aged decades. If that happened to Eleanor—and it's my fault—Kirk is so going to kill me.

Know how I know? Because if anyone risked Lucas like that, I'd be pretty murderous, too. I've only known him for a few weeks, though. How possessive and protective of the big shifter would I be after *seventy* years?

I'm spiraling. This only usually happens when I see blood. There might not be any in sight right now, but it doesn't matter. I'm losing it.

And Lucas can tell.

He clamps his hand on my shoulder, steadying me far more effectively than my tight grip on the rope had. "Sucre." The pet name is a rumble deep in his chest that does more to help me catch my breath than his unexpected touch. "Listen to me. Ellie will be alright. By the time we make it back to the pack house, she'll be fine. It's you I'm worried about."

Why is that? Oh, right. It's because I'm currently having a full-blown panic attack in the middle of a rickety bridge a good twenty feet over a raging river? He's naked, Ellie is unconscious, and I'm seconds away from joining her and only hoping I don't drop down to the Winter Creek again before her mate finds me first...

Oh. Put it that way, it's a pretty good reason for him to be worried.

For Lucas's sake, I try to pull it together. It doesn't quite work right away, but I *try*.

"Okay." I suck in a breath. "Okay. I'm good." No, I'm not, but I fake it.

“Sorry. I just... I had to test the bridge. I needed to know what happened.”

A hint of a growl to his voice, Lucas’s fingers dig into my shoulder.

I’m not even sure he realizes how tight he’s grabbing me until I utter a small ‘ow’ under my breath.

He immediately backs away from me, dropping down so that he’s at Eleanor’s side again.

Lucas is quiet for a moment before he sighs, glancing up at me with an unreadable expression on his face. “The blood ward almost killed you once. If I hadn’t been there...” He stops short, then huffs this time. “It doesn’t matter. You’re safe. I’d like to keep it that way. So, if you would, start heading back.”

I’m more than happy to get the hell off of this bridge. But... “What about Eleanor?”

“I’ve got her.” Lucas slips one broad hand under her shoulders, the other under her ass. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Something inside of me goes tight watching the easy way he cradles her, pressing her to his chest as the tan cap flutters over his arms. With no effort at all, he’s back on his feet, holding another female way too close for my liking.

I’m being ridiculous. It’s not like *I* can carry Eleanor back to the pack house. I definitely can’t leave her here either, and as Alpha, Lucas never would.

But he’s also naked, and it does something to me to see him with Eleanor in his arms like that...

“What’s the matter, sucre?” He narrows his gaze on me. His nostrils flare just enough that I know he’s trying to scent something before he murmurs, “Are you jealous?”

I *am*. “No. Why would I be?”

He doesn’t answer me. He just jerks his head, gesturing for me to leave the bridge.

And since I can’t do anything else after I lied to him so boldly, I do.

It takes everything I have not to turn around and watch Lucas and Eleanor together. It’ll only ramp up a jealousy I have no right to feel, and I spend the entire trek down the stairs reminding myself that Lucas is the Alpha of the pack. The leader. He has no interest in the happily mated Eleanor other than to keep one of his own safe.

Just like he’s done everything he could to keep me safe, even from himself...



I touch down first, Lucas moving soundlessly behind me.

Before he could turn toward the woods, another figure comes bursting out of them.

It's Kirk. The second I recognize him and see that he's shirtless, I'm about to close my eyes... and then I realize he must've stopped to grab a pair of sweats on the way; that, or he was running in his two-legged form since he is wearing a pair of shoes. Phew. It's one thing to see Lucas in the buff, but as good-looking as Kirk is, he's Eleanor's mate.

And his face is twisted in a panic I know all too well as he races toward Lucas, arms outstretched.

"Ellie!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Lucas tips Eleanor into Kirk's arms.

Kirk buries his face into her neck, letting out a soft whine that gets lost in the hood of Eleanor's cape.

As though having her mate near was enough to break the hold the curse had on her, Eleanor's body jerks a moment before she gasps.

And then, more weakly than I ever wanted to hear, "It's okay, darling. Kirk... my mate. My love. I'm okay."

Kirk squeezes her tight. "Ellie, honey, you scared the shit out of me. What were you thinking? Leaving the creek... we don't do that."

"I was just helping Fallon."

Uh-oh. Kirk's head shoots over to me, eyes blazing a fierce gold color that shines out of his dark face. "That's Lucas's intended. Why would you help her leave when she's the only one who can break the curse?"

I don't know if Eleanor answers him, or how she tries to justify what went on on the bridge. My skull is buzzing too loudly as I try to process what it was that Kirk just said.

This isn't the first time that someone has implied that I'm only in Winter Creek because I'm supposed to be able to break the curse. So far, I haven't, and no one has mentioned it against for a while, but that's always in the back of my mind. Same thing with how he called me Lucas's intended mate. After all, it was Kirk and Eleanor who sat with me and explained the concept of fated mates in the first place.

But for him to say it right now with Lucas standing barely a foot away from me, the three shifters going along with Kirk's comment as though it was just understood *fact* that I'm supposed to be to Lucas what Eleanor is to Kirk... on top of everything else, this is just too much.

Lucas can tell. Lowering his voice, he murmurs something to Kirk that I'm still not able to hear. The other shifter nods, cradling Eleanor ever closer before he lopes off into the woods.

Back to the pack house, no doubt.

Lucas waits a few seconds, giving them space, before he gestures for me to head to the woods next. More dazed in the moment than I want to admit—and with my jealousy still kicking my ass, shouting that anyone who comes heading down the dirt road could get a peek of Lucas's naked body—I step ahead of him.

We walk in quiet for about five minutes. When it becomes obvious that I have no clue where I'm going, Lucas moves in front of me to lead the way. I do my best not to stare at his ass as he guides me, but... yeah. Now that I know Eleanor is doing a little better, I'm way too intimately aware of just how naked Lucas is.

Can he tell? With his sense... no way he doesn't. He stays silent, though, and because I don't know how to even start a conversation with him considering how we left things... I keep my mouth shut.

Until he shifts on his heel, giving me his profile as he says my name.

I immediately freeze. "Yes?"

From the way he's peering at me now, I'm almost expecting him to bring up my obvious jealousy again, but he doesn't. Instead, he looks at me with an unblinking stare and says, "I know you have questions. You always have questions." To my surprise, he doesn't sound annoyed like he used to. More... *charmed*, I guess. "Go on, Fallon. Let me have 'em."

He's rewarding me for nearly killing Eleanor by giving me free rein to badger him with my questions? I don't know who this gorgeous guy is and what he did to the Lucas I've spent the last couple of weeks getting to know, but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Do I mention the beast? The curse?

How he didn't even try to deny that I'm his *intended*?

I could, but the first question is the one I haven't been able to get passed since I woke up last night.

# CHAPTER 5

## BACK TO NORMAL



“**W**here have you been? I mean, you obviously know about what happened with the blood ward.” As well as confirming that that was what stopped me in my mad dash of a flight the other night. “You know I got hit hard and landed in the water... I was out for a full day... and I don’t know when I would’ve seen you again if I hadn’t screwed up today.”

“Is that why you tested the ward? To get my attention?”

“No.”

“Then does it matter where I was?”

Does it matter? More than he knows. “Yes. I woke up and Tristan was there.” My voice gets thick. “I would’ve rather it had been you.”

Lucas’s expression softens. “I wanted to be there—”

Yeah. I heard that before.

“I would’ve been,” he adds, and I want to believe him, “but it was better if I kept my distance while... anyway, I decided it would be better if I stayed at the hunting cabin and cleaned it up. So that’s where I’ve been. I planned on coming back tonight, but then I... you needed me. More than last night, you needed me now so I came.”

I don’t know how to react to everything he just said. Sure, it looked like a hurricane had gone off in there. Almost everything in the cabin was destroyed, including the taxidermied wolf head spreading sand all of the floor with the feral Lucas standing in the middle of the ruined space.

As though he’s thinking along the same lines I am, he admits, “I don’t usually get so out of control. But that night... I kept him from going after what he wanted most and he destroyed the cabin to get out his aggression.

When you got hurt... you saw him. I've never had him take over two nights in a row. Only even the full moon and the new moon... and when I thought I lost you again."

*Again.*

Oh. He must mean when I first met the beast and I ended up passing out in front of him.

I also can't help but notice how Lucas talks about his feral side as almost another person. Like it's not really *him*. Is it because he wants me to think the same so that I don't reject Lucas because I can't handle his monstrous side?

Or is it because he's trying to put everything out there so that I know exactly who I might be the intended mate to?

As I struggle to come up with the answer to that, Lucas dips his chin in my direction. "Any other questions, Fallon?"

He's daring me. No longer hiding his secrets, he's giving me the chance to rip open his chest and explore every inch of him.

But that's not fair. Not really—not when I can't be as vulnerable with him.

I was. Once. Right before we had our first kiss, I opened up to Lucas about my endless search for my happily-ever-after. And while I was rewarded for my honesty with that kiss, he was so quick to walk away once it was done that I've almost regretted it ever since.

He wants to tell me. More than that, he wants to get inside of my head and see where my thoughts are.

Good luck with that.

*Any other questions, Fallon?*

He probably expects me to ask about the blood ward. About how I'm supposed to break the curse. What exactly it means to be a shifter's intended... but both of us can surprise the other, and that's exactly what I do when I ask, "Yeah. What's your last name?"

"Excuse me?"

*Gotcha, Lucas.*

"It's an honest question. Everything has been so hectic since we met." Isn't that the truth? "Call it a quirk, but I prefer to know the last name of whoever I'm sleeping with."

Lucas's big body just about vibrates in place.

"Does that mean you plan to mate with me again?" His voice turns hoarse. "Even after you know what I am?"

Assuming he means ‘mate’ to mean ‘sex’, I don’t see any reason why I shouldn’t get to enjoy him again. As for everything else... that can wait. “I was planning on it. I mean, if you want to.”

I leave the ball in his court. I wait for Lucas to reject me again. I don’t expect him to proposition me out in the woods or anything, but so long as he knows that I’ve decided his feral side isn’t exactly a dealbreaker, we can move on from this.

But, first, I need a name.

And, with a predatory gleam in his amber-colored gaze, I get it.

“Guidry. My last name is Guidry.”

It’s just a name, but in that moment, it rings with *forever*.

LUCAS SAID HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE BEST IF HE KEPT MY DISTANCE FROM him.

I can’t blame him. He seems to have a set idea of how he thinks people should react and, so far, I’ve done the opposite almost every single time.

Find out witches are real? I took that with a grain of salt.

Face off against a naked, aroused beast with a gaping maw? Sure, I screamed, but I didn’t pass out until I landed face-first in a pile of my own rapidly cooling blood.

Stumble upon him while the feral was in a rampage because Lucas refused to let me see him like that? I might have bolted because he told me to, but now that it’s been a few days since the new moon, I’m a lot more understanding of the whole situation.

Even before I learned Lucas was the feral, my heart had gone out to the broken, lonely shifter who most of the curse was based around. Kirk and Eleanor had mentioned his story—while conveniently neglecting to mention they were talking about Lucas—and I’d already promised myself I’d do whatever I could to help break the curse and free him.

Now that I know it’s *Lucas* who needs to be freed, I’m even more determined to find a way to break the stupid curse. Not only because there’s a good chance I’ll be able to smash the blood ward at the same time, but because... well... it’s Lucas, and it’s the least I can do for the generous shifter who’s already done so much for me.

Once upon a time, I thought he was the huntsman in my twisted fairytale. Now I know better. I'm still playing the part of Red, with my grandmother as the villain but instead of the huntsman being my hero, it looks like I might be falling for the big, bad wolf.

And, surprisingly, I'm kind of okay with that.

On the plus side, things between Lucas and me are settled. I only wish it was the same for my relationships with the rest of the pack.

Since she came to see me in my room the night of the new moon, Jade's been avoiding me. I wouldn't be surprised if it's on Lucas's orders. On our walk back to the pack house, it was his turn to grill me about what led to me showing up at the hunting cabin. It never even occurred to me to cover for Jade. Nope. I threw the she-wolf right under the bus.

Serves her right. Maybe if I believed that she let slip the secret that Lucas and his friends were shifters on accident, or that she didn't knowingly send me after Lucas when he was feral... maybe I would've covered for her. But I didn't.

I'll have to deal with that eventually. For now, I'm spending most of my time either in the library—I started a book about wild wolves that's fascinating—or reading in my room. When Lucas is in the house, he'll track me down, finding some excuse to spend some time together.

I learn he's a pool shark, and while we both pointedly avoid the piano room, he has a charming habit of humming under his breath while we do laundry together.

It's the one chore I've been allowed so far, even though it's not so much a pack chore as I'm allowed to wash my own clothes. Despite being the Alpha, Lucas has a turn on the rotation to do the loads for the rest of the wolves. There isn't that much—considering most of the shifters spend their time in their fur, and I learned that their clothes are destroyed if they shift while dressed—but I look forward to the times when Lucas's chore is laundry or sweeping up fur because he doesn't mind me keeping him company.

Dinner, on the other hand, is a different story. A pack affair, anytime it's his turn to cook, he gently eases me out of the kitchen. Since I've been kind of avoiding the other wolves myself, I don't mind.

It's back to eating along upstairs for Fallon.

Since the night I woke up to Tristan watching me and sent him away, Blondie seems to be conveniently out of the house whenever Lucas is in it. I chalk that one up to the Beta avoiding his Alpha, and based on how Lucas

has a tendency to growl under his breath whenever I mention Tristan, the feeling is kind of mutual.

I don't want to think I screwed up the dynamic the five of them have had for the past seventy years. But when I can't even bring myself to face Eleanor and Kirk after she collapsed on the bridge... I have to admit that I did.

Lucas was right about one thing. Eleanor turned out to be okay.

I didn't believe it myself until she came to visit me in my room the next afternoon, showing off the single set of wrinkles that bracketed her hazel eyes.

Right when I tried to apologize effusively, the bubbly human laughed it off. According to Eleanor, she'd been waiting decades to get rid of her baby face. The two new wrinkles made her look a little more distinguished, she said, and though I wouldn't put it past her to just say that to help me get over some of my all-consuming guilt over the situation, I take her at face value.

I kinda have to when Kirk is standing at her back, watching over her like her own personal bodyguard, glaring at me the first time my continued apologies has Eleanor's cheery smile faltering.

Needless to say, the two of us have basically been put on lockdown. For the last couple of days, Kirk was given a break from going out to watch out for the witches so that he could spend it with Eleanor. She might have only been out for about fifteen minutes before she recovered, with her new wrinkles serving as a reminder that the curse of Winter Creek was still going strong, but the experience was enough to trigger Kirk's possessive side.

Yesterday, when I went down to the kitchen to grab a drink, I saw him snarl at Jade for reaching out, prodding Eleanor's cheek with her fingernail. And while I'm all for seeing Jade get snapped at by Lucas for teasing the mated pair, it was rough watching the easy-going, laidback Kirk look like he was about to claw her hand off for daring to touch his mate.

He's not feral, but it's close, and we all seem to come to an unsaid decision to take the time to cool off.

Too bad that also includes my attraction to Lucas...

He asked me if I planned on mating him again. I said 'yes'.

I'm still waiting.



BY THE END OF THE WEEK, THINGS HAVE SLOWLY GONE BACK TO NORMAL.

I knew that I was basically forgiven when Eleanor knocks on my door one morning, but when I open the door, it's Kirk who formally invites me to join them for breakfast.

From the way Eleanor hooked her arm in her mate's, beaming up at him as he asked me in a flat voice, it's obvious that he's only doing this for her. But if Eleanor thinks we're cool, then Kirk is going along with it, and I feel better that I'm back to having more than half of the pack on my side.

No one has brought up that my stay in the pack house has become more open-ended than it originally was. Now that I'm not feeling like I'm walking on eggshells whenever Lucas is gone, I begin to get the vibe that... I don't know. That I *belong* here.

These Lucas's friends are slowly becoming mine.

Well... not Jade. I can deal with that, though. Besides, Eleanor admitted it took decades before she got along with the she-wolf. Now that I'm stuck in Winter Creek for who knows how long, she'll have to get used to me sooner or later.

Right?

I'm not the only one who seems to think I'm beginning to belong with the pack. About a week after I discovered the truth about how the curse affects Lucas, four of the five of us are sitting down to dinner.

It's the Alpha's turn to go out in his fur, taking a quick run over their territory to double-check that no one has breached it since the afternoon.

I almost dipped out of dinner. With Eleanor and Kirk on one side of the table, Tristan and Jade on the other, I feel like I'm back to being an outsider. Even as I take the seat next to Eleanor, I get the sense that we're the ones outnumbered.

As soon as I dig into my plate, Tristan addresses me for the first time since I walked into the kitchen.

"I almost forgot. I spoke to Lucas before he headed out. Fallon, he wants to put you on dish duty tonight if that's okay."

Really?

I've never been so happy to be included in a chore rotation. Normally, I'd get a little ticked off if the guy I'm sleeping with tries to pawn off dishes or laundry on me. Just because I'm a woman, that doesn't mean I'm in love with doing housework, right? But, in this case, since taking a turn at the sink means that Lucas is starting to treat me like I belong here...

“Yeah. No problem. I’ll wash the dishes.”

Tristan doesn’t say anything in response. He just returns to his meal.

Tristan doesn’t say anything, but *Jade* does.

“Poor thing. No scent on your skin *and* he’s putting you to work. Shame.”

My smile freezes on my face. I have to resist the urge to fling my fork at her, especially when she flutters her lashes at me. Her emerald-colored eyes glitter wickedly from across the table.

Eleanor frowns. “That was low, Jade. Even for you.”

“What?” Jade’s innocent expression isn’t fooling anyone, but that doesn’t stop her from trying. “I’m just saying I thought she was a guest.”

Tristan gives her a side-eye look. “She’s pack,” he says firmly.

Figuring out that none of us are buying her wide-eyed stare, Jade drops it, snorting instead. “Please. Not yet, she’s not.”

“Jade—”

“Don’t start,” she snaps at Kirk next. “You know I’m right. To join the wolves of Winter Creek, you either have to grow fur or take a shifter’s bite. Unless I’m wrong, Luc’s pet is still pretending to be human.”

*Pretending?* “I *am* a human—”

She ignores me, waving her hand toward my throat. “Look. The Alpha’s bite is missing. So he mated her once. That doesn’t make her pack. It just makes her a tramp.”

Wow.

Wow.

Tell me how you really feel, Jade.

I thought living for four years in a dorm with Jeannie Lipton was rough. Less than a month with this chick and I’m being called a ‘tramp’?

With a sweet smile everyone at the table knows I don’t mean, I say, “I know you’re, like, really old. But nowadays, if you want to insult someone who actually gets to have and enjoy sex, you’d be better of calling me a ‘slut’.”

I might’ve hissed out the last word because I couldn’t help it, but it’s Jade who jumps up from her seat, digging her claws into the table top as she growls.

Oh... okay. I forgot I was baiting a werewolf again.

Whoops.

Luckily for, there are two others who are loyal enough to Lucas that they’re not going to sit there while Jade rips into me with her claws. Her

words, sure, but I can give as good as I get there. As a human—because I *am*—I can't do anything to battle her fangs and claws.

I don't have to.

Tristan's blue eyes ice over. "Sit down, Jade."

"Tris—"

The pretty Beta pours more dominance into his voice. "Sit. You don't want to do this."

Yeah, she does. If he let her off her leash, she'd leap over the table and come at me. No doubt about that.

But Tristan doesn't. Kirk is standing, too, moving just enough that he's blocking Eleanor.

Eleanor, meanwhile, is taking a sip from her glass of water, giving Jade a knowing look over the rim.

"What's he going to do? Choose an echo over me? Over pack? Good fucking luck."

Echo? What the hell does *that* mean?

I don't know. And since she storms out of the back door to the kitchen, disappearing outside while leaving an awkward aura behind her, I figure it's probably not the right time to ask.

# CHAPTER 6

# NOTHING



**I** already lost one pump. Like a twisted version of Cinderella, I ran over the muddy terrain with one white heel before I realized I was at a disadvantage. Kicking it off between one step and another, it's lost in the downpour behind me long before I realize my mistake.

With the predator at my back, I should've kept my shoe as a weapon.

In a world full of supes, it's laughable that's all I have. My grandmother hates it that I can barely work up the energy to perform the simplest spells. Despite my mother being a full-blooded supe, I have no advantages from her blood, either. I'm a hybrid that's never belong anywhere, and right when I thought I finally found somewhere that I did...

I'm about to die.

If I can't escape the wolf behind me, I'm dead.

My opal is bouncing on my chest only to be battered by the rainfall. My hair is covering my eyes, and no matter how many times I shove it out of my face, it doesn't matter. It falls forward again, making it even harder for me to see in the dark woods.

It might've been easier if the Luna was out. It's the full moon, the night I've been waiting for, but the unnatural storm is acting like a shield, keeping her from helping me in my escape.

I have nothing to help me...

My skirt is bogging me down. As I slide forward in the mud, I grip the heft of the chiffon tightly, hoping it'll make the run easier. All I have to do is reach my mate. The Alpha of his pack, nothing will stop him from protecting me.

That's what he does. That's what he vowed to always do, and once we

*bond tonight, I'll never have to worry about being prey again.*

*But I have to reach him. I have to find him.*

*He wasn't where he was supposed to be. On the unmarked line that separated my grandmother's coven from shifter territory, I didn't find Lucas waiting for me.*

*Oh, no.*

*I found a rabid wolf instead.*

*It's chasing me. Smaller than a shifter, without an animalistic need to hunt, to feed, I can't talk any sense into it. The wolf wouldn't understand me. It would see me only as an intruder to his habitat, and without any of Luc's packmates to scare it off, it's up to me to escape it.*

*Only... I don't think I can.*

*It's smarter than any animal should be. The rain doesn't throw it off from its scent, and instead of chasing me, it found another way to ambush its prey.*

*Because there it is. Standing in front of me, its yellow eyes blazing, its open maw dripping with saliva that disappears in the room... it's there, and before I can scream, it's on me.*

*It's on me, and there's no way for me to get out from under it even as the wolf begins to savage me through my mating gown, my blood perfuming the air even as my screams finally sound louder than the crack of thunder around me...*

# CHAPTER 7

# DINNER



I come to with a start, almost expecting to find a wild wolf in my room with me.

It's been a few days since I've gone outside. In fact, I'm back to being a self-imposed prisoner on the third floor. With the exception of going down to the library to grab a book or tiptoeing into the kitchen to snag a couple of snacks to add to my growing stash, I've hardly left my room since the night I was excited to do freaking dishes of all things.

Thanks, Jade. Her attitude took all the enjoyment out of Lucas finally adding me to the chore rotation, and while I spitefully scrubbed every single last one from dinner, I couldn't get the accusing way she called me a 'tramp' out of my head.

I know it got back to Lucas. The next morning, he came up to my room to apologize on Jade's behalf.

As if I was going to accept that.

In true Lucas fashion, though, he made another Alpha pronouncement—something along the lines of “I will make it up to you and show you just how important you are to me *and* the pack”—before disappearing.

And I mean *disappearing*. That was three days ago and my hand dandy Lucas detector hasn't picked up on him coming close enough to the pack house to register since.

Is that why I had a nightmare about being chased through the woods in the same chiffon dress and white pumps Marie made me wear when she left me trussed up for the feral version of Lucas? Because, deep down, I want to chase *him*?

I'm not sure, but that doesn't do anything to lessen the waves of fear and



remorse crashing into as I jolt awake, the scent of mud and rain, of rusty blood, and wet dog fresh in my nose.

Panicked, I sit up, staring around. I only calm down enough when I see that I'm indoors, that I'm upstairs in my third floor room, with the windows closed, the October sunset streaming in to bounce off the glass pane, and not a hint of an autumnal thunderstorm in sight.

Whoa.

Huh.

Yeah...

I probably shouldn't have had a heavy snack, then decided to take a nap, huh?

It's not the first vivid dream—or nightmare—I've had since I got zapped. There's been a couple; not to mention the weird hallucination I had the first night I was awake again. That was definitely the darkest, though, and considering how real it felt, I wouldn't be surprised if I looked down and found myself in that same peach chiffon dress that Marie gave me the night she had her boys tie me to the tree... and that the woman in my dream wore as the wolf ran her down in the Winter Creek woods.

Though I know I'm being a little ridiculous, a quick peek reveals that I'm wearing another one of Eleanor's tank tops. One of these days I'm going to have to do something about getting a wardrobe of my own. I haven't yet, though, and so long as she doesn't mind sharing, I don't mind borrowing.

No dress, I think, hoping that's enough to calm the racing heart I woke up with.

My opal is resting over the top of the dark grey tank, chain twisted from my restless sleep. Absently, I run my thumb over the gemstone, then adjust the chain so that the clasp is in the back.

I'm not bloody. I'm no mud-covered, either. I'm a little shaky, but other than that I'm okay.

Weird. It seemed so real, too...

*Knock, knock.*

Grateful for the distraction, I turn toward the door, already knowing who's out there when the knob immediately begins to turn.

I've given up on locking it. I didn't see the point when I realized that almost all of my roommates are shifters. With their strength, a simple lock wouldn't stop them, though manners seem to.

Well, except for Eleanor. She's the only one who knocks, then opens my

door before I even let her know I'm in here.

She's wearing a bubbly expression as she pokes her head in. "Oh, good. Lucas said you were sleeping before and that he didn't want to disturb you. But dinner's ready so, if you're up, you should really come down and join us."

I don't even want to ask how Lucas knew I was sleeping. Unlike Eleanor, he respects a closed door so I doubt he peeked in on me. More than likely, his shifter side picked up on it—for all I know, his wolf heard my snores through the door or something—and figured there was a reason I was so quiet.

Right. Because I was having a nightmare where I was being savaged by a wolf in the rain...

I shake my head, shoving the memory out of it. "I'm okay. I ate before I laid down."

Eleanor is human, but she has one hell of a set of puppy dog eyes. "You've gotta have a little bit of room, right? Because Lucas... he spent the last two hours making this dinner special. He really wants you to eat it."

"But I'm not hungry," I begin.

"Can you try?"

"Why?"

Since living here, I've noticed that the wolves seem to have an obsession with making sure I eat. Once I discovered that Eleanor and Kirk routinely brought me meals up to the third floor shortly after my arrival on *Lucas's* orders, I just went along with it. It wasn't a big deal if I ate on my own though, or if I joined the others downstairs.

So why tonight?

"Just trust me," Eleanor says. "It's a shifter thing." She waves. "Come on."

I inch across the bed, patting my wild hair in place as I climb off of it. "Eleanor... is this something I should know?"

She shakes her head, curls bounding. "It's not bad, if that's what you're thinking. It's just... male shifters have this urge to prove they're a good provider for their females. That usually revolves around food. So, yeah, dinner's waiting. Let's go!"

Before I can stop her, Eleanor disappears from the doorway. By the time I chase after her, eager to find out more, she's already waiting for me on the landing to the stairs.

I've got to remember that, despite her being human, she's got a little

shifter to her. I guess being super quick is just another one of those quirks she has after being Kirk's bonded mate all these decades.

She keeps the lead the entire trip down to the main floor, checking over her shoulder to make sure I'm right behind her. And though my gut is telling me I should've probably stayed upstairs, I am.

Once we're outside the kitchen, Eleanor yanks open the door, bustling through it first.

After taking a deep breath—my stomach going tighter when an incredibly familiar aroma hits me—I follow her.

She's already seated, right next to her mate. Tristan is across Kirk, Jade sitting on his left.

Lucas, gorgeous as ever in a tight black tee, dark denim jeans, and his bare feet, is leaning up against the counter where the dinner spread is laid out.

"Fallon," he rumbles. "There you are."

Yup. Here I am. "Sorry I'm late. You guys didn't have to wait for me."

"Yes," Lucas says firmly. "They did." Picking up a plate, he nods at me. "Would you like me to serve you?"

My stomach lurches. This isn't the first time that Lucas offered to plate me up a meal. Usually it's because he's standing by the counter when I walk into the kitchen, but there were a few occasions when my gut said there was more to the offer than him just being kind.

This is one of them.

The dinner looks good. It smells amazing.

And, yet... I can't shake the feeling that I'm going to hurl all of a sudden.

Grabbing the back of what's become *my* chair, I scoot it back, then plop down. Careful to look anywhere but directly at Lucas, I say, "That's okay. I'm good."

I hear a groan. Probably from Eleanor.

Whoops.

I can't help it. This dinner... I don't know, it's *different* in ways I can't quite put my finger on. Maybe once I feel a little more comfortable—or my earlier snack finally digests—I can have a small plate. For now, I'd rather just join the table while the others chow down.

The plate clinks on the counter as Lucas sets it down. "If you want to serve yourself, that's fine. So long as you eat." He pauses for a moment. "I made this specifically for you."

Yeah. I noticed—and that's part of the problem.

I knew from the moment I walked in here. The scent of kielbasa and sauerkraut is so distinctive, there was no way even my human nose could miss it. And, wouldn't you know, it's another one of my favorites?

My mom used to make it for me. Alongside her infamous mac and cheese—which, yup, there's a bowl of ladled out next to the mashed potatoes—we'd have sliced kielbasa in a pool of sauerkraut for a comforting meal.

And Lucas has prepped that for dinner tonight.

I want to eat it. I really do.

But... I *can't*.

"I bet she would eat if Tristan made the meal for her," Jade says sweetly, cutting into the sudden silence in the kitchen.

Oh, what a vicious little *snake*. It doesn't take Eleanor's quickly delivered hint for me to realize what she's getting at. As though the tension between Tristan and Lucas isn't palpable enough when it comes to my presence in the room, why wouldn't she think it's a good idea to egg it on?

Is this her way of getting back at me for sleeping with him even before I understood he was my mate? Lucas and I are both grown, consenting adults, and even if it was just sex—and I have to admit what passes between us in the piano room wasn't *just* sex—it's none of her business.

If you ask me, she probably thought her little "I don't like secrets" stunt was enough to turn me off of Lucas. Joke's on her, but now that I've gotten over his being the beast... now that I owe my life to him... I'm probably more into him than I was before. Of course, that's probably because I know that I'm supposed to be his fated mate, but still. I made my choice.

Well, sorta. I didn't agree to bond with Lucas or anything so far, but I'm open to continuing our budding relationship for now. That means the chance of anything happening between Tristan and me is miniscule, and it's a shitty thing for Jade to do to suggest otherwise.

I like Tristan. I hope we can be friends. Either way, I don't want to hurt him. I also don't want to make Lucas doubt my growing feelings for him.

Just for her catty little comment, I want to pick up a plate and pile as much of the prepared food on it as I can. If that's shifter speak for showing Lucas he's providing for me, I really should.

Would it be spiteful?

Sure.

Would I be tempting the weird dreams to start again if I go to bed on another upset belly?

Probably.

Would it be worth it to wipe that poisonous look right off of her pretty face?

You betcha.

Only... my lack of hunger isn't the only reason why I stay seated instead of getting up or letting Lucas make my plate for me. I might be new to this whole wolf shifter courtship thing, but if the Alpha was making a move on me, you'd think he would've kept this dinner between the two of us.

But he didn't. Maybe it's because he *is* the Alpha, but he has the entire pack here. And I mean the *entire* pack.

A little nervous, I look around the table.

Tristan has his arms crossed. He's leaning into his seat, sitting more to the side than centered so that he can watch the rest of his packmates out of the corner of his eye. Eleanor gives me a reassuring nod. Kirk looks bored. Jade is tapping her fingernails against the empty space of the tabletop.

No one has a plate in front of them. No one else is eating.

This is weird. I don't always sit down to eat meals with the others, and I'm still waiting for my turn in the rotation, but whenever I do join them at their table, I always seem to walk into breakfast, lunch, or dinner midway through. With how busy the wolves seem to keep themselves, someone is always coming and going.

I've never once seen someone hold off on starting the meal until everyone is here. In fact, I can't remember the last time we *all* sat down together like this.

Covering up my unease with a stifled chuckle, I gesture toward the counter. "Don't hold back on my account. Food's gonna get cold. Go on, guys. Eat."

They all turn to look at Lucas.

What the...

The Alpha takes a second to work his jaw loose. "You first," he grates out. "They're waiting for you."

I don't understand why. This is so different than every other meal that we've had that it has me on edge. All I keep thinking about is Eleanor's warning that this dinner is special, that it's some shifter thing that I don't get... and I find my stomach twisting on itself.

"And? You're the freaking Alpha, right? Tell them not to."

Jade snorts under her breath. Tristan glances over at me, his pretty face

twisted in a look of surprise, as Kirk sighs. Eleanor covers hers with her hand, making it obvious that she can't believe her warning went to waste like this.

And Lucas... he doesn't react at all except to say, "I made this for you especially, Fallon. Would it be so bad to accept what I offer?"

Maybe if Eleanor hadn't given me a heads up that shifters equate giving food as a way to show they would be a good mate, I would have. To me, it's just dinner.

To Lucas, I'm beginning to think this is kind of like his version of a werewolf proposal or something.

And that's the thing right there, isn't it? I'm more than interested in seeing where this thing between us goes, but am I ready to take the next step? Kirk and Eleanor made it clear when they first told me about shifter mates: there is no such thing as divorce.

Besides, I've lived as a rent-free guest in his house for weeks now, eating their food, and not doing a damn thing to help. Supes or not, that rubs my independent human side wrong.

"Trust me," I tell him, "I've already taken more than enough."

"Then take some more. Share my food with me."

With *him*, I notice. Not *us*.

When I don't say anything in response to that immediately, he says, "Fallon. Look at me. Look me in the eyes. Please."

A disbelieving scoff chases his bark of a command, though something tells me it has much to do with the tacked on 'please' than what he was giving me outright permission to do.

I think I know why, too. To look directly at an Alpha... that's to challenge him. To goad him into a fight, or to tell him that you don't respect his authority.

Being around Lucas and the others as long as I have, I've noticed how often none of the others actually meet his amber-colored gaze. I guess I must have picked up the habit, too.

I've been avoiding his intense gaze from the moment I entered the kitchen. I'd glanced at his profile, admired his mouth, observed his jaw, and had a conversation with his chin. Not once did I give his eyes more than a feeling glance—until now.

Ignoring the others, I do what he asked me to.

My queasy stomach drops all the way down to my freaking toes.

I can't stop the sensation from happening. I swear, no one should have as much power in their stare as Lucas does. It's like he's looking right past my eyes and straight into my soul. It does something to me, too. All the shame I felt at being tricked by Marie, the guilt I can't escape for imposing on Lucas and his friends, as well as the weight of both Lucas and Tristan's attraction to me... if I wasn't already too twisted up to eat, that did the trick.

Especially when, the instant our eyes meet, I see something in his. A spark and a hunger and a *need* that washes over me, a heat so sudden and consuming, it's like he's picked me up and laid me out in a bubble bath: shocking at first, then soothing, and ultimately just *right*.

The sensation is there and gone again, so quick that it doesn't take much for me to convince myself that I imagined it.

Except, of course, for the way my heart is beating, and the whisper-thin tie stretching between Lucas and me has me wanting to tiptoe toward him and fall into his arms.

But I don't.

I *can't*.

Swallowing the lump lodged in my throat, I smile at him—and glance away. “I'm okay,” I say again. “Really.” The butterflies in my belly are flapping so damn wildly, there's definitely no room for food. I give an apologetic shrug as I push my chair away from the table. “Maybe later. Yeah?”

“Later?” rumbles Lucas. “Fine. I'll eat later, then, too.”

What?

“That's not what I meant—”

Lucas waves at the untouched food. “Everyone, eat,” he orders, and then he's gone.

Slipping out through the back door, taking that wondrous heat with him, he's *gone*.

And I'm left behind, feeling the weight of four different pairs of eyes on me.

Wow, Fallon.

Way to go. You single-handedly ruined Lucas's special dinner.

# CHAPTER 8



## ELEANOR'S VISIT



**W**hen it becomes obvious that Lucas isn't coming back, I mumble some ridiculous excuse and haul my ass out of the kitchen.

I'm grateful when no one gets up to chase after me. I almost swear I hear Jade make a comment as the door swings closed behind me, but I have no idea what she said.

Probably for the best.

Once upstairs again, I head straight for my en suite bathroom. My encounter with Lucas left me chilled. Adding that to the memory of the rain sluicing down on me in my dream and I figure a nice, long *hot* show is just what I need.

I stay in there for a while. That strange sixth sense I have that tells me when Lucas is near is pinging wildly but in reverse. If I have to guess, he's heading for his hunting cabin. That, or he's patrolling again, since every other pack member was downstairs when he left.

I'm just sitting on the edge of the bed, comfortable in Eleanor's sweatpants and the same tank I wore earlier as I'm towel-drying my hair when I hear the knock. It's gentler than before, and the knob doesn't twist, but... I don't know. I get the vibe that it's Eleanor out there.

"Fallon? You okay?"

Look at that. I'm right.

"Yeah," I lie.

"Can we come in?"

We. Welp. That explains why she didn't just barge in. Kirk—because it has to be Kirk—must have stopped her.

*Can we come in?*

Can I really stop them?

“Go ahead.”

The door eases in. Eleanor enters first, Kirk inches behind her. His expression says that this wasn't his idea, but because his mate was here, so was he.

Wonderful.

I toss my damp towel to the side of the bed, but I don't get up. If I'm in bed, hopefully they'll take the hint and cut this visit short.

“What's up?” I ask, playing dumb. As though I don't know why they're here.

“After dinner, we figured someone should come up and check on you. Tristan offered, but...”

Kirk clears his throat. “The Alpha wouldn't have liked that.”

No, I agree. He probably wouldn't have.

I still don't know how Tristan managed to convince Lucas to let him be the one who watched over me after I got zapped. Now that I know Lucas was the one who saved me, I would've thought he'd want to stay with me. At the very least, shifters are pretty freaking possessive. I don't know how he could handle Tristan being in my personal space when the Beta made it clear that when he says the choice is mine, he's counting himself as an option.

“Right,” says Eleanor. “So we came up instead.” She hesitates for a moment, nibbling her bottom lip before she blurts out, “Dinner could've gone better.”

Tell me something I don't know.

“I suggested that, the first time he made dinner for his intended, it should've been a private affair,” cut in Kirk. “It's what I did with Ellie. But Lucas... he wanted the pack as witnesses.”

“Because he's the Alpha,” added Eleanor.

Alpha my behind. Maybe that's part of the reason he did that, but I think I've gotten a better handle on Lucas these days. He wanted an audience because he needed Tristan—and Jade, too, I'm betting—to see that he was cooking for me.

When I toss that back at Eleanor, a little more snippily than I mean to—channeling Jeannie Lipton a bit there—she exchanges a pointed look with her mate.

He nods, then slips back into the hall. Grabbing the door knob behind him, he shuts the door, leaving me and Eleanor alone.

I raise my eyebrows. “What’s that about?”

Eleanor shrugs. “Another wolf thing. As a shifter and part of the pack, he’s loyal to Lucas. I mean, he’s loyal to me first, but Lucas is a pretty close second. They’ve been through a lot together... the four of them have, really... and he won’t say a bad word against him.”

Well, *that’s* interesting, isn’t it?

“And you?”

Eleanor’s eyes twinkle. “I’m part of the pack because I mated in, but I’m not a shifter. I don’t have that hard-wired loyalty to Lucas because he’s the most dominant wolf in Winter Creek. I can say what I want, and after seventy years, I’ve earned the right to do that.”

It’s so funny to me. When I look at Eleanor, I see a boisterous beauty who was probably younger than me when she mated Kirk. Talking to her, though... she’s kind of like what I always thought a grandmother would be, minus the Mrs. Clause fit. Like she’s seen enough shit that nothing fazes her anymore, and she’ll tell the truth with an impish smile if she feels like it.

Man, she’s awesome.

I pat the edge of my bed. “If we’re gonna chat, you might as well be comfortable. And, yes,” I add, a tease of my own, “I know you’re mated. I’m not hitting on you.”

Eleanor grinned. “Good thing, too. I don’t need Lucas scowling at me the way he does Tristan when the Beta’s hanging around the stairs when he’s supposed to be keeping an eye on the witches.”

I pointedly ignore her comment. “You were saying about Alphas?”

“Oh. Right. About Lucas and his Alpha status.” Eleanor plops herself down at the foot of my bed. Tucking a stray curl behind her ear, she says, “It’s pretty simple. Luc... he’s used to doing things a certain way. Alphas are different. They’re—”

“Demand control freaks?” I offer.

Eleanor muffles her laugh with her fingers. “Oh, Jesus, Fallon. I swear, you’re much better for him than...” Her eyes widen. “Never mind. Forget I said that.”

No way in *hell*.

“Better than who?” I ask. For some reason, Jade’s face flashes before my eyes. “You don’t mean—” I stop short myself. “I thought Lucas wasn’t mated. At least, not officially.”

That’s what he told me. That he almost was once, but she died before

they could finalize their bond. That her death triggered the curse... and that he'd held out hope he'd have another mate.

Eleanor reaches out, laying her hand on my calf. "You're right. And that's my point. Lucas spent seventy years hoping his intended mate might return to him. Like it or not, but the Alpha thinks that's you, Fallon. That's why, at first, he kept his distance."

Right. When he played hot and cold, giving in to the pull between us with either kisses or sex, only to reject me right after.

"I remember," I say wryly.

"I know. But it's also why, when he realized he couldn't, he takes it for granted that you'll choose him. Because Lucas... the Alpha doesn't even contemplate a scenario that you won't. You're his fated mate, sweetie. You're not supposed to be able to."

Welp. Doesn't that make me feel a little better for how difficult I find it to keep away from Lucas.

It's not me and my out of control hormones, no, no. It's *Fate*...

"We... and I mean all of us, even if Jade is Jade and Tristan is..." Eleanor stops for a moment, leaving me to fill the pause in myself. Yeah. I know about Tristan. "We want him to be happy. Not just because of the curse, either, but because he deserves it."

"The title of Alpha is earned every second of every days," Eleanor continues. "Lucas has to be the strongest of us, the one who has to be in complete control to make up for when the feral takes over. His life is dedicated to the survival of his pack. Each and every one of us he's taken in... we're his responsibility. But he's ours, too—until he bonds with his mate."

"And what then?" If I tie myself to him for as long as we live... I need to get up. I need to pace. Shimmying out of the bed, I take a few steps away from it before turning back on her. "He becomes mine?"

"Only in the very best way."

So, yes.

Eleanor joins me in the middle of the room. "In a way, it started tonight. I should've explained better... this dinner was special in a way humans don't really get. He's a shifter, right? And shifters show their interest with food."

"What?"

"It sounds weird. I know. It took me a while to get used to it myself. But it makes sense when you remember they're as much their wolves as they are

their human side. Wolves prove themselves as good mates by feeding their mates. That's what Lucas was doing tonight."

"And why he insisted I eat first?"

Eleanor nods. "That's right. It was his way of putting you above the rest of the pack."

*What?* "I didn't ask for that!"

"I know," she says soothingly. "And the rest of us understand what Lucas is doing. By feeding you first, it was his way of saying that he'll provide for you if you choose him. He'll feed you, he'll protect you, and you'll want for nothing so long as you bond yourself to him as his mate."

Was I right? The idea that... "Was he, like, proposing to me in a shifter way? And by refusing to eat it—"

"You were basically rejecting him, yup. And while his human side probably knows you didn't mean it like that, his wolf... good chance he's out there, licking his wounds right now."

Oh my freaking God.

I turn to Eleanor, a look of horror on my face.

Taking pity on me, Eleanor bumps her shoulder against mine. "Hey. No one ever said it was easy to be a shifter's mate, Fallon."

But I'm not. Not yet, at least.

Right?

# CHAPTER 9

## IT'S FATE



**B**arely an hour passes after Eleanor finally left me alone with my thoughts before I hear another knock.

And the fact that I recognize the rhythm of the *rap-tap-tap* makes me realize that I'm way more gone than I want to admit because I *know* who's out there just from the knock.

Taking a deep breath, wishing I had enough time to change out of my sleep clothes—or even run a brush through my hair—I call out, “Come in, Lucas.”

He doesn't ask how I know. He just pushes the door in and, two big steps into my room, says in his deep voice, “Eleanor was in here.”

“She came by after dinner.”

Should I have mentioned the disaster from earlier tonight? Probably not.

“Alone?”

How can he slip enough jealousy into one single word like that? Another Alpha trick, maybe?

“Kirk was here, too,” I tell him.

It's not a lie, and the way Lucas stares at me from just inside of my room tells me that he knows I'm being honest as well as sensing that there's more to the answer that I'm keeping to myself.

Not wanting to admit that, I get up so that we're both standing. “And now you've stopped by. Is there something I can do for you, Lucas?”

“Yes. You can tell me where I went wrong.”

I blink. “What?”

He's wearing different clothes. A white shirt instead of the black, a darker pair of jeans, and still no shoes. Kicking behind him, he shuts the bedroom

door so that it's just the two of us in here.

And then he says, "I thought you told me that you were mine. Have you changed your mind?"

I can't even deny that.

I did. I totally did. Lost in the throes of sleeping with Lucas, I would've said anything to keep him doing what he was doing to me.

I just... I never expected him to come out and say that now.

If you ask me, though, if Lucas wants to put everything out in the open like that, it's only fair that I get to do the same.

"Does it matter? It was just sex."

It wasn't just sex and we both know it.

"You're my intended, Fallon—"

"Am I?" He seems to think so. "Because I've been hearing a lot about mates, but I don't think you've ever come out and, I don't know, *asked* me."

"Ask? Shifters don't ask. They know."

Maybe that's so. Tapping my chest, ignoring the way his gaze seems riveted to my opal—and trying not to be frustrated that it's my necklace and not my tits that seem to catch his attention—I remind him, "Human."

"And? Even before we mated, you already signaled your interest in me. I thought you knew..."

I can't even try to deny that, either.

And then he says, "You fed me first," and I'm so completely lost that all I can do is stare up at him.

"I did *what*?"

He juts out his chin. "The steak, remember? And the bacon. You fed me."

Oh, yeah. I definitely remember. But—

"I thought you were a stray!"

His eyes flash, his glower back in place. "Are you insulting my wolf?"

Is he serious? "No, you idiot! I literally thought you were a stray dog that was hovering around my grandmother's house because he was hungry."

He's certainly looking hungry now—and I highly doubt it's because he abandoned dinner to go out for a run.

"I'm not a stray," he bites out between clenched teeth. "I'm the Alpha."

"Oh, I know. Eleanor reminded me."

What was it I said? His eyes darken as he crosses the room so quickly, I don't even have the awareness to back out of his reach.

"Eleanor... she touched you." Another sniff, nostrils flaring as though



trying to pinpoint exactly where. He points at my upper bicep. “There.”

What the... I have no idea what that has to do with anything or why a muscle is ticking in his jaw as he stares down at me, but his impressive shifter senses must have just picked up on that before he seemed to zoom right at me.

“She might’ve bumped up against me when we were talking earlier,” I admit, only just resisting the urge to rub my skin as though that would erase whatever it is that has Lucas scowling like that. “Why? Is that a problem?”

“Yes.”

Okay, then. It looks like blunt and honest Lucas is in charge right now. Better than the beast, I guess, but not by much.

“Why? It was just an innocent touch—”

“From a female who you once told the pack was your type,” he reminds me.

Holy shit. He’s *serious*, too.

“I was teasing,” I begin, falling silent as Lucas takes a few purposeful steps closer to me.

Slowly, gently, he reaches out to lay his hand on the exact spot where Eleanor’s t-shirt brushed up against me. A sizzle and a spark zips from my bicep down to my fingertips the instant his palm curves around my upper arm. The caress is as heated as it is possessive, and that’s before he rubs my skin like the memory of her casual touch is a visible mark he’s desperate to erase.

“Lucas?” A lump rises up in my throat. I force it down at the same time as goosebumps erupt all along my arm. “What are you doing?”

“Do me a favor, Fallon?”

“Um. Sure.”

The way he’s stroking me now, I don’t think I could deny him anything. I almost want to throw back my head, simply enjoying his touch. Breathing him in, having him so close... I can almost forget the monster I found in the hunting cabin in favor of the beautiful man who banged me so thoroughly in the piano room less than a week ago.

I know he’s both. As naive as I can be, there’s no denying that Lucas isn’t also the beast I first met out in the woods. But, as he leans in, bowing his body over mine, tugging me into his chest as he rests his chin on the top of my head, I can at least pretend for a moment that he’s *not*.

At least until his possessive shifter side makes another appearance—

“Please don’t let anyone else touch you right now. Until the mating dance is done one way or another, I don’t think I can stand it. As it is, I’m finding it harder and harder to stay in control knowing that we mated once but I didn’t mark you. I think we both know that my wolf is only getting harder to tame.”

He’s right about that part.

Turning into Lucas, I brace my hands against his broad chest. It’s either that or wrap them around his waist as I echo, “Mating dance?”

He nods, a gesture I can’t see in this position but that I can sense from the way his chin shifts against my loose hair.

“My wolf thinks of you as his mate. Sleeping together... my instincts are telling me that you’re mine. Until you reject me outright or I bite you, we’re in the mating dance.” He runs his fingers through his hair, leaving track marks behind in the curls. “And tonight’s dinner doesn’t count. You have to say it. ‘Lucas, I reject you,’ and I’ll leave you alone if that’s what you want.”

Hang on—

*Reject him?*

I can’t. It probably would be the smartest thing for me to do. I mean, he’s probably about a hundred years old chronologically—even if he looks like he’s in his early thirties—and if I thought his being a wolf shifter was a hurdle to a prospective relationship, that’s nothing compared to discovering he’s also the beast.

Is that why he never thought he was rejecting me all those times? Because he never said it?

So maybe he didn’t realize he was doing it, but the way he stalked away from me after our first kiss? And how he left me behind in the piano room almost immediately after he finished? I took it as rejection.

But Lucas—

*This isn’t done. Me and you... this isn’t over, either.*

I thought he was full of it then. Now? I’m not so sure—but I can tell you one thing. Since there’s no denying that I’m stuck here in Winter Creek for the time being, I can’t see any reason why I shouldn’t be his partner in this little dance of his.

And, yeah. That’s a lie. There are a million different reasons why I should put an end to this right away, but I’m not going to—and I think we both know that.

*Bite you...*

The way he said that like it’s all he’s ever wanted to has me tilting my

head up to look at him. It's tough, this close, but I manage.

"Why didn't you bite me? Last time, I mean."

Last time, I said, as though it's inevitable there will be a next time... and who am I kidding? If he reached into my sweatpants right now, he'd find me growing damp, readying myself for him.

Lucas stiffens, and since I purposely angled my hips back to avoid tempting myself by rubbing up against him, I can't tell if one of my favorite parts of him has. It's possible—especially when he keeps bringing up 'mating' like that—but something about my question has him hesitating.

Was it something I said?

I guess I was a little too forward. If my understanding is right, if Lucas marked me, it was basically the same as making me as his wolfy wife. Just like Eleanor and Kirk, there's no need for a wedding band or anything if I'm walking around with a scar of his bite mark on the side of my neck.

"I didn't think you wanted me to."

"Did you want to?"

He shudders out a breath. "Luna, yes. We wouldn't have been able to perform the ceremony since she wasn't out, but I'd be lying if the instinct to make you mine any way I could isn't there."

Honest, I think. Lucas—when he answers my questions—either dances around the subject or is brutally honest. At least I know what I got this time.

Resisting the urge to stroke my unbroken neck, I ask, "Ceremony? What do you mean?"

"The Luna Ceremony can only take place on the night of the full moon. When a shifter takes his mate beneath the Luna, asking our goddess for her blessing. If I mate you... if I *mark* you when the Luna's out, you'll be mine for life."

What was it Kirk and Eleanor told me the first time we discussed shifter mates? There is no divorce in the supe world.

"Not that I expect you to say 'yes' now. I don't. But it's time I introduced you to the pack as my intended instead of just a pack guest."

"That was what dinner was about, right?"

He nods. However, instead of mentioning the disaster from earlier tonight, his cheeks hollow.

"I'm sorry," he grates out. "Whether Ellie is happily mated to Kirk or not, I just... I can't do this."

Huh? "Do what?"

“Let you smell like someone who isn’t me.”

Before I can ask why that single brush of her t-shirt against my bare upper arm is bothering him so badly, Lucas releases his hold on me. Dropping his head lower, looping his arm around my waist so that I can’t move away from him—as though I *would*—he presses his cheek against my shoulder. His dark curls are incredibly soft against my neck, the stubble on his jaw tickling my skin as he blows out a warm breath.

I shiver, enjoying whatever it is he’s doing—and then it hits me what he *is* doing.

“Lucas... are you scent-marking me or something?”

He doesn’t deny it. “I told you. I can’t have you smelling like someone else. Not now.”

“So I smell like you instead?”

Probably not as potently as I did after we had sex, but Lucas seems determined to leave his mark on me one way or another.

And, God help me, but I *like* it, especially when he simply murmurs, “Yes.”

Honestly, that shouldn’t make me as giddy as it does. From the moment I first met him, I couldn’t ignore the inexplicable pull I felt toward him. Every time he seemed to push me away, I sucked it up and reminded myself that I couldn’t expect anything from my trip to Winter Creek except for maybe a fling.

Something tells me that Lucas was never in it for a fling. He wants forever, and me? Now that I’m stuck here, I’m not entirely *opposed* to the idea.

In fact—

A wicked, wicked idea pops into my brain.

If Lucas could smell Eleanor on me that easily...

Lifting my hands so that they’re between us again, I give him a gentle shove instead of bracing my palms against him this time. Sensing I mean it, he immediately releases me again but before he can say anything, I shift the position of my hands so that I have one on each of his cheeks. I hold him in place, then go up on my tiptoes. Running my fingers through his delicious curls a few times, I press my forehead against his hard chest, rubbing it once or twice.

All that done, I step back, satisfied.

Lucas raises his eyebrows.

I grin. “Hey. I want you to smell like me, too. It’s only fair.”

Especially since I know it’ll probably piss Jade off that my scent is all over Lucas.

Not as good as sex—and, right now, I probably should keep my nonexistent panties on around Lucas—but at least it’s something. Especially since she might think she has a chance after I accidentally rejected him.

Haha.

Nope.

# CHAPTER 10

# MINE



**W**as sleeping with Lucas in my room after the mess I made at dinner was the smartest idea?

I'm gonna be honest and say: Yes. Yes, it was.

I blame it on the way I transferred my scent onto him. Even as I was trying to tell myself that I needed to keep in control around him, I think I already knew what was going to happen. The moment I shifted my hips, trapping his erection between us, my lusty side kind of took over.

The next morning, I tell myself it was the only thing I could do to prove to Lucas that I was still interested in being his mate.

Something changes between us after that. Suddenly, 'intended' has a whole new meaning. I think of it like an engagement for shifters, a promise that I'm thinking about bonding to him and becoming his fated mate without the full commitment. Up until I am, I can change my mind... but the more time I spend with Lucas, the more it's a foregone conclusion that—in spite of Jade—I'll be full fledged member of the pack.

Nearly everyone is already treating me like I am. Instead of the wolves trying their best to shield me from the truth of what they are, and the secrets of Winter Creek, I'm learning more and more what it's like to live in a supe community. I don't even really have to ask my hundreds of questions. With their newfound openness, I learn a little more every day just by being around Lucas and the others.

Take the town square for example. It's neutral territory, though anything that has to do with the witches isn't. That's why the only Boudreaux Designs in the house are ones Eleanor couldn't bring herself to discard after she mated Kirk. If a witch runs the shop, the wolves don't go there.

Everything else is fair game. Like the restaurants and the small grocery store run by humans. That's not all, either. There might not be any television or internet here, but there's a reason why Lucas's library has books more recent than when the curse first hit or why the wolves dress in modern clothes.

Just like I suspected, humans don't exist within the curse, unless they're like me and get dragged into it.

The blood ward is keeping me here. Other humans *can* leave, but even though time doesn't stop for them, it slows. I'm proof that it ain't easy to find Winter Creek. From how Eleanor explained it to me, the curse on the town almost acts like a lure. It brings those best suited to stay; those who don't need a blood ward to trap them behind its borders.

That makes sense to me. A town made up of feuding supes could never survive. While the curse keeps them in stasis so that the last seventy years never caused the witches or the wolves to age, they're not *immortal* immortal. Like, they can die. Just like I could've if Lucas hadn't saved me.

That also means they need necessities. Food. Water. The basics to keep themselves alive.

That's what the humans in Winter Creek are for, I guess, and once the curse is broken and the witches won't try to use me again to try and break it, Lucas promises to show me off to some of his contacts in town.

For now, though, I'm not supposed to leave shifter territory. Lucas won't come out and say it, but it bothers him that the only sign of a witch crossing onto his land is when Remy took the chance to chase after me. I wondered what happened to him, knowing that Remy had to make it back to the coven in one piece otherwise Lucas wouldn't continue with his obsessive patrols, but the one time I asked, he changed the subject so expertly, I didn't even realize I never got an answer.

He does that a lot. When I corner him with a direct question, he'll answer me. However, he has a habit of using his pouty lips and his Alpha stare to distract me to the point that sometimes I don't even notice he picks and chooses when he does.

Can't really blame him. I'm keeping my own secrets, aren't I?

The biggest one is how pointedly I've been avoiding the piano room.

I have my reasons for it. And while the memory of what passed between us is a pretty fresh one, the night that I saw the ghost of Lucas at the piano is even worse.



Should I have asked him about that?

Chalking it up to a side effect from being zapped by Marie's blood ward, I decide to keep it to myself. Same thing with the strange dreams I keep on having.

If it was only once, I could've attributed it to prolonged anxiety, my spat with Jade, and taking a nap on a full stomach. I'd pushed her to the point that I saw her wolf snapping at me despite her still being in her skin. It made sense that I would have a nightmare involving a rabid wolf chasing after me.

Given the chance, she totally would.

The spoiled dinner made my rivalry with her worse. On more than one occasion, Lucas has made it a point to reassure me that he's never had anything going on with Jade. My cheap shot about actually getting laid had hit a bull's-eye. For as long as she'd been part of his pack, Jade had only wanted to catch Lucas's attention. Despite Tristan being an unmated male, if she couldn't have Lucas, she didn't want anyone.

No wonder she walks around like she has a stick up her ass. Going seventy years without sex would put a chip on anyone's shoulder. Especially now that Lucas was finally getting some after his decades-long dry spell.

I pointedly refuse to ask about his past. Apart from the day he boldly asked me about my type in guys—after I made it obvious I was attracted to girls, too—we've both made an unspoken agreement that any of our previous loves are going to stay where they belong: behind us.

I don't know which of us that's harder for. I've never shied away from my experience, though I'm not the kind of chick who kisses and tells. Lucas obviously wasn't a virgin when I met him. That he'd a mate and lost her is kind of his whole origin story. Seventy years ago, the feral's mate died and he was cursed to be that *thing* because of it.

Now I know that the identity of the feral is Lucas. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together and realize that he'd waited seventy years for another mate.

Why? I'm still not sure. It has something to do with the curse, obviously, and my grandmother went to great lengths because she was positive I'd be the one to break it. I don't know how I'm supposed to do that, either, though it seems to have something to do with me being Lucas's intended.

He lost his mate. Now he has me, and though I messed up not recognizing how big a deal it was for him to specifically cook dinner for me in front of his pack, we more than made up last night.

Lucas needed the release. I hadn't seen him so relaxed... well, *ever*... and though it stung a little when he slipped out of my bed shortly after he finished, he's the Alpha. He has pack responsibilities that will always come first.

If I want to go ahead with this relationship, I have to remember that. I have to accept it, too. If I want Lucas, I have to acknowledge that he comes with four others. One of them might not be my biggest fan, but the other three have done a great job welcoming me.

I adore Eleanor. Now that Kirk's not so pissed at me, we bond over sharing coffee in the morning and talking about recent advances in technology. And Tristan... I think he's finally got the hint that me and Lucas are me and Lucas.

I'll miss his flirtatious smile and the heat in his blue eyes as he looks at me, but he's a good second to Lucas, and I know I'll never be able to show him how grateful I am for saving me the night I fell off the bridge.

We can be friends, too, and I manage to delude myself into believing that until the morning after I slept with Lucas for the second time.

IT STARTED OUT INNOCENTLY ENOUGH.

It was a beautiful late October morning. At her insistence, I'd also kept the black cloak that Eleanor lent me the day we headed out for the rope bridge. It was warm enough to serve as a jacket as I went outside to just get some fresh air.

No one had been in the kitchen for breakfast. My internal gauge knew that Lucas had slipped out while I was showering earlier, but I couldn't find anyone else inside, either. That meant Eleanor was probably sleeping in—or enjoying herself with her mate—and I decided to take an apple outside with me for a quick breakfast while I enjoyed the breeze.

After I finished my snack, I tossed the core into the trees surrounding the back of the pack house, a snack for any animals that might be wandering be.

Behind me, someone clears their throat. And then, “If you were finished with that, I wouldn't have minded take a couple of bites myself.”

It's been a while since I heard that suave tone. The flirtatiousness should've tipped me off to who it was, but it isn't until I spin around and find

Tristan watching me, his legs crossed, back leaning up against the back door that I know who called out to me.

“Holy shit, Tristan. You can give a girl a heart attack, sneaking up on me like that.”

He smiles at me. “I thought you heard the door. If not, didn’t you catch my scent?”

“Of course not. I’m human, remember?”

“That’s right. My mistake.”

There’s something about his smile that’s rubbing me the wrong way. It hits me all of a sudden that this is the first time I’ve been alone with him since the night he saved me. That shouldn’t be as big of a deal as I’m beginning to think it is.

“What’s up?” I ask. “Heading out on patrol?”

He’s fully dressed, except for his shoes. Shoeless shifters could go one of two ways: it could mean he plans on turning to his wolf and doesn’t want to waste time shucking his shoes, or he’s sticking around the house today. The way he’s watching me closely... I’m not so sure which one it is.

Me, though? I think I should go inside.

Too bad he’s casually blocking me from going through the back door.

“What’s up?”

“I was just wondering if you’d had a change of heart yet.”

Huh? “About what?”

His lips curve. It’s not a smile anymore, but coy grin that I’ve seen on too many fuckboys to count. “About you. Me. I told you, Fallon. You get to choose. I just... I want to make sure you understand that I could be a good mate to you, too.”

Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me.

My stomach flip-flops when I realize he’s dead serious.

“Tristan, I—”

I never get the chance to finish what I was going to say. Good thing, too, because I was kinda stumped there.

The way his smile slides off of his face as he looks over my shoulder at something? Even if I did answer him, I don’t think he’s listening.

Following the direction of his stare, I turn around.

*Lucas.*

Bursting through the woods, wearing his sweatpants and a fierce scowl, it’s Lucas—and he’s running right at me and Tristan.

“Hang on, Luc. You okay? Don’t tell me you’re going to go all beast on us?”

It was a tease. At least, I meant for it to be. If the pack wants to dance around the topic, acting like it’s no big deal that Lucas is cursed to turn into that *thing* every couple of weeks, maybe I’d feel like I fit in a little better if I do, too.

Too bad neither of the two shifters get that I was joking.

Tristan pushes away from the door, moving to stand in front of me. All signs of the flirt are gone as he plants his bare feet on the grass in front of me. “Don’t hurt her—”

Lucas’s eyes go from their familiar amber shade to a molten lava, simmering with fury. His deep voice drops to a low growl. “You dare think that I would?”

Tristan swallows roughly, meeting the Alpha’s stare. “I don’t want to, Luc. But you keep forgetting she’s Fallon. She’s not—”

Lucas narrows his gaze. “Are you challenging me, Tristan?”

“No, but—”

“We’ve already discussed this. You know that.”

“I know about your claim,” Tristan says, purposely dropping his head so that he’s not locking eyes with Lucas any more. “But Fallon hasn’t made her choice yet, has she? Until she does, I want her to know that I’m here for her.”

Ah, crap. Why did he have to bring me into it like that?

Lucas doesn’t seem to like it, either.

“I let you convince me that I needed to give her time after she knew about the curse. I backed off. After I pulled her out of the water and brought her back to the house, I let you sit with her after you chased the witch off. Don’t make me regret that, Tris.”

I blink. Hang on... *Lucas* is the one who rescued me, not Tristan?

“It was my right to do that,” Tristan argued. He didn’t deny Lucas’s claim, I notice, but juts out his chin. “You told us she’s under the pack’s protection.”

“She’s under *my* protection. She’s *mine*.”

Tristan holds out his hands, a warding off gesture. “I want to break the curse as much as anyone. But if that’s the only reason you want to press your claim on Fallon...”

Lucas’s jaw goes tight. “It’s not that. You know it’s not. I’m sorry, Tris, if you thought that Fallon was yours. I really am. But we’ve talked about this.

My claim came first. Until she rejects it, you need to accept that she's mine."

I take a step back. The weight of two pairs of dominant, *expectant* stares made me do it without me even realizing it.

It's obvious what each one of them want from me, but I'm as sorry as Lucas is because this was never a love triangle. Tristan keeps pressing me to choose, and calling 'Fate' may be a cop-out, but Lucas isn't the only one who feels like we're a perfect fit.

I do, too, and Tristan can tell from the apologetic look on my face.

His pretty face goes taut as he dares another glance at Lucas. "She doesn't know better, Luc. She doesn't know *you*, not really. It's not fair. She's not—"

"*Enough.*"

The effect Lucas's bark has on his Beta is immediate.

Tristan cocks his head, a small gesture, but when I remember that these two are shifters, I recognize what he's doing: he's throwing his throat to the Alpha.

He's submitting.

Do I think he's giving up? For all of our sakes, I really, really hope so.

Tristan isn't wrong. I'll admit that. I've only just begun to learn who Lucas Guidry is, and the idea that we're fated mates has done a lot of heavy lifting so far. But that's supposed to be the magic of having that one person meant for you. Once we admit there's that pull, we have forever to get to learn everything about each other.

In the same breath, though, Tristan doesn't know *me*. How could he? I can't shake the idea that I'm a fantasy to him, a woman that he thought he might finally have... only for me to be meant for his Alpha.

Another snarl. "*Go.*"

Tristan doesn't have to be told twice. Without even a backward glance my way, he takes off running toward the trees that Lucas had emerged from. Right as he hits the first one, he shifts mid-stride, falling forward and landing on all four paws. His clothes explode off of his body from the force of the shift, leaving tattered remains to flutter to the grass.

And all I can think to say is, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He's speaking through gritted teeth as Tristan's wolf lopes off into the trees. "I'll deal with Tristan."

"Lucas—"

"He's a good male. A good Beta. The curse has done us all wrong, and

it's my fault. When the time comes... I'll make it up to him."

Well, that sounds a lot better than *I'll deal with Tristan*. I'm not surprised that Lucas is taking all the blame for the curse, either. I've heard him do the same once before, when I was eavesdropping on his conversation with Tristan.

They'd been talking about me then, too, about this idea that I'm Lucas's to claim.

I didn't know what that meant then. Now that I do, I can't help but struggle with something else.

Moving into Lucas, he senses me when I'm about a foot away from him. With Tristan long gone, he turns to look at me. "Yes?"

"I don't... Lucas, I don't understand." I lay my hand on his upper arm, hoping he won't shake me off. He doesn't, and I give him a squeeze. "Question time. Okay? I've got another question. Will you answer?"

"Don't ever be afraid to ask me anything, sucre. In the beginning, I wasn't sure if you'd like the answers, but you and me... we're passed that now. So ask away. I'll always be honest with you... even if you'd rather I wouldn't be."

The one thing I've ever asked for in my relationships was honesty. Finding a lover to stick around when the sex was done was hard enough, but I never compromised on honesty. That's why I ditched my last boyfriend when he attempted to cheat on me with Jeannie. I can forgive almost anything so long as my partner is upfront and honest.

Lucas is... complicated. Should I have ended things between us when I found he was hiding his feral side from me? It was a lie by omission, and a pretty big one. He's a shifter, though. A shifter who was born almost a hundred years ago, and who had no reason to be as honest with me as he was.

I sense he's still holding back on me. He has secrets that hasn't brought himself to share with me yet. A protector through and through, I don't know if he's trying to shield himself or me—but that's a bridge I'll cross when I get to it. If it's another doozy, I'll have to decide if it's a dealbreaker. For now, I'm going to take this supe world with a grain of salt and remind myself that I've left the human world way behind.

If I find out he's hiding anything else from me, I might change my mind, but for now...

"I've heard about the curse from almost the first minute I arrived in Winter Creek. I've been told that I'm supposed to be the one

“The only way for the curse to be broken is if the cursed Alpha finds his true mate and bonds her to him.”

Oh.

The cursed Alpha... Lucas.

His true mate... me.

Oh...

While waiting for my response, Lucas is looking down at me like he's dying to kiss me, but he doesn't want to push me as the fall-out from his confession rattles around my brain.

To save the pack... to save the witches... to save Winter Creek, I have to give myself over to Lucas forever.

And he's so sure that I would never want to that, despite the couple of times we've been intimate so far, and the fact that I'm supposed to be his fated mate, he wants to kiss me... and he isn't sure I'd welcome him.

Welp. Maybe I shouldn't be as into his possessive side as a modern woman, but fuck it. Something about the way he claimed me as his in front of Tristan like that just revs my engine. I'm not ready to promise him forever yet, but if he wants me to kiss him, I'm totally down with that.

I go up on my tiptoes, parting my lips in invitation.

Lucas bows his head. Laying his hands on the small of my back, he pushes me up against him as he takes my mouth with his.

When he finally breaks our kiss—because God knows I wasn't about to do it—he rests his forehead against mine.

“The full moon is tomorrow,” he murmurs.

That's another shifter thing. They instinctively know all the phases of the moon.

At first, I didn't really understand why it mattered. As a shifter, they can go from human to wolf whenever they want, just not when the moon is full. The moon herself is a symbol of their goddess; it's why the wolves call her the Luna. They pray to her, worship her, and if you're like Kirk and Eleanor, they thank her for bringing mates together.

For Lucas, it means something totally different.

“You'll be going back to the hunting cabin, won't you?”

To be the beast.

His hair tickles me as he gives a short jerk of a nod.

“Will you wait for me?” he asks. “Because, I vow it, sucre, I will wait for you as long as it takes.”

He says that like he expects me to find a way to leave him while he's suffering from the curse. A curse that I could easily break if I agree to be his bonded mate, but that he won't ever force me into doing before I'm ready.

Even if I could walk away from him, I wouldn't. In the last month, I've gotten in way too deep. In the last two weeks, I've gotten used to the idea that I'm not going anywhere anytime soon.

And I mean it wholeheartedly as I say, "Always."



# CHAPTER 11

# JOLIE



**L**ucas is still in the house the next morning when I wake up.

I haven't been in Winter Creek long enough to get a good read on his schedule. He mentioned that he would be spending the full moon at his hunting cabin, but I didn't know when he would be leaving. Assuming he'd be gone early, I slept in.

I'd brought up two different romance novels from the library. I planned on heading down to see what Eleanor had made for lunch—since today's her day, and Kirk's on dish duty—and then cozying up in bed, falling in love with my book boyfriends while my real lover was alone in his cabin.

First, though, I hopped in the shower. Standing beneath the spray, I wonder if I should offer to go with him. After all, Lucas said that the beast raged as hard as he did because the human side was preventing it from going after the thing he wanted most.

Lucas didn't have to spell it out for me. When the curse turns him into that thing, the feral wants to fuck. More importantly, it wants me as his partner.

I'm not so worried about that. On two different occasions, I've seen Lucas get enough control to overtake the feral side. First, when he ran off as the beast only to return as himself to cut me down from the tree. Then during the new room, when he shifted back long enough to tell me to 'run'.

He could do it again. I have full faith in him that he could. And while I'm still hemming and hawing when it comes to making our mate bond permanent, if spending the night with Lucas during the full moon helps him get through the curse, isn't that what a good mate would do?

It's an idea, and one I'm thinking about as I get ready. Throwing on a

new change of clothes, I brush my hair, leaving it to air dry as I move out of the bathroom and into my borrowed bedroom.

Just as I'm about to grab the first of the two novels from the nightstand, I notice a manila envelope face-down on the floor. From its angle, it looks like someone must have slid it right under my door.

When? No idea. I can't say for sure that it wasn't there when I hobbled to the bathroom because I had to pee, then hopped in the shower after.

I wonder what it could be...

Swooping down, I pick it up. It's not very heavy, and as I shake it, something moves from one side of the oversized envelope to the other.

Weird.

I turn the envelope over. In case I think it's not meant for me, someone has written my name—*Fallon*—in a flowing, old-fashioned script.

Even weirder.

With a shrug, I undo the clasps on the back. Too late, I wonder if whoever sent this would go through the trouble of, like, booby-trapping the envelope or something. It opens easily enough. Tipping it over, I hold the envelope above my hand so that I can shake out its contents.

Then, when I see what was inside of it, I have to admit there was no reason for my anonymous sender to booby-trap it.

This is a bomb in and of itself.

There are two photographs, each one about wallet-sized. Funnily enough, the photos themselves don't look aged except for a sepia overtone to both of them. It's like someone went and had them printed recently for the express purpose of making sure I see the pictures.

The photos don't look aged. I can't say the same for the subjects.

If I looked really quickly, I'd think it was me. The blonde hair. The gold-colored eyes. The heart-shaped face and the opal hanging around her neck in the photo on top. She's wearing a chiffon-dress that looks closer to a burnt orange in the image, but was probably a peach shade when the picture was taken.

Because why wouldn't it be?

She's not alone in the first picture. And that's how I know it's *not* me. Apart from the face that I didn't take any posed photos while I was wearing the dress Marie made for me, by the time I met Lucas in the woods, my dress was spattered in blood.

The girl in the picture has a pristine dress on—and Lucas's arm slung

over her shoulder.

I stare at it in disbelief. This Lucas... this is the same Lucas who has a portrait hanging in the piano room, from the white collared shirt to the greaser-style hairdo that hides the curls I know and love.

It's the same Lucas I imagined playing the piano for me when I was recovering from the blood ward...

Shuffling that photo from the top to the bottom, I gape at the second photo even longer.

There's that girl again. The not-me. With her blonde hair styled in big, bouncy curls similar to the ones Eleanor wears to this day, pinned back by a pale violent headband that matches her dress, she's not wearing her opal in this picture.

But she is posed side-by-side with Marie Boudreaux.

My grandmother is wearing a gown that looks exactly like one of the cream ones she had on during my stay at the Coven House. Her champagne-colored hair is twisted up in her signature chignon.

As she poses with her gloved fingers clutching the not-me's hand, she's giving a haughty expression to the camera that I know all too well.

My hands trembling and my mouth gone dry, I flip over both of the photos.

I don't know what exactly I'm hoping to find. Just remembering that my mother had a habit of printing out my baby pictures, dashing the time and place on the back, then shoving them in a photo album because she was born in the era where they didn't have phones to keep track of all of their photos... remembering her little quirk has me checking to see if someone else had done the same.

The handwriting is different than the script on the front of the envelope. The letters have a swirl to them, though it's undeniable that whoever wrote the information had meant to do a print style rather than cursive.

*Jolie and Lucas, Winter Creek '54*, written on one. *Grand-mère and Jolie, Winter Creek '54*, written on the other.

The pictures flutter from my fingertips.

*Jolie.*

Of course it would freaking happen to be Jolie.

Silly Fallon. Naive Fallon.

Gullible Fallon.

Did it really take someone vindictively shoving these pictures under my

nose to finally understand what's been in front of me all along?

I knew he had another mate. Shying away from the topic was as much fault as mine, especially when I just assumed that I was his second chance. Deep down, I doubted that I was actually Maria Boudreaux's granddaughter. I guess I thought she made it up, the perfect excuse to get a lonely orphan to come to Winter Creek to break the curse.

Now... not I'm no so sure.

*Jolie.*

All those times, I thought it was a sweet pet name. When I first met Marie and she tucked on 'jolie' in her French accent, I thought she was calling me 'pretty' in that way a grandmother would. Then, later, when Jade did the same thing—a lot nastier than Marie did, to be fair—I took it as just another example of her being catty.

But she wasn't, was she?

She was trying to tip me off without having to pull out the photographs.

What was it she said?

*I don't like secrets.*

Gotta say, the fact that I could be this Jolie's twin is a pretty big one.

LUCAS OR MARIE? THAT'S THE QUESTION.

I don't know where those pictures came from. After I got over my initial shock, I picked them up, stowing them in one of my back pockets. Hiding them didn't do anything to erase what I saw, though, and all I can think is who to confront first: Lucas or Marie?

I have no doubt in my mind who thought it would be funny to slip them into an envelope and slide them under my door. That seems a very *Jade* thing to do. She probably expected me to immediately confront Lucas with what I thought I knew, and the fact that it'll be the full moon tonight is a nod in her favor.

What happened? Her plan to drop me in front of the feral during the new moon didn't pan out so she decided to blow up my world with this perfectly timed grenade today?

She got one thing right, though. Full moon or not, I'm not about to sit on this; literally, since I still have the photos in my back pocket.

I'm sorry. If the only reason that Lucas is so intent on making me his mate is because I look just like the mate he lost? I can't do it. I need love. I told him that from the beginning. I need to be 'the one' as much as I need to find mine.

That doesn't mean that I begrudge him for having a love before me. That would be hypocritical as fuck considering my past. But if he just wants a replacement... I can't do it.

But would I rather take the chance to confront Marie with the photo and see if the witch will tell me the truth. She's already proven to me once that she can lie to me with a straight face and I'd never know. How can I believe she'll tell the truth this time?

After hiding this revelation from me when all I asked Lucas for was honesty... how can I believe he'll tell the truth, either?

Usually, in a situation with much lower stakes than this one, I'd grab a coin from my bag and flip it. Heads, I confront Lucas. Tails, Marie.

If only I had a freaking coin.

I don't. Since Lucas rescued me and brought me back to the pack house, anything I've had belongs to someone else. All my stuff—my phone, my wallet, my ID, my luggage—is back at the Coven House. Maybe that should've been a sign to figure out a way to meet with my grandmother again, but instead of doing that, I finally make a decision on my own.

Lucas.

I'm going after Lucas first.

until after lunch the next afternoon, when Lucas announced he'd be heading to the hunting cabin for the night and that, as Beta, Tristan's in charge.

That's the Alpha in him, I figure. It doesn't matter that he and Tristan were all but at each others' throats yesterday. Today, the pack needs Tristan to step up and, loyal as ever, he's going to do whatever Lucas wants him to.

Jade is out on patrol. As far as I knew, she'd been gone since early this morning, almost like she's trying to avoid the fall-out from her little stunt.

If this goes anything like I'm expecting it to, she'll be happy to be conveniently missing.

As soon as he heads outside, I make my excuses to the table and hop up, running after him.

"Lucas, wait!"

His big back stiffen for a moment before he spins on his heels to face me.

“Fallon? What do you think you’re doing?”

Okay. How to start this conversation?

Before I can, Lucas adopts his familiar glower. “I thought you were going to stay inside with the others while I went to my cabin.”

That was the plan, yeah. “I know. But, um, I was wondering...”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “Fallon, I hope you’re not asking to join me.”

Wait— “Why?”

“If you come with me, I can’t promise that I’ll be able to control my other side.”

“You said you’d never hurt me,” I remind him. “As a wolf or... you know... you said I’d be safe.”

He nods. “I did. But I also told you that the beast doesn’t want to hurt you. Do you want him to mate you? To mark you? Because that’s the part of the curse that really makes me pay. I’m cursed to become fully feral whenever the Luna is control, but I can only finalize my bond with my mate on the night she’s full.”

Don’t be jealous, don’t be *jealous*...

Once I got over my shock of seeing the other me in the photo, it was inevitable that jealousy would set in. This Jolie was the woman that Lucas triggered a seventy-year-old curse over. I’m still not sure about the details—and now that I’ve learned this little tidbit, I don’t think I want to—but this is her. I know it deep down in my gut.

This is the woman Lucas loved, and I can’t help but wonder if she was in my place, if he’d be trying to talk her out of mating him.

What about our first kiss? Our first time fucking? I thought I got past the way his rejection made me feel when Lucas stopped pretending that I wasn’t his intended mate.

Right now? I realize I haven’t, and the surge of jealousy is the catalyst behind everything that happens next.

Dipping my hands in my back pocket, I grab the first photo I can. A quick glimpse shows that it’s the one of Lucas and Jolie.

I storm toward him, shoving it in his face. “If she was the one offering, would you stop coming up with excuses?”

His entire expression shuts down as he plucks the photo from my fingers. His gaze roves over once before his cheeks hollow. “Where did you get this?”

I don’t answer. I don’t have to.

Lucas's eyes flash in the midafternoon sunlight. Disappearing the photo into his own pocket, he rumbles, "*Jade.*"

I don't give one eentsy-weentsy shit that she's in trouble now. All I care about is having Lucas answer me.

"Tell me this, then... if it was possible, would you rather have her back?"

Tact? Sorry. Don't know her.

Lucas blinks, lifting his hand to run his fingers through his hair. "I don't think this is the right time for this conversation."

Of course he doesn't.

Oh, well.

"Did you pick me out to be her replacement?"

That last accusation does it.

With a huff, he drops his hand back to his side. "You want me to answer that? Fine. You're not her replacement. You *are* her."

I'm not.

Taking a step closer to me, his voice dropping, he says, "You smell as sweet."

"Lucas. Stop."

He does.

I don't have the photo any longer, but we both know exactly who I'm asking about as I ask him, "Who was she? And don't be cute."

"Alphas aren't cute."

Right. And humans don't feel the urge to latch onto their lovers and scream 'mine', but I've been struggling with that ever since I got this photo.

"I'm not kidding. I... I need to know. And you promised to answer my questions. Believe me, Lucas... I've never needed you to be more honest with me than I do right now."

That's all I had to say.

"Jolie was my intended."

For a beat, my heart just stops. I knew that. I figured that out the moment I saw the photo... but there's something about hearing him confirm it for me that freaking *hurts*.

"Okay. What about me?"

"I want you to be my bonded mate. I won't back down from that. But, until you wear my mark, you *are* also my intended. Are. Right now, you're the one on the other end of my bond." Right. Because I'm alive and Jolie obviously isn't anymore. And then he adds, "Unless you reject me," and I



latch onto that instead of him.

Reject him? He'd said something like that when he was facing off against Tristan yesterday and I ignored him because it never would've occurred to me to willingly end this thing I have going with Lucas.

Then again, I didn't think he was using me as a *replacement* before now.

"I can do that?"

I'll still be trapped in Winter Creek until I can figure out a way around the blood ward. Considering I was ready to go all the way to the Coven House to confront Marie, maybe I still will. She can wait another seventy years for another Jolie to come along, and I can go back to Manhattan and forget all about Lucas—

"You can reject me," he says again, "and choose another."

Oof. The way my heart seems to stutter in my chest at just the thought of leaving Lucas behind tells me that forgetting him... it's not going to be as easy as that.

But I'm still pissed, so I decide to snap at him. "Why don't you reject me?"

His eyes widen. Holy shit. I actually caught the Alpha off guard.

"I'll never do that."

"Why not?"

"Because the Luna whispered that you were mine and I'm going to believe that until my very last breath. Is that a good enough answer for you, sucre?"

"No," I tell him. "Your moon goddess picked the other blondie for you. Not me. I just happened to have her face."

Lucas closes the small gap existing between us. "Is that what you think? That it's your face that makes you my mate? That it's not your soul?"

Soul... like, what? Is this a reincarnation thing?

I thought it was bad enough that it was one hell of a coincidence that I looked like Jolie. But is he implying that I *am* her somehow?

"Lucas—"

"Fallon Genevieve Witt."

The way he just recited my full name—middle name included—has me stopping my sentence short.

"My mom liked stories about Camelot..." I shake my head. "How did you *know* that?"

"Because that's the name the Luna told me five Lunas ago. But I couldn't

leave to search for you. The curse kept me here, but because of it... I'm not the only one the Luna whispered your name to." He pauses a moment, then admits, " Marie knew."

*Surprise.*

And that's how she found me, huh?

Did she know I would be the spitting image of her granddaughter? Or was that just a happy accident?

Is that how Armand knew to find me? If he had a copy of this photo, it would've been child's play...

"She thought you were Jolie," Lucas says, drawing my attention back to him. "If you want the truth, I see why. Not even counting your scent, you're alike in so many ways. Your looks, obviously. There's how you both love to read. Your favorite meals... Jolie had a fondness for oranges, but her absolute weakness was—"

"Peaches."

He gives me a knowing look. "But if you think I only want you because you're her *replacement*... you couldn't be more wrong. The goddess might have whispered to me that you are mine, but that's not what makes me love you."

Whoa.

"You... you *love* me?"

"Oh, Fallon... from the moment I saw you trying to take my ax off the wall, my heart's been yours. Then I got to see how courageous you are. How kind. Funny, too. The things you say sometime... the way you stand up to Jade... you don't know how many times I had to hide my smile so I didn't give it away too soon and scare you off."

Lucas takes another step toward me. My breath hitches, but I don't move away.

"I love the way you think. Watching your mind work is fascinating to me. Sitting with you in the library... I've never had anyone sit in comfortable silence with me. I'm the Alpha. They're all scared... but you're not."

"Because I'm reckless," I say. "Impulsive." Jeannie's voice echoes in my ear, almost sounding like Jade as I add, "Gullible."

He traces the edge of my jaw with his finger. "You're Fallon. And if you'd let me have you, you'll be mine."

I shudder under his caress. "Do you mean that?"

"I do. Just as much as I mean it when I say I love you."

I want to believe him. He sounds so honest. Genuine, too. More than that, Lucas is relieved. Like this was the last weight on his shoulder, and now that I know all of his secrets, he's ready to give up the last one.

He *loves* me, and I think I do believe him.

That doesn't change the fact that I've known him a month. And while this is one of the longest relationships I've ever had, even I don't throw the 'L' word around that quickly. I've only ever said it once—to Danny, right before I found out he was making moves on Jeannie—and I regretted it.

I don't want to regret anything about Lucas. Not if this is it.

Not if this is meant to be.

So, more hesitantly than he probably likes, I say, "Isn't this... I don't know... kinda fast?"

I was looking for a fling. For a good time. The more I got to know Lucas, to see what a generous, caring man he is, and how good he is to me and his pack... the more I thought, hey, maybe this could be more of a long-term thing.

But *forever*?

"I'm a shifter. When we know, we know."

He's a shifter.

I'm not.

"We don't have to finalize the bond tonight, do we? I can just... you know." I raise my eyebrows at him. "I can keep you company at your cabin."

"Let me make one thing clear. If I mate you on the night of the full moon, I'll bite you, *sucre*. I'll *keep* you... is that what you want? Because with the beast in control... that's what will happen if you come with me tonight."

Is that what I want?

I... I don't know.

# CHAPTER 12

# MARIE RETURNS



If I could believe that it was *me* he wanted, it would be a lot easier for me to make that decision. I wouldn't even need a coin to flip or anything. Following my heart—following my gut—I would just know.

My heart says Lucas.

My gut says protect your heart.

My brain says I'd be an impulsive idiot if I forgot all about the picture Lucas slipped into his pocket with the same hand that he's stroking my jaw now.

As though he can read my mind, he drops his hand.

And he sighs.

"I won't deny that Jolie was my fated mate, but she died the night we were going to mate. All these years, I've suffered when the Luna was here and when she was missing." The full moon and the new moon. "I can exist without the other half of my soul the rest of the time, but not then. I prayed I would see her again. And then, last month, I scented your blood... *her* blood... and I knew you were returned to me."

"But... Lucas, I'm not Jolie."

"I know. You're my Fallon. I waited seventy years, *sucre*. I'll wait as long as it takes for you to believe me. To love me."

It's only after he's left the house without me and I feel the emptiness like an ache in my soul that I have to admit that there's a good chance I already do.

IF YOU THINK THAT I WAS SATISFIED WITH MY IMPROMPTU CONFRONTATION with Lucas on his way to the hunting cabin, you haven't been paying attention.

I didn't follow him. I couldn't.

I know me. The way Lucas confessed his love for me... it was so close to being enough to make me forget how hurt I was when I saw Jolie's face for the first time. He says I'm not a replacement. The supernatural world is so magical and mystical that being a reincarnation... that makes a lot more sense.

Especially when I start thinking about the weird dreams that started after I got zapped with the blood ward...

Lucas was honest with me. In his stoic, Alpha way, he told me everything he could. I'm finally understanding that his type and rank of supe makes him different from anyone I have ever known so it's kinda wrong of me to assume he'll offer me information without me fishing for it first.

He responds better to someone direct. Someone upfront. Only then did he tell me everything I wanted to know... and now it's up to me to sift through it all and decide if his answers are good enough for me.

As much as I don't want to admit it because I just can't bring myself to focus too closely on the *why*, but a part of me... it wants to accept everything he said as truth and let it go.

Luckily that's only a part of me. The other part?

It needs to know the truth. I need to know the truth.

I got Lucas's side of the story—but I still have a second photograph in my pocket.

There had to be a reason Jade went to the trouble of giving me a picture of Jolie and Marie. If she just wanted to throw a wrench in my prospective mating or whatever with Lucas, just the photo of Jolie and him should've been enough.

Am I playing right into Jade's manipulative claws by going off to confront my witch of a grandmother tonight?

Oh, yeah. It's not going to stop me, though.

Knowing that I'm probably about to make a huge mistake isn't going to stop me—but the pretty boy blonde Beta who cuts me off as I try to tiptoe around the back of the house might give it a good try.

"Fallon."

"Tristan."

He takes in my black cape. I'd hoped it would be enough to shadow me while I was walking through the woods, but I didn't account for wolves and the moonlight, huh?

Like everything else in Winter Creek, the moon seems bigger here. Bigger and brighter.

And I only have tonight to do this until the next time the moon takes control over Lucas.

"Going somewhere?"

I don't answer him. "You don't have to watch me. I'm a big girl. I'm not going back to the rope bridge." That, at least, is true. "So you can go back inside and I'll see you later. 'Kay?"

Moving around him, I keep going until I reach the iron gate in front of the pack house.

The *closed* iron gate.

As I look at it, Tristan voice comes from behind me.

"I've only ever wanted to protect you. For my sake or Luc's, it shouldn't matter. You're pack, Fallon. I'll always be there for you, whether you're my Alpha's mate or..."

*Mine.*

Oh, Tristan. I'm sorry, but tonight is not the night to push me on this.

"Yeah?" I shift so that I'm facing him again. "Is that like how you were there for me when you pulled me from the river that night?"

For days now, I've silently stewed over what really happened that night. At first, it was the reveal that a blood ward was keeping me stuck in Winter Creek that kept me obsessing over it. My whole near-brush with death didn't help matters, or the creepy way I woke up to Tristan watching me sleep.

But then, on more than one occasion, Eleanor let slip something... Lucas said something else... and the initial events I had formed in my mind began to fall apart.

I know Remy was there. I heard a howl come from the woods. When I was running, it was obvious that I was being chased and my gut said that it was Lucas as a feral who was behind me.

Tristan told me he saw Remy on the bridge. He said he saw me fall.

But Lucas said that he was the one to pull me from the river and bring me back to the house before Tristan convinced him it would be better if he put some distance between us—and while Lucas was straightening up his hunting cabin, Tristan was giving me every impression that he was the one who saved

my life...

Until now, until I've called him out on it.

Ducking his head, avoiding my gaze, he says softly, "I never told you that it was me, Fallon. Lucas dove in the river as I went after Gauthier. Isn't that good enough?"

Maybe he didn't explicitly take credit for going into the water to get me, but he sure as hell implied it the night I woke up again. At the very least, he didn't correct me when I got the wrong idea—or any time since until right now.

Hey. Not that it matters, right? Whether it was Lucas who saved me from drowning and Tristan who scared off Remy or the other way around, I should just be grateful that I had two guys who were willing to rescue me after I ran.

I should be, and I probably would've been if Tristan hasn't spent the last two weeks flipping between trying to guilt me and trying to convince me that I should dump Lucas for him.

"Do me a favor. Open the door and get out of my way." I was planning on hopping the iron fence, hoping it didn't catch on my black cape, but if he's going to follow me around, the least he can do is make himself useful.

"Can't I explain first?"

I'd rather he didn't. "The fence, please."

He does it. Showing off his shifter's strength, he pushes the fence out. I slip through, expecting Tristan to slip out behind me and huffing under my breath when he does.

"It was my last chance—"

I don't have time for this, but that doesn't stop me from whirling on him. "Okay. Let's get this straight. Am I your fated mate?"

Tristan pauses for a moment. "I... something about you calls to me."

That didn't answer my question. "Lucas said he knew from my scent. That your moon goddess told him that I was born to be his fated mate."

"He's an Alpha. The Luna only talks through those who are Luna-touched and alpha shifters. Not betas—"

Tristan is still missing my point. "Fine. Kirk's not an alpha, is he?"

I think he knows where I'm going with this. "No. He's considered a delta."

"But if you ask him, he instantly recognized that Eleanor was his mate. Right? But you... you can't say the same, and that's okay. This is a fucked-up situation as it is. I like you, Tristan. As a *friend*," I emphasize. "Can't that



be enough?”

Tristan purses his lips. “You’ve made your point.”

I nod at him. Good. “Sorry to be so harsh, but it had to be said. Besides, I’m on a deadline. I’ve gotta be back before Lucas realizes I’m gone.”

I’m banking on him being too distracted with his inner battle and the curse to sense that I’m on the move. I don’t really know how shifter mate bonds work, but if this tug inside of me is the reason why I always seem to know when Lucas is near, I figure it works double for him.

Tristan brow furrows. “Gone? Where are you going?”

I could lie. Will he be able to tell? I don’t know.

And, honestly, I should probably let someone know in case this all goes sideways.

“I’m going to visit my grandmother. Why? Are you going to stop me?”

“Lucas left me in charge. I should throw you over my shoulder and drag you back to the house.”

Once again, his voice takes on that flirty edge... only it’s different this time. Almost like it’s his default, and while I don’t doubt that he’d mate me given the chance, the restrained *want* I’ve grown used to from him is finally gone.

This is the Blondie I can be friends with, though maybe not so soon if he actually goes through with his threat.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I tell him.

He’s a wolf shifter. He might dare.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he says, “Give me one reason why I should let you go.”

Sure. I can do that.

Lucas might have the picture of him and Jolie, but I still have the one that shows off my twin and my grandmother. Pulling it from my pocket, I hold it out so that Tristan can get a good look at it in the moonlight.

For a moment, he stares at the photo, a look of surprise on his pretty features. If I’d even entertained for a moment that perhaps it was Tristan who left me the envelope, that suspicion goes up in smoke when I see the way he’s peering at the photo of Jolie and Marie.

I want to ask him about her. How well did he know Lucas’s former intended? Is there a reason why he didn’t use this as a way to get me to choose him over the Alpha?

I don’t, though. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about the wolves of

Winter Creek, even when Tristan obviously wanted in my pants, his loyalty was to Lucas and the pack first.

Which is why I'm a little surprised when he runs the back of his hand  
"Thanks."

I stick the photo back in my pocket in case I need it for ammo against Marie—if I actually make it to her manor. Then, with a small grin, my cape flapping around me, I start to walk away.

It doesn't take long for me to realize that I have a new shadow.

I glare at Tristan over my shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"I said give me one reason why I should let you go. I didn't say I was going to let you go on your own." Gesturing with his chin, his blue eyes sparkling in the moonlight, he grins. "After you."

AT MY INSISTENCE, TRISTAN STAYS QUIET AS HE GUIDES ME. SO USED TO being in the woods, he knows even better shortcuts than Eleanor does. Even better, he manages to completely avoid passing the hunting cabin.

Smart. If Lucas caught our scent, he would expect Tristan to explain what we were doing together.

In the dark.

In the woods.

Alone.

So maybe I made it clear to Tristan that we're just friends. Will the feral side of Lucas get that? Yeah... it's better all around to take a path away from where the Alpha is currently at.

Finally, Tristan stops me with a quick noise in the back of his throat. He's careful not to touch me, though he does point at an inconsequential rock on the ground. "If you take another step, you'll be on witch territory."

Look at that. The rock has more meaning than I would've thought.

Left unsaid in the silence that follows is Tristan's belief that I should turn back.

He can if he wants. Determined to get to the bottom of all of this tonight, I take that step.

Grumbling under his breath, Tristan follows.

The moment he does, I notice a patch of shadows between two trees

ahead of us. It wavers, then suddenly materializes into—

“Ah, jolie. Welcome back.”

*Grandmere.*

At my side, Tristan growls.

I don't think he thought we would run into her so quickly. As a shifter, he would've spent our trek relying on his nose, but Marie is a witch. I highly doubt she was standing here all night, waiting for us.

If she can build a powerful blood ward, who's to say she can't create a spell that would let her know when one of her enemies—or her granddaughter—crossed onto witch territory.

Maria gives him a quaint smile before turning to me. “Petite fille.” Granddaughter. “Tell your pet to heel.”

Tristan's growl grows louder.

“I came to talk to you,” I tell her, “but if this how you're gonna act, we'd better go.”

It's a bluff. I'm not about to leave that quickly, not without getting what I came here for, and that's assuming that the witch won't use magic against me to keep me in place before I try to walk away.

Last time, she used magic on wolf territory. Just passing back over that line won't be enough.

But it's not necessary.

“Trêve,” Marie says, holding up her hands. “A truce. I've been waiting so long to see you again. Stay. There's a reason you've come back. Tell me. No tricks tonight. See, no knives.” Not that that matters much since I saw her conjure one from thin air before, but still. “I'm alone. I wish you no harm, Fallon. Come. Talk to your Grandmere.”

My head throbs so suddenly, I wince beneath the hood of my cape. What was it? The way she actually called me by my real name now that I know Jolie existed? Or how easily she refers to herself as my grandmother, like she honestly believes that I'm her blood?

Tristan inches toward me, silently checking to see if I'm okay.

I wave my hand. He backs off.

Marie watches with that faux pleasant expression on her face.

Truce, she said. Talk to her?

Okay.

I told myself that, if I ever came face to face with Marie again, the blood ward would be the first thing I asked her about. Even though I desperately

want to ask her about Jolie, I still find myself saying, “Tell me about the blood ward.”

Her lips curve into a please little smile. “You discovered it, oui? My apologies, but I couldn’t risk you leaving Winter Creek with the curse still in place.”

Follow-up question.

“What about the curse? Huh? You want me to break it. How?”

“Fallon—”

“Hush,” Marie says, dismissing Tristan easily with a wave of her hand. “Don’t you agree that it’s time for her to know? To know all of it?”

“Lucas told her enough.”

“Twisted it, I’m sure. Made himself out to be the hero, not the villain.”

“The witches are responsible for the curse,” snarls Tristan. “You’re the reason Jolie died in the first place!”

Oof. Hearing her name out loud is like a punch to the gut.

Marie breathes hard through her nose. “You are wrong. But, in the spirit of our truce, I’ll let that pass. I would still warn you to mind yourself. I want the curse broken as much as any of your kind.”

“Obviously,” I cut in. “I mean, you were willing to sacrifice me to do it.”

“I make no apologies for it,” Marie says, lifting up her hand and patting the back of her chignon. “My granddaughter made her choices as I made mine. I’ve always looked out for the best of the coven. If she’d chosen family over that pack, I could have saved her, too.”

But she didn’t, did she?

“What happened?” I can’t ask Lucas, but maybe it won’t be so bad to ask Marie. “How did she die?”

“Hasn’t he told you?”

No, but that’s more my fault than his.

“It was a long time ago, but I remember it so... so vividly. Jolie... I told her the wolf would be the death of her. She never listened to her Grand-mère.”

“Am I Jolie?”

“You have her blood,” is Marie’s answer. “Do with that what you will.”

Right the same blood that she had Armand steal from me so she could make a ward to trap me here.

Before I can return the conversation back to the subject of the blood ward, a long, drawn-out howl of a warning splits through the night’s sky. I

gasp, thinking it might be Lucas, but as I jerk my head in the direction of the same, I notice something.

“Where’s Tristan?” I ask.

The question wasn’t meant for Marie. Not really. I simply asked it out loud because it’s all I could think of when I turned on my heel that quickly and realized that the Beta was gone.

But I asked, and she answers with a small, secretive smile before she says, “Searching for Remy, I’d assume.”

*What?*

# CHAPTER 13

## FAIR FIGHT



**T**he second howl echoing through the night has me breaking toward it. Was it the smartest thing in the world to turn my back on Marie, racing toward the sound of a distressed wolf? Probably not.

Does that stop me? Not even a little.

Remy... what is Remy doing out here, lurking on the edge of the pack's territory? Granted, I wouldn't be surprised if Marie brought him with her for security reasons, but considering how she has no problem showing off her magic, it's not like she *needs* someone to protect her. She's a powerful enough threat on her own.

If she wanted to attack us, she could've done it while she had us frozen at her whim. She hadn't... and she also doesn't try to prevent me from going as I dart off into the woods.

Why should she? As I follow the howl, coming to a short stop when I break between a closely grown copse of trees, then stumble upon the scene in front of me, Marie glides right up beside me. The skirt on her dress is still swishing as she easily keeps my pace, rustling against my upper thigh as I stare in horror into the clearing.

Beneath the full moon, I see two creatures: one on two legs, the other on four. It's a human figure on slightly bent legs, leaning forward as he jabbed his right arm in the direction of his opponent.

His opponent is—no surprise—a wolf. Sleek and limber with fur that are different shades and hues of gold and bronze mixed, the wolf has its forelegs angled down, hind legs high, prepared to pounce. Its muzzle is peeled back, revealing a pair of sharp fangs as it bares them up at the man.

My heart just about stops when I see the wolf.

Now, Jade's fur was closer to blonde. Lucas and Kirk were both black wolves, though the Alpha's size was much larger than the other wolf. And Tristan...

I asked him once. The night I discovered that shifters were real, I asked him what he looked like in his wolf form. Hands going right to his waistband, he offered to shift and show me. Even then I already had my heart set on Lucas, and while it would've been nice to see what Tristan was packing beneath his sweatpants, I turned down his offer. I never got the chance to see what he looked like shifted.

I think I finally am.

Tristan launches himself at the other man. When he moves, he whips his body around, just managing to avoid being barreled over by the shifter.

The moonlight reflects off of something he's holding, and the gold hoops he has in his ears. His low ponytail spins with the rest of his momentum, wrapping around the side of his neck as he drops into a practiced crouch.

Another stray moonbeam bounces off of the object in his hand. A knife, I realize. That's Remy, and he's wielding a knife like he's prepared to stab Tristan with it.

I gasp.

Marie pats my shoulder. "Be grateful, Jolie. Younger witches tend to need their herbs and the cauldrons to whip up even the simplest of spells. He won't be able to stun your wolf the way I did, so the battle is... mm... somewhat fair."

Grateful? *Grateful?* "He has a knife!"

"Oui. It's silver, too, because what else would one arm themselves with in a duel with the wolves?"

Between the lilt of her French accent, the way she insists on calling me 'Jolie', and her conversational tone, I can't stand it. Having her so close is bad enough, but I desperately want to grab her by her elegant shoulders and give her a shake. I'm watching a knife-wielding witch challenging an oversized wolf, knowing instinctively that a fight like this could easily end in death, and she looks like she belongs at a local tennis match.

It only gets worse when she adds, "I wouldn't allow him the chance to work up a charge. Even a witchling should be able to whip up a defensive spell given enough time."

"Marie—"

She clicks her tongue.



Knowing what she wants from me—what she expects—I almost swallow my tongue in a bid to keep from saying it.

Swallowing roughly, I spit out, “*Grandmere.*”

“*Meilleur.*”

*Better*, I translate, barely realizing I’ve done it. “Please. Can’t you stop them?”

Marie purses her lips, one perfectly manicured finger tapping the bottom one. “Ah, oui. I could. But will I?” She shakes her head slowly. “No. I didn’t order Remy to challenge the mutt. I won’t call him off.”

“No,” I retort, “but you probably gave him permission to jump Tristan like this.”

Because I have no doubt in my mind that what happened. When Marie released her hold on us, Tristan must have caught Remy’s scent on the breeze and gone off to investigate. Too distracted by my grandmother, I didn’t even see him go—and now he’s...

Oh. He’s *limping*.

Did he hit the ground too hard with his pounce? Something tells me that it’s worse than that. That Remy did more damage with his silver blade than Tristan had been able to with his wolfish claws and fangs.

I cover my mouth with my fingers. They’re trembling as Remy calls something out in French. It’s to Tristan, and while I’m not able to translate it, it doesn’t take a native speaker to know he’s egging the shifter on.

Next to me, Marie shrugs. “Remy is coven. I’m the matriarch. It’s how things are done in Winter Creek. Your wolf understands.” She pauses. “Both of them.”

You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me. It’s bad enough I’ve felt like a chew toy between Lucas and Tristan ever since I came to stay with the pack, but even Marie knows that they both think they have a claim to me?

“Besides,” she continues, lowering her hand so that she can gesture at how Tristan finally recovered from missing Remy, digging his paws into the dirt before he wheeled on the witch in spite of his limp. Remy stays poised, knife gripped tightly in his hand as Tristan snarls, the patch of fur near his left hind leg already darkening. “It’s only fair. This is our territory. The Beta chased him off of yours during the new moon. Why shouldn’t one of my boys get the chance to prove himself to my granddaughter on his own?”

Ew. Is that what he thinks he’s doing? And Tristan... knowing Tristan as well as I think I do by now... is probably just being my protector, keeping

Remy away from me.

I need this to stop, even if I have no idea how.

And then, as though she could read my mind, Maria *tuts*. “If you’d rather Remy retreat, make him.”

“What? How?”

I really hope she doesn’t think I should go out there and sacrifice myself to Remy for Tristan—

“Simple, *petite fille*. With *magic*. Unless you’re not the Jolie I think you are, tap into your well of magic and stop this male nonsense.”

If I could, I would. Right now, I’d give anything to be a supe like nearly everyone else I’ve met in Winter Creek if only that meant I could put a stop to this fight. Even from this distance, I can begin to smell the rusty tang of spilled blood in the air. From the way Remy has one arm tucked to his side now, plus Tristan obviously favoring one leg, it could be from both of them.

I’m already going light-headed at the sickening stink. Something about the volumes of it mixing with the earthy overtones found in the woods has my stomach tightening. I want to stop this, but I also have the instinct to flee... and that’s about all I can do.

Everyone thinks that I’m Jolie. Looking at her picture... the way I feel like I might’ve lived her life decades before mine... I *might* be.

But I’m not a witch, and I tell Marie that on a shaky breath.

“So you say. If that’s the case, I hope your wolf can handle Remy’s.”

*What?*

She never moved her hands. I’d kept her in the corner of my eye even as I watched Tristan and Remy circling each other so I’m pretty sure she wasn’t responsible for what happens next.

Oh, no. It’s *Remy* who shifts his silver knife from one hand to the other, then uses his good hand to conjure a ball of glowing white light before tossing it at Tristan.

The wolf yelps. He *yelps*. The sound is painful, but the way he drops on his side is a hundred times worse.

I can’t stop myself from whirling on my grandmother. “I thought you said he couldn’t use magic against Tristan!”

“Ah, Jolie. I believe I told you not to allow him to build up his spell. You can’t fault me for your oversight.”

I want to scream. No... instead of shaking Marie, I want to knock her aside and throw myself into the middle of the fight. If she can be believed,

Remy challenged Tristan because he still has this delusion that I might be into him.

Yeah, right. Even if I hadn't accepted that Lucas is meant to be my fated mate, I'd never want anything to do with the witch who left me tied to a tree, hoping I'd survive the beast in the woods so he could have his shot at me.

But now that he's hit Tristan with some kind of magic that's paralyzed him? I can't stand here and watch him turn his knife on my friend. And considering the witch has already tossed his blade back to his dominant hand before crouching down beside the still and unmoving Tristan, I have no time to waste.

Like before, Marie doesn't stop me as I burst through the trees. She doesn't follow me either, though, and I completely put her out of my mind and I race toward Remy.

Marie seemed to think that—as Jolie—I had some kind of magic to wield. If only. Running on fear and a determination to protect Tristan, I do the only thing I can think of: I instinctively reach for that whisper-thin tie connecting me to Lucas and give it a tug.

After that, I simply shout, "Leave him the hell alone!"

Remy's head shoots up.

He hadn't known I was here; probably because a shifter's nose is amazing, but a witch probably can only scent as good as a human can. As my voice echoes around the clearing, he lowers the hand holding the silver knife the same time as he slowly rises up from his crouch.

"Fallon," he breathes. "You're here."

I am... and I completely ignore him as I throw my body over Tristan's before Remy can react.

If he wants to gut the Beta, he has to get through me first, I think as I jam my ear against his sleek fur, praying for a heartbeat.

*Don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead...*

With my opal digging into my chest, I shift my weight, making sure that any vulnerable part of Tristan is covered. With my hands, I grab fistfuls of his fur, pressing them deep against his feverish skin.

I'm still looking for some sign that he's still alive: a pulse, a heartbeat, *something*. Luckily for me, there's no visible blood on this side—which just means he landed on his injured side—but he's barely moving, and I'm not sure how much of it is from his wounds and how much is from Remy's spell.

It seems like eternity, though it probably was only a few horrifying

seconds, when I finally notice the slight rise and fall of his chest. I shove my right hand in front of his snout, shuddering out a breath of my own when a warm breeze hits my skin.

He's *okay*. Well, maybe not okay, but at least he's *alive*.

Not wanting to crush him, I lift up enough so that he has room to breathe

—  
—and that's when I remember we're not alone.

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you're wondering," Remy says, yanking my attention over to him. "Not that the mutt doesn't deserve to be put down, but I was just showing him what happens when he thinks he can get away with daring the coven."

Is *that* what he calls it?

Remy has moved back a few steps, watching the way I hovered over Tristan with a curious expression on his striking features. He still has the blade, twirling it between his fingers. This close, I can't deny that it's at least eight inches long with a threatening curve to the weapon—and a point that is slicked with blood.

Beneath the moonlight, there's no denying it. My breath catches as I shift again, pushing myself up on a pair of shaky legs.

But I don't drop. My breath catches in my throat, sure, but that's all.

For the first time in my life, the sight of fresh blood doesn't make me queasy or afraid. Oh, no. It's makes me fucking *furios*.

That's Tristan's blood. For no other reason than because he feels drawn to me, my friend protected me against Remy—and he's bleeding because of it. He's *hurt* because of it.

No.

My hands curl into fists at my side. Digging the heels of my strapped sandals into the dirt, I stand next to Tristan's fallen wolf in Eleanor's clothes and her cloak, daring Remy to bring that blade back over here again.

I don't have magic. I can't grow claws or fangs. I'm no supe, even if I might've been a shifter's mate in another life.

I am in this one, too—and while Tristan isn't my mate, he's pack.

And I'm a protector.

"Back off, Remy Gauthier," I tell him. My voice is lower than my earlier shout, and a lot more dangerous. It just seems the right thing to use his full name, too, and if I affect a hint of a French accent of my own as I utter it, I pretend not to hear it. "The fight's done. Understand?"

“Oh, Fallon... or can I finally call you Jolie again?”

I set my jaw. “It’s Fallon.”

And it’ll always be Fallon, if I have anything to say about it.

He nods, conceding that. “You’re confused. The curse... the beast. You forget you’re coven.”

I’m not. “I’m pack.”

Remy shakes his head. “You’re coven,” he repeats, “and once the mutt gets back to its paws, you’ll see how easy they all turn on those that are different. It happened once. You *died*—”

No. Jolie did.

I’m standing here, I’ve got a damn pulse, and a lifetime of memories of my own. Of sitting with my mom, doing crosswords, baking Christmas cookies, watching Jeopardy. Of making friends with the new girl in school, finding out she’s a twin, and becoming the third member of the Lipton trio all through school and college. Of my relationships, my flings, my one-night stands, and how—in less than a month—I’m ready to give that all up for a forever with Lucas.

His left arm is still hanging at his side, fingers on his hand curled inward, almost like he’s babying it. The other holds the knife as he lifts it up, resting the point against his temple.

A flash of recognition hits me as I look at the bloody blade. This isn’t the first time I’d seen one of the witches use it, only last time it was Armand who sliced me up with it, not Remy.

Now he has it, and something tells me that—despite his early admission that he didn’t kill Tristan... *yet*—he would use it on the wolf the first chance he got.

But he doesn’t get one. As he crooks his finger, gesturing for me to come to him, I give him a “you’ve got to be kidding me” look.

“You know this was always going to happen,” he says.

Uh, no. I had no idea.

“Did you forget that you left me for a beast?” I remind him.

“Ah, but I also remember that I told you that, if you survived, I got to have you.”

I step back. “You’re delusional.”

Remy has the nerve to grin. “I’m coven. So are you. And if I have to eliminate every wolf in Winter Creek to keep you, I will.” Gesturing with his knife. “Starting with him.”

I throw my hand out. “Not while I’m here.”

Suddenly, Tristan whines, a soft sound that’s enough to carry over to me. Swiveling to look behind me, relief crashes into me like a wave as I see that the wolf is slowly getting back to his feet.

“Tristan!”

“Get away from him,” snaps Remy from somewhere behind me. “It’s a wounded beast. A monster. If you give him the chance, he’ll go for your throat. Believe me.”

I don’t believe that.

The wolf looks up at me, his blue eyes dazed over. For a moment, he looks up at me as though he has no idea who I am, but maybe that’s just the aftereffects of whatever Remy’s spell did to him. He isn’t showing off his fangs, though he also steps back as though he can’t trust himself to come any closer to me.

He can’t. I can.

Stretching my hand out, ghosting my fingers over the nearest patch of fur I can reach, I wordlessly let him know that we’re both going to be okay before I turn on the witch.

“You ask me, there’s only one monster here and, surprise, it’s not the werewolf.”

His dark eyes flash in the moonlight. “I’m coven—”

“You’re a monster,” I say again, stronger this time. “Who helped my grandmother *tie* me to a *tree*, knowing a feral was after me? Who stood there, watching as she sliced my arm open, spraying my blood all over the damn grass... and then he had the nerve to proposition me before he walked away?”

“Fallon—”

I’m not done. “You chased me. I almost died because you scared the shit out of me on the bridge, but you still think you’re a good guy because you’re ‘coven’”—I use air quotes, a sign that reckless Fallon is in control—“when I’d rather spend the rest of my life as the Alpha’s mate than ever think about having a fling with someone like *you*.”

To my surprise, Remy chuckles.

He actually *chuckles*.

“You’re more Jolie than you think, mon cher. She said something similar when I tried to sway her away from her mate. And then... well, we both know what happened next.” His darkly handsome face just turns *dark*. “It’s

so easy to charm a simple mind. Animals. Humans. Maybe not a shifter... but I've had a lot of practice these last seventy years. Let's give it a try— *wait.*" Remy lets loose a snarl that would rival anything a shifter did as he gestures with his knife. "Where did Crowder go?"

Crowder? Who—

Oh.

*Oh.*

Remy must mean Tristan because, when I forget my head for a second and look away from him, I see that the wolf is just gone. *Again.* He slipped away, disappearing into the darkness, into the trees, leaving me behind with the witch.

Is it because my grandmother vowed that there would be a truce between us? Did he think I was safe on witch territory while he needed to head back to the pack house? Maybe, but I'm not thinking about any of that. Not really.

I'm just thinking that, if Tristan thinks he should be getting the hell out of Dodge, so do I.

So I run. That seems to be my MO ever since coming to stay in Winter Creek. Right now, I'm not even thinking about going to the train platform that is so much out of my reach, it might as well be on another planet. I just want to get away from Remy.

I make a good enough effort. In fact, I probably get about ten feet away from him before something slams in my back, sending me flying forward.

As darkness creeps in, pulling me under as effectively as the blood ward on the bridge, I realize that he must've had enough time to launch another defensive spell. And this time?

I'm obviously the target.

# CHAPTER 14



# GRAND-MÈRE



**T**urning the Gauthier boy down was nothing compared to confessing to Grand-mère that, tonight, I finally leave the coven for my mate and his pack.

She had to know this was coming. From the moment I left Lafayette, joining Grand-mère and the coven back east, I'd been searching for something. A sense of belonging, perhaps, or some affection after my parents' death. The humans in our town didn't understand why a supe female would mourn as much as I did, but when I never expected to lose my family in such a mundane manner, it was inevitable that I'd struggle to hide what I was.

In Winter Creek, I wouldn't have to. Tapping into my father's blood—my grandmother's blood—I could be the supe I was... and that was before I first met Lucas and realized that it wasn't Grand-mère who led me to return to the coven.

*It was the Luna herself who guided me to find my fated mate.*

Only Grand-mère doesn't see it like that. Pacing the length of one of her favored sewing rooms, her heels click-clack across the floor as her skirt angrily swishes around her legs, she alternates between using French and English to tell him how foolish I'm being.

I try to calm her. She's the only family I have left—at least, until my bond with my mate is unbreakable and we eventually have pups of our own—and I don't want to lose her. Grand-mère took me in when I had nothing, and though I've learned that that coven and the pack coexist uneasily in this supernatural sanctuary, I'm willing to be the component that brings both sides together.

*But not if Grand-mère isn't interested in...*

*"Petite fille, my darling granddaughter... it's your mother's blood that's making you like this. Abandon the coven? Forsake us for the wolves? No. Non. I can't allow it."*

*I'm sitting on one of the stools where Grand-mère usually sits, using her magic to conjure dress after dress, relying on her spellwork to build her business at the same time as she rules the coven with an iron fist. She expects me to join her in developing Boudreaux Designs, shipping her magic-made collections all over the world while protecting the secret of the witches in Winter Creek.*

*I would still, if she was happy to see me as Lucas's mate. Since she's not—since she's gone so far as to offend my deceased maman—I adjust the skirt of my peach chiffon dress, purposely avoiding the power in her familiar eyes.*

*When I look at Grand-mère, I see Papa staring back at me. Usually, there is warmth there. Love, too. But tonight?*

*There's a closed-off expression on her face that tells me that I should've waited to have this conversation after the Luna Ceremony was done and I wore Lucas's mark on my throat. Maybe then Grand-mère would see I was serious instead of—as she puts it—being a silly little girl.*

*I'm on the cusp of turning twenty-five. Witches don't have fated mates, and my Grand-mère had seemed surprised that I moved to Winter Creek without a husband in tow. Sometimes I think that's why she was so quick to throw Remy at me. She wanted me to be wed, to be emotionally bonded before I stumbled upon my true mate.*

*Because while my father has the coven in him, there's no deny that my mother—*

*"It has nothing to do with my maman," I argue, rising up from my seat. "I knew from the moment I ran into Lucas in the woods. It might've been fate that drew me to him at first, but it's more than now. It's love."*

*"Love." She huffs. "It's not love."*

*"It is," I insist. Reaching up, patting the opal hanging off the gold necklace Lucas gave me the night he confessed we were fated mates, I tell Grand-mère, "He says I'm the most beautiful female he's ever known. That my scent is as sweet as sugar." I smile, unable to keep my lips from curving. "He calls me 'sucre'."*

*Grand-mère scoffs. "A silly name for a silly girl. Let me guess. You call him your mutt."*

*She's actually not that far off. "Mon chiot," I admit.*

*My grandmother stops. Taking a deep breath, she turns to me. "Jolie... you barely know the wolf. Give it time. This is all so sudden."*

*For her, maybe. For me? It feels like I've known him a lifetime instead of only a few months, and I look forward to learning even more about my mate.*

*"We're fated, Grand-mère." She must understand that. "Just like my parents were. They were happy—"*

*"Oui, until their vehicle exploded and not even magic could save them." With a sniff, she adds, "And if you won't practice your gift, it won't save you, either, mon Jolie."*

*I guess that's it then. Grand-mère will never understand.*

*I'm already standing, positioned much closer to the door than my grandmother is. Heading for it, my white pumps echo across the floor the same way as Grand-mère's stilettos did as she paced earlier.*

*She watches me go, a frown tugging on her lips.*

*When I reach for the doorjamb, I grip it lightly, then spin so that I'm meeting her disapproving look. It takes everything I have, but I give her a smile. "But that's it. I don't need magic. I just need Lucas."*

*Then, before she can lecture me any more, I turn again and slip out into the hall on the manor.*

*"Ce loup sera ta mort," Grand-mère calls after me.*

*She's wrong. I know it intimately. Falling in love with a wolf shifter, being his fated mate... Lucas Guidry won't be the death of me.*

*He'll be the best thing I'll ever have in this life for as long as I get to live it, and with a peek up at the Luna, filtering down through the trees behind Boudreaux Manor, starts tonight.*

# CHAPTER 15

# MON CHIOT



○ of. My head is *killing* me.

There's a throb at the base of my skull that makes me wonder if someone took a mallet to it or something. The only way I know I'm not dead is because it hurts too damn much. The only relief that comes with letting go is that the excruciating pain fades as you do—

Whoa.

Whoa.

Where did *that* thought come from?

I don't know, and I doubt that I want to. Blaming it on the strange dream I'm just waking up from, I shift my hand, bracing the back of my head before I even open my eyes.

As the back of my fingers brush against something made of fabric, the rest of my senses seem to come back on line. I'm awake, even if I feel like I'm hungover, and once I recognize that the very vivid scene I'd envisioned between Jolie and Marie had to be a dream, it's like I'm Fallon again.

I'm *me* again.

And the last thing I remember? Is Ponytail at my back as I was ready to run from him. I'd planned on chasing right after Tristan, returning to the pack before Lucas had any idea what kind of trouble his Beta and his intended mate found themselves in.

But then something slammed into my back. Magic, I figured, another one of those stunner spells that he'd hit Tristan with so that he could turn their "fair fight" into a slaughter. I have no doubt in my mind that, once my grandmother decided to walk about from the challenge between one of the wolves of Winter Creek and her witch, Remy took that as further permission

to use his silver blade against Tristan.

He was on their territory, right? Welp, so was I, and it looked like I became fair game, too.

So what happened after he hit me with his spell? I know I dropped, I know I must have lost consciousness, but now... all I can tell is that his magic has left me feeling like I'd spent an entire night out on a bender, and the most I know is that I'm alive, I'm conscious again, and—from the feel of the fabric I touched and the furniture beneath my back, I'd been moved inside.

*Again.*

Last time, I collapsed after I fell face-first into my spilled blood and my phobia meant my brain just couldn't handle it. But Lucas was right there, my savior and protector even then, and he brought me to his hunting cabin.

Holy shit. Where would Remy bring me?

I purposely keep my eyes closed, just in case he's somewhere near. I don't want him to know that I'm awake; at least, not until I can figure out what my next move is going to be. However, when I breathe in through my nose, trying to calm my suddenly racing heart, I freeze when the stink of *dog* fills my nose.

Because it's not 'dog', is it? And the furniture beneath my back and my ass is familiar because this isn't the first time I ever woke up on this couch...

Quirking one eye open, I wince at the too-bright light coming from the fixture somewhere over my head.

To my right, a chair drags across the floor. A soft snuffling sound fills the space, and as I blink rapidly, trying to get my sight back, the most I can see is a shadowy silhouette of a hulking creature.

No, I amend, as the details fills themselves in. Not creature.

Beast.

*Lucas.*

It's him. The eyes give him away, and even in that mishapen form—with his hands mangled into gnarled paws with inch-long talons, patchy fur covering half of his naked body, scars standing out on his tanned skin, and a pair of fangs jutting out past his bottom lip—I know that it's *him*.

A lump lodges in my throat. For a heartbeat, I'm not sure it's from relief or fear—and then the big monster hedges closer on his big paws and... yeah. This beast is a terrifying mix of the guy I want and the feral side that breaks my heart, but it's so hard for me to see him like this. The rational part of my

brain is saying: he's a protector. He's *my* protector. Even before I knew what I would have to do to break the curse—or that the beast was Lucas at all—everyone made it clear that the feral in the woods only really wanted one thing from me.

And, as a feral, he wouldn't even realize that he shouldn't just take it. In this form, broken as he is, if he wanted to mate, he would... and now he has me on his territory, in his cabin, and he moves toward me with his talon pointed as though he can't resist touching me once he realizes I'm awake.

The rational part of my brain reminds me that I've already slept with Lucas once. If I'd had the chance in the time since, I would've happily jumped him again. Whether it's because I'm supposed to be this Jolie chick or that the shifters' moon goddess decided I was meant for Lucas, I can't deny that I want him.

And, curse or not, this *is* Lucas.

But that's the rational part of my brain. After everything that's happened so far—and me not having any freaking clue how I ended up in the alpha cabin again, with this feral version of my lover stalking ever closer—I found it a lot easier to ignore the rational part of my brain in favor of the much louder *irrational* part that is screaming:

*Scary monster wants to eat Fallon for a snack!*

Worse, as he inches toward me, a whine caught in his throat, his body begins to react. Instead of Lucas getting control over the beast like he did the night I discovered the truth about him, he doesn't turn back to his human self. As his cock twitches, going from a limp dick to a semi in between one step and the next, he's growing aroused.

And the rest of him? He's growing even more animalistic. His cheeks hollow, his nose flattening into a snout, his jaw sharpening into more of a muzzle. His beard becomes thicker. Fuller. Even more fur erupts along the bare patches on his arms until it looks like he's slipped them into the sleeves of a coat.

I swear to God, if he turns around and he has a fucking tail, I wouldn't be surprised one bit. That's how much his wolfish side has overtaken his human half.

He's still on two legs. His claws are sharper, his fangs longer, his pointed ears poking out through his dark curls, showing off the tufts that belong to his beast... but the rest of his shape remains human. His cock is completely hard now, and as he drops to a crouch in front of me, a quick peek over his head

reveals that his ass is surprisingly hair-free—and there’s not a tail in sight.

Lucas is rumbling now. A sound deep in his broad chest, it’s almost like a purr.

I gulp and, pulling myself up in a seated position, placing my sandals on the floor of the cabin, I brace myself to run.

He’ll chase. That’s the thing about predators. As prey, if I run, Lucas will chase—and we all know what happened the last time he did.

*And the time before...*

The voice that pops into my head is mine, only it *isn’t*. A little throatier, a little more mournful, it flutters through my brain, gone before I can really focus on it.

It’s also a distraction, something I don’t realize until it’s too late.

Hot breath fans my face as the beast closes the small gap between us. He has one possessive hand on my shoulder, the heat from his calloused palm a brand on my bare skin.

With a push, he eases me back so that I’m leaning into the couch; my legs are braced against the floor, but with this angle, he opens my midsection up to him. With his other hand, he bats at the afghan, knocking it aside.

Lucas snarls when his claw gets snagged in one of the yarn loops. The frustrated sound reverberates right through, making me whimper.

The beast’s head cocks, his amber eyes unblinking as he stares at me. Without looking away, he flicks his paw, sending the afghan to the floor all while I’m locked in his gaze.

I know I should look away. Right? One thing I learned living among a shifter pack is that the Alpha takes any prolonged eye contact as a challenge so I should look away.

I can’t.

“I’m okay, Luc,” I whisper. “I— *oh.*”

Okay. Might’ve spoken too soon because I’m so *not* okay since he rumbled again before dropping his entire face into my crouch.

I’d meant to reassure him. To let him know that, even in this form, I’m not afraid of him. But there’s a difference between trying to calm him and not being taken by surprise when he buries his nose against my pussy before breathing in deep.

I’m panting, and as much as I’m drawn to the human version of this shifter, I’m not turned out by the feral’s aggressive side. The opposite, in fact, and after a few terrifying seconds when I imagine that this beast *eating* me



has a totally different connotation than from a couple of minutes ago, he draws away.

Did he realize that he might be turned on but that Fallon isn't? Or was Kirk wrong and, even as a feral, my mate is the epitome of control around me?

I have to believe that.

Lucas assured me that he would never take the choice away from me. If we were going to be bonded mates, it would be when *I* was ready to pledge him my forever. Just because shifters went all in almost immediately after they recognized who their fated mate was, he was more than willing to give me all the time I needed.

After all, he waited seventy years for his second chance with his mate. And, thanks to the curse and Marie's blood ward, it wasn't like I was going anywhere soon... so, yeah. We had time.

But as I watch the feral curl up on the floor, the tufted ear tickling my ankle as he nuzzles next to me as though he can't quite stay away, I realize something.

I can't stay away from him, either, can I?

I was fooling myself before when I convinced Tristan that I wanted to confront Marie. That should've been obvious when she actually found us walking through the woods and my reaction was disappointment that she found us before I could find my way to Lucas's alpha cabin.

Deep down, I think I knew that—if I did—I could pretend like it was out of my hand. Fate, right? I'm his fated mate, and whether Tristan came along as a chaperone or not, I doubted that would be enough to stop me.

As loyal as he is to Lucas, it certainly wouldn't be enough to stop the Alpha.

I don't think anything is...

Because I... I belong here. In this time. In this hidden supe town. In this moment with Lucas... whatever happened—whoever I really am or was—it doesn't matter because I belong to *him*.

For as long as I can remember, I couldn't shake the sensation that there was "the one" out there, waiting for me to find him.

Does that mean I'm down to strip and offer myself to this monstrous version of him? Yeah... not quite. I remember, the first time I saw Lucas in this form, I seriously wasn't sure if it would be worse for him to gobble me up or rip me in half with that monster dick. I know I'll have to to bond to him

—to prove to him that I accept every part of him, while also letting him bite me—but there’s got to be a way to have an honest discussion first.

Especially since I’m not sure how well he can consent when he’s this broken creature. Kirk told me once that ferals just take, but if that was the case, I would’ve woken up to Lucas mounting me. Since I’m obviously still dressed—with the same orange and brown afghan tucked around me—and the only part of me that aches is my head and not my pussy, he didn’t take advantage of me while I was out.

Of course not. That’s not the Lucas I’ve gotten to know over the last few weeks—curse or not—and the part of me that thought it was crazy that I felt like I knew him directly after we met... well, maybe that’s not so crazy if we already had a connection in another life.

And maybe it’s even more obvious that we’re supposed to have a connection in this one...

THE FIRST THING THAT I CAN THINK TO DO IS BRING OUT THE REAL LUCAS.

Completely ignoring the fact that this is also the *real* Lucas, I reach down. It takes more nerve than I want to admit to, and my fingers hover over the top of his head for a few seconds before I push myself to make contact, but when I thread my fingers through his curls, I’m immediately thrown back to that afternoon in the piano room.

I’d done something just like this when he had my ass parked on top of the Grand, hands on my thighs as he went down on me. He’d given me permission to grab onto him if I needed to and, oh, had I needed to.

His hair was so soft then. It’s the same now.

“Lucas...”

His wolfish ear twitches. The beast’s big body went still the instant I touched him before he leaned his hand into my hand, almost like he was a big dog looking for skritchies.

I’d mistaken him for a big, black dog before. Back when I was staying at the Manor House and I saw his eyes reflecting up at me in the moonlight, I’d thought he was a stray. I’d saved my scraps for him, having no clue that—in shifter courtship—I was basically letting me know that I was interested.

In a way, I was being his protector. By feeding him, I was at least being a

provider.

And now I'm his mate—or I will be, if Lucas wants to do this.

Keeping my voice low, keeping it soothing, I say, "It's me."

He swivels his head, looking up at me while still keeping his head against my hand. His face, I notice, is different. It's more human than before, and his eyes have darkened. Unless I'm imagining it, there's a hint of his glower starting with the fine lines bracketing them.

No sign of his fangs, though he hadn't completely returned to me.

Not yet.

I move my hand, releasing his hair as I lean further, cupping his cheek.

The powerful Alpha still hasn't blinked. His pupils have dilated, I see, and he's shifted so that he's on his knees. I can hardly believe it. Lucas Guidry is on his fucking knees in front of me, peering up at me as if I hold the answer to his forever in my eyes.

Will I ever get over wondering what he sees when he looks at me? Whether he sees Jolie or Fallon, does it matter so long as I can stare into his amber eyes and know that this magnificent male has always been meant for me?

It doesn't. And maybe that is just me showing how Fallon will always be gullible, but no one had to tell me that I used to be Jolie... well, no. In her catty way, Jade definitely did have to tell me because, without those photos, I doubt I ever would've known... but since my arrival in Winter Creek, I knew there was more to it than Marie finally finding me.

The vivid dreams where I was living part of Jolie's life don't hurt, either

—

Hang on. Maybe... maybe they're not dreams. Maybe they're repressed memories or flashes of another life. Why not? Supes are real. Witches and shifters are real, and vampires are supposed to be, too, thought I've never met one—

*In Lafayette, you have...*

Oh. A flash of a pale Adonis with soft grey eyes, shoulder-length golden brown hair, and pointed canines skitters across my mind before vanishing again.

Okay. Once, I can forgive. That throaty voice popping up again, followed by a face I've never seen before but that I *know*... this is getting weird.

But, then again, it gives me an idea...

I want to bring Lucas back. To discuss the curse and our future with the

man, not the monster, I need *him*—and since my shock seemed to trigger the change last time, maybe if I shock Lucas, I can trigger it again.

My hand is still on his cheek. Purposely keeping up our stare, I lower it until I'm cupping his chin and then, snagging a memory that definitely isn't mine, I murmur, "Mon chiot."

I probably butcher the French. I took it back in high school, but though it came easy to me then, once I passed, I forgot everything I learned about the language.

And, yet, I translate it instantly.

*My puppy.*

To be honest, I didn't really think it would work. I've always been the type of chick who went with her gut. Whether it was flipping a coin or impulsively scheduling a two-week vacation to meet her grandmother, I have a tendency to act first, then ask questions later.

Using Jolie's nickname for Lucas... I didn't think it would really do anything, though my instincts told me to go for it.

And, whoa, were they *right*.

# CHAPTER 16

# CONNECTION



**T**he change is almost immediate. For the first time that I notice, Lucas's shutters his amber eyes, breaking our stare. When he opens them again, I can just tell that he's back in control of his body. How? I'm not really sure, but I *know*.

His bones crack. Throwing himself away from me before rising up on his twisted legs, he keeps going until he's standing straight. His shoulders no longer hunched, his body tanned and muscular and flawless, this is the man that I slept with.

This is the man I fell in love with.

Lucas is still naked. Obviously. Going from the beast to the man didn't provide him with a change of clothes, but he doesn't seem to notice. Instead, he's looking at me with a mixture of wonder and hope as he croaks out, "Sucre?"

Sucre.

*Sugar.*

Lucas's pet name for Jolie—and the one he gave me.

Because he did. From the moment he wrapped me up in his arms, murmuring the name as he teasingly accused me of tempting him before we mated that first time, he called me 'sucre'... the same way he once called the other me that.

And the fact that it feels so... so *right* instead of it being a joking pet name I couldn't understand is the last bit of resistance against this insanity that I have left.

I've been in denial for so long. As hard to believe as it was, I even used the photos that Jade slipped under my door as an excuse that it was all one

big coincidence. I just so happened to resemble the unfortunate woman who was slaughtered seventy years ago, and Marie—grandmother or not—spent the time after the curse began searching for an unsuspecting human woman to take over for Jolie.

But the dreams have only become more vivid the longer I've been in Winter Creek, not to mention the sensation that I'm her *and* me.

What's real?

Lucas is real—and, right now, that's all that matters.

Especially since he's standing there, no longer the beast but the stoic Alpha I can't keep away from, and he's still watching me with an expression that's a mixture of hope and awe, trepidation and something that is so heartbreaking, I suddenly can't stand to keep meeting his gaze.

Of course, the alternative is dropping my line of vision to his sculpted chest or—eep—the rest of his naked body, and I find myself locking eyes with the taxidermied wolf head on the wall.

My stomach drops. The same weakness I experience whenever I accidentally see blood rushes through me, only fading slightly when I rip my attention away from the wolf's head and back to the wolf in human form looking in front of me.

He moved again. Like a damn cat, I didn't see him shift or hear a creak on the floorboard as he lowered himself back into another non-threatening crouch, but suddenly he's *right freaking there* and it's all I can do not to choke on my sudden breath.

And then he murmurs, "You know?," and I almost stop breathing.

Woof. *You know?* That's a loaded question if I've ever heard one—and I hesitate to answer it.

What do I really know?

"A little," I hedge after a few heavy seconds.

"You called me 'mon chiot'," he points out, gentling his voice as though he can tell that I'm definitely on the edge of freaking out.

Which, okay, I totally am. A minute ago, reckless Fallon thought she'd wait until Lucas was *her* Lucas again and then see if he still wanted to take her as his mate. But now... if he doesn't, if he rejects me again, I don't know how I'll survive.

I made it twenty-five years without him. In less than a month, I can't imagine being without him. If this is what it's like to be a shifter's mate, I get why Eleanor and Kirk are still so lovey-dovey after seventy years.

Just like I get why Tristan mourns what we could've had if I wasn't born to be Lucas's—and why Jade will always consider herself my enemy because Lucas was born to be mine...

I nod. "It's the only thing I could think of to bring you back to me."

"Bring me back... how did you know?"

How to explain? "I... I just did."

"Only one soul has ever called me by that nickname and I..." Lucas gulps. Hypnotized, I watch his Adam's apple bob with the action. "I never told anyone."

Oh, boy. It's one thing for me to confront him with Jolie's photograph and ask him about his feelings for her. It's something totally different to let slip my suspicion that our likes and our scents and our appearance isn't just one wild coincidence like I wanted to believe.

I have to change the subject. Not only because I just... I can't think about what it means if I'm not just Jolie's twin, but truly his lost mate herself... but also because Lucas's naked body is a temptation that I really need to resist right now unless I want to jump right into mating without the two of us really hashing out what it would mean.

He told me that, during the full moon, he wouldn't be able to control himself. I already showed him that he can. The beast went from a slobbering monster to a lap dog, and when I used his old nickname, he came back to me.

Will his control hold, though, once I'm as naked as he is?

Good question.

Nudity might not be a big deal for shifters, but I'm not one. I'm human—at least, I'm pretty sure *I* am—and I have two instinctive responses to seeing a naked man: either he's a threat and I start reaching for my mace, or my body starts creaming itself, readying my aching pussy for sex.

Since I first woke up to find him watching over me while I laid out on his couch, unconscious, I've only ever been attracted to him. With his shifter senses as amazing as they are, no doubt he can scent me growing wet, even after everything that's happened tonight.

I guess that's fair, though. He can use his nose to figure out just how badly I've always wanted him. With not a stitch of clothing on him—and none of the feral's fur concealing his body now that he's struggling to keep to his human form—there's no denying that he's primed for sex, too.

*If I mate you on the night of the full moon, I'll bite you, sucre. I'll keep you... is that what you want?*



I couldn't answer him before. Maybe eight hours later now, and if he asked me that again, would my answer be the same?

I... I'm not so sure and *that* is another reason why I have to focus on something that isn't his hard chest, his even harder dick, and the dawning realization that he waited seventy years for his true love to return—and even then he's not pushing me to accept him as my mate before I'm ready.

The most he did was let me know he'll be ready for me when I am...

Hopefully, he still means that.

For now, though, I was in need of a change of subject. I've got one now.

"How did I get here?" Now that he's able to communicate with me, it's about time I ask that. "I was out in the woods and..."

For a moment, I believe that my innocent question was enough to trigger the change again. Lucas's shoulders tighten, the cords on his neck standing out as he grits his human teeth.

And then he blows the breath out of his nose. "You called to me. I answered."

I *what*? "How?"

Lifting his folded fist, he taps the space between his nipples. "Through the promise of our bond. Our mate bond. You called to the beast, and even as that *thing*, I knew my mate needed me so I went."

Oh. When I instinctively yanked on that tie I felt stretched out toward Lucas... he actually felt it? Not only that, but even on the night of the full moon, he collected himself enough to come save me?

It's like that night in the woods all over again. Since learning Lucas's secret, I tried not to think about it too much—and I'd be a liar if I said I was successful. As the feral, he followed the scent of my blood like Marie intended him to, but only after I screamed bloody murder did he leave... and then come back in time to present himself as the gorgeous huntsman who rescued me.

Remy hurt me again, and Lucas came to save me...

"I met Tristan when I was almost to you," he adds, answering my unspoken question before I had the chance to ask it. "He was coming to get me when I felt pain so deep in my chest, I lost all control of the feral. After that, all I remember is finding my mate on the ground with another male hovering over her."

Either Remy hesitated or Lucas arrived right after the witch hit me with his spell.

*Good.*

“He wasn’t pack,” Lucas continues. “That’s all that mattered. He was standing between me and you so he became an obstacle. Tristan went back to the house to let the others know that, Luna damn it, the witches went too far again. I brought you here.”

“And Remy? What happened to him?”

Lucas lifts his chin. “I don’t know. He was breathing when I left him.”

Considering I have no doubt in my mind that Remy would’ve killed Tristan given the chance—and I don’t want to think about what he would’ve done with my unconscious body—I can’t find it in me to care if he still is.

“He hit me with some kind of magic,” I explain. “That was probably what you felt.”

“I know. Bastard was trying to rip our bond apart. He didn’t realize that it’s been a part of us for longer than he could ever guess. Unless you reject me, it’s not going anywhere. And once we’re bonded? It’ll finally be permanent.”

Actually, I don’t think that’s right; the first part, at least. From what Remy said, it’s not like he thinks I only just met Lucas. Though he might have pretended like we’d never met, or that he never knew Marie’s granddaughter, I’m pretty sure he mentioned Jolie.

In the back of my mind, something is nagging at me. Something he said that didn’t seem so important at the time, but now—

Crossing his arms over his chest, Lucas finally turns his head, giving me his profile. “But since that’s not going to be tonight, you should go back to the pack house.”

Wait—*what?*

That was the last thing I thought Lucas was going to say. For a moment there, I thought we were on the same page about throwing caution to the wind and accepting that we’re meant to be—hoping that everything will work itself out later—but I guess not.

Flustered and more than a little bewildered, I ask, “Are you trying to get rid of me? *Tonight?*”

“It’s still the full moon. You were only out for a couple of hours and, by now, the Luna’s at her height. I’ll shift to my wolf if you want, trail you back to make sure you’re safe, but you shouldn’t be here.”

“What if I want to stay?”

His gaze slides over to me. “Why would you want to do that?”

He knows. I'm certain he does... but he wants to hear me say it.

Fine.

"You asked me before if I was ready to finalize this thing if I followed you to the cabin tonight. I didn't know how to answer before, and I didn't even get the chance to go to you. You found me... but that makes me finally deciding what I want even easier. It's you, Lucas. I want *you*."

His body goes tight; it's not just his jaw now. Lucas sucks in a breath, holds it, then shudders it out as he turns so that he's facing me head-on again. "You don't know what you're saying."

I pretend to think about it for a second. Then, after palming my opal for a little boost of seductive nerve, I run my thumb down my cleavage. His eyes are riveted on the path of my finger as I dip beneath my boobs, trailing my belly before reaching the waistband of my borrowed shorts.

Lucas is leaning toward me as I flick the button on the jeans. "You see, Luc, I'm pretty sure I *do*."

He swallows. "Fallon... you have no idea what you're doing to my control right now."

Considering his big hand just dropped to his groin, roughly palming his erection as he licks his bottom lip, I know that, too.

Here goes nothing...

Taking the zipper between my fingers, I tug it down.

His nostrils flare.

*Gotcha.*

Now, I'm not trying to take the choice out of his hands... paws... whatever. He's made it clear repeatedly that a mate gets to choose. Tristan did the same. That means that he gets to choose, too.

I just want him to know that I'm an option.

If he didn't scent how much I want him earlier when he stuck his snout in my crotch, that's understandable. He was the beast, and I was trying to make sense of how I ended up in his clutches. But now that he's Lucas—*my* Lucas—and I can keep him like I promised... there's no denying my arousal, especially to his sensitive shifter's nose.

Lucas trembles. One hand stays on his cock, while the other reaches for me.

He can't quite touch me. Of course not. There's at least five feet separating us.

Or, there *were*.

“Oh, *sucre*... walking toward me like that when you should *run*.”

Putting on as brave a face as I can muster, I rise up on my tiptoes even as he continues to manhandle his cock. “I’ll only run if you promise to chase me.”

Lucas groans. “You’re playing with fire, *sucre*. You know that, don’t you?”

Yup. I totally know.

And it’s about to get a whole lot hotter.

Slipping my questing fingers between our bodies, they brush the back of his, inches away from his cock. I won’t just grab him, though. I won’t just touch him.

But I will ask for permission.

“Can I?” I whisper huskily.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he lets go of himself. Opening his arms wide, giving me full access to every inch of his body, he rumbles, “Ah, *sucre*... in this life and every other, I’ve always been yours. You never have to ask.”

In that case...

I cover the head with my hand, laying my fingertips on his overheated flesh.

Lucas rumbles something under his breath as I circle my fingers around him, dragging them down his length, but I’m too distracted by his body to pay attention to what he said, especially when he starts bucking his hips.

I squeeze, going as tight as I can as I stroke a little faster.

Is it because it’s the full moon? Or because he has seventy years of pent-up need to work through? Fucking once couldn’t have been enough to get all of that out of his system, and he’d been careful not to corner me since his rejection after made me feel like utter shit.

Whatever it is, I’ve barely started—and I only just began to fantasize about going to my knees and finally finding out what Lucas tastes like—when he gasps, hot come spurting out of his cock, spattering all over my hand as he shudders beneath my grip.

Once he’s finished, Lucas rests his forehead against mine. “*Sucre*...”

I slow my pace, enjoying the feel of him in my and when I realize something that has my heart skipping a beat in pure anticipation.

“You’re still hard.”

Lucas pulls away from me. For a second, I think I imagined him coming

as hard as he did before I recognize the scent of spunk in the air, and realize that my finger's are gliding a lot easier against his skin courtesy of the makeshift lube.

I want to keep going, but Lucas... he seems embarrassed.

No.

Worse.

He seems like he's already about to close himself off.

Holy shit. I swear to God, if he rejects me again, I don't know *what* I'll do...

I wait.

He sighs.

"It's the full moon," is his only response as he takes my sticky fingers away from his erection, folding them in his hand.

"Human," I remind him. Because, until proven otherwise, I'm clinging to that shit like a lifeline. Being a shifter's fated mate? I think I can handle that. Finding out I'm a supe, too... yeah. That's gonna be a no. "You're gonna have to give me a little more to go on than 'it's the full moon', Luc."

He squeezes my fingers, as though he still needs the connection. *Phew.* "The Luna urges all bonded shifters to claim their mates. Just knowing that you own the other half of my soul... my body knows you're mine. That's you've always been mine. It wants nothing more than to cover yours, filling you with my come, covering you in my scent... but it's the full moon," he says again. "The curse compels me to be the beast. I can hold it back for a little while, but if I mate you the way I want you, I won't stop until I bite you."

"Okay."

He blinks, stunned. "What?"

Did he not hear me?

"I said 'okay'."

He wants it. So different than rejecting my advances and telling me that we shouldn't be doing this... he's basically vibrating in place with how bad he wants to continue this.

But, because this is Lucas, he won't stop until he tries to talk me out of it for my own good.

"What about the beast?" he says. "He'll have to bite you, too."

I kind of figured that.

"Marie said I had to tame the beast to break the curse. Maybe that's what

she means. Tonight... instead of running from your feral side, I think..."

I think I'm supposed to *fuck* it.

I don't say that part out loud. It's not necessary.

Lucas knows exactly what I'm thinking—and he dips his chin to his chest. "You don't have to do this. We can wait. I told you that. I'll wait forever to prove that I'll be the best mate to you... so don't think you have to do this tonight."

Oh, Lucas. You're the one you said you like how honest and open and *modern* I am. The night I basically seduced him in my bedroom, making him mine to prove that I could... it was easy to forget how different we are.

I'm a human—I think.

Lucas is a shifter.

I'm from the modern age—maybe.

Lucas... isn't, but those differences doesn't seem to bother him.

And, welp, modern chicks... we own our sexuality. I always have, and while my years of banging guys and chicks just for the fun of it—and because I never knew if they might be 'the one'—will be done and over with once I make this official with Lucas, I'm surprisingly cool with it.

"I know. I don't have to. I *want* to."

His eyes flash. "Fallon..."

My name is a groan in his deliciously deep voice.

I was already a done deal. Even if Lucas decides that sex is all he wants right now and that he's not prepared to finalize this bond between us, I'd take it. When I expected we would be nothing but a fling, that still didn't stop me... *twice*... and now that I finally accept that we're meant for forever?

I want to. I want *him*.

But I'd be lying if it wasn't the heat... the need... the devotion in the two syllables of *my* name—not Jolie's, not *sucre*—that really has me ready to initiate here and now.

I have a better idea, though. A way for me to feel like I'm in control, and to show Lucas that this isn't just a pity fuck or me giving into my lust like I've done before leaving the two of us unsure how to react around the other when it's done. Tonight, I know for sure what I'm getting into if we go through with this, and if he'll trust me with this, I'll do everything to prove to him that I trust him, too.

Moving into him, I grab his biceps. Instantly, his big hands land on my hips.

I grin.

“Got a question for you.”

Matching my grin, my intended mate rumbles, “Of course you do.”

It’s okay. I think he won’t mind answer this one.

“Do you have any rope?”

# CHAPTER 17



# TOGETHER



In one hand, I'm holding the length of rope that Lucas scrounged up from the closet of his alpha cabin.

In the other, I'm clinging to his as he stalks forward, clearing the path in front of me so that he can lead me through the woods.

Before we headed out, he gave me at least two more chances to change my mind. By the third 'no', the Alpha nodded his head, giving me his naked back, then held out his hand.

My nerve—and my resolve—is tested immediately. The second we move outdoors, the Luna's shine seems to find him, making his tanned back glow as though she's already giving him her blessing; at this point, I'd believe anything when it comes to a supe's ability and traditions.

Without my cape, I shiver, though that might have more to do with anticipation rather than the temperature. I purposely left it behind in the cabin because, well, if I go through with this, I'm going to be naked sooner or later. I might as well keep the cape safe.

It's for the same reason that Lucas didn't bother getting dressed. He knows what we're going out into the woods to do, and though I didn't have to spell out every detail of what my plan with the rope is, he knows.

He knows—and he's more than eager to let me have all the control.

I don't want to go too far from the cabin. For one, it's pretty freaking cold out. I should be warm before I know it, but how long will that last? No. Heading back when we're done is part of the plan.

The other reason is purely selfish. This is my male. My mate. I've learned that you never know who could be out there lurking in the woods and, sorry, but I'm the only one allowed to drink in his beautiful body.

Even if he's that monster, he's mine, and by the end of tonight, I'll have the mark on my throat to prove it.

Lucas, however, has one tiny suggestion. When he mentioned after he found the rope, I couldn't find it in me to shut him down.

And that's how we found ourselves standing in front of the same tree that Marie had Armand and Remy tie me to a month ago. Only, this time, it's Lucas who puts his back up against, rumbling deep in his chest as I quickly wrap the rope around him.

My knot is shit. Way I see it, it doesn't really matter. With his strength, the rope isn't really holding him back. Nope. It's more of a reminder that I'm trusting him with my body tonight. If he pushes against the rope, I'm hoping it'll serve as a quick check to keep him from turning too quickly.

It's inevitable that I'm fucking the beast tonight. Thankfully, I got a better look at him earlier tonight. Maybe it's because I've gotten to know Lucas—to love him—that his feral side doesn't seem as monstrous as I remember.

He's more man than wolf in that shape. Standing on two legs, with two hands, and a cock that might be a little bigger than normal but still one that belongs to a human... I can do this. To keep Lucas, I'll have to.

Once I finish, I look over my handiwork.

Okay. That's a lie. What I really do is stare at his cock.

He already blew his load once in the cabin. It didn't do a damn thing to take the edge off which, I admit, might work in my favor.

To bond me to him, he needs to fuck me under the full moon and bite me before he's done. Lucas pointed out I didn't need to take it so literally when I suggested we head outside, but he didn't argue one bit.

It's the wolf in him, I bet. He wants to mate me with the moonlight bathing my skin, even if he didn't come out and say it.

I'm not looking for leisurely love-making. It's not even about breaking the stupid curse, either. I mean, that's part of this... but, more than anything, I have this strange urge inside of me to make Lucas mine as fast as possible.

It's a compulsion. A *need*.

A desire I can't resist, and one that I don't as I shoot my hand out, massaging the head of his cock, gathering the bead of pre-come that's settled there.

Oh, yeah. He's ready to blow.

Good thing, too, because so am I.

At the first brush of my finger against his overheated skin, my mate

groans.

“Fallon. Don’t tease. In the name of the Luna, don’t fucking tease me. If you want to play, here.” He holds out his hands. “I’ll hoist you up. Sit on my face, wrap your legs around the tree... if you don’t want to mate right away, let me taste you.”

Lucas, I’ve learned, is a generous lover. If I let him, I don’t doubt he’d spend hours licking my pussy before I got a turn to play with him. Both times we were intimate, he worshiped me with his mouth while playing with me with his fingers. I only got a turn to find out what his cock tasted like last time, and I never got the chance to suck him off because he was so desperate to shove himself inside of me.

Tonight, all I want is the sensation that I’m full of him. He can go down on me later. I’m sure I’ll want to do the same to him.

But first...

I lean into him, going up on my tiptoes so that I can steal a quick kiss from him.

If I had any doubts that Lucas is in control, they’re gone by the time he deepens the kiss, taking my mouth as gently as possible for a shifter used to a mouthful of fangs.

When I pull back, he still looks like his human self, except for the inch-long claws that are curving over his fingertips.

He’s a master with them. It just goes to show how much I trust him because I don’t even flinch when he uses them to reach out and slice my shirt and my bra to ribbons. He comes within a centimeter or two of getting my actual skin, but he doesn’t.

And, whoa, that’s so fucking hot. Lucas is so desperate to get me naked that he took matters into his own claws.

“Off,” he barks, showing a mouthful of fangs with the command. “Please.”

Have I told him what it does to me for this big Alpha to beg? I have him tied to the tree, and though I know he could break through the binds easily, just the fact that he’s submitting to *me* as me more than willing to comply.

I don’t bother with the ruined tank top. He cut enough that my midriff is puckered skin, aching for his touch. Remembering how he shoved my bra out of the way the first time we mated, I do that. My nipples go hard with the first gust of wind—or maybe that’s from the heated look of desire that crosses his face as his predator’s gaze as he locks on my tits.

“I want you. Come to me, sucre. You taste so sweet. Give me *more*.”

He’s panting. His back up against the tree, it looks like it’s taking every ounce of effort he has not to lunge for me.

“I will,” I promise. “Just let me—”

The button on my shorts is still undone. So is the zipper. All it takes is a quick tug and a couple of shimmies and I’m naked

Lucas throws his head back and howls.

It’s such an animalistic sound, I stop to see if it’s going to be his gorgeous, flawless face peering at me when he finishes his howl.

It is, and the look of hunger twisting his features has my pussy clenching.

Here goes nothing.

Moving so that I’m right in front of him again, I hold out my arms.

“Okay. Do it. Hoist me up,” I tell him.

Lucas doesn’t hesitate. I purposely didn’t tie the rope around his arms the way that Remy did to me so he has full use of his upper body. The rope itself crosses over his navel. In the position, his erect could rub against the rope if I grabbed it and yanked it back.

As he lifts me easily off the ground, I grab hold of his cock. I’m pretty sure he was going to go ahead and lift my pussy up to his mouth, but I have a different idea. I only told him to hoist me up because, as often as I fantasized about climbing Lucas like a tree, it would help if I actually knew how to climb.

Since I don’t, I use Lucas’s strength to my advantage. When he has me high enough that I can wrap my legs as far around Lucas and the tree as I can, I squeeze his cock like it’s a freaking emergency brake.

“That’s it, Luc, baby,” I purr.

“Fallon?”

I guess he really never thought I was just going to go for it.

Silly Lucas. Don’t you know *Fallon* by now?

I shift my hips. Wordlessly following my leads, he moves his big hands, careful not to cut me as he slides one hand down from my pit to the underside of my thigh. Once that’s done, he does the same with the other, only pausing to give my tit a delicate squeeze of his own.

With both hands under my legs now, he has me spread wide open. His eyes seem to glaze over as he glances down. I can only imagine what it does to see how damn wet I am already. Even in my tight grip, his cock pulses and I know that he’s ready.

I am, too.

It's a little awkward, trying to line up our bodies while he's tied to a tree and I'm two feet off of the ground, but where there's a will, there's a way, and the miracle of this position is freaking *gravity*.

That's right. As soon as he lodges the head of his cock inside of me, I inch a little forward and, look at that. Gravity takes over and I'm fully seated before I know it.

The bond won't form unless he bites me. In the back of my mind, I remember that, just like I remember how much is at stake. But that's in the back of my mind.

In the front of my mind?

Is how fucking amazing this feels.

It gets even better, too. Lucas starts out slow, rocking up into me as though he doesn't want to frighten me off. To show him that he has to work a lot harder to get me to change my mind, I kiss him again.

And, okay, I might have bit his lip. When the rusty tang of blood hits my tongue, for the first time in my life, I'm not afraid of the stuff. I tell myself it's because it was an accident, that I didn't mean to do it and my phobia is only really triggered when I *see* the stuff, but none of that matters. I kiss him again because all I can think is *more* as I bury my fingers into his curls.

That's all the permission Lucas needs to take off the kit gloves with me. I go from a gentle thrusting motion to a genuine fucking in a heartbeat, and that's nothing compared to how forcefully he buries his face in my chest.

I'm already keening by that point. As his warm breath heats up my skin, I pant a little harder, letting out a soft moan when Lucas trails one of his canine fangs around my nipple before sucking the whole fucking thing in his mouth.

I've always loved it when someone plays with my boobs, no dick required. Throw in the possessive way he's pounding into me as he twirls his tongue around my nipple and, holy shit, I'm about to go off.

Can he tell? I think he can because, suddenly, he pulls his face away. I have only a split second to see the look of wonder—the look of *need*—crossing his face before he lets go of one of my legs.

One slice through the rope and Lucas is free. Too lost in the feel of his body bucking up into me, I barely notice until he shifts our bodies so that I'm the one pinned up against the tree.

The trees keeps me from even attempting to avoid the onslaught of pleasure. He has one hand on my ass cheek, the other cupping my boob, as he

pistons his hips, chasing his climax.

Good luck, Lucas, because I'm just about to hit mine.

"Fuck me," I whimper. "Take me, Lucas. Harder."

He does, and with a flick of his claw against my nipple, he sends me over. The orgasm crashes into me as I reach out, digging my nails into the side of the throat so that I have something to hang onto as I ride out my coming.

As I squeeze him, Lucas lets out a howl that sounds more wolf than man. I didn't realize that I had closed my eyes sometime during sex until I open them at the sound.

His face has gone taut, fangs overhanging his bottom lip. He's still Lucas, but one look in his eyes and I know he's hanging on by a thread.

I'm right.

"Fallon... I can't hold back anymore. He... he wants his turn."

It takes everything I have not to tighten up at his admission. To be pinned to the tree, his big body holding me up as my legs stay intertwined just above his ass... I'm already as vulnerable as I can get, and that's not counting that I'm only just coming down from my orgasm.

Then again, I knew what I was getting into when I initiated sex with him. I told him I trusted him as we walked through the woods.

Welp. It's time to prove it.

"Go ahead, baby," I say, my voice hoarse. "Make me yours."

Lucas has an impressive enough girth when he's hard as a man. Burying my face against his shoulder so that I don't have to watch his body break again, I know when the beast is in control because I'm so stuffed full of his monster dick, I can barely ride him.

I don't have to. It's no wonder he switched out positions, using the tree to trap me between it and his body. Unlike Lucas, his feral side isn't trying to make this good for me. He's not hurting me or anything, but trying to lead me to another orgasm... I don't think that's going to happen until Lucas is back.

Because the beast? It just wants to *rut*.

There's no other way to explain it. With my face hidden in his furry shoulder, he uses his fangs to slice into the point where mine meets my neck. Even without the tree, he's pinned me on his fangs and his dick as he grunts around a mouthful of my flesh.

It... it doesn't hurt, though. None of it. Not his fangs digging into my skin, or the huge fucking cock that is barely moving inside of me. Because I've already come once, my body is sensitized, and his much bigger body is

finding spots on mine that have my legs starting to shake.

Another grunt. One big push and I'm biting down hard so I don't scream. It would be from pleasure if I did, but I don't want to give Lucas the wrong idea.

And then, as quickly as the beast took him over, my mate is back.

His bones crack. I didn't notice it before, but the sound echoes now as I slide down the tree, my weak legs scrambling to wrap around his trimmer waist.

At the same time, he lets go of my shoulder, perfuming the air with my blood. My blood and the overwhelming scent of our mating as he bucks up into me again and, with the fervor of a male who's waited seventy years for this moment, he roars out his own release.

## EPILOGUE



**L**ater, I'll wonder why I thought it was a great idea to allow Lucas to pin me against the tree like he did.

I mean, I can explain it away as a female empowerment thing. One of the only humans I've come across in Winter Creek, it's always irked me how everyone seems to think I need their protection. Back in New York, I was good with a little self-awareness and my trusty mace, but in the supe town? It was like they all expected Fallon to crumble at the first sign of danger.

I should get a pass when it comes to being tied to a tree. That wasn't me being reckless; I was just a naive idiot who trusted her estranged grandmother wouldn't betray her the way she did. After that, though? I've faced ferals and jealous packmates, witch's with a grudge and the promise of a monster dick.

Is that why, once I first climbed up on top of Lucas's beastly side, I was a-okay with him breaking through the ropes and using the tree to keep me right where he wanted me?

Oh, yeah. I can't really deny that, can I?

Too bad my poor back is all tore up now. It's like rug burn to the nth degree, and I'm probably not doing any scrapes and scratches any favors by curling up with Lucas among the leaves, letting his body heat warm me up outside instead of insisting we return to his hunting cabin.

I can't find it in me to care—until the late October breeze shifts and it isn't the chill it brings with it that catches my attention, but something completely different.

You know how they say that something simple can trigger a memory?



Like the first notes of a song, or a scent?

That's what happens to me. The wind brings a whisper of a new scent over the potent aromas of our sex.

Cuddling up next to me, I don't think my mate has noticed it yet. Even if it belongs to a member of his pack, I can't imagine him being okay with one of the others sneaking up on us on the heels of our bonding.

I don't just notice it, though. It calls to me in a way similar to how I felt drawn to Lucas, and while I know it isn't his scent that has me parting my lips, sampling the taste of it on my tongue.

I can't quite place it. It's a little bit sweet, a little bit peppery almost, with an earthy undertone that has me slipping out from under Lucas's embrace and quickly leaping up to my feet so that I can go after it.

I've never been that graceful before. If I wasn't so distracted by that *scent*, I might've marveled at how different I am already. Eleanor told me that, once I bonded to Lucas, there would be perks. I wasn't going to turn into a wolf since I didn't have any shifter blood, but as a human mate, I'd have increased strength, speed, and an extended life span.

Looks like I can add an amazing sense of smell to the list. The old Fallon would never have been able to siphon one particular scent out of the thousands in the woods and know instinctively that it means something to her.

But Lucas's mate?

She does, and she doesn't even realize that she's abandoned her newly bonded mate in favor of going after it until I hear Lucas call after me.

"Fallon?" He hesitates, and then, "Jolie?"

It's that name. Everything that happens next, happens because

For a heartbeat, I completely forget about the phantom scent luring me away from Lucas. The way he murmured Jolie's name, as though he has his doubts whether it's me or her that he just mated... that he *bonded*... something inside of me shatters.

I stumble like I've been hit from behind even though Lucas never touched me.

*Jolie...*

I almost answered to it, too. Isn't that nuts? When he said 'Fallon', I took another step. When he said 'Jolie', I stumbled.

Because, so distracted by the scent, for a moment I thought I was Jolie.

Is that why I can't place the scent? Because it's not a trigger for Fallon's

memories, but for *hers*?

I don't know. Up until this very second, I was a hundred percent sure that I was Fallon Witt. Despite all of the memories slipping through the cracks, making it undeniable that I have at least *some* tie to Jolie Boudreaux, I was still Fallon.

But now... *I don't know* and I *hate* not knowing.

Sudden age wells up inside of me knocking out the last of the post-climax bliss.

I want to run. I promised Lucas I wouldn't, that the only time I would go is if he chased, but as the world seems to spin around me, I completely forget what I said.

Instead, as though I'm as much a beast as Lucas is, my body goes rigidly tight. Shoulders hunch, fingers flex, and as I sense the way the big Alpha eases to his feet, tiptoeing behind me, I... I *snap*.

There's no other word for it. My twisted, naked body bends over, hands landing on my dirty knees. My head bows next, a shudder running up and down my spine as every part of me lurches.

*"Fallon—"*

I fall forward. Shooting out my hands, I hope to break it before landing flat on my face, but that's not quite what happens.

I mean to hit the ground with my palms. Instead, I hit it with my paws.

Yes, *paws*.

The rest of my shape catches up. My legs become hindlegs, my nose a snout, my ears shifting so that they're on the top of my fuzzy head... and when I try to scream, all that escapes me is a shocked whimper before the panic sets in.

I can't help it. As I look down and see a pair of oversized paws... when I see that the fur is the same shade of blonde as my hair... that the gold chain my opal has always hung on has expanded to fit the shape of my new neck, with the opal itself dangling like an ID tag on a pet's collar... I realize that, once again, I've reached my limit.

Just like that fateful night when I slipped in my own blood, my mind breaks and the only thing I remember is a high-pitched keening howl echoing around me.

*My howl.*

AND THAT'S THE END OF [PACK](#), THE SECOND BOOK OF THE **WOLVES OF Winter Creek** series!

It's not as big of a cliffhanger as last time, especially now that Lucas and Fallon have made the decision to finalize their mate bond, but I will say that the familiar scent that has Fallon shifting to a wolf for the first time is very important. So is the fact that the former human can shift at all. And while they both believe that the curse should be broken now that Lucas has his fated mate back, Fallon still needs to know how exactly she is Jolie, what that makes her now—and what that means for her and her new mating.

All of that is revealed in the third—and final book—of Fallon's story, so I hope you come along for the ride when [Predator](#) releases at the beginning of next year! Until then, keep scrolling/clicking/reading for the cover art and the book's description :)

*xoxo,  
Sarah*



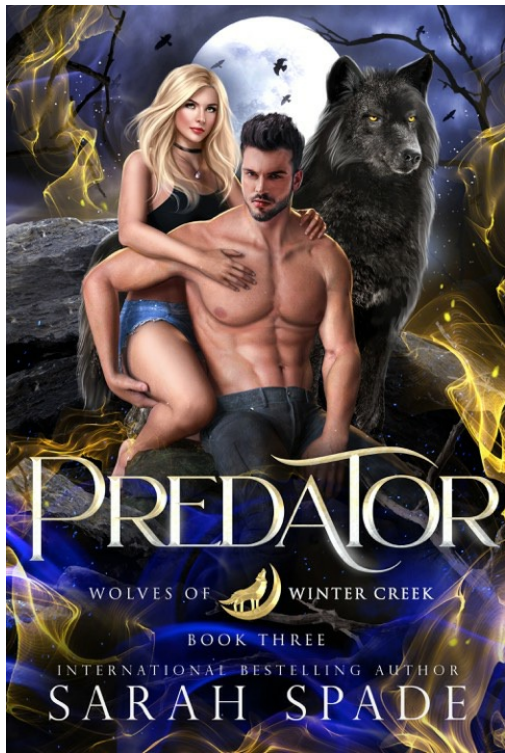
FALLON  
AND  
LUCAS

WOLVES OF WINTER CREEK



**PRE-ORDER NOW**

PREDATOR



# HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

The curse is broken—kinda.

I know why I was brought back to Winter Creek—for the most part.

My story is over... and that's just wishful thinking talking. I wish it was time to settle into my happy-ever-after, but things have only gotten more complicated since the full moon.

Because while Lucas is my bonded mate now, his bite did more than just mark me as his. It triggered something deep inside of me that I never would've guessed was there, and now I'm coming to grips with everything I thought I knew about my life was a lie.

I'm not human. I don't know if I ever was. Part-witch and part-shifter, there's a reason why I was hunted down seventy years ago—or why I've been given a second chance at another life.

I'm still Fallon, though, and as I struggle to figure out which if my memories of mine and which belong to the woman I used to be, I just want to find a happy ending to my new story.

I have the hero, right? The wicked witch got what she wanted when I broke the curse on Winter Creek, and my new pack is happy to welcome me as one of their own.

Well, *most* of them—and that's one problem.

The other? A familiar scent I can't quite place... until my grandmother sends one of her henchman with a proposition that I just can't refuse.

Because, as it turns out, I'm not the only new wolf shifter in Winter Creek, and my old friend needs my help... no matter how much Lucas still thinks he has to protect me.

It's time for this chick to show how much of a predator she can be.

*\*Predator* is the third—and finally—book in Fallon and Lucas's trilogy. There will be one last book after that, featuring a new POV character, but this one wraps up Fallon's arc.

Out February 20, 2023!



# **THE FERAL'S CAPTIVE**

## SNEAK PEEK AT THE FIRST BOOK IN THE CLAWS AND FANGS SERIES

My eyes flutter open.

I already know something is wrong before I'm completely awake. As a shifter, my senses are usually firing on all cylinders. My nose can tell me almost as much about my surroundings as my sight does. My ears, too.

None of them are working right.

My nose is stuffed up. Supes don't get sick like humans do, but this is what I think it must be like. It's as if someone shoved a wad of cotton up each of my nostrils because I can't smell a damn thing.

Same with my ears. Everything is dull. I move a little, and I hear something heavy sliding across the floor, but it sounds like it's coming from far, far away.

The room is dark and, except for me, it's empty. There's one window, high above my head on the wall at my back, and it's closed. Shades are drawn, letting in a sliver of light, so I know it's still daylight out there. Normally the meager light would be enough for me to make out every detail—but it isn't. The most I can see is that the room is made up of four solid grey cinder block walls with a single dark brown door breaking them up. If I didn't know any better, I'd think it looks like some kind of cell.

And that's when I remember.

The quicksilver. The black wolf.

The chase.

My senses are trash. Now that I remember that I was dosed with quicksilver, it makes sense. Quicksilver is a sedative, but it also cuts a shifter off from their wolf. It wears off in time. Based on how... how *human* I feel right now, I can tell it hasn't yet. My wolf is eerily missing.

And that's not all that isn't quite right.

Wherever I am, I'm laying down on a blanket that's protecting me from the hard cement floor beneath it. I jerk up, and that same sound from before follows my movement. I feel heavy, too, like whatever I'm dragging is attached to me.

Uh-oh.

I look down.

The first thing I notice is that I'm human again. Last I recall, I was in my wolf form, but the human arms and legs I'm looking at are undeniable. Of course. With the quicksilver coming between me and my wolf, I would've reverted back to my human form in order to contain my beast.

The second thing?

I'm not naked.

Not that I would prefer to wake up without any clothes on in an unfamiliar room. Considering I had shifted during the attack, I *should* have. My clothes are a mess of tattered remains in the forest while I'm here, wearing a slinky, dark red dress that covers me all the way down to the middle of my thighs. No bra, no panties, but at least my tits aren't hanging out. Small victories.

Then there's the tiny matter of the third undeniable thing...

I've been chained to the bare wall behind me.

Each of my ankles has a shackle on it. A length of chain—from the faint crackle I sense coming from them, I know they're made from silver, just like the shackles—is attached to each one, threaded through a sturdy-looking ring screwed into the cinder block over my head.

I don't scream. He's already proven that he sees me as his prey, and no matter what his intentions are, I'm still as much a predator as he is. My heart might be racing, my stomach tight and queasy as the reality of my situation sinks in, but losing my head won't help me get out of it.

Think, Quinn. Focus.

Okay. First things first. I can't reach my wolf. I can't rely on my shifter's senses. I still have a brain.

What happened after I was out? That's something to worry about.

Rubbing my thighs together, I'm relieved to find that I don't feel any tenderness or pain. On the plus side, my mysterious captor might've dressed my naked body before chaining me to a wall, but he didn't force himself on me.

*Yet.*

Once I pay closer attention to the shackles on my ankles, I no longer expect him to.

I already knew he was a shifter. He appeared on the edge of Hickory as a black wolf before turning human. The chains only reinforce my belief.

A human in the know might still be stupid enough to go for steel or iron chains if they wanted to trap a she-wolf. At my full strength, I could snap those easily; they'd never hold me. Only silver could, but even if they were tipped off to one of a shifter's few weaknesses, I'd expect them to wrap me up in them, not caring if they burned the crap out of me or not.

I'm just a captive, right? Depending on what they want with me, so long as they keep the chains away from my goods, what does it matter if I suffer in other places?

But the person who locked me up in these chains? They were careful to keep the silver from my bare skin. The chains are stretched out and positioned far from me so I wouldn't accidentally brush against them while I was unconscious, and there's fabric padding between me and the silver shackles.

I might be trapped. The silver might weaken me further.

At least I'm not being burned by it.

Just in case, I give an experimental kick. The chains swing, then go taut, but they don't break. Even when I can tap into my wolf again, I don't think I'll be able to snap them. The silver is too powerful.

Crap.

Now, I'm not pissed about the chains. Not really. Maybe a human chick would be, but us supernaturals see things a little differently. While I don't know exactly why he took me captive, I can't deny it wasn't smart of him to lock me up. He doesn't know me. He doesn't know how I'll react. She-wolves of my rank are still vicious and strong when we're backed in a corner, and that's exactly where I am right now.

I've also heard stories about shifters on the edge of going feral who chose the chains for themselves. Usually they're alphas, but most dominant shifters have a close call or two. I did. When I first understood—really understood—that West was rejecting our mate bond, I wanted to lash out. It didn't get so bad that I needed to be restrained from taking out my pain on him, but it was rough.

So the chains? The chains I can understand. But the quicksilver burning

through me, keeping me from getting in touch with my wolf?

He never should've done that.

I'm a shifter. You hurt my wolf, you hurt my soul. And you'll pay for it.

Unfortunately, attacking the black wolf who ambushed me is out. Even before the quicksilver, he was too strong for me. I either need to outsmart him, or get the heck out of Dodge before he realizes I'm awake.

I look down at the chains holding me back again and wince.

This is gonna hurt, isn't it?

**AVAILABLE NOW**

## THE FERAL'S CAPTIVE



### **There's no escaping him...**

Fate sucks.

As a shifter, I've always known that Fate—in the form of our goddess, the revered Luna—would have the final say when it came to my life. That includes everything: my pack, my rank, even my forever mate.

And I hate it.

I want to choose. I want my life to be mine, and if that makes me the odd one out in our pack? Oh, well. A delta, it's not like the higher ranks—our Alpha, his Beta, and the pack council—have much use for me anyway.

Still, even I'll admit I've always been drawn to the Beta of the Sylvan Pack. When I discover that he's my fated mate,

it seems like giving in to the Luna's demands might not be such a bad thing after all—until he rejects me for a female he can't even have.

Because, yeah. Not only does Fate suck, it has a twisted sense of humor when it comes to me.

So that's that. I have to pretend like my broken bond isn't a constant ache while watching as my fated mate begs for table scraps from another wolf.

Is it any wonder that I start spending my free time in the woods

surrounding our territory?

I wasn't afraid. Even at my low rank, I know I'm scarier than anything else that lurks in the darkness of the trees. But I was wrong—and when I see those insane golden eyes staring at me, I know I'm in deep, deep trouble.

My name is Quinn Malone, and I've just been captured by a feral...

\* *The Feral's Captive* is the first in a new rejected mates paranormal romance. Set in the same world as *Never His Mate*, shifters are an open secret, most humans are off-limits, and a feral wolf shifter male is willing to sacrifice everything to steal the wolf he believes is his mate. And though it may not be fated, Quinn and Chase's bond is just as undeniable...



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