

SHADOWED HEIRS
BOOK ONE



Ruthless
ALPHA

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
C.J. PRIMER

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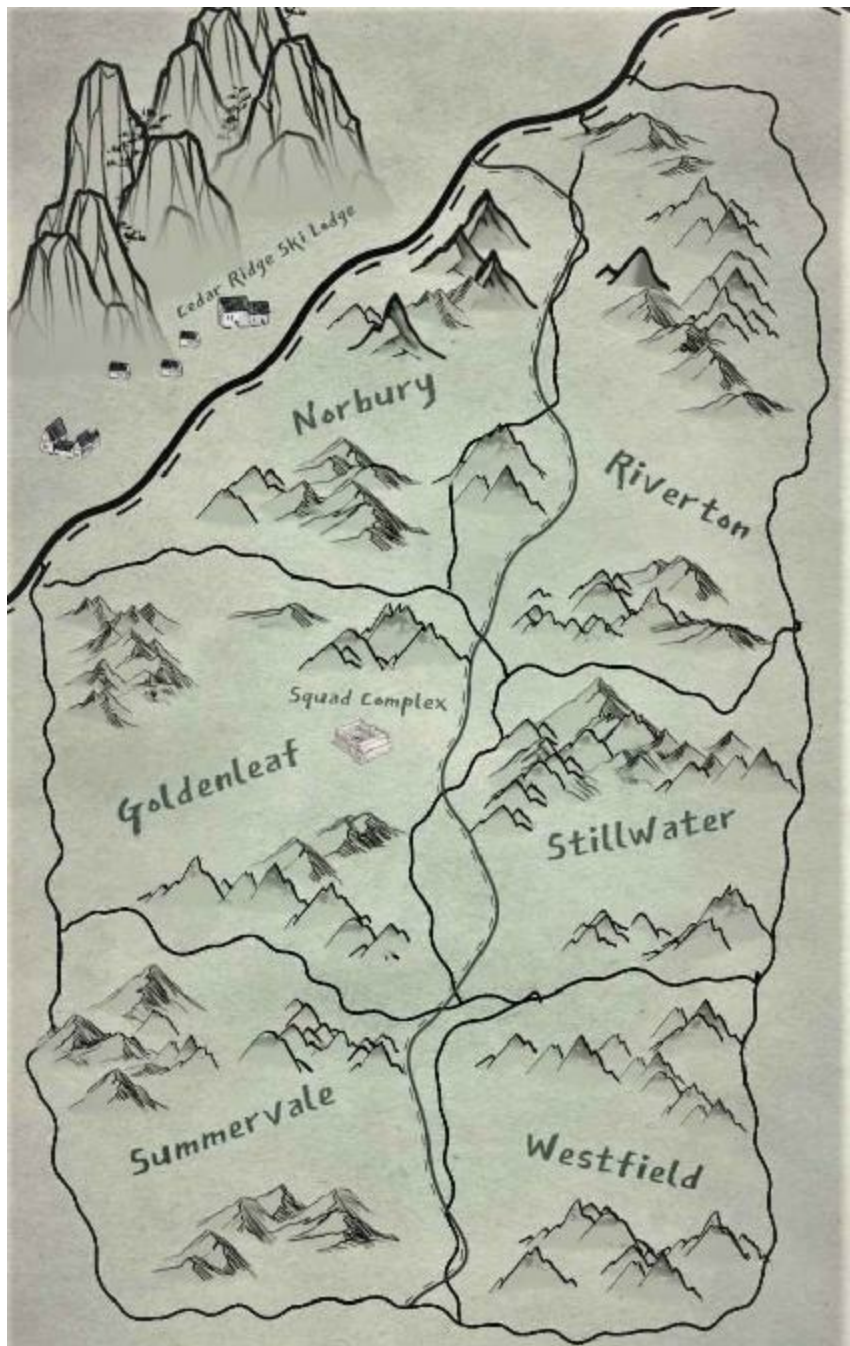
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Six-Pack Territory Map

Goldenleaf Pack

Alpha: Maddox Kessler
Luna: None
Children: None

Summerville Pack

Alpha: Theo Jacobsen
Luna: Brooke Eastwick
Children: River

Westfield Pack

Alpha: Iver Anderson
Luna: None
Children: None

Riverton Pack

Alpha: Brock Masters
Luna: Astrid Bauer
Children: Sloane, Tristan, Marigold

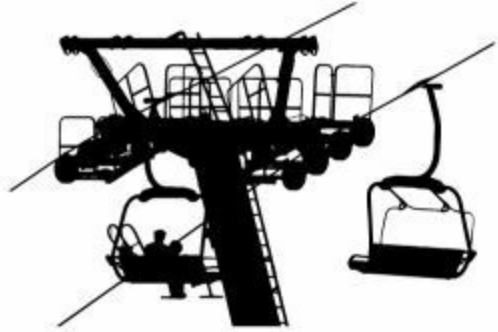
Stillwater Pack

Alpha: Reid Raines
Luna: Serena Harper
Children: Ardie, Archer, Ares

Norbury Pack

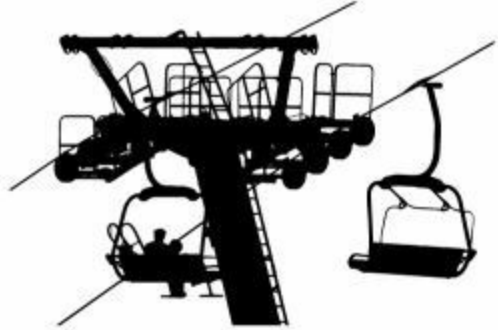
Alpha: Chase Walker
Luna: Vienna Vega
Children: Sebastian, Valentine

Playlist



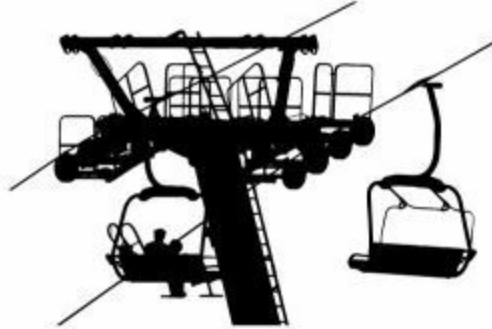
Hate Me – Ellie Goulding, Juice WRLD
Cardigan - Taylor Swift
Dial Drunk – Noah Kahan
Greatest Love Story – LANCO
Red (Taylor’s Version) – Taylor Swift
Ghost Of You – 5 Seconds of Summer
I Wish You Would – Taylor Swift
Friend For Life – X Ambassadors, Medium Build
Car Crash – Wakey!Wakey!
If the World Was Ending – JP Saxe, Julia Michaels
Mess Is Mine – Vance Joy
when the party’s over – Billie Eilish
Hold Me While You Wait – Lewis Capaldi
Hold On (acoustic) – Chord Overstreet
Skinny Love – Birdy
Need You Now – Lady A
Someone You Loved – Lewis Capaldi
How Long Will I Love You – Ellie Goulding
Too Much To Ask – Niall Horan
Favourite Ex – Maisie Peters
What Hurts the Most – State of Mine
Long Live (Taylor’s Version) – Taylor Swift

Give Me Back My Hometown – Eric Church
You And I – Lady Gaga
Somebody That I Used To Know – Gotye
Rage – Medium Build



You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#).

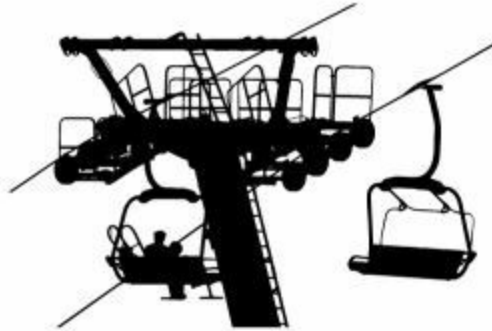
Content Warning



This book contains darker themes that may be triggering to some readers. Triggers include, but are not limited to: graphic sexual scenes/situations, strong language, threatening situations involving firearms, injury caused by firearms, verbal abuse, confinement, snakes, blood, and mentions of murder. Please know your triggers and proceed with caution.

*For all the girls who rooted for the big bad wolf-
because he can see you better,
smell you better,
and eat you better.*

Prologue



When our parents were young, our world looked a lot different than it does now. Their shifter packs kept to their own territories, but at least they were able to live freely among the human world.

Not anymore.

Somehow, the secret of our kind's existence got out, and now we're being hunted.

My friends and I are the alphas of our packs. It's our job to keep our alliance's territory safe, and in order to do that, we have to take precautions. Stay hidden, or risk being discovered and wiped out.

We're heirs to an empire, living in the shadows.



Ten Years Ago

Orange flames lick around the thick logs in the bonfire pit, curling upwards toward the darkened sky. Inside the steel ring, the wood crackles and burns, reducing to embers as more logs are hauled onto the pile to feed the ravenous fire. Sparks scatter as more wood is placed, the flames brightening to illuminate the faces of everyone gathered around the pit.

My family's here. My friends, too. All of the alphas and lunas of the six-pack alliance, as well as members of their inner circle and their teenage children. About thirty of us, in total.

I don't look at them when the light of the fire brightens, though.

I turn to look at *her*.

My best friend, aside from my twin sister. The girl I grew up playing tag with and teaching to skip rocks in the creek. The girl I've always thought of as my own, but now we're almost sixteen and the meaning behind that possessiveness has started to evolve... and I'm not quite sure what to do about it.

Sloane's tanned skin looks golden in the glow of firelight as my eyes map out the delicate features of her face. My gaze traces her high cheekbones, the gentle curve of her dainty nose. Her thick, dark eyelashes flutter as she blinks, staring into the fire with a glazed look in her moss green eyes.

A shiver runs through her, and I'm not sure if it's from the chill in the air

tonight or because she feels me watching her, her inner wolf sensing a predator in their midst. Either way, she snuggles in closer like it's an instinct, and I relish the feeling of her soft, warm body against mine. Even through the thick layers of clothing we're both wearing, I can feel her heat- and between that and her proximity, my blood's running hotter than the flames dancing in the pit in front of us.

We're seated together on an old wooden bench, my arm slung around Sloane's shoulders and her body tucked snugly into my side, her knees pulled up to her chest for added warmth. She's a tiny waif of a thing, so fragile in comparison to my own hulking form. I'm growing every day- in both height and muscle mass. Most guys my age are right about now, thanks to puberty and our wolves coming in, but since I've got Alpha blood I'm already ahead of the curve in size and strength.

I wonder if she's noticed that; if she likes it. If it's enough for her to stop looking at me as the kid she grew up with and start seeing me as something *more*.

She's changed over the last year, too. It's impossible not to notice the way her boobs have grown, filling out her tops until the fabric strains against them. Her ass is plumper, the curve of her waist more well-defined. She's fuckin' *sexy*, and it seems wrong to feel that way about my best friend. But here we are.

Sloane tilts her head back to look up at me, a smile breaking across her face when our eyes meet. Those cute-as-fuck dimples sink into her cheeks on either side of her smile, a riot beating in my chest.

"What?" she asks coyly, searching my eyes like she'll find the answer there to why I'm staring at her like I've never seen a woman before.

But I haven't. Not one like *her*.

She's magnificent.

"Nothing," I sputter, diverting my gaze back to the fire.

"Aw, c'mon," she coaxes, reaching up for the hand that's dangling over her shoulder. She threads her nimble fingers through mine, giving my hand a little squeeze. "What's on your mind?"

I glance down to meet her eyes again, my heart slamming against my ribs.

How do I tell her what I'm really feeling? Do I just fucking go for it and hope for the best?

I immediately shove that idea aside. There's no way she feels the same way about me as I do about her. My inner wolf and raging hormones may be

blurring my own lines lately, but Sloane has never let on that she wants to be anything more than friends.

And why would she? She's already got me wrapped around her dainty little finger, and she fucking knows it. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for that girl.

Even if she chooses someone else.

Because that's bound to happen, right? Every dude in our school wants her. She seems oblivious to their attention, but I see the way they look at Sloane. My wolf goes crazy with jealousy every time, and I have to fight like hell to keep him contained. Learning to integrate my wolf has been a struggle, but nowhere near as taxing as hiding my true feelings for the girl I grew up with. We've been friends for a long time, so there's a certain level of comfort between the two of us. She can cuddle up to me like this in front of our family and friends, and nobody bats an eye. We've always been this way. Close, affectionate, but platonic.

"Tell me," she breathes, and the whispery, husky sound of her plea goes straight to my dick. I'm constantly horny whenever I'm around her. Even jacking off at least twice a day isn't enough to sate the urges, and at this point, my balls are permanently blue.

I lean down, bringing my face right in front of hers. So close that I feel her warm breath skate across my lips, my eyes nearly crossing from how close hers are as I stare into them.

I could bridge the distance right now. In one tiny move, I could press my lips against hers and kiss her how I want to; how I've always imagined it.

But what if it ruins everything?

I'd rather have her in my life like this than not at all. Plus, I'm not sure I could take that kind of rejection. Not that I've got a particularly fragile ego, but being rejected by the only girl I've ever given a damn about would shatter it for sure.

If I hold back for too long, though, there's bound to be someone else who'll come along without reservations and steal her away from me.

It's a slippery slope, one I have no idea how to navigate without falling on my face.

My gaze leaves hers for a moment to flicker across the fire, to where our parents are seated together. They're looking this way, whispering to each other conspiratorially, and I'm momentarily relieved that I had enough impulse control to stop myself from going in for the kiss.

I'll bet Sloane's dad would've freaked out. Alpha Brock has never been my biggest fan, and he's not exactly subtle in the way he watches me when we're together. He's always eyeing me warily, like I'm a bomb about to go off that he'll need to swoop in to save his daughter from.

I glance back down at Sloane, her question still hanging in the air between us. She wants to know what I'm thinking about.

I've never been great with words.

Why can't I just tell her how I feel?

You. I'm thinking about you, Sloane, and how much I want to kiss you right now. I'm thinking about how I've been in love with you since I was five years old and you cried when Tristan knocked you over and you skinned your knee on the pavement, and I pushed him down in retaliation, not caring that I'd get in trouble for picking on someone younger. I've always wanted to take care of you and protect you, and now I realize why. It's because I'm in love with you, and I always have been. And if you don't love me back, then I guess I'll die alone, because you're the only one for me.

"I've gotta take a leak," I mumble, wincing when I realize how crudely that came out.

Idiot.

"I'll walk with you," Sloane offers, shuffling her legs off the bench and planting her feet on the ground. Her curls spill over her shoulders as she stands, and I immediately dwarf her with my own height as I rise to my feet from the bench beside her.

"Hey, where are you two going?" Brock barks out, because of-fucking-course Sloane's dad has been keeping an eye on us all evening.

"To take a piss," I reply, tossing a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the dark forest at my back.

Sloane sidesteps closer to me, linking her arm through mine. "Buddy system," she adds with a cheeky grin.

It's not like Brock can argue with that. All our lives, we've been warned about the dangers of going into the woods alone after dark, our parents stressing the importance of buddying up.

He nods curtly, though the tense set of his jaw and the disapproval in his glare betray how he really feels about the two of us going off together on our own.

It's almost laughable, because he's got nothing to worry about. Sloane and I have never stepped a toe out of the friend zone, and I doubt that'll change

with a hike through the snow to take a leak.

With her daddy's approval, Sloane and I skirt around the bench and trudge away from the bonfire pit, snow crunching beneath the soles of our boots as the firelight fades behind us. Reaching the dense cover of the trees, the two of us slip into the darkness of the forest, me leading the way to navigate around rocks and fallen limbs in our path that are partially obscured beneath the snow.

Once the sounds of the music and chatter around the bonfire fade completely, I finally come to a stop, picking out a tree to piss on. Sloane hangs back politely as I break away from her and stride up to the wide trunk, unzipping my fly and pulling out my dick- with difficulty, since it's semi-hard. Then I relax and let it flow, steam rising from the stream as I empty my bladder.

I sigh in relief, shaking off, but the back of my neck prickles with awareness as I feel the unmistakable sensation of being watched. I jerk my head sideways to look over my shoulder and Sloane's eyes ping up to collide with mine.

"Were you just peeking?"

"No!" she shrieks, her face instantly turning red with embarrassment. "Gross, why would I look?"

"You tell me," I drawl, tucking myself back into my pants. I turn around to face her, still dragging up the zipper, and her gaze drops to track the movement, her face flushing even redder when she belatedly realizes what she's doing and turns away.

"I wasn't looking," she insists.

My lips curl into a smirk. "Liar."

"I wasn't!"

I start toward her, eating up the distance between us in a few long strides.

"You sure?" I tease, grabbing her around the waist. Sloane squeals, kicking her feet as I lift her from the ground, tickling her sides relentlessly underneath her thick hoodie. "Just admit it!"

She dissolves into fits of giggles, flailing and kicking and barely able to catch her breath. "Okay, okay!" she finally concedes. "You win! I... looked."

I set her back down, chuckling as she swats my arms away from her body and spins to face me.

"Why?" I ask, both amused and intrigued by this strange turn of events.

Sloane throws up her hands. "I don't know! Curiosity?"

"Uh huh." I fold my arms over my chest, smirking.

She rolls her eyes, giving me a shove. “Stop it!”

I laugh as I stumble back a step. “Hey, if you wanna see my dick, all you have to do is ask.”

“Ugh, no!” she protests with a grimace, reaching out to shove me again.

I capture her wrists, yanking her into my chest instead. Then I spin us both around, trapping her between my body and a large tree trunk. “Don’t lie, you little creep,” I tease, grinning down at her.

“I’m not lying,” she pants, still adorably flustered.

But as we stand there, pressed up against one another and staring into each other’s eyes, something between us suddenly shifts. Any trace of playfulness is gone, replaced by something a whole lot more potent. Electricity crackles between us, our faces drifting closer until we’re breathing the same air.

Our breaths come out in short bursts, fogging in the frosty air between our lips.

There’s less than an inch of space between us.

I should just fucking go for it.

I’ll never know if I don’t try, right?

But what if it ruins what we have?

I linger there for what feels like an eternity, frozen in indecision. And just as I’m about to chicken out again like a goddamn pussy, she makes the decision for me.

Sloane flings her arms around my neck to yank my face closer, pushes up on her tiptoes, and crushes her lips against mine.

It’s. Fucking. *Everything.*

When our mouths slam together, every nerve ending in my body lights up, fireworks exploding behind my eyelids like the damn fourth of July. I grab her face in both hands, pressing my lips harder against hers as they start to pout and twist. They’re so damn soft, but her kiss is firm- desperate and demanding, raw and possessive. I tilt my head to deepen it, sweeping my tongue across the seam of her plush lips until she lets me in.

I’ve thought of this exact moment so many times, wondering what it’d be like to finally kiss Sloane. Honestly, I expected our first kiss to be hesitant and clumsy, since neither of us really know what we’re doing, but this isn’t like that. Instead, it’s as if our bodies know exactly how to respond to one another’s, primal need taking over.

She sinks a hand into my hair as our tongues meet, twining together. She tastes like peppermint gum and sweet sin, her body melting against mine.

She smells so good.

Has she always smelled this good?

A growl rumbles in my chest as I kiss her harder, deeper, like it's the last thing I'll ever do. My hands slide beneath her sweatshirt to grip her waist, my fingertips digging into her warm, supple flesh. She makes this hot little moaning sound that has me groaning in response, our lips sliding as our tongues battle for dominance.

Then, just as quickly as it started, Sloane jolts back to break the kiss, looking a little dazed when her eyes open to collide with mine. We're both breathless, the air fogging between us as we pant and stare at one another. Her face is flushed, lips puffy as they part to speak.

"Madd, I..."

"Don't," I choke, shaking my head. "Don't say that was a mistake."

Her brow furrows. "I wasn't..."

"I like you, Sloane," I blurt, not letting her finish. I've gotta get this out before I lose my nerve. "I like you as more than a friend. I have for a while."

I hold my breath, watching as her lips curl up into a soft smile. "I do, too."

I flinch back in surprise. "You do?"

"Well yeah, I just didn't want to ruin the friendship, ya know?" She chuckles softly, lifting a hand to cup my jaw. "I like you, but I wasn't sure if you felt the same way, so I didn't wanna risk it," she admits with a sheepish grin.

My heart stutters in my chest, tripping over its valves to catch up.

Is this really happening?

"Okay, I'm feeling really awkward right now, so I'm gonna need you to say something or kiss me again or--"

I dive in to capture her lips before she can finish that sentence, kissing the hell out of her. And though that first kiss was magic, it doesn't hold a candle to the second one. I lift her into my arms, holding her body tight to mine as I ravage her with my tongue and lips and teeth, not coming up for air until I'm on the verge of suffocation.

"Damn, well I guess that settles it. I can't believe you're my girl," I say incredulously as I struggle to catch my breath. "*Mine.*"

"And you're *mine*," she replies, grinning smugly as she bops the tip of my nose with a fingertip. "Don't you dare forget it, Maddox Kessler. It's me and you."

"You and me," I agree, staring at her in awe as my whole world shifts on its axis, all the jagged pieces finally fitting together and making sense.

She squirms against me and I relinquish my grip, allowing her to slide down my body and find her footing in the snow. “Well since that’s out of the way, now what?” she asks, shoving her hands into the front pocket of her hoodie and tilting her head in question.

A low chuckle rumbles in my chest as I reach out for her arm, dragging one of her hands back out of her pocket and clasping it in my own. “Now let’s go stir shit up like we always do,” I say, waggling my brows. “From here on out, we’re the duke and duchess of fucking mayhem, baby.”



Present Day

My heart pounds as I sprint through the forest, mud squelching beneath my paws. A storm rolled through here earlier, and now the wet terrain of the forest floor is slowing me down.

Hopefully it's slowing *them* down, too.

I can hear them behind me in hot pursuit. I'm running as fast as I can, chest heaving and lungs burning from the effort, yet it still doesn't seem fast enough. I'm lagging with exhaustion, and they're starting to catch up on their ATV's.

Gunshots pop off, the deafening sound of each one echoing through the forest around me like a death knell. One whizzes past my ear, so close that I can feel the heat of the bullet before it embeds itself into the trunk of a tree just ahead, bark splintering from the impact.

Too close.

They're too close, and the foliage around me is starting to thin. There's a clearing ahead. If I get caught out there in the open, I know I'm done for.

A shriek pierces the air- the sharp, pained howl of another wolf. One I recognize all too well. As soon as I hear it, something inside me breaks, a wave of pain searing through my limbs and causing me to stumble. My body seizes in agony as the bond between us severs, feeling like it's being physically torn from my skin.

My mate.

He's dead.

The realization slams into me as another shot pops off, the heat of the bullet tearing through the flesh of my thigh. The burning agony is so intense that it's momentarily blinding, a high-pitched yelp escaping me as I try and fail to find my footing.

Then I see them.

It's too late.

Mud sprays from beneath the tires of the ATV, and I lift my head to see the hunter hopping off to approach me on foot, two others flanking him. His face is obstructed by the night vision goggles he's wearing, but I'm not looking at his face. I'm staring at the gun clutched in his grasp, the moonlight glinting off the barrel.

He takes aim, the leather of his glove creaking as he starts to pull the trigger. But then...

Growls sound out. Teeth gnash. Jaws snap.

Three wolves come out of nowhere and start attacking the hunters, but the gun still goes off with a loud *BANG*.

White-hot pain sears across my chest and suddenly I'm falling, teeth clanging together as I hit the mud.

But as everything starts to go dark, my viewpoint suddenly changes.

I'm standing over the wolf, watching sticky hot blood pool on the ground beneath its body and soak into its fur while the air around the animal starts to shimmer with a shift back to its human form.

It's not *me*.

I'm... dreaming?

My eyes pop open and I jolt upwards in bed, drenched in a cold sweat and panting so hard I can barely catch my breath.

It was a dream.

Just a horrible, terrifying dream.

A dream so vivid that it felt real, but it *wasn't*. It was a nightmare.

I ease back down onto the pillows, focusing on calming my racing heart and drawing deep breaths of air into my lungs.

I lift a hand to wipe the sweat from my brow, struggling to process the traumatic trick my mind played on me in sleep.

Just a dream.

Slowly, my breathing returns to normal. My pulse levels out. My eyes start to

feel heavy again.

I'm just starting to drift off when the sound of a commotion downstairs has me sitting up in bed again, straining my ears to try to hear.

"Luna!" a panicked voice screams, and goosebumps break out over my skin.

Tossing the sheets off my body, I slide out of bed, quickly padding over to the door and pulling it open. As I peek into the darkened hallway, I hear the same voice call out again, louder this time.

"Luna!"

A door opens on the opposite end of the hall, my Aunt Juliet pulling the tie of her robe tight around her waist as she darts out of the bedroom that she shares with my Uncle Cole. They're the alpha and luna of this pack of wolf shifters, and I've been residing here at the packhouse in Denver with them since I was seventeen.

Juliet immediately sprints toward the stairs, and I stand there blinking for a moment before taking off after her to find out what's going on, my bare feet slapping against the hardwood as I trail her downstairs and to the kitchen.

"Put her on the table!" Aunt Juliet barks as she enters.

She rushes inside, but I freeze in the doorway, feeling the color drain from my face at the sight before me.

Three pack warriors are in the kitchen, muddy and naked like they just shifted from their wolf forms. Two of them grab sweatpants from a stash in the cabinet and start to tug them on while the third carries a nude, bloodied woman in his arms, dripping a crimson path as he brings her over to one of the large tables. He lays her unconscious body down gently and immediately steps out of the way, Juliet rushing to the woman's side to assess her injuries. My aunt is a doctor, though she doesn't typically get to utilize her skills on the pack since shifters heal so quickly. Instead, she puts them to use working in the E.R. at a hospital downtown, so she's no stranger to providing urgent medical attention.

"Towels, I need towels!" Juliet shouts as she leans in to check if the woman is breathing, lifting her wrist to measure her pulse. "And someone get Tobias, tell him to bring his medical kit!"

The warriors spring into action, sprinting out of the room to follow her commands. One returns a few seconds later with a stack of towels and Aunt Juliet grabs one off the top, pressing it firmly to the woman's chest and applying pressure to stem the bleeding.

"What happened?" my aunt snaps, whipping her head toward the nearest

warrior.

“Shot by hunters in the forest,” he pants.

Aunt Juliet’s eyes widen. “Why was she in the forest?!”

There’s a curfew for a reason- so things like *this* don’t happen. There hasn’t been an incident in a decade, though, and people have started breaking curfew more often, seeming to forget why it was imposed in the first place.

This is a hell of a reminder.

Heavy footsteps thud behind me moments before my Uncle Cole shoulders past, striding quickly across the kitchen to his wife’s side. He takes in the sight of the woman on the table, his brows drawing in.

“Why isn’t she healing?” he asks, voice low.

“Must be the bullet,” Aunt Juliet replies hoarsely.

“If it’s silver, she won’t heal until it’s out,” Tobias states calmly as he strides quickly into the kitchen, medical kit in hand. He sets it down, carding his fingers through his auburn hair and turning to Juliet. “What’ve we got?”

Uncle Cole steps away so that Tobias can take his place, moving back to observe while Tobias and my aunt start murmuring grimly to one another about the woman’s condition and pulling supplies out of the bag. The two of them went to med school together and currently work in the same hospital, though Tobias works in pediatrics rather than in the emergency room like my aunt.

From my position in the doorway, their backs are to me, so I can’t really see what they’re doing from my viewpoint as they get to work. Instead, my eyes focus on the steady drip of blood running from the table to the floor, glazing over as I stare in frozen horror at the growing maroon puddle.

I understand the urge to break curfew. We’re shifters, and the more we restrain our inner wolves, the more they thrash with the itch to get out and run. It’s a primal need within all of us, one we’ve had to learn to tamp down in order to stay safe.

Not everyone can, and this is the consequence. A cruel reminder of the evil in this world.

It wasn’t always this way. There weren’t any restrictions on shifting until ten years ago, when hunters found their way to this territory and killed three members of the pack over the course of a week. I didn’t live here at the time, but I know they went into complete lockdown for several months after until the hunters cleared out and left the area. We took precautions of our own in my pack’s home territory at the time, afraid they’d find us next. And right

when we all started to feel safe again, prepared to return to normalcy, word got around that other packs had been hit.

Nobody knows how these hunters learned of our existence, but it was obvious that they were on a crusade to exterminate our kind. Their methods of hunting us improved. Silver bullets to prevent healing. Wolfsbane to suppress our inner animal. Weaknesses they only could've learned about through capture and torture of other wolf shifters.

So, the curfew went into effect. Regulations were imposed on shifting and safeguards were put in place so that we could do it securely, without fear of getting shot at, should the hunters ever return. But a measly half hour allotment to run within a half mile radius just doesn't cut it for some wolves. Hence the curfew breaking.

"How did they get past our border security?" my uncle growls to Remy, the warrior who carried the woman in. As Alpha of this pack, Cole is the one who makes the rules and the one the warriors answer to.

"They didn't. They tripped the alarm," Remy responds. He's still painted in the woman's blood, staring vacantly at her limp form on the table as Tobias and Aunt Juliet hastily work to save her life. "That's how we knew to go looking for them, but they'd already found Amelia..."

"Where's her mate?" Uncle Cole demands.

Remy starts to shake his head as two more warriors appear in the kitchen, speckled with mud, pale-faced and solemn.

"We found Omar," one of them provides. "He's... gone. Bullet to the head."

"Shit," my uncle hisses under his breath.

A shrill scream cuts through the room, my gaze pinging back to the woman-*Amelia*- on the table as she thrashes beneath Tobias' hands, suddenly awake and in obvious pain.

"Help me hold her!" Tobias bellows, and my uncle and the other warriors rush over instantaneously, fanning around the table to hold Amelia down as her shrieks and cries fill the kitchen.

"I've almost... got it..." Aunt Juliet murmurs through gritted teeth, still leaning over Amelia, a pair of forceps in her grip.

It isn't until she lifts her hand that I realize she's dug the bullet out of Amelia's chest, but that's also the moment I realize how eerily quiet it is all of the sudden- Amelia's no longer screaming or thrashing, she's just... *still*.

My aunt drops the bullet onto a metal tray with a clang, ditching the forceps and leaning back in over Amelia. Without missing a beat, she plugs the

woman's nose, tilts her head back, and starts performing CPR.

The image in front of me blurs as I stand there on shaky legs, still watching from the doorway. Time slows to a crawl. Everyone looks on anxiously as Aunt Juliet blows air into Amelia's mouth and counts out chest compressions.

But it's too late.

Minutes pass.

Three.

Five.

Ten.

Uncle Cole comes around the table, setting his hand on his mate's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jules," he breathes, his deep voice more gentle than I've ever heard it. "She's gone."

Tears shine in my aunt's eyes as she turns to look at him, shaking her head in disbelief. Their gazes lock for a long, somber moment, silence falling over the room.

Tobias is the one to break it.

He picks up the pair of forceps, plucking up the bullet and moving it in front of his face to examine it closely. "Wolfsbane," he mutters, noting the purplish sheen coating the bullet. He cuts his gaze to my uncle. "They knew what they were hunting."

I reach out to grip the doorframe, my breath catching and my knees wobbling.

"Bastards," one of the warriors mutters.

Juliet draws a sharp breath as she looks from the bullet back to Cole. "It's happening again," she says, her voice strained.

"There's another bullet in her thigh," Tobias points out, his assessing gaze combing over Amelia's lifeless body.

I grip the doorframe harder, fingertips digging into the wood as I try to steady myself, my dream suddenly coming back to me.

A wolf running through the forest, chased by hunters.

Shot in the thigh, then the chest.

Bile crawls up my throat as I stare at the corpse on the kitchen table, realizing...

It wasn't a dream.



“Wake up, Madd.”

Through the haze of sleep, a voice registers somewhere in the back of my mind, tugging me from the depths of my slumber.

“*Madd!*”

The voice is louder this time, closer. It belongs to my twin sister. Footsteps pad across the floor and a pair of hands land on my bare back, shaking me.

“You have to wake up.”

I roll over with a groan, blinking my eyes open to see Avery peering down at me through the darkness.

“Council meeting, now,” she snaps, taking a small step back and staring down at me grimly.

The sheets pool at my waist as I sit up, scrubbing a hand over my face. “What happened?” I ask, voice rough with sleep.

“The Denver pack was attacked.”

A wave of adrenaline soars through me and I jolt up, heart slamming against my ribcage and breath stalling in my throat.

Avery’s hand lands on my arm, her brown eyes meeting mine. “*She’s fine.*”

Despite the immediate relief her words bring, I shake her hand off with a scowl. The tension slips from my muscles, my pulse slowing back down to a somewhat normal rhythm. “I didn’t ask,” I grumble as I slide out of bed, bending at the waist to fumble for a pair of sweatpants I left on the floor

beside it.

“Didn’t have to.” The corner of her mouth lifts in a smirk and she waves a finger between us. “Twin telepathy.”

I roll my eyes, snapping the waistband of my sweats against my hips and striding over to the dresser to grab a t-shirt.

“Where’s the meeting?” I mumble as I yank open the top drawer, grabbing the first one I see and pulling it on overhead.

“Riverton.”

I nod, tugging the hem of the shirt down. It makes sense that we’d have the meeting there, since the Riverton pack’s Luna is Alpha Cole’s sister. The remote area of the Colorado wilderness we live in is divided into six territories for the six shifter packs that reside here, collectively called- *you guessed it*- the six-pack. The packs came together decades ago, long before I was born, to form an alliance. Norbury and Riverton are on the north end, Goldenleaf and Stillwater in the middle, and Summervale and Westfield to the south.

My old man was Alpha of the Goldenleaf pack, and he stepped down to pass the title onto me a couple of years ago. Now I’m the one in charge of keeping our pack safe, which is why I have to head to this damn council meeting in the middle of the night, to discuss with the rest of the six-pack alphas how we’re going to handle this hunter situation. Though the Denver pack is across the state, we’re aligned with them, too- and if there are hunters in Denver, it’s possible they could make their way north and find our territory.

I cover up my messy bedhead with a backwards hat, slide my feet into a pair of sneakers, and shove my cell phone into the pocket of my sweats.

“Okay, what do we know so far?” I ask as I start for the door, my twin keeping pace with me.

“Two of their wolves were shot by hunters,” Avery provides as we slip into the hall.

“Why were they out past curfew?” I growl, hitting the landing and taking the stairs two at a time. “How did they get by their patrols?”

“Don’t know. Should we get Mom and Dad?”

I pause at the bottom of the stairs, swinging my gaze to my sister and considering for a moment. “Nah,” I decide with a shake of my head. “Let ‘em sleep. We’ll fill them in in the morning.”

Avery nods slowly. We’re still getting used to this packhouse being ours, since our parents moved next door after they stepped down from their

positions as Alpha and Luna. Hell, I've been at this job for two years now, and sometimes my first instinct is still to go to my dad when there's a threat. My sister draws a shallow breath as she stares at me, her big brown eyes rounded in fear. "Madd, do you think..." she trails off, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "It's happening again, isn't it."

It's not a question. From the resignation in her voice, she knows.

"Fuck," I mutter, starting for the front door and grabbing the keys to my Jeep from the bowl on the kitchen island along the way. "Come on."

We climb into the Jeep and I fire it up, tires screaming against the pavement as I floor it out of the packhouse driveway.

"You know what this means, right?" Avery asks, looking over at me hesitantly as I pull onto the street. "If the hunters are back, it's not safe there anymore. Sloane..."

"Don't," I snap.

Avery heaves a sigh. "She'll have to come back, Madd. You know she will."

I grind my molars, the muscle in my jaw ticking. Although my eyes are intently focused on the road ahead, I can feel my sister's stare on the side of my face, gauging my reaction.

"Are you ready for that?" she asks tentatively.

"Not my pack, not my problem," I grumble, hitting the gas to speed up.

"You won't be able to avoid her forever. She's got a place in squad leadership by birthright."

I flex my grip around the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white.

Sloane Masters. The mere mention of her name is enough to send me spiraling, but the thought of her coming back...

At one point, it was all I'd ever hoped for. Sloane is only a couple months younger than Avery and me, and when we were kids, the three of us were inseparable. Our parents say that when we were toddlers, they'd put us down for a nap and come back to find the three of us snuggled up in the same crib, like we couldn't stand to be apart even for sleep. Me and Avery were born as a pair, but it's like Sloane was meant for us. She and Avery were best friends. And as for Sloane and me... it always felt like something more.

When we hit puberty, I started to understand why. Right around the time that all the other guys my age started noticing Sloane, too.

She had this magnetic energy that people just couldn't look away from. A laugh you could listen to on repeat for the rest of your life and never tire of. Moss green eyes that could draw you in with a single glance, and a body that

would make the gods themselves weep with envy. She was so fucking beautiful, but it wasn't just about the way she looked. She radiated warmth. She had a kind word and a smile for everyone. They all fell at her feet, including me.

I was under her spell from day one; there was nobody for me but Sloane.

And I was the lucky sonofabitch that landed her.

Sloane was the girl everyone wanted, but she chose *ME*.

... until she didn't.

I mash the gas, taking the turns of the forest road far too fast as we race toward Riverton in the dead of night, the only illumination emanating from the Jeep's headlights.

Avery, wisely, doesn't press me further on the issue of Sloane fucking Masters- which is good, considering we're en route to her family's home, which is filled with nothing but bad memories for me now. Though Sloane herself hasn't lived there for years. Her parents are Brock and Astrid Masters, the alpha and luna of the Riverton pack. Brock is in the process of transitioning power over to his eldest son Tristan, but he isn't set to be officially sworn in as Alpha until summer.

Tristan Masters is a good friend of mine. He's one of the leaders of the security squad, the six-pack's squadron of trained fighters that patrols and protects its borders. My dad was the one who started the security squad back in the day, and my sister and I took over its leadership shortly after we graduated from high school. It's a huge responsibility, so there are seven of us that lead the squad together currently, all sons and daughters of the original six-pack alphas.

We make it to Riverton in record time, and aside from Alpha Chase, who has a shorter drive than us from the neighboring territory of Norbury, we're the first to arrive. Brock is agitated, pacing, as his mate Astrid quietly looks on, worry etched in her features.

Tristan sees Avery and me come in and makes a beeline for us, his eyes rimmed with exhaustion. Council meetings used to only be for alphas and their betas, but things have changed over time. Now, our betas typically stay behind to hold down the pack, and some of the lunas attend with their mates. When these meetings involve issues of security, as they so often do, squad leaders have to show up, too- which is the reason Tris was pulled out of bed, and why Archer and Ares walk in with their dad, Alpha Reid, a few minutes later.

“The fuck happened?” Ares asks with a scowl, watching after his father as he goes to interrupt Brock’s pacing.

Ares Raines is our newest squad leader, and the youngest of us. He inherited his mom’s flame red hair and her wild streak, and unlike his calmer, more reserved older brother Archer- also a squad leader and currently training to take over as the Stillwater pack’s alpha- Ares completely lacks a filter, blurting out whatever comes to his mind.

“Hunters took out a couple of the Denver pack’s wolves,” Tristan explains, scrubbing a hand over his face. “That’s all I really know so far, my dad’s waiting until everyone gets here to go into specifics.”

“Are they the same ones as before?” Avery asks apprehensively.

Tris shrugs. “Don’t know. I think Denver’s operating under that assumption until proven otherwise.”

We stand together in strained silence, grim looks on all our faces. We were young the last time there was an incident with hunters over in Denver. Though it has been a decade since that happened, it completely changed the way we live.

The six-pack used to own and operate businesses on the fringes of the territory to generate revenue, all of which were shut down. The massive ski resort now sits abandoned; the brewery only operational behind closed doors, to ship our products elsewhere. What was once a bustling little tourist area is now a ghost town, our packs’ territory essentially cut off from the human population.

We have constant patrols and heightened security measures. We only shift within certain perimeters that are set at a healthy distance from the borders of our land, and never after dark unless it’s a full moon. The idea was that if we stay hidden, we stay alive; and so far, it’s worked. The hunters have located other packs across the country, but never ours.

At least not *yet*.

If the same hunters have indeed returned to Denver, they’re far too close for comfort.

The roar of a motorcycle outside signals the arrival of Theo and Brooke Jacobsen; the alpha and luna of the Summervale pack. They also happen to be my aunt and uncle- Brooke is my mom’s identical twin sister. They enter the packhouse and shrug off their leather jackets, all of us now just waiting on Iver and Lo Anderson.

My buddy Iver just became Alpha last year, taking over the Westfield pack

from his old man, Jax. He's also a squad leader, along with his sister, Lo, who heads up the security squad's IT unit. When the two of them walk through the door, we all breathe a collective sigh of relief, turning our attention to Brock so he can finally clue us in on what the hell is going on.

"The Denver pack is working to track the hunters as we speak," he says once we've all taken seats on the couches, looking to him expectantly. "We don't know yet if they're the same ones as before, but they definitely knew what they were hunting. The bullets they used were silver, coated in wolfsbane."

Avery curses under her breath beside me, her leg bouncing up and down in nervous agitation. I clamp a hand down over her knee in a silent signal for her to knock it off, sliding her a hard look that says to calm the fuck down.

"If this gets out, it'll cause a panic," Chase murmurs, swiping a hand over his chin.

"Maybe that's what we need for people to understand the gravity of the situation and respect the rules," Brock grumbles, and I don't miss the look he shoots in my direction.

The guy isn't my biggest fan. I guess that's fair, considering whenever his kids got into trouble in their teens, I was usually the mastermind behind whatever scheme we were embroiled in.

He still blames me for the accident.

I still blame him for his part in ripping Sloane from my life.

I return Brock's glare, refusing to back down or acknowledge his jab, and Lo speaks up to diffuse the tension.

"I'll round up IT in the morning to make sure our tech's where we need it to be," she says thoughtfully, combing her fingers through her long blonde hair.

"A few of the border cameras are old and need replacing, and we may want to consider testing the alarms and running drills to refamiliarize everyone with the protocols for a breach."

"I can help with that," Tristan offers, and she nods gratefully.

"We may want to consider tightening the curfew," Reid suggests.

Theo scoffs. "Didn't do Denver much good. I thought we said we weren't going to go back to the sign-ups and allotments and all that bullshit?"

"That was before the hunters came back," Reid counters, frowning.

"Denver's only a few hours away. They could be on their way here right now, for all we know. The less wolves we have roaming the territory, the less chance we have of being found."

"If they can even find us," Ares grumbles, and Reid whips his head around,

pinning his son with a warning stare.

“Shouldn’t we get a better idea of what we’re up against before we jump to changing the rules for the curfew?” I sigh, the leather of the sofa cushions creaking beneath my weight as I lean back, resting my hands atop my backwards hat. “For all we know, this was a one-off.”

“That’s what we thought the last time they hit Denver,” Brock snaps, still glaring daggers at me. “And they lost three members of their pack within a week. I don’t know about you, but I’m not willing to lose even one.”

I scowl at him, my tattooed fingers curling into my palms as I bite my tongue against my retort.

He’s not willing to lose members of his pack, but he’ll send his own daughter away.

Fucking hypocrite.

“I think we all need to calm down, come up with some ideas, and reconvene to discuss how to move forward once we’re all rested,” Astrid says coolly, setting her hand on Brock’s shoulder in an attempt to redirect her mate. “For now, let’s just focus on what we already have in place. Where are we at with patrols?”

Avery is in charge of assigning squad fighters to patrols, so she takes the lead, explaining the numbers and routes and shifts while my mind drifts off to a place I rarely allow it to.

It always does when I’m in this house.

Sloane’s bedroom was right down the hall. Some nights, I helped her sneak out through the window, while others, I snuck in to sleep next to her. I wonder if it still looks the same. I remember exactly how her room looked back then- her floral wall mural and that damn pink duvet that used to get tangled around our ankles.

I wish I didn’t. Sloane Masters is dead to me.

I wish I’d never laid eyes on her.



It's a strange feeling, coming home.

Back to the place I grew up; the place it all began. The place I left behind eight years ago when my dad shipped me off to live with my aunt and uncle in Denver, insisting it was a chance for a new start.

As if I had a choice.

I didn't then, and I don't now. As soon as he heard that two wolves from the Denver pack were gunned down by hunters, he said I had to come back home. The problem is, the six-pack doesn't feel like home to me anymore. It hasn't for a long time. Even when I'd come back here for holidays, I was just visiting; checking in with family and friends and hearing how their lives had moved on without me.

That's not to say I haven't kept in touch with people here over the years. I talk to my family all the time, and I'm still close with Avery and Lo. They were excited when they heard I was coming back, so even though it feels strange, at least I've got people here who are happy to have me.

I know there's at least one who won't be.

I'm under no illusion that things can go back to the way they were before I moved away. I still bear the scars of when I left the six-pack at seventeen, both emotional and physical.

My dad tells me to come straight to the packhouse in Riverton, so naturally, as soon as my brother tells me they're getting the security squad together to

deal with the hunter situation, I bypass the packhouse completely and head for the squad complex instead. My father may be able to force me to come back here, but my days of letting him order me around are long gone. If he didn't want me to be independent, he shouldn't have sent me away to Denver in the first place.

The squad complex is a fixture of the six-pack territory. It's centrally located, almost smack in the middle, right on the fringes of the town of Goldenleaf. *Madd's territory*. I heard he became Alpha of the Goldenleaf pack two years back, but he didn't answer when I called to congratulate him. Not that I was surprised. He hasn't answered any of my calls since I left.

The squad complex itself is huge- there's a building along the north side that has dorms for the squad fighters, barracks for new recruits, a dining hall, and plenty of recreational space. Then, further down, there are offices for the squad leaders, a massive weight room for training, and the IT hub. There's an indoor arena used during inclement weather along the entire east side, bordering the huge outdoor practice field with tall walls to enclose it on the south and west. The gate to enter the complex is on the west side, and that's where I enter from after I park behind the dorms and walk around the building.

The practice field within the walls of the squad complex is crawling with people when I arrive, fit young squad fighters eagerly awaiting the announcement they've been gathered here for. I wander into the fray, a pair of girls turning to watch me curiously as I pass by.

"Hey, you're new," one of them comments, and I pause to turn toward her, nodding.

Her red-haired friend peeks out from behind her, squinting suspiciously. "Where are you from?"

They're young- nineteen or twenty, I'd guess. Probably new to the squad, and not from my pack since they clearly don't recognize me. "Just got in from Denver," I say nonchalantly, combing my fingers through my unruly curls.

The two of them smile in recognition. Due to the alliance between Denver and the six-pack, people sometimes relocate, so it's not out of the ordinary for someone from Denver to suddenly show up here or vice-versa.

"Mated?" the first girl asks, eyes dropping down my petite frame like she's sizing me up.

I just shake my head.

"Ooh, then you're in for a real treat," the redhead grins. "The squad leaders

here are hot as fuck. Though I've got dibs on Tristan, so don't go getting any ideas about him."

I grin, fighting to hold in a giggle. If only she knew she's talking about my little brother. "Are you two...?"

"She wishes!" her friend laughs, elbowing the red-haired girl playfully. "Tristan hardly knows she exists."

"It's only a matter of time," she shoots back defensively.

The brunette flips her long ponytail over her shoulder. "Whatever. Iver's hotter, anyways. Or Madd."

My heart skips a beat.

"Maddox Kessler?" the redhead snorts in disbelief. "Yeah right." She turns back to me, rolling her eyes. "Stay far away from that dude if you can. He's a straight up psycho."

I chuckle to myself, shaking my head. "I'm sure he's not *all* bad."

Her eyes widen in warning. "You don't know him."

"You'd be surprised," I muse.

I haven't seen Madd in a long time, but that doesn't mean I haven't heard things, like how he changed after I left. People say he turned cold. Callous. *Ruthless*. Or at least he acts like he is.

The Madd I knew was warm and kind and full of life. He'd give you the shirt off his back, drop everything to help a friend out of a bind. He was always playful and scheming and getting all of us into trouble, but hey, what teenager doesn't have a rebellious streak? It didn't change who he was, deep down.

So yeah, I've heard rumors about 'Mad Maddox'. But I don't believe them.

Maybe he's been fooling everyone else with his cold-hearted bullshit, but not me. I once knew Madd like the beat of my heart. Better than he even knew himself.

We haven't spoken in eight years, but that kind of soul-deep connection can't be erased.

I should know.

When he cut off all contact after I left, I tried to move on and forget him- but like it or not, Madd will always be a part of me.

"So what's your name?" the redhead asks, her voice shaking me from my thoughts.

I open my mouth to respond, but my brother beats me to it.

"Sloane!" he calls out from across the practice field, grinning widely and

throwing a hand up to beckon me over.

The girls' eyes practically bug out of their heads as they look from Tristan to me, making the connection. I give them a little wave as I turn away, leaving them slack-jawed in shock as I jog over to my brother and practically tackle him with a hug.

"How's my baby bro?" I tease, pushing up on my tiptoes to ruffle his hair.

"Hey, none of that shit when we're here," he laughs. "I'm a big bad squad leader now. Gotta keep up appearances."

I roll my eyes, shoving at his chest playfully as Lo and Avery approach, flinging their arms around me and trapping me between them.

"I'm so fucking glad you're back," Avery sighs, eyes full of emotion when she pulls back to stare at me.

"About damn time," Lo adds. She grabs onto my hand, squeezing it tight in hers. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever show your face around here again. It's been months!"

"I know, I know," I laugh. "I've been getting more involved with the IT hive back in Denver and time just got away from me."

Lo's eyes light up. "Does that mean you're joining the squad's IT unit here?"

"Duh," I reply, sticking out my tongue.

"Okay, where the hell is Madd?" Iver asks, huffing in annoyance as he, Archer, and Ares join us. "He's the one who said four o'clock. I've got shit to do."

"Probably balls deep in Roxy," Ares snorts.

My heart stutters in my chest, stomach sinking like a stone.

Everyone but me shoots Ares a dirty look and his eyes widen, snapping to meet my own as he holds up his hands in surrender. "Shit, sorry Sloane..."

"Really, Ares?" Avery groans, cutting him a glare. Her eyes soften as she turns to me apologetically, slipping an arm around my shoulders. "I probably should've told you..."

"No," I say, quickly steeling my expression and shrugging her arm off. "It's fine, really. I've been gone a long time. I have a lot to catch up on."

The door to the squad complex slams, and I whip my head around to see my past storming from the building like a dark cloud, headed right for me.

The one and only Maddox Kessler.

I'm thrown back in time, and suddenly I'm that seventeen-year-old girl again, staring numbly out the car window at my first love as my dad drives away. But the man in front of me now isn't the same boy who was standing in the

middle of the street with tears staining his cheeks, screaming ‘*don’t go*’.

He’s taller. At least six foot two, and he’s filled out considerably, packing muscle onto his already broad frame. Tattoos wind from his knuckles up his forearms and biceps, disappearing beneath the sleeves of his black t-shirt and peeking out from beneath his collar, ink crawling up his thick neck. His expression is hard, sharp jaw clenched tightly and dark blue eyes like stone.

He doesn’t look my way as he strides toward us. It’s like he looks right through me, seeing everyone else *but* me.

Part of me is glad for it. Madd used to look at me like I was the only girl in the room; the only girl in the whole universe. If he looked at me like that now, I’m not sure I’d be able to keep faking this confident, composed façade I’ve been putting on since I stepped through the gate of the squad complex.

But then the *other* part... the other part of me longs for just a crumb of his attention. Just one glance, some sort of acknowledgement that I once meant something to him.

I don’t get it.

“You guys ready?” he asks as he approaches, eyes sliding from Tristan, to Iver, to Avery- skipping right over me and landing on Lo before sweeping to Archer and Ares.

They all either nod or mumble in the affirmative.

“Alright, let’s get this shit over with then,” Madd mumbles under his breath as he breezes right past me, close enough to touch. His scent hits me with a wave of familiarity, and I swear it’s stronger than it used to be, spicy and distinctly masculine. Distinctly *him*. I left behind a boy, but this older version of Maddox is all man.

“Listen up!” he calls out, curling his index finger and thumb and sticking them in his mouth to whistle sharply. All at once, the dull roar of conversation dies out, everyone’s attention snapping to him. The way he commands a crowd is a thing to see, dominant energy rolling off him like a physical force.

“By now most of you have heard rumors about the hunters in Denver,” Madd begins, gaze sweeping over the horde of fighters gathered before him. “I’m here to tell you that they’re true.”

A wave of apprehension ripples through the crowd, a rumble of low murmurs and whispers rising up as they all look to one another with alarm.

Madd clenches his jaw in irritation, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as the sound around him builds. Then he holds up a

hand, and just like that, everyone goes silent again.

“Alright, everyone calm the fuck down,” he growls. “I hope you got that out of your systems, because you’re the last people who should be panicking. Save that for the children and the elderly, the defenseless within our packs. As for us, this is the exact reason we’re here. *This* is what we’ve trained for. If those assholes do wind up making their way to our borders, we’re the first line of defense.”

He sweeps his gaze over the people assembled before him again, the intensity in his eyes conveying the gravity of the responsibility the squad carries. “It’s our job to protect our people, to stand up for our packs and our land. You’re *warriors*. The best of the best. You’re the ones who are going to take those hunters down if they come knocking. So are you with me? Are you ready to fight for what’s ours and send these demons back to hell where they belong?” Madd definitely knows how to rile up a crowd. A roar of affirmation erupts from the squad fighters on the field, echoing off the corrugated metal walls of the squad complex and sending birds scattering from the trees in the surrounding forest. All the while, I’m watching Madd with rapt fascination. He can’t seem to even so much as look at *me*, but I can’t look away from him. He’s like a dark god, everyone here completely captivated by his larger-than-life presence.

Including me.

“Alright, good,” he barks, and the crowd settles so that he can speak again. “Now that’s out of the way, we’re going to make some adjustments to the training schedules and exercises going forward, but first we need to talk about doubling up the patrols.” He swings his gaze over to his sister. “Aves?” She nods, stepping up beside him to take the reins and announce the new patrol assignments. Avery’s a force in her own right, commanding the crowd almost as powerfully as her brother as she begins to rattle off the new plan for patrols.

I barely hear her over the sound of my own hammering pulse in my ears. I’m still staring at Madd, watching as he folds his thick, tattooed forearms over his chest, the muscle in his jaw feathering as he gazes upon the men and women he leads.

He’s familiar, yet different.

Something comfortable, yet terrifying.

And for a moment, it strikes me that the rumors may be true- maybe he’s really nothing like he used to be. Maybe he’s a stranger.

But then he reaches up, carding his fingers through his hair as a shallow sigh leaves him, and I'm hit with a pang of emotion as I recognize the move. He used to always do that when he was exhausted; I remember teasing him about it being one of his tells that his body needed rest. Sometimes we'd stay up late just talking for hours about nothing and everything, and when he started combing his fingers through his hair like that, I'd insist it was time to go to sleep.

He's bigger now; bulked up with hard-earned muscle and covered in ink. He wears his hair a little longer on top than he used to, but it suits him. His voice is deeper, and his stare is harder. He may look different, but I know my Madd's still in there; the boy who said he'd never stop loving me.

He always was a good liar.



Before leaving the council meeting last night, Tristan gave me a heads-up that his dad had already made the call for Sloane to come back. As if enough bad news hadn't already been dropped on me.

Hunters *and* the return of Sloane Masters? It's like hitting the bad news jackpot, all in one night. *Lucky me.*

While I'm glad Tris warned me so I wasn't blindsided when she showed up today, the knowledge of her return prevented me from getting any sleep whatsoever. I crawled back into bed when I got home and just lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell I did to deserve this windfall of bad fucking karma.

The lack of sleep has me in an even worse mood than usual, only amplified when I'm about to push the door open to exit the squad complex and I see *her* through the window.

I'd recognize that mess of curly dark hair and her petite stature anywhere. Sloane has always been fucking *tiny*, the top of her head barely reaching my shoulder. And even though eight years have passed, she pretty much looks the same, except her tits are a little bigger and her ass is rounder. Not that her small tits ever bothered me. They were the first pair I ever touched, and to me, they were perfect.

I stand frozen with my hands against the push bar of the door, heart thumping, breath stalling. She looks sexy as fuck in a pair of yoga pants and a

little white crop top, and the fact that she has the nerve to show up here looking so damn good makes me hate her even more. She's standing out there like she owns the damn place, on *my* practice field with *my* friends. Chatting and laughing with them and acting like she never left; like she's not a ghost from my past here to fucking haunt me.

I take one last, hard look at her, drag in a deep breath, and push open the door.

Once I step outside, I don't look at her again. Not when I walk across the field, and not even when I march right up to where she's standing with the other squad leaders- my sister and my closest friends- who have welcomed her back with open arms. I look past her, through her, anywhere but *at* her.

It takes everything in me not to. Something about Sloane has always pulled me in, drawing me to her like a moth to a flame. And despite my best efforts to ignore her, I still feel it, even though I don't want to.

By the time we finish making our announcements to the squad, I'm practically shaking with the effort it takes to restrain myself from looking her way. That, paired with the fact that I'm exhausted from not getting any sleep, has my already short temper on a hair trigger. When Avery grabs my arm to pull me aside, I damn near take her head off.

"What?" I demand, whipping around to face my sister as she flinches back.

"Jesus, Madd, get it together," she admonishes with a scowl.

I bury my fingers in my hair, squeezing my eyes shut and dragging in a deep breath. Then I blow it out slowly, steadying myself and opening my eyes.

"Sorry, I'm just..."

"I know." She stares into my eyes, and without me having to explain, I know she does.

Avery always jokes that we have twin telepathy- and while we don't actually have any mystical powers bridging our minds, we did share a womb, forging a deeper connection than most siblings have. We can communicate with a single look, which is why I don't have to tell her how twisted up my mind is right now. She knows how hard this is for me.

I know it's hard for her, too. I'm her brother, but Sloane was her best friend. It was easy for her to play both sides while Sloane was hours away in Denver, but now that she's back, Avery is caught between the two of us, likely feeling the strain of her loyalty being yanked in opposite directions.

Her eyes drift past me, and I see the alarm in them before I hear Sloane's voice.

“Hey Madd.”

Every muscle in my body tenses at hearing my name roll off her tongue. Avery’s eyes flicker back to mine, rounded in concern and begging me to play nice. For anyone else, I’d refuse, but Avery’s pleading stare has me sighing in resignation.

Guess I’ll have to get this over with at some point, right?

Slowly, I turn around, and right when my eyes land on Sloane, I wish I hadn’t.

Seeing her up close is like a gut punch. She’s just as beautiful as she used to be, with those long, dark lashes framing her green eyes and those full, pouty lips that I’ve kissed more times than I can count. Her skin is a creamy caramel tan, almost golden, and her glossy dark hair is longer now, but still wild with loose curls.

A breeze picks up, carrying her familiar scent to me- notes of vanilla, jasmine, and peach. She must still use that fancy peach body wash she used to steal from her mom’s shower when we were teenagers. The breeze ruffles her hair, and that’s when I see it- the jagged scar running from the side of her forehead to her temple.

At the sight of it, my blood runs cold- suddenly I’m seventeen again, kneeling in the snow as I cradle Sloane in my arms, screaming for her to wake up.

She quickly darts a hand up to sweep her hair over the scar, but now that I’ve seen it there’s a lump in my throat that I can hardly breathe past.

“Oh, come on,” she chuckles uncomfortably. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s not even that bad anymore.”

My Adam’s apple bobs with a hard swallow, familiar guilt gnawing at my insides.

I don’t fucking like it. I shouldn’t feel bad for her, not after the way she just left without a fight.

It’s with that bitter memory that I take all the guilt, all the regret, and shove it so far down I practically choke on it, choosing instead to focus on my anger. That’s an emotion I understand well. It’s ruled me for the last eight years.

“Why are you here?” I growl, narrowing my eyes on her.

Any trace of a smile disappears from her face at my tone. “The hunters,” she replies simply. “It wasn’t safe for me to stay in Denver, so I...”

“No, I mean why are you *here*, Sloane?” I snarl, cutting her off. “This meeting was for the squad, and last I checked, you’re not a part of it.”

I catch an elbow to the ribs from my sister, whipping my head sideways to shoot her a glare.

“She’ll be helping Lo with the IT unit,” Avery provides, pinning me with a hard look of her own.

We stare each other down, and while I could push back, I know it’s not worth it. Sloane is back, and as the daughter of an alpha she has a place here, whether I like it or not.

I don’t.

I clench my teeth, raking a hand through my hair as I shake my head. “Fine,” I grumble. “Whatever.”

I turn away from my sister only to see Roxy Childers pushing her way through the other squad leaders, her eyes fixed on me. As if I need one more annoyance today to add to the growing pile of shit that’s been dropped in my lap. I barely have time to curse under my breath before Roxy is squeezing past Avery and practically throwing herself at me.

“Hey babe,” Roxy coos, dangling off my neck, blue eyes sparkling. She swings her gaze to Sloane warily, sizing her up. “Aren’t you gonna introduce me?”

I should’ve known that’s why she came over here. Roxy is territorial as hell, which is why she’s hanging all over me, practically pissing on my leg to stake her claim.

I shrug her arms off, not wanting to deal with this shit right now, but the way both girls stare at me expectantly doesn’t leave me with much of a choice.

“This is Roxy,” I mumble, shifting away from her and throwing a thumb in her direction.

“Madd’s girl,” she tacks on.

Sloane doesn’t seem bothered in the least by Roxy’s actions or declaration. Ever the kind, cool-headed one, she offers Roxy a genuine smile, twin dimples sinking into her cheeks on either side. “Sloane.”

Roxy’s eyes widen in recognition. “Alpha Brock’s daughter?”

“That’s me,” she replies proudly, and I resist the urge to slam a fist into the nearest wall. The Sloane I knew hated when people called her that. She always said she was her own person, not just the daughter of an alpha. Especially an overbearing prick like Brock Masters.

“Are you just visiting?” Roxy asks, twirling a strand of her light brown hair around a finger and edging toward me. Now that she knows who Sloane is, she’s clearly feeling threatened. Everyone knows our history.

“Not this time,” Sloane sighs. “With the whole hunter situation, my dad wants me close.”

“And god forbid you go against something that daddy dearest commands,” I mutter bitterly.

Her eyes snap to me, the moss green of her irises blazing in defiance. “Actually he told me to come straight to the packhouse when I got back, but I came here instead. “

“Wow, what an act of rebellion,” I snort. “What’s next, staying up past your bedtime?”

Sloane levels me with a glare and I give it right back to her, the two of us suddenly locked in a staring contest that I refuse to back down from.

“So, no love lost between you two, huh?” Roxy chuckles uncomfortably, her gaze shifting between us.

Sloane rolls her eyes, folding her arms over her chest and lifting her chin. “Go ahead and say you hate me, Madd. We both know you’re a liar.”

My blood boils in my veins, every negative emotion connected to this girl screaming to the surface. How fucking dare she come back here after eight years and act like she still knows who I am?

“You don’t know shit about me,” I hiss, stepping closer to Sloane and pointing a finger in her face. “Not anymore.”

I turn away, but not before I see her flinch.

Good.

Let her be scared of me. Maybe then she’ll just stay away, and I won’t have constant reminders of what could’ve been thrown in my face every time I look at her.

Sloane Masters was my first everything. My first friend, my first kiss, my first love.

My first heartbreak.

My only one, because Sloane didn’t just break my heart, she tore it from my chest, threw it on the ground, and crushed it beneath her heel.

There’s nothing left in my chest now but a gaping hole where it used to be, the echo of a memory of what it was like to actually *feel* something.

Who’s the real villain, the one without a heart, or the one who rips out someone else’s?

Food for fucking thought, right there.

I stomp away from her, tearing across the practice field as Roxy scrambles to keep up behind me.

“Madd...”

“Not now, Rox,” I snap.

She jogs to catch up to me by the time I reach the doors to the squad complex, following me inside.

“Why don’t we go upstairs to your dorm room, just chill out for a while?” Roxy suggests, struggling to keep pace with me as I storm down the corridor, eating up the distance in long strides.

I live at the packhouse in Goldenleaf, but all the squad leaders have dorm rooms here at the complex in the event we decide to stay the night. I crashed here a lot before my parents moved out of the packhouse, but these days it’s a rarity.

“No,” I growl, harsher than I intend to. I grind to an abrupt halt, knowing that if I don’t give this girl some crumb of attention, she’ll just keep following me around like a lost puppy. I turn to face Roxy, reaching out to cup her chin in a hand and looking into her blue eyes. “I’m gonna go work out. I’ll call you later, ‘kay?”

Roxy’s head bobs with a nod. “Yeah, sure.”

She looks wounded, but I can’t find it in me to feel guilty for it. Not when I’ve got so many other things on my plate right now.

I lean down to brush my lips against her cheek in the barest show of affection, then turn and continue down the hall, bound for the weight room. If there’s anything that’ll help me get my head on straight, it’s losing myself in a grueling workout.

And since Sloane’s back, I have a feeling I’ll be doubling up my workouts from now on.



My bedroom at the Riverton packhouse is exactly as I left it at seventeen: over-the-top girly with enough pink and florals to make you gag. It never bothered me when I came back here to visit my family for a few nights, but now that I'm here to stay, some changes are definitely in order.

I start making a list of them in my head as I unpack, clearing out what's left in the closet and drawers to make room for my current wardrobe and packing my old things away in boxes. They're just reminders of a life I left behind long ago; one that no longer feels like my own.

You'd think I'd sleep like a baby on my first night back at home, but as soon as I crawl into bed, I'm restless, tossing and turning. Seeing Madd again after all these years was harder than I anticipated. I knew he held a grudge when I left, but after all this time, I guess I thought he'd let it go.

Clearly, I was wrong.

I wasn't prepared for that frosty reception at the squad complex today, and just the thought of having another confrontation like that with him makes me physically ill.

We never used to fight. Then again, we never really had a reason to. Nothing's how it used to be, and I hate the divide that exists between us now. It's late when I finally give up the struggle for sleep and get out of bed, heading to the kitchen for a snack. I walk in to find my mom perched on a stool at the kitchen island, flashing me a bright smile like she's been waiting

for me to arrive.

The stack of Oreo cookies and glass of milk at the spot beside her- my favorite late-night snack- confirms that she has been.

It doesn't surprise me, but sometimes it's annoying that my mom's always two steps ahead. Astrid Masters isn't just an ordinary shifter, she was blessed with extraordinary gifts- one of them being the gift of glimpsing the future. She's a seer, as her grandmother was before her, and when I was young, my parents often speculated as to whether I'd inherit the gift, too. Imagine their disappointment when I turned out to be just a regular kid.

"Can't sleep?" Mom asks as I round the kitchen island and take the stool next to her.

"You tell me," I grumble. "You clearly knew we'd be having this conversation."

She breathes a sigh, setting her hand on top of mine comfortingly. "It isn't easy coming back, is it?"

"You have no idea," I murmur, picking up an Oreo.

"Madd giving you hell?"

"Of course."

I twist the cookie to split it, licking the white frosting off the inside.

"He's struggled since you left," Mom comments, watching me. "I'll bet he's glad you're back, even if he doesn't show it."

"Yeah right," I snort, turning to face her. "He *hates* me, Mom. Like actual hate. I never thought Madd could look at me the way he did today." I shake my head, popping half of the cookie into my mouth and crunching down. "I'll bet he wishes I was the one the hunters took out in Denver," I mumble around bits of Oreo as I chew.

"Don't even say things like that," Mom admonishes, furrowing her brow and shaking her head.

"It's true."

She pins me with a hard look. "It's *not*."

I reach for the glass of milk, taking a sip to wash the cookie down. Then I lick my lips, turning back to her. "Can't you just tell me whether or not we're fated mates, put me out of my misery?"

Fated mates are basically the shifter equivalent of what humans call soulmates- but while humans merely speculate that someone is their soulmate, we actually receive confirmation. If we're within proximity of our fated mate while running under the light of the full moon, the tug of the bond

will lead us to one another. The moment we lay eyes on each other, the bond will snap into place, and we'll know we're fated; meant to be.

It all sounds like sunshine and roses, but a lot of things have to go right for that to happen. For starters, it has to be a full moon for our wolves to fully recognize the bond and come together. We have to be close enough to be able to feel it and actually get to one another, so if your mate is out running with another pack, better luck next time. Our wolves can't recognize the mate bond until after our eighteenth birthday, and even then, only under the full moon and when in close proximity. Oh, and if all those things do fall into place, you still have to seal it with a marking before the next full moon, or the bond is ripped away in an agonizing, excruciating fashion. *Fun*, right?

Given all those factors, it's a miracle that anyone finds their fated mate. Shifters can take a chosen mate instead by marking one another beneath the full moon to forge a bond, but it's not the soul-deep bond that comes with being fated. That's why a lot of us wait, with the hope we'll find the one person meant for us. Some wait their whole lives and never do.

My parents did. A lot of things had to fall together for them to find each other, but I guess that's where fate comes into play, right? If two people are destined for one another, fate will find a way to bring them together under all the right circumstances for the bond to snap in. Madd and I always speculated that the two of us could be fated, but I left when we were seventeen, so we never had a chance to run together under the full moon after we came of age. We were just two kids that were crazy in love, so it was probably wishful thinking that we were cosmically destined for one another. Though now that I'm back, I can't help but wonder if fate had a hand in putting us back in each other's lives.

Mom lets out a giggle, curls bouncing as she shakes her head. "If only it was that easy, right?" She picks up my hand, tucking it between hers and looking into my eyes. "Honestly, I haven't seen it. But even if I did know your future with Madd, you know what I'd say."

"That I have to work it out on my own," I grumble, frowning. I pull my hand back, waving it in the air. "Yeah, yeah. I've heard the whole song and dance about not messing with fate. Doesn't mean you can't give a girl a little heads-up once in a while." I pick up another Oreo, splitting it and licking the frosting. "He's seeing someone, anyways," I say absently.

"And what about you?" Mom probes. "Are you and Garrett still...?"

"No," I answer quickly, stuffing the cookie in my mouth.

She watches me chew, searching my face until I finally swallow it down and elaborate. “We broke things off months ago. It just wasn’t working. And I guess it’s a good thing we did, in hindsight, since Dad didn’t really give me an option when he told me to come back home.”

“He just wants what’s best for you,” Mom says gently.

I roll my eyes, frowning. “As if ripping me away from everyone and everything I care about is what’s best.” I throw up two fingers. “Make that twice, now.”

“You’ll learn to forgive him for it someday,” she sighs, stealing half of my cookie and popping it in her mouth.

“Yeah, right around when Madd forgives me,” I scoff. I can’t hide the bitter resentment dripping from my tone. If I learned anything today, it’s that time does not in fact heal all wounds. Some are far too deep for even time to touch. I reach up to my forehead, absently tracing the raised skin of my scar with a fingertip.

My mom catches me doing it, eyes filling with sadness. I quickly jerk my hand away, sweeping my hair back over the scar and picking up another cookie.

The accident was hard on all of us. I overheard my mom crying to my dad a few days after I woke up, blaming herself for not knowing I was going to get hurt that day, as if she could’ve somehow prevented it. Though her gift gives her visions of both the past and future, she’s never been able to control them. She only sees what fate wants her to see, and she never saw the accident coming. None of us did.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you,” I start cautiously, eyes flickering over to her. “I had this dream, the night the hunters attacked those wolves in Denver.”

Mom perks up right away, twisting her body toward me and leaning in. “What kind of dream?” she asks eagerly.

I wince at her reaction. I’ve always felt like I disappointed her somehow when I didn’t inherit her gift- like she was seeking that connection with me, and I failed her by just being woefully *normal*. I don’t want to get her hopes up, but that dream has been driving me crazy since I had it. It’s too coincidental that it played out exactly as things did for the wolves in the forest that night in Denver, and though it was probably just a strange, one-time thing, nobody will understand the way it has me reeling better than an actual seer.

“It was...” I hesitate, not wanting to call it a vision, but unsure how to

explain. “I had a dream that I was running through the woods, being chased by hunters. In my dream, I was shot in the thigh and the chest, and then after I woke up, pack warriors brought Amelia in.” I swallow hard, the harrowing memories of that night assaulting me. “She was badly hurt... shot in the same places.”

Mom grips onto my arm, gaze pinned on mine. “Do you think it was a vision? Have you ever had anything like that happen before?”

I shake my head. “No, never. I... I don’t know. It was just weird. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Sensing my apprehension, my mom reins in her excitement, releasing my arm and leaning back with a slow nod. “Did you have the dream earlier in the night? When did they bring her in?”

My brows draw together as I mull over her question. “I... it was almost right after. I know it sounds crazy, but the dream was so vivid, it felt like it was happening in real time.”

Mom nods again, pausing for a beat while I can practically see her wheels turning. “Let me know if you have any other dreams like that, or strange feelings of knowing something. My abilities manifested when I was a child, but you never know...” she trails off with a shrug. “Maybe it’s a fluke, or maybe there’s something to it. Only time will tell.” She smiles kindly, taking my hand in hers again. “I’m here for you Sloane, always.”

“I know,” I rasp, my throat suddenly raw with emotion.

Before I can think on it too much, my younger sister Marigold comes strutting into the kitchen, approaching the island from the other side, leaning over it, and reaching out to steal my last Oreo.

“Hey!” I object, but she’s already stuffing it in her mouth like a heathen, not even twisting it apart to lick the frosting first.

“Nobody told me we were meeting for late night snacks,” she grumbles around the cookie in her mouth. “Rude.”

“Says the girl who just stole my last Oreo,” I mutter, folding my arms over my chest indignantly.

To add insult to injury, she swipes up my glass of milk, finishing that off, too. “Pup’s gotta eat,” she says smugly after she’s swallowed it down, rubbing her tiny baby bump.

My sister is lucky- she didn’t have to look far to find her fated mate, he basically fell in her lap. Rhett is the son of my dad’s beta, Jared, and on Goldie’s first full moon run after her eighteenth birthday, the bond pulled the

two of them together and snapped in. They've been blissfully happy together for the last three years, and in five short months, they'll make me an auntie.

"I'll let it go this time," I tease, pointing a finger at her, "but only for the good of my little niece or nephew in there." I lower my finger to point at her belly, cracking a smile at the thought of the life growing inside her.

"Do we have any more?" Goldie asks, brushing the crumbs off her fingers. "This kid already has a wolf's appetite."

Mom smiles, easing off her stool and heading over to the pantry to retrieve the package of Oreos.

Goldie leans over the kitchen island, resting her elbows against the surface.

"Trouble sleeping?"

I nod.

"Madd?"

I nod again.

"Good luck with that," she snorts, pushing off the countertop and turning to snatch the package of cookies out of Mom's hands. "Thanks, grandma," she sing-songs, turning on a heel and heading back down the hall toward the room she shares with Rhett.

My mom winces, turning back toward me. "I do *not* feel old enough to be a grandma," she groans.

I laugh, sliding off the stool and rounding the island to wrap my arms around her. "At least you're a hot grandma," I tease, hugging her tight.

Her body shakes with a laugh, and the next thing I know, we're both lost in fits of giggles, holding onto one another.

When we finally pull away from the embrace, my mom cups my cheek, gazing fondly into my eyes. "Try to get some sleep, hon."

I nod, reaching up to lift her hand from my cheek and giving it a little squeeze. Then I head back to my room, crawl into bed... and sleep like a damn baby.



“Madd, are you even listening?” Roxy whines, stomping her foot like a petulant child.

I’m not.

I haven’t been since she breezed into my office at the squad complex and started going on and on about what to wear to this party tonight. A fucking *party*, as if we don’t have more pressing matters to be focusing our attention on right now.

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

“Yeah, you’ll look great in whatever you wear, babe,” I mumble, waving her off as I continue scanning the list of new patrols that Avery sent over.

Roxy stomps around to my side of the desk, snatching the paper out of my hand.

“You weren’t listening,” she declares, clearly riled up about whatever fashion emergency she’s having. “Ariana went and bought the same dress as I was gonna wear to Andie’s party tonight. The *same dress!*”

I arch a brow. “So?”

She throws her head back, heaving an exasperated sigh. “So, we can’t show up wearing the same thing!”

“Wear something else, problem solved,” I mutter, snatching the paper back from her and setting it on my desk, gaze dropping to it to resume combing through the list of names. In light of the hunter situation, we’re doubling up

the patrols, and although this is usually Avery's wheelhouse, she asked me to look it over to ensure she didn't push any of the teams' rotations too close together.

"It's not that simple," Roxy huffs. "I picked it out weeks ago. I planned my shoes and jewelry and hair around *that* dress."

I go back to ignoring her tirade, scanning the paper to try to find where I left off. Until Roxy realizes I'm ignoring her again and grabs onto the arm of my desk chair, twisting it toward her and planting herself in my lap.

"I know something that would make me feel better," she purrs, looping her arms around my neck and pushing her tits up into my face.

"I'm not in the mood," I grumble, grabbing her by the waist and lifting her off me, setting her back on her feet.

Roxy folds her arms over her chest, staring me down with those piercing blue eyes. "It's because of *her*, isn't it?"

"No," I snap.

She leans over me, planting her palms on my thighs. "Then what is it?"

"Jesus, Rox, fucking lay off!" I groan, shoving her away.

She stumbles back exaggeratedly, gaping at me. "You can't treat me like this, Madd! I'm your *girlfriend*."

"That's a title you gave yourself."

She flinches, even though she knows it's true. The two of us couldn't have less in common, and I don't really do the whole relationship thing, at least not in the traditional sense.

Roxy and I have been hanging out for a while. I'm not fucking anyone else, because I'm not a total asshole, but we don't go on dates or talk about our feelings or any of that other bullshit. Honestly, Roxy probably wouldn't give a shit about me if I wasn't an alpha. She likes the perks that come with being attached to someone of my rank.

She may be a social climber, but she's not a bad person. She's a hell of a squad fighter, and she gets along well with my sister, which is always a prerequisite for any girl I spend my time with. But both of us know this is just a casual fling with an eventual expiration date, so there's no point in putting in the effort to turn it into something more.

"I can tell you're in a bad mood, so I'm gonna go," she sighs, strutting back around the desk and grabbing her purse off the chair opposite me. "Do you wanna pick me up here at eight, or should I meet you at the packhouse?"

"I don't care," I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose between my thumb

and forefinger and squeezing my eyes shut in exasperation.

“I’ll just meet you at the packhouse.”

I blink my eyes open to see Roxy heading for the door, and even though I know I should probably say something to clear the air, I just let her go.

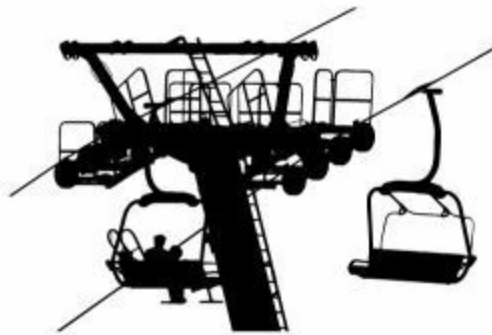
She struck a nerve by bringing up Sloane. Any mention of her has always had that effect, but now that she’s actually living here again, fucking haunting me, I’m gonna have to learn to get used to it. Especially because I’ll be forced to see her again in just a few short hours.

It’s Andie Raines’ birthday, and the girls are throwing her a party at the old ski lodge to celebrate her turning twenty-two. We’re not technically supposed to go anywhere near the Cedar Ridge resort since it was shut down a decade ago, but that hasn’t stopped us from bending the rules to use it for the occasional rager. Andie is Alpha Reid’s daughter- Archer and Ares’ sister- so since she’s basically six-pack royalty, this is one of those instances.

I typically look forward to parties at the old lodge, but not tonight. Andie and Sloane are friends, so I have no doubt that she’ll be there. She’s probably over there right now helping Avery get things set up.

I’d just skip the party entirely if I didn’t know it’d hurt Andie’s feelings if I don’t show. Women are emotional like that, especially Andie. A few months ago, she decided to take a hiatus from her role in squad leadership to nanny for her little cousin, and she actually broke down in tears when she told the rest of us that she was stepping back for a year, as if it somehow meant we wouldn’t all still see each other regularly. It was fucking ridiculous.

So while the last thing I want to do tonight is be stuck in a room with my ex, hopefully I’ll be able to avoid her easily enough. It’d be in her best interest to avoid me, too. I’m on edge, ready to self-destruct, and if Sloane puts herself in my path at this party, I’ll make her regret it.



I’m in a shitty mood before we even arrive at the lodge later that night. Avery

and I always roll into events like this together, but as I'm getting ready to leave, I get a message from her saying she's ditching me to catch a ride with someone else.

Okay, maybe those weren't her *exact* words, but it was easy enough to read between the lines of her vague message and put two and two together as to who that 'someone else' is, and the thought of my twin choosing Sloane fucking Masters over me makes me want to put my fist through a wall.

Knowing Aves, her heart's in the right place. She probably didn't want to leave Sloane to walk into the party all by herself when she just got back into town, and she knows better than to ask me if she can catch a ride with us. I already told her I'm taking Roxy, so I'll bet she figures it's no big deal for her to go with Sloane, instead.

It shouldn't be, but I'm so pissed off about it that I'm white-knuckling the steering wheel the whole drive over to the lodge, thinking about how Sloane wouldn't need an escort to this damn party if she didn't fucking abandon all of us in the first place.

If she didn't abandon *me*.

Because nobody else felt her absence as profoundly as I did; nobody else was completely fucking destroyed by her leaving.

The party is in full swing when Roxy and I arrive. She's clutching onto my arm as we walk through the door like she's afraid I'll disappear if she doesn't anchor me, and I guess I can't blame her with the way I've been acting. When I'm in a mood like this, everyone around me becomes collateral damage. She's borne the brunt of my bad mood the whole drive over here.

At one point the Cedar Ridge ski resort was a thriving business that attracted tourists from all over the country, but after a decade of disuse, it's hard to picture it as anything other than the dilapidated shell it's become. The darkened hallways feel haunted, pictures hanging crooked on the walls and furniture stacked haphazardly in corners. Remnants of parties past still litter the floors; a red plastic cup here, a burned-out cigarette there.

Despite the condition of the rest of the building, the girls did a decent job of cleaning up the old ballroom in preparation for tonight. There are tables full of liquor bottles, kegs floating in tubs of ice, and Ace hauled his DJ equipment in and has music pumping through a tall set of speakers, the bass beat vibrating the floor. Ace Conway is the son of the Norbury pack's beta and best friends with Alpha Chase's son, Seb- you rarely see one of them without the other, and that's the case tonight, the two of them huddled

together over the turntables. They're both eighteen, set to join the squad this summer after they graduate high school.

I came to a lot of parties here in my teens. Hell, I was the one who threw them. They were always under the radar back then, but nowadays, we take the proper precautions before hosting one, extending the night's patrols to encompass the perimeter of the lodge- which is easy to do when the hosts of the party are the same ones in charge of the security squad. In light of the hunter situation, we also put a ban on shifting tonight in the event the unusual activity at the old lodge were to draw any outside attention. *Safety first.*

"I need a drink," Roxy mutters, clutching tighter to my arm as we step into the fray.

"My thoughts exactly," I grumble, immediately steering us toward one of the tall cocktail tables filled with a cluster of liquor bottles, mixers, and a stack of plastic cups.

Roxy wastes no time in grabbing a cup and pouring herself some horrible coconut rum and fruit juice concoction, while I peruse the selection of liquor for something a little stronger, landing on whiskey. The moment I reach for it, I hear the familiar sound of Sloane's laugh from somewhere nearby, ringing out like an echo from my past. I cringe at the sound and the memories it elicits, foregoing the cup to just grab the whole damn bottle, ditching the cap and taking a long pull.

The burn of the whiskey sears my throat on its way down, settling in my stomach and warming me from the inside. I'll need a hell of a lot more of it if I'm going to make it through tonight.

Roxy side-eyes me as I swallow down another gulp, licking the whiskey from my lips. Then her gaze drifts past me and she moves closer, grabbing onto my arm. "Come on, lets..."

Before she can finish that thought, my sister's voice calls out.

"About time you two showed up," Avery teases, laughing as she comes up beside me and slings an arm around my waist. She peers up at me, the glassiness of her eyes a telltale sign that she's already buzzed. "I was beginning to wonder if you were ditching out on me."

"Hey, who ditched who tonight?" I fire back bitterly.

She rolls her eyes and gives me a playful shove, liquor sloshing from her cup and splashing my feet.

"Damnit, Aves," I growl, stumbling back, only to collide with someone behind me.

I hear a little yelp of alarm and whip around to grab onto their arm to prevent them from falling, only to meet the wide green eyes of the one person I was hoping to avoid.

Sloane blinks back at me, and for a long, painful moment, I'm just frozen there, imprisoned in her stare.

I can't move.

Can't think.

My breathing stalls.

My heart races.

Time slows to a crawl, our gazes still locked- then slowly, her expression softens, the corner of her plush lips lifting in a little smirk.

"Um, Hi. Can I have my arm back?" she asks, her eyes finally leaving my own to flicker downwards.

I follow her gaze only to discover that my hand's still wrapped around her arm. I quickly yank it away with a scowl, flinching back like I've been burned, only to bump into Roxy behind me. Her plastic cup crunches between us, cold liquid soaking the back of my t-shirt.

"Ugh, what the hell?!" Roxy shouts, and I turn to see the front of her white dress splashed with pink, the crushed cup still in her hand and dripping onto the floor. She glares daggers at me, then stomps away, bound for the restroom.

"Shit, I'd better go help her," Avery mumbles, tearing off after Roxy.

It takes me a second to realize that they've left me standing here alone with my ex, the back of my shirt soaked in booze that smells like damn sunscreen.

Fucking *great*.

I tighten my grip around the neck of the whiskey bottle, lifting it to my lips and sinking a long gulp as I feel Sloane edge a little closer.

"So, uh, I was hoping we could talk," she says hesitantly.

I swallow down the liquor, lowering the bottle and wiping my mouth off on a forearm. Then I slowly turn to face her, arching a brow. "About what?"

She shuffles her feet, my eyes drawn to the movement, and it's no wonder that she almost fell when I knocked into her- she's got four inch heels strapped to them. She's always been a girly girl, and when she first started wearing heels as a teen she went right for the highest ones- anything to cheat a few inches of height- even though she could barely walk in them. She looked like a newborn foal, all wobbly with her knees knocking together. I gave her so much shit about it, but Sloane's nothing if not determined, and it

didn't take her long to perfect the art of walking in heels until she was gliding in them like a damn runway model.

The memory brings the ghost of a smile to my lips, though I quickly force it back and steel my expression before she sees.

But Sloane doesn't miss it. She never misses a damn thing.

The barest spark of hope flares in her eyes, and I'm quick to shut that shit down.

"We don't have anything to talk about," I grumble, shaking my head.

Sloane frowns, heaving a sigh and folding her arms across her chest. The action pushes her tits up so that they're nearly spilling out of the neckline of her skin-tight tank dress, and I mentally curse myself for the way my eyes are drawn right to them; something else she definitely doesn't miss.

Damnit.

I fucking *hate* that I'm still so attracted to her. Even after she left town and completely ghosted me, there's no denying that she's the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, and that's not an exaggeration. I wish it was.

Tonight, she looks like a damn smoke show. The soft yellow hue of her dress compliments her coloring, and I swear she's wearing it just to fucking taunt me. I used to always say that I loved her in yellow; something about that shade makes her skin look golden. And the fact that she has the nerve to show up here dressed like *that* just to rub it in my face has deep-seated resentment bubbling to the surface.

"Things don't have to be weird between us," Sloane ventures, as if she's done nothing wrong and I'm just being unreasonable.

Princess Sloane is used to getting her way. She's always had everyone wrapped around her finger, so she probably assumes I'll fall all over myself trying to get her back now that she's home again.

She's wrong.

"No?" I challenge, sparks of anger flaring to life inside me. "How should they be then, Sloane? You waltz back in here after all this time and expect things to just go back to the way they were?"

She flinches at my tone, a little crease forming between her brows as they draw together. "No, but..."

"But *nothing*," I snap, not letting her finish. "It's too late. I've moved on."

"What, you think I haven't?" she scoffs, clearly offended. "I didn't come back for you."

Her words land precisely how she intends them to- like a damn gut punch.

Fair play, since I took the first shot, but that doesn't make them sting any less.

"Good, because you'd be wasting your time," I mutter bitterly. "I've got no room in my life for people who up and leave without looking back."

She scowls, curly hair bouncing as she shakes her head. "You know that's not what happened."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"Well, I guess you've got your version of events and I've got mine."

Sloane throws her head back, scrubbing her hands over her face and heaving an exasperated sigh. "Can't we just move past this? I'm here now, so we have to coexist." She takes a little step closer, her expression softening. "We were friends once, Madd. Can't we just... start over?"

"What, you wanna act like the past eight years never happened?" I growl, narrowing my eyes on her. "Fine by me, Sloane. Better yet, how about we pretend none of it did? Just go ahead and forget it all, because I sure as shit have."

I turn around and storm away, so damn agitated that my skin is itchy with the urge to shift. Anger always brings my inner wolf to the surface, and the restrictions on shifting don't help matters. The angrier I get, the more he pushes forward, and the harder he pushes, the more irritated I become. It's like a vicious cycle, trapping me in an endless loop of my own rage because I can't just let him out to run it off.

I head for the cluster of furniture in the corner where my friends always post up, whiskey sloshing in the bottle dangling from my fist with every step. Over the years of throwing parties here, we've dragged barstools and chairs from the lodge restaurant and couches from the lobby into this ballroom, forming a crude semi-circle of mismatched seating. Iver, Tristan, and Ares are lounging there with drinks in hand when I throw myself down onto one of the couches with an annoyed groan.

The three of them look my way as I raise the bottle to my lips, taking a healthy pull of whiskey.

Iver glances toward Sloane across the room, then arches a brow at me. "So I take it that went well?"



After Madd storms away, I just stand there reeling from our confrontation, feeling completely out of place amongst the crowd of strangers until Avery returns from the bathroom.

“What’s wrong?” she asks as soon as she sees the look on my face, but I don’t tell her. We never talk about Madd. It’s been an unspoken rule between us since I started dating her brother all those years ago; she’s basically best friends with both of us, so it wouldn’t be fair to put her in the middle of our squabbling, no matter how badly I wanted to after I moved away and he was radio silent.

I didn’t pull her into our drama then, and I don’t do it now. Once again, I just suffer in silence, a sea of my own thoughts and insecurities trying their damndest to pull me under.

It takes Avery all of two seconds to put it together, though, her head swiveling between Madd, downing a bottle of whiskey like it’s his job, and me, fidgeting and frowning.

She sighs when I don’t respond, giving me a pitying look and linking her arm through mine. “C’mon,” she urges, tugging me to move with her.

I take a few steps before I realize that she’s leading me in the direction of the makeshift lounge area in the corner, and I dig in my heels, refusing to budge another step.

“I should go.”

Because this isn't my world anymore, and I feel it now more than ever. I used to party at the lodge all the time- I helped Madd drag the very couch he's currently sitting on from the lobby to this room. But that was nearly a decade ago, and even though it's a familiar scene, nothing feels the same as it once was. I used to be part of it all. Now I'm an outsider looking in, struggling to find my footing in a life that I left behind.

I've put on a good front since I've been back, but that doesn't mean I don't have raging insecurities about how I'll fit in after being away for so long. *If I still fit in.*

"Oh, stop," Avery admonishes, rolling her eyes. "Don't let Madd scare you off. He isn't the fucking king around here."

Except he kinda *is*. As the oldest male heir, Madd has been leading our rag tag gang since we were in diapers. He may not be in charge of our group in any official capacity, but from what I saw at the complex yesterday, it's clear that everyone still looks to him for guidance.

Which is another reason why I'm feeling so damn uncomfortable around my old friends. If they had to choose sides, they'd choose Madd's. I know that. They may all be putting on a good show at welcoming me back, but I doubt they truly want me here, upending the status quo.

Avery gives me a hard look. "Don't make me pick you up and carry you over there."

I snort a laugh, curly hair swishing in front of my face as I shake my head. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wanna bet?" She arches a brow, and for a second I think she really means it. Avery's strong- every inch of her lean frame is toned to perfection, the result of years of disciplined, rigorous training. Her mom was known as the 'barbie beast', and the apple didn't fall far from the tree. I have no doubt she'd be able to overpower me effortlessly.

"Oh my gosh, I'm kidding!" she laughs, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Lighten up, babe. It isn't like you to be this sullen. You're usually a little ray of sunshine."

"I know," I sigh, raking a hand through my hair and glancing around. "I'm just kinda... out of my element here."

Avery's brows pinch together in confusion. "Since when? The Sloane I knew loved a good party. Now buck up," she says, slapping me on the back, "and let's go hang out with our friends. You're back now, babe, and it's time that everyone got used to it."

I blow out a slow breath, shoring up my confidence. “You’re right,” I concede. “Okay. Let’s go.”

She grins in triumph, linking her arm with mine again and leading me over to the cluster of seating where the guys are hanging out. I hold my breath as we approach, but Madd doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t even look up at me.

I make a beeline for the seat furthest from him- a barstool against the wall- and slide onto it, crossing my legs and leaning back with a sigh.

“Where’s your drink, Sloane?” Iver asks, eyeing me up. If he wasn’t like a brother to me, I’d probably be struck by how attractive he’s grown up to be. He’s classically handsome, with blonde hair and gorgeous baby blues, and he’s got this whole clean-cut, preppy vibe going on. Not my type, but definitely not hard on the eyes either.

No, apparently my type is the moody bad boy covered in ink and drowning in whiskey.

“Why don’t you grab her one?” Avery suggests as she takes the stool beside me. “Get me one while you’re at it,” she adds, tossing him a wink.

He arches a brow, smirking. “Is that any way to ask?”

“*Please*, Iver baby,” Avery coos, batting her lashes and pouting her lips.

He cackles a laugh, pushing up from the couch. “Okay, only if you promise to *never* do that again.”

She sticks her tongue out at him and he waves her off with a grin, turning to stride away in search of beverages.

“You can call *me* baby anytime, Avery,” Ares cuts in, waggling his eyebrows.

She rolls her eyes at him. “Keep it in your pants, Raines.”

A giggle slips past my lips, even though my heart aches with envy as I watch my friends interact with one another. I miss this- the easy banter and playful jibes. I used to be right in there with them, giving as good as I got. But now I’m on the outside, and I hate it.

Lo and Andie pass by Iver on their way to join us, Iver making a big show of checking Andie out and whistling in appreciation. Andie Raines is dressed to the nines tonight, her green sequin dress catching the lights like a disco ball and her auburn hair slicked back in a high ponytail. She’s got the fiery personality to match her hair color and she’s been dancing up a storm tonight, a thin sheen of sweat glistening on her skin.

“Hey there, birthday girl!” I greet cheerfully as she approaches, flashing Andie a bright smile.

“Hey, runaway,” she winks.

It’s not a nickname I’m fond of. Not that my friends would know any better- I’ve always laughed it off as if it doesn’t bother me. But it does, because I *didn’t* run, not really. I never would’ve run.

Andie flops down onto the sofa beside her brother. “Where’s Archie?” she asks, stealing the plastic cup out of his hand.

“He disappeared a while ago with his girl,” Ares replies, side-eyeing Andie as she downs the rest of his drink.

She coughs after she swallows it, staring down into the empty cup with a grimace. “Ugh, what the hell was that, jet fuel?!”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I was trying to make a long island,” he smirks.

“Remind me to never, *ever* let you make me a drink.” She scrunches her nose in disgust, swinging her gaze around until it lands on Madd. “Hey, grumpy pants! Gimme some of that whiskey.”

Madd looks up for the first time since I sat down, the muscle in his jaw feathering as he lifts his chin. “Come and get it.”

Lo rolls her eyes, stepping over to snatch the liquor bottle from Madd’s grasp. “Don’t be a dick, it’s her birthday.”

He scowls, but doesn’t make any move to actually stop Lo from taking the whiskey over to Andie. She tips a sizable pour into the birthday girl’s cup before returning the bottle to Madd’s tattooed fist.

“What’s got you all broody tonight?” Lo asks, dropping onto the couch beside him.

His navy blue eyes flicker in my direction, but Avery quickly comes through with the save, sparing both of us the discomfort of the truth.

“Roxy’s all pissed off because he spilled a drink on her,” she says coolly.

“She’s still in the bathroom trying to get it out of her dress. Pretty sure she’s regretting wearing white.”

“Sure, *that’s* why she’s pissed off,” Ares snorts.

Madd jerks his head toward him. “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Ares must not register the warning in his tone, because he’s still wearing that goofy smile as he gestures to me and says, “well obviously she’s got bigger problems than a spilled drink, now that Sloane’s back...”

Madd’s grip tightens around the neck of the whiskey bottle, his inked knuckles turning white.

“That ship has sailed, bud,” Tristan cuts in, and I’m thankful he’s speaking up in an effort to diffuse the situation because Madd looks like he’s about to

blow a damn gasket. The vein in his neck bulges, his posture tense.

“Has it, though?” Andie asks cheekily, glancing between the two of us with a conspiratorial smirk. She clearly hasn’t picked up on the obvious tension- no doubt thanks to the amount of alcohol currently coursing through her bloodstream.

And as if anyone else needs to pile on, Iver returns at that moment with two cups in hand and jumps right into the conversation. “I’m just waiting for you two to run together on the full moon, find out once and for all whether you’re fated,” he says with a teasing grin. “The rest of us still have bets going, you know.”

“Is it too late to get in on that?” Ares asks, interest piqued.

“Nah, man, a hundred bucks,” Iver offers. “Which side are you on, fated or not fated? Odds favor fated right now, but you could tip those scales.”

“Fuck this,” Madd snaps, slamming the whiskey bottle down on a side table and jolting to his feet.

“Aw, c’mon, it’s just a joke,” Iver laughs, leaning in to nudge him with an elbow.

Madd shoves him away, keg beer sloshing from the cups in Iver’s grasp as he stumbles backwards.

“Whoa, easy!” Tristan barks out, jumping up to intervene.

Iver scowls at Madd as beer drips from his hands “What the hell, bro?!”

Ares chuckles uncomfortably, leaning away from the conflict. “C’mon, Madd, lighten up.”

Madd’s gaze sweeps between his friends as he pants in anger, chest heaving with every ragged breath.

And because old habits die hard, I stick my neck out in an attempt to calm him down, since I used to be the one person who always could. “Madd, come on...”

I immediately regret it.

He whips around, furious eyes focusing on me, and if looks could kill, I’d be slayed on the spot by the glare he cuts my way. His lips part to speak, and I brace myself before he even gets a word out, knowing by the look in his eyes that whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to hurt.

“Why don’t you just go back to Denver, Sloane?” Madd growls cruelly. “Run away, that’s what you’re fucking good at. Nobody wants you here.”

His words slice through me like a knife, shining a spotlight on my insecurities, and I can’t control the sting of tears that prickle behind my eyes

in response. I sink my teeth into my lower lip, trying my hardest to get it together and stop them from flowing, but with the way my emotions have already been on overdrive, it's useless. They flood in, obscuring my vision as Madd turns around and stalks away.

Avery leans in on one side of me, Lo rushing to the other, both of them trying to comfort me as the tears slip free and track wet paths down my cheeks. I sniffle, wiping them away with my hands, and suddenly Madd grinds to a halt, his back still to me, his posture tense. Then, slowly, his head turns as he looks back at me over his shoulder.

Though my vision is still blurry with tears, our eyes meet- and while the last thing I want to do is give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry, I can't stop the big, fat tears from continuing to fall.

And then Madd does something I never expect him to.

He whips around, stomping back in my direction with madness in his eyes.

I brace myself for the worst, as do those around me. Everyone freezes in a state of suspended animation, watching Madd as he charges through the crowd, past Iver and Tristan and Andie and Ares, his eyes focused solely on me.

I hold my breath, even as he invades my space- and before I can process what's happening, his strong arms wrap around me, lifting me from the barstool with ease and clutching my body tight to his chest. Like a long-dormant reflex awakening at his touch, my arms automatically wind around his neck, my legs around his waist. I bury my face in Madd's shoulder, a sob wracking my body as his familiar scent washes over me, my heart aching from the memories it elicits.

He spins me around just as fast, stomping back the way he came. Without a word, he carries me from the ballroom, trudging down the hallway of the abandoned lodge as I cling onto him for dear life, chest aching and tears flowing.

He carries me all the way to the end of the hall, kicking open the double-doors of the presidential suite, a musty smell greeting us as he strides inside and leans forward to lay me down upon the old leather couch just beyond the doors. I blow out a shaky breath as he eases me back onto it, my arms slipping from Madd's neck as he presses his forearms to the cushion on either side of my head to support his weight, his much larger body hovering over mine.

His dark eyes collide with my own, jaw clenched tightly as he stares down at

me with a scowl twisting his lips. Then he lifts a hand to swipe a tear from my cheek with the pad of his thumb, bringing it to his mouth and licking it away.

I blink up at him, half-dazed by this sudden turn of events. One minute, he's cutting me down with his words, and the next, I'm pinned beneath him, the heat of his body sinking into mine. Even more jarring is how natural it feels for us to be close like this; breathing each other's air, staring into one another's eyes. For a second, it's like I never left. Like no time has passed, and we're back to how we always were.

If only that were true.

Those dark, hollow eyes of his are so damn familiar, yet not. So much has happened over the last eight years, our lives diverging completely. Only now, they've come crashing together once again, and I'm not sure either of us are prepared to weather the fallout.

"Stop crying," Madd rasps, catching another tear with his thumb as it slips free. "Fuck, please stop crying. I'm sorry, okay? Just... stop crying, Sloane. *Stop it.*"

The strain in his voice has the opposite effect of his words, though. Hearing it only makes more tears flow, as does the warm weight of his body on mine. I'm crying because he hurt me, but I'm also crying because I miss him. Because I want him, just like this, even though I shouldn't.

He wipes away my tears with his thumbs as they spill from my eyes, a pained, conflicted look reflecting back at me in his own gaze.

"Madd?"

A feminine voice floats in from the doorway, and I turn my head with a sniffle to see Roxy standing there, peering in at us in what must appear to be a very compromising position. My cheeks immediately redden with embarrassment, eyes flickering back up to meet Madd's.

He doesn't even look in Roxy's direction. His gaze is still intently focused on my face as he growls, "Fuck off, Rox."

"But Madd..." she whines, edging into the doorway.

He rocks back on his heels, the heat of his body leaving mine as he rises up on his knees and twists his upper body toward her. "I said fuck off!"

I flinch at the savagery of his yell, watching as he pushes off the couch and stomps over to the double-doors, grabbing onto one with each hand and slamming them in her face so hard that they rattle on their hinges. Engaging the lock, he whirls back around and strides toward me.

I scramble to sit up on the couch, afraid of what'll happen if he climbs on top of me again. At least Roxy showing up was enough of a distraction that I've stopped crying. I wipe the wetness from my cheeks, hoping my makeup isn't a mess, then wondering why the hell I even care about my makeup at a time like this.

"That wasn't nice," I say quietly, tipping my head toward the doors.

"I'm not nice," he retorts.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I'm not convinced he's truly as heartless as he portrays himself to be these days. If he was, he would've left me sitting in the other room crying in front of everyone, not carried me away and licked my tears. He wouldn't have dismissed Roxy like that to preserve my dignity.

I wet my lips with my tongue as I look up at Madd hesitantly. "You used to be."

"I used to be a lot of things," he grumbles.

A long pause falls over us as he stands before me like a statue, his tall, looming form making me feel even smaller.

"She'll be losing her mind out there," I say, glancing toward the doors.

"Let her."

My chest rises and falls rapidly with my breathing, my heartbeat pounding out of control. Knowing I need to put some distance between us in order to think clearly, I abruptly push up from the sofa, squeezing past him to pace further into the room.

This suite used to seem like a palace, but now, it's impossible not to notice how dirty and aged everything in here appears. A long time ago, this place was *ours*; me and Madd's. We claimed it when we first started throwing parties here at the lodge in our teens. If you look closely at the large oak door, you'll see our names written on it in permanent marker: Sloane and Madd, the duke and duchess of mayhem. Silly titles we anointed one another with and proudly claimed.

Memories flood in as I glance around the room- so many memories of our nights here together. We lost our virginity to one another on the king-sized bed situated on the rear wall, just two fumbling, awkward teenagers who had no idea what they were doing but were so in love that it didn't matter. We got better at it with practice. The way Madd's eyes flicker over to the bed tells me he remembers the significance of this room, too. It's a shame that it has fallen into such a state of decay, but it's also apt, considering the same thing happened to our relationship.

I step up to the dresser, trailing a fingertip through the thick layer of dust on the surface. “I haven’t been here since that day,” I say quietly, scrutinizing the dust on the tip of my index finger before rubbing it away with my thumb, turning to glance at Madd. “The lodge, I mean. I haven’t been here since... the accident.”

I don’t miss the way he flinches slightly when I bring it up, regret flickering in his eyes. He raises an arm to rake a hand through his messy hair, the hem of his t-shirt riding up to reveal his lower abs and sculpted v-line, unsurprisingly inked to match the rest of him.

“I came here the day you left,” he murmurs. “Trashed the mechanism for the lift. Like that’d make a difference somehow, and you’d come back.”

Pain lances through my chest, my heart aching for that teenage boy I left behind. “I didn’t have a choice Madd. You have to know that.”

He shakes his head with a frown. “There’s always a choice.”

“But...”

His pained expression morphs to anger on a dime, and he cuts me off before I can finish. “You could’ve fought.”

“I tried!”

“Then you should’ve tried harder. You could’ve at least...” he trails off, shaking his head again. “Doesn’t matter. What’s done is done. Ancient history.”

My throat aches, stomach twisting in regret. “Madd...”

“No, Sloane,” he snaps. “*You* gave up on us, not me. You left for Denver and never looked back.”

I feel tears welling up in my eyes again, the finality in his tone shattering any hope I had for us into a million pieces.

He points a finger at me, taking a step in my direction. “Don’t you dare cry, Sloane. Don’t you fuckin’ do it.”

I can’t help it. It hurts too much. My vision swims with tears, and I focus all my energy on forcing them back, refusing to let them fall. Refusing to break in front of him yet again.

Madd closes the distance between us in a few long strides, grabbing my face in both hands. He leans over, bringing his face closer to mine until our lips are just a whisper apart, our noses brushing. The anguish in his eyes reflects my own as he calmly says, “get it together, Duchess.”

His use of my old nickname stirs a desperate longing within the depths of my soul, and I try one more time.

Just one more time.

“Can’t we...?” the words die on my tongue before I can get them out, but it doesn’t matter. I already see his walls slamming back up, fortifying a barrier to keep me out of the heart that used to belong to me.

“No,” he rasps, letting me go and stepping away. He digs his hands into his hair, pacing back and forth, back and forth. “We can... coexist,” he grinds out, turning to look over at me with a sullen expression. “But that’s it, Sloane. That’s all you’re getting from me.”

“But what about the moon?” I venture.

Madd’s frown deepens. “If you’re smart, you’ll stay far away from my territory on the full moon,” he growls, brow furrowing. “If we’re bonded, I’ll reject it.”

I draw a short gasp. “You wouldn’t...”

“You wanna fucking try me?”

I snap my mouth shut, pausing to search his eyes, as if I’ll find the answers there. “What happened to you, Madd?”

He just shakes his head, turning away from me and striding for the door. I watch after him, and he stops before pulling it open, pausing with his hand on the knob. “*You* happened.” he murmurs.

And with that, he’s gone.



“You look like shit,” Mason chuckles, tossing a bottle of water at me as he enters the living room of the Goldenleaf packhouse.

I let out a low grunt the bottle hits me in the stomach, peeling my forearm from my eyes and lifting my head to pin him with a glare.

“Rough night?” he asks, sinking onto the couch opposite me.

“You could say that,” I mutter, shifting my weight against the leather cushions to sit up and twisting the cap off the water bottle he just assaulted me with. “I’m in deep shit with Roxy.”

He arches a brow as I raise the bottle to my lips and start guzzling it down, waiting for me to explain.

Mason’s my beta; my second in command when it comes to running the Goldenleaf pack. Just like Alpha, it’s a title that traditionally passes through bloodlines- so he inherited it from his father, who was my dad’s beta. Although Mason’s almost a decade older than me, we grew up here together at the packhouse, so we’ve always been close. He’s practically family.

Though Mason is still looking to me expectantly, I make him wait, chugging down the water until it’s gone. Then I crunch the empty bottle in a fist, wiping off my mouth with the other arm.

“I was a dick to Sloane,” I grind out. “She started crying, so I took her into the other room to calm her down.”

My beta’s eyes widen, his interest piqued at the mention of my ex. “And?”

“Roxy walked in.”

“And?” he urges.

I press my lips together in a tight line. “And I might’ve told her to fuck off. Yelled it at her, actually.” I cringe inwardly as I recall the hazy memories of last night. “Then slammed the door in her face.”

Mason winces. “Ouch.”

“Yeah.”

I set the crumpled plastic bottle on the side table, easing back against the sofa cushions with a sigh.

“So, you and Sloane...” he probes, lifting his brows suggestively.

“Me and Sloane are nothing,” I grumble. “I just can’t stand when she cries. I had to make it stop.”

Mason nods slowly, weighing my response. “So, no old feelings there?”

I blow out a breath, sinking further back onto the couch and crossing an ankle over my knee. “Oh, there’s plenty. But it’s mostly hate. And even if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t change anything.”

“Stubborn asshole,” he chuckles.

I just shrug. There’s no sense in arguing when he’s fucking right. I *am* stubborn, always have been. But it’s not without reason.

I hated Sloane for throwing away what we had. Hated her for giving up on us. But it was a whole lot easier to hate her when she wasn’t here, staring me in the face and reminding me why I loved her in the first place. Now I’m all fucked up and I don’t really know *how* to feel. I’d rather look at her and feel nothing at all.

“What are you gonna do about Roxy?” Mason asks.

“Haven’t decided yet,” I sigh.

“Think she’ll forgive you?”

“Probably.”

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and narrowing his eyes on me. “Do you want her to?”

“Dunno,” I admit. “I don’t need the drama, that’s for sure.” I stab my fingers through my hair, grimacing as I weigh my options. One thing I definitely won’t be doing is fucking ghosting her. I know from experience that cutting off all contact is the worst way to end a relationship, and I may be an asshole, but I refuse to stoop to that level.

“Guess I should probably go over to her dorm this afternoon and smooth things over,” I murmur. “Or just end it before she’s dragged into the fucking

mess that is me and Sloane.”

Not that there’s a chance of anything happening there, but because Sloane just being here has me in a constant state of volatility. If things continue as they have, anyone close to me is likely to become collateral damage.

Mason nods in understanding, and before he can ask any more questions about my ex, I quickly pivot to discuss business.

“Hey, any word on that shipment?”

He frowns, the look on his face making it clear how he feels about the task I set him to. “It should arrive this afternoon.”

“Good.”

“Is it?” Mason challenges, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “No honorable wolf fights their battles with bullets.”

He’s right, we don’t- but the circumstances with the hunters are extenuating ones, which is why the council came to the tough decision to procure firearms for the squad. I asked Mason to exploit his connections with a shifter pack in Chicago in order to get them- one that notoriously dips their paws in all sorts of illegal shit. Rumor has it they’ve got ties to the mob, which is why they’re able to get ahold of anything, *for a price*. That part was tougher to swallow than the guns themselves, considering our packs’ coffers aren’t as thick as they once were since the ski resort shut down. Luckily, we had enough funds squirreled away and made smart investments to keep us afloat over the last decade, but we had to liquidate one of those investments to pay for artillery.

“I get it, Mase, but we can’t bring fangs to a gun fight. We’ll lose.”

His frown deepens, though he doesn’t disagree. He may not like it, but he knows we’ll be at a disadvantage against the hunters if we rely solely upon brute strength against their rifles.

“The council already approved it,” I add, a thinly veiled reminder that he doesn’t have a say in the matter. “And we’re not just handing out guns and turning people loose with them, we’ll make sure everyone has the proper safety training.”

“I’m still not comfortable with it,” Mason grumbles.

“Comfortable with what?” Norah asks as she saunters into the room, her hazel-eyed gaze sliding between us.

He looks over at his mate, brows drawn in. “The guns.”

“Oh, *that*,” she replies with a wince. From her reaction, I have no doubt Mason has vented to her about his feelings on the matter more than once.

“But I mean, we have to fight fire with fire, right?”

I gesture to her, smirking at Mase. “See? Your mate gets it.”

He cuts her a scathing look, but Norah deflects by throwing a thumb over her shoulder. “Hey, anyone know why Avery just came back from her run looking like she’s about to keel over?”

“She let Ares make her drinks last night,” I chuckle.

They both grimace, Ares’ reputation for being a terrible mixologist preceding him.

I wave a hand flippantly. “She’ll be fine. Aves is the toughest chick I know.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Norah smirks. “But seriously, Madd, you may wanna check on her. She looked like she was about to puke her guts up.”

I groan, pushing up from the couch. “Yeah, yeah. I need to go for my run anyways.”

With the curfew on shifting that has been in place since the hunters first arrived on the scene ten years ago, most of us have made a habit of letting our wolves out to run in the mornings, since we can’t after dark. The hunters always use the cover of night to ambush the shifter packs they hit.

They won’t be able to employ the element of surprise here, with the security measures we have in place. If they find us, we’ll be ready. And we’ll end them.

I jog upstairs, making my way down the hall to knock on my sister’s door.

“Avery? You decent?”

“Yeah!” she calls from the other side, and I let myself in to find her sprawled out on the bed in shorts and a sports bra, drenched in sweat.

“Norah said you looked like you were gonna be sick,” I say, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe.

“Yeah, well...” she flops her head sideways to face me, blonde hair sticking to her forehead. “I don’t know what Ares put in those long islands, but my head’s killing me. I need to chug a gallon of water and pass out for a few hours. Let my shifter healing kick in and get rid of this hangover.”

I chuckle to myself, shaking my head.

“What are you doing today?” she asks.

“I’m headed out for my run now, then I’ll probably go over to the complex.”

She arches a brow. “Gonna try to mend fences with Roxy?”

“Something like that,” I mumble, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Wanna come with?”

Avery snorts a laugh. “Sorry, you’re on your own. I’m staying far away from

that mess.”

“Hey, where’s the solidarity, sis?” I tease. “You’re supposed to have my back.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna do your dirty work for you.” She props herself up on an elbow, squinting her eyes. “Speaking of, wanna tell me what happened with Sloane last night?”

“You’re right, you should stay far away from my mess,” I mutter, pushing off the doorframe and retreating a step.

“Thought so,” she smirks.

We both know I’ll tell her all about it eventually. Avery and I don’t have secrets- she’s the one person I can talk to about anything; the one person I can always depend on. Her mate better wind up being from our pack, because traditionally the female leaves her pack to join her mate’s, and there’s no way I’m letting her go.

“Have a good run!” Avery calls to me as I back out of her room into the hall.

“Lots of wolves out today around the squad complex.”

“Noted,” I mumble as I start pulling her door closed behind me. “Feel better.”

I head downstairs as I map my run out in my mind, appreciating the heads-up about the forest being crowded this morning. Unless it’s a full moon, I prefer to run alone, and with the squad complex being located in Goldenleaf’s territory, privacy’s sometimes difficult to come by. I need it today; I need to get out in the woods and lose myself for a while, so I’ll stop thinking about all the things that are weighing so heavily on my mind.

Like why I couldn’t just walk away last night when Sloane started crying.

And what I’m gonna do about it.



Roxy is definitely pissed. When I show up at her dorm room at the complex later that afternoon, she greets me with a scowl, blocking the doorway instead of inviting me inside.

“Did you lose your phone?” I ask, annoyed that she didn’t respond when I tried to text her earlier.

“No,” she snaps. “You told me to fuck off, so that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“Yeah, I suppose I owe you an apology for that,” I sigh.

“That’d be a good place to start.”

Roxy steps aside, and I take that as an invitation to stride past her into her room, hearing the door snick closed behind me as I struggle to decide whether whatever Roxy and I have between us is even worth the headache of trying to salvage.

“Well?” she asks, throwing her hands on her hips and staring me down.

Right. The apology.

“Sorry about last night.”

It’s a bland, half-assed attempt, but I didn’t come here to grovel. If that’s what she expects me to do, she’s about to be sorely disappointed.

Her responding frown tells me she is.

Roxy flips her straight light brown hair over her shoulders, cocking her head to the side as she studies my face for a moment. “Have you ever noticed how you rarely kiss me?” she asks, and her question is so out of the blue that it takes me by surprise. “And never with your eyes closed.”

My brows draw together in confusion. “So?”

“So now I know why,” she states, as if that somehow explains what the hell she’s getting at. “I always thought that was just your thing, until I saw you with *her*.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” I growl in frustration, taking a step toward her.

“*Sloane*, Madd, I’m talking about Sloane! Jesus, are you really that dense?”

“I know *who* you’re talking about, I just don’t see what she has to do with us.”

“That’s the problem,” Roxy huffs. “I take a lot of your shit, Madd, but I won’t let you embarrass me. And last night-”

“I was just trying to calm her down,” I interject. “Nothing happened.”

She chuckles wryly, shaking her head. “Maybe not last night, but it’s only a matter of time, isn’t it?”

“What the hell are you trying to say, Rox?” I snap. “Just fucking spit it out.”

“I’m saying that I won’t be made a fool of, Madd. If you want her, then-”

“I don’t fucking want her!” I growl, cutting Roxy off again.

“But last night...”

“Didn’t mean shit. I felt like a dick for making her cry, so I calmed her down. End of story.”

She narrows her eyes on me. “But you didn’t feel like a dick when you told me to fuck off?”

“That’s why I’m here!” I groan, scrubbing a hand over my face in exasperation. This girl is giving me a fucking migraine.

Roxy heaves a resigned sigh, moving toward me until she’s pressing her chest against mine, looping her arms around my neck and blinking up at me with those wide blue eyes. “Listen, Madd, I’ve thought about this a lot. And if you want this to work, I need you to be all in from now on. I want this to be a *real* relationship, with titles and everything.”

Well this just took a fucking turn.

I reach up to grab ahold of her arms, peeling them from my neck. “You know I don’t do relationships.”

Her expression falls. “Then I’m done wasting my time,” she says, pushing off from my chest, her hands landing on her hips again.

“An ultimatum?” I scoff. “Really, Rox?”

Though if she truly wants to end things, I can’t find it in me to care. There’s something wrong with me; something missing inside or faulty with the way I’m wired. When I say Sloane ripped my heart out when she left, I mean it—it’s like there’s just a black pit of emptiness inside my chest now. There’s nothing left to break, but there’s nothing left to actually *feel* anything, either.

I should feel *something* about Roxy cutting things off, shouldn’t I?

But all I feel is indifference.

“It’s the only way,” she says resolutely. “All or nothing. So…” She moves toward me again, peering up at me hopefully. “Are we doing this?”

I reach up to rub the tension from the muscles at the base of my neck, giving a little shake of my head. “Sorry, Rox. This was fun while it lasted, but that’s not me,” I grumble.

Her lips part in surprise, like she actually expected a different answer, and I use the moment of stunned silence to retreat, moving past her and toward the door.

After a beat, she calls after me. “Madd, if you walk out that door, I’m done.” She’s trying to be tough, but the waver in her voice betrays her false bravado. “You won’t get another chance.”

I rest my hand on the knob, glancing back at her over my shoulder. “I know.” I see the defeat in her blue eyes the moment she realizes that I’m not going to

turn around, and for a second, I wish it affected me. I wish I wasn't so fucking damaged that I could have a shot at happiness with someone like Roxy.

But what I told her was the truth. That's not me.



“Where are you going?” my dad asks as I sink down onto the edge of the bench beside the front door, sliding my feet into a pair of sneakers.

“Out,” I answer simply. Bending at the waist, I tie the laces of my left shoe, then the right, feeling the weight of my father’s stare on me all the while as he waits for me to elaborate.

“Out where?” he finally growls when I don’t, and I glance up to see him clenching his jaw in frustration.

I roll my eyes, pushing up to stand and running a hand through my untamed curls. “Why does it matter? I’m not leaving the territory, if that’s what you’re concerned about. I’m not looking to get picked off by the hunters.” I turn toward the door as he raises his voice loud enough to make me flinch.

“Sloane!”

I throw him a scowl over my shoulder.

“Where are you going?” he repeats, folding his thick forearms across his chest and leveling me with a stern stare.

“Probably to see Madd,” my sister unhelpfully chirps as she walks into the kitchen, heading straight to the fridge. “I heard he swept her off her feet at Andie’s party last night.”

My dad’s head snaps in Goldie’s direction, then back to me in astonishment.

“Is that true?”

I narrow my eyes on him, his demanding tone making my temperature rise.

“Why? If it is, are you gonna send me back to Denver?” I frown, twisting around the rest of the way to face him fully. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Dad, but I’m not a kid anymore. I can make my own choices.”

His thick brow furrows, fury brewing behind his eyes. “As long as you live under my roof...”

“That’s another thing,” I cut in. “I’ve decided I’d rather stay at the squad complex for a while. I’m helping Lo with the IT unit, and we’re short on people willing to work the night shift.”

“No.”

I turn away from him, taking a step toward the door. “Not your choice.”

“Sloane!”

I whip back around. “What, Dad?!” I shout, my body practically vibrating with anger.

He flinches back slightly, his eyes widening, just as surprised about my outburst as I am. I’m not a confrontational person by nature. No, I’m usually sweet and understanding, known as the girl who’s always smiling and kind. But right now, that girl feels like a stranger to me. The past few days have been hell, and I’m all riled up with only one place to direct my rage.

“*You* did this!” I say, pointing an accusatory finger in his direction. “You sent me away, all for what? So I wouldn’t get hurt?! Well it didn’t work, Dad. It hurt like hell back then when you made me leave, and now it hurts to be back after all this time. The accident might’ve hurt me physically, but what you did by sending me away has left a scar a whole lot deeper than *this* one!” I sweep my hair away from the side of my forehead, my dad’s eyes immediately honing in on the jagged line of discolored flesh. When they flicker back down to meet my own, there’s pain shining in the moss green irises that are so similar to my own.

I drop my hand, allowing my hair to fall back into place to cover the scar, and a tense silence falls over us, my father and I locked in a staring contest while my sister looks on uncomfortably.

“You’re alive,” he finally says, his voice eerily calm. “That’s all that matters.”

“Is it?” I counter.

“Sloane, stop being a brat,” Marigold sighs, throwing in her two cents again when it’s neither wanted nor needed.

“Butt out, Goldie,” I snap.

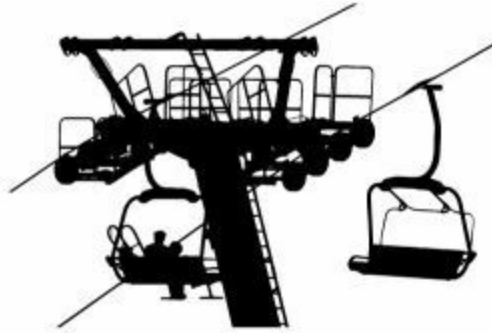
She holds up her hands in surrender, slinking backwards to continue her raid

of the fridge.

I turn for the door, twisting the handle and yanking it open.

“Sloane, we’re not done here!” Dad calls after me.

“I am,” I say as I step outside, slamming it loudly behind me.



When I arrive at the squad complex in Goldenleaf, I’m surprised to find the practice field crowded with people again. I wasn’t told about a meeting, but then again, I’m not exactly in the loop. That’s the first thing that needs to change- I need to claim my rightful position in squad leadership so I can take on something that’ll keep me busy and distract me from the shitshow my life has become.

As I enter the fray, I quickly realize that it isn’t the squad fighters populating the field today. They’re all younger- high school aged, I’d guess- and suddenly a brunette girl rushes toward me, her hazel eyes alight and a huge smile stretched across her face.

It takes me a second to recognize River Jacobsen. I used to babysit for her as a kid, but now she’s a full-blown teenager, and *holy hell* is she *beautiful*. Before I can even get a good look at her, she’s throwing her arms around me, practically tackling me with a hug.

“Sloane!” River gushes, squeezing me tight.

“Hey, Riv!” I laugh, returning the embrace fondly. When I pull back, she grabs for my hands, still beaming at me.

It’s hard to believe that the awkward looking pre-teen I once knew grew into the stunner standing before me now. She looks like a damn model with her tall, slender stature and her high cheekbones, big eyes, and smooth, poreless skin. River is beyond gorgeous, but I guess that’s to be expected considering who she’s related to. She’s Madd and Avery’s cousin- their moms are identical twins.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, surprised to run into her at the squad

complex, of all places.

“High schoolers train on Sundays,” she replies flippantly. “Well, those of us who plan on joining the squad, at least. But how are you? Avery said you were back! I tried to get to Andie’s party last night to see you, but my dad caught me sneaking out and you can imagine how that went.” She rolls her eyes, flipping her sleek straight hair over a shoulder.

I wince, hissing a breath through my teeth. My dad’s protective, but Theo Jacobsen takes things to a whole other level. He’s the alpha of the Summervale pack and River is his sole heir. It remains to be seen how he’s going to handle the transfer of power when he steps down someday, as pack alphas are always male, but something tells me Alpha Theo isn’t going to hand over the reins to some dude over his own daughter. When the time comes, I’m staying far away from that mess.

“You didn’t miss much,” I say, secretly thankful that she wasn’t there last night to witness my public breakdown. “I’m sure there’ll be plenty more parties you can sneak past the warden to go to. I’ll have to give you some tips.” I wink, smirking conspiratorially. I practically perfected the art of sneaking out when I was a teenager- the least I can do is pass down some of my best tricks to another girl with an overprotective father.

“Ugh, yes please,” River groans. “Having a computer genius for a mom is cool until she wires the house with a security system that keeps it locked up like Fort Knox.”

“Okay, that might be a little trickier,” I laugh.

She sighs, casting a longing glance across the practice field. “I thought my dad would back off after I turned eighteen.”

“Spoiler alert, they never do,” I mutter, that ugly confrontation with my own father playing in my mind.

I regret being so harsh with him. I don’t know what came over me in that moment- it was like all the stress I’ve been under lately just made me snap. Though I can’t deny that it felt good to get some of those pent-up feelings off my chest after all these years. My relationship with my dad has been strained ever since he packed me up and shipped me off to Denver, and at this point, I’m not sure if it’s salvageable without some healthy doses of brutal honesty. River nudges me with an elbow, pulling me back from my thoughts. “So, are you gonna be a squad leader now or what?”

“That’s sorta what I’m here to figure out,” I mumble, glancing toward the building behind her. “Gonna try to get my hands on a dorm room first,

though.”

“Madd’s in his office,” River supplies, and the offhanded way she says it tells me that she has no idea what has gone down between me and her cousin since I’ve returned. “I always stop by to see him and Avery on Sundays if they’re around. Heads up, though, he’s a little grumpy.”

“Apparently that’s his default setting these days,” I say with a wry smile.

A whistle sounds across the practice field, and I look over to see the high school recruits circling up around a few older squad fighters. “I’d better let you get to practice,” I murmur, pulling her in for another hug. “It’s so good to see you, Riv. We’ll have to catch up for real sometime soon.”

“Definitely,” she agrees, hitting me with another gorgeous smile as she pulls away.

She spins around and jogs over to join her peers while I take a deep breath and start for the complex, hoping I can figure out this dorm situation without having to see Madd. I’m too emotionally drained to go another round with him, especially this soon after the last one.

I take the stairs to the second floor, starting down the hallway that houses the offices only to find a long row of closed doors, each of them vacant. Except the one at the end of the hall, that is- the door’s open, light shining into the hall from inside, and based upon what River just said, it’s an easy guess as to who it belongs to.

Because *of-fucking-course* that’s the kind of luck I’d have.

For a moment, I consider turning around and just bailing on the whole thing. But then I’d have to go home and face my dad, and if given the choice, Madd seems like the lesser of the two evils right now. He may hate me, but at least it’s not under the guise of being in my best interest.

I approach the open office door on quiet feet, hesitantly peeking my head into the doorway.

My heart skips a beat every time I see Madd Kessler in the flesh. He was good looking back when we were teenagers, but now that he’s grown, the man’s sexy as sin. From his strong, square jaw, to the mouthwatering muscle he’s packed onto his large frame and the whorls of ink decorating his tanned skin, he’s the embodiment of what parents warn their little girls to stay away from- yet here I am, running toward the sea of glaring red flags over and over again like a masochist.

He’s seated behind his desk, leaning back in his chair with his feet kicked up on the desktop, cell phone clutched in his tattooed grip. The moment I peek

in at him, his dark blue eyes flicker to the doorway. They collide with my own and for a tortuous moment I'm sucked into his orbit, held captive by that stormy stare.

His upper lip curls back from his teeth in a snarl, and I brace myself for another round.



I've been hiding in my office at the squad complex since I left Roxy's room, killing time scrolling through my phone when I really should be hitting the weight room for a workout. I'm lost in the mindless scroll of social media when my inner wolf suddenly perks up, moments before I catch the faintest whiff of a scent that's embedded so firmly in my memory, I couldn't forget it if I tried.

And I've tried.

Notes of vanilla, jasmine, and just a hint of peach tickle my nose- the distinct scent of a ghost from my past, back to haunt me.

I glance up right as Sloane peeks her head in the doorway of my office, the cherry on top of the shit sundae I've been served today.

Irritation flares as my lip curls back from my teeth. "When I said we could coexist, I thought it was understood that meant we'd stay out of each other's way," I growl.

Rather than taking my warning for what it is, Sloane steps into the doorway. She breathes a sigh, the forlorn look in her eyes and the slump of her shoulders giving me momentary pause. I'm not sure I've ever seen Sloane look so... *defeated*.

It does something to me, and I fucking hate it.

"What do you want?" I snap.

She must realize how pathetic she looks, because she suddenly stands up

straighter, lifting her chin like she's shoring up her confidence. "I need a dorm room," she says evenly. Not asking, but telling. Because that's the Sloane I know, not the shrinking violet that first peeked her head in here.

"Tough shit," I scoff, slapping my phone down onto my desk. "They're all taken, and even if they weren't there's a waitlist. Some of the full-time squad fighters are camped out in the barracks waiting for one to open up."

"Oh." Her throat bobs with a hard swallow and she nods, turning around to retreat.

Again, not the Sloane I know, and this version of her irritates the hell out of me.

"Why?" I find myself asking- and kicking myself as soon as I do. I shouldn't fucking care.

She stops in her tracks, spinning back around to face me. "What?"

"Why do you need a dorm?" I ask gruffly.

Sloane worries her lower lip between her teeth, like she's deciding whether or not to give me the real answer. "Things are a little... tense at home. I just want my own space." She heaves a sigh, running a hand over her hair.

"Doesn't matter, I'll figure something else out."

I drag my feet off the desk, my shoes landing on the floor with a thud as I lift my ass from the chair and dig a hand into the pocket of my sweats. "Here," I say, pulling out a key and tossing it in her direction before I can reconsider what I'm doing or change my mind.

She doesn't catch it. She flinches back like I've just chucked a grenade at her, letting it fall to the floor beside her with a metallic clang. Her brows draw together in confusion as she turns and bends at the waist to pick it up, giving me a spectacular view of her ass in her little cutoff jean shorts. I clench my teeth as my eyes zero in the perfect roundness of each cheek peeking out from beneath the frayed hem, unable to look away.

My dick twitches beneath my zipper, images flashing in my mind as I picture bending her over my desk and peeling those little shorts off, smacking that gorgeous ass and watching my welted handprint bloom on her skin...

"What's this?" she asks as she straightens, shaking me from the unwelcome fantasy I conjured up in my mind.

"Room one-oh-one," I rasp, shifting my weight on the desk chair and subtly adjusting my boner. "I don't use it anyways."

Sloane's eyes flicker from the key, to me, then back again. Probably wondering what the catch is since I haven't exactly been kind or giving since

she waltzed back into my life.

“Are you sure?” she asks tentatively.

I give her a single, curt nod.

“Thank you,” she says breathily, the relief evident in her voice. I wonder what the hell happened at home to make her so eager to leave already. I won’t ask, though. Because I shouldn’t care. *I don’t.*

She turns to leave again, and in an effort to drive that point home, I call out after her.

“Sloane.”

She freezes, glancing back at me over her shoulder. Her green eyes are wide when they meet mine, like she’s afraid I’ll change my mind about my sudden generosity.

“This doesn’t change anything between us,” I snarl.

“Yeah. I know.”

The resignation in her voice and the slump of her shoulders almost does me in again. I bite down on the inside of my cheek so hard that I taste the metallic tinge of blood on my tongue as she walks away, a barrage of questions flooding my brain.

What happened to break her down like this?

Was it me?

Part of me should be glad if it was, right?

Isn’t this what I wanted, to break her as badly as she broke me?

But even if it was, any sense of victory is hollow when faced with the reality of seeing her like this. Which only makes me despise her more, because I shouldn’t feel fucking *bad* for Sloane finally getting what she deserves. For her experiencing just a fraction of the pain that I did when she walked out of my life.

I push up from my desk chair, deciding that now’s the perfect time to go lose myself in a workout for a while so I don’t have to think about this shit anymore. I can still smell Sloane’s scent in the hallway when I leave my office, the agonizing familiarity propelling me away from there to escape it. I quickly make my way down to the weight room, finding Tristan, Archer, and Ares working out when I arrive.

“Hey Madd, where’d you disappear to last night?” Archer asks when he sees me come in.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I say, throwing up a wave to Tristan as I pass him doing reps on the lat pull. “Heard you went off somewhere with

Kaylie.”

The corner of Archer’s mouth kicks up in a grin. “My girl wanted a tour of the old lodge, so I indulged her.” He licks his lips, the mischievous look in his eyes letting me know exactly what they got up to on that ‘tour’. “We came back to the party after a while, though. Heard you left.”

“Little help here, bro!” Ares chokes out through gritted teeth, struggling on the bench press in front of Archer with the weight bar pinned to his chest.

Arch curses under his breath, apparently remembering that he’s supposed to be spotting for his brother. He darts in to grip onto the bar, helping Ares lift it to the rack and dropping it on with a loud thunk.

Ares abruptly sits up, panting as he wipes sweat from his brow.

“Still trying to catch up to me on the bench?” I tease.

He turns at the waist, gesturing to the stack of weights pinned on each end of the bar. “I’m getting there.”

I step closer, leaning in and squinting to make a big show of checking the amount of weight he was lifting. “Looks like you’ve still got about sixty pounds to go, bud.”

He rolls his eyes, waving me off and pushing to his feet. “Where’s Avery at? Haven’t seen her around today.”

“At home resting, since you tried to poison her last night.”

“Hey, I have no regrets,” Ares laughs, shrugging. “I successfully got her drunk enough to dance with me.”

Archer snorts, slinging his arm around his brother’s neck and yanking his head down, putting him in a headlock. “Avery Kessler is so far out of your league you’re not even playing the same sport.”

Ares grabs onto Archer’s forearm, twisting to get away, and I take a step back as the two of them start grappling with one another, heading over to the leg press machine beside Tristan.

“Know why Sloane just came by my office to ask for a dorm room?” I question as I move behind the machine to set the weight.

“So she went through with it,” he sighs, letting go of the pull bar. The weights slam down with a thud behind him and he leans forward, scrubbing a hand over his sweaty face. “Goldie said Sloane got into it with my dad earlier and things got pretty ugly.”

I arch a brow in his direction. That explains why Sloane said things were tense at home, but I never would’ve guessed that she actually snapped off at her dad. She’s always gone along with whatever he says- that’s why we’re in

this whole situation in the first place.

Tristan runs a hand over his buzzed head, frowning. "I know you don't want her here. I'll see what I can do to try to get her to change her mind."

I shake my head, dropping down into the seat on the leg press. "I don't really care if she's in the dorms," I grumble. "I don't spend time there anyways."

"Yeah, but it'd probably be better for her to be far away from you, right?"

I shoot him a sideways glance, the faintest niggle of suspicion tickling the back of my mind. Tris has never stuck his nose in my business before when it comes to his sister, so it's a little odd that he's suddenly volunteering to intervene on my behalf. Maybe it's because she's back now, so things are different. Or because he witnessed me being such a dick to her last night.

If I had to venture a guess, it's probably the latter. I'd fucking kill someone if they spoke to Avery like that.

I'm a goddamn hypocrite.

"I mean, I doubt you wanna run into her when you go to Roxy's," Tristan adds with a shrug.

"Yeah, well that won't be a problem either," I say, bending my knees to press my feet to the plate on the leg press and pushing up, starting in on my first set of reps. "Roxy and I are done."

"Really? Why?"

"Since when are you so interested?" I grit out, my leg muscles starting to burn. Tris doesn't respond and I heave a sigh, immediately regretting my misdirected frustration. "She wants to do the whole relationship thing," I mutter.

"So?"

"Not my thing."

I turn my head to see Tristan rolling his eyes, pushing up from the bench. "I mean, you guys were basically in a relationship already though, weren't you? So what's the difference?"

"You wouldn't get it," I mumble, turning away from him and continuing my squats, my breathing becoming more labored with each one.

"Does it have anything to do with my sister?" Tris asks hesitantly.

"People really need to stop fucking asking that."

"It's a fair question."

I abruptly bend my knees all the way in, the plate dropping hard and the weights clanging.

"No, it's *not*," I growl, sitting up and turning toward Tristan, pinning him

with a glare. Working out is supposed to calm me down, but right now, it's just getting my blood pumping for all the wrong reasons. "We aren't in high school anymore, bro. It's been *eight fucking years*. I've moved on, so everybody else needs to do the same thing and just leave me the fuck alone about it."

He throws up his hands in surrender, eyes widening. "Whoa, I was just asking. I won't again."

"Good," I mutter, grabbing for the hem of my shirt and yanking it off over my head. I'm too hot- my blood is boiling in my veins, singeing me from the inside. I toss it aside, twisting around to press my feet to the plate again and starting in on another set of reps.

Tristan wisely slinks off to hit another machine, leaving me stewing as I continue my squats. The harder I push my body, the more my mind shuts off. Those turbulent thoughts that have been swirling around in my brain start to become blissfully silent as I slip into a meditative rhythm, and for the first time in days, I start to feel a sense of peace.

If only it would last.



Most people hate Mondays, but I've got a skip in my step today that I haven't had since coming home, humming to myself as I flit between the closet and my open suitcase on the bed. I stuffed my biggest bag full of clothes and other essentials early this morning and slipped out of the packhouse before anyone else woke up, leaving a note indicating where they could find me: my new dorm, room 101 at the squad complex.

I have no idea what possessed Madd to actually do something *nice* for a change, but when he tossed me that key, I saw a glimmer of the boy he used to be- the one who would do anything to help a friend in need. Not that we're friends, but we used to be. Once upon a time, we were everything to one another.

I'm under no delusion that we'll ever get that back, but lending me his dorm was an unexpected twist in our current drama. One that I'm not going to read into or question because I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Other than his scent, there isn't much of him left in here. A few items of clothing in the closet and dresser, rumpled black sheets on the bed, and a framed photo of him and his twin are the only evidence that this room was once inhabited by Maddox Kessler. He must've moved the rest out when he took the mantle of Alpha for the Goldenleaf pack, but glancing around this room, knowing he used to live here, I start to imagine him in the space. I picture him sitting at the desk in the corner, hunched over paperwork, or

lying on the bed, shirtless and scrolling through his phone before bed. There's something comforting in envisioning him doing quiet, mundane things, rather than stomping around angrily all the time.

I don't remove his things- because god forbid I start another war between us by doing so- but I push them aside to make room for my own stuff, quickly getting to work unpacking my suitcase and making myself at home in my new digs. This dorm is larger than most of the others, specifically designed for a squad leader, and if all goes according to plan, I'm hoping that I'll soon have the title to go along with this room assignment.

One step at a time.

"Hey beautiful, I heard you were moving in," Ares drawls, stepping into the open doorway of my new dorm room and leaning a thick shoulder against the doorframe. "Need any help unpacking?"

"Thanks, but I'm actually almost finished," I say as I fish a hanger out of the closet and slip a dress onto it. "I didn't bring everything, just one bag for now."

"Wow, gorgeous *and* low maintenance? You'd better stop it before I fall in love with you."

A giggle slips past my lips and I roll my eyes. "Does that actually work on women?" I ask, scrunching my nose.

He shrugs, a mischievous glint shining in his big brown eyes. "You tell me."

"Nice try, Ares, but I'm probably the most emotionally unavailable girl in this whole building," I sigh, crossing the room to return to my suitcase on the bed and pulling out a few more of my things. "Not to mention the fact that I'm what, five years older than you?"

"Psh, age is just a number," he scoffs, waving a hand dismissively.

I toss a grin his way as I move back over to the closet to hang up more of my clothes.

"Well, I just wanted to come by and say welcome to the neighborhood. If you ever wanna hang, I'm in Andie's old room," he says, carding his fingers through his red hair. "Room one-oh-four," he adds belatedly, as if suddenly remembering that I'm new around here and wouldn't be familiar with his sister's old dorm assignment.

"Thanks, Ares," I say, flashing him a genuine smile. "I really appreciate it. It's nice to have a friend around here."

He smirks, pushing off from the doorframe and pointing a finger in my direction. "Friend zone me all you want, Sloane, but when you get lonely at

night and need a cuddle buddy, you'll be whistling a different tune."

I laugh, balling up a shirt in my hands and throwing it at him. He ducks out of the way with a laugh of his own, blowing me a kiss as he retreats back into the hall.

Ares Raines really has the whole slick, charming thing down pat. And though I'd never go there with him in a million years, I've gotta admit that it's a nice change of pace for a guy to actually laugh and flirt with me after all the verbal abuse I've taken from Madd these last few days.

I slide another shirt onto a hanger in the closet, then step over to the doorway to retrieve the one I threw at Ares. As I bend down to pick it up, I see a pair of feet approaching my door wearing black flip-flops and hot pink toenail polish.

I straighten with the shirt in my hands only to come face to face with Roxy, her brows lifting in surprise when our gazes meet.

"Oh, sorry," she stammers. "I saw the door open, so I thought..." She trails off, blue eyes wide and throat bobbing with a hard swallow.

"I just moved in," I rush out. "Not with Madd, he gave me his old room. Well, he said that there weren't any rooms left and there was a waitlist, but that he didn't use this one anyways, so I'm just kinda borrowing it, I guess. For now. Not with him. Just me." I snap my mouth closed, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment at the realization that I'm just nervously rambling. "He didn't tell you?"

Roxy shakes her head, folding her arms tightly across her chest. "We broke up."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Yeah." She heaves a sigh, sweeping her ponytail over her shoulder and fiddling with the ends of her hair. "Well this is awkward, huh?" She chuckles uncomfortably, glancing past me into the room. "I actually just came by to get some stuff I left here, do you mind if I..."

"Oh, sure," I blurt, stepping aside and gesturing for her to come in.

Roxy moves past me into the room, heading straight for the nightstand and pulling open the top drawer.

And if I wasn't already thinking about her sleeping beside Madd in that bed, in this room, I definitely am now.

"For what it's worth, there's nothing going on between the two of us," I grit out, cringing at the awkwardness of this whole situation. "He doesn't want anything to do with me."

“Do you really believe that?” she murmurs as she rummages around in the drawer. Then she pushes it closed and turns around, clutching a phone charger, some hair ties, and a pair of sleep shorts in her grip. She must see the confusion written all over my face, because she heaves a sigh, shaking her head. “Look, I know Madd.” She winces, amending, “well, as much as he’ll let anyone know him, at least. Let’s just say that if I got upset at a party and started crying, he wouldn’t have jumped in and carried me away so I could save face. He probably would’ve just told me to suck it up before walking away.”

I stare at her dubiously as she strides back toward me, her light brown ponytail swishing behind her.

Roxy is pretty. I can see why Madd chose her. From her slender, athletic build, to her bright blue eyes, tiny nose, and full lips, the girl is a damn catch. It sort of makes me want to hate her, but if Madd was really as cold and aloof as she makes him sound while they were dating, I just feel sorry for her.

“Maybe now that you’re back, you can get through to him,” she sighs, shrugging. “I tried, but let’s face it, I wasn’t the one.”

“I mean, you could be...” I say, not even knowing why I do. It’s not like it’s easy to watch Madd with someone else. I just feel guilty because Roxy is obviously hurting over things ending with him, and I somehow doubt that their breakup happening right after I suddenly reappeared in his life is entirely coincidental. Me being here seems to have brought out the worst in him.

She chuckles wryly. “Yeah right, like I’d stand a chance against the history you two have.” Her voice breaks, eyes rounded in sadness. Then she quickly schools her features and blows out a shallow breath. “It’s okay, Sloane, I don’t blame you. I knew Madd and I weren’t built to last. I guess I’d just hoped that might change with time. But you know what? I deserve better than to be strung along by a guy who’s in love with someone else.”

“He’s not in love with me,” I mutter, curly hair swishing in front of my face as I shake my head. “Maybe a long time ago, but not anymore.”

“We’ll see,” Roxy drawls, the corner of her mouth lifting slightly in the ghost of a smirk. “Well, anyway, welcome to the dorms. I’m right down the hall if you need anything. Room one-twelve.” She steps closer, reaching out to touch my arm. “Even if you just wanna drink wine and talk shit about our mutual ex,” she adds with a wink.

I can’t help but laugh. “Thanks, I appreciate that,” I say, following her as she

starts toward the door. “I honestly can’t believe how cool you’re being about this. I’m not sure I would be if the roles were reversed.”

She pauses in the doorway, turning to me with a shrug. “Well, life’s short, right? I feel like this whole thing with the hunters is a huge wakeup call as to how short it can really be.”

I nod sadly in agreement.

“Besides, there are plenty of other alphas to go around,” Roxy continues. “And speaking of, you wouldn’t wanna put in a good word for me with your brother, would you?” She grins conspiratorially, waggling her eyebrows.

I stifle a giggle, nodding again. “I’ll see what I can do.”

After Roxy leaves, I finish unpacking my suitcase, tucking my things away in the closet and drawers. Then I immediately strip the bed and carry the linens to the laundry room, planning to wash them twice after Roxy’s visit reminded me what she and Madd likely got up to while twisted in those sheets. The thought of my first love being intimate with someone else makes my stomach hurt, but I suppose I can’t blame him for moving on. It’s not like I waited around for him all this time.

I would’ve been a fool to.

I stuff the bedding into the washer, start the cycle, and then, not really knowing what to do with myself, I start wandering around the complex with the hope of running into Avery or Lo. I don’t wind up seeing either of them, but instead find myself gravitating toward the back of the building, where I find and climb the old utility ladder up to the roof.

Madd and I originally found it by accident when we were kids, hanging out at the complex in the summertime while our parents trained up the new recruits. During a game of hide and seek with the other squad leaders’ kids, the two of us stumbled upon the ladder and headed up, turning giddy when we realized it provided roof access. For some reason, we didn’t tell the others about it—not even Avery—and from that point on, the two of us would sneak off to the roof to watch the squad train on the practice field, stealing private moments together before we even fully realized why we wanted them.

I grip onto the rusty rungs, making the familiar ascent for the first time since I was a teen. When I’m halfway up, it occurs to me that this ladder probably isn’t the safest after so many years of disuse, but I still continue to the top, thankful that it holds my weight. I hop off the ladder onto the roof once I reach it, dusting my palms off on my leggings and glancing around.

The view’s the same, yet different. The trees are more mature, the foliage

thicker, but it's still peaceful and serene up here, a little slice of privacy in an otherwise crowded setting. It's the perfect place to get away and be alone for a while, and I'm glad I wound up wandering this way and remembering it existed.

I smile to myself in contentment, stepping over to skirt around the big air conditioning unit that blocks the view to the practice field...only to find I'm not alone up here after all.



A plume of white smoke curls from the end of the joint pinched between my fingers as I hold it out in front of me, watching the paper curl and burn to ash. I don't smoke often these days, but I indulge once in a while when I need a little something to take the edge off. And after unloading the shipment from Chicago and getting everything set for the squad to start training with firearms tomorrow, I definitely need something to help me relax.

The Denver pack has been on lockdown since their brush with the hunters last week, but just because there hasn't been another incident doesn't mean they aren't still out there, watching and waiting. Taking drastic measures like procuring and training with guns only makes the threat feel that much closer, like they're breathing down our fucking necks, the shit just waiting to hit the fan.

The waiting's the worst part. If it were up to me, I'd rally our squad to take the fight to *them*, see how *they* like to be hunted for a change. But there are too many variables; too many lives hanging in the balance. The safest thing for my pack and the entire alliance is to stay hidden. They can't kill us off if they never find us, right?

But we have to be prepared in case they do, and that's where the guns come in. We've gotta fight fire with fire if there's a chance in hell of us coming out of this unscathed.

I lift the joint to my lips again, dragging in a deep inhale and holding the

smoke in my lungs as I drop the roach to the ground and grind it beneath my heel. Then I gaze out over the practice field from my perch on the roof of the squad complex, exhaling slowly and letting the breeze whisk the smoke away.

I haven't been up here in a while. When I lived at the complex, I'd hide out up here regularly, but these days I hardly get a moment to myself. Between running my pack and heading up the squad, there's always something I'm being pulled away to deal with.

Not that I'm complaining. Leading is what I was born to do; it's in my blood. And though I'm still getting the hang of it, my dad says my instincts are spot-on thus far. He says I'm a natural.

High praise, coming from the esteemed Alpha Gray.

I slide my palms behind me on the concrete ledge I'm perched upon, leaning back to rest on my elbows. The ledge runs down the entire length of the roof in the middle, and I watched the squad training on the field countless times from this exact position before I was finally old enough to join them. I wasn't alone back then, though. Sloane was always beside me, chattering in my ear about whatever was on her mind while I hung on every word like the sun shined out of her ass.

My inner wolf suddenly perks up, right before I hear the scuffle of footsteps behind me, and I know it's her before I even turn to look over my shoulder. For one, my wolf and I are decidedly *not* on the same page when it comes to Sloane Masters- he's always fucking delighted when she comes around- and for two, nobody else would climb that rusty old utility ladder to hang out on the roof.

When I turn, our gazes lock, and Sloane stops in her tracks with her green eyes rounded in surprise. "Sorry, I didn't think anyone would be up here..." Seeing her on this roof is so familiar that for a second, I feel like I've been thrown into a vivid flashback and it's a seventeen-year-old Sloane standing there, her wild curly hair blowing in the breeze. It hits me so hard that my chest aches for the kids we used to be, for the carefree days and nights we shared before everything turned to shit.

I can't look at her without remembering, and every time I do, it feels like a knife to the heart.

"Run along," I grumble, turning away to gaze out over the practice field again.

I grind my molars, pushing all those old feelings as far back in my mind as

they can go, but then I hear the light patter of her footsteps against the concrete moving closer rather than retreating. I swing my gaze back around to see her approaching the ledge in pair of black high-waisted leggings and a lavender crop-top, my eyes immediately drawn to the sliver of her tan belly showing.

“What are you doing?” I scowl.

She shrugs. “I think I’ll stay.”

Sloane plops down onto the ledge a few feet away from me and I eye her menacingly, clenching my jaw tight. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She snaps her head in my direction, defiance blazing in her eyes. “Why, what are you gonna do, Madd? Say more hateful shit to try to push me away?”

She heaves a sigh, turning sideways and pulling her feet up onto the ledge, tucking her knees into her chest and looping her arms around them. It makes her look even smaller than she already is; delicate and unassuming.

Looks can be deceiving.

That’s how she got away with so much shit when we were kids- everyone thought I was the troublemaker, but she was the Bonnie to my Clyde that nobody suspected. And I was so damn enamored with her that I always gladly took the blame.

“You don’t own everything around here,” she mumbles. “This place was mine once, too.” Resting her chin atop her knees, she snorts a laugh. “Hell, since it was, I’m surprised you still come up here.”

“If I stayed away from everywhere that reminded me of you, I’d have nowhere to go,” I mutter, thinking out loud and wincing as I immediately regret admitting that to her.

A hot prickle of anger unfurls in my chest and I push up to stand. “If you won’t go, then I will,” I growl, reaching up to secure my backwards hat tighter to my head.

“Whatever,” she scoffs, rolling her eyes. “Go ahead and stomp away again, as if that’ll solve anything.”

“There’s nothing to solve,” I snarl. “I stay out of your way, you stay out of mine. It’s that simple.”

“So we can’t even have a conversation?”

“What would be the point?”

She throws up her hands. “I don’t know, to clear the air, to try to move forward? In case you haven’t noticed, it hasn’t exactly been easy for me to be back here, either. You’re not the only one struggling to adjust.”

“And who’s fault is that, Sloane?” I demand, narrowing my eyes on her and taking a threatening step in her direction.

She swings her legs off the ledge, the toes of her sneakers meeting the rooftop. “Blame me for leaving, blame me for coming back. What the hell do you want from me, Madd?”

“*Nothing.*”

“You sure about that?” she clucks, arching her brow in challenge, all fucking sass.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” I growl.

She rolls her eyes again and I ball my fists at my sides, resisting the urge to punch something.

Sloane waves a hand flippantly. “You’ve obviously got an ax to grind since you’ve been treating me like crap since I came back here.”

“How’d you expect me to act?” I scoff wryly. “Did you think I’d fall to my knees, beg you for another chance?”

She pushes to her feet, brow furrowed and lips twisted in a scowl. “Well no, but I didn’t expect you to hold an eight year grudge for some shit that wasn’t even my fault.”

A chill washes over me, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

“Oh, I know it was my fault, *trust me*. Everyone blamed me for what happened that day.”

What I don’t say is how much I blamed myself. How I went from being a respected future Alpha to the guy who almost killed Sloane; the one who got her sent away. How I didn’t even flinch at the looks of disdain aimed my way in the wake of her injury, knowing I deserved every single one of them.

She shakes her head, dark curls bouncing and a tinge of sadness flickering in her mossy green irises. “I wasn’t talking about the accident. I meant *after.*”

“I’m not doing this again,” I mutter, turning around and stalking away. Because I can’t stand to see that look in her eyes, and I won’t let her see it reflected back at her in my own.

“Stop walking away, stop acting like you don’t care!” Sloane yells after me.

“I don’t!” I call back, refusing to turn around.

“No? Then why’d you console me at the party? Why’d you give me your dorm?”

Rage unfurls in my chest and I whip back around, advancing on her again in quick strides. “Because you fuck with my head!” I shout, shoving a finger against my temple. “You show up here after all this time and I don’t know

how the fuck I'm supposed to act around you!" I close the distance between us and reach out to grab her by the biceps, yanking her in close, my upper lip curling back from my teeth in a snarl. "I choose to walk away because I know it's not fucking healthy that every time I see you, I can't decide if I want to fight with you or fuck you."

A flare of anger ignites in her eyes to match my own and she pushes hard against my chest, glaring daggers up at me. "Well which is it, Duke?" she demands, trying to shove me away but failing to move me an inch. "Do you wanna fuck me or fight with me?"

Hearing those words from her lips paired with my old nickname sends a shockwave of primal desire straight to my dick. My tattooed hand darts up to wrap around her throat and she draws a short gasp as my grip tightens, drawing her even closer and angling her face up to mine. I lower my own until our noses brush, her big green eyes blazing with heat as I growl, "both." Suddenly we're crashing together, a frenzied mess of lips and tongues and teeth. I'm not even sure which one of us moves first- it's like a taut cord stretching between us just snaps, sending us colliding into one another with the force of a lightning strike. Our lips slam down on one another's, and unlike when we were kids, there's nothing sweet or yearning about the way we kiss. It's messy and urgent and desperate, my tongue licking into her mouth and chasing hers, my head angling to deepen our kiss until there isn't a breath of space between us.

My hands cruise down her body until I'm lifting her by the backs of her thighs, her legs wrapping around my waist, arms cinching around my neck. They hit the bill of my backwards hat, knocking it off my head and sending it tumbling to the ground. She throws her body weight into me like she can't get close enough, and it knocks me off balance- I stumble back a step, the backs of my calves meeting the concrete ledge. I fall down onto it with Sloane in my lap, still kissing the life out of her as my arms close tightly around her waist, squeezing the air from her lungs.

Kissing her feels like coming home. She buries her hands in my hair, hips grinding down over my lap as our tongues battle for dominance. I swallow her little whimpers, groaning into her mouth as my cock thickens beneath my zipper, aching to be freed. Our lips move together in perfect synchronicity, like our bodies remember exactly how to move with one another's.

The familiarity of it all is too much. Reality comes crashing in as I suddenly realize what the hell I'm doing and I yank back abruptly, throwing Sloane off

me and shooting to my feet.

She stumbles back to catch her balance, shock and surprise written all over her face. Her lips are puffy and swollen from our kisses, eyes still clouded with lust.

I can't look at her. Not now, not like this.

I whip around, flinching when she calls my name.

"Madd!" she yells sharply, panting to catch her breath. "Don't you dare kiss me like that and then just walk away. You don't get to do that."

I twist to face Sloane again, closing in on her in a single long stride and darting a hand out to grab her roughly by the chin. I press down on her lower lip with my thumb, forcing her jaw open and sliding my digit into her mouth, pressing the pad of it to her tongue. I lean in until our foreheads are touching, eyes darkening as they bore into hers.

"I can do whatever the fuck I want."

And with that, I shove her back and turn away again, deriving some sick sense of satisfaction from leaving her panting and wanting in my wake.



“What is it?!” I ask, heart pounding with excitement as Madd tows me by the hand around the side of the ski lodge.

“You’ll see,” he laughs. Then he suddenly stops in his tracks, whirling around to face me and blocking my view around the building with his broad form.

“Madd!” I whine, stomping my foot in frustration.

He throws his head back on another laugh, reaching out to take my face between his hands. “Always so impatient,” he admonishes, leaning down and pressing a soft kiss to the tip of my nose. “Now wait here, I wanna see your face when you see my present.”

Madd’s hands slide down to my shoulders and he moves me to stand against the side of the building, my back meeting the roughly hewn stone facade. His eyes spark with mischief as he backs away and darts around the corner, and it takes everything in me to remain rooted to the spot as I wait for him to tell me I can look.

I have no idea what hairbrained scheme he’s gotten up to this time, but as always, I’m along for the ride and eager to find out. I told him a couple weeks ago that my half birthday was coming up, because it means we officially only have six months left until I turn eighteen and we can run together under the full moon. I could see the wheels spinning in his head as soon as I told him, and today he picked me up and said he had a half birthday

gift for me- as if celebrating a half birthday with presents is a thing.

“Alright, you can come out now!” Madd calls, and a wave of giddy anticipation hits me as I push off the wall and bound around the corner of the lodge.

My eyes light up with excitement when they land on the moving benches of the ski-lift traversing slowly down the slope, whirling around the base, and re-angling to make their steady ascent.

“Surprise, Duchess.”

I swing my gaze from the ski-lift to my boyfriend, standing there with his arms folded over his chest and a smirk on his lips. “You got it working?!” I squeal, running toward Madd with a wide-eyed grin. “How?!”

He laughs, catching me around the waist. “Remember Carson, that nerd I got partnered up with in bio lab? His brother’s a mechanic. A damn good, one, too.”

“I can’t believe you did this!” I gush, pushing up on my toes and crushing my lips to his.

He kisses me back like only Madd can- forceful but gentle, tender yet demanding. There’s a promise conveyed in every glide of his lips on mine, in every flick of his tongue against my own, and like always, I’m breathless when it ends, staring up at him with so much adoration that I feel like I could burst.

I can’t believe he did this for me. How many times have I looked longingly at that lift, telling Madd that I wanted to take a ride on it up the mountain? Of course he’d find a way to make it happen. If I asked him for the moon, I have no doubt that he’d figure out how to rob everyone else of its light to give it to me.

“Catch me if you can, Madd,” I tease, pushing away from him and taking off running for the lift in a dead sprint.

I hear his laugh floating on the breeze as he follows after me, the heavy thud of his footsteps in the snow echoing behind me.

He catches me right when I get to the base of the lift, looping his arms around my waist and yanking me back into his chest. “What’d I tell you about running from me,” he growls in my ear, sending a shiver skittering up my spine.

“That you’ll always catch me,” I pant breathlessly.

“Damn right.” He lets me go, landing a sharp swat on my ass that makes me yelp.

I spin around, pinning him with a glare, but Madd just grins back at me with that blazing heat in his eyes that makes me melt every time.

He tips his head toward the lift. "Ready to take a ride, Dutch?"

"So ready," I breathe.

He steps closer and slings an arm around my shoulders, walking me to the pickup point at the base of the lift.

My heart pounds as we stand side by side, watching over our shoulders as the next bench completes its descent, whirling around and coming up behind us. It moves closer until it's nudging the backs of our calves, and I squeal as I flop down onto it beside Madd, our feet leaving the ground as it starts to take us up.

He scooches closer, throwing his arm over my shoulders again and tucking me into his side.

"So do you like it?" he asks, beaming down at me.

"I love it. And I love you." I snuggle against him, blowing out a contented sigh as we're lifted higher in the air, the snowy landscape of the forest in winter widening before our eyes. "Thank you for this. Best half birthday present ever."

The lift continues its ascent as we sit together in blissful silence, taking in the view of the territory, the mountains, and beyond. It's more gorgeous than I imagined, and I'm completely captivated by the scene. Everything about this moment is perfection...

Until the lift suddenly jerks, our bench coming to an abrupt halt. It swings on the cable and I'm pitched forward, my ass sliding off the seat and a scream tearing from my throat as I feel myself falling. Then I'm yanked up, strong hands wrapping around my arm and holding on tight.

"I've got you!" Madd yells, and I snap my head up, our eyes meeting as I dangle from his grasp over the thirty-foot drop. His own are rounded in terror, panic written all over his face.

"Madd!" I whimper.

"C'mon!" he grits out as he braces himself on the bench and starts to pull.

"Grab on with your other hand!"

I reach up, fingers brushing the aluminum edge of the bench seat as he starts to haul me back onto it.

Then it suddenly jerks again, starting back up.

His hands slip.

And I'm falling...

My screams wake me up from the dream, the bedsheets sticking to my sweat-slick skin. My heart pounds, breath coming out in short pants as my adrenaline surges from the assault of memories.

I've dreamed about the accident before, but never like *that*. The dream I just woke from was so vivid, like I was actually there, reliving every horrific moment again. I swear I can still feel the bite of the cold air on my skin and the ghost of Madd's hands gripping onto my arm.

It felt like more than a dream.

A... *vision*?

My mom has had visions of the past- it stands to reason that if I did inherit her gift, I might have them too. And I had that dream about the wolves in Denver...

I climb out of bed and try to shake off the sick feeling curling in my gut, but reliving one of the worst moments of my life in such vivid detail has my stomach in knots. My forehead throbs, and I shudder a harsh breath as I trail my fingertips over the scar there, tracing it down to my temple.

At least it wasn't the middle of the night this time. Daylight is spilling in through the cracks in the blinds as I glance over at the clock on the nightstand, realizing that I only beat my alarm by ten minutes. If I'd had that unsettling dream in the middle of the night, there's no way I would've been able to get back to sleep. As it is, now I've just got a few extra minutes to get ready before training with the squad today.

It's the first day of firearms training, and Lo and Avery suggested that I take part, too, since I'm angling to claim my spot as a squad leader. I have no idea how Madd's going to feel about that, but I can't find it in myself to care after the kiss-and-run incident on the roof yesterday. I'm done walking on eggshells around him after that nonsense.

I change into a pair of leggings and a tank top, finger-combing my curly hair as I flit around my room, getting ready. It's still a little damp from my shower last night. I hate sleeping on wet hair, but I hate wrestling with the blowdryer even more because it just frizzes out, which is decidedly *not* a good look.

I grab my keys, water bottle, and phone, and on the way out the door, my eyes snag on the white baseball cap resting on my dresser. Madd left it up on the roof yesterday in his haste to run off after that kiss.

That fucking *kiss*.

Just thinking about it makes my toes curl.

An idea strikes me, and I step back inside, snatching up the hat and slipping it

on over my head- backwards, like he wears it. If Madd wants to play games with me, I'll give 'em right back to him. All's fair in love and war, right?

I grab a bite to eat in the dining hall, then head out to the practice field where Lo and Avery are waiting for me. Avery's eyes immediately flicker up to the hat on my head, recognition flashing in them, but she doesn't say anything. She just gets this *look*, like she's curious but is afraid to even ask.

Can't say I blame her. I wouldn't voluntarily step into the Madd and Sloane disaster zone, either.

The three of us make our way through the gate and into the woods, following the steady stream of squad fighters heading out for their first target practice. I squint against the bright sunlight filtering in through the trees, reaching up and turning my hat forwards to shield my eyes from it. When we reach our destination, I recognize it as the area the squad uses for war games with new recruits- and I suppose it's apt, as training with guns is a simulation of the war we may be heading into.

Paper targets are hung on a dozen trees, each one with a rifle resting against the trunk below. The squad leaders who have prior experience with firearms- Madd, Archer, and Ares- are standing there waiting for everyone to arrive, talking amongst themselves in low voices.

As the girls and I draw closer, Madd's gaze slides over to me and immediately darkens, focusing on the hat I'm wearing. He looks away quickly, but I don't miss the way his jaw clenches, his posture stiffening.

Eat your heart out, Duke.

I smile to myself in smug satisfaction as the girls and I fall in with the growing crowd of squad fighters, chatting amongst ourselves for a few minutes until Madd whistles to get everyone's attention.

"Alright, listen up!" he barks, eyes sweeping over his captive audience. "Here's how this is going to go. We'll do a quick rundown of gun safety, then everyone's going to get a chance to shoot."

Murmurs of nervous excitement rise amongst the squad fighters, but immediately hush when Madd lifts a hand.

Just like that first day on the field, I'm in awe of how effortlessly he commands a crowd.

"Target practice will be twelve at a time. The rest of you can hang by the bunker until it's your turn."

The 'bunker' being a shoddy wooden platform used for war games, which is basically an intense version of capture the flag.

“The big things we’re going to work on today are your stance and your aim,” he continues, and I find myself nodding along with everyone else, anxious to get started.

Madd picks up one of the rifles and starts going over the basics- first, he demonstrates where the safety is, warning us not to disengage it until we’re ready to shoot. Then he shows us how to hold the gun properly, how to aim, and how to fire. I flinch at the loud crack when he pops off a shot, a hole tearing through one of the paper targets. Next, he goes on for a while about how we shouldn’t touch the trigger until we’re ready to shoot, how we need to identify what we’re shooting before we pull it, and how we should never, *ever* point the barrel at something we don’t intend to kill.

After that, the most eager of the squad fighters rush to the front to go first, while the rest of us trek over to hang out by the bunker and wait our turn. They come back about ten minutes later with big smiles on their faces, and that’s how it continues for the next hour, until Avery loses her patience and asserts her authority to push us to the front of the line.

One of the guys that yields his spot to us makes eye contact with me as he passes, and I immediately get this itchy, uncomfortable feeling. I lean in toward Avery, elbowing her to whisper, “Who’s that?”

She follows my line of sight to the young warrior with floppy brown hair. “Who, him?” she asks quietly, tipping her head toward the guy.

I nod.

“That’s Luke Jenkins. He’s from my pack. Funny story, his mom and mine used to be, like, mortal enemies. Hannah Jenkins.” She pauses for a moment, squinting her eyes in consideration. “Can’t remember his dad’s name. Damn, is that terrible since I’m from the alpha family? I should know these things.” She shakes her head, giggling softly. “My uncle Theo has always called him mop top, so that’s just how I think of him.”

I chuckle at that, too.

Avery leans in closer, nudging me. “Why, do you think he’s cute or something?” she whispers.

I shake my head with a grimace. “No, it’s not that. Well, I mean, he’s not *unattractive*. But I don’t know, something about him just feels... icky.”

“Nah, the dude’s harmless,” she scoffs, waving a hand dismissively.

“Honestly, I don’t even know how he made the squad. He’s clumsy as shit.”

We both giggle as the group ahead of us returns to the bunker to tag us in, and we fall in with the next one to jog over to the makeshift shooting range

where Madd, Archer, and Ares are changing out some of the paper targets.

“Everyone take a rifle,” Madd barks out impatiently as we approach, purposefully avoiding eye contact with me even when I walk right past him.

As if he didn't just have his tongue down my throat yesterday.

I shiver at the memory of his hands all over me, his lips on mine. The guy has turned into a colossal jerk, but *damn* is he a good kisser. And while Madd may say he doesn't care, the heat behind that kiss said otherwise.

“Keep the barrel pointed at the ground until I say,” he instructs further as we scramble to form a line with me in the furthest spot, each of us taking a gun.

It's lighter than it looks, but it's still awkward and weighty as I lift it clumsily with both hands. We're all spaced about ten feet away from each other, but this many guns in one place makes me feel profoundly uncomfortable. My skin crawls, the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. The three squad leaders move behind our line, and when Madd barks out his next command, I flinch.

“Alright, let's see your stance.”

I raise the rifle, sliding my hands along it until my grip feels somewhat comfortable. It still feels awkward and unbalanced, though, and Ares comes up behind me when he notices me struggling with my form.

“Need a hand?” he asks smoothly.

I throw him a grateful smile over my shoulder as the other squad members start firing at the targets. “Please.”

He grins back at me, moving in closer. “Try to relax a little,” he croons, placing his hands on my tense shoulders. Then he wraps his arms around me from behind, bringing his hands up to cover mine and adjust my grip.

“Better?”

It actually does feel better. More secure.

Before I can answer him, though, he grunts, the heat of his body leaving my back.

I whip my head around to see that Madd has a hand gripped around the back of his neck, and even though Ares is no slouch, Madd throws him off me like a ragdoll.

“What the hell, bro?!” Ares protests, stumbling back and rubbing the nape of his neck with a wince.

“Go help Avery,” Madd growls, flicking his head in his sister's direction.

“I've got this.”

Ares doesn't argue- he just shoots Madd a glare and moves away, all too

willing to go rub up on Avery.

“That was a little dramatic, dontcha think?” I murmur, turning to face the target again and flexing my fingers around the rifle in my hands.

I can feel the weight of Madd’s stare burning into me as I try to relax my shoulders and grip the gun like Ares showed me, but it’s still a little wobbly in my grip.

“You’ve gotta hold the butt of the gun tight to your shoulder,” Madd grumbles.

I adjust it in my hands, hiking the back end of the rifle up higher. “Like this?” He sighs in annoyance and I feel him move in closer. Then his arms come around me, covering my own and adjusting the rifle in my grip. The hard planes of his chest meet my back, his body heat radiating into me.

“Here,” he grunts. “Now lean in, look down the barrel to take aim...”

I do, but it’s hard to focus with him this close to me.

“Click off the safety,” he continues.

I comply.

His hands leave mine and he retreats a step. “Fire when you’re ready.”

I suck in a harsh breath as I squeeze the trigger, popping off a shot. It misses the target by a good five feet, the round hitting the trunk of another tree, and I lower the barrel of the gun with a frustrated huff.

“You need to hold your arms steady,” Madd says, stepping in close again. I lift the gun, and he covers my hands and arms with his to assist me once more. “Try inhaling when you aim, and exhaling before you pull the trigger.” This time, he doesn’t step back. He helps me hold the gun steady as I take the shot... and clip the edge of the paper, this time.

“Better,” Madd grunts in approval. “Again.”

I squeeze the trigger, and a hole punches through the paper target.

“Yes!” I hiss in victory, sinking back into Madd. And that’s when I feel just how far his approval extends, because there’s no mistaking the bulge of his hard-on pressing against the top of my ass.

My breath catches.

“Again,” Madd urges.

I fire the shot and miss completely.

“Tighten up your stance,” he commands in a clipped tone.

I push my ass back against his obvious boner. “Don’t act so annoyed, you’re clearly enjoying this,” I tease.

Madd’s inked hand leaves the outside of mine, sliding up to wrap around my

throat. “You don’t know who you’re playing with, little girl,” he growls into the shell of my ear, flexing his grip around my neck.

“Oh, I think I do,” I breathe as I aim the rifle. “The question is, do *you*?”

I pop off the last round and by some miracle, it hits the target almost dead center.

A grin spreads across my face and I start to lower the gun and turn toward him, flinching when he barks out, “Safety on!”

I click the safety, pointing the barrel at the ground and spinning around triumphantly.

Madd snatches the rifle from me with a scowl. Then he plucks the hat off my head, sliding it backwards onto his own.

“So how’d I do?” I ask, grinning like the cat that got the cream. Because yeah, hitting that target was a total fluke, but it couldn’t have come at a better time. And I’m sorta proud that I did so well my first time with a gun.

“Room for improvement,” he mutters. Then he lifts his chin, lazily tipping his head. “Go on, run back and send the next group out.”

I glance down the line to see that the others have finished up, Lo and Avery hanging back to wait for me and eyeing my interaction with Madd warily.

“Thanks for your help,” I chirp, pushing up on my tiptoes and brushing my lips against his cheek.

He flinches back like I’ve burned him, raising a hand to brush the offended skin as his scowl deepens.

I just spin and jog away, leaving *him* in the dust this time to stew over what just happened.

I bask in my moment of victory, because I have no doubt I’ll be paying for it sooner or later.



After everyone has a chance at target practice, the squad fighters clear out to return to the complex while the boys and I stick around to clean up. I go around collecting the rifles while Archer tears down the paper targets, and it takes a whole thirty seconds before Ares comes storming over to get in my face, demanding an explanation for getting rough with him while he was rubbing up on Sloane.

“Wanna tell me what the hell that was about earlier?” he huffs, lips pinched in a scowl.

“I think you know,” I reply in a bored tone, carrying a few rifles over to the crate and double-checking that they’re unloaded before carefully setting them inside.

Ares grabs a couple more guns, at least helping with the work while he interrogates me. “No, I don’t, so why don’t you spell it out for me, Madd?”

I swing around, meeting his gaze as I take the rifles from his hands. “Nobody touches Sloane but me.”

He narrows his eyes, folding his arms over his chest indignantly. “Really, bro? Thought you didn’t want her.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I mutter as I turn away, bending at the waist to set the rifles in the crate. “That girl will never not be mine.”

“So you *do* want her, then?”

I wave him off, trekking over to pick up a few more rifles as Ares follows on

my heels.

“I don’t get you, man,” he rambles as we collect the rest of the guns and carry them back over to the crate. “If you don’t even want her, why get all territorial? Just to stop anyone else from shooting their shot while you torture her for running out on you once upon a time?”

I drop the rifles in the crate and straighten, turning back toward Ares. “Now you’re getting it,” I remark, patting him on the shoulder patronizingly.

He shrugs my hand off with a scowl. “That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“I don’t really give a fuck.” I pluck the remaining guns from his hands, checking them and depositing them in the crate with the others.

“Arch, back me up here,” Ares sighs exasperatedly, glancing to his brother.

Archer just shakes his head with a chuckle. “I’m staying out of this.”

“Smart man,” I quip, squatting down to grab ahold of the crate and hauling it up into my arms. “You guys good? I’ve gotta get back to the packhouse.”

Archer replies “yes” at the same time Ares says “no”, and I give him a pointed look that warns I’m not in the fucking mood.

Ares wisely backs off, stepping out of my way as I start toward the path back to the complex.

The kid needs to learn his place. He thinks he’s hot shit now that he’s a squad leader, seemingly forgetting where he falls in the pecking order. Should he challenge me again, especially on this, I’ll have no problem reminding him.

I carry the crate back to the squad complex and drop it off in the locker, still fuming over the little stunt Sloane pulled today. The trouble with knowing someone for your whole damn life is that they know exactly how to push your buttons. Apparently eight years of distance doesn’t change that, because Sloane hit every one of mine with that little act she put on at target practice. From showing up wearing my hat to grinding her ass into my cock, she knew exactly what to do to get me riled up, and I hate that it fucking worked.

Now I’m just pissed off and have a wicked case of blue balls; a real winning combination. And while I should be avoiding Sloane and going on with my life as if she’s not here, instead I’m obsessing over how to make her pay for fucking toying with me.

I arrive home at the packhouse with every intention of going straight upstairs and jacking off, but those plans are shot to hell when I walk in to find my parents sitting in the living room. It’s a familiar scene- my dad in the recliner with Mom draped in his lap, the two of them looking at one another so adoringly that it makes me wanna gag. They’re fated mates, a shining

example of what a healthy, loving relationship should look like. Which is great and all, but I could do without the constant parental PDA.

“Oh good, you’re home,” Mom chirps when she sees me come in, flipping her long blonde hair over a shoulder and flashing me a wide smile.

“You here to check up on me?” I tease as I step into the living room to join them. I slip my keys into my pocket and take off my hat, carding my fingers through my hair.

“Something like that,” she muses. “So how are things going?”

Before I can answer, Avery strolls into the room, eyeing the white baseball cap in my grasp. “Nice hat,” she comments, the corners of her mouth lifting in a knowing smirk.

Such a little shit.

I chuck it at her, flopping down onto the couch and turning my attention back to my mom. “Things are good. The squad had their first training session with guns today. Target practice. Went pretty well.”

“Where’d you do it?” Dad questions, because even though he retired from his position as Alpha, he hates being out of the loop.

“Out in the woods where we do war games,” I reply. “Just used paper targets on the trees.”

He nods approvingly. “Everyone take to it pretty well?”

“Well enough, for their first time,” I say with a shrug. “We’re gonna hit it every day this week, try to get everyone comfortable before we get into more intensive training.”

“Moving targets?”

I nod. “Still figuring that one out. IT worked up some pretty cool VR simulators too, so people can work on honing their skills that way.”

“No substitute for the real thing, though,” Dad mumbles, running a hand over his chin in contemplation.

“That’s what I told Lo, but she insists that the tech is top-notch. Suppose I can’t argue with the metrics it pulls, too. It’ll help us track accuracy and improvement as we go.”

“She’s right, I tried it,” Avery cuts in, sinking down onto the couch across from me. “I actually felt a lot more comfortable handling a real gun today after playing with the simulator yesterday. The size and weight of the rifle is almost identical.”

“You be careful,” Dad warns, shooting Avery a stern look.

Mom rolls her eyes, throwing him a look of her own over her shoulder. “As if

women can't handle themselves just as well as men?"

"Of course they can," he grumbles, pressing a kiss to her temple and stroking his thumb along her outer thigh. "Especially Kessler women."

Mom grins at that, swinging her gaze back to Avery and tossing her a wink.

My mom was a hell of a warrior back in the day. Fallon Eastwick Kessler wasn't nicknamed the 'barbie beast' for nothing. Even now, she could probably still give most of the squad fighters a run for their money.

"And how are... *other* things going?" Mom asks, arching a brow in my direction.

While the woman's a physical force, subtlety isn't her strong suit.

I bury a hand in my hair, shaking my head. "Just say it," I groan.

"Fine, how are things going with Sloane?"

"Here we go," Avery sighs, pushing up from the couch and walking away.

Mom's brows draw together in concern as she watches after Aves, then swings her gaze back on me.

"It's fine," I grumble.

"It's not!" Avery calls over her shoulder.

"Hey, if you walk away then you don't get to throw your two cents in!" I yell back to her, scrubbing a hand over my face and turning back to my mom.

"It's fine," I repeat.

Mom gives me a dubious look she doesn't believe me, while Dad just chuckles softly, shaking his head.

I wish I could give them more of an explanation, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. Everything has been fucked since Sloane came back. And between making her cry at Andie's party and kissing the hell out of her up on the roof, I obviously have no idea what I'm doing when it comes to my ex.

"Is it true that she had a vision when the hunters attacked Denver?" Mom asks.

I furrow my brow in confusion. "What? *Sloane*?"

That can't be right. Sloane didn't inherit her mom's gift- and for some reason, she always felt like she failed her somehow because of it. I can't even count how many times she got in her head about not being 'special' and I had to list off all the other ways she was to try to lift her spirits. I did it every time, even though I never really understood why she had such a complex about being normal. I guess it's because she favored her mom in so many other ways growing up that people just expected her to get Astrid's gift, and when she didn't, she hated feeling like she let them down.

“Astrid mentioned that Sloane had a dream the night the hunters came, that it’s possible she’s manifesting as a seer after all,” Mom explains.

I shake my head with a frown. “I don’t know anything about that,” I mumble. *Not that I’ve given her a chance to tell me.*

“I have an idea, why don’t we do a big family dinner on Sunday, like old times?” my mom asks, her blue eyes alight. “We could invite all the alpha families, give Sloane a real welcome back to the territory...”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” I sigh, holding up my hands. “Just because she’s back doesn’t mean we’re on friendly terms. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Oh come on, you two will work it out,” she says flippantly. “Don’t be stubborn.”

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Dad snorts.

Mom throws an elbow into his ribs and he grunts, tightening his arms around her so she can’t do it again.

“Well as fun as this was, I’ve got some things to take care of,” I sigh, pushing up from the couch and shoving my hands into the pockets of my gym shorts.

Dad perks up. “Pack business?” he asks hopefully.

I pull a hand out of my pocket to point a finger in his direction. “You’re retired, old man,” I chide. “Try enjoying it.”

Mom laughs, reaching behind her to ruffle his salt and pepper hair. “You know your dad doesn’t have an off switch when it comes to this stuff.”

“Thirty years as Alpha will do that to you,” he shrugs.

“Fine, you wanna come with me to round up the weekly report from the enforcers?” I ask, edging toward the door and giving a little flick of my head in invitation.

He slides my mom off his lap, getting to his feet. “Isn’t that Mason’s job?”

“He’s got something going on with Norah today.”

“Let’s go, then,” Dad barks eagerly, slinging an arm around my mom’s shoulders and pressing a kiss to her temple. “You good here, babe?”

Mom rolls her eyes, pushing him toward me with a laugh. “Have fun, boys. I’m gonna go find Avery, see if I can get more dirt out of her than I got from you,” she says, waggling her brows at me.

“Good luck with that,” I murmur. I pull open the door, my dad following me outside. “So how long before Mom convinces Aves to take her to the complex so she can try out that VR simulator?” I ask as he closes the door behind him.

“Oh, ten minutes, max,” he laughs as we start toward my Jeep in the driveway. “You know if the hunters do show up, there’s no way she’s sitting this one out. Your mom’s got a warrior’s heart. It’s frustrating sometimes, but I love that about her.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” I grumble, rounding the Jeep to the drivers’ side. “You’re fated mates, so she’s perfect in your eyes.”

“Well yeah,” he agrees, opening the door and sliding into the passenger seat. I get in and fire up the engine, glancing over at him with my hand on the gearshift, sensing there’s more on the tip of his tongue. My dad never misses out on an opportunity to impart wisdom. “But?” I ask cautiously.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “But it’s not always smooth sailing. Just because we’re fated doesn’t mean we don’t have our fair share of disagreements.” He shrugs a shoulder, staring out the windshield in contemplation. “Your mom drives me crazy half the time, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love her with everything I am. Love isn’t easy, son, but I can tell you that it’s worth it.”

“I don’t even know what love is,” I mutter.

“I think you do.”

I shoot him a side-eyed glare. “If you start with that shit, I’ll leave you here with Mom,” I warn.

He chuckles softly, holding up his hands in surrender. “Fine, I won’t push. But if you ever do wanna talk about it...”

“I know.”

I shift the gear in reverse, backing out of the driveway.

My dad and I have always had an open line of communication, but this isn’t something I’m ready to discuss with him. Hell, I’m not sure if I’ll ever be. I suck at owning up to and talking about my emotions, and Sloane’s return has them twisted up beyond recognition.

As the two of us head out to take care of business, I’m hit with a wave of nostalgia. It feels like old times when I was under his wing, learning the ropes of how to be Alpha from the best one I know. With my dad at my side, I already feel more level-headed than I have in a while- like his calm, cool demeanor is rubbing off on me.

It’s exactly what I didn’t know I needed, and I hope to fuck it lasts.



“Okay, this tech is sick,” I gush, taking the VR goggles off and blinking as my eyes adjust to the change in light.

“Right?!” Lo grins proudly. She takes the goggles and gun from me, setting them on the table below the large TV on the wall. The room we’re in used to be storage at the complex, but IT recently commandeered it and had it emptied out to use for the VR training modules.

“It’s so realistic!” I exclaim, still blown away by the system Lo rigged up. “It really felt like I was out in the woods shooting.”

“Well good thing you weren’t, because your accuracy was only thirty-eight percent,” Avery mumbles, turning the tablet in her hands toward me so I can view my stats. “And you took four hits, baby girl. We need to get that number to zero.”

I nod determinedly, spinning back around to face Lo. “Alright, gimme that gun back, I’ll go again.”

“Easy, killer, let’s see where you can improve first,” she chuckles, waving Avery over.

She crosses the room to Lo, and the two of them peer down at the tablet, reading through my stats thoughtfully and pointing out different numbers to one another. As I watch them, I can’t help but notice how freaking *gorgeous* both my friends are. The two leggy blondes almost look like they could be sisters, and as a short brunette, sometimes I feel woefully out of place

amongst them.

“Shit, I didn’t realize it was almost eight, we’d better get over to the conference room for the squad leader meeting,” Avery rushes out, switching off the tablet and sliding it onto the table behind her with the rest of the VR equipment. “You’re coming, right Sloane?”

“Should I?” I ask hesitantly, glancing between them and worrying my lower lip between my teeth.

Avery cocks a brow. “I mean, you wanna be a squad leader, right?”

“Well yeah.”

She gives a little flick of her head to beckon me. “Then c’mon.”

Avery follows Lo out the door and I trail behind, smoothing my hands over my hair nervously.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to just show up like this?”

“I don’t see why not,” Lo chirps, twirling one of her blonde pigtail braids around a finger as she glances back at me. “We don’t exactly have a protocol for this situation. I mean, it’s not like you’d have to go through training camp with the new recruits at this age.”

“Don’t even mention that,” Avery groans. “Madd would make her join in with the high schoolers just to torture her.”

Lo winces, shooting me another look. “Well, you’ve already had the basic training, right? Didn’t you train with Denver’s squad?”

“Sort of. I mean, they train up everyone there, but I wasn’t a full-time pack warrior or anything.”

“We’ll leave that part out, too,” Avery winks, approaching the doorway of the conference room and standing aside, gesturing for me to go in ahead of her.

I take a deep breath as I cross the threshold, but thankfully my broody ex isn’t waiting inside. It’s just the other guys around the table- Archer, Ares, Iver, and my brother Tristan.

Ares perks up right away when he sees me come in. “Hey, Sloane, glad you decided to join us,” he drawls, flashing me that charming smile of his.

“Bout time,” Iver agrees.

“Does Madd know about this?” Tris asks, narrowing his eyes on Avery suspiciously as she follows me inside.

“He’ll figure it out soon enough,” she snorts, dropping down into a chair and motioning for me to take the one next to her.

I pull it out from the table and sit down, Lo claiming the empty one on my

other side.

“Eh, don’t worry, Sloane, I’m sure Madd will be thrilled to see you,” Ares teases, winking at me.

And as if on cue, that’s when the man himself walks in- and when his dark blue eyes meet mine, he abruptly grinds to a halt.

“What’s she doing here?” Madd snarls, sweeping an icy glare around the conference table.

“She’s part of this,” Avery says simply.

He narrows that glare on his sister. “The fuck she is!”

“Fine, you big baby,” I sigh, pushing up from my chair with a dramatic eyeroll. “I’ll go.”

“No.” Avery shoots to her feet beside me, pointing a finger in my direction and pinning me with a stern stare. “*Stay*, Sloane.” Then she whips her head back around to look at her brother. “Madd, you and I run this squad *together*. It’s not just about what *you* want.”

“We still have to agree.”

“Not if I pull trump on this.”

“That’s for new recruits,” he scoffs, waving a hand dismissively.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Avery challenges. “I haven’t used mine for the year yet, and I wanna use it on Sloane.”

The two of them stare at each other while the rest of us exchange uncomfortable glances, no one wanting to get involved in the Kessler twins’ power struggle. The two of them have always had this weird dynamic where they can have full blown conversations with just a look- and though neither of them say another word, Avery somehow wins whatever battle they’re locked in because it appears that Madd concedes, huffing a sigh as he steps around the conference table.

“Fine,” he grits out, scrubbing a hand over his face and flopping down into the empty chair. “But she doesn’t get a vote yet, not till she goes through the proper initiation.”

“Fine,” Avery fires back.

I’m not sure if I should be worried or not about what that ‘initiation’ entails, but I’m just trusting that Avery wouldn’t agree to it if it was something crazy.

“Alright now that’s out of the way...” Archer breathes, lifting his brows and glancing around the table, “what do we have to go over this week?”

Avery and I take our seats again and I try to focus on Archer, even though I can feel Madd’s wicked stare burning into the side of my face.

“Tris, Iver, how are you two coming on shooting?” Madd grumbles.

“Good,” my brother nods. “We can start cycling in to lead the training sessions if you need us.”

“Us, too,” Lo adds. “Me and Avery have it down, and Sloane’s getting there.”

“Alright, let’s do Lo and Aves on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and Archer and Tris on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays,” Madd mutters.

“Ares can lead with both groups all six days, and Iver and I will come fill in whenever we can get away from our Alpha duties. Cool?”

I don’t miss how my own name is conspicuously absent from his assignment.

“Works for me,” Ares shrugs.

“So we’re just doing afternoons?” Tristan clarifies, glancing around the table.

“Yeah, let’s leave the mornings for our usual workouts,” Archer mumbles.

Madd swings his gaze over to his sister. “How are we doing on the new patrols, Aves?”

“Some growing pains, but they’re adjusting,” she sighs. “If anyone complains too much, we’ll take them off their extra rotation. There are plenty of fighters willing to pick up extra shifts, especially the ones stuck in the barracks.”

Madd arches a brow at her in question and she chuckles conspiratorially.

“I might’ve told them they could move up the waitlist for a dorm based on their participation,” she winks.

“We could always double up in the dorms,” Ares suggests with a smirk. “I wouldn’t mind Morgan or Katya as a roommate...”

“Keep it in your pants, Raines,” Avery admonishes, and I snort a laugh.

“How are we lookin’ in IT?” Madd asks, steering the meeting back on track as he looks to Lo for a response.

“We’re all buttoned up,” she chirps cheerfully. “Got the security system updated, so now we’re just playing with the new VR setup. We’re gonna post sign-ups online so everyone can schedule times to train on it.”

“Perfect,” he nods. Then he pauses, sweeping his gaze around the table and arching a brow. “Anything else?”

Is it just me, or is this the shortest meeting known to man?

“Anyone wanna grab a drink?” Iver asks, pushing his chair back from the table.

Unsurprisingly, Ares is the first to jump on the offer. “Shit, count me in,” he laughs, clapping Iver on the shoulder.

The others mumble in agreement and start to get up, while I glance warily

toward Madd as I rise to my own feet. As everyone else starts filing out of the conference room, I stand frozen in indecision, Avery nudging me to follow Lo.

“I’ll catch up,” I murmur, eyes flickering over to Madd. He’s still slumped in his seat, staring at something on his phone.

Avery gives me a pitying look, setting a hand on my shoulder as she skirts past me to leave the room. She’s the last to slip out, closing the door behind her, and at the sound of the latch snicking closed, Madd looks up to realize that we’re the only two left.

His eyes snap to mine, cold and distant as ever, and I heave an exhausted sigh. “Look, Madd, if this is gonna be a problem...”

“Why do you insist on inserting yourself in every aspect of my life?” he snaps, abruptly pushing to his feet and shoving his phone into the pocket of his sweats.

“Excuse me?” I scoff, flinching back. “It’s *my* life too, Madd! You don’t get to dictate what I do with it, and I’m sick of tiptoeing around, always worrying what you’ll think.”

“Why even ask, then?” he glowers. “You’re obviously just gonna do whatever the hell you want.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t have to be like this...”

“No?” He advances on me, closing the distance between us until I’m backing up to escape him, my ass bumping into the edge of the conference table.

“How should it be then, Sloane?” he growls, slapping his palms onto the table at either side of my hips and crowding me in.

I lean back, arching away from him as my pulse races. “We can be friends.”

He shakes his head quickly. “Nah, doesn’t work for me.” He leans in even closer, his eyes darkening. “Try again.”

I press a palm to his chest, trying to shove him back, but he’s like an immovable wall of muscle. He just keeps closing in on me, hovering above me until there’s barely any space between us.

He’s trying to intimidate me, but his proximity has the opposite effect. My breath comes out in short pants as I stare up at him, his spicy, masculine scent enveloping me like a familiar embrace.

“What do you want from me, Duke? An apology?” I breathe, wetting my lips with my tongue. “Fine. I’m sorry I left, even though I begged to stay. I’m sorry I didn’t come back sooner.”

His nose brushes against mine and my breath catches, my eyes sliding closed.

I can feel his heart racing beneath my palm, banging around in his chest at the same chaotic rhythm as my own.

“I don’t need your apology,” he grumbles, our mouths so close that I can feel his warm breath on my own lips. He slides a hand up to grasp my hip, fingertips digging into my flesh in a bruising grip. “I need you to stop strutting around here fucking *taunting* me with this body.” He releases his grip, his hand sliding up my belly, brushing over my breast. The backs of his knuckles graze the length of my throat until he’s cupping my jaw, sweeping the pad of his thumb across my lower lip. “With these fucking lips...”

Heat floods my core and a needy little whine escapes me that I instantly regret. I hate that he has this effect on me. I hate that I should be pushing him away, but instead I’m tilting my chin up, trying to get even closer.

“Kiss me, Duke,” I whisper.

And he does. *Shit*, does he *ever*. His lips slam against mine so hard that it makes me dizzy, our tongues clashing together in a frenzy of hunger and aching *need*. Madd’s arm wraps around my waist, hauling me up to sit on the edge of the table, and suddenly his knee is kicking my legs apart to wrap around his hips, my arms wound around his neck and my fingers pushing into his thick hair.

We kiss like we’re both starved for it, like we’re trying to reclaim little pieces of each other with every slide of our lips and twist of our tongues. His chest rumbles with a growl and I kiss him harder, like my damn life depends on it-like I’ll never get the chance again.

I might not.

Whatever this is between us is fragile as hell, bound to break at any moment, yet I’m still clinging to him like a life raft in a stormy sea; like I have some fighting chance of holding onto something this volatile.

I shudder against him as his rough fingertips trace the waistband of my leggings, and when I arch closer, he takes it as an invitation, shoving his hand down the front of them. I’m so worked up that his finger slips easily through my slick folds, pressing into my opening before moving back up to circle my clit.

Our lips break apart as my head falls back on a moan, but Madd doesn’t miss a beat- with one hand between my legs, he rucks my shirt up with the other, yanking my bra down roughly until my breasts spill from the cups. Then he leans forward, sucking one of my stiff nipples into his mouth as I cry out from the intensity of his ministrations.

My thighs quake around his hips as Madd forces a thick finger inside of me, then two, stretching my channel as he slides them in and out. “Is this what you wanted, Sloane?” he growls against my skin, rolling my hard nipple between his teeth. “You want me to remind you how hard I can make you come?”

“Fuck, Madd!” I cry out, tugging at his hair.

He shoves his fingers in deeper, picking up his pace as he fucks me with them. “Nobody else gets you this wet, do they Duchess?” he rasps, moving his head up beside mine and trailing the tip of his tongue along the shell of my ear. “And you wanna know why? Because this *pussy* still *knows* who it *belongs* to.” He punctuates his words with deep thrusts of his digits until I’m breathless and trembling, hovering on the precipice of an orgasm that I know is going to fucking destroy me.

His thumb brushes my clit, his fingers hitting that sweet spot inside me, and I spiral into oblivion, my orgasm barreling down on me so hard that tears leak from the corners of my eyes. The breathy cries that leave me don’t even sound like my own; it’s like I’m floating above my body, brushing the heavens.

But that can’t be right. Not when Madd’s master is clearly from down below. He doesn’t stop until I’m completely wrung out, going boneless in his arms as he tugs his hand out of my pants and brings his fingers to his mouth. He sticks out his tongue and crudely runs his fingers along it as he holds me captive in his stare.

“I still fucking *own* you, Sloane,” he murmurs, pupils blown so wide that his eyes almost appear black. “Don’t you forget that.”

He abruptly lets me go, retreating a step as I scramble to catch myself before I collapse back onto the table.

I shouldn’t be surprised when he turns away and leaves, but it still fucking stings. And while he might’ve just snatched the power back, he also showed his cards... and now I know exactly how to level the playing field between us.

Game on, Duke.



“Hey, you made it!” Ares calls out as I stroll into the Goldenleaf bar, darting a hand up to wave me over to the table in the corner where he’s seated with the other squad leaders.

As if I don’t know how to find the way to *my* table, in *my* bar.

The kid’s really starting to get on my last nerve. If Ares wasn’t like a brother to me- albeit an annoying younger brother that I never really wanted- I would’ve put him in his place long ago. As it is, I put up with his shit because I know he’s just trying to fit in with the rest of us, and it’s probably tough being the youngest.

But just because I understand it doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Where’s Sloane?” Avery asks as I approach, looking past me like my ex is going to materialize at any moment.

“How the fuck should I know?” I grumble, sliding onto the empty stool beside her.

Even though I washed my hands, I swear I can still smell Sloane on me- and from the way Avery’s nose twitches to the side-eyed glance she throws my way, I’m not imagining things.

Fucking *great*. Can’t wait for that interrogation later.

“Hey, there she is!” Lo announces, and to my surprise, I swivel on my stool to see Sloane striding into the bar, looking a whole lot more put together than when I left her.

She's changed into a tight pair of black skinny jeans and a plain white cropped tee, but she's still got that post-orgasmic flush to her cheeks, her lips still a little puffy.

It's always been my favorite look on her.

"Sloane!" Ares calls, lifting his arm to wave her over as I resist the urge to tear the limb from his body.

Clenching my jaw, I look around for the server, desperately in need of a drink.

"Hey guys," Sloane greets cheerfully as she walks up to our table, rounding it to take the open stool between Ares and Iver. She's startlingly casual, as if I didn't just finger fuck her to orgasm on the table in the conference room. And I don't know why that bothers me so much.

Maybe because my balls are currently bluer than the electric lemonade Lo's sipping on.

"So what'd you think of your first squad leader meeting?" Iver asks, nudging Sloane with an elbow.

She shrugs a slender shoulder. "Honestly? I thought there'd be more to it. Are all your meetings that short?"

"Hey, we don't fuck around," Archer replies with a chuckle, pointing the rim of his beer bottle toward Sloane. "As I'm sure you noticed, things can go off the rails pretty fast if we don't stick to business."

"Mostly because of Ares," Lo adds.

"Hey!" he protests.

"Don't act like it isn't true," Avery chides, leaning over and slinging an arm around his shoulders.

Ares doesn't deny it- he just leans into her like having my sister this close to him is equivalent to hitting the fucking lottery.

Yet another reason to make me wanna punch the guy.

"Hey, what'd Andie say when you asked her about coming back?" Iver asks, looking between Archer and Ares.

Their sister Andie is on a temporary hiatus from squad leadership, but given the escalating situation with the hunters, we've discussed trying to bring her back on board.

"She's in, as soon as Aunt Liv finds a new nanny for baby Maeve," Archer supplies.

"Good, we need her," I mutter. "With all this hunter bullshit, we could use her skills."

Iver leans in toward Sloane to bring her up to speed. “Andie’s the best shooter out of any of us,” he explains. “All the Raines kids have been training with firearms for years. Luna Serena suggested it as a way for them to blow off steam, thinking it might come in handy someday.”

“And it has, so basically my mom’s cooler than all of yours,” Ares flexes, waggling his brows and taking a swig of his beer.

“Nah, I think Tris and Sloane have you beat,” Lo muses, stirring her drink with the little swizzle straw. “Theirs can tell the future.”

“Not enough of it to give us a heads-up about whether these hunters are gonna show up or not though, eh?” I grumble as I finally make eye contact with the server and flag her down.

Kelly strides over with a bright smile on her face, tucking her short blonde hair behind her ears. Apparently she’s been serving drinks in this bar since our parents were our age, and she always takes good care of me and my friends when we’re here, making sure our drinks are never empty for long.

“Beer, Alpha?” she asks, tossing a coaster onto the table in front of me.

“You know it,” I reply with a nod.

She slides her gaze across the table to Sloane, offering her a smile and tossing a coaster down in front of her as well. “What about you, honey?”

Sloane sinks her teeth into her lower lip, tilting her head in contemplation.

Shit, it’s cute.

I look away quickly, mentally bitch-slapping myself for even thinking that.

“Do you have Chardonnay?”

Ares snorts a laugh. “Really, Denver girl?” he teases.

Kelly gives a little shake of her head. “Sorry, hon. We do have white wine, but I wouldn’t recommend it,” she says with a grimace. “The red’s halfway decent, though.”

Sloane purses her lips, considering, then waves a hand. “Just a beer is fine.”

“You sure, Princess?” Ares goads, nudging her in the ribs with an elbow.

My eyes flicker back over to Sloane to gauge her reaction to Ares calling her ‘Princess’- a name I know she hates, or at least she used to.

“Not a princess,” she replies breezily, swinging her gaze over to me and meeting my eyes. Some of that familiar teenage mischief sparkles in her own as she clarifies, “a *duchess*.”

“Shit, I forgot about that!” Iver laughs as Sloane and I hold eye contact, neither willing to be the first to back down and look away.

“About what?” Ares asks.

“That’s what Madd and Sloane used to call each other when we were kids,” Iver says, wagging his brows. “The Duke and Duchess of mayhem.”

Kelly returns to set beers down in front of Sloane and me as we remain locked in a staring contest of epic proportions. Even as I reach out to pick up the bottle and take a sip, I hold her gaze, wondering what’s going on in that head of hers.

She raises her own bottle, and the way she slowly wraps her lips around the rim is fucking filthy. My cock jerks to attention and I can feel my wolf pushing forward, likely making himself known to her in my irises.

“I’ll be your duke, Sloane,” Ares drawls, slipping an arm around her waist.

My fist clenches atop the table.

She slowly arches a brow.

And I’m the first to crack.

I slam my beer bottle down as my gaze snaps to Ares, glaring daggers at him in warning.

Wisely, he heeds it immediately and yanks his arm back. Sloane just rolls her eyes, her delicate throat bobbing as she swallows down the gulp of beer.

What happened in the conference room was a moment of weakness on my part, but with the way I left things, I thought it’d at least knock her down a peg or two. Instead, it’s seemed to have the opposite effect. She’s more emboldened than ever, a wicked smirk curling her lips.

“Everything alright, Madd?” she asks coyly.

“Fucking great,” I grumble, lifting my beer again and chugging down half of it.

The others exchange uncomfortable glances, Avery quickly swooping in to change the subject. Because my twin’s always got my back.

She starts going on about Lo’s VR stuff again, but I’m barely listening. If Sloane intended to rattle me by showing up here and acting like nothing happened, then it’s fucking working. I just keep watching her out of the corner of my eye, wondering what her game is and hating that I can’t figure it out.

This whole no shifting after dark thing really blows. I could use a run to clear my head, especially since my wolf keeps relentlessly clawing at my insides in a bid to get free.

“You in, Madd?”

I jerk my head up at the sound of my name, eyes settling on Tristan. “Huh?”

“Shots. Ares is buying.”

“Nah,” I grunt, tipping back my beer and finishing the rest of it off. I wipe my mouth on a forearm, setting the bottle back down. “I’m actually gonna get outta here. Got an early meeting with my beta tomorrow.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Avery offers a little too quickly. She slides off her barstool, picking up her vodka cranberry and tossing it back. Then she slides the glass back on the table, licking her lips as she turns toward me. “You ready?”

I nod, easing to my feet and tossing up a two-finger wave to the others. Sloane’s giving me a look that I can’t quite read, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d almost swear it’s disappointment.

Maybe because I’m not willing to stick around for whatever game she’s trying to play with me.

I resist turning back to try to figure out what that look’s about as Avery and I head out, exiting the bar and crossing the parking lot to the road that leads into town. The packhouse is only a few blocks away, and this is a walk we’ve done many times- usually a whole lot tipsier than either of us are now.

“So, are you gonna make me ask?” Avery pipes up as we walk, and honestly, I’m surprised it took her this long to bring it up. She’s probably been dying to know since I sat down next to her at the bar.

“That depends,” I grumble, kicking a loose rock in the road and sending it skittering across the pavement. “You gonna force me to tell you by pulling trump again?”

She heaves a sigh. “Are you really still pissed about that? I know you don’t like it, but we both know bringing her in is the right thing to do.”

“You should’ve talked to me about it first,” I mutter.

“Honestly, it was a last-minute thing. We were training on the VR, time got away from us, and when I realized it was time for the meeting, I just sorta asked her if she was coming.”

I swing my gaze to my sister, arching a brow. “And I’m sure you didn’t encourage her to come along, huh?”

Avery presses her lips into a tight line. “Well yeah. Of course I did.”

I roll my eyes, shoving my hands in my pockets, my sweats slipping lower on my hips.

“I meant what I said, Madd,” Avery sighs, knocking her shoulder into mine as we walk. “She’s part of this too.”

“She hasn’t been part of this for a long time,” I grit out.

“But she’s back now. So how long are you gonna punish her for leaving?”

I shoot her a hard glare, shaking my head. “You know it’s not just about her leaving.”

“Okay, fine,” she groans. “How long are you gonna punish her for ducking your phone calls?”

“And text messages.” I grind to a halt, turning toward my sister. “And how about when I drove all the way the fuck out there and she wouldn’t even tell them to let me past the gate?”

Avery shakes her head, stopping across from me and folding her arms over her chest. “Look, I’m not saying what she did was right. But you don’t know her side of things either. Maybe she just wanted a clean break, ya know?”

“Well she could’ve fucking *told* me,” I grumble.

“You’re right. She could’ve. She should’ve. But she didn’t. And now it’s been so long that it seems like a waste of energy to keep dwelling on it. Don’t you ever get tired?”

“Of what?”

Avery throws her hands up. “Being so angry all the time, carrying all this shit around with you.”

“I wasn’t like this before she came back,” I scowl.

She stares at me dubiously, arching a brow.

“Okay, maybe a little,” I admit. “But still. Without her here, at least I was able to not think about her for five fucking seconds.”

Avery gives me a sad look as we both start walking again. And as we make our way closer to the packhouse, she gives me a full minute of blissful silence before she throws her two cents in once more.

“I think you two should just sit down and hash things out,” she mumbles.

“Not gonna happen.”

She knocks her shoulder into mine. “Stubborn ass.”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

“So you won’t talk to her, but you’ll hook up with her?”

I swing my gaze to my sister, arching a brow.

“Please,” she scoffs, waving me off. “I smelled her all over you when you came into the bar. Don’t you dare try to lie to me, Maddox Kessler.”

I stab my fingers through my hair, heaving a sigh. “Okay, yeah. I did. So what? It was a moment of weakness.”

“You sure that’s all it was?”

“Aves, I appreciate what you’re trying to do here. I really do. But I’ve gotta sort this shit out on my own.” I point a finger in her direction. “And you’d

better not tell Mom any of this shit, she'll just try to meddle.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know I'd never. Though she tried her hardest to get it out of me the other day. Even after everything, I think she's still rooting for you two.”

“That's surprising, considering how tense things got between her and Brock for a while there,” I say as we reach the packhouse, veering off the road to walk up the driveway.

“She's just protective,” Avery reasons. “And she's not scared of Brock Masters. Especially when it comes to her baby boy.” She darts up a hand, ruffling my hair.

“Knock it off,” I chuckle, shoving her away playfully.

We approach the front door, pausing on the stoop before we go inside.

“Seriously, though, Madd. When you do wanna talk...”

“I know.”

I press a kiss to my fingertips, smashing them against her forehead and rubbing them in. “Love you, Aves.”

She swats my hand away, laughing softly. “Love you too, stubborn ass.” She points a finger at me, lifting her brows. “Figure out your shit.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I groan, reaching for the handle and pushing the door open.

Avery stops in the kitchen to grab something to eat while I head straight upstairs, locking myself in my room. And though there are probably a bunch of other things I should be doing, I flop onto my bed, reach into the waistband of my sweats, and pull out my dick.

It thickens beneath my palm as I give it a couple lazy strokes, my mind conjuring up the image of Sloane's perfect body quaking around my fingers as she came undone. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to stifle a groan as I fist my cock, remembering the way she tugged at my hair, the little cries that left her lips as I brought her closer and closer to the edge.

And with that picture in my mind, I come in two minutes flat, fucking hating myself for it.



Madd’s voice is hoarse, full of heart-wrenching anguish as he chokes out my name on a sob. He’s crawling through the snow toward my unconscious body, unable to walk but determined to get to me. One of his legs is twisted at an odd angle, broken from his jump off the ski-lift, but he’s fighting through the physical pain, tears streaming down his face from the effort.

His eyes round in horror as he closes the distance and sees the crimson blood blooming in the crisp white snow beneath my head, spreading like spilled ink on a blank canvas. He pushes himself harder in his desperation to reach me, panting from exertion when he’s finally close enough to reach out and gather my limp body in his arms.

“Sloane, baby, wake up,” Madd rasps, frantically sweeping my hair out of my face. It’s a mess, soaked with blood still spilling from my head wound at an alarming rate. “Please, Duchess, wake up!”

But I don’t.

I can’t.

I’m out cold, dead to the world yet somehow outside of my own body, watching this horrific scene unfold for the first time.

Madd scrambles to pull his cell phone out of his pocket, scrolling through his contacts with shaking hands before mashing the button to place a call, holding it up to his ear.

“Dad? I need help!” he rushes out. “Sloane got hurt, she fell off the old ski

lift..." He trails off, choking on another sob as muffled shouting sounds from the other end of the line. "I don't know, just hurry..."

He ends the call and shoves the phone back in his pocket. Then he gathers me in his arms again, begging for me to wake as he attempts to stand. His injured leg gives out and he slumps to his knees, tears and snot streaming down his face. Holding me tighter to his chest, he tries again.

And again.

He screams out in frustration, then changes tact. Sitting in the snow with me in his lap, he pushes off with his good leg, grunting under the effort it takes to slowly drag us backwards. He's bound and determined to get me back to the lodge by any means necessary, but at this rate, I'll bleed out before he can.

We don't make it far before a sleek tan wolf comes into view, sprinting right for us. Snow sprays out from beneath its paws as it slides to a stop, then the air shimmers around the animal with its shift, Madd's mom rising up in its place.

"What happened?!" Luna Fallon demands as Madd slips his jacket off and tosses it toward her.

"Fell from the lift... hit her head..." he pants, so winded from his effort to drag us through the snow that he's unable to string together more than a few words at a time.

His mother shrugs on the jacket, zipping it up and crouching down in front of us to assess my injuries as another wolf suddenly leaps out from the treeline. My dad barrels toward us, barely slowing before he's shifting to his human form and staggering to find his balance on two legs. "What did you do?!" he demands, green eyes wild as he lunges for Madd and wrenches my limp body from his arms.

"It was an accident," Fallon cuts in. She wraps an arm around Madd, helping him to stand. "They fell off the lift. We need to get them to a doctor..."

Madd reaches out for me, his fingertips barely grazing my arm before my dad twists around to yank me away. "Don't touch her!" he snarls, clutching me tighter as he stumbles back.

"Hey!" Fallon snaps, narrowing her eyes on my dad as she tugs Madd into her side protectively. "You'd better watch how you talk to my kid, Masters."

"That kid of yours is a menace," he growls back. "This is the last straw! You keep him away from my daughter, or so help me, I'll..."

"You'll what?" Fallon challenges, edging in front of Madd and taking a

threatening step toward my dad. “I’d choose my next words very carefully, if I were you.”

The roar of a motor cuts through the thick tension hanging between them, and not a moment too soon. Their heads snap in the direction of the noise, an ATV racing toward us with Madd’s dad behind the wheel and my mom riding beside him. Snow spits out from the tire treads as it arcs in front of us and slides to a stop, the engine still idling with a purr.

“Get in!” Alpha Gray orders, and my dad wastes no time in circling behind the ATV and hauling himself up onto the rack with my unconscious body cradled in his arms.

There isn’t room for all four of us on the platform attached to the back of ATV, though. There’s barely even room for my father.

“Just go,” Madd grits out, wincing as he tries to put weight on his injured leg and hobble closer.

Gray’s eyes flicker down, taking stock of his son’s condition. “Madd...”

“Please, Dad,” he urges. “She needs help...” his voice breaks as it trails off and Fallon slips her arm around her son’s shoulders in support, nodding to her mate.

He nods back, then hits the gas, the engine roaring as he whips the ATV around and speeds away.

I wake up drenched in sweat, the sound of Madd’s broken cry as he watched me being driven away echoing in my mind.

I’ve heard various accounts of what happened after I fell that day, but actually seeing it play out like a movie before my eyes is a whole different experience; one that I won’t soon recover from. The sheets are tangled around my ankles from the way I’ve been thrashing, my face and pillow wet with tears.

This time, I don’t second guess whether it was just a dream. What I just saw was far too vivid. And unlike the last time I dreamed of the accident, it wasn’t rooted in a memory- not my own, at least. Because though I was there, I wasn’t conscious. I have no firsthand recollection of what happened between the time I fell and when I woke up days later.

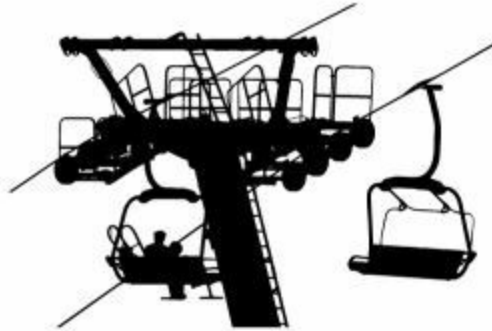
But I’ve just seen it all play out in shocking detail, and I can’t hold back the torrent of emotions it triggers. I shudder a sob, curling up on my side in the fetal position and burying my face in my pillow.

It’d be easier if it was just a dream.

The heartbreaking reality is harder to face, even all these years later. Seeing

Madd again as that terrified teenage boy...

My heart breaks for my first love all over again as I cry myself back to sleep, praying no more visions come.



My chest is painfully tight as I approach the front door of the Riverton packhouse, knowing what I have to do but dreading crossing the threshold. I haven't been back here since moving to the dorms. My father and I haven't spoken since our screaming match the day before that, and I'm still feeling guilty about what I said to him, even more after my nocturnal vision of the accident.

I've never seen the mighty Brock Masters so desperate and scared, and now that I have, I'm developing a new sense of understanding for his actions in the wake of the accident. Sending me away was extreme, but after seeing him and Fallon at each other's throats and considering what another incident like that could've done to our parents' relationship and the entire six-pack alliance, maybe it really was the only way. Me and Madd were magnets to trouble back then, and the accident was just the latest in a long string of teenage misbehavior.

The week before, my dad caught Madd sneaking into my bedroom through my window. And the week before that, we got busted throwing a party at the old lodge- just a few nights after the two of us were caught breaking curfew, stealing away for a midnight run. We were always pushing the boundaries, seeing what we could get away with and never considering the consequences. Until the day we fell from that lift, and everything came crashing down around us.

I take a deep breath as I open the front door, forcing myself to step inside the packhouse before I lose my nerve. And of course, the first person I see upon entering is my dad. He's standing over the stove in the kitchen with a spatula in hand, cooking breakfast like he did most days while I was growing up. The

smell of his pancakes has my mouth watering and my stomach growling instantly.

He throws a glance over his shoulder at the sound of the door opening and closing, his brows lifting in surprise when he sees it's me. "Back just in time for pancakes," he remarks, turning his gaze back to the stove as he slides the spatula underneath one to flip it.

I shake my head as I advance forward, folding my arms tightly across my chest. "I'm not back. I'm just here to talk to Mom."

He turns around to face me, jaw ticking. "Sloane..."

"Not now, Dad," I sigh, my heart aching for the fiercely protective parent who scooped me up when I was seventeen and the distance that has grown between us since. "I just... I need to talk to mom."

He nods, turning back to the stove- but not before I see the flicker of defeat in his eyes. "She's out on the patio," he grumbles.

"Thank you."

I head for the living room, passing through it to get to the sliding glass door at the rear of the packhouse that leads out to the patio, heart aching with every step. I know I need to patch things up with my dad. I'm not quite ready for that conversation yet, though, and right now, there's something much more pressing I have to do. My head's all twisted up from these visions I've been having, and I need to talk to my mom and figure out what the hell is going on with them.

I open the slider door, stepping outside to find Mom perched on the far side of the wicker outdoor sectional with her knees tucked into her chest and a steaming cup of tea clasped in her hands. She's gazing out toward the forest, seemingly lost in thought, but at the sound of the door she glances my way, eyes lighting up when she sees me.

"Hey sweetheart," she coos as I slide the door closed behind me.

"What, no tea waiting for me this time?" I tease, striding across the patio in her direction.

She pats the cushion beside her in invitation. "You hate tea."

"Fair enough," I sigh, sinking down on the sofa beside her. I pull my legs up onto the cushion, snuggling into Mom's side and leaning my head against her shoulder.

She wraps an arm around me, pressing her cheek to the top of my head and stroking her fingers through my hair. And like always, she knows what I need, content to just sit with me until I'm ready to talk.

“I had another dream,” I finally whisper, staring out at trees as the breeze ruffles their leaves.

“Tell me about it,” she replies gently.

I suck in a deep breath through my nose, struggling to find where to begin. Then I tell her about both dreams I’ve had of the accident, describing the vivid detail of each that made them feel like something other than a dream. Something *more*.

She listens quietly, and when I’m finished, we both sit up straighter, turning to sit sideways so we can look at one another.

“Is that how your visions started too?” I ask hesitantly. “Dreams?”

Mom sips her tea, giving a little shake of her head. “No, but not every seer is alike. The gift can manifest in different ways. Maybe that’s just how your visions will come to you.”

“So you think it was a vision?”

She gives me a funny look, pursing her lips and twisting around to set her cup down on the side table. “Did I ever tell you why I thought you would inherit my gift?” she asks casually, turning back toward me. Then she reaches out to take both of my hands in hers, staring into my eyes. “Shortly after you were born, I had a vision. It was of you and me, sitting at the kitchen island in the middle of the night while you told me about a dream.”

I yank my hands back in shock, my jaw dropping. “What?! Why didn’t you tell me that night?”

“Visions are fickle,” she shrugs. “They never give me all the pieces of the puzzle, so I couldn’t be sure what it meant. I just had a feeling. And I knew if your dream was truly a vision, you’d be back, and here you are.”

I shake my head in disbelief as her words settle over me. *She knew*. Somehow it feels like a betrayal, but my mom has always kept her visions close to her chest, for fear of tipping the scales of fate.

Hanging my head, I stare down at the cushion of the outdoor sectional, my eyes glazing over. “I wish you would’ve told me,” I mutter.

Mom reaches out for me again, cupping my cheek and lifting my head until my eyes meet hers. “You had to come to it on your own. Once you open your mind to accepting the visions, they’ll come more freely. You can start to learn their patterns, even control them sometimes.”

Her hand falls away as I shake my head adamantly. “I don’t want them,” I mumble. “I thought I did. I thought I wanted to be like you, but it’s too much, Mom. I can’t...” I trail off with a sniffle, fighting back the tears that threaten

to spill at the rush of emotions.

“You *can*,” she states matter-of-factly, grasping my hands again. “Fate wouldn’t give this gift to someone who can’t handle it. And I’m here for you, sweetheart. Every step of the way. It can be difficult at first, but in time, you’ll see why this is a *gift*, not a curse. And you’ll learn to use it, to wield your visions as a guide to better understand your world and make a difference in it.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat, biting down on the inside of my cheek.

“You know, my own abilities manifested when I was a child, but only as an intuitive. The visions didn’t come until after I met your dad,” she continues, a knowing gleam in her eye. “The more time I spent with him, the stronger they got. So the fact that you’re receiving visions now could mean your mate’s nearby.” She shrugs, twisting around to reach for her mug of tea again. “Food for thought.”

“You said you didn’t know whether Madd was my mate,” I point out, unable to hide the bitterness dripping from my tone.

If she knew, why would she have kept us apart all these years? Just to torture us both?

“I don’t,” she admits, sipping her tea. “Honestly, hon. It could be anyone, only fate knows. But I’ve learned that things are rarely coincidental. And if you pay attention to your visions, of when they happen and their frequency, sometimes you can learn more from them than the visions themselves.”

I flop back against the cushions with a huff, folding my arms and staring out at the trees again as I contemplate my mother’s cryptic advice.

“Well now that the cat’s out of the bag, have you had any other visions about me that you wanna share?” I grumble.

Mom’s quiet for a long moment, and I swing my gaze back to her in question, noting the strange way she’s looking at me and the deep crease forming between her brows.

“What is it?” I ask.

Her lips part like there’s something on the tip of her tongue that she wants to say, but then she snaps her mouth closed again, shaking her head. “Nothing. I trust fate, and you should, too. Everything happens as it’s meant to.” She reaches out for my hand, giving it a squeeze. “I love you, Sloane.”

“Love you too,” I murmur, squeezing her hand back.

She tips her head toward the house, a faint smile coming to her lips. “Can I talk you into staying for breakfast?”

I heave a sigh, pushing up from the sectional. “Not today. I’ve gotta get over to the IT hub to connect with Lo about an assignment she has for me.”

I can tell she’s disappointed, but she nods in affirmation, accepting my decision. “I’m glad you’re reconnecting with your old friends and that you’ve found a place with the squad,” she says thoughtfully. “But don’t forget that you have a place here, too. You can always come home.”

My heart squeezes painfully, that lump forming in my throat again. “I know,” I rasp, edging toward the door. I pause before opening it, looking back at her once more. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime,” she replies breezily, lifting her mug of tea to her lips again.

I make eye contact with my father through the sliding glass door, and rather than going back in there, I retreat a step, contemplating a new escape plan to avoid confronting him. Then I turn around, tossing a sheepish wave to my mom as I slink away around the packhouse, taking the long way back to my car.



“Since when are those two friends?” I grumble, glaring over at Sloane and Roxy sitting together at a table across the dining hall at the complex, chumming it up like they’re old pals.

“Beats me,” Tristan shrugs, pushing pasta around his plate with his fork. “My sister barely talks to me these days.”

Roxy says something and the two of them start laughing, Sloane throwing her head back and clutching a hand to her chest like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

I frown. “What do they even have in common to talk about?”

Tris shoots me a side-eyed glance. “Besides you?” He chuckles softly, shaking his head. “I dunno, maybe they both like Taylor Swift music or something.”

I wrinkle my nose, grimacing. “Sloane doesn’t listen to Taylor Swift.”

“You sure about that?”

I tear my gaze from the girls to turn my head toward Tristan, his brow arched in question.

“No,” I admit. “I mean, she didn’t used to. People don’t change *that* much.”

“Eh, you’d be surprised,” he mutters, stabbing his fork into a noodle and bringing it up to his mouth.

I narrow my eyes on Tristan suspiciously. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He takes entirely too long to chew one fucking noodle, swallowing it down

and licking the sauce from his lips before answering me. “Nothing, man. I’m just saying, people change. You two used to be all about each other, but you both moved on. You had Kristen, then Roxy, Sloane had Garrett...”

I clench my teeth so hard that it’s a miracle I don’t crack a molar.

Who the fuck is Garrett?

I drop my fork to my plate where it lands with a noisy clatter, shoving up from my seat at the table.

“Whoa, dude, where you goin’?” Tristan asks as I snatch up my plate.

“Need a workout,” I grumble.

I turn away from the table, making a beeline for the wash bin where we deposit dirty dishes.

“Well are we still on for tonight?” Tris calls after me.

I don’t respond. I just toss my plate in the bin and storm out of the dining hall, my wolf rattling around in my chest and my skin prickling with the need to shift.

I could head down to the gym, but it’s still daylight, and letting my wolf out will burn off a whole lot more aggression than lifting weights. With that in mind, I head for the exit doors to leave the complex, passing Avery as she’s on her way in.

“Hey, Madd, what’s going on?” she asks, but I just shake my head.

“Not now.”

“Okay...” she replies cautiously, spinning around and jogging after me to catch up as I tear across the practice field. “Where are you going?”

“Out for a run.”

“Didn’t you already run this morning?”

“Need another one.”

“Madd, what’s-” she reaches out for me and I shrug her hand away, abruptly stopping and spinning around to face her.

Avery almost runs right into my chest, her brown eyes rounded in surprise as she grinds to a halt just in time.

“Did you know Sloane had some dude back in Denver?” I growl.

My sister’s mouth pops open in surprise. She shakes her head adamantly, holding up her hands in surrender. “I swear I didn’t know anything about it. You know Sloane and I never talk about her love life. It’s been our rule since she started dating you, so that I’d never be put in the middle.”

I grunt in annoyance, turning back around and stomping through the gate of the squad complex into the forest beyond its walls. Avery continues to follow

me, her footsteps featherlight against the dirt in comparison to mine.

“Madd, come *on*, you can’t seriously be pissed about this? You were still dating Roxy when she came back here...”

I whip around again, and this time, Avery does run into me, a puff of air escaping her lips as she meets the hard planes of my chest.

“I never *dated* her,” I clarify as she stumbles back with a wince. “We didn’t go on any actual dates or do lovey-dovey shit. We just fucked.”

“So that’s better somehow?” Avery scoffs.

“Well yeah.”

She throws up her hands. “How?!”

“Because no feelings were involved, Aves! I never gave my heart away to someone else after her. She was the only one...” I trail off, shaking my head, hating that I just admitted that out loud. “Whatever,” I grumble. “Doesn’t matter anyways.”

Avery reaches out for me, setting her hand on my arm. “Maybe it does...”

I flick her hand away. “No, it *doesn’t*. You don’t get it. I thought Sloane was it for me, and then she just left and fucking ghosted me. Now she’s back, playing all her little mind games to try to pull me back into her web, and for what? So she can just up and leave again, go back to some dude in Denver?”

I shake my head, scrubbing a hand over my face. “She already said she didn’t come back for me. I should’ve listened.”

Avery arches a brow. “She actually said that?”

I nod.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I mumble bitterly.

Turning away again, I stride forward a few paces before dipping off the path, reaching behind my back to grab onto my t-shirt and shucking it off overhead. I toss it down on the large trunk of a fallen tree and start toeing off my shoes when Avery’s shirt lands on the trunk beside my own.

“What are you doing?” I snarl, whipping my head around to face her.

“Coming with you,” she replies nonchalantly.

“I want to be alone.”

Avery shrugs a shoulder. “Then let’s be alone together.”

I narrow my eyes on her, searching her face. “Why?”

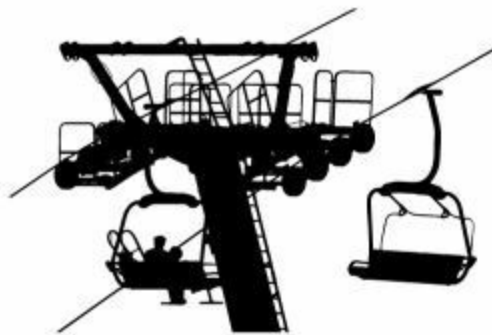
Her expression softens as she takes a step toward me, setting her hand on my arm again and staring into my eyes. “Because I’m your sister, and I know when you need me.”

I grunt, giving her a curt nod.

It's as good of an admission as she'll get from me, because damnit, she's right. Avery's always fucking right these days.

The two of us undress in silence, leaving our clothes piled neatly on the overturned tree and averting our eyes from one another's naked forms. Nudity is accepted in shifter culture, but it's not like I want to see my sister's bits if I can help it. Then we both call our wolves forward, bones popping and rearranging and the air shimmering around us as we take on our animal forms- a matching pair of silver wolves.

My own wolf is larger, but the similarities between us are still pretty damn apparent as we shake out our fur and bound away from the complex, heading deeper into the forest. With the earth under my paws and my wolf taking the lead, I can already feel the tension slipping from my muscles. Too bad I know it's only a temporary fix.



The Stillwater Tap is packed for ladies' night. It's a weekly event that always draws a huge crowd, and ironically, even though it's dubbed as *ladies'* night, it's always a total sausage fest. Females drink for free, so dudes flock to the place to sniff around the she-wolves, hoping the complimentary alcohol will increase their chances for an easy hookup.

My friends and I claim a huge table near the bar, the top of it already crowded with empty beer bottles and shot glasses. I don't typically drink this much, but tonight, I'm aiming to get drunk enough to forget for a few hours.

Too bad the person I'm trying to forget is seated across the table from me.

I should've known Sloane would tag along with Avery and Lo. She keeps throwing me looks, but I've been dodging every one of them, eyes flickering away the moment hers meet mine. The run with Avery this afternoon helped me clear my head, but I'm still all fucked up when it comes to my ex, especially after learning that she was involved with someone else.

It was easy to ignore the idea of her being with anyone else when I didn't have a name to put to it.

Fucking *Garrett*. What kind of a name is that, anyways?

I'll bet he has a small dick.

I throw back another shot of cinnamon whiskey, the liquor burning my throat the whole way down. I don't know why Ares is obsessed with drinking this stuff, but I've gotta admit, after the number of shots I've had, it's not half bad. I'll probably be breathing fire tomorrow, but that's a problem for sober Madd.

"Another round?" I ask, slamming my empty shot glass back onto the table.

"Fuck yeah!" Ares whoops. "Fun Madd is out tonight!"

I furrow my brow, frowning. "I'm always fun."

Iver laughs and claps me on the shoulder. "Yeah, that look on your face just screams fun, bro."

Everyone else laughs at my expense as I push up from the table, a little wobbly on my feet as the liquor seems to hit me all at once.

Shifters metabolize alcohol quickly, so it takes us a lot to get drunk... and judging by my poor coordination right now, I've probably had enough to drown a sailor. Still, I head for the bar, signaling to the server for another round of shots for me and my friends.

"So what'd I do to earn the cold shoulder this time?"

I whip my head around to see Sloane leaning an elbow on the bar top beside me, batting those long lashes of hers and twirling a dark curl around her finger.

I didn't even hear or smell her approach me.

Yep, definitely drunk.

I turn away, eyes focusing on the bartender as he starts pouring the shots I ordered.

"Really?" Sloane scoffs. "Now you're giving me the silent treatment? What are you, eight years old?"

"If you want someone to talk to, why don't you go call your boyfriend?" I mutter, eyes glazing over as I stare ahead.

"Hmm, don't have one of those. Try again."

Slowly, I turn my head to face her, immediately regretting it.

Because she's so damn *beautiful*. As crazy as she makes me, I can't deny that Sloane Masters is the total package. She's cute as hell, with her tiny stature and her wild curly hair. The dress she's wearing clings to her curves, and I'm

definitely *not* picturing what her naked body looks like underneath it as my eyes drop down her form, climbing back up slowly. Her plump lips are shiny from some kind of gloss she's wearing that I'm suddenly tempted to lick off, and let's not forget those adorable dimples in her cheeks. Those damn *dimples*. Maybe I should try to make her smile so I can see them.

Fuck I'm drunk.

I shake my head in an effort to dispel my thoughts, turning back toward the bar.

"Since when do you like Taylor Swift?" I mutter, thinking aloud.

"Huh?"

I swing my gaze to her again, frowning when I see her with her brow furrowed in confusion, head tilted in question. "Taylor Swift."

Sloane snorts a laugh, shaking her head. "I don't know where you're getting your information, but I don't listen to Taylor Swift."

The bartender returns with his hands full of shots, setting them down in front of me. "On your tab, Alpha?"

I nod, watching him line them up.

How the fuck am I supposed to carry these?

As if she's reading my mind, Sloane reaches out to grab a few, but I swat her hand away with a scowl.

"What's your deal?" she asks dubiously, folding her arms over her chest.

Too bad it just pushes her boobs up higher and makes them look awesome.

When I don't answer, she just rolls her eyes, reaching back in. "C'mon, let me help."

"I don't need any help," I grumble, nudging her away and stretching my large hands over the shot glasses as I try and fail to grasp all of them. Changing tact, I try to scoop them all together instead, cupping my hands around the cluster of glasses and sliding them toward me.

"Madd!" she giggles, reaching in to catch one before it goes tumbling off the edge of the bar.

"I said I didn't need your help!" I bark out- much louder than I intend to. I basically yell it in her face.

And *boy* does it piss her off. I see the playfulness melt from her expression, anger sparking in her eyes as her wolf pushes to the surface in defense, golden flecks swirling in her green irises.

"Fucking *cool it*, psycho," she snaps, pointing a finger at me and pressing it into the center of my chest. "You're not the only one who gets to be pissed

off.”

“What the hell do you have to be pissed about?” I growl.

She just shakes her head.

“No, tell me!” I press, getting up in her space. “Why the fuck are *you* pissed off, Sloane?”

She throws up her hands in exasperation. “You didn’t catch me!”

“What?” I flinch back, brows drawing together in confusion.

She gives another shake of her head, folding her arms again and staring down at the floor, kicking the toe of her shoe against it. “You used to say that if I ran from you, you’d always catch me,” she murmurs. Then she looks up at me, pain and regret shining in those sage green eyes as they lock with mine.

“You didn’t.”

We just stare at each other for a long moment, my heart tripping over its valves.

I didn’t catch her.

How the hell was I supposed to catch her when she ran away and cut me off completely?

“Fuck this,” I mutter, pushing off from the bar and heading for the exit, trying my best not to stumble over my own feet on my way out. As I shove through the crowd, I hear my friends calling after me, but I don’t turn around.



It's late when Avery drops me off at the squad complex. We stayed until bar close, tossing back shots and dancing like fools, and it was exactly what I needed in the wake of facing Madd's wrath for what feels like the millionth time. I mean seriously, how much anger can one person carry around with them? It must get heavy.

I giggle at the thought of Madd carrying a bunch of sandbags labeled 'anger', frowning and grumbling like he always does these days. Okay, I might be a little intoxicated. Or a lot. But that doesn't really matter because I'm about to sleep it off and hopefully the amount of alcohol in my system will put me so far under that my dreams won't come knocking.

The visions, I mean. If I had a regular ol' dream about something ridiculous like talking dogs or fluffy unicorns I'd be cool with it.

I giggle to myself again, tripping over my feet and stumbling a step as I pass through the gate of the squad complex onto the practice field.

Okay, I should probably get it together. Look all authoritative and shit just in case I run into any squad fighters since I'm angling to be a leader. Or already am? It's all a bit of a grey area right now.

I cross the field to the main doors of the complex, tugging on the handle to open one and frowning when I find that it's locked. Then, remembering the little fob Lo gave me to attach to my keys, I wave my wristlet in front of the sensor and voila- the lock disengages.

Good thing I remembered that, or I would've been sleeping on the roof tonight.

Though come to think of it, I don't hate that idea. I'll bet the view of the stars is killer at this time of night.

I head inside, the eerie silence of the darkened hallways making the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The complex is always bright and lively and bustling with people, so seeing it this quiet and still is a little bit creepy. Though the alcohol has dulled my senses, a chill travels up my spine as I speedwalk through the dim, empty hallways to the dorms, fumbling in my clutch for my keys along the way so I can make a quick entrance.

I unlock my door as fast as possible, slipping inside my dorm room, closing it behind me, and re-locking it. I breathe a sigh of relief once I'm safely inside my room, then immediately laugh at myself for being so ridiculous. Of all places, the squad complex is definitely safe.

I need to stop freaking myself out.

I step away from the door, toeing my shoes off on my way across the room to my bed as another shiver tracks up my spine, my inner wolf stirring in warning. I barely have time to register it before a strong pair of arms close around me, yanking me back into a hard chest as a hand covers my mouth to muffle my scream.

The awareness that someone's in here with me has my heart racing instantly, my fight or flight instincts kicking in as my wolf surges to the surface. I writhe and kick and scream into the hand covering my mouth as my attacker grips me tighter, leaning his face down beside mine.

"Caught you," Madd growls in my ear.

I freeze, both simultaneously relieved and terrified that it's him.

Slowly, he loosens his arm from around my waist, lifting his hand from my mouth. As soon as he gives me enough slack, I spin around, slapping my palms against his chest and shoving him back.

"What the hell, Madd?!" I whisper-shout, scowling. "How did you get in here?"

I should've scented him right away when I walked in, but thanks to the booze dulling my senses, I'm not at the top of my game.

The corner of his mouth tips up in a smirk. "Did you really think I didn't still have a key?"

I stare at him, drawing shallow breaths as my frantic heart rate starts to slow to a normal cadence.

The shadows cling to the sharp lines of his features, making him look even more hauntingly beautiful than usual. It's not fair that someone that good looking can also be so closed-off and cruel. Then again, the devil himself was once an angel.

"What do you want?" I breathe, the backs of my calves meeting the edge of my bed as I retreat a step.

He regains the distance I put between us with one of his own toward me as I resist the urge to squirm beneath the intensity of his stare.

"Remember what I said before, about how I never know whether I want to fight with you or fuck you?" he murmurs.

My breath catches as he steps even closer, our chests brushing and his hand darting up to wrap around my throat. He flexes his grip- firm and possessive, yet not overly restrictive- as he angles his head down, eyes burning into my own. "I'm getting real tired of fighting, Duchess."

Then his lips descend on mine. They barely brush before I'm shoving him back with a start, reeling from this game of hot and cold he's been playing with me.

Madd stumbles back, unsteady on his feet. His eyes meet mine with the same degree of shocked surprise, like he has no idea what he's doing, either. But as I stare at him through the darkness, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his ragged breathing, it hits me how much I want this. I *need* it.

As if he sees it on my face, he moves closer again, devious intent written all over his own. He gets right up in my space, grabbing me and yanking me into him roughly, and this time, I don't push him away.

He lunges down to capture my lips and I shove up on my toes to meet him halfway, needing his kiss in this moment more than I need air in my lungs. I need it to ground me, to remind me of home and help me remember the people we used to be, the carefree teenagers who had the world at their feet and hearts that had never been broken. I crush my lips to his, tasting cinnamon whiskey and regret, yet I willingly drink in his poison without a thought to my own survival.

I claw at his t-shirt to bring him even closer until we're tumbling down onto the bed, Madd's hard body landing clumsily on top of mine. Despite the awkward landing, he doesn't miss a beat, supporting his weight with his elbows on either side of my head as he continues to kiss me breathless.

We've both had too much to drink. In the sober light of day, this would probably seem like a bad idea. But right here, right now, I just want my Madd

back. Even if it's only for a night.

I slide my hands up beneath the hem of his shirt, the ladder of his hard ab muscles rippling beneath my palms. Madd's body is truly a work of art- taut and toned, every sharp line well-defined. Dominant alpha energy radiates from his pores until it almost feels like it's vibrating off him and right into me, feeding the inferno raging inside my chest and between my thighs.

I tug at his shirt in frustration until he finally breaks our kiss long enough to yank it off over his head, tossing it away and slamming his lips over mine again. I run my hands all over his naked chest and arms as our tongues tangle, his own hands all over me. He pulls the front of my dress down and my bare breasts spill out, nipples pebbling up into sharp points as soon as they hit the air. His lips leave mine to suck one of them into his mouth, licking and teasing it until I'm panting, arching into him for more.

The wonderful, maddening thing about his man is that he knows exactly what drives me wild.

He licks a path between my breasts all the way up the column of my throat, his lips returning to mine with even more feverish urgency than before, like he's hell bent on devouring me. He drags the hem of my dress up my hips at the same time I fumble for the button of his jeans.

We're both a little clumsy and uncoordinated thanks to the liquor, but there's no denying that for the first time in a long time, Madd and I are finally on the same page. We claw at one another's clothes frantically, frustrated they aren't coming off fast enough until we both take matters into our own hands, Madd rolling away from me and kicking his shoes and pants off while I shimmy out of my dress, panting in anticipation as he crawls over me again and captures my mouth in another scorching hot kiss.

My legs part for him in invitation and he settles himself between my thighs, hiking one my legs up between us as I feel the smooth head of his cock nudge my entrance. I rock my hips up in an effort to get him inside me faster, the energy between us crackling like a livewire.

I gasp into his mouth as he eases in, slowly at first, then snapping his hips forward to bury himself to the hilt. His chest vibrates with something between a growl and a groan when he bottoms out, my inner walls fluttering around him as they stretch to accommodate his girth. Because I forgot how big that monster between his legs was- but now that it's buried between my own, I'm remembering all too well.

I sink my fingernails into the backs of his shoulders, moaning softly as the

feeling of fullness overwhelms me. Madd pulls out halfway, then surges back in, thrusting hard and deep as he sets a punishing pace that has my moans turning into screams, my back arching and toes curling.

It's as good as it always was, yet better than it's ever been. It's like our bodies remember exactly how to move with one another's while simultaneously rediscovering what makes each other tick. The slight curve of his dick hits that sensitive spot inside me that drives me fucking *crazy*, stars bursting behind my eyes with every punch of his hips.

"*Fuck*, I missed this pussy," Madd growls against my lips, licking a path down my jaw and scraping his teeth across my neck. His thrusts become savage, like he's trying to imprint himself inside me. *As if I could ever forget*. Madd was my first, and though he doesn't know it, he's also my only. I wasn't saving myself for him or anything, but it's like I somehow knew I'd end up right back here with him someday, that we'd come crashing back together so hard that we'd never be able to escape each other again.

His hands cover my breasts, squeezing and pinching my nipples until I'm falling apart beneath him spectacularly, crying out as my climax rockets through me. My back arches, thighs trembling and inner walls gripping his cock as he continues to pound in and out, fucking me through my orgasm. It's pure bliss, so intense that tears leak from the corners of my eyes, my body going slack against the mattress.

As I start to come back down, Madd suddenly scoops his arms around my back, lifting me from the bed effortlessly and settling me in his lap, lowering me back down on his cock. I grip onto his broad shoulders for leverage, my head falling back and long hair brushing the base of my spine as I start riding him hard, meeting every one of his sharp thrusts from below. Our skin is slick with sweat, our pants and moans blending into a heady soundtrack of our mutual pleasure.

I lose track of where my own body ends and his begins, the two of us pressed together so tightly that there isn't even a whisper of space left between us. I'm clinging to him with my arms wrapped around his neck, his own encircling my waist. My breasts slide up and down against the planes of his chest, the friction against my nipples sending sparks of heat straight to my core. One of his hands cruises up my spine to sink into my hair at the base of my skull, fisting it and yanking my head back. Then he licks his way up my neck, sucking my sensitive skin until the coil in my belly is wound so tightly that it's ready to snap again.

“Fuck, I’m close,” Madd pants, grinding his hips up into me. “You gonna come with me, Dutch?”

“Yes!” I gasp, my thigh muscles burning as I ride him harder. “Fuck yes, Duke, *fuck fuck fuck...*” my words trail off into an unintelligible moan as I crest another orgasm, falling over the edge into oblivion. Madd’s answering groan signals that he’s following me right over it, and with a final hard snap of his hips, he shudders his release, filling me with warmth as it floods inside me.

We both struggle to catch our breath, Madd falling back onto the bed with a grunt and taking me with him. I land on his chest, then roll off halfway, his arm tucking around me and securing me in place, preventing me from moving any further.

Even though I know what we just did was probably a mistake, I can’t find it in myself to regret it. Not when I’m still riding the high of multiple orgasms, boneless and sated and content.

Madd’s chest rises and falls with his breathing, the tattoos on his skin shifting with its movement. He has too many on his body to count. I wonder when he got his first ink; what drove him to cover his skin with so much of it. He used to talk about tattoos a lot when we were teens, planning what he’d get and where he’d put it on his body, but his skin was still clean when I left town.

Though the questions are on the tip of my tongue, I don’t ask them. I don’t want to spoil this fragile moment of peace between us.

Madd shifts his head sideways, glancing down at me, and I tilt my chin up to meet his gaze. Then he reaches around me, gently trailing his fingertips over the scar that runs from my forehead to my temple.

I flinch, grabbing his wrist to move his hand away, but he doesn’t let me. He just continues tracing the jagged line with his fingers, his eyes tracking their path.

I try not to be vain about the scar, but I know it’s ugly. I expect to see that reflected in his eyes when they snap to meet mine again, but I’m surprised when I’m instead met with a look that I haven’t seen from Madd in years. For a second, he’s looking at me so reverently that my heart skips a beat.

Then his hand slides down to my arm and he tucks me into his chest so I can’t see his face anymore, resting his chin against the top of my head. Neither of us say anything as we lay there together, skin on skin, like this is how it’s always been.

Sleep starts to creep in, but just as it’s about to take me under, Madd speaks.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers to me in the dark, his voice strained. “I’m sorry I let you fall.”



I fucked up.

If I was trying to stick to my guns about keeping my distance from Sloane, then the last thing I should've done was sleep with her.

In both senses of the word. We fucked, then I passed out in her bed, leaving me to wake up beside her this morning with an aching sense of familiarity I wasn't ready to face.

So I crept out of bed and snuck out, heading to the forest for my morning run to clear my head and try to figure out where the hell to go from here. Because ordinarily, a drunken hookup would be meaningless, but with the history between Sloane and me, nothing's without consequence.

The line between love and hate has been getting razor thin since her return, and last night, I'm pretty sure it snapped. I've been so damn mad at her for so long, but now I'm just... *tired*. I'm tired of fighting with her. Tired of pushing her away because I can't let go of the anger and resentment I've been carrying around for the past eight years. Tired of trying to ignore this inevitable pull that has always existed between us, now stronger than ever.

By the time I finish my run and shift to head back to the packhouse, my thoughts feel even more twisted up than when I started, a wicked hangover beginning to set in. That's what I get for throwing back whiskey shots like it was my fucking job last night. I walk in the front door to find Avery sitting at the kitchen island eating breakfast, shooting me a suspicious look when she

sees me enter wearing last night's clothes.

"Where have you been?" she asks conspiratorially, cocking a brow.

There's no point in lying to her; not when I'm still wearing Sloane's scent like it's cologne. "Where do you think?"

Her lips spread into a hopeful smile as she sets down her piece of toast, brushing the crumbs from her hands. "Did you two finally sort your shit out?"

"We didn't do much talking," I mumble.

She wrinkles her nose, grimacing. "Gross."

I shrug a shoulder. "Hey, you asked." Stepping in closer, I reach over my sister, plucking the second piece of toast from her plate.

"Hey!" Avery protests, but I'm already shoving it in my mouth as I stride away. *Finders keepers.*

She frowns, turning back to her breakfast and hovering over her plate protectively in case I go in for seconds.

"Are you on the schedule for training today?" I call back to her as I head toward the stairs. As pleasant as Sloane's scent is, it's not strong enough to cover up the fact that I also reek like a damn distillery. I'm desperately in need of a shower.

"Nope, it's the boys' day," my twin replies around a bite of food. "I've got tomorrow." She swallows, then swivels around to cast a dubious look in my direction. "Shouldn't you know these things? You're the one who came up with the rotation."

"Probably," I mutter. "Been a little preoccupied."

"So are you two back together, then?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

Avery throws her head back on a sigh. "Jesus, Madd, just *talk* to her! Get everything out in the open or there's no way you two can move forward."

I pause at the bottom of the stairs, gripping the railing and glancing back at Aves with a frown. "I'm not so good at the talking stuff," I admit.

"Tough shit. You have to do it."

"I know." I scrub a hand over my face, turning back toward the stairs and starting up them before she can continue her lecture. It's nothing I haven't heard before or considered in the context of Sloane's sudden reappearance, and I don't need to be reminded yet again how messy things have gotten between the two of us. Not when my thoughts are already stuck in a constant loop of doubt and confusion after waking up beside her this morning.

I know Sloane didn't choose to leave town when we were seventeen, but she sure as hell could've fought harder to stay. She could've fought for *us*. Instead, she just gave up, folding to her dad's demands because his approval was obviously more important to her than what we had. That girl was my entire fucking world and she just disappeared like a ghost, throwing me away like I never even mattered to her.

When she was gone, it was easy to convince myself it was all a lie. That I was just young and dumb and fell for a girl who never really cared in the first place. But now that she's back, I keep seeing my pain and regret reflected in her own eyes every time I look at her, so I know it couldn't have all been bullshit. She cared. Still does. So why the hell did she cut me off when she left?

I have to know *why*. I fucking deserve to know.

So after I shower, change, and flop down on my bed to sleep off my hangover, I pick up my phone and send a text to a number I haven't messaged in years. I tell Sloane to meet me at our spot on the roof of the complex after dinner, angling to finally hash things out and get some long overdue answers.

But she doesn't reply.

And that evening, she doesn't show.



“Alright, this is our first time running this drill, so pay attention,” I snap, ready to take someone's head off if they so much as step a toe out of line today.

The squad fighters must sense that I'm in no mood for nonsense because they immediately quiet down, giving me their full attention.

“This is a single shooter course, but it'll only take each of you a few minutes to get through it,” I say, throwing a thumb toward the forest at my back.

“You'll be timed. There are a total of fifteen targets set up out here, and

they're the same white paper targets you've been practicing with thus far. You won't know where they're placed until you get out there and come across them."

I sweep a stern gaze over the gathered crowd, continuing. "The goal of this exercise is to be able to identify the target and line up your shot as quickly as possible. If you take too long to line up your shot, you won't get a chance at many of the targets before we call time, so keep moving. This is just practice, but be sure to keep track of how you do and where you can improve, because down the road we'll be using this drill as a test to determine your capabilities. Got it?"

"Yes, Alpha," the squad fighters murmur in unison, nodding their heads. Some of them appear eager to begin. Others fidget uncomfortably, clearly nervous about how they'll perform. I'm just angling to make a quick exit after overseeing the beginning of the drill because Sloane turned up to participate- and she's the last person I want to see after she left me sitting alone on the roof for hours last night like a fucking moron.

Having gone over the basics, I step aside to allow Avery, Lo, and Ares to take over. While they start lining people up, I stride a few paces away to check over the guns and ammo again. I've already checked over them a few times, but I'm basically just inventing ways to distract myself from looking over at Sloane because I can feel her watching me, like she's searching for a reaction.

I won't allow her to make a fool out of me again. If she wants to ignore me, I'll give her the same fucking treatment.

I distract myself a little too well, because I don't even notice when Sloane peels away from the rest of the group to start heading my way; not until she's walking right up to me with a goofy little smile on her lips.

"Hey," she greets, giving me an awkward wave as I turn to face her.

I grit my teeth, eyes dropping down her form to take her in. She's in her typical workout attire- black leggings, white t-shirt- but her clothing isn't what catches my eye. Her cell phone is tucked into the waistband of her leggings, the top of it sticking out like a fucking taunt.

My eyes catch on it and I'm instantly annoyed. One, because the squad knows they aren't supposed to bring their phones to practice, and two, because I sent Sloane that text over 24 hours ago and she couldn't even dignify me with a response. I thought she'd at least have the decency to come up with some excuse for ditching me last night, but instead she's flaunting

the fact that she chose not to respond, like some sort of flex that she has the upper hand.

“What do you want?” I growl, my eyes pinging from the phone at her hip up to her face.

Her smile immediately dissolves, brows pinching together. “Wow, really?” she scowls, folding her arms over her chest. “This is how you’re gonna act?”

“What did you expect?” I ask icily.

She flinches back as if she’s shocked by my demeanor. “You’re unbelievable,” Sloane mutters under her breath.

The fact that she’s playing dumb right now only infuriates me more. And because I want her to feel just a sliver of the fucking hurt that I felt sitting up there alone on the roof last night, I go for the jugular, aiming to cut her down with my words.

“Where have I heard that before?” I muse, tapping a finger to my chin in mock consideration. “Oh, that’s right.” I pause to run my tongue over my teeth. “Pretty sure you said that the other night while you were coming all over my dick, didn’t you baby?”

The barb lands precisely how I intend it to. Sloane’s jaw goes slack, anger sparking in her eyes to match my own. Her small body is practically vibrating with it as she jerks up a hand and rears back, landing a hard slap against my cheek. I see it coming from a mile away, but I don’t stop her.

Because I welcome the pain.

Because I’m fucking dead inside.

“Fuck you!” Sloane shouts, her strained voice full of anger and indignation.

I detach from any semblance of emotion, rolling my eyes like the fucking asshole I am. “Been there, done that.”

She gapes at me again, then spins around so fast that her hair whips against my chest. Then she storms away, past the squad fighters pretending that they’re not watching our interaction with morbid curiosity, tearing off into the forest in a blur of dark curls.

I know I should derive some sense of satisfaction from provoking that reaction, but I just feel hollow inside. Because even though Sloane hurt me, I don’t enjoy hurting her. The mere thought of it makes my chest fucking ache. With a growl of frustration, I turn around and take off in the opposite direction, bound for the complex. I hear gunshots pop off as the squad continues their drill, and something has my wolf stirring in warning.

I ignore it.

Later, I'll wish I hadn't.



Twigs crunch beneath the soles of my sneakers as I push my way through the thick brush of the forest, stomping my feet and absolutely fucking *seething*. I have no idea where I'm going, only that I need to put as much distance between myself and Maddox Kessler as possible before I lose it.

The fucking *audacity* of that man. How dare he behave that way after we slept together? Nevermind the years of history between us. For him to treat me like a cheap hookup after everything we've been through...

I hear movement from somewhere behind me, gritting my teeth and balling my hands into fists at my sides.

Of course he'd fuck up epically and then come running after me. It's like the party at the lodge all over again- but if he thinks I'll forgive him as easily this time, he's sorely mistaken. I won't allow Madd to treat me like crap over and over then redeem himself with a half-assed apology. I don't even want to hear it.

"I said fuck *off*, Madd!" I shout as I whip back around, expecting to see him tailing me.

But I don't.

I don't see anyone. Instead, I hear the loud crack of a gun firing, and almost simultaneously, searing pain like I've never felt before pierces my abdomen just above my navel. I slam a hand over it instinctively, something hot and wet instantly pooling beneath my hand. A helpless whine escapes my lips as

the magnitude of the pain registers and I look down to see crimson blood soaking into the cotton of my white t-shirt, spilling from between my fingers. Shockwaves of pain ripple out through my limbs and my legs give out underneath me. I crumple to my knees, still pressing a hand to the wound in my belly as my mind struggles to comprehend what's happening.

I've been shot.

The hunters have found us.

Is this how it ends?

Can I warn the others before it's too late?

Madd...

"Shit!" a voice yells out, followed by the heavy thud of footsteps pounding toward me.

Though the blood loss has me feeling woozy, I try to move.

I can't let the hunters finish me off, not before I have a chance to warn the others.

My body doesn't cooperate, though. Every movement is agony as I try and fail to get to my feet, looking up in a daze as someone rushes toward me, yelling for... help?

It's not a hunter.

It's a squad fighter.

I remember him from an earlier training drill: Luke Jenkins.

"Sloane?" he gasps as he slides to a stop in front of me, hitting his knees.

"Holy shit, I'm so sorry! *Fuck!*" He gapes at me with wide, terrified eyes, reaching out with a trembling hand, then flinching back like he's not sure what to do. "Help! I need help over here!"

Another set of quick footsteps pound against the earth and I look past him to see Avery sprinting our way, her face blanching when she sees me.

"It was an accident! I saw her white shirt and I thought it was a target, I swear I didn't mean to..." Luke rushes out, but Avery is already shoving him away from me as she slides to her knees to take his place, no doubt sustaining some wicked road rash on her shins in the process.

"What the *fuck*, Luke?!" she snaps, glaring daggers at him. "Go get help, we need a medic!"

Luke scrambles to his feet to follow her order as Avery turns to me, taking my hand. "Sloane, it's gonna be okay. Have you been keeping pressure on it? Here, let me take over."

My hand falls away from my body limply as Avery replaces it with her own.

I hiss a breath through my teeth at the pain of her touch, right as Ares rushes up to join us, panting and out of breath.

“What the hell happened?!” he demands, crouching down on my other side.

“That fucking idiot Luke Jenkins,” Avery growls. “Can you help me move her? We need to get her to a medic at the complex.”

Ares sweeps my hair out of my face with his fingertips, tucking it behind my ear and looking into my eyes. “Sloane, how are you doing?” he asks, more serious than I’ve ever heard him. “Think you can hold your hands over the bullet wound for me so I can carry you?”

I nod weakly, sliding my hands up toward my belly. My arms are heavy and my head feels like it could float away, but somehow I manage to press my hands against my stomach as Avery pulls hers back, hot blood squelching beneath my palms.

Ares slides one arm around my back and the other beneath my knees, a pained cry escaping my lips as he scoops me into his arms and cradles me against his chest. Then he rises to his feet, lifting me up. My phone slips free from the waistband of my leggings in the process and Avery’s eyes light up when she sees it hit the ground.

She stoops to grab it with her bloody hands, wiping them off on her t-shirt so she can operate the screen. “Sloane, babe, what’s your passcode?” Avery asks urgently as Ares starts forward, blinding pain searing through me with every jostling movement as he carries me.

“Twelve twelve” I answer groggily.

Madd’s birthday.

Avery keeps pace with us, staying right beside me as she unlocks my phone and navigates to my contacts, hitting dial and holding it up to her ear. “C’mon, pick up, you moron...” she murmurs, growling in frustration as she ends the call and redials.

The trees blur around me as Ares carries me as fast as he can through the tangled foliage of the forest while Avery continues to try to place a call.

“Fucking asshole,” she mumbles after another failed attempt. Then she scrolls through my contacts again to call someone else- and they actually pick up. “Tris, it’s Avery,” she says down the line breathlessly. “Get down to the complex right now. Sloane took a stray bullet during our drill.”

Shit, my brother’s going to freak out.

So are my parents.

Everything starts going in and out, the pain and blood loss affecting my

ability to focus. Black spots cloud my vision, agony searing through my body.

Distantly, I register our arrival at the complex. A medic meets us at the gate, jogging with us to the infirmary. They lay me down on a cot once we get there and my eyes flutter shut as I try to focus on the voices surrounding me.

“She’s already healing.”

“Don’t you have to get the bullet out?”

“It’s not silver, her body’s forcing it out. I’m more concerned about the blood loss.”

“We’ll have to give her a transfusion.”

“We’re the same blood type!”

I force my eyes back open at the sound of my brother’s voice, my vision blurry as I see Tristan rushing in, pale-faced and out of breath. He yanks up his sleeve, offering his arm to one of the medics as he swings his gaze over to me. “Fuck, is she gonna be okay? This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“She’ll be fine,” the medic reassures, guiding Tristan away from my bedside.

“She’s already healing, we just need to give her some blood.”

That’s the last thing I hear before my eyes grow too heavy to keep open. I allow them to slide closed, succumbing to exhaustion and drifting off. My mind shuts down to allow my body to work overtime to heal itself, and the last thing I remember is feeling at peace, somehow knowing it will all be okay now.



“The doctor said she can come home tomorrow,” my mom says as she sets her phone down on the dresser in her bedroom, turning toward my dad as he walks in from the hall.

His shoulders sag as he heaves a sigh of relief. “Thank god.”

He looks exhausted. His eyes are red rimmed with dark circles etched beneath them, like he hasn’t slept in days.

Upon seeing his posture of defeat, Mom crosses the room to her mate, wrapping her arms around his waist. She just hugs my dad for a long moment, then tilts her head back to look up into his eyes. "It's going to be okay, Brock."

He stabs his fingers through his disheveled hair, shaking his head. "We almost lost her," he grits out.

"We didn't," my mom reassures.

"But we could have." His voice is gravelly, his green eyes shiny with unshed tears.

Mom's arms fall away from his waist as he steps around her, pacing across the room and scrubbing a hand over his face. "We have to do something, Astrid. She's only seventeen. She keeps getting into trouble, and sure, she survived this time, but what about the next?" He scowls, shaking his head. "We can't just sit back and do nothing."

"And you really think Denver's the answer?" Mom asks.

He shrugs, pacing away from her again. "If we send her away, maybe she won't get hurt again..."

"Sending her away won't keep her safe," she replies quietly.

Dad whips around, narrowing his eyes on her. "What do you know?"

Mom looks away quickly, shaking her head and stepping over to fiddle with something on the dresser, but my dad isn't having it. He follows her, sliding an arm around her waist and spinning her around to face him.

"Astrid, you have to tell me," he urges, cupping her cheek in a hand. "She's my little girl..." His voice breaks as it trails off, the agony in it palpable.

My mom draws a deep breath, her brow furrowing in consideration. She doesn't typically share her visions of the future. She keeps them close, never risking how sharing them could interfere with fate.

"I had a vision," she starts quietly, eyes flickering up to meet his. "Sloane... when she's older, she gets hurt. I think... maybe it's the hunters." She sinks her teeth into her lower lip, shaking her head. "All I saw was her standing in the woods, yelling Madd's name like they were having an argument, then she gets shot. I've tried to see past it, but I can't."

Dad flinches back, his expression twisting with a mixture of shock and grief and rage. "It all comes back to that fucking Kessler kid," he growls. "I'll fucking end him..."

Mom shakes her head again, her light brown curls bouncing around her face with the movement. "No, you won't," she says gently, reaching out to press her

palms to Dad's chest like she always does when she needs to calm him down. "Be reasonable. Our daughter loves that boy. And she'll survive it. I'm not sure how I know, but deep down, I just do. Fate didn't show me her death. It showed me a defining moment in her life."

My dad turns away and strides over to the bed, sinking down on the edge and burying his face in his hands. "I can't lose her, Astrid," he rasps, his voice muffled in his palms. "I can't..."

The vision is abruptly cut off as I start to come to, overwhelmed by the emotions it contained and fighting the urge to cry. My eyes struggle to adjust to the florescent lighting overhead as I blink them open, confusion setting in when I realize I'm waking up in an unfamiliar place.

"Hey honey, welcome back."

I turn my head to see my mother sitting beside the bed I'm lying in, clutching one of my hands in both of hers.

What's my mom doing here?

Then it all floods back.

The argument with Madd.

The forest.

The gunshot.

I blink against the bright lights, sliding my elbows back and wincing as I try to slide back and sit up.

"Hey, take it easy," Dad barks out, and I glance past my mom to see him posted up near the door, watching me like a hawk.

"I'm fine," I say hoarsely, casting a wary look his way as I shuffle to sit up on the cot.

Mom turns to look at him over her shoulder. "Can we have a minute?" she asks gently.

Dad's jaw clenches like he wants to object, his gaze sliding hesitantly between the two of us. Then with a heavy sigh he finally nods, grunting in frustration as he abruptly turns around and exits the room.

I watch after him for a moment, my heart aching from the vision I just experienced.

"I know that look," my mom says quietly as soon as he closes the door, giving my hand a little squeeze. I swing my gaze back to hers as she leans in a little closer, asking, "What did you see?"

I wet my dry lips with my tongue before parting them to speak. "You two talking about... *this*," I whisper.

Mom squeezes my hand tighter as she blows out a slow breath.

“You knew.”

She nods sadly, tears shining in her eyes.

“But you knew I’d be okay.”

My mom nods again.

“So why’d you send me away?”

She strokes the back of my palm with her thumb, staring deeply into my eyes.

“Because we’d almost just lost you, and we felt like we needed to do something. I asked fate for guidance, and I was given a vision of you in Denver. You were so beautiful, so happy. You were thriving.”

I shake my head, wincing at the stab of pain from my belly as I sit up taller.

“But this still happened.”

“It was fate’s plan,” she replies cryptically.

I frown, dissatisfied with that answer but not knowing what to ask to make sense of it all.

Mom squeezes my hand again. “I know you’re still angry with your father, but he loves you so much, Sloane. He’s only ever done what he thought was right. Both of us have. He didn’t decide to send you away on his own. We agreed it was best. And I thought... I swear Madd was still part of your life, in that vision of you in Denver. But sometimes I misinterpret things.”

The vision I just woke from flickers through my head again; the images of my father looking more broken than I’ve ever seen him. I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from crying as I recall the awful things I said to him after I came back home, especially in the context of seeing his agony following the accident firsthand.

“Can you ask him to come back in?” I rasp, glancing toward the door.

Mom gets to her feet right away, scurrying over to the door and pulling it open. I shouldn’t be surprised that my dad’s waiting right on the other side, that same look of guilt and grief in his eyes as they held in my vision.

My mom waves him into the room, swapping places with him and stepping out, closing the door behind her. I wish she’d stayed for moral support, but I suppose this is between me and my dad. That’s how it started, and that’s how it’ll end.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt, not knowing where to begin. “For the things I said, for shutting you out...”

Dad crosses the room to me in a few long strides. “No need for that right now,” he replies gruffly, setting a hand on my shoulder. “Just rest.”

I swallow hard, fighting back tears as I gaze up at him. “You know I love you, right?”

The corner of his mouth lifts in a small smile and he leans down, pressing a kiss to the crown of my head. “I know, baby girl,” he murmurs, crouching lower so he can wrap his arms around me. He does it carefully, so as not to jostle me with his movements, but the warmth of his loose embrace makes my heart swell. “And I hope you know how much I love you.”

“I do,” I sniffle. And even though we still have a lot to talk about, despite the fact that we’ve got miles to go in rebuilding our relationship, it feels like a solid first step to getting there.



“Where the hell have you been?” Avery demands, storming into my office right as I’m lowering myself into my chair behind the desk.

I take in the bloodstains on her shirt and hands, my heart plummeting.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sloane got shot.”

“She *what?!?*” I roar, springing to my feet in an instant. I lunge around my desk, eating up the distance to the door in a few long strides.

My sister steps back into the doorway to block my exit, holding up her hands.

“She’s fine, she’s resting up in the infirmary and her parents are with her right now.”

“What the fuck, Aves!” I spit, resisting the urge to slam my fist through the nearest wall. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did!” she yells back.

“No, you fucking didn’t!” I seethe.

Avery scowls, digging her hand into the pocket of her shorts and yanking out a cell phone to prove me wrong. “I called from Sloane’s phone, asshole.”

“Bullshit,” I scoff. “I don’t have any missed calls.”

“Look for yourself,” she huffs, typing in the passcode and handing it over.

My brows pinch together as I stare at the screen, because right there on the call log are three phone calls to me, placed less than a minute apart. Yet I swear my phone never rang.

I shake my head in disbelief, handing the phone back to Avery as I pull my own out of my pocket. I unlock it and bring up the call log, brow furrowing when I see that Sloane's calls are conspicuously absent.

"It doesn't make sense..."

I grab Sloane's phone back from Avery and press call on my contact, holding her phone in one hand and my own in the other. Hers shows that it's calling me, but the screen of my own never lights up with an incoming call.

Now thoroughly confused, I mash the end call button on Sloane's phone, pulling up her contact on my own and trying the same thing. It says I'm calling her, but her phone doesn't ring.

And a realization slams into me so hard that I stumble back a step, falling into one of the leather chairs positioned in front of my desk.

There's something wrong with our phones.

"What's going on?" Avery asks, taking a cautious step toward me.

I barely even hear her over the pounding of my own frantic pulse, blood rushing to my ears as I navigate to the messaging app on Sloane's phone, typing my name into the search bar. My contact comes up and I click on it to view the texts exchanged between us, but my message from yesterday isn't there... a long string of her own texts are, though.

Thanks to cloud storage, they go back years- hundreds of texts that she sent, but I never received. A strange numbness settles over me as I start to read through the first handful that were sent after she left town, my heart tripping over its valves.

Sloane: *Madd, please talk to me. I miss you. I love you.*

Sloane: *Is this how it's going to be? You're just going to pretend I don't exist? Out of sight, out of mind, huh?*

Sloane: *Just tell me you're okay.*

Sloane: *You're killing me, Duke. Don't do this.*

Sloane: *I LOVE YOU. I'M SORRY. JUST PICK UP THE PHONE!*

Sloane: *Fine. I don't need you either. Have a nice life, douchebag.*

Sloane: *I didn't mean that. You know how much I love you. Please answer me.*

My chest tightens as I scroll through Sloane's messages, feeling like I'm intruding on a journal full of her private confessions. *Years* of them. She sent texts to say how much she missed me. How she loved me. How she still thought about me. Congratulating me for becoming Alpha. For taking over the squad. Years of accomplishments that she followed and tried to reach out

to me about, only to never receive a reply.

All this time, I thought she ghosted me. I treated her like garbage because of it. But as it turns out, I ghosted *her*, too.

The pain that comes with this discovery is one thing. The rage is another beast entirely. It bubbles beneath my veins until I'm practically vibrating with fury, my inner wolf rattling my cage and skin tingling with the urge to shift.

"Madd, talk to me," Avery urges, but I'm just staring blankly at the phone in my hand, my eyes glazing over.

"How did she get shot?" I murmur, my voice a dull monotone.

Avery blows out a slow breath. "It was just a stupid accident," she mutters.

"She was out in the woods during the drill and Luke Jenkins confused her white shirt for a target."

I tighten my grip around the cell phone in my hand.

"Find Jenkins," I growl, pushing up from the chair. Because finding out that the past eight years of my life have been a lie is going to take some time to unpack, but there's an easy place to aim my rage in the meantime. "And the rifle he was using for the drill," I add as I stalk toward the door to leave my office. "Bring them both here."

"Where are you going?" my sister asks, scrambling after me.

"To bring Sloane her phone back," I reply calmly. I pause in the doorway, turning to face her. "Jenkins and the gun, *now*."

"Yeah, okay," she breathes, nodding.

Avery follows me out of my office, the two of us taking off in opposite directions. I storm through the corridors of the complex until I reach the infirmary, busting through the door without a second thought.

I belatedly remember that Avery said Sloane's parents were here with her, but by some stroke of luck, they aren't anymore. Lo and Ares are, though. They're both posted up in chairs beside the cot Sloane is lying in, all three of them whipping their heads around to look toward the door in startled surprise when I shove it open.

Sloane's green eyes meet mine and a brutal pain pierces my chest, like it's about to crack open and bleed.

There are so many things I need to say to her, starting with a big fucking apology. I should grovel, fucking *beg* Sloane to forgive me for the way I've put her through the wringer since she came back to town, but right now, I'm just so fucking *mad* that I can't see past my own anger to explain myself to her.

So instead, I just cross the room and hand her phone back. Then I give her my own.

“Someone messed with our phones,” I mutter.

Her brows draw together in confusion, head tilting.

And I leave before I can say one more stupid fucking thing.

I leave to go break something; to direct my rage at someone who actually deserves it. Like the asshole who shot her.

I don't really give a shit that it was an accident. Luke Jenkins is a total klutz that shouldn't have even made the squad in the first place. His dad was a friend of my mom's, so Aves and I let him in as a favor, hoping he'd improve with time.

He hasn't. He's still just as much of a stumbling, bumbling idiot three years later, and if almost fucking *killing* someone isn't a good enough reason to rid the squad of him once and for all, I don't know what is.

My heavy footsteps echo through the corridor as I stomp back toward my office, stepping inside to find it empty. Well, not *empty*. There's a rifle resting on my desk, so I suppose one out of two isn't bad.

I approach my desk and lean against the edge, drumming my fingers on the surface while I wait for Avery to deliver Jenkins. For a second, I wonder if she's going to come through, but I should know better than to doubt my twin. A few minutes later she appears in the doorway, Luke trailing sheepishly behind her.

The kid looks worse for the wear when he steps inside my office. His shoulders are slumped, eyes rounded in fear, but I can't find it in me to feel sorry for him. I've slipped from anger into a state of cool detachment, eerily calm but no less lethal.

“Close the door,” I instruct Avery, and she shuffles behind Luke to shut it.

He flinches at the snick of the latch, eyes dropping to the gun on my desk before pinging back up to meet my own.

“Pick it up,” I tell him as Avery walks over to stand at my side.

Jenkins stares at the rifle in shocked dismay, shaking his head adamantly. So I repeat the order, putting Alpha command behind it this time to compel him to cooperate.

“Pick. Up. The. Gun.”

“Madd, what are you doing?” Avery asks nervously, gripping my arm tightly as she looks up at me in question.

I don't look back at her. My eyes are solely focused on Luke as he steps

closer to the desk, reaching out to pick up the rifle with shaking hands. I roll my neck on my shoulders, a coldness like I've never felt before settling over me.

Because I had everything when I had Sloane, then I lost her.

And the past eight years have been hell, but they could've been so different if someone hadn't fucking messed with us and kept us apart.

And the fucker standing in front of me now almost took Sloane from me permanently before I even realized that.

I run my tongue over my teeth, glaring daggers at Jenkins like he's solely responsible for the shit show my life has become. Then I speak again, putting alpha command behind my words so he has no choice but to comply.

"Swallow the barrel and pull the fucking trigger."

"Madd, *no!*" Avery gasps, gripping my arm tighter until her fingernails dig into my skin. "Stop it right now!"

Luke's eyes fly wide, my own glazing over as I watch him draw in the rifle until it's flush with his chest, his body trembling like he's trying to fight my Alpha command.

Avery lunges toward him to intervene, but I grab her around the waist and haul her back, holding on tight as she fights against me. She freaks the fuck out as Luke bows his head, wrapping his lips around the barrel with tears streaming down his face. He struggles to hold the gun in place with one hand while fumbling to click off the safety with the other, finger sliding over the trigger...

Then he pulls it.

Avery lets out a panicked shriek as he does and the firing pin clicks, the chamber empty.

Luke's shoulders sag and he shudders a sob, the front of his jeans darkening as the little fucker pisses himself. He drops the gun to the floor with a clatter, stumbling a step backwards with tears and snot running down his face.

I let Avery go and she jerks away from me, burying her face in her hands as I pin Jenkins with a cold stare.

"That's your only warning," I growl, lifting my chin. "Now get the fuck out of my sight."

He doesn't wait around for me to change my mind. Luke spins and runs to the door, flinging it open and fleeing my office like the room is on fire.

"You're a fucking asshole!" Avery shouts, slapping her palms against my chest and giving me a hard shove.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I mutter.

Stepping forward, I bend at the waist to swipe the rifle up, setting it back on top of my desk.

“You scared the shit out of me,” she admonishes, pacing over to the chairs in front of my desk and collapsing into one of them. “Seriously, do you even realize how fucked up that was?”

I grunt, striding around to the other side of my desk and taking a seat in my own chair.

“You know that’s the kind of bullshit that earned you the nickname Mad Maddox, right?” she snorts. Then she leans back, scrubbing a hand over her face in exasperation. “I really thought you were going to make Jenkins blow his own head off for a minute there.”

I swivel in my chair, folding my hands over my lap and staring at the gun lying on my desk. The one that could’ve killed the only woman I’ve ever loved before I had a chance to make things right with her.

Avery watches me for a moment, tilting her head. “How’d you know it wasn’t loaded?” she asks.

I lift my gaze to meet her eyes. “I didn’t.”



“What the fuck was that?” Ares grumbles, blinking in confusion as Madd charges back out the door of the infirmary.

I shake my head, just as confused as he is.

“Why would someone mess with your phones?” Lo asks, wrinkling her nose. I glance down at the pair of cell phones in my lap- my own, and what I’m guessing is Madd’s. I lift it and the screen lights up, an image of a muddy Jeep wrangler set as the background of the lock screen.

Yup, definitely his.

I pause when a prompt appears to enter the passcode, realizing that I don’t know it. It used to be my birthday back when we were teenagers, but surely he’s changed it since. Then again, I never changed my own.

So I try it.

And it works.

When the phone unlocks, his messaging app is already open, and my heart skips a beat as I realize what I’m looking at.

Madd’s messages... to *me*.

Only they’re messages I never actually received, the most recent one sent just yesterday, asking me to meet him on the roof.

My heart plummets, all the air whooshing from my lungs on an exhale.

“Sloane, what’s going on?” Lo asks, her brow creasing in concern as she leans in to try to see what I’m looking at.

I jerk Madd's phone away from her prying eyes, pressing the screen against my chest protectively and whipping my head around to stare at her and Ares, my mouth hanging open. "I... it's..."

I shake my head, mind reeling as I try and fail to find words while the two of them look to me in question. Then I draw a deep breath, grasping for some semblance of composure in light of the fucking bomb Madd just dropped in my lap.

Ares cocks a brow, both of them still awaiting some sort of explanation.

I wish I had one.

"Thanks for checking up on me, guys, but I just... I need a minute," I grind out, forcing the words past the growing lump in my throat.

The two of them exchange glances, hesitantly rising from their chairs beside the cot.

"You sure you're good?" Ares asks.

I nod, still holding the phone tight against my chest, right over my pounding heart.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

My friends reluctantly leave, casting suspicious glances in my direction on their way out, and only once they're gone do I dare lower the phone again, my eyes focusing in on the most recent outgoing message once more.

Madd: *We should talk. Meet me at our spot on the roof after dinner tonight.*

That's why he was such a jerk today. He thought I ditched him.

Not that it's any excuse, but...

Fuck.

I never received that message. If I had, I would've gone. A real conversation between the two of us is long overdue.

Sucking in a breath through my teeth, I start scrolling back... and back...

There are so many messages- all from a long time ago, but thanks to cloud storage, they're right here at my fingertips. At least a hundred of them... all of which went unanswered from the time I left until now.

When I read the first handful of texts he sent after I moved away, I swear it feels like my heart's being cleaved from my chest.

Madd: *I'm sorry we fought. I miss you already. Hope you made it to Denver ok.*

Madd: *Please pick up my call, Duchess.*

Madd: *Guess you're still mad. I probably deserve that. Just know I love you and I miss you, and I'll figure out a way to fix this. I'm going crazy without*

you here, babe.

Madd: *Sloane, come ON. How long are you gonna punish me for that stupid ass fight? Pick up the fucking phone.*

Madd: *Getting real sick of these games, baby.*

I start hyperventilating, the realization of what this means settling over me like an icy frost. He tried to message me after I left. All this time, I'd thought he was so mad that he cut off contact, but he *tried*...

Tears blur my vision as I scroll a little farther, pausing to read again.

Madd: *Are you serious? You're fucking ghosting me now?*

Madd: *That's it, I'm coming up there.*

Madd: *I'm on my way, Dutch. See you soon.*

Madd: *I'm here, tell them to let me through the fucking gate!*

Madd: *WHAT THE FUCK?! TELL THEM TO LET ME IN!*

Madd: *Sloane, please... don't do this. I fucking love you. Let me in, baby.*

Madd: *I swear if you don't get them to let me in right the fuck now, I'm DONE. This isn't fucking cute anymore. Let. Me. In.*

I bury a hand in my hair, tugging at the strands as tears slip from my eyes and track wet paths down my cheeks.

He tried to come to Denver. And for some reason, he couldn't get past the gate.

I never knew...

I shudder a sob, my heart fucking breaking.

Because he didn't shut me out.

He wanted to stay in touch, and someone prevented us from doing that.

And I have a sinking feeling that I know who.

I bury my face in my hands, allowing my emotions to overwhelm me as I weep into them. It's not enough- I grab the pillow from behind me, slamming it against my face and using it to muffle my frustrated scream.

I let myself just fucking sob for a few solid minutes, letting it all out. Then I collect myself, lowering the pillow, wiping the wetness from my cheeks, and swinging my legs over the side of the cot, resolute in what I need to do.

There's a painful tugging in my lower belly when I rise to stand, but for the most part, I'm all healed up, the gunshot wound quickly becoming a distant memory. Thank god for shifter healing, right? I definitely need a new shirt, though. The bloodstains on this one are more than a little off-putting.

While protocol typically calls for checking out of the infirmary after an injury and getting the go-ahead from the doc on staff, I just slip out without telling

anyone, swinging by my room to change my shirt before heading up to the roof.

Because somehow, I know that's where he'll be.

I grit my teeth against the dull pain in my belly as I grip the rusty rungs of the old utility ladder and climb up, an odd sense of numbness settling over me.

If I'd actually received those messages from Madd, things could've been so different. My entire life could've been different. Instead, I endured years of pain, trying to heal from the worst heartbreak imaginable... for *what*? Because someone thought it'd be better that way?

I'm not sure which is worse- knowing that Madd never meant to break my heart, or having it broken all over again by learning this now, after eight wasted years.

I haul myself up the final rungs of the ladder, climbing off onto the rooftop as my pulse picks up tempo. I swear I can sense Madd's presence before I even step around the big AC unit to see him sitting on the ledge looking out over the practice field, and I freeze in my tracks, just staring at his back for a moment as nervous energy skitters through me.

"You tried to keep in touch."

He slowly turns to look over his shoulder, his dark blue eyes meeting mine.

"So did you."

I suck in a sharp breath, my chest burning. I don't know what to say, where to begin... so much damage has been done up until this point that this thing between us may no longer even be salvageable. But as we stare at one another across the rooftop, that magnetic pull between us stronger than ever, I know our story is far from over.

"Come here," Madd rasps, pulling his legs up and twisting around, kicking them out over the other side of the ledge.

My feet move toward him almost on their own accord, and as soon as I'm close enough, Madd reaches out for me, pulling me in to stand between his spread legs and wrapping his strong arms around me tightly.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Sloane," he croaks, hooking his chin over my shoulder and burying his face in my hair. "For all of it."

I melt into him, wrapping my own arms around his neck and losing myself in the heart-wrenching familiarity of his scent, his touch. "I know," I whisper, carding my fingers through his unkempt hair.

We just hold one another for a long moment until I'm climbing up into his lap, straddling his waist and pressing myself even closer to his chest- like if I

let go, he'll suddenly disappear.

Eight years.

All the longing, the heartache, the misery was for *nothing*. We were robbed of all that time together, and for the life of me, I can't understand *why*.

I finally pull away, leaning back with my arms still draped around Madd's neck so I can look into his eyes.

"Is there any way you can ever forgive me?" he asks, his voice raspy with regret.

I tilt my head, studying his face. "That depends. Were you just being an asshole because you thought I ghosted you, or is that part of your personality now?"

He hangs his head, shoulders slumping.

"I'm only teasing," I chuckle.

Madd picks his head back up, shaking it defeatedly. "How can you joke around at a time like this?"

"Because it's either that or bawl my eyes out, and I've done enough crying over the last eight years to last a lifetime."

He winces at that, his grip around my waist tightening. "Fuck, Dutch, if I knew..."

"Neither of us did," I reply quickly, giving a little shake of my head.

"When I find out who did this, they're fucking dead," Madd grumbles, squeezing me tighter. I feel every one of his emotions behind his grip on me—the possessiveness, the longing, the regret. That last one's the hardest to swallow, because even though we just found out we've both been played, there's no un-doing the hell he's put me through over the past few weeks. The things he did inflicted much deeper damage than that gunshot today.

I push it all out of my mind, not wanting it to taint this moment—because this right here is the reunion I dreamed of after I was shipped away to Denver; the two of us holding one another, refusing to let go. It's the reunion we both deserved but were senselessly deprived of.

Madd presses his forehead against mine, squeezing his eyes shut like he's savoring this closeness as much as I am; our two jagged, broken hearts colliding, fusing to try to fill in the cracks. "What are we supposed to do now?" he asks, his eyes fluttering open to stare into mine.

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, subtly shaking my head as I whisper, "I don't know."

He heaves a sigh, running a hand up the curve of my spine. "Sloane, If I

knew, I never would've said the things I did, never would've..."

"Shh," I hush, placing a finger over his lips to cut him off and leaning my face in closer to his. "Not now, Madd. Right now, I just... I want to forget the last eight years ever even happened."

I grind my hips down over his lap and his eyes blaze with the metallic shimmers of his wolf, peeking out at me through his irises. My own wolf rises to the surface to peek back, and I slide my hand from his face down to his chest, dipping lower until I reach his beltline. Then I lean in, whispering against his lips huskily. "Make me forget."



The last time Sloane and I fucked on this rooftop, we were a couple of clumsy teenagers, ripping each other's clothes off with desperate urgency.

Now, eight years later, it seems we're no different.

As soon as she rolls her hips over my lap, my cock springs to attention like a heat-seeking missile, all my blood rushing south. Sloane Masters has ruined me for other women- she's fucking *perfection*, and ever since she walked back into my life and gave me a taste of what I've been missing, I haven't been able to look at anyone but her.

It's always been *her*.

And that really pissed me the fuck off when I thought she'd spent the last eight years ignoring my existence. But now...

"Make me forget."

Her lips brush against mine with every whispered word, and I grab her by the nape and yank her closer, capturing them with my own before she can change her mind. Our lips pout and twist, parting for our tongues to tangle as she grinds down over my rapidly hardening cock, chasing the friction of the ridge of it against her core.

I should take my time with her. Make this count. But instead it's like we're thrown back in time, two horny teenagers frantic to get each other naked as quickly as possible.

Within seconds of our lips meeting, we're tearing at each other's clothes in a

frenzy to remove the barriers between our skin. Her shirt comes off first, followed by my own. Then I'm yanking up the band of her sports bra, her tits spilling out right into my hands as she tugs it off overhead. I give them a rough squeeze, murmuring my approval before lifting her off my lap and taking her in my arms. Shooting to my feet, I spin around to lay her down on the wide concrete ledge, lowering my face over her chest and sucking one of those perfect nipples into my mouth.

Sloane's curly dark hair pools beneath her head as her back meets the smooth surface of the ledge, my body hovering over hers. I swirl my tongue around her nipple, rolling the stiff peak between my teeth as a breathy gasp falls from her lips.

"*Madd,*" she moans, sinking her fingers into my hair and tugging at the strands.

Fuck, I love when she says my name like that.

I release her nipple with a loud pop, lifting my head to look up at her gorgeous face. "Yeah baby?"

"More," she pants, arching up into me at the same time she tugs my head back down, shoving her tits right in my face. If she's trying to suffocate me in her cleavage, I can think of worse ways to go.

I lick my way over to her other breast, giving it the same treatment as the first- tracing the outline of her nipple with my tongue, then sucking it into my mouth, teasing the hard bud with my teeth as more needy little cries fall from her lips.

Sloane has always loved it when I play with her tits. Back when we first started fooling around, I swear I got her off once on nipple play alone.

Her legs wrap around my waist to draw me in closer as I continue worshipping her breasts with my hands and tongue. Our height difference puts me at a distinct disadvantage, because I can feel the heat of her core against my abs instead of where I really want it, my hard dick pressing painfully against the concrete underneath us.

Fuck this.

I give each of her tits one last kiss, one last squeeze, then rock back on my heels, rising to my knees over her.

She looks like a fucking goddess lying below me, the top half of her body naked, tits shiny with my saliva and a flush crawling up her neck. Her lips are deliciously puffy, parted as she draws short, gasping breaths of anticipation.

"Tell me what you want, Duchess," I murmur, reaching down to roughly cup

her pussy through her leggings.

Her body jerks and she draws a short gasp.

“Fuck me, Duke,” she breathes, those moss green eyes locking in on mine.

“Fuck me until I forget. Fuck me like only you can. Fuck me like I’m yours.”

My cock punches against my zipper, a growl rumbling in my chest. “You *are* mine, Sloane,” I drawl, leaning over her and wrapping my tattooed hand around her throat. I lower myself down until my face is hovering right above hers, our harsh breaths mingling. “You’ve always been mine.”

Mine.

My wolf echoes the word in my brain as I dip down to capture her lower lip with my teeth, tugging on it as she releases another sweet moan. I drag her lip between my teeth until it slips free, then tilt my head, stick out my tongue, and lick across the seam of her pouted lips. Her scent wraps around me like a drug- notes of vanilla, jasmine, and peach; a unique, intoxicating blend that’s so distinctly *her* that it makes my chest ache.

I rock back again to kneel over her, eyes raking up and down her half-naked form. “Sorry, baby, I’m not gonna make you forget,” I grumble, grabbing onto her thighs and lifting them to wrap around my waist. I tug her closer, her back sliding against the ledge until she’s right up against me so I can grind my rock hard cock against her center. I meet her gaze, staring into her captivating green eyes intently. “I’m gonna make you remember who you belong to.”

“Please, Madd,” Sloane pants, sliding her hands over her bare tits, arching her back as she squeezes them together.

I untwine her legs from around my waist, leaning forward to grasp onto the waistband of her leggings and yank them down. The fabric gets tangled around my hands in my haste to get them off and they snag on her sneakers, a frustrated growl escaping me as I struggle to pop off her shoes and get rid of those damn pants. Once I finally wrestle them off and toss them away, my eyes return to her body, spread before me in all its naked glory, and I raise a fist to my mouth and bite down on it to stifle a groan at the sight of her.

“Goddamn you’re sexy,” I mumble as my eyes map out every inch of her skin, pausing on the reddened, puckered flesh above her belly button.

The gunshot wound.

It’s mostly healed, but just seeing it, knowing what it was, sends a spike of pain ripping through me. If Jenkins wasn’t such a lousy shot, that bullet could’ve ended her life today. I lean down over her, running my fingers over

the affected skin, pressing my lips against the mark.

“I’m sorry this happened,” I rasp, kissing it again softly. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Don’t,” Sloane hisses, picking up her head and shaking it. “Not now.” She buries her hands in my hair again and pushes my head down, lifting her hips to direct me between her thighs and showing me exactly how she intends to silence me.

Not that I’m complaining. I’ve jacked off to the thought of burying my tongue between her thighs at least a dozen times since licking her taste from my fingers that day in the conference room.

I slide down her body, pressing my palms to her inner thighs to spread her wider before diving in, dragging my tongue along the length of her slit.

Sloane shudders a breath, her fingers tightening their grip on my hair as she lifts her hips, chasing my tongue.

“You’re fucking delicious, Duchess,” I groan, nipping her pussy lips with my teeth. “Ride my face till you come, baby.”

I lick between her folds, the sweet, tangy taste of her arousal dancing on my tongue. She grinds against my face as I lap at her center, practically suffocating me with her greedy pussy- but again, I can think of worse ways to go. Sloane squirms and moans and tugs my hair until she has me exactly where she wants me, my tongue flicking the sensitive nub of her clit, her thighs trembling around my ears.

I tease her entrance with the tip of a finger, her inner walls clenching around me when I sink it inside her. I push it in and out, then add another, stretching her so she’s ready for my cock. She bucks her hips, chasing my fingers, my tongue. And once I suction my lips around her clit, it doesn’t take long for her to reach the brink of climax- I know all the telltale signs that she’s getting close. The staccato of her breathing, the faint little whimpers, the tensing of her muscles.

And I know exactly what she needs to cross the finish line.

I suck harder as I pump my fingers in and out, and she falls over the edge of bliss beautifully, coming undone beneath me. A strained cry leaves her lips as she falls apart on my tongue, pussy gripping my digits as her orgasm rocks through her. My cock hangs heavy between my legs, throbbing with need. I’m not sure I’ve ever been this hard in my fucking life- if I don’t get inside her soon, it might actually kill me.

I shove up from the ledge, popping the button on my jeans and shoving them

down my hips, nearly tripping in my rush to kick them off my legs. Sloane's head lolls to the side, her eyes heavy-lidded as she watches my cock spring free, her pink tongue darting out to wet her lips.

And yeah, I'd love to shove my dick past those plump lips and fuck her throat, but I'm way too close to the edge to fuck around with foreplay. I want to be buried deep inside her cunt when I come, filling her up and claiming her as my own. Because she always has been. Always will be.

Mine.

This isn't about feelings or emotions or our uncertain relationship status; it's a deep-seated primal need, an animalistic urge to assert my dominance and stake my claim. Because like I told Ares once, Sloane will never *not* be mine. I may not know where we're supposed to go from here, but I know that for certain.

And from the way she's looking at me, she does, too.

I step up to the ledge again, grabbing onto Sloane's legs and shifting her sideways until her ass is almost dangling over the edge, tossing her feet over my shoulders. Then I wrap a hand around my painfully hard cock, dragging the head of it through her slick folds until she's whimpering for more, rolling her hips as I position the tip at her entrance.

A low groan leaves me as I punch my hips forward to slide home, her inner walls stretching around my girth and choking my dick. I grit my teeth against the urge to blow my load right then and there, my fingers digging bruises into her calves as I hold them against my chest, bottoming out.

"*Fuck,*" I growl, pausing for a moment when I'm buried to the hilt, my pelvis pressed tightly against hers. "This fucking pussy..." I pull out halfway, then thrust in deep again, babbling my thoughts aloud through gritted teeth. "Goddamn, girl. It's too fucking good."

Sloane moans as she arches her back, grabbing onto her tits and squeezing them as I start pounding into her. All the while, I'm watching her with rapt attention, completely in awe of how fucking stunning she is.

Me. She chose *me*.

All those years ago, and again, right now. Any guy would give their left nut to be in my position between her gorgeous thighs, but I'm the lucky sonofabitch that gets to have her. My duchess. My fucking queen.

My luna, my wolf whispers somewhere in the back of my mind, and that only has me hammering into her harder as she screams out in ecstasy.

I spread her legs wider, lowering them to either side of my hips as I lean

down over her, wrapping an arm around her back. As if her body is completely attuned to mine, she immediately loops her arms around my neck and I press a kiss to her lips as I lift her up, holding her against me and impaling her on my cock.

This is decidedly the best part of the size difference between us. Sloane's so fucking small that I can throw her around, maneuvering her effortlessly. She clings to me as I grasp her hips, guiding her over my cock to meet every hard snap of my own.

She licks against my lips, forcing her tongue past them and stealing another filthy hot kiss as I fuck her standing up. Then I twist around, lowering us both until my ass meets the ledge and settling her over my lap so she can ride me. Her knees slide down to rest on the concrete at either side of my hips and she leans back, teeth sinking into her lower lip as she grinds down over my cock, chasing her own pleasure while ratcheting mine up to new heights.

If you'd told me this morning that I'd be up here on this rooftop, buried in Sloane's cunt this afternoon, I would've laughed in your face. But now I realize how inevitable this was, even without the soul-crushing realization that someone purposefully kept us apart. Sloane and I are like two magnets, destined to collide. The harder we fight it, the harder we come crashing together.

I yank Sloane's body into my chest, capturing her lips with my own as she rides me, thrusting my hips up to meet every drop of hers. Tilting my head to deepen our kiss, I swallow her moans- then I wrap an arm around her waist, twisting to lay her down on the ledge again, one of my legs still planted on the ground and the other knee pressed to the concrete.

Drawing one of her thighs up between us, I lean over her lithe body, licking a path between her breasts and up the column of her throat. I pepper kisses along her jaw, working my way up to her temple, pressing my lips to her scar. It may be a painful reminder of the past, but it's part of our story, part of *us*. Following the jagged path of it, I kiss my way along the ridge of her scar all the way up to her forehead, burying my cock deep inside her and circling my hips.

Her fingernails score my biceps as a keening cry leaves her lips, the friction of my pelvis against her clit nudging her closer to climax. "You gonna come all over my cock, Dutch?" I pant, pressing my forehead to hers and staring into her eyes as I drive my cock inside her harder.

"Yes," she gasps, digging her fingernails into my skin. "Fuck, I'm close."

Shit, me too. My muscles clench, balls drawing up as I pound into her perfect fucking pussy, losing myself in the bliss of being inside her.

“Give it to me,” I rasp, grinding harder against her clit. “Come for me, babe. Right now. *Fuck...*” My words trail off on a guttural groan as her inner walls spasm around my shaft, shoving me right over the edge of my own climax. We both come hard, shuddering and moaning and grasping onto one another for dear life as we ride it out.

We’re both breathless when we come back down. I pull out and roll off her body, falling limply onto the concrete beside her, completely fucking spent.

“Damn, Duke,” Sloane rasps, still trying to catch her breath. She turns her head to gaze at me, a sated smile creasing her lips.

I can’t help but return it, stretching my arm up and curling it beneath my head as my chest rises and falls rapidly with my breathing. “Better than it ever was,” I murmur, my chest aching with that admission.

It feels strange, to suddenly be open with her like this after building walls around my heart to keep her out for so long, but everything’s different now.

My stomach sinks like a stone at that thought. Because if I’m being honest, I have no idea where to go from here.



Dread settles in my gut as Madd pulls his Jeep into the driveway of the Riverton packhouse, shifting the gear into park and cutting the engine. The two of us barely exchanged a word the whole drive over, each lost in our own thoughts while the air inside the vehicle grew increasingly thick with tension. At this point, it's practically suffocating, but there's no turning back now that we're here.

My dad has to be responsible for blocking our communication with one another. It's the only logical explanation I can think of- he sent me to Denver because he thought it'd prevent me from continuing to get into trouble, and when we were teenagers, Madd Kessler was the definition of trouble. Given his role in the accident and how my dad blamed him for my getting hurt, it tracks that he'd take things a step further and make sure I'd remain cut off from Madd once I got to Denver.

It breaks my heart to think my dad would do that to me, but it doesn't make sense for it to be anyone else. And on the heels of the two of us patching things up earlier today, the realization that he's the most likely culprit behind the cruel block in communication stings even more.

I feel the heavy weight of Madd's gaze on the side of my face, but all I can do is stare out the window numbly at the house I grew up in, both anxious and terrified to get out of his Jeep and go inside.

I've never been a big fan of confrontation. I'm more of a *smile-and-pretend-*

that-everything's-fine type of girl than one to rush in, guns-a-blazing. Case in point: the man sitting next to me. How many times should I have gone running in the other direction when he came at me with some cold-hearted bullshit about how I wasn't welcome back here? But instead of running, I kept wandering back into the wolf's den, clinging to the memories of how we used to be and the hope that somehow, some way, we'd get back there.

There's so much more we could've been. We missed out on eight years of our lives together- and sure, maybe things wouldn't have worked out between me and Madd in the end, but that was *our* choice to make, not anybody else's. Nobody had the right to sabotage our relationship by cutting off our contact.

It's with that thought that I finally tear my gaze from the house, reaching down to unbuckle my seatbelt and swinging my head sideways to look at Madd. "Maybe I should go in there and talk to him first," I suggest.

He shakes his head with a frown. "I don't think so."

"Madd..."

"No, Sloane!" he snaps, banging the heels of his hands against the steering wheel.

I flinch, startled by his outburst, and he quickly reins it in, drawing a deep breath and composing himself.

"You weren't the only one affected by this," he mutters, his voice much calmer. "We're going in there together."

I heave a resigned sigh, knowing there's no use in trying to talk him out of it. When Madd sets his mind on something, it's happening, whether you like it or not.

"Fine," I grit out, stabbing my fingers into my hair and combing them through my unkempt curls. They're even more wild than usual after that spontaneous rooftop fuck sesh- the memory of which will live in my head rent free for a long time. "But use your words, not your fists, huh?"

"No promises," he mumbles.

"Madd."

He blows out a slow breath, flopping his head back against the headrest and scrubbing his hands over his face. "Alright, fine. I'll try to keep my cool."

Satisfied with that, I nod, reaching for the door handle. I pause before pulling it open, eyes flickering back over to him. "Just... let me do the talking," I say. "At least at first."

Madd arches a brow, giving me a hard look. He's never been great at

standing back and holding his tongue. He's decidedly the *go-in-guns-a-blazing* type.

"Hey, you've got a lot of making up to do for the way you've treated me," I remind him with a stern stare of my own.

He gestures wildly toward the packhouse, eyes flying wide. "Because of him!"

"We don't know that yet."

Except *I do*. I feel it in my bones that the person responsible for this mess is inside that house, and the anxiety of going in there and facing him down has my stomach in knots.

Madd scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief as I push open the car door.

I pause before stepping out, looking back at him. "I just need you to do this for me, okay? Things between my dad and me are complicated enough already. You can come in, but let me handle this my way."

He grinds his molars, jaw ticking. "Okay," he concedes, though he doesn't look too pleased about it. I hop down from the Jeep as Madd throws open his own door, nudging mine closed with a hip and starting up the front walk.

Behind me, Madd quickly circles around the Jeep, eating up the distance between us in a few long strides until he catches up. Then we walk up to the front door side by side, my nerves mounting with each step closer. I take a deep breath as I reach for the knob, shoring up my confidence before twisting it and pushing the door open, exhaling as I step over the threshold.

My parents are in the kitchen making dinner together, and my mom swings her gaze toward the front door when I walk in, her face lighting up when she sees me.

"Sloane!" she chirps, her excited greeting catching my dad's attention. He turns to cast a glance over his shoulder toward me as he stirs something on the stove.

"And Madd," Mom adds brightly, offering him a warm smile. "You two are just in time for dinner, we're making tacos."

I meet my dad's eyes, narrowing my own on him as I hold up my phone. "I know what you did."

He arches a brow, giving the taco meat a final stir and removing the pan from the burner. He sets the spatula down beside it, turning around to face me.

"What'd I do?" he asks calmly as he wipes his hands off on a kitchen towel.

Mom's brows furrow as she looks between the two of us, seemingly perplexed.

I blow out a breath, moving closer with Madd right on my heels. “I know what you did to my phone,” I say, tossing it down on the kitchen island with a loud thump. My gaze slides to Madd beside me, then back to my father as I fold my arms over my chest indignantly. “*Our* phones.”

Dad glances down at my phone and shakes his head, a little crease forming between his brows as they draw together. “I didn’t...”

“You can cut the crap, I already know!” I rush out, completely losing my cool. Because it’s bad enough for him to have done this, but now feigning ignorance just adds insult to injury.

Dad clenches his jaw tightly, the golden shimmers of his wolf appearing in his irises as he pins me with a harsh stare. “Sloane, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he replies calmly. “So before you come in here and disrespect me, I’m going to need you to be a little more clear on exactly what it is you think I’ve done to your phone.”

I throw up my hands in exasperation. “You did something to block us from contacting each other!”

My mom whips around to stare at him, mouth agape.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down,” Dad says with a shake of his head, showing me his palms. “I did no such thing. I wouldn’t even know how to do something like that.”

He’s putting on a convincing act, I’ll give him that. But I know it was him. Who else?

“I don’t believe you,” I mutter, glaring daggers at my dad. “I don’t even know why I’m surprised. I mean you sent me to Denver to keep me away from Madd, right? Makes sense that you’d take things one step further and block me from talking to him after I got there.”

Dad narrows his eyes on me, remaining calm, though I can tell he’s on the verge of losing his cool. “I sent you to Denver to keep you *safe*. I don’t know where you’re getting your information from, but you’re wrong.”

“Seriously?” Madd spits, shouldering past me and advancing a step toward my dad. “You won’t even admit it?”

He’s practically vibrating with anger, and honestly, I’m surprised he’s been able to rein himself in this long. I match his step forward, sticking out an arm in front of his chest to hold him back- though if he really wanted to push past me, I wouldn’t be able to stop him. It’s more of a symbolic gesture; one he respects by remaining planted in place.

“Careful, son,” Dad warns, shifting his gaze to Madd. “Our packs don’t need

a rift in the alliance.”

“I’m *not* your son, and I don’t give a shit about the alliance!” Madd fires back. “Not if this is what we do to each other. You think I’ll ever be able to trust you after this, work with you?”

My stomach sinks. I hadn’t even thought about the political implications of this revelation- of what it’d mean for the six-pack if two of the alphas are at each other’s throats. I glance over toward my mom, and from the apprehension in her expression as she watches Madd and my dad snarling at one another, I know she’s thinking the same thing.

“Just admit you messed with our phones!” I blurt, taking another step toward my father and trying to head off the argument escalating between the two of them.

“I didn’t!” he snaps back.

“I did,” a voice from behind me says.

I whip around at the sound of it to see my brother Tristan standing at the base of the stairs, gripping the banister.

The room falls so silent as we all gape at him that you could hear a pin drop.

“What?” I whisper, my mouth hanging open in shock, my mind struggling to grapple with his admission. “Why?”

Tris pushes off from the banister, scrubbing a hand over his face as he steps toward us. “I didn’t do it to hurt you,” he says, meeting my eyes. His own are rounded in sincerity, agony lurking in their depths. “After the accident, I overheard Mom telling Dad about a vision she had where you got shot. She said Madd was there, and I just thought... I thought if you didn’t talk to Madd anymore, then it couldn’t happen.”

A memory floods back to me, my blood turning to ice in my veins. Earlier today, when Tristan rushed into the infirmary to give me his blood, he said something. I didn’t understand what he meant at the time, but he said, ‘*this wasn’t supposed to happen.*’

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Madd spits, rushing toward Tristan furiously.

“You watched me lose it after she left!” he shouts, shoving at my brother’s chest. “You just sat by, knowing why she wasn’t answering me...”

“I’m sorry, man!” Tris yells as he stumbles back. “I was just trying to protect her!”

Tristan barely gets the words out before Madd lands a sharp punch to his jaw, barreling into him and taking him to the ground.

I spring forward to intervene, but an arm comes around my waist, holding me

back.

My dad.

“Give them a minute,” he murmurs, his eyes trained on the two of them grappling on the floor.

I whip my head around to stare at my father, wide-eyed. “But...”

Dad tears his eyes from the boys’ brawl to give me a look, as if he understands something I’m missing here.

Is this some stupid testosterone driven thing, where they have to beat the shit out of each other instead of actually talking about it? *Men are so fucking weird.*

Tris grunts as Madd gets a few solid hits in, unleashing his rage on my brother. To Tristan’s credit, he holds his own, dodging most of the blows that Madd attempts to deliver. At least they’re pretty evenly matched for size and strength. I cringe as I watch them, wincing with each hit Madd lands- but then they slow down as they both start to tire, chests heaving with their panted breaths.

“That’s enough,” Dad finally barks out.

Madd lands one more hard punch to Tristan’s shoulder before he jolts back, shoving up to his feet and wiping blood from his mouth as he turns to me. His tattooed knuckles are split, bright red blood standing out in contrast to the black ink.

“Let’s go,” he growls, stalking toward me.

I look past him at my brother as he sits up on the floor, wiping the blood from his own mouth on a forearm. Our eyes meet, my own vision blurred with the tears forming behind them.

“How could you?” I rasp.

Tristan pulls up his knees, resting his forearms on them and hanging his head.

“I’m sorry, Sloane,” he croaks, one of his eyes barely visible through the swelling on his face. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I was fifteen, and when I heard you might get killed...” he trails off, his Adam’s apple bobbing with a harsh swallow. “I was just scared.”

My mom approaches him, tossing a bag of frozen peas in his lap. She must’ve grabbed them from the freezer in preparation while he and Madd were still scuffling. “How did you even do that?” she asks as it lands.

It’s a fair question- while I’ve always been technologically inclined, working in IT at the Denver hive and here at the six-pack security squad, Tris has never demonstrated much prowess when it comes to computer skills.

He picks up the bag of peas and presses it to his swollen eye, shrugging a shoulder. “It isn’t hard. I just googled how to block numbers. I was around both of you enough to have access to your phones, and everyone knew your passwords were each other’s birthdays.”

I frown, crossing my arms over my chest. “What about after I got back? Didn’t it ever occur to you that we’d figure it out?”

“I didn’t think it mattered anymore,” Tristan sighs. “You guys had moved on! Or at least I thought you had.” He shifts his weight, moving to stand up. “Mom, a little help here?” he asks, holding out an arm to her.

She backs up a step, pointing a finger at him with a scowl. “I don’t think so, mister. You know better than to mess with fate! What the hell were you thinking?!”

He heaves another sigh, shaking his head as he slumps back down. “It was stupid.”

“Damn right it was stupid,” I snap.

Though part of me understands. It doesn’t make me any less furious, but... *I get it*. If I’d heard that either of my siblings were in danger, I would’ve acted, too.

“How’d you stop me from getting through the gate in Denver?” Madd murmurs, swiping a hand over his chin.

“Hayes,” Tristan answers simply. *Our cousin*. “When Avery told me you’d gone to Denver, I called him and told him that you were a stalker and to make sure you didn’t get through the gate.”

I turn away from my brother, repulsed, and step closer to Madd, slipping my hand into his. “Come on,” I say, nudging him toward the door before he can jump my brother again. “Let’s go. I’m done here.”

“You’re not staying for dinner?” My mom pipes up.

“Another time,” I grit out, tugging on Madd’s hand.

Mom nods in understanding, and I turn to meet my Dad’s eyes, suddenly tongue-tied.

“Sorry...”

He shakes his head, holding up a hand to cut me off before I can continue with my fumbled apology. “We’ll talk later.”

I nod gratefully, eager to just get the hell out of here while everyone’s still in one piece. He hands me my phone and I take it from him, sliding it into my pocket and turning back for the door.

“Sloane, Madd,” Tris calls desperately after us, his voice strained.

Neither of us turn around. Hand in hand, we make our way to the door, our mutual misery finally uniting the two of us. And I can't help but think about how even though Tristan messed with fate when he blocked our phones, Madd and I still found our way back to each other. That can't just be an accident, right? It has to count for something. Even after everything... maybe there's still a chance for us, after all.



“Here,” I say, handing Madd’s phone back over to him as he drives the winding forest road that connects the six-pack territories.

Tristan was right- it’s shockingly easy to block and unblock contacts on a cell phone. Within five minutes, I’ve already learned how and removed the block from both of our phones. If only the damage it caused to our relationship had such an easy fix.

Madd’s tattooed fingers brush mine as he takes his phone from my hand, lingering for a beat longer than what passes for incidental contact. I don’t flinch away, though. My gaze snaps over to meet his as I register the sensation of sparks dancing between our skin, a silent longing passing between us in our stare. Then my stomach lets out a loud growl of protest, interrupting the moment.

The corner of Madd’s mouth ticks up in amusement. “Hungry?”

“Starved,” I admit with a breathy sigh, clutching a hand against my loudly complaining belly. It’s to be expected after my body had to work so hard to heal itself this afternoon- something I probably would’ve given more thought to if I’d actually stuck around the infirmary for discharge instructions. As it is, I can only hope we make it back to the complex in time to catch dinner at the dining hall. “Maybe we should’ve stayed for tacos after all,” I mutter to myself.

“Yeah, that wouldn’t have been awkward,” Madd snorts, shooting me a side-

eyed glance.

Okay, it may be a while before he and Tristan can break bread together again.

“The fridge at my packhouse is always stocked,” he adds with a shrug.

“Pretty sure there’s leftover pizza from that spot in Stillwater.”

“Dino’s?!” I blurt excitedly, my mouth practically watering at the mere mention of it. “Oh man, I haven’t had Dino’s in *years*.”

“Cold pizza it is then,” Madd chuckles. He hits the gas, blowing past the turn for the squad complex and heading straight for the town of Goldenleaf instead.

While the idea of setting foot in his packhouse again after all this time should be anxiety-inducing, instead I’m relieved that he’s not just dumping me off at the dorms. After the hellish ordeal I’ve been through today, I really don’t want to be alone right now- and I’m too exhausted to care if that makes me look weak. If anything, I blame it on my ravenous hunger and the promise of my favorite pizza.

After Madd parks his Jeep in the driveway, the two of us get out and head in together. While I half expect Avery to be waiting for us in the living room, demanding to know what’s going on, it’s quiet when we arrive, the other residents evidently elsewhere.

I follow Madd into the kitchen at the back of the house and he strides right over to the fridge, pulling it open and grabbing the pizza box out. The refrigerator door swings closed as he turns to me with the box in hand, flicking his head back toward the way we came. “C’mon, let’s go up. Mason and Norah will be home soon, and unless you wanna answer a bunch of questions...”

“Good call,” I instantly agree, sidestepping to let him take the lead again. I’d love to catch up with Mason sometime, but I just don’t have it in me right now.

I follow Madd out of the kitchen and up the stairs, trekking the same track to his room that I’ve taken countless times before. It all feels so heartbreakingly familiar that I get lost in my own thoughts as I follow, not even realizing that he’s breezed past his bedroom door to continue on down the hall.

It takes my brain a few seconds to catch up and piece together that he’s headed for the master bedroom at the end, because of course he would’ve moved in there when he became Alpha. It’s yet another reminder of how our lives have diverged, marching on without one another over the last eight

years.

Madd pushes open the door to the room that used to be his parents' and I enter behind him, sweeping my gaze over the large interior to take it all in.

Even if his scent wasn't clinging to this room, one look around the space would confirm that it's his. From the choice of furniture to the tangle of dark sheets on the bed, everything about it is distinctly Madd, an aching sense of recognition tugging in my chest as I glance around.

The black dressers are sleek and modern, one of them topped with a row of baseball caps. The large full-length mirror has little photos and mementos tucked into the edge of the frame; something he started to do when we were younger, because he's way more sentimental than he ever lets on. An electric guitar sits in the corner next to an amp, and I smile at the memory of our last Christmas together when his parents finally caved and bought them for him because he was convinced he was going to be a rockstar someday.

While I pause just inside the doorway of his bedroom, comforted by the glimpse it's giving me of the boy I used to know, Madd strides over to set the pizza box down on a side table next to a black leather sofa.

"I need to grab a quick shower," he mutters, turning back to me as he rakes a hand through his unkempt hair.

My head bobs with a nod. "Sure, go ahead," I reply, making a beeline for the pizza box as soon as he steps away from it. I'm not at all shy about helping myself- he'll be lucky if there's any left for him by the time he's done showering.

I hear Madd chuckle to himself as I enthusiastically pop open the lid of the box and dig in, distantly registering the click of the bathroom door as he disappears inside. Grabbing the largest slice out of the box, I bring it to my mouth and take a bite, not even bothering to hold back the moan of satisfaction that leaves me when the taste hits my tongue.

It's *that* good, even cold.

I take down an entire slice in a minute flat and quickly grab another one as I hear the sound of the shower turning on behind the bathroom door.

I could definitely use a shower too. *Would it be weird to use his shower?* I mean, I'm not sure what the protocol is for exes after they find out that they were broken up due to interference. Does this mean we're finally done fighting?

I try not to overthink it as I wander around Madd's room while munching on a cold slice of pizza. I walk up to the dresser with the baseball caps lined up

on top, grinning wickedly to myself as I spot the white one I taunted him with at training. I decide that I might try to swipe it again on my way out, just to tease him.

Stepping over to the full-length mirror, I pause in front of it to get a closer look at the mementos he's shoved into the frame as I chew a bite of pizza. There's one of those cheesy photobooth strips with pictures of him and Avery, the two of them pulling faces at the camera. Below that, there's an old lift ticket from when the ski-lodge was operational- more specifically, from the first time Alpha Chase took him snowboarding as a kid. And tucked just underneath that is a ticket stub from a concert at Red Rocks Amphitheatre; one that we snuck out to go to and got raked over the coals for it by our parents after they found out.

Given how adamant Madd seemed about cutting me out of his life, I'm surprised to see that he still has it on display. But then I sweep my gaze around the room again, really paying attention this time, only to realize that it isn't just the ticket stub- there are little reminders of us everywhere.

The notebook resting on top of his guitar amp is the one I gave him to jot down song lyrics in. I doodled the word 'mayhem' all over the front of it in permanent marker, an ode to our silly nicknames.

The Foo Fighters hoodie slung over the back of the couch is one that I used to steal and wear all the time. It was big on him back then, but I'll bet it fits like a glove now that he's filled out.

And the picture on the dresser... well, it *used* to be a picture of us. I gobble down the rest of the pizza slice as I step over to inspect the frame closer, only to see that it's been replaced with a photo of him and Avery with their parents. Guess I can understand why.

I pick up the frame to get a better look at the picture, but as I do, another loose photo that was stuffed behind it slips off the dresser and flutters to the floor. I bend down to pick up the picture, and before I even turn it over, I know what I'll find.

It's me and Madd, on the edge of seventeen. One of his arms is securely wrapped around my waist, the other lifted to flip the bird to the camera as I throw back my head on a laugh. It's a picture I remember well, but back then, the corners of it weren't worn down as they are now. From its rugged condition, it's obvious that it has been handled a lot.

My heart aches as I cast a glance toward the bathroom door, the dull drone of the shower running still echoing from inside. Madd may have acted like he

cut me out of his heart, but looking around this room, it's apparent that he never really did. Even after thinking that I left him behind on purpose, he still held on to all this stuff. Held onto *me*, or what little he had left of me that he could.

Before I even really decide to, my feet start moving in the direction of the bathroom, my hand reaching out for the knob and twisting it to push it open. The room is clouded with steam, the glass shower wall foggy as Madd glances over at the sound of the door closing behind me.

"Sloane?" he asks, running a hand down his face to wick off the water. He leans back on a heel, peeking out at me around the glass. "What's up?"

I can't find the words to respond. Instead, I just grab onto the hem of my shirt, pulling it off over my head and dropping it to the tiled floor. Then I reach behind my back to unfasten my bra.

Madd's gaze turns smoldering as he watches me strip down to nothing, his teeth sinking into his lower lip to stifle a groan once I'm fully naked before him. His heated stare rakes up and down my form slowly, his dark blue eyes locking with mine again as he growls, "Come here."

I move toward him effortlessly, led by the undeniable pull between us until I'm stepping into the shower behind him, my gaze dropping to track the water droplets carving paths down the dips and curves of his inked skin. His cock hangs heavily between his toned thighs, already hard and pointing right at me. Everything about him draws me in, and he knows it, too. He doesn't have to say a word to get me to move closer. I step right up to him until my nipples are brushing his chest, the contact sending a fission of heat straight to my core.

Madd bends down, looping his arms around me and pulling me tight against him. "What did you find?" he murmurs, pinning me beneath the intensity of his dark stare.

As if he knows I was snooping around in his room and that's what led me in here.

Then again, he knows *me*.

He always has.

My lips part to speak, but I'm unable to force words past the lump in my throat. Instead, I push back against him, splaying a palm against his broad chest as water cascades down over his skin, watching it run between my fingers. My eyes zero in on the inky patterns decorating his flesh, finally focusing on the individual tattoos making up the canvas of his skin, and my

heart trips over its valves.

Because right there, over his heart, is the clearest message he could send me—one that I somehow never noticed or picked out since it's so well hidden amongst the rest of his ink.

Duchess.

My eyes dart up to meet his, and from the knowing look in his eyes and the tilt of his lips, he's well aware of what I've just realized.

"I always said it'd be my first tattoo, didn't I?" he rasps, sliding a hand up my wet body until he's cupping my cheek. He tilts my head back, rubbing the pad of his thumb along my lower lip as his eyes track the movement.

I throw my arms around his neck, yanking him down while pushing up on my tiptoes until our lips collide. Water cascades down our faces, our lips sliding, tongues battling for dominance. We devour one another, our mouths still fused together as Madd lifts me up into his arms to bring me closer. My legs wrap around his waist and he twists me around until my back meets the cool tiles of the shower wall, pinning me against it firmly with his body.

I gasp into his mouth as he circles his hips to line himself up, the tip of his cock prodding my entrance. Chasing it, I grind my own hips down, and a low groan escapes his throat as he slides inside.

"Fuck," he growls, dragging his lips from mine down to my jawline as he thrusts deeper, filling me up.

My inner walls stretch to accommodate his girth, a breathy moan leaving me as my head falls back against the tile. He rocks out halfway and punches back in, fucking me hard and fast against the shower wall until I'm breathless, dangling on the precipice of release.

Madd kisses his way back up to my lips again, circling his hips to grind his pelvis against my clit as he swallows my moans. He alternates hard thrusts with rolls of his hips until I'm falling apart on his dick, my orgasm triggering his own. With a final thrust, he buries himself deep inside me, groaning into my mouth as he floods me with the warmth of his release.

We're both panting as we come back down, Madd easing out of me and settling me back on my feet. He holds me steady as my knees wobble beneath me, directing me under the stream of the shower and grabbing for a washcloth, using it to clean every inch of my skin. I clean him, too, running the cloth and my hands all over his hard body until I'm panting again, all worked up and ready for round two.

We don't fuck again there in the shower, though. We get out and towel off,

then go back into his bedroom, where he tosses me a t-shirt to wear. It's so big on me that it goes down to my knees, but just as I'm turning to Madd to poke fun at how ridiculous it must look, I catch the heated look in his eyes at the sight of me in his shirt and bite my tongue.

Okay, then.

The two of us settle on his bed- me in the huge t-shirt and him in only a loose-fitting pair of athletic shorts- and despite the fact that we're eyeing each other up like we want to tear them off, the two of us instead do something that we should've done a long time ago.

We talk.

I tell him about what it was like to get dropped off in Denver at seventeen, and he tells me what it was like here in the aftermath of my leaving. We eat the rest of the cold pizza, reminiscing about times in the past when we'd grab a pie from Dino's and go hang at the old lodge. I ask about his tattoos, and he points out his favorites, telling me about the plans he has for more.

We talk and talk until the wee hours of the morning, catching each other up on everything we've missed, because even if we can't get the last eight years together back, maybe there's still a chance for us.

Only fate truly knows, but at the end of it all, when I fall asleep in Madd's arms, I'm content in the feeling that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.



I'm not used to sharing a bed with someone. I haven't in a long time, other than that night in the dorms with Sloane, but I don't give much thought to it when we fall asleep together.

Taking a solid kick to the ribs in the wee hours of the morning is the definition of a rude awakening, though.

I grunt and roll away, mumbling expletives under my breath- but rather than drifting back off to sleep, my wolf perks up for some ungodly reason, whining in the back of my mind and raking his claws against the inside of my chest.

It's some sort of warning, and it takes my sleepy mind a moment to realize what it is and snap into awareness. I squint my eyes open in the dark, registering the sound of Sloane's panted breaths and the movement of her body on the bed next to me.

I roll toward her to figure out what the hell is going on, only to take an elbow to the face.

Fucking *ouch*.

I grunt again, flinching back and running my tongue over my front teeth, tasting blood. And if I wasn't awake before, I sure as fuck am now.

My shifter senses immediately kick into high gear, my eyes rapidly adjusting to the darkness as I sit up in bed and peer over at the sleeping beauty beside me. Her eyes are closed, but her face is scrunched up, a little crease forming

between her brows as she lets out a soft whine, her body thrashing against the blankets.

She's dreaming.

"Sloane," I call gently, reaching over to give her shoulder a little shake.

She doesn't respond. She just thrashes harder, her limbs flailing and her heel narrowly missing my nuts.

"Sloane," I say again, louder and firmer this time.

Still nothing.

Another little cry escapes her lips, like she's fighting some sort of monster in her nightmares.

It's no match for the one beside her in this bed, though.

I roll over on top of Sloane, securing her thrashing body with my own and cupping her face in my hands. Her skin is pale, glistening with a thin sheen of sweat as I lower my face right down in front of hers and raise my voice again, putting Alpha command behind it this time. "Sloane, baby, wake up!"

Her eyes pop open, wide and terrified as they lock with mine. Then I see a flicker of recognition register, her tense body slackening beneath me.

"Madd?" she croaks, raising a hand to my face as if to test whether or not I'm really here with her.

"Yeah, it's me," I rasp, pressing my forehead against hers in reassurance.

"You were having a dream."

"Not a dream," she whispers.

I lift my head to gaze down at her and she shakes her own sadly, her eyes shining with the fresh hint of tears.

"A vision?"

She told me last night that she'd been having visions in the form of dreams since the hunters hit the Denver pack, but I guess I just didn't expect them to be so... violent.

Sloane bites her lip, nodding.

"What'd you see?"

"I... I don't know..." she stammers, her glassy green eyes darting around the dark room anxiously.

While part of me wants to know what she saw that was so upsetting, the urge to comfort her is stronger. My wolf is practically demanding it- he's the one who alerted me to her distress in the first place, and now he's shoving all his primal instincts to the forefront of my brain.

Comfort. Soothe. Protect.

Though I suppose they're my instincts, too. My wolf and I are fully integrated; he's just a lot more blunt about what we both need.

I roll off Sloane's body, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her in to lay on my chest instead. "Shhh..." I hush, stroking her hair back from her face and pressing my lips to her forehead. "It's alright now, I've got you. Go back to sleep, Duchess."

Her chest rattles against mine as she draws a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "Thank you," she whispers softly.

My wolf fucking *preens*.

Smug bastard.

I keep a firm hold around Sloane, listening to the sound of her breathing until it starts to level off again in an indication that she's drifted back to sleep. Only then do I allow my own eyes to close and, still holding her tight against my chest, I start to doze off, too.

The next time I wake, it's thankfully not the result of another vicious kick to the ribs. Instead, I'm roused from sleep by Sloane squirming against me, wriggling out from the cage of my arms and sliding out of bed.

"Where do you think you're going?" I ask groggily, squinting against the rays of light filtering in through the cracks in the blinds.

"Bathroom."

Her bare feet pad against the floorboards as she makes her way to the en-suite and ducks inside, closing the door tightly behind her. I stretch my arms over my head with a yawn, wondering what the hell time it is and if there's any hope of talking her back into bed once she's done in there.

The toilet flushes and she emerges from the bathroom a minute later, bypassing the bed and tiptoeing toward the couch across the room instead.

So I suppose that answers whether she's planning on coming back to bed.

Sloane picks up her phone from the side table, frowning down at the screen as it lights up. "Shit, it's almost eleven. We slept through training," she mutters as she scrolls through her notifications.

"I'm sure the others had it handled," I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my face.

"And if it's already eleven, then we've got the place to ourselves, so get back over here."

She rolls her eyes as she tosses her phone back down and turns to me, shaking her head. "I need coffee first. And maybe some food. Yeah, food would be good."

"Women are so needy," I mumble.

Sloane plucks a throw pillow from the couch, whipping it in my direction. I bark a laugh as I bat it out of the air, watching her strut over to my dresser and snatch my white hat from the row along the top. She slips it on her head backwards, those cute-as-fuck dimples sinking into her cheeks as she hits me with a mischievous grin.

“Nuh uh, take that off,” I growl, sitting up and swinging my feet over the edge of the bed. “You lost hat privileges after fucking taunting me at practice.”

Though I’ve gotta admit, she looks hot as fuck in nothing but my t-shirt and hat right now. Pretty sure it’s my new favorite look on her.

Sloane’s grin deepens as she clocks my hungry perusal of her. “Catch me if you can, Madd,” she challenges with a smirk, tossing me a wink before darting for the door.

I spring to my feet, taking off after her, but damnit she’s quick. By the time I’m out the door, she’s already halfway down the hall, giggling all the way.

I pick up my pace, aiming to catch her on the stairs. Her curly hair bounces with every step and I take the stairs two at a time in hot pursuit, finally catching her at the bottom when she jolts to a stop. I snag her around the waist, picking her up and yanking her back into my chest with a laugh, but then I hear a throat clearing and snap my head up to look toward the living room.

That’s when I realize why Sloane stopped at the bottom of the stairs. It wasn’t because she gave up the chase- it’s because my fucking parents are sitting in the living room, staring right at us.

“Good morning!” Mom announces, a little too smugly.

Sloane wriggles to free herself from my grip and I set her back down, shooting her an apologetic glance.

She looks back at me like she wants the floor to open up beneath her feet and swallow her whole. Her cheeks are flushed with embarrassment, her hands hastily smoothing the rumpled shirt and tugging the hem.

I slip an arm around her shoulders as I glance back to my parents, jaw ticking in irritation. Not that I’m against them stopping by, but their timing really fucking sucks.

“What are you guys doing here?” I ask, raking a hand through my hair.

Avery strides in from the kitchen, chomping on an apple, and I turn to her, narrowing my eyes. “And why didn’t you give me a heads up?”

“Oh, like *you* did about bringing my bestie here for a sleepover?” she fires

back. “Rude.” Avery rolls her eyes dramatically, her expression softening as she turns to Sloane with a smile. “Hey, babe. Want some coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Sloane croaks, slipping out from under my arm to scamper off toward my sister.

The two of them head into the kitchen while I walk over to the living room, flopping down on the nearest sofa with a sigh. “Don’t tell me you’re bored with retirement again,” I chuckle wryly, glancing at my dad.

“We need to talk,” he growls.

I furrow my brow in confusion, sitting up a little straighter in response to his harsh tone. “About?”

He pins me with a stern glare and I blow out a breath, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees.

“If this is about what happened with Tristan, he fucking deserved it,” I mutter. “Didn’t Brock tell you *why* I hit him?”

“You hit Tristan?!” Mom pipes up, a flicker of morbid excitement in her eyes rather than the disapproval my father is casting at me.

Okay, so guess that’s not why they’re here.

I shake my head in confusion. “If this isn’t about Tris, then...”

“Jenkins,” Dad grits out. “Is it true that you used Alpha command to make him swallow the barrel of a rifle and pull the trigger?”

“You did *what*?!” Sloane screeches, grinding to a halt in the doorway from the kitchen, her mouth hanging agape. She’s now wearing a pair of leggings underneath my tee, no doubt thanks to one of the stockpiles of clothing hidden around the packhouse. Shifters always need to have extra clothes on hand- we can’t exactly take them with us when we’re in our animal forms.

I turn back to my dad with a wince. “That little fucking snitch,” I mutter under my breath. “Of course he’d piss himself and then go tattle to you...”

“He didn’t,” Dad snaps, cutting me off. “Your sister told me.”

I swing my head back around to aim a glare her way. “Traitor.”

“Hey, don’t blame me,” Avery scoffs, leading Sloane into the living room with two cups of coffee in hand. “That was out of line and you know it.”

“You’re out of control, Madd,” Dad growls, pulling my attention back to him. “You need to lock it up right the fuck now, or else...”

“Or else what?” I challenge, my hackles raising instinctively at the threat in his tone. “You gonna come out of retirement?”

“If it comes down to that.”

I shake my head, burying my face in my hands. “It wasn’t even loaded,” I

mumble from behind my palms.

“You scared the crap out of him!” Avery shouts. “Loaded or not, you scarred the poor kid for life!”

I pick my head up, narrowing my eyes on her. “Not helping.”

“Don’t care,” she huffs. “I’m always gonna call you on your shit, just like you’ll always call me on mine. That’s what we do.”

Sloane plops down next to me on the couch, blinking those big green eyes at me. “Did you really do that to Luke?” she asks quietly, a slight waver to her voice. “You know it was an accident, right?”

I heave a sigh, leaning back against the cushions and stretching an arm behind her. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You can say that again,” Avery mutters.

I shoot her another glare as she hands Sloane’s coffee off to her, but only because I know she’s fucking right and I hate it.

“This isn’t the type of alpha I raised you to be, son,” Dad admonishes. The disappointment in his tone cuts through me like a knife, my throat tightening, fists clenching.

“I know,” I grind out. “Fuck, I know.”

Sloane leans in a little closer, like she’s lending me her support, and something about the move soothes the storm brewing inside.

“It’s one thing to have a temper,” Mom says, and I glance up to meet her bright blue eyes. “It’s another thing to let it control you. I was a lot like you when I was younger, so I get it, Madd. But when you’re in a position of power, where everyone is looking to you to set an example, you have to think twice before reacting. Hell, three times, if you need to.”

I nod my head, her words sinking in. Mom’s always had my back when Dad and I don’t see eye to eye, but I get why she’s on his side about this one.

“I fucked up,” I admit, my voice gravelly. I swing my gaze around the room, meeting my parents’ eyes, my sister’s eyes, Sloane’s eyes. “I’ll own that,” I say. “I’ll apologize to Luke, try to make things right with him.”

Dad nods his approval.

“Well,” Mom sighs, pushing up from her spot on my dad’s lap. “Now that’s out of the way, can we talk about *this*?” She points between Sloane and me, wagging her brows.

I roll my eyes, throwing my head back in exasperation as Avery fucking cackles from across the room. “Can we not?” I groan.

“What? I’m thrilled that you two finally worked things out!” Mom gushes.

“Sloane, honey, we’ve missed you around here. And your timing couldn’t have been better, obviously. Nothing calms down a hotheaded alpha male like finding his mate...”

“Mom!” I protest, picking my head up and aiming a scathing glare her way. She holds up her hands in surrender. “I’m just saying! The full moon isn’t far off...”

I shake my head, looking to my dad for help. “Will you get her outta here?” Dad laughs, rising to stand and slipping an arm around my mom’s waist, pulling her into his side. “C’mon, babe. Let’s leave these kids to it,” he says, urging her toward the door. She rolls her eyes like he’s being ridiculous, but complies nonetheless.

“Madd, come by later so we can talk some more,” Dad tosses over his shoulder.

I tip my chin in acknowledgement, watching after them as they leave.

“I’m gonna grab some more coffee,” Avery chirps. “Sloane, you want some?”

“No thanks,” she replies quietly, and I glance down at her, the tension in her tone sending up alarm bells in my head.

She turns to meet my stare, and my chest tightens as I take in the look in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask hesitantly.

I know I fucked up with Jenkins, but I was defending *her*, damnit.

Sloane worries her lower lip between her teeth, eyes flickering away. “I need to talk to you,” she says quietly, and my heart plummets.

Fuck, is this really it? All that progress, all the strides we made last night, wiped out because of one stupid mistake?

She drags in a deep breath, gaze lifting to meet mine again as Avery disappears into the kitchen. “I need to tell you about my vision.”



The dull roar of chatter from the other squad leaders echoes down the hall as Sloane, Avery, and I make our way to the conference room at the complex, all three of us a little bit on edge. As soon as Sloane told me about her vision, I asked Avery to call an urgent meeting with squad leadership- because if it's to be believed, then we'll need to act fast.

Everyone in the room is still chatting away when we approach the doorway, but as soon as I step into the room, they go silent. The other squad leaders eye me warily like I'm a ticking time bomb, and as soon as I sweep my gaze around the conference table to take stock of who's here, I discover why.

Tristan Masters is seated between Ares and Lo, staring down at the table and purposefully avoiding my glare.

I narrow my eyes on him, my upper lip curling back from my teeth in a snarl. "Out."

The others collectively wince as Tristan looks up at me.

"Madd..." Iver sighs in an attempt to stick his neck out for his friend.

I snap my head around to glare at him. "You know what he did, right?" I growl, swinging my glare around to Archer, Ares, and Lo. "All of you know?"

They exchange anxious glances, nobody rushing to be the first to speak up. That is until Archer, ever the voice of reason, takes the lead.

"We know," he states calmly, leaning forward in his chair and folding his

hands on the table. “And I get why you’re pissed about it, trust me, but he was just a kid at the time.”

“That’s no excuse,” I fire back. “He’s not a kid anymore. He could’ve told us weeks ago, fucking owned up to what he did rather than letting it drag on. He didn’t.”

“He made a mistake,” Archer reasons.

“Can you guys stop talking about me like I’m not in the room?” Tristan groans, pushing up to his feet. He plants his palms on the table, leaning forward over it and locking eyes with me as I resist the urge to punch him in the face again. “You know how sorry I am for what I did to you,” he says sincerely. Then he glances at Sloane, cringing as he amends, “to both of you.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Doesn’t change what happened.”

“I know,” he sighs, shaking his head. “*Fuck, I know*, and I have to live with that. I wish I could go back in time and change it, but I *can’t*, man.” He heaves another sigh, his voice rough with regret. “I don’t know how I’ll ever make it up to you guys, but I’m gonna try...”

“Don’t bother,” I grumble, cutting him off. “Just stay out of our business, like you should’ve done from the beginning. What Sloane and I do is between us-”

“And *this* is between *us*,” he interjects. “Me and you and Sloane. It doesn’t have anything to do with the squad.”

I bang a fist against the table, startling the others. “The fuck it doesn’t! We have to trust each other to work together.”

“Come on, guys, we’ve been friends all our lives,” Lo pipes up, swinging her gaze between Tristan and me. It’d typically be Avery’s move to speak up right about now and try to smooth things over, but she’s just as pissed off at Tristan as I am over what he did. My twin is firmly on Team Madd with this one.

“Tris made a mistake,” Lo breathes, locking eyes with me. “And yeah, I think we can all agree that it was a huge fucking mistake, but it’s not like he did it maliciously. We’ve all been through too much together to let something like this drive a wedge between us.”

“So you guys are all on his side?” I scoff, glancing around at the others in disbelief.

“We aren’t on any side,” Archer says matter-of-factly. “We’re all on the side of this squad not imploding. On the side of solidarity, because we have a lot

bigger shit going on right now. Isn't that why you called this meeting?"

"He's right," Sloane says quietly, placing her hand on my arm.

I glance down, meeting her wide green eyes, and the storm brewing in my chest immediately calms. I don't know how she does it with a single touch, a single look- especially because a week ago, those same actions would've provoked entirely different emotions within me.

"We have to push past it for now because this is more important," she says, giving me a pointed look. And while I don't like it, I give her a single, curt nod in agreement, pulling out the nearest empty chair at the table.

It feels like everyone else breathes a collective sigh of relief as I sink down into it, taking Sloane with me and planting her firmly in my lap. I need her to anchor me right now, and for what she's about to disclose to everyone seated around us, I know she needs me, too.

The others, wisely, don't comment on the fact that the same girl I was spitting vitriol at during our last meeting is now sitting in my lap. The tension still hangs thickly in the air as Tristan retakes his seat and Avery claims the chair beside me, the matching grim expressions on our faces betraying the gravity of what we need to discuss.

"So what's going on?" Iver asks nervously, looking between me and Sloane.

She draws a deep breath, my arm tightening around her waist as she blows it out slowly before beginning.

"So, some of you know that I've had a couple of visions..."

"You're a seer?" Ares blurts, eyes widening. "Seriously? Way to bury the lead on that one, guys!"

"It's still new," Sloane replies bashfully. "And I don't really know what the visions mean yet, but..."

"What'd you see?" Iver cuts in, interest equally piqued.

I slap a palm against the table in annoyance. "Will you guys just let her finish?" I snap, scowling at my friends. "Damn."

Ares holds up his hands in surrender, slack-jawed and wide-eyed like I'm the one being unreasonable.

Once he hears about Sloane's vision, he'll understand. I don't get rattled easily, but I've been on edge since she told me what she'd seen. Avery, too, because we immediately shared it with her to get her take on it. The consensus was to call this meeting, because if we don't act, we're fucked.

"I've been having these... dreams," Sloane says, her voice wavering like she's unsure how to explain herself. I plant a hand on her thigh, giving it a

little squeeze in encouragement, and she continues. “Visions. I had my first one in Denver, the night the hunters attacked. And I’ve had a few more since I came back here, but mostly they were of the past. Until last night.”

She pauses, everyone waiting with bated breath for her to go on. “Last night, I had another vision. There was a man standing in the middle of the street at the entrance to the access road, someone I’ve never seen before. I think...” She trails off, wincing. “I think it might be one of the hunters. Something about him seemed off, like he wasn’t here with good intentions.”

“Shit,” Iver mutters under his breath.

“Do you know when it’s supposed to happen?” Lo asks.

Sloane nods, her throat bobbing with a hard swallow. “The night before the full moon. The only thing the man said was the full moon’s tomorrow, and wolves need to run. I kept trying to get closer, but for some reason, I couldn’t. It was like I was being held back. Restrained, somehow.”

We all sit in silence for a long moment as everyone processes Sloane’s warning. Even though I’ve already heard about her vision, an eerie chill creeps up my spine all the same.

“So that gives us a week,” Archer mumbles.

Iver scrubs a hand over his face, leaning his elbows on the table. “Should we cancel the run?”

Sloane glances back at me, and I know what she’s thinking. Cancelling the run is the obvious thing to do, but neither of us have brought it up, both hesitant to broach the topic.

We just found our way back to one another, and this full moon should be *ours*. We’ve waited so long to run together; to receive confirmation as to whether we’re fated mates. After all we’ve been through, we deserve this chance. But staying safe is more important.

“Well if we know they’re coming before the moon, we could set a trap,” Ares suggests, swiping a hand over his chin. “If we take them out, then there’s no need to cancel the run.”

“If we cancel the run, everyone will know why, after what just happened in Denver,” Archer mutters. “They’ll panic.”

I stroke my thumb against Sloane’s thigh, contemplating the best course of action. “We need to make a recommendation to the council,” I say. “Either cancel the run now or wait to make the call until we’ve handled the threat.”

“Should we take a vote?” Avery asks, glancing around the table. “All in favor of cancelling the run now?”

Me, Sloane, Archer, and Tristan raise a hand, and I can already see how this is going to go.

“Those in favor of waiting?”

Iver, Ares, Lo, and Avery cast their vote for the second option, which leaves us at an impasse.

“It’s a tie,” she announces.

Normally, we’d discuss again and re-vote, but before we can move in that direction, Ares speaks up.

“Well technically it’s not a tie,” he points out. “Sloane hasn’t been initiated yet.”

I brush him off with the wave of a hand. “That’s just a formality.”

“You said yourself that she doesn’t get a vote until she’s initiated,” Ares challenges.

Of course he’d bring that up, the little shit.

No doubt it’s because without Sloane’s vote, the decision would tip in his favor.

“What’s the initiation?” Sloane asks, leaning forward on my lap and peering back at me. “I mean, I should just do it, right? You all did.”

I shake my head with a frown. Suddenly, I don’t want her to do it. Because I know what the initiation entails, and I don’t want to put her through that, especially not now.

Before, I insisted on her being initiated because I thought she’d chicken out, and thus the issue of her insisting on taking her place in squad leadership would take care of itself. Now it’s come back to bite me in the ass.

Thanks, Ares.

“Just tell me what it is,” Sloane presses when nobody speaks up, sweeping her gaze around the table.

“We can’t,” Avery grinds out, sliding me a glance that says she’s just as hesitant about this as I am.

“You don’t learn what it is until the initiation itself, that’s part of it,” Iver provides.

We were young when we came up with the whole initiation thing. It was just for fun at the time- we were a bunch of teenage thrill seekers looking for a way to up the stakes, and that’s what we landed on.

“Is this really necessary?” Tristan groans, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Guess the two of us can still agree on some things.

“Hey, you guys are the ones who insisted it’s a rite of passage,” Ares huffs.
“I had to do it...”

“I already said I’d do it,” Sloane sighs, shifting her weight on my lap.
“Whatever it is, I’ll do it right now.”

She sounds a little too eager. *If only she knew.*

Avery slides me a glance, chewing on her lower lip, and knowing what she’s seeking, I give her a subtle nod in assent.

“Fine,” she declares, speaking for both of us. “We’ll hold off on cancelling the run, and in the meantime, we’ll work up a plan of approach to the hunter situation and get Sloane initiated. Are we all in agreement?”

“When?” Ares asks, his eyes lighting up as he rubs his palms together eagerly. “Are we gonna throw a big party after, like usual?”

Archer elbows his brother. “Head in the game, Ares. We need a plan to handle the threat first.”

He slumps back in his seat with a frown, pouting like a fucking toddler.

“Let’s bring it to the council first, then regroup here tonight to come up with a plan,” I suggest.

Everyone else grunts and nods in affirmation, pushing out their chairs and rising to their feet. As they murmur amongst each other and start making their way to the door to leave, Sloane twists around in my lap, her eyes meeting mine. “What’s so bad about the initiation?” she whispers, searching my face like she’ll find the answers there.

I shake my head. I wish I could tell her all about it, but tradition dictates that she’ll go in blind. Though if I can’t figure out a way to change things up for her initiation, I may have to break the rules and give her a heads-up.

I clench my jaw, tightening my grip around her protectively. “You’ll see.”



It feels ridiculously indulgent to be out drinking with the girls tonight when we all know that trouble is knocking, but Avery wouldn't take no for an answer. After everything that's transpired over the last few days- getting shot, having that vision, meeting with the squad leaders and the council, coming up with a plan to head off the hunters- we're all desperate to return to some semblance of normalcy, and tonight just happens to be ladies' night at the Stillwater Tap.

Madd wasn't super pleased when Avery told him she was stealing me away for a girls' night out. He's been stuck to me like glue ever since we worked out why we couldn't communicate after I moved to Denver, like he's afraid that if he lets me out of his sight, we'll lose this fragile peace we've found and things between us will change again.

I suppose I can't blame him.

Now that we've reconnected, it feels like we're stuck in this strange state of delicate suspension, holding our breath as we wait for the bottom to drop out from beneath us.

We've come this far, but what if it's all for nothing?

Not knowing whether we're actually fated mates is like the ever-present elephant in the room that neither of us has the guts to acknowledge. We used to say that if we weren't fated, we'd still bond as chosen mates, but I'm not sure whether that's still on the table after everything... and I sure as shit

don't want to be the one to bring it up.

At this point, we're both avoiding the inevitable- partially because we're not sure if we'll even get to run together this full moon, but mostly because it's a whole lot easier to just live in the moment rather than planning for the future. If we never had to leave Madd's bed, we'd be golden. It's the one place trouble has yet to find us.

"Sloane, you're freaking *glowing*," Andie remarks, her comment pulling me out of my tangled web of thoughts and thrusting me back into the present.

Lo shoots me a sly grin, wagging her brows. "Must be all that make up sex with Madd," she teases. "We've barely seen you two since you sorted your shit out."

Avery grimaces, sliding off her barstool and flicking her long blonde hair over a shoulder. "Think I'm gonna go grab more drinks while you guys have this conversation."

"Aw c'mon, don't you wanna hear all the dirt?" Andie laughs.

"My room's down the hall in the packhouse," Avery replies, deadpan. "Trust me, I know what they've been up to."

I slap my hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle, Lo and Andie completely losing it as Avery moves away from our table to head to the bar.

"So?" Lo asks as soon as Avery's out of earshot.

I can't hold back the grin that stretches my lips, my cheeks blushing. "Okay, yeah, it's totally the make up sex."

"I knew it!" she exclaims, slapping a palm loudly against the table to punctuate her victory.

"Well, we still have a ways to go," I amend, smoothing a hand over my hair. I spent over an hour straightening it, taming every frizzy curl, but it's so sleek and glossy that it was totally worth it. "I mean, it's not your typical situation. We're falling back into old patterns, but so much time has passed that there are bound to be hiccups along the way. We're not the same people we used to be, so we're kinda trying to navigate that. It's strange getting to know someone again when you've also known them since infancy."

"I bet," Lo says, nodding in understanding. "Though anger issues aside, I'm not sure Madd's changed all that much since we were teenagers."

Her statement gives rise to an unexpected flare of jealousy, my wolf perking up territorially. It's not fair that she got all that time with him while it was robbed from me. All of them did- Andie, Lo, Avery, the guys... everyone else was still part of his life, while I was cruelly cut out.

“I’m sure you guys will work things out,” Andie pipes up reassuringly. “Even when he was pretending to hate you, we all knew he never stopped loving you. You guys are meant to be.”

“If you’re not fated, there’s no hope for the rest of us,” Lo adds with a snort.

“Alright, babes, bottoms up!” Avery sing-songs as she approaches the table with two shot glasses in each hand, the rims lined in sugar and lemon wedges resting atop each one. She sets them down, sliding a glass to each of us as she retakes her seat.

“Ugh, lemon drops?” Andie asks, eyeing the shot in front of her warily.

“Shit, I forgot,” Avery mutters with a wince. “Want me to get something else?”

Andie got drunk on lemon drop shots the night she lost her v-card, and she hasn’t been a big fan of them since. I’m not sure if it’s the memory of the hangover or of what happened with the guy after that turned her off of them. Maybe both.

Lemon drops are also Avery’s favorite, so she clearly has selective memory.

Andie rolls her eyes, picking up the shot. “*Sure* you did,” she chastises, giving in and thrusting her glass toward the center of the table. The rest of us pick up our shots and follow suit, clinking them together.

“To girls’ night,” I say, grinning at my friends.

“While it lasts,” Avery adds with a chuckle.

We all knock the shots against the table and tip them back, the vodka burning my throat all the way down. I scrunch up my face, shoving the lemon between my teeth and biting down to diffuse the taste of the liquor.

“Those are fucking foul,” Andie coughs, wiping her mouth off on a wrist.

Avery sucks the juice from her lemon wedge, dropping it into her empty shot glass with a light laugh. “Whatever. I think they’re delicious.”

I recover from my own shot, turning to Avery with a brow raised. “What do you mean, while it lasts? You’re not calling it quits already, are you?”

“Oh hell no, we’re just getting started!” Avery exclaims.

“She means it’s only a matter of time before the guys show up,” Lo cuts in, chuckling. “They can’t stand to be left out. Every time we try to have a girls’ night, they just happen to wander in, like they had no idea we’d be here...”

“That, and Madd looked like he wanted to strangle me when I told him I was stealing you away.” Avery gives me a pointed look and I laugh, tossing my shiny straight hair back.

Honestly, I’m surprised we’ve made it this long without him crashing our

party. Madd has a jealous streak a mile long, and even when we were young, he hated when Avery and I did things without him. He'd always invent an excuse to turn up and join in.

"Are things any better with Tris?" Lo asks, stirring the ice around in her vodka drink with the swizzle straw.

I shrug a shoulder. "As good as they can be, right now. I mean, he's my brother, and I get why he did it. I think it'll take Madd a little longer to forgive him, though."

"He's a champion grudge holder," Avery agrees. "Though you already know that."

Andie lets out a squeal as the DJ changes the song, jumping up from her stool excitedly. "Dance floor, now!" she demands, reaching toward Lo to pull her up from her seat.

Avery and I exchange a glance, knowing there's no way we're getting out of this one. 'Call Me Maybe' just might be the most annoying song in existence, but Andie has always been obsessed with it for some reason. Every time it comes on when we're out somewhere, she insists we all dance- and I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia as the four of us make our way toward the dance floor, the crowd parting for Andie Raines as she leads us to the center.

This bar is located in her pack's home territory of Stillwater, and the majority of the patrons here are members of the Stillwater pack. As the alpha's daughter, Andie is respected and adored- she's spared the sleazy come-ons and wandering grabby-hands that the rest of us are often subjected to on the dance floor during ladies' night, even though she's arguably the most beautiful girl in here. Her long red hair swishes behind her as she bops to the song, a wide smile stretching her lips that shows off her straight white teeth. She's dressed to the nines tonight, just like the rest of us, and while the dudes on the dance floor keep a respectable distance, they can't help but gawk at her.

The four of us dance together, losing ourselves in the music as the DJ spins to another song and the crowd starts to close in tighter around us. I'm shaking my ass to a hip-hop song when I feel someone come up behind me, the warmth of their body pressing against mine as an arm locks around my waist, yanking me backwards into a hard chest.

I'd know that possessive grip and intoxicating scent anywhere.

I throw my head back against Madd's shoulder, reaching back to loop my arms around his neck as I melt into him. "I was wondering when you were

gonna show up,” I muse, tilting my chin up until I meet his blue eyes.

“What are you wearing?” he grumbles, his hands touring the front of my cute chiffon romper. It’s pale yellow in color- his favorite on me- with a plunging neckline and sinfully short hem, all my best assets on display.

I spin around in Madd’s arms, taking a small step back so he can get a better look at me. “You don’t like it?” I ask, tilting my head.

Except I know I look damn good tonight. The sky-high heels I’m rocking make my legs look way longer than they actually are and wrestling with the straightening iron definitely paid off. Madd’s practically drooling as he takes me in, his eyes darkening as they flick down my body, then slowly rake back up to meet my own.

“I’m gonna have to have a word with Avery about letting you go out dressed like this,” he mutters.

“What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed?” I ask innocently.

Madd clenches his jaw, his gaze sweeping around the dance floor before he steps closer to me again and tugs my body against his. “I don’t like the way these other assholes are looking at you.”

I roll my eyes, pressing my palms against his chest to push him away, but he doesn’t give me an inch of leeway. He anchors me against him tighter, his hands sliding down to squeeze my ass as he leans his head down beside mine, growling into my ear. “You’re *mine*.”

Um, is it suddenly scorching hot in here?

My heart stutters in my chest, a shiver tracking up my spine as my wolf pushes to the surface.

She likes being claimed by Madd a little *too* much.

“C’mon,” he urges, shifting me to his side and tucking me against him with an arm around my shoulders. “The guys got a booth.”

“But we have a table over there,” I protest as he starts to lead me off the dance floor, pointing in the other direction.

Either he doesn’t hear me, or he doesn’t care. I’m betting on the latter. I shoot my friends an apologetic glance over my shoulder as Madd guides me over to a round booth tucked away in the corner where Iver and Ares are posted up. Madd slides in on the other side, pulling me with him and settling me on his lap.

“Hey, Sloane,” Ares drawls, his gaze immediately dropping to scope out my cleavage.

“Eyes up here, bro,” Madd growls in warning.

I stifle a giggle as Ares' eyes ping to Madd's, widening like he's surprised he got caught. "Hey, I wasn't-"

"Yes you were," Madd snaps. "Don't let me catch you doing it again."

I twist around to look at Madd, rolling my eyes. "Really, caveman?"

He just grunts, shifting me on his lap until my ass is settled right over his very hard dick.

Well alright, then.

"I'm gonna go scope out the dance floor," Ares sighs, moving to slide out of the booth. "Iver, you in?"

Iver shoots a smug grin our way before nodding in agreement, shuffling over and getting to his feet to follow Ares.

As soon as they depart, Madd slides us a little further into the booth until we're facing the room, the table in front of us. "You feel what you're doing to me?" he asks in a low voice as he rearranges me on his lap.

I lean back against him, resting my head on his shoulder. "Don't blame me because you can't control yourself."

His hands stroke against my bare thighs, fingertips digging in as he kneads the pliant flesh. "Please," he scoffs, leaning in closer until his lips tickle the shell of my ear. "As if you're not dripping wet right now."

I shiver as his fingertips brush the apex of my thighs, shuddering a harsh breath.

"You are, aren't you?" he muses, catching my earlobe between his teeth and giving it a little tug.

If he keeps this up, we're gonna have to get out of here, stat. Between the delicious way his ab muscles bunch and stretch against my back with his movements, the firm ridge of his dick riding beneath my ass, and the way he's teasing my thighs with his rough fingertips, inching closer to where I want him, I'm practically a fucking puddle.

I gasp as he slides a hand inside the leg of my romper, his fingers brushing against the lace of my panties. "Madd!" I whisper-shout, body tensing and thighs slamming together.

"Shhh," he hushes, tracing the seam of my pussy lips with his finger. "Don't make it obvious."

I grab for his wrist beneath the table, pressing my thighs together tighter and squirming to get away. "What if someone sees?" I hiss through clenched teeth.

He holds me tight against him, chuckling lowly in my ear. "Relax, babe.

Unless they're laying on the floor looking under the table, they can't see shit." He uses his other hand to pry my thighs apart, giving him better access to stroke me through my panties.

My eyes dart around the bar, terrified that I'll find someone looking- but from the way we're tucked in the corner, we're fairly inconspicuous.

Still, I probably shouldn't let him continue... *right?*

I had quite a few drinks before he showed up tonight, so I blame what happens next on the liquor.

Madd's fingers slip beneath my panties, the thick tip of one sliding inside me with ease.

Because he's right.

I'm soaked.

I'm so fucking turned on that I can't see straight or make rational decisions.

Case in point.

"This better be for me and not some other asshole in here," Madd growls, pumping his finger in and out slowly.

"Madd," I gasp, my body slackening against him. I throw an arm over my head, wrapping it around the back of his neck and tugging his face closer to mine. "You've gotta stop..."

His low chuckle rumbles in my ear, the sound of it vibrating through my body all the way down to the tips of my toes. "I don't think you want me to," he murmurs against my neck. "I think you want me to remind you who this pussy belongs to."

He slides his finger out of me, dragging it up to circle my clit as I bite down on my lip to stifle a moan.

This is a terrible idea. We're in a very public place, all of our friends are here, and... oh, *fuck*.

I whimper under my breath as Madd starts rubbing my clit, his other hand pressing me firmer to his lap so I can feel every hard inch of him against my backside.

We shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't let him do this, but there's no way I'm about to tell him to stop- not when he's already got me so close to unraveling, dangling on the precipice of release.

Just when it's about to take me under, his finger leaves my clit, sliding back down to my entrance. I whine in protest, ready to throw a fucking fit about him edging me, but then he plunges his thick digit inside my opening and I lose all train of thought.

“Who does this pussy belong to, Duchess?” Madd drawls in my ear as he fucks me with his finger.

I try my best to hold it together, to not look like I’m over here in the corner about to come all over Madd’s hand. “You,” I breathe as he slides another digit in, shuddering at the delicious stretch.

“That’s right,” he says smugly, spreading his hand to rub my clit with his thumb while his fingers remain buried inside me. “You’re mine, Sloane. All. Fucking. *Mine.*” He punctuates each word with hard thrusts of his fingers, my inner walls gripping them tightly.

His thumb rubs my clit harder, his voice a harsh rasp in my ear. “Now come for me, baby. Show everyone in here who you fucking belong to.”

I shatter spectacularly, throwing my head back against his shoulder and tightening my arm around the back of his neck as my orgasm crashes over me. The music in here is loud enough, but Madd’s lips slam against mine to swallow my scream anyways, his tongue plundering my mouth as harshly as his fingers do my pussy. He kisses the life out of me as I ride his hand, his ministrations drawing every last ounce of pleasure out of me until I’m boneless in his arms, wrung out and seeing fucking stars.

His hand slips out of my panties as I fight to catch my breath, still sagging against him as reality starts to creep back in.

Holy fuck.

Did we really just do that?

My cheeks burn with shame as my eyes dart around the crowded bar- but by some miracle, nobody’s looking this way. Not only did we just do that, but we actually got away with it.

At least I hope we did.

Fuck.

“Somebody needs to get ahold of my brother, he’s scamming on every poor girl in here,” Andie laughs as she flops down in the opposite side of the booth, completely oblivious to the little bubble Madd and I are in. She’s breathless from dancing, a thin sheen of sweat clinging to her milky skin.

Madd slides his hand out from underneath my romper, resting it on my thigh instead as I lift my head.

“Who, Ares?” I stammer, trying my best to act as normal as possible, like I didn’t just get finger-fucked to orgasm right here in this booth.

“Who else?” Andie sighs, rolling her eyes.

“Scooch over,” Lo demands as she approaches, hip-bumping Andie and

lowering herself into the booth beside her. “Sloane, you missed a hell of a show,” she gushes, sweeping her blonde hair over a shoulder and fanning her face with a hand. “Ares was hitting on some chick, and I have no idea what he said to her, but he came *this* close to getting slapped.”

I giggle, shaking my head as I relax back against Madd, his arm locking firmly around my waist and his hand splaying against my belly.

“Have you two just been hiding out back here?” Andie asks.

“Something like that,” Madd mumbles, slyly raising his hips to grind his hard-on against my ass. “We were just talking about getting out of here though, weren’t we, Sloane?”

I nod in agreement, because I’m pretty sure if I say no, he might try to fuck me right here in this booth.

Though for some reason, I don’t hate that idea.

It has to be the liquor, right?

Damn Avery and her lemon drop shots.



“Can’t you just give me a hint?” Sloane whines, her wide green eyes meeting mine as she props herself up against my chest on a forearm. She sticks out her lower lip in a pout, batting her eyelashes- and while a weaker man would take one look at her right now and fold, I’m no stranger to her persuasion tactics.

I reach up to cup her jaw, thumbing that pouty lip of hers as I stare into her eyes. I see the flare of excitement in them, like she thinks I’m about to cave and spill all the details about the initiation ritual for squad leaders, and for a second, I let her believe I might.

She perks up even more as I furrow my brow in contemplation, all too eager for me to disclose the secret.

Then a smile breaks across my face and I chuckle lowly, shaking my head. “Nice try.”

“Ugh!” Sloane groans dramatically, rolling off my body and landing on the bed beside me with a huff. “What’s the point of sleeping with the boss if I can’t get special treatment?!”

I slide an elbow underneath me and roll onto my side, smirking down at her. “And here I thought it had something to do with my big dick.”

She rolls her eyes, muttering, “you’re a big dick, alright.”

A growl rumbles from my chest and I lunge for her. Sloane lets out a high-pitched squeal as I haul her back against me, locking an arm firmly around

her waist as the fingers of my other hand seek out her most ticklish spot: the sides of her ribs.

She squirms against my hold, trying to get away, but there's no escaping my iron-clad grip. She erupts into fits of giggles as I tickle her mercilessly, laughing along with her until she's breathless and tears are leaking from the corners of her eyes.

I only let up because the way she's wriggling her pert little ass against me has all my blood rushing south. We're dressed for bed- me in a pair of athletic shorts, her in a tank top and a pair of cotton shorts- and with only these measly layers of thin fabric separating us, we might as well be naked.

Sloane pants to catch her breath, her body melting into mine, and my dick likes that, too. It twitches against her backside and she draws a short gasp, whipping her head around to gape at me.

"Really, Madd?"

"What?" I ask innocently.

"Do you just have a constant boner?"

"When I've got you in my bed, yes."

She rolls her eyes, peeling my arm from around her waist and sitting up, twisting to face me.

"Don't act offended," I scoff, rolling onto my back and tucking an arm behind my head. The corner of my mouth lifts in a smirk as I meet her gaze.

"You love my cock."

Her eyes flicker down to the obscene bulge in my shorts that I'm making no effort to conceal, and I don't miss the way the tip of her tongue darts out to wet her lips before her gaze snaps back to mine.

"You're shameless."

I shrug a shoulder, still smirking. "You can admit it. I tell you all the time how much I love that pussy."

"Madd!" she admonishes, swatting at my chest.

I dart a hand out to capture her wrist, tugging her in until she's falling on top of me, her curly hair wild around her face. As good as she looked last night with her hair straightened, I'm glad the curls are back. They suit her.

"Not everyone has a dirty mouth like you," she mumbles, planting a kiss on said mouth. She pulls back far too soon, leaving me wanting, but then she gets this devilish gleam in her eye that I recognize all too well.

My dick gets even harder.

Sloane pushes up from my chest, shuffling down my body until she's

straddling my thighs, dragging her fingernails against my abs. “I like to think actions speak louder than words,” she muses, her hands traveling lower until she’s tucking her fingers into the waistband of my shorts.

Fuck yes.

I lift my hips as she starts to drag them down, my pulse kicking up a notch in anticipation.

Sloane watches with rapt attention as she lowers my shorts, the head of my cock catching on the waistband before it springs free and slaps against my lower abs. Then she licks her lips again, her hooded gaze meeting mine as she reaches forward to wrap her hand around my length.

I grit my teeth as she tightens her grip and starts pumping up and down, my dick growing impossibly harder in her hand.

“Fuck, babe,” I hiss, and a lazy smile of satisfaction creases her lips as she shuffles back a little more, leaning over to kiss the tip of my cock.

I punch my hips up, chasing her lips, but she pulls back again, teasing the fuck out of me with a devious little smirk.

My muscles tense as Sloane leans back in. She swirls her tongue around the head of my dick like she’s licking a fucking lollipop, then backs off again with a smug smile, clearly enjoying this little game she’s playing.

Her grip around my shaft tightens as she pumps my cock a few more times, and when she lowers her head over it again, I decide I’ve had enough of her toying with me. Her lips press against the tip and I sink a hand in the back of her hair, holding her in place as I thrust past them into her warm, wet mouth.

Fuck, it feels good. *Too good.*

Sloane chuckles around my dick, the vibration of it sending shockwaves of pleasure rioting through me as she takes me deeper, her tongue swirling against the underside of my shaft. With my hand still resting on the back of her head, she starts bobbing up and down over my lap, sucking and slurping and making love to my dick with her mouth.

She’s right. Actions speak louder than words.

My phone buzzes on my nightstand with an incoming call, but there’s no way in hell I’m picking it up. Not now.

“Damn that feels good,” I murmur, one hand fisting her hair, the other fisting the sheets.

She takes my cock all the way to the back of her throat, her lips kissing the base, and I see fucking stars.

There’s no way I’m gonna last.

“Fuck, Dutch,” I groan.

My phone is still vibrating incessantly, but I couldn’t care less. Not when Sloane is giving me what might just be the best blowjob of my fucking life. I’m consumed by pleasure, my muscles slackening, my balls tightening...

And then someone suddenly pounds a fist against the bedroom door, startling Sloane so bad that she jerks and almost bites my dick.

“Madd!” Avery’s voice calls from the other side.

“Not a good time, Aves!” I growl back, though hearing my sister’s voice when I’m about to come is less than fucking ideal.

“We need to get to the complex, IT picked up something at the border!”

Well that’s a boner killer.

Sloane releases my cock with a loud pop, sitting up and wiping the saliva from her chin with the back of a hand. “Did she just say...?”

“Yeah,” I grumble, scrambling to yank my shorts up over my still very hard dick. I’m going to have the worst case of blue balls in the goddamn world after this.

Sloane hops off the bed and scurries to the door while I find a t-shirt to pull on, grabbing a hat off my dresser and slipping it on over my bedraggled hair. I toss her one of my hoodies to throw over her skimpy pajamas as she lets Avery in, and as soon as I see my sister’s face, my hackles raise. She’s clearly spooked by whatever’s going on.

The three of us waste no time in rushing out of the packhouse, piling into my Jeep and speeding to the squad complex. Aves fills us in along the way, though she doesn’t know much yet- only that Lo called from the IT unit and said to come down right away because something tripped the security system set up around the perimeter of the six-pack territory.

We park at the gate and sprint across the practice field to the doors, rushing through the darkened corridors of the complex until we reach IT. Lo is there waiting for us along with a couple of members of the squad’s IT team, and she dismisses them as she ushers us inside quickly, leading Avery, Sloane, and me to the large table in the back where she’s got a laptop set up, already connected to the giant TV screen on the wall.

“Has the border been breached?” I ask, getting right down to business.

Lo shakes her head, dropping into the chair across from the laptop. “Nothing’s crossed it, but we picked up activity just outside of the border in several spots.”

The three of us huddle behind her as she clicks through different windows on

her computer, lifting a hand to point up at the TV screen that mirrors her own.

“About thirty minutes ago, the motion detectors picked up something just north of Riverton.”

I stare at the grainy night-vision image on the screen displaying playback of the video feed. “I don’t see anything,” I mutter.

“That’s because the cameras didn’t pick it up,” she says, clicking on another window. It brings up a list of several motion alerts, each of them timestamped. “We didn’t think much of it until ten minutes later, when there was another hit on the north side of Norbury, then the west.”

I furrow my brow, studying the list. “But nothing on the cameras?”

“Nothing,” she confirms. “Whoever or whatever it was didn’t get close enough, but from the way they were skirting around the border like that...”

Lo clicks the mouse a few more times, bringing up a map and moving her cursor over red dots indicating the site of each alert. “Here, here, and here.”

“It’s almost like they’re testing our security,” Avery murmurs, swiping a hand over her chin. “Like they know where our borders are located, and they’re looking for a way in.”

Lo looks over her shoulder, meeting Avery’s eyes. “Exactly.”

“What about the patrols?” I ask. “Has anyone checked in with them?”

“Already done, and they said everything’s quiet,” Lo provides. “Nothing out of the ordinary. I told them to stay back a hundred feet like usual and keep a lookout, but they haven’t reported any activity.”

My whole body vibrates with uneasy energy as I stare at the screen, eyes pinging between each point to map out the pattern along the northern border of the territory. Sloane sidesteps closer to me, her hand finding mine, and when she laces her fingers through my own it instantly calms the raging tempest in my chest, my pulse slowing to a normal rhythm and my turbulent thoughts slowly dissipating.

“We’re going on lockdown,” I growl, my eyes still trained on the screen. “No shifting, no full moon run...” I glance down at Sloane. “No initiation. Nothing in the forest until we know it’s safe.”

She sinks her teeth into her lower lip, nodding back at me in agreement.

“If we get another hit, I’m going out there,” I add.

“I’ll go with you,” Avery says quickly.

Lo swivels her chair around to face us, shaking her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea...”

“We’ll play it smart,” Avery cuts in before she can finish. “The last two hits were by the road, so if that pattern continues, we can take the Jeep to go check it out. No shifting, just a little recon.”

Lo glances between the two of us nervously, but she doesn’t raise another objection. She just swivels back around to face her laptop, bringing up the map of the motion detectors again.

There’s always the chance it could be an animal. The sensors we have only pick up things over a certain size or weight, so it’d have to be a large animal, but it’s possible.

Though in my gut, I know it isn’t. Not after that vision Sloane had and what we’ve been preparing for.

I pull out the nearest chair, flopping down into it and pulling Sloane onto my lap. I need her close to me right now more than I need oxygen in my lungs—she’s the only thing keeping me together.

It doesn’t escape me what that likely implies. The way our wolves react to one another is a telltale sign of our potential as fated mates, though Sloane and I have avoided talking about the M-word since we rekindled things. The moon doesn’t matter much to me, anyways— I already know what I want, and there’s no way I’m letting this full moon pass without marking Sloane as mine one way or another. It’s the last thing we need to do to finally set things right again; to put us back on the path we were meant for.

Being with her again is already changing me. Before she came back, my knee-jerk reaction to this situation would’ve been to go charging straight out to the border to investigate the threat, regardless of the consequences. But Sloane’s presence brings a sense of calm and clarity that I often struggle to find, allowing me to consider how reacting to the alerts would only draw attention if there’s truly someone out there testing us.

She doesn’t even know it, but she’s helping me become the Alpha that I’ve always wanted to be. The one my father hopes I can be. The one my pack deserves.

Sloane settles back against my chest, my fingers tracing patterns on her bare thigh as I stare at the screen, waiting for an alert to pop up. All four of us are silent as we wait. And wait.

Ten minutes pass.

Twenty.

An hour.

But another alert doesn’t come.



After hours of staring at the screen in the IT hub, waiting for an alert that never arrives, Madd and I head to my dorm room to try to get some sleep. I crash out right away, completely exhausted from the events of the night. Thankfully, my sleep isn't disturbed by any visions, and I wake to the pale glow of the morning sun peeking through the curtains, dappling the room in patches of light.

I snuggle in closer to Madd, stealing his warmth as I wake up slow, then roll over to find him already awake beside me. His hair is deliciously disheveled, his phone screen illuminating his frowning face as he stares down at it. And judging by the dark circles etched beneath his eyes, he didn't rest nearly as soundly as I did.

At my movement, his gaze flickers over to me, a weak smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Morning, beautiful," he murmurs, his voice rough with exhaustion.

"Have you slept at all?" I ask, sliding my elbows underneath me to prop myself up.

"I'm not tired," he grumbles. He glances back down at his phone and pushes a hand into his hair, carding his fingers through the strands, then pauses, navy blue eyes flickering back to me.

We both know that's his tell- a surefire sign that he's sleep deprived. I used to tease him about it all the time.

I give him a hard look, arching a brow in challenge.

Madd yanks his hand back, shaking his head with a low chuckle. “Sometimes it’s a pain in the ass that you know me so well,” he mutters.

“A blessing and a curse,” I tease, leaning over to press a kiss to his lips. Even the way they move against mine betrays his fatigue- Madd’s kisses are usually demanding; hard and possessive and all-consuming. This one is gentle and reserved, our lips barely brushing.

At least it starts out that way. As our mouths fuse, his arm wraps around my waist to draw me closer. His tongue licks along the seam of my lips, pushing past them to chase mine, but just as things are starting to ramp up between us, I pump the brakes. Because as much as I’d love to drown in Madd’s ocean right now, what he really needs is to rest.

Pressing my palms against the hard planes of his chest, I push away, reluctantly breaking our kiss and scrambling out of bed before I fall deeper under his spell.

“Where are you going?” he protests, flipping over onto his stomach and reaching out for me.

His fingertips brush my bare thigh and I jump back, shaking my head. “You’ve gotta sleep, Madd. If there’s a threat we’re about to face, you need to be rested and on top of your game. And as much as I want to crawl back in bed with you, we both know if I do that, we won’t be sleeping.”

He wets his lips with his tongue, his eyes raking down my body hungrily. “Just come lay with me.”

I shake my head.

“C’mon, I swear I’ll sleep...”

I bark out a laugh, spinning around and stepping over to the dresser. “You’re a terrible liar,” I say as I pull open a drawer and rifle through it, picking out leggings and a t-shirt to wear. “I’ll only distract you.”

He groans, rolling to his back again and huffing a sigh. “Fine.”

The fact that he gives in so easily is a testament to how he’s running on empty right now. Madd’s the most stubborn person I know, and as an Alpha, accustomed to calling the shots, he doesn’t often take no for an answer.

I get dressed quickly and before I even leave the room, Madd’s down for the count. He’s got an arm slung over his eyes, his bare chest rising and falling rhythmically with his breathing. I take a second to admire his chiseled physique and inked skin before slipping out into the hall, deciding to head over to the IT hub to see if there’s any update since last night.

The halls of the squad complex are relatively quiet since most people are out on the field for the morning training session. The Raines brothers are leading it today, so I have no qualms about skipping out on their torture. Whenever Archer and Ares lead training together, it's a cardio nightmare.

I navigate through the corridors toward the IT hub, turning a corner to see my brother walking toward me from the other end. I stutter a step when I see him, nearly tripping over my feet, and Tristan's expression twists into an uncomfortable wince before he greets me with a quiet, "hey".

"Hi," I reply, slowing to a stop as we meet in the middle.

"Heading to the hub?"

I nod, reaching up to comb my fingers through my unruly curls.

I hate how awkward things have been between us since finding out that he was responsible for cutting Madd and I off from one another. I've always been close with my siblings, so it's weird to distance myself from my brother as much as I have lately.

"I was just in there to get the rundown," Tristan says, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Nothing new since last night."

I nod slowly. "Guess that saves me the trip."

A moment of tense silence falls between us, and just as I'm searching for some excuse to escape the awkwardness, Tris advances a step toward me.

"Can we talk?" he asks, tilting his head and fixing me with a pleading gaze.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Okay."

He starts to walk forward again and I turn around to fall into step with him, both of us slowly trudging back in the direction I came from. Another beat of stagnant silence lingers between us before Tristan speaks up.

"I'm really sorry, Sloane," he sighs, the regret in his tone palpable. "I never should've tried to take matters into my own hands like that. It was stupid, and I know it's no excuse, but I was just a dumb kid, I never considered the potential fallout from doing it." He heaves another resigned sigh, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I was just scared. I didn't want you to get hurt."

"But you *did* hurt me," I blurt, grinding to a halt.

He stops, too, swiveling to face me. "I know I did. And I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry. If I could take it back, I would. I wish I could."

I fold my arms over my chest and stare down at the floor, kicking the toe of a sneaker against it. "Me too," I whisper.

I lift my head to meet Tristan's eyes again, finding them shining with regret.

"Are you ever gonna be able to forgive me?" he asks quietly.

I blow out a slow breath, uncrossing my arms and dropping them to my sides. “I’ve already forgiven you, Tris. I’m just trying to figure out how to move past it. How *all* of us can move past it.”

He nods sadly, the muscle in his jaw ticking from the hard set of it. “So are you and Madd, like, together now?”

The million-dollar question.

“We’re figuring things out,” I say.

He presses his lips into a tight line, nodding again. “I know it’s not my place, especially after what I did, but just...” he trails off as he reaches out to set a hand on my arm, staring into my eyes with his dark ones. “Be careful, Sloane.”

I flinch back with a scowl, furrowing my brow.

Tris raises his hands in surrender, showing me his palms. “I’m just saying, Madd’s different than he used to be.”

I shake my head adamantly. “He isn’t, deep down.”

“You missed a lot.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Tristan hangs his head, shoulders slumping. “I guess that’s fair,” he mutters. He returns his gaze to mine, eyes rounded in sincerity. “All I’m saying is that I know Madd, too. And after you left, he kinda lost it. In a big way. People don’t just come back from that kind of darkness overnight.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I grumble.

He frowns, and I take a step toward him, grabbing onto his hand and forcing him to meet my stare. “He’s my person, Tris,” I say, my voice breaking with emotion. “He always has been. Always will be.”

My brother searches my face for any flicker of hesitation. “How can you be so sure?” he asks slowly.

I shrug a shoulder. “I just am. When you know, you know, and you’ve just gotta blow past all the red flags and go for it.”

He stares at me for a long moment, then nods, seemingly accepting that answer. Not that I need his approval. What Madd and I do is our business, and he never should’ve involved himself in the first place.

“Maybe you should take a page outta my book,” I say, giving him a little nudge.

Tristan arches a brow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Are you ever gonna tell Andie how you feel about her?”

He frowns. “That’s different.”

“Is it?”

My brother rolls his eyes, turning around to continue down the hall. I jog a few steps to catch up, forever cursed by my short stride, then fall into pace with him again.

“At least the scare last night got you out of the initiation,” he mutters as we walk.

“I still don’t get why everyone’s making such a big deal out of that,” I scoff.

“It can’t be that bad.”

Tristan swings his head sideways to glance down at me, arching a brow.

“You mean Madd hasn’t told you?”

“He’s been just as secretive as the rest of you,” I sigh in annoyance. “The whole cloak and dagger thing is really getting old.”

Tristan abruptly stops walking, grabbing onto my arm and swinging me to face him. “The initiation is all about facing your fears, Sloane,” he says, his grave expression giving me pause. “Think about it. What’s your greatest fear?”

My heart stutters in my chest, my breath stalling in my lungs. Unconsciously, I reach up to trail my fingertips over the scar on my temple.

“See why Madd doesn’t want you to do it?”

Though his revelation is definitely startling, I take a measured breath to compose myself, dropping my hand from my face and shrugging Tristan’s hand off my arm. “Then why is everyone else pushing so hard for it?” I ask with a scowl.

“Not everyone,” he grumbles. “Ares. Because he’s immature, and he’s not thinking past the thrill of it. He’s never been on the other side of an initiation before, so of course he’s jumping at the chance to be without even considering how it’ll affect you.”

Sometimes I forget that Ares is so much younger than us. He’s very much still in his teen troublemaker phase, not so unlike Madd around the time I left.

“With any luck, the security issues will be enough to make everyone just forget about it,” Tristan mumbles.

“No.”

His brows shoot up.

“If you guys all did it, I’m not gonna chicken out,” I say, shoring up my resolve.

Tristan opens his mouth to speak, but I continue on before he can get a word out.

“All of you need to stop trying to protect me. That’s how we got in this whole mess to begin with! Dad thought he was protecting me by sending me to Denver. You thought you were protecting me by blocking my phone. But all of that only hurt me in the end. Can’t you guys see that I don’t need to be protected? I’m not fragile. I’m a big girl, and I can make my own decisions. No matter how well-intentioned it is, you guys need to step back and let me live my life the way I choose to. You need to trust that I know what’s best for myself and respect that.”

While he looks a bit taken aback by my declaration, Tris doesn’t argue with me. He just stares at me for a long moment, his expression shifting to one of resignation as he nods his head.

“You’re right,” he replies. “I’m sorry.”

I press a hand to his chest, looking into his eyes. “I know. And I forgive you.”

His Adam’s apple bobs with a hard swallow. “Thank you.”

The two of us begin walking again, the silence between us decidedly more comfortable now that we’ve come to an understanding and set aside our issues. We end up at the entrance to the dining hall, the smell of pancakes and bacon wafting out and beckoning us inside.

Before we enter, though, Tristan grabs my arm to stop me one last time.

“Just because I agreed to back off doesn’t mean I don’t have your back, Sloane,” he clarifies. “I’m your brother, so I always will, no matter what. I hope you know that.”

Without a second thought, I throw myself toward him, wrapping my arms around him tightly. “I love you,” I breathe, overcome by emotion as his arms fold around me to return the embrace.

“Love you too,” he murmurs.

I hug him for a second longer, then pull back, smiling up at my little brother, glad that we can finally move forward.

“Think you can get Madd to forgive me, too?” he asks, a teasing lilt to his tone.

A giggle slips free from my lips and I shake my head, elbowing him playfully. “Good luck with that one. Nobody holds a grudge quite like Maddox Kessler.”

Tristan’s face scrunches up in a grimace. “What do you see in that guy, anyways?”

I smile dreamily, thinking of all we’ve been through, all we’ve overcome.

How from the moment I hit puberty and started looking at Madd as more than a friend, I knew there'd never be a question in my mind as to who I'd choose to spend my life with.

I glance up at Tristan, confidently replying, "Forever."



Coming up with a plan is the easy part. The execution is where you can run into trouble- when unknown variables that you didn't fully account for come into play and knock the train off its track.

That's why plans like this are never simple. They're plans on top of plans, contingencies to counteract every worst-case scenario. We picked apart every detail of Sloane's vision to try to get a clear picture of what we're up against, but there are still a lot of unknown factors, the biggest one being what the hell our enemy's angle is.

We've heard about the hunters' attacks on other packs. They never make their presence known beforehand- they use the element of surprise to sweep in and decimate the ranks. Their only goal seems to be extinction, and if they do take prisoners, it's only to explore easier ways to kill us. They've already identified silver and wolfsbane as weaknesses to shifters, and the tactics they've employed in the aftermath of those discoveries have been devastating to the packs they've hit.

Those other packs weren't ready for the hunters, but we are. Sloane's vision has given us a unique advantage, and we're using that information as an opportunity to stay a step ahead of the enemy. Our best assumption is that the hunter is coming here on a scouting mission, though if things go right today, he won't get the chance to report back to his comrades about what he's found. Not only that, but he may also be the key to us staying a step ahead.

“We’ve got a black truck incoming,” Lo says from the back seat of my Jeep, her laptop perched on her knees as she starts typing furiously. “Sending an alert out now to let the patrols know.”

I keep my eyes fixed on the tablet in my own lap, watching the live feed from one of the new cameras we installed out here a few days ago. We’ve got multiple views of the main road outside the territory as well as the access road leading into it, where Sloane saw the hunter in her vision. Our own scouts are hidden in the surrounding forest, ready to report back at any sign of a disturbance, and all three of the Raines siblings are out there too, armed and ready.

Andie, Archer, and Ares have the most experience with firearms out of any of us, and they’re all adept with long-range targets. Hopefully we won’t have to use them- our plan is to take the hunter alive so that we can get information out of him- but just in case, all three of them are waiting in the wings, more than capable of taking him out if it comes down to that.

I watch as the black pickup truck on the screen slows, ignoring the ‘no trespassing’ signs to turn onto the access road to the six-pack territory. All of us in the Jeep collectively hold our breath- Sloane in the passenger seat beside me, and Avery and Lo in the back. We’ve been waiting here for the better part of an hour, positioned about a mile from the main road on the northern end of the territory where the turn-off is. Iver and Tristan are in their own vehicle behind us, and we’ve all got earpieces in to remain in constant contact with one another.

“Everybody ready?” I ask, and am immediately met with affirmative responses from Iver, Tristan, and the Raines’ through my earpiece.

I tap a finger against the tablet screen to switch camera views, watching as the truck turns, then pulls off onto the shoulder of the road, the driver cutting the engine and climbing out.

“That’s him,” Sloane hisses, gripping onto my arm tightly as she leans over the center console to stare at the screen in my lap.

The image isn’t the clearest, but I’m surprised to see that the guy looks to be around my age- tall and broad with tan skin and dark hair. He slams the door closed behind him, stepping around the front of the truck and out onto the road.

“Let’s move out,” I say, handing the tablet over to Sloane and firing up the Jeep’s engine. The tension inside the cab of the vehicle is thick as I mash the gas, speeding toward our target. If he realizes it’s an ambush and attempts to

flee, one of our shooters will take out the tires of the truck. If he tries to escape on foot, he won't get far. We expect him to run, so we've accounted for that in our plan.

What I don't expect is for him to just be standing there waiting for us when we crest the hill.

I hit the brakes, tires screaming against the asphalt as I crank the wheel and skid sideways in the road, coming to a stop about a hundred feet from where he's standing. As soon as I get the Jeep in park, I throw open the door and jump out, Iver and Tristan quick to exit their own car and rush up to flank me on either side.

"I have a clear shot," I hear Andie say through my earpiece.

Then I hear another door slam, turning my head toward the sound to see Sloane jogging around the front of the Jeep toward me.

"What are you doing?" I growl, as this was decidedly *not* part of the plan. She's supposed to stay in the car, ready to get the hell out of here if this goes sideways. I'm willing to put myself in harm's way, but not her. *Never her.*

"Something doesn't feel right," Sloane whispers, her panicked green eyes meeting mine as she steps up beside me. "I'm coming with you."

I shake my head. "Get back in the Jeep," I snap, the warning in my tone brokering no room for argument.

But this is Sloane we're talking about here. Only a few people will ever step up to challenge me, and she's one of them.

"No, Madd, I'm--"

"Tris!" I bark, not letting her finish. She may hate me for this, but it's not like I have time to stand here and argue with her right now; not with so much at stake.

Tristan's at my side in an instant, and I level him with a hard stare. "Stay back here with Sloane, and make sure she *stays.*"

Tristan furrows his brow, opening his mouth like he's going to argue with my command, so I change tact, pulling out the only trump card I have in my arsenal.

"If you wanna make things right between us, then you'll do this for me," I say to him.

His head swivels between me and his sister, and for a moment, he looks torn—but then he sidesteps closer to Sloane. "I'm sorry," he mutters as he grabs ahold of her arm.

Her jaw goes slack, her furious gaze darting between her brother and me as

she tries to shrug off his grip.

I turn back to Iver, giving him the nod, and we start forward.

“Madd, wait!” Sloane calls after me, grunting as she struggles to free herself from Tristan’s hold.

I don’t.

I *can’t*, because this isn’t about me and her right now- it’s our one chance to get ahead of the hunters. If we can take this guy alive and pump him for information, it’ll give us an edge when they come for us. This plan is all we’ve got, and I need to see it through to protect my pack. To protect us all.

“This is private property,” I call out to the guy in the road as Iver and I advance on him.

He raises his hands, showing me his palms. “I know. I don’t want any trouble,” he calls back.

Sloane’s right, something feels off. Why is he just letting us approach him like this, and why doesn’t he seem surprised to see us? I don’t like it. The whole thing stinks of a setup.

We could always just take him out. Andie’s already said she has a clear shot, and she doesn’t miss. But we have to play this smart. He’s of more use to us alive.

“Then why are you here?” I demand, my long strides eating up the distance between us as he remains rooted to the spot.

I get a better look at him as Iver and I draw closer. He’s definitely around my age, and we have similar builds. His tight-fitting t-shirt betrays his muscular physique, and he’s got a sleeve of tattoos decorating one arm.

“I just want to talk,” he replies, still holding up his hands where I can see them.

But that’s not all I see. There’s a swirl of metallic in his irises as his scent is carried to me on the breeze, and I stop in my tracks.

“You’re a shifter?” I blurt.

He drops his hands, nodding.

“You’re hunting your own kind?” I snarl.

His eyes widen at my accusation, his hands lifting in surrender again. “No, my pack is on the run from the hunters,” he rushes out. “We have been for a long time, we came here seeking refuge...”

“How did you find us?” Iver interrupts, folding his arms over his chest as he steps up beside me. There’s still a few good yards of distance between us and the stranger, but we’re holding our position, not taking any chances.

“We’ve been looking for you for a while, since we heard about your alliance,” he replies, chancing a step in our direction. “I heard that your packs came together decades ago to give you strength in numbers, and my own pack is tired of running. I thought if I could talk to someone in charge, if we could join...”

“You could’ve led them right to us!” Iver interrupts again, scowling.

The guy shakes his head. “We haven’t. They lost our trail months ago. But we know about them, valuable information that could be of use to you, if you’ll grant us refuge.”

Iver slides me a questioning look, but I’m still focused on the man in front of us, sizing him up.

He meets my eyes and blows out a breath, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Look, I understand your hesitation. But I came here alone, and all I’m asking for is a chance. I know you have scouts in the forest and snipers waiting for your command. We did our own recon, and I knew it was a risk coming here, but I still came because we have a common enemy, and we can help each other.” He pauses, shifting his gaze to look between the two of us. “I can tell you’re both Alphas. I am, too. And I’m trying to do right by my pack and keep them safe. The full moon’s tomorrow, and wolves need to run.”

I just stare at him for a long moment, considering his words. Then I step forward, extending a hand in greeting. “Maddox Kessler.”

His shoulders slump in relief as he slaps his palm into mine, shaking my hand firmly. “Javier Cruz. My friends call me Javi.”

“We’re not friends yet,” I grumble, pulling my hand back and shoving it into my pocket, “and I’m not sure if we can help you. I’ll take your request to our council for consideration.”

Javi nods, turning to Iver and offering a handshake of his own. While the two of them greet one another, I glance back toward Sloane and the others waiting by our cars, beckoning them over with a flick of my head. They’ve all heard everything we’ve said through their earpieces, so they don’t hesitate to advance.

“Where are you from originally?” I ask as they start toward us, still sizing up this guy and wanting to get as much information from him as I can.

“My mom was from a pack in Bozeman,” he replies easily, “but we’ve been nomadic for most of my life. I only became Alpha recently, and my priority is finding a place for my pack to finally call home.” He reaches up to push a

hand through his hair, my eyes catching on a set of roman numerals inked on the inside of his bicep.

“Like I said, we’ll consider it,” I mutter.

His gaze flickers behind me as Sloane and the others approach, lingering on her for a beat in a way that my wolf definitely doesn’t like. “Mine,” I declare, the word leaving my mouth in a growl as I reach out for her and pull her to my side.

Sloane rolls her eyes at me, then turns to Javi, giving him a little wave. “I’m Sloane.”

He nods, only giving her a cursory glance before looking to me again, like he’s trying to demonstrate he’s not a threat.

Smart man.

As Tris, Avery, and Lo introduce themselves, Sloane pulls me aside, delivering a sharp jab to my bicep. “I was trying to tell you something was off,” she hisses, glaring daggers at me. “Maybe try fucking listening to me next time. What if you’d given the order to shoot?!”

“Then I guess we wouldn’t have to take this to the council,” I grumble.

“Think I can come to this council, plead my case?” Javi pipes up, and I turn back toward him, irritated by his eavesdropping.

Damn shifter hearing.

“This is as far as you go, for now,” I say, giving him a hard look. “We’ll get your number and let you know what the council decides.”

The metallic shimmer of his wolf flares in his irises, betraying his agitation, but he gives me a friendly smile nonetheless. “I understand. I appreciate your consideration.”

Sloane’s hand slips into mine, giving it a little squeeze, and my own wolf settles in my chest. I glance down at her, but I can’t quite read the expression on her face. She’s staring at Javi in contemplation, like she sees something we don’t.

It’s enough to put me on edge, so I’m quick to wrap things up, taking Javi’s number and sending him on his way. As soon as he gets in his truck and pulls out, I turn to Sloane, arching a brow in question.

“What is it?”

She gives a little shake of her head, chewing on her lower lip. “I’m not sure,” she says softly, though I can see her wheels turning. “Can you bring me to Riverton? I think I need to talk to my mom.”



The ride to the Riverton packhouse is tense as we discuss the curveball we've been thrown and what to do about it.

Madd sees any outsider as a danger and is therefore resistant to the idea of another pack setting foot in our territory.

Avery is wary, but she's open to the prospect of welcoming newcomers into the fold, so long as they're fully vetted first.

Lo keeps listing off pros and cons, looking at this whole thing from an analytical standpoint like it's a math equation she can find a clear solution to.

I'm freaked out, but it isn't about the idea of this pack joining our alliance, per se. It's about the *feeling* I had when I got near Javi and looked into his eyes. It was reminiscent of something I felt weeks ago, and the reminder of it connected dots in my brain that I previously hadn't, sending my mind into a tailspin. And if there's anyone who can help me make sense of what it could mean, it's my mom.

"The council is meeting us in Riverton," Avery mumbles, furiously typing away on her cell phone. "I've already messaged everyone and they're on their way."

"Doubt this is the meeting they were expecting to have today," Lo muses. She's focused on her laptop, scouring the internet for anything she can find about Javier Cruz.

Madd's gaze flickers up to glance at her in the rearview mirror. "What've you

got, Lo?”

She huffs a sigh, pressing the lid of her laptop closed. “Nothing yet, but that’s not a huge surprise. Most shifters keep a low profile nowadays, and the last name Cruz is super common. I’ll do a deeper search when I get back to the hub and see what I can turn up.”

Madd grunts, obviously dissatisfied with that answer. Though it’s just more ammunition for him to use in his argument against providing asylum to this pack. I get why he’s apprehensive, but part of me wonders if this is just Madd being a dick because Javi checked me out.

Yeah, I didn’t miss the way he staked his claim over me like a caveman in response.

I throw up a hand to brace myself against the roll bar as Madd whips his Jeep around the corner like a maniac, turning off the main road to head into my home territory of Riverton. Though this isn’t an emergency situation, there’s still a sense of urgency in getting everyone together to debrief and figure out how to proceed. Hence the crazy driving.

And with the council getting together, putting half a dozen alpha males in one room to voice their opinions, I can only imagine how the discussion is going to go.

This whole thing is a little bit scary since it’s uncharted territory for us. The alliance first came together over thirty years ago, and it’s always been just the original six packs residing here, sharing the sub-divided land and pooling resources. We have an alliance with my uncle’s pack in Denver too, but they’re across the state. The thought of actually inviting another pack to join so close to home is intimidating.

And there’s something about that *feeling* I got from Javi, something I can’t shake.

I don’t even realize that I’m holding my breath until we pull into the driveway in front of the packhouse, the air whooshing from my lungs on a heavy exhale. Avery and Lo immediately unfasten their seatbelts and hop out of the Jeep, heading straight for the front door, but as I reach down to unbuckle my own, Madd’s hand lands on mine.

“Are you gonna tell me what’s up?” he asks, and I snap my head up to lock eyes with him, startled by his proximity. He’s leaning over the console toward me, his face inches from mine- I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I didn’t even notice him move into my space.

“What do you mean?” I ask slowly.

He slumps back into his seat with a frown. "I can tell something's wrong."
Of course he can.

I avert my eyes and click the button to unfasten my seatbelt, shrugging the strap off my shoulder. "Sometimes it's a pain in the ass that you know me so well," I mumble, feeding his own line right back to him.

"A blessing and a curse, right?"

I glance over to see a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth.

Touché.

"Did you see something?" Madd asks hesitantly. "A vision, or..."

"Not a vision," I cut in, stabbing my fingers through my hair in frustration.

"More like a feeling. I promise I'll tell you about it, I just need to talk to my mom and try to make sense of it first. I mean, the visions are one thing, but if I'm an intuitive like her, too?" I close my fist in my hair, tugging at the roots as I drop my head back against the seat. Squeezing my eyes shut, I blow out a slow breath, trying to settle my nerves. "I don't know, this is just a lot," I murmur.

Opening my eyes, I turn my head to face Madd. "I hate not knowing what's going on in my own brain. I'll feel better once I talk to her."

"Okay," he agrees, reaching for his door handle. He pauses before opening it, looking back at me with a brow arched. "So, just to be clear, this isn't about you being pissed at me for making Tris hold you back today?"

I snort a laugh, rolling my eyes. "Oh, I'm still pissed about that. But this doesn't have anything to do with it. We'll discuss *that* later."

"Can't wait," he mutters, throwing open his door and climbing out of the Jeep. He circles around to my side right as I'm hopping down, capturing me by the waist and yanking me in to steal a kiss.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs against my lips, his hands sliding down to cup my ass.

"Get a room, you two!" Iver heckles as he walks up the driveway with my brother.

Madd pulls away from my lips with an annoyed grunt, his hands still firmly gripping my ass as he turns his gaze on them. "Good idea. Tris, can we use yours?"

Tristan frowns, but Madd punches him in the arm as he passes by us, my brother cracking a smile in response.

Guess it's good to see those two getting along again.

Madd slings an arm around my shoulders and steers me to follow Iver and

Tris up the front walkway to the packhouse, and from out here, everything seems peaceful.

That's decidedly *not* the case when Tristan pushes open the door.

The four of us enter into total chaos, half of the council already here debating what to do about Javi and his pack's request to join our alliance. The Raines' beat us to the packhouse, no doubt shifting to their wolf forms and taking a direct route through the forest rather than taking the road around, so everyone inside is already up to speed and very opinionated about how to best handle this situation.

Through the shouting and bodies and sheer mayhem ensuing, I spot my mom leaning against the lower banister of the staircase, just standing back and taking everything in. I leave Madd's side to make a beeline for her, a smile lighting up her face as she sees me coming.

"Can we talk?" I ask as I approach her, trying and failing to conceal the worry written all over my face.

"Of course," she replies instantly.

I love that about my mom. She never hesitates to drop everything when one of her kids needs her.

Mom waves for me to follow her toward the back door, my heart beating a riot in my chest the whole way. It doesn't slow to a normal cadence until we're outside and she's closed the sliding glass door behind us, sealing the raised voices of the gathered crowd inside.

"What's up?" she asks as she turns to face me, eyes rounded in concern.

I blow out a breath and rake a hand through my hair, moving to step over to the sectional on the patio. This is definitely a sit-down type of conversation.

Mom follows my lead, and when the two of us are settled onto the cushions, I finally shore up the courage to speak. "I realized something today and I'm freaking out a little bit about it," I admit, struggling to pull my thoughts together to put them into words. "Remember that kid who accidentally shot me during target practice, Luke Jenkins? I just remembered something about him. A feeling I had when I was around him a week or two before that happened."

She nods slowly, her eyes locked on mine and imploring me to continue.

"I don't really know how to explain it. It was just like this uncomfortable, *icky* feeling." I grimace as I recall how I felt that day when I looked at Luke, like my skin was itchy and bile was crawling up my throat. "I didn't think much of it at the time," I continue, "and honestly, until today, I'd forgotten

all about it, because it hadn't happened again. I mean, I don't remember having that feeling in the woods when he found me, or when he came by to apologize after. It was just that one time."

"Your intuition," Mom muses, tilting her head in contemplation. "Maybe it was trying to warn you of what was going to happen."

"But is that possible if it was an accident?" I rush out.

Her lips curl up in a small smile and she leans over, setting a hand on my arm. "Absolutely. Intuition isn't necessarily about intent. Sometimes it's just a tip-off. Like, for example..." she trails off as a commotion from inside draws our attention, both of us turning to look through the glass doors to see Alpha Reid trying to diffuse whatever argument has sprung up between his boys.

Archer typically keeps his cool, but Ares has him fired up about something, and I'm glad I'm out here right now instead of in there. I'll bet the testosterone inside is suffocating.

Shaking her head, my mom turns back to me with a sigh. "So, as I was saying, sometimes it's not what you think. You know Cal Conway, Chase's beta?"

I nod.

"The first time I saw him, I got this feeling of darkness within him, permeating everything around him. I thought it meant he was dangerous," she finishes.

My brows shoot up in surprise. "Cal? Really?"

It's difficult to imagine 'Uncle Cal' as anything other than the doting father and brilliant artist he is.

She nods before going on. "Turns out, he was fighting some serious inner demons from his past, but that didn't mean he was a bad guy. Far from it. What I'm trying to say is that sometimes, those feelings I get as an intuitive mean something totally different than what I think they do. So, if you had that feeling about Luke, maybe it was your intuition giving you a heads-up that he was connected to something that was going to happen rather than him as a person."

I draw a deep breath. "Do you think I'm... an intuitive, like you?"

She shrugs a shoulder. "I think you could be. You've already got the visions. If you get those feelings, you should listen to them. The universe might be trying to tell you something."

I drop my head to stare down at my hands in my lap, mulling over her words.

“I had another one today,” I say quietly before glancing back up at her again. “It’s what made me think back to Luke. When we met that alpha, Javi, I got this *feeling*. It was different than with Luke, but similar enough that I made the connection.”

“What did you feel?”

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, tilting my head as I consider how to explain. “It was just this knowing feeling tickling the back of my mind, this tightness in my gut...” I shake my head as I trail off. “I don’t know. I’m trying not to read into it, but I’m also kinda freaking out about it because this is totally new to me and I don’t know what it means...”

“Was it a bad feeling?” she asks, interrupting my rambling.

“No,” I say, surprising myself with how easily that answer comes to me.

“Well, I don’t think so. I felt like maybe he was hiding something, but there was also this weird sense of familiarity, like he... belonged with us somehow? Does that make sense?” I groan, burying my face in my hands.

“Oh my gosh, I sound like a lunatic, don’t I?”

Mom chuckles softly, reaching out to take my hands and lowering them from my face. “No, you don’t,” she replies, staring into my eyes sincerely. “I completely understand. It’s confusing trying to pick apart what the feelings mean, especially at first, but you just have to trust your gut and listen to them as best you can.”

“But what does it mean?”

“Maybe that you should try to sway the others to give him a chance,” she suggests. “Have you told Madd?”

“Told me what?”

I startle at the sound of his voice, whipping around to see him peeking his head out from the sliding glass door.

Mom pats my thigh, pushing up from the sectional. “I’m gonna head in, give you two a few minutes to chat.”

I shoot her a grateful smile as she heads for the patio door, skirting around Madd’s broad form as he steps outside to join me. Rising to my feet, I stride toward him, meeting him halfway and stepping into his waiting arms. They fold around me and I drag in a deep breath through my nose, his intoxicating scent delivering an instant sense of comfort.

These are the moments when I’m most thankful for our history. Without a word, Madd knows exactly what I need- even if it’s just to be held for a moment to calm my inner chaos. After a beat, I pull back, tipping my head up

to look into his blue eyes.

“My mom thinks I’m an intuitive, like her,” I say, just coming right out with it. “I had a feeling about that Javi guy, and she helped me make sense of it a little bit.”

Madd arches a brow, his interest piqued. “What kind of feeling?”

“I think we should give him a chance.”

He shakes his head with a scowl. “Absolutely not. It’s a safety risk. The more I think about it, the less on board I am with even considering letting them in.”

I furrow my brow. “That’s not the Madd I used to know,” I murmur, pressing a hand to his chest, over his heart. “The Madd I used to know would always help someone in need.”

“I’m not that guy anymore, Sloane,” he mutters.

“You could be.”

He just stares at me for a long moment, a silence stretching between us. Our gazes remain locked until we’re interrupted by the sound of the patio door sliding open. I lean around Madd’s hulking form to see my dad at the door, peering out at us.

“Just wanted to let you know that Theo just arrived,” he grumbles. “We’re ready to start the meeting.”

I hold up a finger. “Can you just give us one more sec?”

Dad’s never hesitated to break up moments between Madd and me, but to my surprise, he nods, retreating a step back into the house and closing the door.

Well that’s new.

Maybe my dad is more accepting of us as a couple than I thought.

I turn back to Madd with a sigh, fixing him with a pleading stare. “Think about what your dad would do, what type of Alpha he raised you to be. I know it’s important to you to make him proud, so now’s your chance, Duke. Let the past go, let the anger go, and take a leap of faith and hope for the best. I’m going to go in there and try to convince those guys that this is the right thing to do, and I’d really like for you to be on my side.”

Madd’s jaw ticks, his eyes boring into mine with so much intensity that it makes me a little weak in the knees. But then he slowly nods, sliding an arm around my waist and tugging me in flush with his chest, dropping a kiss on the crown of my head.

“Okay,” he murmurs, squeezing me tight. “Let’s do this.”



“You guys, we’re the *six-pack*. Not the *seven-pack*, or the *eight-pack*...”

“Iver makes a good point,” Ares states, throwing his thumb over his shoulder in his direction. “*Seven-pack* just doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Avery rolls her eyes. “That’s the least convincing argument yet. Who the hell cares what we call ourselves? This is about human decency. If we were on the run, I’d sure as shit hope that another pack would be willing to help us out.”

I bury my face in my hands, groaning in frustration. We’ve been at this for the better part of an hour now, and we’re no closer to reaching an agreement than when we first walked through the door. All the key players are here: the alphas of each pack, their lunas, and all seven squad leaders- nine, if you count Sloane and Andie. Everyone’s scattered around the living room of the Riverton packhouse, posted up on couches and chairs while bickering nonstop.

“I’m just sayin’, outsiders can’t be trusted,” Ares mutters.

“You do realize that I was an outsider once, right?” his mom scoffs disapprovingly. I pick my head up to see Serena flip her red hair over her shoulder, fixing her son with a scathing look.

“That’s a good point,” my uncle Theo agrees, sliding her a smirk. “You couldn’t be trusted at first.”

My aunt Brooke whacks him on the chest with the back of a hand, the frown

on her face betraying exactly how she feels about his commentary.

“You’re not even on the council, you don’t get a vote,” Archer cuts in, pointing a glare at his younger brother.

“Well I’m still part of this discussion, aren’t I?” Ares fires back. “I’m a squad leader. The *security* squad. This is a matter of security if I’ve ever seen one.”

Brock scrubs a hand over his face, heaving an exasperated sigh. “Did the alpha respond to you yet?” he asks me.

Because I’m the one who took Javi’s number, so I’ve been tasked with being our point of contact with him.

Lucky me.

I lift my ass from the couch cushion, shoving a hand in my pocket to retrieve my phone. As soon as the screen lights up, I see a message notification on the screen, frowning as I read the text waiting for me.

“Yeah,” I reply, jaw ticking as I look back up at the others. “They’re holed up in that old motel off highway four.”

“Well that’s a little close for comfort,” Alpha Chase mumbles from across the room.

“My thoughts exactly,” Iver agrees.

Alpha Reid leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers together. “Where’d you say they were originally from?”

“Bozeman.”

He furrows his brow. “I thought the Bozeman pack was wiped out by the shadow pack during their reign of terror.”

My friends and I have heard stories about the shadow pack and the crazy alpha who led them, but that was before our time. Our parents, however, have firsthand knowledge, because they fought a war with the shadow pack- and *won*.

“Maybe they’re survivors,” Avery suggests with a shrug. “He said there aren’t many of them in his pack, only fifty or so.”

“And when did you get that info, when you were flirting with him?” Tris teases.

Avery gasps, clutching a hand to her chest like she’s scandalized. “I was not!”

“I don’t trust a pack that has been nomadic for that long,” Chase murmurs.

“It’s not natural.”

“Savages,” Iver agrees.

“There has to be some reason they’ve never settled down,” Andie speculates.

“It can’t just be the hunters, right? I mean they’ve only been around for what, ten years?”

“This is fucking exhausting,” I mutter under my breath, side-eyeing Sloane as the others continue to bicker.

“Maybe this decision should fall to Theo. His pack owned this land before the six-pack was formed.”

“No, this is on all of us. It’s been ours for a long time.”

“What happens if we can’t agree?”

“Aren’t we missing the bigger picture here?” Sloane tries to cut in, but she’s quickly steamrolled by everyone talking over each other again.

“Hey!” I bark out, loud enough to capture everyone’s attention. The room falls blissfully silent, and I nod my head toward my girl. “Sloane has something to say.”

She gives me a little smile of gratitude that makes my wolf preen, pushing up from her spot beside me on the sofa to stand.

“The spirit of the six-pack is inclusiveness, isn’t it?” she asks, sweeping her gaze around the room. “I mean, everyone here but Brooke and Theo were outsiders once. The alliance brought us together, and look at us now! We’re practically family.”

“One big dysfunctional family,” Lo chuckles.

“Well sure, but family nonetheless. All of us. And I’m sure it didn’t start out that way, at least not at first,” Sloane continues, gesturing to her parents and the other older alphas and lunas, “but you still came together and made it work. Because you had a common enemy and recognized there was strength in numbers. Now here’s another pack asking to join, and another common enemy we share. I’m not saying we just invite them in. I’m saying that we should give them a chance and start the conversation. Once they’re fully vetted and we verify they aren’t a threat, we can make things official, but for now, I think it’d be cruel to turn them away. We’re all running from the same thing, so shouldn’t we help each other?”

I may not be fully on board with this, but what Sloane’s saying makes a hell of a lot of sense. And if she’s convincing my stubborn ass, then it has to be working on the rest of the room.

“And what if the hunters are on their trail?” Iver questions skeptically. “What if they brought them right to us?”

“Then I guess we have more ranks to fight them,” I say, having Sloane’s back like I said I would. “Hell, maybe with additional ranks, we can go on the

offensive for once. I don't know about you, but I'm sick of hiding out and just waiting for them to strike."

Iver's brows shoot up. "You're on board with this? You trust them?"

"I trust Sloane."

Ares makes a whip cracking sound and I cut him a glare.

But then Brock speaks up, saying the last thing I expect him to.

"Madd's right."

I'm so caught off guard that I almost want to ask him to say it again. Just one more time, so I can pull out my phone and record it, save it to play back for him every time we're at odds with one another.

Did Brock Masters just actually agree with me on something?

I must be living in an alternate universe.

"We need to trust each other," Brock states, getting to his feet across from his daughter. "And we need to use the resources we have at our disposal. Astrid and Sloane's gifts give us insight that most never get. Our IT unit can dig up information on anyone. And our squad is trained to defend us against any threat."

"So we use what we've got to vet them," Theo murmurs, picking up the ball from Brock and running with it. "Let them stay where they're at while we investigate further, and if everything checks out, then we take a vote."

Brock nods. "It's not like we can take one now when there are so many unknowns."

I mull over the proposal, turning to Iver and Ares since they've been the most outspoken in opposition thus far. "Would you guys be more apt to say yes if they were fully vetted?"

"Yeah," Iver replies easily. "I'm not trying to be a dick about it, security's my only concern."

"I'll get IT on it right away," Lo pipes up, always ready to spring into action.

"I can set up patrols to do recon near where they're staying," Avery suggests.

"I'll reach out to my contacts with other packs back in Montana, see if they know anything about survivors from Bozeman," Reid adds. "Madd, your dad has some contacts there, too."

I nod. "I'll see if he can make some calls."

"Sounds like we have a plan, then," Reid nods.

"Finally!" Tristan sighs, throwing his hands up.

"Wait, so if the hunters are a false alarm, are we running tomorrow night?"

Brooke asks, blue eyes blinking behind her glasses as she sweeps her gaze

around the room.

Theo leans back in his seat, tossing an arm over her shoulders. “I say we do the full moon run, but we keep it short, like we have been. An hour max.”

Sloane slides me a glance, the look in her eyes saying everything she isn’t right now. Because we haven’t talked about the run. And we need to.

“Alright, who wants a beer?” Brock asks, effectively calling the meeting to a close. Most everyone murmurs in affirmation, pushing up from their seats and stretching their limbs. Some follow Brock into the kitchen, while others linger in the living room, the dull hum of idle chatter filling the space.

I rise to stand, watching as Sloane drifts out of the living room and toward the hallway opposite from the kitchen. She glances back over her shoulder, giving a little flick of her head to tempt me to follow, and I immediately leave the ruckus behind to go after her.

I catch up to her about halfway down the hall, and the sounds of chatter from the main part of the packhouse diminish as we make our way to the end, Sloane leading me into her old bedroom.

“Damn, this is a blast from the past,” I chuckle as I follow her inside, taken aback by the startling familiarity of the space as I ease the door closed behind me.

“No kidding,” she snorts, trailing her fingertips along the edge of the pink duvet. “I was going to redecorate when I moved back, but then I wound up moving to the dorms instead, so...” She glances back at me, shrugging a shoulder.

I step closer to one of her dressers, picking up the framed photo of us with our friends, taken at one of the parties we threw at the old lodge. “It’s like a time capsule. Nothing’s changed.”

“Except my dad had the lock on the window replaced,” she says with a wink. I smirk. “Probably a good call.”

Sloane sighs, lowering herself to perch on the edge of the bed and smoothing the duvet with her palms. “Should we stay here tonight, for old time’s sake?”

I set the photo back down on the dresser, turning toward her and eating up the distance between us in a few long strides. As soon as I reach her, I immediately lean over to crowd her in until she falls back against the plush comforter, her hair spilling underneath her head in a mess of dark curls. “I’ll definitely fuck you in this bed, for old time’s sake,” I murmur, hovering over her in a push-up position and nipping her plush lower lip.

She makes this soft little moaning sound that always drives me fucking wild

and I wrap a hand around her throat, crushing my lips against hers. My cock stirs to life behind my zipper as her legs wind around my waist, her thighs squeezing against my hips to drag me closer. I kiss her harder, deeper, until we're both breathless, finally breaking our kiss to come up for air.

I brush her hair away from her forehead as I gaze down at her, just taking in the sheer beauty that is Sloane Masters. She's always wearing her hair down these days so it falls in front of her face to hide that damn scar, but I wish she'd realize that it doesn't diminish her beauty. In my eyes, it enhances it. It's a marker of her strength; of everything she's been through and overcome. Of all we've been through.

I'm still struggling to come to terms with the reality that she's mine again, and this time, she's not going anywhere.

"Sloane, about the run tomorrow..."

She presses a finger to my lips to silence me, giving a little shake of her head. "Later. We need to talk about it, but now's not the time or place." She sighs, eyes flickering toward the door. "I just needed a breather, but we should probably get back out there."

"No, we should get back to my packhouse," I growl, diving back in to kiss her again.

Our lips glide together in perfect synchronicity, sparks ricocheting between our skin. Our panted breaths mingle, tongues tangling, until finally she breaks the kiss, pushing her palms against my chest with a groan.

"You're killing me, Madd."

I push up from the bed, extending a hand once I'm standing to pull her up, too.

"Me?" I scoff, reaching down to grab a handful of her ass. "You kill me every day, walking around looking like this."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm literally in leggings."

"Doesn't matter what you wear. You're fuckin' sexy." I step back, giving her a slow once over and sinking my teeth into my lip to stifle a groan.

Sloane blushes under the weight of my attention, inching closer to me and reaching out to grab ahold of my very hard dick through my jeans. I grunt when she makes contact, covering her hand with my own.

"Don't start something you can't finish," I warn.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a smirk. "Who says I'm not gonna finish?"

A growl tears from my chest as I grab her around the waist, hauling her up into my arms. Sloane yelps and giggles, playfully struggling against me as I

step closer to the bed, throwing her down onto it. Then I turn her over, yanking her hips back so she's bent over the edge of the bed, tucking my fingers into the waistband of her leggings and shoving them down her thighs.

"Madd, not here!" Sloane gasps, pushing up on her forearms and looking back at me over her shoulder. "What if someone hears us?"

"Let 'em," I grumble, popping open the button of my jeans and lowering the zipper. I shove them down my hips along with my boxers, my cock springing free, rock hard and ready.

Her eyes drop to take it in as I wrap a fist around it, and when they lift to meet mine again, they're clouded with lust. It's all the permission I need to step forward, gripping her hip with one hand and guiding the head of my dick through her slick folds with the other.

"Sorry, baby, I've gotta have you," I murmur, lining myself up and punching my hips forward to sink into her wet heat.

A breathy moan escapes Sloane's lips and I lean over her body to cover her mouth with a hand, holding back my own groan of pleasure as I sink deeper inside her.

"Fuck," I choke, rocking my hips back and thrusting forward again. "This fucking *pussy*."

Sloane's eyes roll back, her whimpers muffled beneath my palm as I start hammering into her from behind, my hips slapping against her ass. Her elbows shake, her arms giving out, and I fall with her onto the bed, my body covering hers as I continue driving my cock into her.

I swear I could die between this woman's thighs with no regrets. She's fucking perfection, a goddess walking the earth among us mere mortals. I don't deserve her. I never will- but damnit if I'm not going to spend the rest of my life trying to be the man that does.

Peeling my hand away from her mouth, I push up from the bed to stand, gripping her hips as I continue rutting into her senselessly. Another moan slips free and she quickly slaps her hand over her mouth to cover it.

"What's the matter, Duchess? Afraid your daddy will hear how good I'm fucking you?" I tease, gripping her hips tighter as I pound into her harder, faster.

Her inner walls choke my cock as her climax hits, Sloane screaming out in ecstasy. I shove her head into the comforter to muffle the sound, her orgasm triggering my own. My balls tighten, the base of my spine tingling, and at the last second, I remember to pull out, spraying ropes of cum over her perfect

peachy ass while gritting my teeth and barely stifling my own harsh groan. She-wolves ovulate with the full moon, so thank fuck I remembered to pull out.

Though I don't hate the idea of Sloane carrying my pups.

Far from it.

I like that idea a little *too* much.

Sloane melts onto the bed, her body going limp as she pants to catch her breath. And, like the fucking gentleman I am, I hobble over to the en-suite bathroom with my pants around my ankles to grab some toilet paper to clean us up.

"How the hell are we gonna go back out there now?" Sloane asks as I wipe my cum off her ass when I return with the tissue.

"We're not."

She props herself up on an elbow, gazing back at me with a questioning look on her face. "What do you mean? I was just joking about staying here tonight."

I drag her leggings back up her hips, giving her ass a slap for good measure once it's covered again. "Looks like it's time to break the damn window latch again."



“Do you really need the moon to tell you whether this feels right?” Madd asks, crowding me in against the wall of the corridor across from the IT hub. The hard planes his body meet my own soft curves, the two of us melding together seamlessly as I stare up at him.

“No,” I admit, enjoying his proximity a little too much. His arms are braced against the wall on either side of my body, Madd caging me in to create our own little bubble out here in the hall. He’s got stuff to do back in Goldenleaf with his own pack, but when I told him I was planning to help Lo in IT today, he insisted on driving me up to the squad complex and walking me in- like he’s afraid if he lets me out of his sight, I’ll change my mind about tonight.

“Then stop getting in your head about it, babe,” Madd drawls, leaning down to brush his lips against mine. “No matter what happens, it’s me and you.”

I wish that were true.

Between our families and our friends, I feel like everyone is watching us expectantly, waiting for the moon to confirm what we’ve always suspected: that Madd and I are fated mates. All the signs are there, but the only way to know for sure is for us to run together beneath the full moon. It’s finally our time; our turn. And I’m starting to feel the pressure.

“I already told you I’d be there,” I say, reaching up to cup his jaw in a hand. His stubble tickles my palm, his skin warm beneath it. “And you’re gonna have to just trust me on that, because you can’t babysit me all day. Lo needs

me here, and your pack needs you back home.”

Madd leans in closer, pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “I know. My wolf doesn’t wanna let me leave, though.”

I’m glad it’s not just me. My own wolf has been feral over Madd today, crazed at the thought of us going our separate ways for the afternoon. It must have something to do with the pending full moon.

“Mine either,” I whisper against his lips. “But they’ll see each other tonight.”

Madd pulls back with a pained look in his eyes, like it physically hurts him to separate from me. “Tonight,” he agrees. Retreating another step, he points a finger at me. “And if you’re late, I’ll hunt you down.”

“Don’t tempt me with a good time,” I laugh, pushing off from the wall and swatting at his arm with the back of a hand as I pass by, bound for the open doorway of the IT hub.

As soon as my back is to him, Madd lands a hard swat on my ass that makes me yelp. I whip around to retaliate, but he’s already taking off down the corridor, glancing back at me with a devious smirk.

Asshole.

I roll my eyes at him before I turn back toward the doorway of the IT hub, stepping inside and heading straight for Lo’s usual workstation near the back. My wolf keens for Madd in a way she never has before, but I shove her back into the recesses of my mind so that I can focus on doing what I came here to do- assist with final security checks before the packs’ full moon runs tonight. I find Lo hunched over her laptop, twirling one of her blonde pigtail braids around a finger as she stares at the screen. She’s so deep in concentration that she doesn’t even look up until I’m practically on top of her, startling when I lean in to get a look at whatever has her so captivated.

“Jeez, Sloane!” she gasps, jolting back and slapping a palm over her heart.

“You can’t sneak up on me like that!”

I stifle a giggle, shaking my head. “You’ve gotta be more aware of your surroundings, girl. What’s got you so focused?” I glance at her screen again, seeing the name Javier Cruz in the search bar. “Did you find something?”

Lo shakes her head with a sigh, pressing the lid of her laptop closed before I have a chance at another peek. “Nothing worth reporting. Cruz is way too common of a last name. I just keep hitting dead ends.”

“Well I have no doubt that if there’s something worth finding, you’ll be the one to find it,” I say, leaning a hip against her desk.

“Of course I will,” she replies confidently, swiveling her chair toward me.

Lo's blue eyes meet mine as she folds her arms over her chest, tilting her head in question. "So, what's the verdict?"

I arch a brow, acting as if I don't know exactly what she's talking about.

It's all anyone seems to be talking about.

She levels me with a skeptical look, calling my bullshit, and I heave a sigh as I hop up to sit on the edge of her desk. "Yeah, we're gonna run together," I say.

"I knew it!" she hisses, lips spreading into a victorious grin. "Ares owes me ten bucks."

"You guys really need to stop betting on us," I grumble.

"Aw, c'mon," Lo chuckles, rising from her chair and clapping a hand on my shoulder. "It's all in good fun, you know we're rooting for you guys." She moves away to step around to the other side of her desk, grabbing another laptop and carrying it over to me. As she hands me the computer, she meets my eyes, her expression shifting from playful to serious. "Are you nervous at all?"

I shake my head as I take the laptop from her. "No. Well, not about the actual run. It's so weird, because on one hand, this feels fast. We only just got back together and we're still trying to figure out how we fit after so much time apart. But then on the other, it feels like we've been waiting forever for this, and it's about time we finally knew, right? So why would we even considering prolonging it?" I sigh, hanging my head. "I think all the pressure is just starting to get to me."

Lo flinches back in surprise. "Madd's pressuring you?"

"No, not at all," I rush out, lifting my head to meet her gaze again. "He's been amazing about this whole thing, actually. It's everyone *else*. It feels like they're all watching, holding their breath to find out if we're really meant to be."

"Psh, who cares what anyone else thinks?" Lo scoffs, waving a hand dismissively as she flops back down into her chair. "It's your life, not theirs."

"I know."

"Do you?" she challenges, arching a brow.

I furrow my own as I stare back at her, not catching her meaning.

Lo settles back in her chair, kicking out one of her long tan legs to cross it over the other. "You're a people pleaser, Sloane. Always have been," she says, the toe of her sneaker bouncing. "And look, I get wanting people to like you and struggling to live up to who our parents expect us to be, but at some

point, you've just gotta throw expectations out the window and do what makes you happy. If you wanna be with Madd, then screw what anyone else thinks or what fate tells you tonight. What do *you* want?"

"Madd," I answer automatically. I don't even have to think about it, because I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

She gestures to me with an open palm. "There ya go, then. That's all you need to be focusing on right now, not other people's opinions. Don't let anybody ruin this night for you guys."

"You're right," I concede with a sigh, tucking the laptop under my arm and hopping down off the edge of the desk. "Since when did you get so wise, Lo?"

She shrugs. "It's easier to see the whole picture when you're on the outside looking in."

"I suppose that's true." I slip the laptop out from beneath my arm, holding it up. "Same program as last time?"

"Yup," she replies, popping the P. "Just do the manual checks on the cameras and sensors in each territory. No alerts have come in, but we always check each one manually before a full moon run, just in case."

"You got it," I say, spinning around to head over to the vacant desk across the aisle from hers. It's where I typically sit when I'm helping her out here at the hub, and with any luck, it'll become my permanent spot once I'm officially made a squad leader.

I settle into the desk chair, fire up the laptop, and get right to work checking the feeds. It's a tedious task, but it's mind-numbing enough that it gives me a reprieve from my anxious thoughts for a little while. That is, until Avery pops by a couple hours later, right as I'm finishing up.

"Big night tonight!" she remarks excitedly, breezing down the center aisle of the IT hub while the male personnel practically break their necks to watch her walk by.

"No pressure, right?" I joke, exchanging glances with Lo across the aisle.

Lo looks toward Avery as she approaches, shaking her head. "You'd better not be here to get Sloane all wound up about the run," she warns. "If you are, turn around now and take that energy elsewhere."

Avery gasps like she's offended, whipping toward Lo dramatically. "I'd never!"

I chuckle to myself, checking the last of the cameras as I feel Avery moving closer.

“Are you almost done?” she asks, peeking over my shoulder at the grainy camera feed on my screen.

“Just wrapping up now,” I murmur.

Avery waits patiently as I log the stats on the last camera, checking over the list a final time before closing out the program. Then I push back from the desk, peering up at her so she can get to whatever she really came here for.

“What’s up?” I ask, combing my fingers through my curls.

“Just wanted to see how you’re doing,” she replies nonchalantly, holding out a hand to help me up from my chair. “Do you wanna get ready together at the packhouse tonight?”

I place my hand in hers, narrowing my eyes suspiciously. “Did Madd put you up to this?”

“No way!” Avery laughs, yanking me up to stand. “I just thought it’d be nice to spend some time bonding with my bestie before my brother steals her away for the rest of the night.”

“For the rest of our lives,” Lo amends.

Avery points a finger at me. “That too. So c’mon, come hang with me.”

I glance over at Lo, chewing my lip nervously. “Do you need me for anything else here?”

“Go,” she urges, waving a hand. “We’re just about done here for the day anyways.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods. “Positive. Have fun tonight! I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

Avery loops her arm through mine, taking that as all the permission she needs to start tugging me in the direction of the exit. “See ya tomorrow, Lolo!” she calls back cheerfully.

“Thanks again, Lo,” I add as Avery pulls me down the aisle.

She gives me a thumbs-up, winking.



“Remember, it’s just me and you,” I say, framing Sloane’s face in both hands and staring into her vibrant moss green eyes.

“You and me,” she agrees with a little nod.

I lean down to plant a kiss on her lips before taking a step back, glancing toward the large crowd gathered in the living room of my packhouse. I’m thankful we were able to steal this last private moment together before the chaos of the run itself, even if we’re just tucked away in the corner rather than being truly alone. I’ve got a duty to my pack to lead the run tonight, and they’re all waiting to begin until I say the word.

The pack always gets amped up for the full moon run. Sure, wolves are drawn to the full moon, compelled to shift and run beneath it, but this ritual is so much more than that. It’s the one time a month that the pack all comes together, forging new mate bonds and strengthening the bond of the pack as a whole. It solidifies our connection with one another; the sense of unity and camaraderie that’s vital to this way of life.

Because it’s so important, my duties to the pack have to come first. This may be a big night for me, but it is for them, too. They’ve looked forward to it all month. And I won’t let them down.

I stride toward the center of the room, cupping my hands around my mouth. “Alright, who’s ready to run?!” I call out, and I’m immediately met with a chorus of whoops and cheers that vibrate the packhouse walls, the excited

frenzy of the crowd palpable.

Fuck, I love this feeling. It's euphoric. I soak it in for a good minute, sliding my gaze around the room to meet the eyes of as many pack members as I can. Then I throw up an arm, gesturing for them to follow before heading toward the rear door.

I pass Sloane along the way, still hanging off to the side of the room. "I'll see you out there," I say, tipping my head to her.

Sloane's lips tip up in a little smirk. "Catch me if you can, Madd."

A laugh tumbles from my throat as I lead the way outside to the back lawn of the packhouse, everyone else spilling out the door behind me. As soon as they hit the lawn, people start tossing their clothes off, leaving them strewn in haphazard piles as they prepare to shift. I lift my own shirt off over my head, chucking it away as I stride toward the treeline at the rear of the property.

Like I said, the full moon run is a ritual of sorts, so there's an order to these things. The pack alpha is the first to shift, signaling the start of the run with a howl. Then, the family of the alpha- in this case, my sister and parents. Next is the pack beta and anyone else with rank, followed by the remainder of the pack, and lastly, any visitors- squad members that chose to stay here for the run rather than going back to their home packs, and tonight, Sloane.

My heart pounds with excitement as I drop my pants and call my wolf forward, the air around me shimmering. Energy surges through my body as my bones snap and rearrange with my shift. When my wolf first came in, this part was uncomfortable and almost painful, but now, it's second nature. It only takes a second for the shift to be complete, and once I'm on four paws and shaking out my fur, I throw my head back and howl to the sky.

As I bound toward the treeline, I hear the echo of howls behind me- my sister, my parents, the ranked pack members. Then more of the pack. There's a deafening chorus of howls that feels like it's echoing all around me as I surge into the forest, my paws pounding against the earth.

I hear the thunder of a running wolf coming up alongside me, turning my head to see that Avery has caught up and is keeping pace with me, like usual. '*Left or right?*,' she asks through the mind link- a handy connection the pack uses to communicate when we're in wolf form.

'*Left,*' I reply, realizing that we're already approaching the edge of the perimeter we set for ourselves. Before the hunters started terrorizing shifters, we were able to run anywhere within our territory under the full moon. Now, we keep to a tight radius, far from our pack's boundary lines.

The two of us veer off to the left, the rest of the pack following as I hear the distant howls of the last of my pack shifting to join the run.

My heart beats faster, and it isn't from exertion. I'm sprinting at top speed, kicking up dirt beneath my fast-moving paws, but it's the anticipation of Sloane joining the run that has my pulse racing.

This is it.

It's finally our time.

Fuck, I hope we're right about being fated.

I kick those doubts out of my brain the moment they arrive, because I refuse to accept any scenario that doesn't end in Sloane and I marking one another by the end of the night. We've waited too long. Endured too much. Fought too hard.

We deserve this.

'*Feel anything yet?*' Avery asks through the mind link, checking in on me.

'*Not yet,*' I reply.

For a second, a tiny seed of panic sprouts within me- because at any moment, Sloane could choose to back out of this whole thing. When she first came back home, I was awful to her. I'm fucking ashamed of how badly I treated her. She has every reason to walk away right now and give me the same cold shoulder I gave her when she returned, and the thought of that fucking terrifies me.

But then...

The moment she shifts, I *feel* it. Because my whole goddamn world shifts, too.

There's a sharp tugging sensation in my chest, like a tether being yanked taut. My senses go haywire, causing me to stumble a step and nearly trip over my own goddamn paws. Without a word to Avery, I abruptly veer off course, mindlessly following the pull that's seemingly overtaking my body.

Most of the pack stays with Aves, but a few confused stragglers try to follow me before they realize there's no point in trying to keep up. I'm on a damn mission, my single-minded focus being to follow the pull from deep within that's leading me to my mate. My wolf is in a frenzy, taking control and pushing me so far back that there's only a glimmer of my human side remaining.

An overwhelmingly delicious scent registers in my nose, growing stronger the closer I get. There's something intoxicating about it, making my brain foggy and my heart giddy. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced, and

even before I find her, I *know*.

Sloane's my mate.

Deep down, I've always known. Our soul-deep connection has been there from the beginning. The two of us were always inevitable.

I'm so out of my mind with the primal need to find my mate that I don't even see her coming. We literally crash into one another at full speed, our bodies meeting with so much force that it knocks the wind out of me. It fucking *hurts*. I get a mouthful of fur, a paw to the gut. We go hurtling across the forest floor and I angle myself to take the brunt of the impact, our limbs tangled together as we roll a few times before finally sliding to a stop.

My eyes focus to meet those of the small black wolf beneath me, and all at once, my own wolf retreats. The air shimmers around me- around both of us- and suddenly I'm back in human form, naked and gazing down into the moss green eyes of the only girl I've ever loved.

The bond between us snaps into place like a bolt of lightning, energy searing through my veins. Our bond hums beneath my skin like a living, breathing thing, and suddenly I can't speak, can't think, can't do anything to escape the tidal wave of heightened emotion pulling me under.

Sloane finds the words for us both. Well, just one. Her eyes widen, lips parting as she whispers, "*Mate.*"

My heart pounds like a stampede in my chest, and it's all I can do to keep from bursting into fucking tears. Because I *knew*. I've known all along. I've loved Sloane my entire life, so deeply and fiercely that it physically aches to think about. I almost lost her, but we found our way back to one another, and this is our reward. Our bond.

I dive forward, stamping my mouth down over hers in a hard, claiming kiss. It's one that says everything I can't right now- how much I love her, how much I need her. How long I've waited for this moment, and how grateful I am that it's finally arrived. Every slide of her lips against mine is an answered confession, conveying her own love, her own gratitude, her own relief.

Her arms wrap around my neck, her legs around my hips. I mindlessly grind against her, my rapidly thickening cock sliding against the heat of her bare center. My tongue chases hers as I angle my head to deepen our kiss, and the next thing I know, the head of my dick is notched at her entrance and I'm pushing inside, her tight heat enveloping me.

Sloane's fingernails dig crescents into my shoulder blades as I sink deeper

inside her, her inner walls stretching and pulsing around my girth. A wave of euphoria washes over me once I'm fully seated, our bodies locked together just like our bond. I rock my hips back then punch them forward again, Sloane's mouth breaking away from mine and a breathy moan slipping free. Primal instinct takes over as I fuck her harder, deeper, until we're both slick with sweat and panting each other's names. She flattens her palms against my chest and pushes, signaling that she wants me to roll over, and I do, holding tight to her thighs and taking her with me. She immediately rocks up into a seated position over my lap and starts riding my cock. It's my favorite view- her tits bouncing, her wild curls spilling over her shoulders and down her back.

Sloane's eyes are hooded as she gazes down at me, her lips parting to reveal the sharp points of her canines. At the sight of them, my mouth tingles and my own immediately descend, ready to mark her, to claim what's mine and seal the mate bond between us. I push up into a seated position, looping an arm around Sloane's waist and yanking her chest against mine. Her scent surrounds me- notes of vanilla, jasmine, and peach- and I press my forehead against hers, staring into her eyes.

"You and me, baby," I rasp, thrusting up into her as she grips my shoulders and continues bouncing on my dick with wild abandon.

"Me and you," she breathes.

And, like a silent pact, we move to seal our bond. Together.

Sloane tilts her head, giving me access to the junction of her neck and shoulder, and when I tilt mine the same way, she sinks her canines into my flesh in the same spot. The sharp sting of her bite barely registers because my teeth pierce her skin at almost the exact moment hers do mine, the two of us coming undone as the mating serum is embedded beneath our skin and our bond forges completely.

There's no way to describe the feeling of utter bliss that comes over me in that moment. Mind-numbing, earth-shattering waves of pleasure rocket through me and I lift Sloane by the hips, painting the inside of her thighs with my release. Her body shudders in my arms as her own climax takes her under, and by the time we both ride it out, we're trembling, struggling to catch our breath.

"Damn, girl," I sigh, wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her hair. "You're fucking perfect, you know that? Fuck, I love you so much, Sloane."

“I love you too,” she breathes, her warm cheek pressed against my chest. “You’ve always been the one, Maddox Kessler.”

Warmth blooms in my chest, and we just hold each other for a long moment, soaking up every last second. Then I finally move to stand up, pinning her body tight to mine to take her with me.

“C’mon,” I say gruffly, holding her up by the backs of her thighs. “I’m taking you back to the packhouse.”

Because Sloane deserves more than a fast, dirty fuck on the forest floor as her memory of tonight. She deserves to be worshipped, and I plan on doing exactly that.

She doesn’t argue- she just leans in and presses her lips against mine, her hard nipples brushing against my pecs. I start carrying her in the direction of the packhouse, leaving the rest of my pack out to finish the run on their own. Tomorrow, I’ll tell them why I bailed. Tomorrow, I’ll share the news that I found my mate and they have a new luna.

But for tonight, it’s just the two of us; the kids who grew up at each other’s sides, who fell in love at fifteen, who were forced apart at seventeen and came back together at twenty-five. We’ve been written in the stars since day one, and the moon tonight only confirmed what I’ve known all along.

Sloane is mine.

My first love, my last love, my only love.

My mate.



“I love the way you look in my clothes,” I say sleepily, watching Sloane roll up the waistband of a pair of black boxer briefs she poached from my drawer. She tosses me a sultry little glance as she finishes rolling the band tighter to her hips. “Funny, I love the way you look *without* your clothes,” she replies, licking her lips as her eyes drop to my bare chest, the smoldering heat in her gaze unmistakable.

I cross the room to her as she drops the hem of the grey t-shirt she’s wearing over the boxers. Though that particular shirt is tight on me, it completely swallows her up, the fabric grazing the tops of her knees. And damnit if she doesn’t wear it well. “You should know better than to look at me like that,” I murmur, grabbing a fistful of the shirt and yanking her toward me. Her body crashes against mine, a surprised little puff of air escaping her lips before I crush my own against them.

She flattens her palms against my pecs as she returns the kiss with equal fervor, her warm, wet tongue stroking against mine. I wind my arms around her waist and start walking her backwards toward the bed with only one thing on my mind. The backs of my calves meet the edge of the mattress and I lean back to fall onto it, aiming to take her with me- but Sloane plants her feet on the ground and pushes against my chest, sending me sailing down onto the mattress solo.

My eyes pop open as I land on my back, blinking up at Sloane. She’s

standing over me with her hands on her hips, a feisty spark in her eyes.

“You promised me breakfast.”

I groan as I curl up to sit, my ab muscles straining. “Tease.”

Sloane smirks. “Horny bastard.”

She’s not wrong.

If I thought I was insatiable before when it comes to this girl, it’s nothing compared to how things are now that we’ve sealed the mate bond. The post-mating fever is in full force, and my dick has been permanently hard since our bond snapped in, no matter how many times we’ve fucked. Which is basically all we’ve been doing since we tackled one another in the forest last night.

“Fine,” I concede, raking a hand through my unkempt hair and pushing up to stand.

Sloane scampers over to my dresser, pulling open the drawers and picking through my clothes. She spins around with a t-shirt and a pair of athletic shorts in her grasp, shoving them toward me, and I slip them on while she taps her foot impatiently.

For such a little wisp of a thing, the girl is serious when it comes to her food.

Once I’m dressed, I grab a hat off the top of my dresser to cover up my bed head, slip it on backwards, and follow Sloane out of my room.

“So what are you gonna make me?” she asks as we stroll down the long hallway, a playful lilt to her tone. “I hope your cooking skills have improved over the last eight years. Oh my gosh, remember the salmon omelet?”

I scrub a hand over my face, chuckling. “Shit, don’t remind me. I almost burned this place down.”

“I still don’t understand how you managed to both undercook *and* overcook it,” she giggles.

“Hey!” I object, grabbing a handful of her ass and dragging her body against mine. “You said it was the effort that counted.”

I lean down to kiss her, but pause when the sound of voices drifts up from downstairs. Voices I recognize.

Sloane’s body goes rigid. “Is that...?”

The two of us exchange a panicked look, then break apart and practically sprint down the hall to the stairs- because nothing pulls you out of your post-mating sex haze faster than hearing your parents’ voices.

I grab onto Sloane’s hand and the two of us bound down the stairs, taking them two at a time until we reach the bottom and round the corner into the

dining room.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Avery croons, sitting at the table with a shit-eating grin on her face. “About time you made it downstairs.”

“Shit,” I hiss under my breath, sweeping my gaze around the table full of people. In addition to my sister, my parents are here, as well as Sloane’s whole family- Brock, Astrid, Tristan, Marigold, and her mate, Rhett.

“Did I miss the memo about family brunch?” I ask warily, taking a cautious step forward. I can’t help but be suspicious that this is some sort of ambush given the history of these people meddling in our relationship.

“It was my idea,” Avery announces proudly. “I thought it’d be a fun surprise.”

“A heads-up would’ve been nice,” I mutter.

Sloane elbows me in the ribs and I glance down to meet her eyes, the look in them imploring me to play nice. I give her a discreet nod, clearing my throat and tossing an arm around her shoulders as I lift my head to look toward the table again.

“So?” Mom asks, practically jumping out of her skin with excitement. “Does our pack have a new Luna?”

Pride swells in my chest as Sloane smiles bashfully, nodding.

Avery squeals, shooting up from her chair and rushing over to us. She practically tackles Sloane with a hug while everyone else clamors out of their chairs and descends upon us, offering hugs and handshakes and congratulatory words. I’m completely overwhelmed by it- here, I thought Alpha Brock would lose his shit when we broke the news, but instead he’s clapping me on the back with a grin, like he’s genuinely happy for us. My parents pull me in for a hug, mom laying a sloppy wet kiss on my cheek. Even Tristan is all smiles, going in for an awkward fist-bump, but I sling an arm around his neck and yank him in, rubbing my knuckles against his head playfully.

It’s more than I ever expected- and honestly, more than I deserve, for how much of a dick I’ve been to half of the people in this room. Avery approaches me last, giving me one of her annoying, ‘told ya so’ looks, and I bark out a laugh, wrapping my arms around her and squeezing tight.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

She just grins back at me in response as she pulls away, winking. Leave it to my twin to know exactly what to do to diffuse the tension between me and Sloane’s family so that we can start the next chapter of our lives together

without the past hanging over our heads.

“Well, should we eat?” Dad asks, tipping his head toward the dining table.

Everyone else mumbles in affirmation, heading that way to retake their seats as Sloane and I follow. I was so taken aback by the surprise of finding our families here that I didn’t even notice all the food. My mouth waters as we draw closer and I take in the array of platters spread across the table, piled with every breakfast food imaginable, including Sloane’s favorite- salmon omelets. And they’re cooked a hell of a lot better than when I attempted to make her one all those years ago.

The two of us claim seats side by side, and as soon as we sit down, we’re met with a barrage of questions.

“So are you actually fated?”

“Did you mark?”

“When are you telling the pack?”

“Slow down,” Sloane laughs, holding up her palms. “Can’t we get some food in us first?”

“Worked up an appetite, huh?” Goldie teases.

Tristan grimaces. “Ugh, can we not?”

“Way to make it awkward,” I laugh, reaching for the plate of omelets. I spear one with a fork, scooping it onto Sloane’s plate before taking another for myself and passing the platter along. The rest of the dishes are lifted and passed, and once we’ve all got full plates, we dig in, lighthearted conversation flowing easily.

“So, you *were* fated, right?” Goldie probes, glancing between Sloane and me. She sets down her fork, swallowing her bite of food before responding.

“Fated and sealed,” Sloane replies, pulling the collar of her shirt over to show my mark on her skin. “The whole nine yards.”

“Ugh, I’m just so happy for you,” Astrid gushes, reaching across the table to take her daughter’s hand. “Both of you,” she amends, reaching a hand out toward me.

I take it, smiling at her as she gives it a little squeeze before pulling both hands back.

Brock wipes his mouth off on his napkin, setting it beside his plate. “Look, I know I haven’t always been the most... *receptive*, when it comes to your relationship.”

Goldie snorts. “You can say that again.”

He cuts her a glare, then turns back to Sloane and me, his expression

softening. “What I’m trying to say is that I hope we can leave the past where it belongs and move forward. We’re all family now, and families don’t always see eye to eye, but they always have one another’s backs.” His eyes lock with mine. “And despite our differences, I know you’ll take care of my little girl.”

I nod solemnly. “You’ll never have to doubt that.”

“Just keep Tristan away from their phones and it should be smooth sailing,” Goldie snickers.

Sloane drops her fork with a clatter and her sister snaps her head in her direction, wide-eyed. “What, too soon?”

“I don’t think they’re quite at the point of being able to look back on that and laugh about it,” Avery mumbles with a wince.

I take a bite of my omelet, washing it down with a gulp of orange juice. “Tris and I are good,” I say, nodding toward him. “Sloane has taught me a thing or two about forgiveness since she came back.” I slide her a glance and she sets a hand on my thigh beneath the table, smiling back at me.

“That’s what mates do,” my dad murmurs, covering Mom’s hand with his own. “They help you become the best possible version of yourself.”

The two of them exchange a look- one that I’ve seen them share a million times, but never truly understood until now. It’s not just love, but something deeper, a connection forged by their bond with one another.

I feel it now, with Sloane. Every time I look at her, I’m so overwhelmed by love and pride and awe that it nearly takes me to my knees. I’ll be the first to admit that I was a skeptic, but this fated mates thing is no fucking joke. It’s the real deal.

“So when are you telling the pack?” Mom asks hopefully. “I mean, I think they figured it out last night, but you’re going to do a formal announcement, right?”

I shrug, glancing over at Sloane. “Maybe this afternoon?”

“Sure,” she agrees easily. “Just give me a chance to pull myself together a little bit.” She glances down at her clothes- *my* clothes- and her cheeks flush pink, like she’s just remembered what she’s wearing.

I give her a slow once-over, licking my lips. “I think you look great,” I drawl, eating her up with my eyes.

Goldie makes a mock gagging sound and Tristan barks out a laugh, shaking his head. “Keep saying gooey shit like that and Ares is gonna have a field day,” he remarks.

“If anybody needs a mate to tame him, it’s Ares Raines,” Avery groans.

“You volunteering for the job?” Sloane teases.

Avery pulls a face and we all laugh, tucking back into our food.

This is exactly what I didn’t know I needed. I always knew I needed Sloane, but being surrounded by our families like this, having them celebrate our union alongside us, is icing on the cake. I can’t remember the last time I ever felt this fulfilled; this carefree and fucking *happy*.

I slide Sloane a glance, and the way she throws her head back on a laugh in response to a comment my sister makes tells me that she’s feeling the same way right now- lighthearted and content, like this is exactly the way things were always supposed to be.

If you’d told me a month ago that I’d be here today, I would’ve called you a damn liar. But right now, I can’t imagine anything better.

Shit, I guess sometimes even assholes like me get happy endings.



My wolf wakes me out of a dead sleep, clawing at the inside of my chest in warning. The little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and the heavy feeling of being watched registers somewhere in my subconscious.

I blink my eyes open with a start, my heart thundering in my chest when they land on a dark figure standing beside my bed. No, not just one- there are several of them, shrouded in darkness, closing in on me. I throw out an arm, reaching for Madd, but the other side of the bed is cold. Gasping in alarm, I push myself up and turn to look for him, but he isn't there.

Then the shadowed figures descend.

Hands grab for me, wrapping around my arms and legs, yanking me out of bed. Before I can make out the faces of my captors, a hood is shoved over my head, cutting off my vision and drowning me in darkness.

I scream.

The hands hold tighter to me, fingers digging bruises into my skin as I'm hauled across the room. I kick and flail, but my efforts are futile- there are too many of them, each of my limbs tightly restrained in their grip. My hands are wrenched in front of me and something is wound around my wrists, pulling tight to bind them together.

My instincts kick in and I descend into a state of sheer panic, screaming and flailing and fighting with all I have. My wolf pushes forward, my skin prickling with the urge to shift so she can defend me. Before I can, I'm

yanked against something hard and warm, and though I'm still panicking in earnest, my wolf suddenly backs down, inexplicably calming.

"Shh, I've got you," a deep, raspy voice whispers.

Madd.

My heart stutters a beat as I come back into my body, registering that he's cradling me against his chest. Secure in Madd's arms, the other hands relinquish their grip on my limbs. Then he starts walking. His footsteps are heavy on the floorboards of the hall, and I sag against him, the fight draining out of me as I realize he's here and I'm safe.

This must be part of my initiation.

He said it'd be today, but I didn't expect it to start now, before the sun has even risen. And I definitely didn't anticipate that it'd begin like this, with them tearing me from bed and scaring the crap out of me.

A little warning might've been nice.

I'll have to take that up with my mate later.

The sound of footsteps echoes in the hallway as I'm carried further away from our room in the packhouse while my brain struggles to try to discern how many sets of them there are. Are all the squad leaders here, or just a select few? Other than Tristan's warning about the general theme of the initiation, they haven't let me in on any of the details. I'm going into this basically blind- and although I now know I'm not in any real danger, my adrenaline is still pumping.

I'm jostled in Madd's arms as he carries me down the stairs, boots clomping against the hardwood floor when he reaches the bottom. Then he makes his way out the front door, the early morning chill biting my bare arms as he brings me to a waiting vehicle, the rumbling engine already running.

"Toss her in the trunk!" someone hisses in a whisper.

"Absolutely the fuck not," Madd growls defensively.

"C'mon, I had to go in the trunk."

Fucking Ares.

"I'm not putting her in the trunk," Madd reiterates, the flat tone of his voice brokering no room for argument.

"Fun hater," Ares grumbles.

A car door opens and Madd shuffles me around in his grip, sliding into the vehicle and settling me in his lap. More doors open and close as the others climb inside, and I feel Madd lean his head down close to mine, the stubble on his jaw catching on the hood covering my head and shifting the fabric.

“Doin’ alright, babe?” he asks in a whisper so low that only I can hear it.

I give him a subtle nod, not wanting to betray the fact that he’s checking up on me. It’s sweet of him to do it, but I’m not afraid. If anything, I’m amped up to get this initiation underway. The others have all done it and passed, so how bad can it really be?

My stomach flip-flops as the vehicle starts forward, leaving the packhouse driveway and pulling out onto the road. I’m not sure where we’re going, so I just relax against Madd’s chest, pressing my ear against it and listening to the steady thump of his heartbeat while we drive. With the hood over my head and the frenetic energy coursing through my veins, I’m clueless as to both our destination and how much time passes. After a while, though, the vehicle comes to a stop, the engine shutting off and doors opening.

Madd climbs out, carefully adjusting my body in his grip.

“Hey, how come I got slung over someone’s shoulder and she gets to be carried in like a bride?” Ares whines, followed by a groan from what I picture as him taking an elbow to the gut.

I’ll have to find out who did that and thank them later.

Madd just grunts, not even dignifying him with a response as he starts walking, the distinctive thick scent of pine registering in my nose.

We’re somewhere in the forest.

My pulse picks up tempo, a fresh bout of adrenaline flooding my veins as my skin prickles with anticipation for what’s to come.

There’s a creak of what sounds like an old door, followed by footsteps thudding against a wooden surface. A musty scent permeates the air, telling me we’ve entered an old building of some sort, though it can’t be anywhere that’s frequented. The air is stale, reeking of years of disuse.

Madd’s muscles ripple against me as he lowers me down, the warm safety of his arms leaving me once I’m securely planted on a firm surface. “You’ve got this,” he whispers to me before moving away, his footsteps shuffling backwards.

Time slows to a crawl, a tortuous minute stretching on for what feels like an eternity as floorboards creak with the movement of people around me. I don’t move, don’t speak- just wait in suspended anticipation for what’s next.

“If you’re going to be one of us, you’ll have to face each one of our fears before facing your own,” a deep voice announces; one I recognize as belonging to Archer Raines. “You’ll have until noon to complete the challenges and collect the keys. Time starts now.”

I hear the scuffle of retreating footsteps, wondering where the hell I am and what I'm supposed to do with that ominous set of instructions.

What challenges?

What keys?

Something suddenly slams down loudly above me, a lock clicking into place, and I finally move. Aiming to get to my feet, I kick out a leg, but my knee crashes into a solid wall.

Ouch.

I change tact, drawing my leg back in and pivoting to go the other way, but when I kick out my opposite leg, I encounter another wall. I try to push up to stand and the top of my head bangs against a firm surface, which is when confusion really starts to set in.

Am I in a fucking box?!

"Find your way out, initiate," Avery says firmly, her voice coming from somewhere nearby.

"You've gotta be kidding me," I mutter, lifting my bound hands in front of my face and grasping onto the fabric of the hood, yanking it from my head. Removing it does little to improve my vision, because it turns out that I am, in fact, in some sort of box, the only source of light filtering in from tiny cracks in the corners. I run my fingers along the wall in front of me, the rough texture and the earthy scent of it telling me it's made from wood.

I've got shifter strength on my side, so wood should be easy enough to break out of. I've just gotta free up my hands, first.

I shift my weight around until I'm sitting on my butt again, holding my bound hands out in front of me. Focusing my vision in the darkness, I can make out the shape of the rope wound around them, and I wriggle my wrists to test its strength. Though it holds firm, it's nothing I can't handle. At least they aren't bound with zip-ties.

I work my wrists against each other, wiggling and stretching them to gradually loosen the rope. It's a little bit tedious, but I finally manage to create enough give in the rope that I can slip one hand free of it, easily dropping the remaining rope from my other wrist. I rub at the reddened skin with a wince, glad my hands are finally unbound.

Now I've just gotta get the hell out of this box.

My heart pounds as I look all around me, identifying the seams of the box that allow slivers of pale moonlight to peek through. I decide that the top of it is the weakest point and, shimmying down to lay flat on my back, I bring my

legs up above me and give it a hard kick.

It doesn't budge. At least, not on the first kick. But with the second, I feel it give a little bit, a spark of victory igniting in my chest.

I kick again and again, grunting with the effort and working up a sweat. The air is thick inside the tight space, growing more suffocating by the second. After I've been kicking so long that it feels like I might just die in this box, I finally manage to dislodge one of the corners, nearly weeping with relief when it pops free.

After that, the rest of the lid comes apart easily enough. With a bout of renewed energy, I shift my body to the other side and kick at the corner until I knock it loose, and with a whoop of celebration, I shove the lid away, popping up to my feet triumphantly and wiping the sweat from my brow off on a forearm.

I take a moment to survey my surroundings as I climb out of the box, quickly realizing I'm inside an old hunting cabin. Only Avery is here with me, sitting atop a table across from the box with one long leg crossed over the other as she reclines back on her palms.

"What the hell was that?" I pant, stepping away from the godforsaken box and throwing a thumb over my shoulder at it.

She shrugs as she leans forward to sit up. "Fear of confined spaces."

"Damn, I feel like I've been dumped into the plot of a scary movie," I remark with a chuckle. "Are all of the challenges this sinister?"

"You'll see," Avery answers cryptically, handing me an elastic band with a key dangling from it. "Head on over to the swimming hole for your next one."

I groan, taking the key from her and sliding the elastic onto my wrist. "Which way is the swimming hole from here?"

"South," she provides, smoothing her long blonde ponytail over a shoulder and nodding to a pair of running shoes waiting beside the door for me, socks stuffed inside each one. "We're in Norbury."

"Great," I mutter. I stoop down to pull on the socks and shoes, then toss her a little wave as I head out the door, bound for my next challenge.

I'd love to stay and chat and ask her more about what I've got ahead of me, but time's of the essence here. It took me a lot longer to get out of that box than I expected it to, and if I've got a half dozen more of these 'challenges' to go before noon, I'd better get a move on.

The early morning sun is starting to peek through the trees as I emerge from

the dilapidated cabin, heading south toward Goldenleaf. The swimming hole is located near the squad complex, so I start in that direction at a leisurely jog. I can only imagine what fresh hell will be waiting there for me once I arrive. The forest is peaceful at this early hour, the birds singing their morning song and small animals scurrying through the brush. It's a deceptively serene scene for the gauntlet I'm undergoing. I have no idea who I'm meeting at the swimming hole or what I'll be tasked with, but I'm eager to find out. When I finally emerge from the woods at the path to the swimming hole, Archer is waiting for me on the bank, tipping his head in greeting as I approach.

"What've you got for me, Arch?" I ask cheerfully, picking my way down the bank to join him.

"Swim out to the deepest spot and tread water for thirty minutes, initiate," he says bluntly.

Well that doesn't seem so bad.

At least it's not a challenge of how long I can hold my breath underwater or something.

I bend at the waist to untie my shoes and slip them off, stuffing my socks into them. "You're scared of the water?" I ask dubiously, glancing up at Archer as I straighten.

"Not the water. Of Drowning," he clarifies. Then he pauses, shrugging. "Everyone's afraid of something."

He's not wrong, and these little peeks into my friends' psyches are enlightening, to say the least. I can't help but wonder what the others are afraid of- though I suppose I'll learn soon enough.

The cold water stings my skin as I wade into the swimming hole, momentarily stealing my breath. I move further from the bank until I can no longer touch the bottom, then I swim out to the deepest part beneath the waterfall, glancing back at Archer for confirmation that I've gone far enough. With a nod from him, I start to tread water, moving my legs and arms to stay afloat.

It's not so bad at first. Truth be told, it's almost relaxing. The forest is calm, and the tranquil waterfall is a soothing soundtrack to this leg of my initiation. I slip into almost a meditative state, keeping a steady pace and regulating my breathing so that I don't get too winded.

I seriously underestimated how difficult it would be to keep this up for thirty minutes, though.

By the time Archer calls out that I'm at the twenty-minute mark, my muscles are screaming for relief, my lungs burning. The last ten minutes are hell, and when Arch finally declares that my time's up, my muscles slacken with relief and I forget to keep my head above water, slipping under.

I sputter as I resurface, pushing my body to cooperate and swim toward the bank. I manage to make it to a shallower spot and get my feet underneath me, then wade through the water on wobbly legs, dragging myself out of the swimming hole and onto the bank. My wet clothes cling to my skin as I make my way over to Archer, panting as I approach him with my hand out, palm up.

"Key, please."

"You earned it," Arch declares proudly, depositing it in my waiting hand.

I slip the elastic over my wrist, the second key joining the first with a metallic clink. "Please tell me the next part is easier?"

He chuckles, shaking his head as I stoop down to pull on my socks and shoes.

"What?" I ask nervously, straightening.

"You've gotta run to Pike's Point."

"You're kidding me, right?" I deadpan. "That's like four miles!"

"Yeah, and one more thing..." Archer trails off, throwing a thumb over his shoulder and glancing toward the forest behind him.

I draw a short gasp at the sight of a sleek tricolor wolf slinking out from the foliage, baring its teeth in a snarl.

A smirk curls Archer's lips as he adds, "Don't get caught."

I want to curse at him, beg for a five-minute reprieve to rest my aching muscles and catch my breath, but the wolf starts advancing and my fight or flight instincts kick in. I spin around, taking off into the forest at a dead sprint.

The soles of my shoes pound the dirt, my heart slamming against my ribcage as I tear through the woods with the animal in hot pursuit. I'd recognize Lo's wolf anywhere, and I wonder if she's deriving some sick sense of satisfaction from chasing me like this.

Honestly, if she really wanted to catch me, she could. It's impossible for me to outrun her in human form. As I continue to flee, though, it becomes clear that the purpose of this exercise is for her to toy with me more than anything. At first, she's right behind me, snapping at my heels while my adrenaline spikes. Then she seemingly backs off- or at least I think she does, until I'm startled to see her coming up on my left, closing in. I weave through the trees,

trying my best to evade her advance, and just when I think I've finally lost her, she's coming up on my right side instead. For the whole four-mile run, she varies her pursuit just enough to keep me unnerved the entire time, my heart racing, lungs burning.

By the time I finally reach Pike's Point, I'm so exhausted that I feel like I could pass out at any moment. The wolf emerges from the forest behind me and the air shimmers as Lo shifts to her human form, rising up on two legs with a satisfied smile on her face.

"What the fuck, Lo?!" I demand, doubling over and pressing my hands to my knees, struggling to catch my breath.

"Fear of being chased," she says flippantly, barely even winded. I eye her warily as she steps over to a downed tree where a folded stack of clothes are waiting for her, along with a pair of water bottles. She tosses one to me and I snatch it out of the air, moaning in relief as I twist off the cap.

While I suck the water down greedily, Lo tugs on a t-shirt and a pair of sweats, reaching into the pocket and producing a key. Water dribbles from the corners of my lips and down my chin as I gulp the entire contents of the bottle, watching Lo warily out of the corner of my eye as she approaches and offers it to me.

"Thanks," I breathe, trading her the empty water bottle for the key and adding it to the others on my wrist. I'm almost afraid to ask, but... "Now what?"

She winces. "You're not gonna like it."

My stomach sinks like a stone and Lo turns around, pointing to the mouth of a nearby cave.

My blood runs cold.

I know exactly whose fear this is, and I could kill him for leaving it out of his warning.



“Good luck,” Lo sing-songs, tossing me a wave as she retreats.

I throw her the middle finger in return as she leaves me to tackle my next challenge, mentally cursing every one of my so-called ‘friends’ that put me up to this.

Everybody knows this cave- or rather, everybody knows to stay away from it. It’s dark and damp, and it stinks from the way water collects on the floor in a shallow pool, making it the perfect home for creepy crawlies. The real kicker, though? It’s infested with snakes.

My throat bobs with a hard swallow as I glance back toward the mouth of the cave, recalling how my brother and I stumbled upon it by accident when we were out playing as kids years ago. We ventured inside, seeking a thrill, and boy, did we find one.

Tristan slipped on a rock and lost his footing, falling into the snake-infested water. In his panic to escape, he kept slipping back into the water and was bitten several times. In the end, he was so shaken by the whole ordeal that he never went back, and he’s had a visceral reaction to seeing snakes ever since. I shiver at the memory, and as if on cue, my brother comes walking up behind me, setting his hand on my shoulder.

“Can’t you just give me the key and pretend I went in?” I ask warily, lifting my chin to glance back at him.

He shakes his head with a frown. “No can do, sis. The key’s in the back of

the cave. You've gotta go in and get it."

I spin around to face him, folding my arms over my chest and furrowing my brow. "Bullshit. There's no way you went in there to hide that key."

"Of course not," Tristan scoffs. "When I said I'd never go back in there, I meant it. The only time I have was for my own initiation." His eyes flicker over my head to the mouth of the cave, a shudder running through him. "Never again."

"Then who put it in there?" I challenge.

He shrugs. "Beats me. One of the other guys, I'm assuming. All you've gotta do is go in and get it."

"That easy, huh?" I mutter wryly.

This challenge is more of a mental one than anything. My shifter healing can combat venom from a snake bite, so entering that cave won't put me in mortal danger. That doesn't mean it won't hurt like hell if I get bitten, though, and something about slithering snakes just gives me the heebie-jeebies.

I stare at the entrance to the cave for another solid minute before I shore up the courage to start toward it, dread pooling in the pit of my stomach the whole way. Tristan follows me silently, but he stops short a few feet from the opening, not daring to venture any farther. I don't blame him. I can already smell the stench permeating from inside.

I remove my shoes and socks again, not wanting to get them all wet in case there's another running aspect of this initiation ahead of me, and with a final mental pep talk, I head in.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself, my feet sliding against the slimy stone floor of the cave as I wade into the shallow water. The smell is so overwhelming that I hold my breath, darkness closing in around me and a dank chill settling into my bones.

This is fine.

Mind over matter, right? I've already broken free from a locked box, tread water until I could barely stay afloat, and endured a harrowing run through the woods while being chased. Wading through a grimy cave should be a cakewalk in comparison.

At least that's what I tell myself until I feel something slither across my toes. A startled gasp escapes me as I jump away, dirty water splashing around my shins. I curse under my breath, taking another step only to feel something move beneath my foot.

Damnit, I hate this place.

I pause to gather myself, steeling my composure and deciding that I just need to move quick, regardless of what I feel underfoot along the way. Lifting a hand to plug my nose, I make my strides as long as possible as I venture further into the cave, my heart beating a riot in my chest.

It's impossible to ignore both the movement in the water at my feet and the icky feeling creeping up my spine, but I grit my teeth and keep pushing forward, determined to accomplish this task. And when I finally make it deep enough inside to catch sight of a metallic glimmer on the rear wall, I basically lunge for the key hanging there. I pluck it up, spin around, and get the hell out of dodge.

My feet slide against the slippery cave floor while I make my exit, but somehow I manage to remain upright and not befall the same fate as Tristan did in childhood. He's still there waiting for me when I emerge, and I drag in a greedy gulp of fresh air, a shiver tracking all the way down my spine.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Tristan asks with a smirk.

"You're sadistic," I groan, shoving at his chest.

He stumbles back with a laugh.

"Tell me the next one is easier?"

"Wish I could," Tris sighs, handing me my running shoes. "C'mon, get these on. I'll run over to the complex with you for your next challenge."

"The complex?" I question, arching a brow.

My brother doesn't elaborate further, though at this point, I don't really expect him to. He just waits while I get my shoes and socks on again, then follows my lead when I depart, keeping pace with me as I jog to the squad complex.

I try to conserve my energy, knowing that I'm not done with their tasks yet. I have no idea what awaits me next, but given what I've already endured, I can only imagine. I've already been at this for hours.

At least Tristan's a little more helpful when we arrive. He directs me through the gate and onto the practice field, where I find Ares standing there waiting for me beside a big rolling whiteboard, his thick forearms folded across his chest.

I slow to a stop in front of him, lifting my shirt to mop the sweat from my brow as I look from the blank whiteboard to the empty field surrounding us, holding my breath in anticipation for something to jump out at me. It's suspiciously quiet, no sign of boxes or wolves or snakes anywhere.

“Well?” I finally ask, looking to Ares in question.

A grin spreads across his face and he takes a step backwards, reaching out to grasp onto the whiteboard and swivel it to the opposite side. The hinges creak as it swings and turns over, and as soon as I see what’s written upon it, my posture deflates.

60 Push-ups.

60 Sit-ups.

20 Burpees.

5-minute plank.

I turn my gaze back to Ares, completely stumped. “Fear of working out?” I ask, wrinkling my nose.

“Fear of failure,” he clarifies.

I blow out a slow breath, shaking my head. “Damn.”

“What?”

“Nothing, I just respect the hell outta you for admitting that.”

He stands up a little straighter, lifting his chin and rolling his shoulders back.

“Yeah, well you might be whistling a different tune when you’re trying to keep up.”

“Come again?”

His face splits into another wide grin. “You’ve gotta keep up with me, babe. Miss one rep and we start over.”

I scowl, kicking at the ground with the toe of my shoe. “Dick.”

Ares chuckles a little too gleefully, rubbing his palms together. “Ready to get started?”

I drop down to the ground with a groan. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Tristan wanders off to watch from afar while Ares steps beside me and sinks down into a push-up position, waiting for me to do the same. I roll onto my belly and plant my palms in the grass, pushing up with my arms, then glance over at him with a nod.

We begin.

The push-ups are brutal. The sit-ups are worse. By the time we get to the burpees, I’m on the verge of calling it quits, but somehow, I grit my teeth and push through, focusing on getting to the finish line. The plank at the end nearly kills me, though.

When we’re finally done, I flop onto my back in the grass, my chest heaving and muscles burning with exertion.

I feel like I could pass out right here.

Tristan brings over a bottle of water for each of us, and I guzzle half of it down, then dump the rest over my sweaty face.

Ares reaches for my wrist and slips a fifth key onto it.

“How many more?” I croak, my head falling sideways to stare at him lying in the grass beside me.

I’ve been keeping a tally in my head, trying to figure out who’s left. I haven’t encountered Iver’s challenge yet. What’s he afraid of?

“You’re almost done,” Ares reassures, curling up to sit and giving me a nudge with his fist. “C’mon, let’s get going. It’s time for the grand finale.”

“I can’t move,” I groan.

Tristan nudges my foot with the toe of his shoe. “C’mon, don’t give up now, Sloane,” he urges, giving me a little smile of encouragement. “You’re in the home stretch.”

I blow out a breath, then move to sit up. My ab muscles feel like they’re on fire when they constrict and I cry out, doubling over and hanging my head between my knees. “I can’t.”

“You can,” Tris assures. He crouches down in front of me, reaching out to lift my chin so I meet his eyes. “C’mon, don’t you wanna go see Madd?”

Just the mention of my mate’s name gives me a surge of motivation. I nod weakly, taking Tristan’s hand and allowing him to help pull me to my feet. Then I hobble along with him as he and Ares lead me off the practice field and to the parking lot, where we pile into Tristan’s SUV.

Thank fuck we’re driving to the next destination rather than running. I don’t think I would’ve been able to handle another run after Ares’ challenge.

I lean my head against the window as Tristan drives, spacing out and not paying much attention to where we’re going. My shifter healing is currently working overtime to try to repair my aching muscles, and I’m so tired I feel like I could sleep for a week. But like Tris said, this is the home stretch. I’m almost finished, and then I can rest.

I’m too drained of energy to even speculate as to where we’re headed, but when we pull up to the old lodge, a pit of dread settles in my gut. They said that the final challenge would be facing my own greatest fear. This is exactly what Tristan warned me about.

A feeling of numbness settles over me as the three of us climb out of the SUV and load up in an ATV instead, my brother behind the wheel. He starts it up and drives away from the lodge, following the path of the ski-lift cables overhead.

I see a cluster of people waiting up ahead at the base of a support tower, and Tristan slows the ATV to a stop as we approach them. The rest of the gang's all here- Lo, Avery, Archer, and Madd- but it's Iver who steps forward to greet me when I disembark from the ATV.

"This one's mine, fear of heights," he says, pointing up at the support tower.

I feel the color drain from my face as I tilt my head back to look up. The support tower is a round metal structure with a ladder running up one side and a T-shaped platform on top. It's at least thirty feet above the ground, and the mere sight of it sets my teeth on edge.

I lower my chin, meeting Iver's eyes as I subconsciously retreat a step.

Madd abruptly breaks away from the others, shouldering past Iver and approaching me. He gets right up in my space, reaching out for my face and framing it in both hands as he gazes down into my eyes. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to," he says, the low, gravelly tone of his voice soothing all the sharp edges of emotion that have risen in my chest. "But I have no doubt that you can."

Our gazes lock and I feel the bond between us pulling taut, followed by a wave of calm, like he's pouring it from himself right into me. I stare at him mutely, wringing my hands to try to hide the way they're trembling.

"We've done this a few times before," Madd continues. "We've got a harness rigged up, so even if something were to happen, you won't be in any real danger."

I nod, glancing up at the tower again. Though Madd's reassurances should alleviate my fears, they don't. This may not be the exact spot where I fell, but for the torrent of memories that flood my brain when I look up at the support tower, it may as well be.

"Plus, I'm coming with you," he adds.

That gets my attention.

I snap my gaze back to his, my jaw going slack. "You are?" I breathe.

He clenches his own jaw, nodding.

I blow out a shaky breath. Tilting my head back, I look up at the lift again, then back at Madd. Then up again, then at him.

"Okay," I finally rasp. "You're right. I can do this. I have to do this."

"You don't have to," he clarifies, stroking his thumbs gently against my cheeks. "You've still got a spot on squad leadership either way. We already agreed."

"No," I whisper, taking a step backwards. His hands fall away from my face,

and I crane my neck to look up at the damn tower again. “I need to do this for me.”

Madd closes the distance I put between us, wrapping his arms around me and tugging me in close. He holds me tight to his chest, the warmth of his body bleeding into mine, and I feel myself start to melt against him. His touch calms me, helps me find my center. My own arms wind around him, holding on tight, and after a few minutes, I finally work up the courage to let go and face this last challenge.

I get strapped into my harness while Madd is strapped into his own. He holds my hand the entire time, grounding me and giving me the confidence I so desperately need to go through with this. I’ve faced everyone else’s fears today, but this time, I’m facing my own. I mean sure, this *technically* may be Iver’s, but this ski-lift has haunted me for a long time now. It’s finally time to let go of old ghosts.

I’m the first to climb, stepping up to the base of the support tower and grasping onto the worn metal rung. It’s warm beneath my palms, the heat of the sun leeching into the metal, and with a last deep breath, I haul myself up, planting my feet on a rung as I reach for the next one.

Once I’m a few feet off the ground, Madd starts to climb up after me. With him at my back, it isn’t as scary as I expect it to be. Honestly, it almost feels like climbing the old utility ladder to get up to the roof of the squad complex, something I’ve done hundreds of times without a second thought. As I ascend, I focus on the rungs in front of me rather than the sweeping landscape of the forest around me. I don’t look down, only up, up, up.

When I finally reach the top, I breathe a sigh of relief, my biceps straining as I pull myself onto the platform. Rather than standing, I scooch on my butt away from the ladder, watching as Madd’s head pops into view and he hauls himself up to join me. He crawls over with a lazy grin on his face, seemingly unphased by the climb we just endured, and plants a big sloppy kiss on my mouth.

I taste the pride on his tongue, feel the victory in every slide of his lips. I almost forget where I am for a moment, but when he pulls back and starts to get to his feet, reaching out for my hand, reality comes slamming back in laser-focus.

My heart pounds, my palms turning clammy. Still, I allow him to pull me up to stand with him. Madd slips a key on my wrist, wraps his arms securely around my body, and shuffles us closer to the other edge of the platform.

“Look down,” he says.

I do, and my stomach flip-flops, curling in on itself. It’s not just the height that gets me, though. It’s the big inflatable landing pad below. I’d thought it was just a safety measure, but now that I’m up here, understanding is starting to dawn on me.

My final challenge.

I whip my head back around to gape at Madd in alarm.

“The climb, the height, that was Iver’s fear,” he murmurs, his thumbs stroking against my spine in soothing circles. “This one’s yours.”

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. “Fear of falling.”

He nods, stepping back and taking my hand again. “I’m right here with you, babe,” he says, eyes rounded in earnestness. “Do it or don’t do it, it’s entirely up to you. But if you do, we’ll do it together.”

It’s strange- being up here should shake me more than it does. But with Madd by my side, even my deepest fears seem to wither away to dust, because I’m reminded of what’s truly important. *Us.*

He took this climb with me, made sure he was here supporting me every step of the way. He gave me an out, but it’s like he knew I needed to do this; that I needed to overcome this piece of our past so we can move on with our future. Maddox Kessler, the boy that was broken after I fell from this lift, is now standing beside me, helping me put my own pieces back together. Because it’s always been *him*. It’s always been *us*.

“You and me?” I ask, tightening my grip on his hand.

“Me and you,” he agrees.

Without warning, Madd yanks me in to kiss me again, the wind whipping my hair as his lips crash against mine. When I first came back to town, his kisses tasted like poison. Now, they taste like sweet rapture, laced with unspoken promises for the rest of our lives together. I’ve lived here, and I’ve lived in Denver, but I’ve never felt more at home than I do when I’m in Madd’s arms. For me, home isn’t a place. It’s him.

He licks his lips as he pulls back, grinning at me as he takes my hand again and urges me closer to the edge of the platform.

“Mayhem, baby,” Madd drawls.

I grin back at him, take a deep breath... and we jump.



Sloane and I enter the old ballroom at the lodge to a chorus of cheers, the entire squad here to celebrate her induction as a leader. After passing her initiation with flying colors and sleeping the latter half of the day away to recover, she's ready to let loose tonight. I am, too, but tonight's not about me- I'm just the lucky asshole who gets to walk in with the woman of the hour on my arm.

She's dressed to the fuckin' nines, looking good enough to eat, and my wolf immediately bristles from all the male attention aimed her way as we move deeper into the room. The smile on her face lights it up, those cute-as-fuck dimples sinking into either cheek. She slaps high-fives with people as we pass, soaking up every minute of congratulatory praise, as she should. She earned it today.

I wasn't sure if she'd jump. None of us were, which is why we decided that we'd give her an out, should she choose to take it. The initiation is just for fun anyways; none of the tasks have any real merit in determining whether someone has what it takes to be a squad leader. All she needs for that is the blood running through her veins as the child of an alpha. Being a squad leader is her birthright, and nothing can take that away from her, especially not some stupid initiation created by a bunch of bored teenagers years ago.

Still, she jumped. And I'm so damn proud of her for taking that leap of faith today to face her fear, put the past behind her, and just fucking go for it.

Sloane Masters never ceases to amaze me.

Her pale yellow sundress swishes around her thighs as we make our way to one of the cocktail tables brimming with liquor bottles, the buttery color of the chiffon contrasting with her tan skin in a way that makes it take on a golden glow. She's so fucking beautiful. It almost hurts to look at her, like staring into the sun. Yet I can't look away.

Nobody can. I'd be jealous if I didn't know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sloane only has eyes for me, the same way I only have eyes for her. You can't fake the kind of soul-deep connection the two of us share.

"Drink?" I ask her as we approach one of the makeshift bars set up throughout the room, glad to see that Avery came through with my request. Among the array of liquor set out upon it, there are several bottles of chardonnay. I pick one up, wagging my brows as I present it to Sloane.

I don't know shit about wine, but I distinctly remember her trying to order a glass of chardonnay at the bar by the squad complex once. At the time, I was still hating her for ghosting me, but that doesn't mean I wasn't paying attention.

Sloane's eyes light up when they land on the bottle, ping-ponging up to meet my own. "How'd you know?" she asks excitedly, stepping closer and placing her palms flat against my chest, grinning up at me.

I shrug a shoulder, playing it cool. "Lucky guess."

I drop a kiss on her forehead, then get to work popping the cork and pouring some into a plastic cup for her. Sloane takes it from me eagerly, sipping the chardonnay and licking her lips. "Delicious," she confirms.

I pour a whiskey for myself, and right as I'm about to suggest we head over to the couches to join our friends, I spot Roxy coming our way. I quickly put my head down, turning back to the table and fiddling with the arrangement of bottles to make myself look busy, as if that'll somehow put her off from approaching me.

Spoiler alert: it doesn't.

It's not me she's coming to greet, though. It's my girl.

"Hey Sloane, I heard you killed it today!" Roxy exclaims, grinning and slapping her palm in Sloane's. "Congrats, girl. Rumor has it that initiation is no joke."

"Eh, it wasn't so bad," Sloane chuckles, glancing up at me with her lips resting on the rim of her cup, a coy smile tugging at the corners of them.

"Psh, stop being modest. I know you're a secret badass." Roxy grins, holding

her cup out, and Sloane taps hers against it with a smirk. They each take a sip, then Rox slides her gaze to me as she swallows. “I hear congratulations are in order for the two of you, also?”

I cough to clear my throat, nodding.

What the fuck am I supposed to say?

I glance down at Sloane, feeling awkward as fuck, but she just smiles at Roxy like they’re old friends, not missing a beat.

“Guess you were right,” she winks, bumping her shoulder against Roxy’s.

“Both about us being mates, and the other thing.”

“What other thing?” I ask, suddenly irritated that I’m feeling left in the dark.

Sloane tosses her hair over her shoulder, turning her gaze on me. “That you were too stubborn to admit you still loved me,” she replies easily, folding her arms over her chest. “Even when you were hating me.”

Guilty.

I can’t help but crack a smile, rolling my eyes as I sling an arm around her shoulders and pull her into my side.

Roxy sighs, a wistful look in her eyes when her gaze lifts to meet my own.

“I’m happy for you,” she says quietly, giving me a little nod. “You deserve someone who makes you smile like that.”

“So do you,” I say. I mean it, too- Roxy’s a good girl. It’s not her fault she got tangled up with me when my heart already belonged to someone else.

Roxy rolls her shoulders back, lifting her chin confidently. “I do, don’t I?” she asks rhetorically, looking to Sloane again with a smirk on her lips. “I’m still waiting for you to put in that good word with your brother, y’know.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” Sloane laughs, tossing Roxy another wink as she gives her a little wave and turns away to disappear into the crowd.

As soon as she leaves, Sloane spins around to face me, plucking my cup from my hand and sliding it onto the cocktail table along with her own. Then she steps in close, pressing her chest flush against mine and looping her arms around my neck.

“You good?” she asks, tilting her head in that adorable way of hers that gets me every fucking time.

It’s not lost on me that I’m the one at fault for that awkward encounter, yet she’s the one checking up on me. I settle my hands on her hips, breathing a sigh.

“I’m sorry about that,” I murmur.

Her brow furrows in confusion as she gazes up at me with those wide, moss

green eyes. “About what?”

I nod in the direction Roxy departed. “Her.”

“Who, Roxy?” Sloane scoffs, shaking her head like I’m being ridiculous.

“We’re cool.”

“I know, but I’m sure it makes you uncomfortable,” I grumble. “I never should’ve gotten with her. I just thought...”

“What, that I’d ghosted you and was never coming back?”

“Pretty much.”

Sloane heaves a sigh of her own, sliding a hand up to my face and cupping my jaw. “Madd, we’re together now,” she says, gazing into my eyes earnestly. “That’s all that matters. Not what happened before. I don’t wanna look back.”

I draw a measured breath, nodding. “You’re right,” I say, though guilt still gnaws at me, a tight feeling settling in the pit of my stomach. “For the record, though, I can’t promise I’ll be nearly as cool about this if I run into anyone you’ve hooked up with. I’m a possessive fucker.”

“Well you won’t have to worry about that, trust me” she chuckles, rolling her eyes.

“What, you don’t think I’ll ever end up in Denver for pack business?”

“Sure you might, but you won’t find anyone I’ve hooked up with there.”

I stare at her for a long moment, puzzled.

The corner of Sloane’s mouth lifts and she lowers a hand to my chest, pressing her palm right over my heart; over the tattoo of her nickname inked onto my skin. “When I say you’re the only one, I mean it, Madd. Why do you think none of my relationships ever worked out?”

“But that Garrett guy,” I blurt, my brain still struggling to comprehend what she’s insinuating.

She sinks her teeth into her lower lip, giving a little shake of her head. “Only you.”

Understanding finally dawns on me, and I just stare at her in stunned silence, completely speechless.

She never hooked up with anyone else. We were apart for eight long years, but she never moved on, never let anyone else in where only I’d been before. I’m hit with a wave of emotion- fierce possessiveness, feral desire, awe and love and relief. A growl tears from my chest as I stoop down to sweep Sloane up into my arms, tucking her against me in a bridal carry and striding toward the exit.

“Madd!” she laughs, looping her arms around my neck and kicking her legs playfully. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll see,” I drawl, ignoring the calls of our friends as I carry her through the crowd of people. I take her straight out of the ballroom and down the long hallway adjacent to it- all the way to the double doors of the presidential suite at the end.

“Wait,” she breathes when I move to open the door, and I freeze with my hand resting upon the handle, looking to her in question.

Sloane drops a hand from my neck, reaching out to run her fingers over the tag we left in permanent marker when we were teenagers. *Madd and Sloane, the duke and duchess of mayhem.*

A smile curls her lips and she glances up at me, her green eyes brimming with adoration that I don’t deserve. “Okay,” she whispers, giving me a little nod, and I push the door open, carrying her inside.

Sloane’s eyes light up when she sees what’s waiting for her, her mouth falling open in surprise.

I understand her shocked reaction; I’m not the type of guy to make grand gestures. Well, scratch that- I used to be, but the last time I attempted a grand gesture, I almost got the girl I love killed. This one seemed safe enough, though, and the look on Sloane’s face right now makes the effort it took to pull this off completely worth it.

While she slept today, I came over here and cleaned the place up, knowing we’d wind up in this room at some point tonight. It’s always been our spot, after all. Our tag on the door says as much.

Sloane wriggles in my arms, signaling she wants to be let down, and I set her on her feet. As I turn to pull the door closed behind us, she steps further inside, drinking in the refreshed space with wide-eyed awe.

The king-sized bed on the far wall, where we lost our virginity to one another, has a fresh set of linens spread upon it, looking cozy and inviting.

The dressers and tables around the room, where she ran her fingers through the dust last time we were here, have been scrubbed clean, topped with as many candles as I could get my hands on. The flickering light of them casts a soft glow over everything, their flowery scent drowning out the musty smell this room took on after a decade of disuse.

I also mopped the hardwood floor, wiped down the sofa, and brought in a little portable speaker to play music. It’s not much, but it’s brought the suite back to some semblance of its former grandeur.

“You did this?” Sloane gasps, turning her awestruck gaze back on me.

I nod.

She flings herself into my arms, climbing up my body and peppering my face with kisses. “I can’t believe you did this!” she squeals between smooches.

“Hey, I can be thoughtful when it counts,” I laugh, lifting her by the backs of her thighs and walking her toward the bed. “This is your night, babe. I wanted to make it special.”

Reaching the bed, I lay her down upon it, shifting her toward the middle as I hover over her. She cups my face in both hands, staring into my eyes.

“I love you, Maddox Kessler.”

“I love *you*, Sloane Masters,” I reply, leaning down to claim her lips in a scorching hot kiss.

I lower my body on top of hers, dragging her dress up her hips while I continue kissing the hell out of her. I only break our kiss long enough to slip her dress off over her head and let her peel my shirt from my torso, and then our mouths fuse once more, my cock thickening behind the zipper of my jeans.

Her fingers start fumbling with the button, tucking into the waistband of my boxers and tugging to try to force them down my hips. I support my weight with one arm and reach down with the other to assist her, clumsily kicking my jeans down my legs as she kicks off her high heels. Once we’re both completely naked, she sweeps her palms over my chest and torso reverently, trailing them down and wrapping a hand around my heavy cock. It throbs in her palm, aching to be inside her, and she arches her back, spreading her legs in invitation.

I drop my head to her chest, licking around her nipples and sucking them into my mouth as my name leaves her lips on a breathy moan. Then I lick a path between her breasts up to her throat, over to the mating mark I left on her skin at the junction of her neck and shoulder. She gasps as I run my teeth over it, her body shuddering beneath me while I line the head of my cock up with her opening.

I push into her slick heat, bottoming out with a groan as I bury myself between her thighs. Sloane cries out, her legs wrapping around my hips as I thrust in and out of her tight pussy. She moves with me, panting and moaning, fingernails raking down my back. I fuck her slow and deep, worshipping every inch of her body until she’s coming undone, her inner walls fluttering, her thighs quivering.

She throws her head back as she crests her climax, and I follow her right over the edge of bliss, snapping my hips forward to bury myself deep inside her when I come. We cling onto one another for dear life as we shudder in pleasure, then collapse together onto the bed, breathless and slick with sweat. Afterwards, we lay there together naked on top of the soft sheets, her head on my chest as I stroke my fingers through her wild curls absently.

“So you’re not afraid of anything, huh Duke?” Sloane quietly muses.

“What do you mean?” I grumble.

She pushes up from my chest, propping herself up on a forearm so that she can look at me. “None of the fears I faced today were yours.”

I tuck her hair behind her ear, trailing my fingertips over the scar on her temple as I do. “That’s because I already faced my greatest fear,” I murmur, tracing my knuckles down her jawline and cupping her chin in a hand. “Nobody else has to face it because it couldn’t be duplicated.”

She wrinkles her nose, furrowing her brow. “What was it?”

“Losing you.”

Sloane deflates, a whoosh of air leaving her. “Madd,” she croaks, her voice breaking with emotion. “You never lost me. You just didn’t know it.”

“Yeah, well I thought I did,” I rasp, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her in closer. “But never again.”

“Never again,” she agrees. Her dark lashes flutter as she presses a soft kiss to my cheek. Then she rolls off my body, slinking out of bed and getting to her feet to hunt for her clothes.

I push up on my elbows, watching her carefully. “Where are you going?”

“This party’s in my honor, isn’t it?” she asks, stooping to pick up her dress off the floor and shake it out. “I should get back out there and enjoy it.”

“Nah, I’m not done with you yet,” I growl, crooking a finger to beckon her back to bed. “Get over here, Duchess.”

She finds her panties, stepping into them and pulling them up, then slips her dress on over her head, seemingly ignoring me as she collects her high heels.

“Dutch,” I warn, sitting up.

She glances over at me, a coy smile curling her lips as she backs toward the door. “Catch me if you can, Madd.”



I hiss at the sting of the tattoo needle biting into my skin, gritting my teeth against the pain.

“Almost done,” Cal murmurs as he methodically works on my ink.

Cal Conway is the best tattoo artist in the six-pack territory, hands down, and I’m lucky he was able to squeeze me in after Madd’s appointment today. I’ve been considering getting inked for a while, but I pulled the trigger on a whim after watching him work on Madd. And after enduring this for the past fifteen minutes, I have no idea how my mate sat for the hours upon hours it must’ve taken to tattoo his whole upper body.

I’m trying to tough it out, but I’m not gonna lie, it hurts like a bitch. Shifter healing is a detriment when it comes to tattoos, so a small amount of liquid silver has to be added into the ink to set it. It fucking *burns*.

“How does it look?” I ask hoarsely as Madd leans over me to check Cal’s progress.

A smug grin curls his lips. “Fuckin’ great, babe. I couldn’t have picked a better tat myself.”

I roll my eyes. Maybe I should’ve gone for a different tattoo- the last thing this man needs is his ego inflated further.

It feels right, though, to ink his name on my skin. His first tattoo was my nickname over his heart, so it only seems fair to have his name on me, too. It’s just another way to announce to the world that he’s *mine*.

“Alright,” Cal hums, flicking off the tattoo gun and wiping the back of my neck off with a damp paper towel. “You’re officially branded.”

Yeah, I suppose it shows the whole world that I’m his, too. Is it weird that I actually kinda love that? I’m proud to be Maddox Kessler’s girl.

No- not *just* his girl. His mate. His luna.

Cal holds up a pair of handheld mirrors. “Wanna take a look?”

“Yeah,” I breathe, bouncing up excitedly. He holds one of the mirrors behind me while I take the other from him and bring it up in front of my face, angling it until I can see the reflection of the tattoo across the base of my neck. “Oh my gosh, I love it!” I gush, turning a bright smile on Madd. “What do you think?”

He leans down, grabbing my face in both hands and planting a hard kiss on my mouth. “I fuckin’ love it,” he growls against my lips, nipping them with his teeth.

Cal peels off his latex gloves and starts cleaning up his equipment, disappearing into the back room of his tattoo shop before returning with a bandage to put over my tattoo.

“Keep this on for a couple hours,” he instructs as he applies it to the back of my neck, securing the edges. “Then you should be good to take it off. Use unscented lotion on it a few times a day for the next week to keep the skin moist and the lines should stay nice and sharp.”

“Thanks again, Uncle Cal,” I say, hopping off the tattoo chair. He’s not actually my uncle, but as the Norbury pack’s beta, he runs in the same circle as my parents- I’ve known him since I was born, and he’s always been ‘Uncle Cal’ to me.

He tips his head, flashing me a rare smile. “No problem. Stay outta trouble, huh? I can only imagine what you two have been getting up to since you got back together.”

“Nah, we’re past the teenage mischief,” Madd drawls. He steps up behind me, wrapping his arms around my body and resting his chin on the top of my head. “Though I hear Ace and Seb have been giving you and Alpha Chase a run for your money.”

“They’ll be your problem soon,” Cal replies. “They’re going out for the squad this summer.”

“Dang, I haven’t seen those boys in forever,” I muse, my mind conjuring up the image of the scruffy-haired kids I used to know. They’re as close in age to one another as me and the Kessler twins are, and the two of them have

always been just as inseparable as the three of us always were. Maybe even more since they grew up in the Norbury packhouse together as the sons of the alpha and beta.

“They haven’t changed much, they’re just a lot bigger now,” Cal says, his eyes brimming with pride. “If you come back for more ink, maybe Ace will be the one to do it. He’s getting pretty good.”

“Ace did this one,” Madd says, flipping over his forearm and pointing out a skull tattoo with impressive shading. “He DJ’d at Andie’s birthday party, but you probably didn’t recognize him. He and Seb have grown a lot since their wolves came in.”

“I was a little distracted that night,” I mutter, glancing up at Madd.

He winces at the reminder.

Stepping back to pull a few bills out of his wallet, Madd passes them to Cal, thanking him before leaving the shop. Then the two of us climb into his Jeep, heading over to the squad complex.

Though only a couple of weeks have passed since my initiation, it feels like so much has changed. Madd and I have fallen into a somewhat of a routine when it comes to balancing our duties to his pack- *our* pack, now- and leading the six-pack security squad, typically spending mornings on pack duties and afternoons up at the complex. While we’re still on alert for the hunters and vetting Javi’s pack to potentially welcome them into our alliance, it feels like life is calmer lately as we navigate our new normal.

It has been shockingly easy for Madd and I to fall back into old patterns with one another. Things between us are better than they ever were, to the point where sometimes I forget that we were apart for so long. Time may have changed us both, but deep down, we’re still the same Sloane and Madd that grew up here side by side, running amok and chasing mischief and falling in love.

We were always endgame.

Madd parks his Jeep in the lot at the complex, and we climb out to head around to the gate, spotting Andie Raines wrestling boxes from the trunk of her car along the way.

“Need some help?” I ask as she struggles to pull a box toward her while balancing another on her hip.

She throws me a glance over her shoulder, sighing in relief when our eyes meet. “Yes, please! My brothers were supposed to be here to do this, but they totally ditched me.”

“They’re leading up gun training today,” Madd says as he relieves Andie of the box clutched to her hip, hauling it up into his arms. “Don’t think that counts as ditching you.”

She rolls her eyes, tossing her red hair over a shoulder flippantly. “Semantics.”

I shake my head, giggling as I reach into her trunk to gather another one of her boxes. “Why didn’t you call Tristan? He would’ve come help.”

She shrugs. “Didn’t even think of it.”

Madd and I exchange a glance, but Andie just blows past it, grabbing ahold of a box and stepping away from the bumper of her car. “Have you guys seen Lo around at all today? She’s not up in the IT hub. I feel like she’s been a ghost the past couple weeks.”

“She’s been working on gathering intel,” Madd provides. “I actually need to get ahold of her, see if she has anything new for us on Javi’s pack.”

Andie steps around her car to head for the gate to the squad complex and Madd and I follow suit, all of us clutching her moving boxes in our hands.

“Think we’ll let ‘em in?” Andie asks.

Madd shrugs. “Maybe.”

The truth is, we haven’t uncovered anything thus far to dissuade us from allowing their pack to join our alliance. And with the threat of the hunters still lurking out there, we could use the extra manpower. We have to do our due diligence and finish vetting them before we can make a decision, but I’m sure it’s only a matter of time.

The three of us make our way into the complex and to the dorms, carrying Andie’s boxes into her new room and depositing them with a stack of others.

“Thanks again for giving up your room to me,” Andie says, flashing me a smile. “Ares was being a douche about giving my old one back.”

“No, really? That doesn’t sound like him at all,” I tease.

She laughs, brushing her hands off on the legs of her pants. “Yeah, well I didn’t want to make a big stink about it since technically I was the one who chose to leave. But now that I’m back, commuting from Stillwater every day would’ve gotten old fast.”

“Arch does it,” Madd mumbles.

“Archer has a reason to, since he’s got pack duties. He’ll be Alpha soon. I’m a free agent.” She folds her arms over her chest, waggling her brows.

“How many more boxes do you have?” I ask.

She waves a hand dismissively. “Just one or two, I can get ‘em. Thanks for

your help, guys.”

I nod, following Madd out the door and into the hallway. Andie heads back to the parking lot, while the two of us start in the opposite direction, toward the IT hub.

“I think I’m gonna miss the dorms,” I say wistfully, glancing back toward the long hallway of matching doors.

“Yeah right,” Madd scoffs with a chuckle. “Don’t act like you don’t love being in my bed every night, Duchess.”

“*Our* bed,” I correct, pinning him with a hard look. “And of course I do, it’s just different. A new phase, I guess. It all happened so fast that I barely even realized the last one was ending.”

He glances down at me, arching a brow. “Any regrets?”

“None,” I say resolutely. “I wouldn’t change a thing. You’re stuck with me, Duke.”

He grins at that, taking my hand and pulling me toward the exit door rather than continuing down the hall.

“Where are we going?”

“Andie said Lo wasn’t around, so there’s no point in going to IT,” he grumbles.

“So where, then?” I reiterate.

Madd grins as he pushes open the door, a blast of warm air hitting us in the face as he steps out and points a finger up to the sky.

A giddy feeling comes over me, my heart fluttering with excitement. *Of course.*

I’m not sure who initiates it, but the next thing I know, we’re racing each other around the building to the old utility ladder, laughing like little kids as we climb up to the roof. We skirt around the big AC unit and wander over to our ledge, where I pause to gaze out at the empty practice field down below, my chest tightening at the memory of finding Madd sitting here when I first came back to town.

“You used to come up here when you missed me, true or not true?” I murmur.

“True,” he confirms, coming up behind me and sliding his arms around my waist. He presses a kiss to the crown of my head and I melt back against him, content in the warm safety of his embrace.

We’ve started playing this game as a way to fill in the gaps cleaved by our eight years apart. Not that it really matters. All that does is the future and how

we'll spend the rest of it together. As far as I'm concerned, we've earned it-nobody has fought harder to be together than Madd and me. We've overcome every obstacle to find our way back to one another, and now that we have, I'm never letting him go.

"What are you thinking about, Dutch?" Madd growls against my neck, his hands sliding against my belly and fingertips dipping into the waistband of my leggings.

I tip my head back against his shoulder to give him better access to kiss and nip my neck, suppressing a shiver as his hand slips into my panties and his finger brushes my clit.

"You," I breathe, my blood turning molten in my veins as he starts rubbing circles around it. "How you're mine, and how lucky we are."

"Damn right," he rumbles in my ear, sliding his finger through my folds and plunging it into my entrance.

I gasp at the intrusion, my inner walls gripping his digit as my knees wobble beneath me. Madd holds me firmly in place as he grinds his hips forward, the hard ridge of his cock riding against my ass.

"Want me to bend you over that ledge, for old time's sake?" he croons, his hand between my legs working me up into a frenzy.

A breathy moan leaves my lips as he pumps his finger in and out harder, his thumb rubbing my clit.

"I'll take that as a yes," he chuckles against my neck.

The next thing I know, we're tearing each other's clothes off and I'm lying back on the ledge with Madd's head between my thighs as he licks me to a mind-numbing orgasm. I can think of worse ways to spend an afternoon. He makes me come twice before bending me over, just like he said, and fucking me so hard that my legs shake and my screams echo. By the time we finish, we're both breathless, crumpling into a heap together atop the ledge.

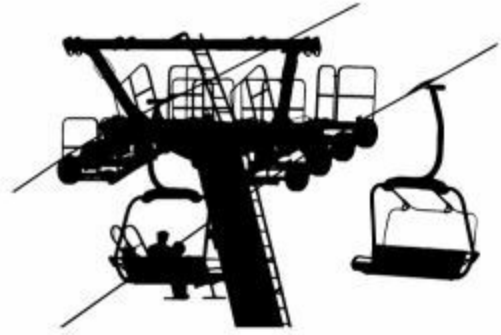
As we lie there naked, gazing out over the practice field, everything feels right. We're together, up here in our special place, keeping watch over our domain like a king and queen.

Or like a duke and duchess.

This is how it was always supposed to be, and I've never felt more whole than I do right now. Madd completes me.

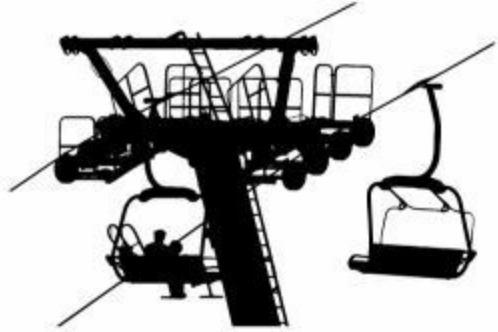
He brushes my hair out of my face, pressing his lips against the scar on my temple. Then he pulls back slightly, gazing into my eyes as the corners of his mouth curl into a smirk.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, repeating his question from earlier. He just shrugs a shoulder, a mischievous spark igniting in his dark blue eyes. “You. Me. How great we are together.” I sigh happily, burrowing farther into his chest. And as I press a kiss to the tattoo of my nickname, inked right over his pounding heart, I whisper, “You and me. Mayhem, baby.”



THE END

Afterword



I hope you're ready for a whole new rollercoaster ride, because if Madd and Sloane's story didn't set the tone for the Shadowed Heirs series, I don't know what could! This is a series of interconnected standalones featuring different leads. Javi and Lo are up next in Shadowed Heirs book two: Savage Alpha.

Thank you for taking a chance on this book. I truly hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I loved writing it. If you did, **please consider leaving me a rating and review on Amazon-** reviews only take a few minutes to write and are so, so important to indie authors like me! Reviews help boost the book in Amazon's algorithm and help to point other readers to the book.

If social media is your thing, follow me on Instagram for updates, announcements, and so much more: @c.j.primer

Until next time!

xoxo, CJ

About the Author



C.J. Primer is an award-winning, bestselling author of steamy romance novels. She specializes in angsty, spicy love stories full of twists and turns and hard-fought happy endings. She writes in multiple genres, including

paranormal romance, dark romance, contemporary romance, and fantasy romance. Her most popular books are the bestselling six-pack series, a collection of werewolf shifter romance novels that have sold over 30K copies and counting.

When she's not writing, C.J. enjoys spending time with her husband, young daughters (two under two!), and her crazy wheaten terrier. She's an avid reader of dark romance books with a passion for travel, animals, and the great outdoors.

Connect Online:

Instagram: [@c.j.primer](#)

Website: www.cjprimer.com

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