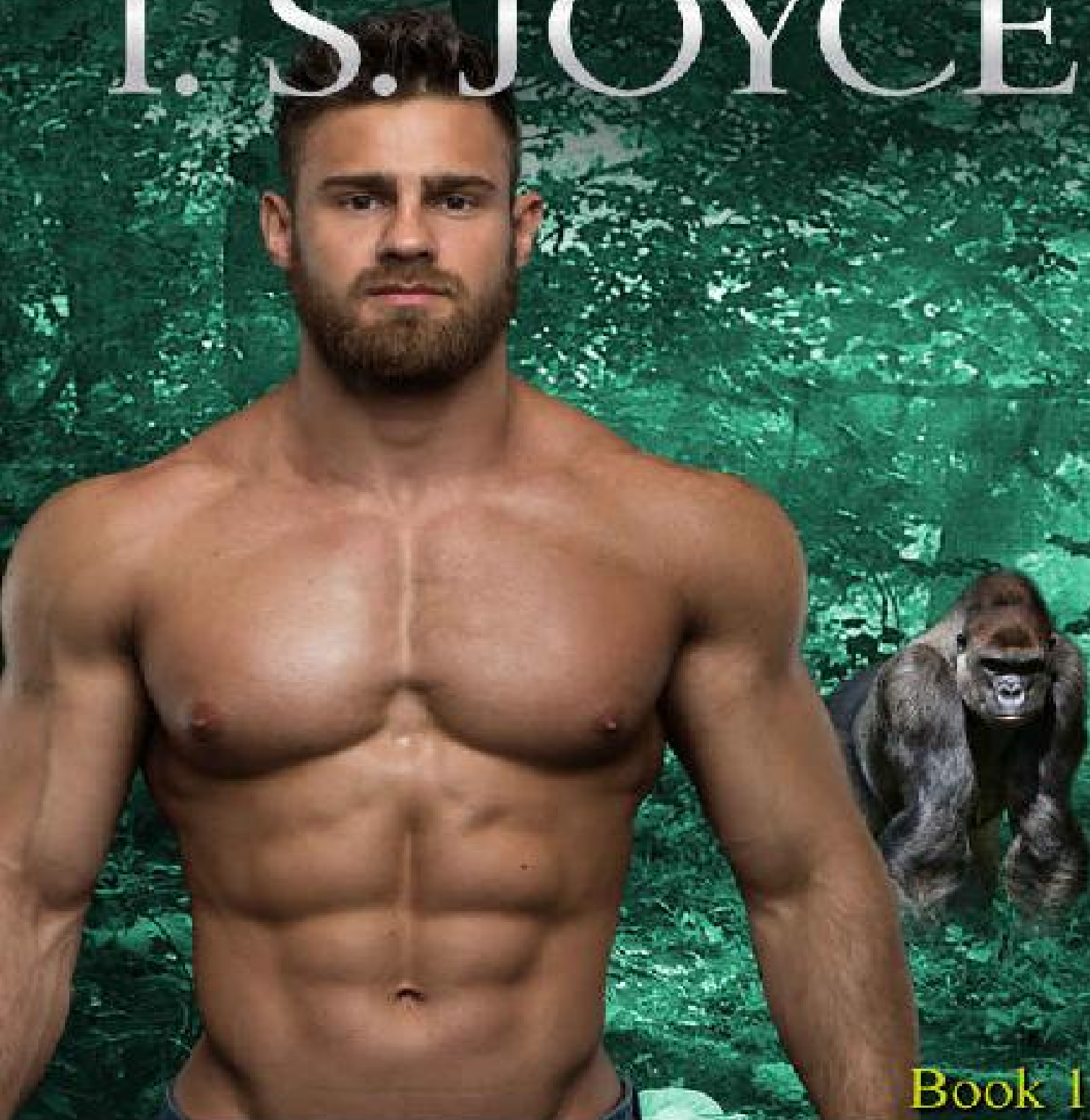


T. S. JOYCE



Book 1

WARLANDER

Silverback

WARLANDER SILVERBACK

(WARLANDERS, BOOK 1)

By T. S. JOYCE

Warlander Silverback

Copyright © 2023 by T. S. Joyce

Copyright © 2023, T. S. Joyce
First electronic publication: November 2023

T. S. Joyce
www.tsjoyce.com

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the author's permission.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental. The author does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

Published in the United States of America.

Editor: Alyxandra Miller

Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten\(10\)](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Up Next from this Author](#)

[For More of these Characters](#)

[Newsletter Sign-Up](#)

[More Bestselling Series from this Author](#)

[For More from this Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

“What am I doing here?” Lucas Slater muttered as he stared at the arching sign over the entrance of the trailer park.

Smashland Mobile Park, it read.

As he hit the gas to roll over the gravel road under the sign, he couldn't help but feel an eerie connection to this place.

How could he not? It looked similar to one of the trailer parks he had grown up around.

He'd traveled straight from Cheyenne for this job, but as he looked around, he wondered why the hell someone better equipped hadn't been hired instead of him. This wasn't his normal assignment.

His phone rang, and he saw the name on the caller ID.

Nope.

He rejected the call before the irritating ring could dredge his animal up even more than he already was.

Something was wrong here.

Lucas parked in front of a firepit. Around the gravel semicircle behind it, six single-wides sat against the backdrop of a Rocky Mountain sunset.

The one on the right was cream-colored with forest-green shutters.

Chills lifted the fine hairs on his forearms. It was so... familiar.

In front of the last trailer on the right, the one that was pulled off farther into the woods, there was a man who was sweeping the gravel with a broom.

Lucas frowned and shoved his door open. The man stopped what he was doing. He leaned on the broom, and his bright-green eyes found Lucas.

“I can’t even fuckin’ believe it worked.” Mmm. He’d said it at normal volume, even far away, which meant the man knew Lucas was a shifter like him.

Lucas strode across the gravel, scanning his surroundings in case this was an ambush. That had happened before.

He sniffed the air and caught a whiff of dominance and fur.

“Where’s your Alpha?” he asked as he approached.

“Ain’t got no Alpha.” The man’s dead green eyes bored straight through him.

Lucas called him on his bullcrap. “Every Crew has an Alpha. Where is he?”

An empty smile painted the man’s face. “If we had an Alpha, it would be a ‘she,’ and trust me when I say you don’t want anything to do with her.” He went back to sweeping the gravel. “She’s fuckin’ mean.”

Lucas watched him for a few seconds. “What are you doing?”

“Evening out the gravel.”

“You don’t have a rake?”

“Imagine me coming to your house uninvited and telling you everything you’re doing wrong.”

“Your Crew caught the attention of the boss.”

“The boss,” he murmured softly.

“Are you the one who killed him?” Lucas asked.

“Killed who?” The feign of innocence in the man’s voice grated on Lucas’s last nerve.

He pulled a newspaper clipping out of his back pocket and held it up. The man glanced at it, and his face morphed into a grin. “It really did work then. She knows exactly how to play you.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes. His phone was ringing in his car, and he could guess at the damn name that would be flashing across his screen right now.

“You don’t belong here, you know,” the man said. “None of us do.”

Lucas shook his head, baffled. What *was* he doing here? He’d asked himself that so many times on the drive here.

“I don’t know you,” Lucas said, and he didn’t hide the growl in his voice.

“No one does. So what?”

“So why are you living in a replica of Asheland?”

“Maybe I don’t have anywhere else to be.” He tossed the broom down. “Maybe I’ve been waiting for you to show up. Maybe I’ve been waiting for a good fight.”

“I’m here to manage a male—likely a bear, and I smell you. You ain’t a bear. You’re more likely a fuckin’ porcupine or something, so don’t give me that shit about waiting for a good fight. I’ll eat you!”

“Ew, kinky.”

Lucas had been ready to throw more words, but that stopped him in his tracks. *Gross.*

“Theoretically speaking, if I was a porcupine shifter, I would kill you anyway.” He grinned brightly, but it didn’t reach his glowing green eyes. “You would choke on me.”

“You aren’t registered, are you?” He didn’t know why he’d asked that, but this guy seemed the type.

The man walked backwards, arms outstretched. “Why would I register to a bunch of humans, Lucas Slater, son of the Boarlander Silverback. Age thirty. Unmated. Unattached. No family group. Registering never did a damn bit of good for anyone that I know.” He turned and barked out over his shoulder, “You think she would’ve been able to drag you out here if you were worth a damn? You’re the expendable one the boss sends because no one would care if you’re gone.”

Rage had boiled in his blood from the moment he’d said Lucas’s name like he knew him.

Lucas pulled off his shirt and took three big steps toward him before something rushed him from the woods like a glowing white torpedo, and Lucas barely ducked out of the way from the outstretched claws aimed for his face.

Realization hit him like a crowbar to the gut as he ducked her wrath, then watched the white tiger land gracefully behind

him and morph seamlessly into a woman he used to know.

Stunned to his bones, Lucas stared in horror at the fire in Cadence's eyes.

No, no, no.

He'd been tricked.

Stunned, Lucas backed away a few paces, but Cadence advanced, matching him for every step he retreated. "You've come," she said on a breath. He couldn't read her expression. Anger? Shock? Frustration?

"I was *sent*," he corrected her. With a quick glance around, he accused her. "You did this."

"Did what?" she asked, lifting her chin higher into the air.

"You replicated the old park."

"So?"

"So it wasn't even ours! We are Boarlanders! We aren't Ashe Crew!"

"*We* aren't Boarlanders anymore, and who says I did this for me?" she asked primly. "Some of us care about other people outside of ourselves."

Realization struck him like lightning. "Who else is here?"

Cadence's eyes cooled and she shrugged up one shoulder. "Gunner."

"Fuck!" He turned and linked his hands behind his head, stared up into the sky, and then rounded on her. "Did Gunner do this?" he asked, flinging the newspaper clipping at her feet.

“What would you do if he did?” she asked. “Would you put him down? Would you mind the big guy, and protect the humans from him?”

“Probably. Gunner deserves everything that’s coming for him.”

“You don’t mean that—”

“I do!”

“You owe me!” she shrieked.

“Owe you for what?”

“You know what.” She shook her head and clenched her jaw, then whispered it again, softer. “You know what. You hurt me. You left me, and you hurt me, and then you punished me for moving on.”

His phone was ringing in his car again, and he gripped his hips and growled out, “You can guess who that is.”

“Making sure his little servant does what he is ordered to,” Cadence ground out.

“What problem do you have with him? He’s fair.”

“Says you—”

“Says everyone!”

“I don’t say that,” Assface chimed in from where he was standing off to the side watching them.

“What is this, Cadence? Huh?” Lucas gestured to the park. “You’ll rebuild this place, but you’re what? Sticking it to the man? Waste of fucking time. Who killed the hiker?”

Cadence crossed her arms over her bare breasts and stared off into the woods.

“Tell me!” Lucas demanded.

“No one,” she murmured.

“Holy shit!” Assface exclaimed. “You can make her mind you?”

“No!” Cadence yelled. “Go inside, Kru!”

“Let me guess,” Lucas called after him. “You spell it with a K?”

“And a ‘u’. No one here cares about your opinion, so you can shut up,” the shifter growled as he strode for the trailer at the edge of the woods.

“I told you it would work,” someone said from a door that was cracked open on the nearest mobile home.

“Show yourself,” Lucas barked.

The door creaked open, and a petite woman with her hair in two braids stepped out onto the small porch. He couldn't see her very well in the shadows, but she didn't look like anyone he knew. She probably wasn't a registered shifter either. Why was Cadence collecting misfits?

“Who are you?” Lucas asked.

The woman's lips parted, but no words came out.

It was Cadence who answered. “Wow.” She was nodding like a bobblehead. “Nice, asshole.”

“What?” Lucas asked. “You know, never mind,” he said, looking from face to face. “I'm outta here—”

“I need you to stay.”

That word combination from Cadence’s mouth dredged up a flashback that threatened to double him over. She’d said those words to him before. He swallowed hard. “We talked about this already.”

“Not for me.” Cadence lifted her chin higher. “For them.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes to slits and backed away slowly. “What is this?”

“No one killed anyone.”

“Yet,” Kru chimed in.

Ignoring him, Cadence slowly stalked forward. “We need someone to take us on. To lead us.”

“An Alpha?” Lucas belted out a laugh. “Cadence, you have lost your damn mind. You know me. I would be a terrible Alpha.”

“We don’t need your leadership, Lucas.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Protection.”

“From?”

Cadence stopped approaching and shrugged up one shoulder. “From ourselves.”

Such truth rang in her tone, Lucas stopped his retreat. Protection from themselves? His gaze drifted from Cadence, the woman he’d tried with before...to the green-eyed Kru, still holding the damn broom handle, to the petite woman in the shadows of the single-wide closet to him.

“Where is Gunner?” He needed to know if that titan was going to come barreling through the trees at him.

“We don’t know,” the petite woman said softly. “We haven’t seen him for three days.”

Lucas studied the woods surrounding the trailer park. “Has he set up territory here?”

“Yep.” Cadence popped the *p* at the end.

Well, that was a red flag. Gunner’s animal wouldn’t want to stray too far if he’d declared territory. But also...how were these people still alive?

“It’s been a long time,” Cadence said low. “Gunner isn’t like you remember him.”

“And you?” he asked.

She huffed a breath and looked down at the dirt. “We’ve all changed.”

“But I won’t change,” he said carefully. It was best if her animal heard him clearly. “Bringing me here won’t get you what you want.”

She didn’t say anything, but he could see the hurt in her eyes.

This was Cadence’s talent—haunting him.

“I...I didn’t want to see you again.”

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin higher. “The feeling is mutual.” There was truth in her tone.

“Then why me?”

She shook her head slowly, and her eyes were so bright blue...so raw with emotion. "Because I ran out of choices. Gunner has only ever lost to you."

"You want me to kill him? Is that it? You put the story in the press so it would draw the attention of the dragon? So you don't have to do it yourself?"

"I didn't put it in there. Jenna did."

Jenna? His eyes flicked to the trailer just in time to see the door click closed. *Shhhit.*

"You've been away from Damon's Mountains a long time, Lucas. I was hoping you remembered what loyalty felt like."

"I'm not made to be an Alpha."

"Protector," she corrected.

"Look...good luck with whatever trouble Gunner has you in. If I was you? I'd cut him loose."

"You're not me. I don't cut friends loose."

Every word she'd uttered in that sentence sliced him deep.

For a few seconds, he couldn't find his voice. Lucas cleared his throat and lowered his eyes to her bare feet. "Tell Jenna I'm sorry. I just..." He shook his head, feeling low about it. "I just didn't recognize her."

"Tell her yourself," Cadence muttered as she turned and walked away.

Cadence didn't look back. He was averting his gaze to be respectful of her, but he knew she didn't look back. He could smell the disappointment wafting off her, and the air here felt so heavy.

He was causing the woods to weigh more. The animal inside of him was angry at so much. Angry at the memories of Cadence, angry that he'd wasted his time here, angry at himself that he hadn't recognized Kellen Brown's youngest daughter. She was a Saw Bear, born to the Ashe Crew, one of the original Crews of Damon's Mountains. She was sensitive, if he remembered correctly, and him forgetting her would've hurt her.

Cadence was right. He had been away a long time, and for good reason. He hadn't been running, he'd been looking for... something. Something bigger, or perhaps something smaller, he didn't know.

"You didn't recognize me either," Kru called out, his back to Lucas as he continued to sweep the gravel.

With a deep frown, Lucas asked, "Who are you?"

Kru tossed a look over his shoulder and said, "Figure it out. Come on, Lucas. You don't need training wheels for this job."

"Job."

With a sigh, Kru leaned on the broom handle and frowned at the door that had closed on the trailer next to the replica of the original 1010. "You think if Cadence had a choice, she would ask you for anything? No. She isn't asking you to step in and be some epic leader. You aren't that, and we all know it. She isn't asking you to bond to us, or call us yours."

"What the fuck does she want then?"

"Help with Gunner. He's..." Kru shook his head. "He's on a path."

“Gunner isn’t my problem,” Lucas growled out. He turned and scooped up his discarded shirt, and shrugged it on as he strode for his car. “He never was.”

If anyone knew what Gunner had really done to him, they wouldn’t dare ask him to help the monster. Loyalty? Ha. He’d known deep loyalty and had been burned. No one had any right to preach about that to him.

He yanked open the door of his truck and got in, slammed the door beside him, and glared at where Kru was sweeping the gravel like a psycho.

The phone in the cupholder rang, and as he peeled out of the trailer park, he connected the call. “I’m not taking the job,” he growled out.

“I don’t care about the job, son,” his dad murmured.

Well, that was unexpected. “I thought you were someone else,” he said. “Hey, Dad.”

“A little birdie told me you are home.”

He bet that little birdie was Jenna. “Not home. I’m on the other side of the mountains but I’m already heading out.”

“Your mom wants to see you. I do, too. Hell, the whole Crew knows you’re here.”

Lucas ran his hand down his beard and huffed a sigh. “Yeah, all right. It’s late tonight. Can I come tomorrow?”

“Of course. Lucas?” Dad asked.

“Yeah?”

“I know this can’t be easy to hear, but she’s trying.”

He trained his eyes on the Smashland Mobile Park sign as he drove under it and into the dark woods. “This isn’t my job. I’m coming to see you tomorrow, and then I’m going back to my real life.”

And then he put the trailer park in his rearview, and did his best to ignore the streak of white that followed him in the sky.

This place had been the plan when he was a kid—grow up with all his best friends and start a park together. But then life had happened and his friends flew to all four winds, and Cadence had happened, and eventually, Lucas had ventured out of Damon’s Mountains too. He had to if he wanted to find himself.

Coming back here, so close to his hometown, was a mix of emotions. If he was honest with himself, he’d stayed away from here on purpose. There was something magical about these mountains. Everyone who had lived under the protection of the dragon knew it, but he had made it. He’d gone out into the world and found his place, and that was nothing to sniff at.

He’d earned his home. His life. His reputation.

Coming back here had been a bad idea—not because it was a bad place, but because it was the only place on earth that could tempt him to give up the life he’d built.

Chapter Two

“He’s going to run again,” Jenna whispered.

Cadence tossed Jenna a giant T-shirt, and she couldn’t help her smile as she opened up the billowing material and read the logo. *Smashland Mobile Park*.

“Since when do we have trailer park T-shirts?” Jenna asked, pulling it over her head to cover her newly-Changed body.

“Since Kru decided to use some coupon he got in the mail at the new print shop in town. Don’t go thinking he did something responsible, either. He seduced the receptionist and negotiated free T-shirts, but they’re all 3X and only fit the boys.”

“He’s such a man-ho,” Jenna murmured, her eyes on the ground.

“Are you ever going to be able to look at me?” Cadence asked.

The heat flared in Jenna’s cheeks as she smiled at her feet and said the same thing she always did when shifters asked her that. “Maybe tomorrow is the day.”

“Anyway,” Cadence said, huffing a sigh as she sank down onto the bottom stair of the 1010 replica. “Guess it didn’t work.”

Jenna dared a glance at the white tiger shifter. “Why did you bring me here? I didn’t even think you liked me. Why did

you choose me?”

Cadence shrugged. “Beaston told me to.”

Chills rippled up Jenna’s arms and the blood drained from her face. “Beaston?” she whispered reverently.

“Don’t think too hard on it, Jenna. He also said to bring in Kru, and that boy is an idiot on a good day.”

And that was Cadence’s way. Say something semi-kind, then follow it up with an insult. Jenna was a watcher. Cadence hadn’t always been this way. She had picked up the habit of keeping people at a distance years ago, back when Lucas ran around these mountains with her. “Was it hard to see him again?” she asked softly.

She’d been raised in a different Crew, but everyone in the mountains knew what had happened. At least, they knew the rumor version of it.

“It felt...” Cadence frowned with a faraway look for the dark woods. “It felt different than I thought it would.”

“Worse or better?”

“Neither. It felt...less.”

Less. There it was—the reason their animals hadn’t matched. The proof.

“Where do you think Gunner is?” Jenna asked.

“You ask too many questions.” Cadence got up and walked back into her single-wide mobile home.

“He’s staying at the Lake Worth Lodge in Red River,” she called out. “I followed him.”

“He’s a leaver, Jenna,” Cadence called. “Always was. We tried your way, but we can’t make him stay.”

But Jenna had heard the rumors on why he was a leaver, and Cadence wasn’t being fair.

The boys thought this was all Cadence’s idea, but it wasn’t. It was Jenna’s.

And now it came to light that Beaston had told Cadence to involve Jenna?

Everyone respected Beaston’s visions.

Now, this felt bigger.

Jenna climbed the stairs of her mobile home and opened the door. She stood in the entryway, scanning the unfamiliar home. She’d left her entire life to come here, and at some point, she had to pay attention to the instinct she’d had to say yes to Cadence’s wild proposal.

Cadence was giving up on Lucas way too easily.

Chapter Three

Lucas wasn't freaking going back.

He'd lost his damn mind when he'd told his dad he was coming to visit this morning. Damon's Mountains were a magnet for all shifters, but for one who grew up there? With all the happiness and healthy disfunction and the amazing dynamics, and...no!

His mind had been bombarded with flashbacks, and he hadn't slept a wink last night just thinking about all the memories from his hometown. He needed to pick up another job and find some forgettable girl in a forgettable city and wipe this craving out of his veins.

These mountains were a drug, and he'd been sober for years.

The sun was barely casting gray shadows over the eastern sky as he shoved the hotel's exit door open and strode for his truck, duffel bag thrown over his shoulder and grasped hard in his clenched fist. The animal was close to the surface, but hell if he knew why. There wasn't anyone to fight here.

The dim light hurt his eyes, but that was probably just because he'd drained the mini-fridge of its miniature liquor bottles last night. God, he was a mess here.

He pulled on a pair of sunglasses and tossed his duffel into the bed of the truck, then turned for the handle of his driver's side door.

The view of the woman sitting on the picnic table stopped him in his tracks.

She was petite, perhaps five foot two. She'd ditched the braids, and her mouse-brown hair hung in crimped waves down her shoulders. It was cold out, despite the lingering hot days of summer, and she wore a gray tank top and black sweatpants with slides over her little feet.

She wore makeup, though this was the first time he'd ever seen her in it. Jenna was always an all-natural type of girl who didn't want attention, but here in the early dawn light it was impossible to ignore her. She wore shimmery burgundy eye shadow that made her dove-gray eyes look even lighter.

Honestly, he didn't ever recall seeing her eyes so clearly. She was submissive, and had never met his gaze that he could remember.

But now? She was looking right into his soul.

He stood frozen, his fingertips on the door handle. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes dipped to the ground. There it was. There was that submissive animal that ruled her. "Making sure you don't run. Cadence said you would. I bet her you wouldn't. I don't like losing bets."

"What Cadence thinks doesn't concern me."

"Truth," she murmured.

"Did you tell my dad I was close to home?"

"No." She glanced up and back down. "But I heard a rumor you were supposed to visit home."

“So?”

She shrugged up one shoulder, stood up from the picnic table, and dusted off the seat of her sweats. “So, I’m going with you.”

He huffed a humorless laugh. “You aren’t the bodyguard type.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m close to your mom. I just want to watch her face when she sees you.”

Well, that stifled any retort he had in his arsenal. He cleared his throat and leaned on the back of the truck. “I didn’t know you were close to my mother. She hasn’t mentioned you.”

Jenna inhaled deeply. “You don’t call her enough then.”

Fuck. That was a knife, but only because he knew she was right. Her callout made him angry. “Worry about your own parents.”

“I do. I visit them every weekend I have off work. Our moms are friends now. Did you know that? When I visit my mom, I get yours.” She offered him a quick smile. “She teaches me to shoot pistols. She even bought me a nine-mil handgun a couple of birthdays back.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes and leaned on his truck. “What kind of nine-mil?” Yep, this was a test.

“A Kimber Micro.”

“Let me guess. Black, with camo on the grip.” She’d gifted him and his father bigger handguns in blacks and

camos. Once upon a time, Beaston had said something about girls liking things that matched.

“Nope. Purple, teal, and silver. She knew a custom girly color would be the only way she could hook me into going to the range with her. She got matching ones for herself and my mom.”

His chuckle surprised him.

“What’s funny?” she asked.

Besides the ‘girls like things that match’ quote rolling across his mind... “I can’t imagine you shooting anything.”

“I’ve wanted to shoot Gunner a couple times,” she admitted, and the vision of it made him laugh again.

He nodded and looked to the woods that surrounded the hotel. “I’ve wanted to shoot him myself.”

“Cadence isn’t trying to get you back, you know. She didn’t even want to bring you in.”

He narrowed his eyes and studied Jenna. She was a few years younger than him, was raised in the Ashe Crew with Gunner. Submissive as hell, and had probably strung together more words to him here in the dim morning light than she had in all the times they’d seen each other in passing as kids. She’d never hung out with Cadence’s circle, that he could remember. “Oh yeah? Cadence tried this same thing for a few years after I left. Feels like a familiar game.”

“This time was my idea.”

Well that drew him up short. “Your idea? Why?”

“Because Gunner told me what you did to him.”

“What I did to him,” he repeated softly, anger whispering through his veins at the mention of it.

“He also told me what he did to you.”

And there it was. That was the word combination that got his attention more than anything else that had happened in the last couple of days. Gunner didn't talk to people who weren't trustworthy. He'd always been closed-off.

“Are you with him now?” Lucas asked curiously.

“No one is with Gunner. He can't take a female. He can barely take care of himself.”

“What about Cadence?” he asked. “She has her attention on him still.”

“They aren't together like that.” Her eyes stayed downcast, but he wished she would look up at him again and let him see the pretty silver in her eyes. As if she could read his mind, she glanced up at him. “At least, it's not like that anymore.”

“Who is Kru?”

She shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I just got here a few days ago. Haven't even finished moving my stuff into my trailer. I had one night in the park with Gunner before he bounced.”

“And he told you about me in that one night?”

She smiled. “We've been friends for years, Lucas. He told me about that a long time ago.”

Okay. This woman had his attention now. The Jenna he remembered was a mouse who didn't make friends easy. She

was always on the fringe, avoiding attention, wishing invisibility. But she was friends with the Fury?

“Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you last night. Truth be told, if I just saw you here in full makeup, I don’t know if I would’ve recognized you this way either. It’s been a long time since I’ve been back.”

“It’s okay—”

“No it’s not, Jenna. I couldn’t see you very well in the shadows, but this is my freakin’ job. I didn’t depend on any of my senses. I was shocked that Cadence was there, but still. It’s not that you aren’t memorable. I just...” He let the words trail off when he didn’t know how to finish it.

“I’m not memorable.” She said it with this awful truth in her voice, like she believed that.

He didn’t know her very well, and wasn’t great with women’s emotions, so he cleared his throat and looked around the parking lot. “Where’s your car?”

A lopsided grin took her face, and she graced him with a flash of silver. “It’s the big one.”

He immediately slid his attention to an F-350 dually with a flatbed on the back of the silver truck. “Bullshit.”

Smoothly, she hit the unlock button on her keys, and the lights lit up on the dually.

Holy. Shit. “Are you working for Kong?” he asked, studying the lumber tied onto the flatbed.

“Only Monday through Friday.”

Okay, he was trying to bite back his smile, but holy hell, this chick was driving a badass rig. And working for Kong at the biggest lumberyard in the Rocky Mountains? “Low-man? Accounting?” he asked, shamelessly fishing for her job title.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she murmured cheekily as she pushed off the picnic table and began walking toward her rig. “I’ll follow you in.”

“Making sure I go?”

“Yep.” She turned and talked as she walked backward. “Your momma deserves a hug from her son.” She even held his gaze for a three-count before she turned and sauntered off toward her truck. He could see the swell of her cheeks from here though, and something about it made him wish she would turn around again and let him see the smile that caused it.

He couldn’t recall ever seeing a big grin on Jenna’s face.

She was different now.

Maybe Cadence was right.

Maybe everyone had changed.

Lucas hopped up into his truck and led the way out of the parking lot. This close to home, he didn’t need the map function on his phone. His animal pointed him in the right direction. In the rearview mirror, he caught a peek of black smoke dumping out the back of Jenna’s truck, which meant she, or her mate, had deleted it. Probably a mate. Women didn’t do stuff like deleting trucks. Right?

Oh hell, it was Damon’s Mountains. Women did whatever they wanted.

But what if it was a mate?

Wait, he didn't care at all. Jenna could have fourteen boyfriends and it didn't mean a hill of beans to him. He wasn't here to ask questions about women or become interested in old friends. *Friends*. Was Jenna a friend? He hadn't hung out in the same circle as her. Sure, the Ashe Crew and Gray Backs and Boarlanders had all gotten together for big events and on holidays and stuff, but there had been some separation between the Crews, and honestly, he hadn't really noticed Jenna much before now. She was the youngest daughter of Kellen and Skyler Brown. He didn't even remember what her falcon looked like, and racked his brain for any time they had actually been Changed together. He remembered the white streak in the sky last night and figured she had some white feathers, but other than that? She didn't sit too deeply in his memories.

The clouds opened up, and the promise of an early-morning drizzle turned to rain that drummed on his metal roof. He flipped on the windshield wipers and glanced in the rearview again. He kinda wished he had her number so he could talk to her on their drive in.

As the main road through town turned to a winding mountain road, he relaxed back into his seat and huffed a sigh. He'd been working in cities for months now, and there was something so relaxing about being in the middle of nowhere. The greenery here was a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding trapped in his lungs.

The only other car on the road right now was Jenna's behind him, and the occasional logger making their way to a

lumberyard. He'd almost, *almost* forgotten how beautiful it was out here. It was ferns and towering trees and winding roads and mossy rocks, and places to Change that didn't require planning and foresight. Here, he could just pull off to the side of the road, hike a few yards in, and disappear from his human skin. No consequences.

That was one of the things he realized he had taken for granted. Even if someone saw him Change here, they wouldn't freak out. Damon's Mountains were full of shifters.

This was a safe haven.

He didn't know how many times he checked the rearview in those couple of hours of winding mountain drive, but it was a substantial amount. Too much, definitely.

It was okay though, because his windows were heavily tinted and Jenna wouldn't see his attention. He wouldn't see her anymore for a while after today.

He turned on a gravel road that he'd driven a thousand times, and something inside of his chest filled up as he scanned the trees he had memorized like the back of his hand. He could drive this winding road up the mountain with his eyes closed. He exhaled as he passed under the Boarland Mobile Park sign. Someone had put up a new layer of brown paint on it. Behind him, Jenna had crept her truck closer to his tailgate. Maybe she was making double-sure he didn't turn off and head back to the main road, or maybe she was excited about seeing the park. If she was close to his mom, it would mean she'd spent time here, not just with her Ashe Crew.

This was probably more her home than his now.

He crested the hill and eased his truck to a stop in shock. The park held the same trailers, all taken care of, the land manicured—the familiarity wasn't what stunned him.

It was the crowds of people.

His mother, Ally, was the Sheriff in town, and his dad was the Boarlander Silverback himself, Kirk Slater. He hadn't aged a day. His parents stood at the helm of the loose-knit crowd, watching him. His mom was tough as nails, hair chopped short and still platinum blonde. She had her hand over her mouth and her eyes were filled with emotion. His dad was standing stoically beside her, his hand on the small of his mate's back, eyes on Lucas. His smile crooked up, and there it was in his eyes—that humor his father had always kept with him.

Fuck. Fuck, it was good to see them.

Around them were people he'd grown up idolizing, and it wasn't just the Boarlanders here to greet him.

The Ashe Crew was here, and the Gray Backs. Kong was here too, with his mate, Layla.

He blew out a shaking breath and gritted his teeth against the emotion that roiled like a hurricane in his chest.

This place was church, and he hadn't seen God in way too long.

Jenna pulled her truck to a stop beside him and pushed her door open. She wore a soft smile for him as she strode around the front of her rig and waited for him. Lucas nodded and cut the engine. He wasn't alone to revisit all these memories by himself. He was glad Jenna had come, even if it was just her making sure he didn't run.

He caught up to Jenna, and came to a stop in front of the crowd as they quieted down.

He cleared his throat in the silence that descended over the woods. He hid his smile as he lifted his voice. “It’s good to be back.” He rushed forward and scooped his mom up in his arms and crushed her to him. She was human, but she was used to the rough-and-tumble ways of the shifters around her. She was laughing and squeezing her arms around his neck as tight as she could. He chuckled and settled her down, then shook his dad’s hand and fell into his gruff hug, nearly losing his wind as Dad clapped him on the back hard enough to rattle his bones. Kirk passed him to Sebastian Kane—or Bash, as people around here called him—who had been waiting not-so-patiently behind his parents for a hug.

“Oh boy, oh boy, your momma’s been counting down the days for you to come home.”

Lucas didn’t have it in his heart to tell Bash he wasn’t staying. He just wanted to enjoy the moment and say his goodbyes again later, quietly, before he slipped away again.

Some of the second generation was home for a visit—Nox, Clinton’s son, and Torren, the son of Kong—were around his age and had been his friends back in the day. They were here for a visit too, and he already knew they’d be hitting the bars in town tonight just from the look on Nox’s face. The next half an hour was a blur as he caught up with old friends and family, but there were a few moments that seemed brighter.

In the middle of a catch-up conversation with Torren, he glanced over and saw Jenna hugging his mom. She hugged her

with her entire being, her eyes squeezed tightly closed. His mom's back was to him, so he had the perfect view of Jenna's face, and time slowed as she opened those pretty bright-silver eyes and looked right at him. She loved his mother. He could tell.

Her smile faltered and then came back slow. *Gorgeous.*

“Hey, man, did you hear what I said?” Torren asked.

Lucas blinked hard and forced himself to break the gaze he shared with Jenna. “What?”

“I asked if you want to fight?”

Lucas frowned. “Why would I want to fight you?”

“The old fight barn is still going.”

“No way,” he said skeptically.

Torren shoved him in the shoulder. “We would give them one helluva show. Remember the fights we had as kids?”

“Two adolescent gorilla shifters always pissed-off at nothing,” Lucas rumbled with a chuckle. “I heard a rumor about you and Nox and Vyr.”

“Is it that we are all in a relationship?” Nox asked.

“Because that rumor is true. This is my boyfriend.”

“Shut *up*, Nox,” Torren growled.

Nox was the spitting image of his dad, Clinton—short blond hair, piercing blue eyes that always danced with humor, built like a tank. He crossed his arms and said, “Torren only talks to me like that when he's horny.”

Torren shoved him hard, but Nox barely moved. If Lucas had to guess, Nox had grown to expect it. Especially since he was in the same Crew as Torren now.

“I heard you’re all paired up,” Lucas said.

Nox nodded magnanimously. “I did find a mate, and she is kind of awesome, and she gives me lots of BJs.”

“Dude, I’m telling Nevada you said that,” Torren murmured.

“Where are your ladies?” Lucas asked around a grin.

“Home. Torren and I are just visiting for a couple days. We tried to get Harper and Wyatt and that whole Crew to come back for a visit...Kane’s Crew too, but you know how adult life is,” Nox said.

Torren said, “Busy,” at the same time Nox said, “Boring.”

“Where’s Vyr?” Lucas asked.

“Saving the world or some shit,” Nox said. “Hey listen, if you fight Torren, I’ll pay you sixty-eight dollars.”

“I don’t need sixty-eight dollars,” Lucas said.

“Dooon’t,” Torren whispered, looking tired as Nox grew a devilish smile.

“Fine, how about *sixty-nine* dollars,” Nox whispered like a weirdo.

Lucas pursed his lips as Nox just stared at him.

“You walked into that,” Torren muttered as he sauntered away.

Moment number two that would haunt him when he laid his head down to sleep tonight: Cadence was now here. She was standing off to the side talking with the second person he had been secretly hoping wasn't here.

Damon Daye, the blue dragon himself—the father of the red dragon, the keeper of these mountains, the protector of all shifters.

Damon Daye, Lucas's boss.

The two people he was hoping weren't here were off to the side talking too quietly for his sensitive hearing to pick up.

He didn't know why he glanced over at where Jenna was talking to some of the second generation of the Ashe Crew, but she was looking right at him with a seriousness in her eyes that caught him off guard.

She shook her head slightly, but he didn't know what that meant.

When he dragged his attention to the dragon, Damon Daye's silver eyes—with those unsettling elongated pupils—were drilling right into him. He twitched his chin, and Lucas didn't have a choice to ignore the summons. Damon Daye was the boss of everyone.

Cadence offered Lucas an empty smile as she walked away to talk to a group of Gray Backs.

Lucas sighed and took a step in Damon's direction, but he startled when Jenna appeared suddenly at his side.

“What are you doing?” he murmured under his breath.

“Paying homage to the dragon with you.”

Lie. He could hear it in her tone.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but she wouldn't meet his gaze.

Whatever her angle was, he didn't mind that she was coming with him. What harm could her presence bring? No one here wanted to insult a submissive. In a way, Jenna was special, and coveted by Crews.

When Damon nodded respectfully at her and didn't shoo Jenna away, Lucas had another moment where he looked at her differently. She was submissive, but walked right up to the blue dragon and sat on a stone ledge near him.

No fear, no hesitation.

Huh.

"Jenna," Damon greeted her.

Jenna nodded and exposed her neck. "Damon."

Inhaling deeply, Lucas offered his hand and shook Damon's. "Respectfully, I'm turning down the job."

Not a single muscle twitched on Damon's face. He didn't look a single year older than when Lucas had last seen him. The man didn't age. He was king of the poker face and didn't give away a single emotion.

Damon ignored his statement and told him, "My mate has stated her desire to host a dinner for you."

"Clara wants me to come over? Tonight?"

"No. In two days' time."

"I'm not staying for two days," Lucas assured him.

“If my mate requests something,” Damon gritted out.
“She *will* have it.”

Lucas actually liked Clara, and wouldn't mind a dinner hosted by her if it was tonight. But... “If this is the plan to get me to stay longer, it's a waste of time. I'm heading out as soon as I'm done visiting here.”

“Look around you, Lucas. Do you know why these people have gathered?”

Lucas scanned the crowd of laughing, teasing, happy shifters. “Because it's an excuse to party?”

The corner of Damon's lips twitched up and fell instantly, as if the smile hadn't existed at all. “They do like to party, but no. They gather like this when any of you come home.”

“Any of us?”

“The kids. Do you know how much effort goes into raising a generation of shifters that will be the next to protect us?”

Damon had never spoken to him like this, and he was caught off guard. “No.” Of course Lucas wouldn't know. He didn't have kids, nor would he ever.

Damon slid his dragon eyes to him. “You should. You should know. What are you doing, Lucas?”

He hesitated, uncertain. With a shrug, he answered, “Doing the jobs you assign me.”

“When will you see?”

“See what?”

“When will you see what I’ve been doing for you?”
Damon slipped his stern gaze to something that moved in the woods. It was a massive silver grizzly, and above him flew a jet-black raven. Beaston and his Aviana.

Chills blasted up Lucas’s forearms, but Damon was not done talking.

“Two evenings from now, dinner will be hosted by my mate. I’ll give you the next job then, and you may choose. Stay or go.” Damon slid a glance over his shoulder as he strode toward the woods where Beaston was disappearing.
“You may bring one friend.”

Lucas clenched his fists at his sides and gritted his teeth as he glared at the dragon walking away. Sometimes he wished he could fight that motherfucker, but perhaps that was just the silverback in him. The animal didn’t like being around anyone with dominance.

Now he would be stuck here, and it would make it even harder to leave.

“You could just go, you know,” Jenna said from where she sat behind him.

He sat down on the stone ledge beside her and sighed.
“And then what? What would disobeying Damon get me? I would be out of a job.”

“You could get another job.”

He slid a look to her, but she wasn’t teasing. Her gray eyes were wide and earnest. “You don’t like working for him. I can feel it clear as day.”

His face relaxed and he leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees as he watched Damon disappear into the woods. “It’s a job. No one really likes their boss.”

“I like mine.”

He studied her face, but there was nothing except seriousness there. “Kong is a good boss to you?”

She cracked a smile. “He is.”

“Then it’s a lucky thing. You were able to settle here in the same Crew you were born to, and find a job you enjoy that you feel fulfilled by. You have found a good life, happiness, and a mate.” Okay, he’d thrown that last part out as a test.

“I don’t have a mate,” she said, “but the rest is accurate.”

Hmmm. “Did Kong give you the work truck?”

“No. I saved up and bought a new rig, and then I welded the flatbed.”

“You welded the flatbed.”

“Yes.”

“You. You welded it.”

She sat up straighter, lifted her chin in the air, and glared at him. “You should look up Falco Flatbeds someday when you’re bored.” Jenna stood and moved to leave, but second-guessed herself and turned back around. “You know, you can spend your whole life living to work, or you can figure your shit out, find something you enjoy, and work to live.” She twitched her chin toward the woods where Damon had disappeared. “He doesn’t own anyone, nor does he want to.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Maybe it’s you who doesn’t understand,” she countered. “Maybe you’ve been away from here for so long that you forgot how to see.”

“How to see?” he asked as she walked away.

“Yeah,” she said without turning around. “How to see.”

Okay, fuckin’ Riddler. How to see what? Between Jenna and Damon, he was real irritated with the cryptic stuff.

He ran his hand down his facial scruff, and faked a smile for his mom when she strode toward him. “Do you want to stay in your old room tonight?” she asked.

He didn’t know why he did it, but he lied. “I’m staying at Smashland.”

A laugh took her and she sank down beside him. “You know that’s a joke-name, right?”

“Doesn’t seem like one. The idiots there actually say it seriously. They even have a custom sign when you enter the trailer park.”

“You just don’t know them well enough yet. Cadence knows it’s silly.”

Irritation had him cracking his knuckles. “You say her name really easy, Ma.”

“Aw, boy, it isn’t like that. I know you were hurt. I didn’t cling to her. She’s nothing important to me, but I do see what she’s trying to do.”

He inhaled deeply and watched Cadence working the crowd. She’d always been good at the show. “I don’t know what I’m doing here,” he admitted low.

“You’re not getting back with Cadence, and no one expects you to.”

Lucas chewed on the corner of his lip. “Then why was I brought here?”

“Because you weren’t just a mate to Cadence, Lucas. That wasn’t your destiny. No one expects that. No matter what happened, you still belong here. You belong.”

“No matter what happened,” he repeated softly.

“You know what I mean,” his mother said low. “You left, but everyone understood. Cadence is off the table, she isn’t part of any reason for you to be here. There is something bigger happening.”

“Something bigger than thinking you found your mate, but your animal choosing something different?” he asked.

His mom plastered on a smile and rested her head against his shoulder. “I know it was hard, but you aren’t the only one to experience that.”

“Oh yeah? Who else, then?”

“Gunner,” she murmured.

Lucas huffed a sigh and cracked his neck to one side, then the other. “Gunner’s problems aren’t my concern.”

“She did it to him,” Ma said. “What happened to you? It happened to him. Cadence did it.”

He stared at the woods, immersed in a hundred flashbacks he hated. Why? Because most of them were good, and fought with the bad he remembered.

“Good,” he growled. “He fuckin’ deserved it.”

“Can’t hate him forever,” Ma said, still resting her head against his shoulder.

“Watch me.”

“Hate is a poison. It’ll take everything from you, and for no reason. You know what is empowering?”

“Ma,” he growled.

“No, seriously. Do you know what is empowering?”

“Forgiveness,” he guessed.

“Forgiveness,” she repeated softly.

“I have a life,” he murmured. “One you should be proud of.”

“And I am. Can you blame me for wanting you to be closer to home though? This is what a mother does. She raises a child, she watches him grow and obsesses with his progress. Her entire life revolves around him and then one day, he is eighteen and he leaves. He finds his independence and builds a life, and the mother is left to remember, and to hope that one day her child will make his way home to her. You were supposed to find a family group, Lucas.”

He made a clicking sound behind his teeth and shook his head. “That wasn’t a life that made sense to me. I’m not Kong. I’m not my father. I didn’t find a good mate. I found Cadence and it all fell apart and now I’m just...I’m just different.”

“Cadence wasn’t for you,” his mother said. “How many times did I tell you that?” She bumped his shoulder and lowered her voice. “How many times, my Lucas?”

He cracked his knuckles again and shook his head. “She felt big.”

“Everything feels big when you are so young. Do you know what feels bigger?”

“Forgiveness or some shit?”

Ma chuckled. “When you are old enough to understand what love truly means. When you have your life together and you aren’t looking for a mate, and she falls into your lap and you know how to take care of her because you have life experience now. Because you have experienced heartache, so your animal will be more careful next time. He will choose wisely.”

“Being around her is confusing.”

“Fair. I can’t imagine.”

“You found Dad young.”

“Not that young, my Lucas. I knew who I was. I had my career. When I accepted your father, I knew what I was getting into.”

He rolled his head back and looked at the sun, shaded by dark clouds. “I can’t be an Alpha to Cadence’s Crew.”

“It won’t be her Crew.”

“What do you mean?”

“Talk to her, Lucas. That trailer park isn’t what you think it is.”

“It looks like a rip-off of Asheland Mobile Park.”

“Or maybe they’re trying to find something familiar. Not for Cadence, or Jenna, or Kru. Perhaps they’re trying to build an anchor for Gunner.”

“Fuck Gunner.”

“Not fuck Gunner. You loved him once.”

“In another lifetime.”

“You’re still breathing, son. Don’t waste the life you’ve been given. It feels big that you are here.”

“For you.”

“For me. For your father. For Damon. For Beaston.”

“Beaston?” he asked with a frown.

“Sometimes things happen for a reason.”

“Are you proud of me, Ma?”

She was quiet for a few seconds too long, so he asked again, “Are you proud of me?”

“I am. Of course I am, but I also want more for you.”

“More than a fulfilling life with a good career?”

“Yes,” she said softly. Truth rang through her voice. “You aren’t caring for your animal.”

“My animal is fine,” but even he could hear the shake in his tone.

“He’s a silverback now, Lucas. You can pretend you are human all you want, but you have an animal that requires leadership responsibilities. You need a family group under you.”

“A bunch of females to manage?”

“No. Your father settled with me and he is happy. He is... full. Kong settled with Layla and he is happy. He is full. He doesn't require extra females or extra offspring. But you must give your animal something to protect, or he has no purpose. And an animal without purpose...is lost.”

He didn't say anything in response. Wouldn't matter if he did. This wasn't the first time he'd gotten this speech from his mom. Didn't change anything. He was still himself, still unpaired, still a satellite out in orbit.

“Think fast,” someone said from behind him.

Lucas turned to find a flying beer can sailing straight for his face. He caught it just before it cracked across his nose, and Kru's baiting grin was plastered across his face. He hopped over the stone ledge and cracked open his own beer as he scanned the crowd. “Damn, they pulled everyone in for this.”

Lucas studied Kru's profile, but he didn't look like any of the first generation. He was absolutely unfamiliar. “Whose kid are you?”

“Damon's,” Kru lied.

“Bullshit,” he muttered as he cracked the tab of the beer.

“Wouldn't it be cool if I was though? Think about it. You could be in the same Crew as a dragon. All the cool Crews have dragons. Damon's Mountains. Harper's Mountains. Kane's Mountains. Vyr's Crew. We just have a stupid silverback.”

“And you don’t even have that.” Lucas took a gulp of the beer but sputtered at the nasty flavor. He scrunched up his face at the label. “Why in the actual hell would you give me mango-ginger beer?”

Kru was chugging his. He shrugged, finished before he wiped his mouth, and said, “I stole it from Jenna’s trailer.”

“Dude, that’s messed up. First rule of the trailer park, don’t go in the girls’ houses.”

“Unless you are boning them,” Kru amended.

Well that got his attention. Lucas twitched his glare to the shifter. “Are you boning Jenna?”

“Yep.” Lie.

He huffed a sigh of...something. Relief? *Get a grip.* He took a small sip of the beer and tried to figure out what had possessed that woman to buy this horrific booze.

“You know what she’s missing?” Kru asked.

“Who?”

“Jenna.”

She was squatted down across the clearing, holding the hands of a toddler, singing something with this gorgeous smile plastered to her face. “What?” he asked absently.

“A mouse.”

“Why would she want a mouse?”

“When Gunner was still here, that first night Jenna got to the park, they were talking about some old mouse that lived in the original ten-ten.”

“Nards,” he murmured as an accidental smile took his face.

“You want to unzip that one’s pants? Get her a present.”

“First off, stop talking about her that way. Second, I’m not trying to get into anyone’s pants, and third? A mouse is not the way to a woman’s heart.”

“Maybe it’s the way to a falcon’s heart.” Kru was watching him with narrowed eyes. “Human rules don’t apply here, big guy. Maybe you’ve been away for too long.”

“Who *are* you?” he demanded.

“I’m the one bringing you the exact beer Jenna likes, and telling you exactly how to make her think about you every time she comes into her home. Every time she feeds that mouse, who is she going to think of?”

“Why do you care about what I do?”

“I stole one of her bras too. She likes orang—ack!”

Lucas’s hand gripped Kru’s throat before he told his body to respond. Well, fuck it all now. He yanked him closer.

“Leave. Her. Alone.”

Lucas was gripping him hard enough to pop a human’s head from his body, but Kru? He smiled, and a feral rumble came from deep in his chest. “And that’s why I care what you do.” Kru yanked away from him and hopped over the stone ledge easily. “See you tonight, Lucas.”

“No you won’t.”

“Okay,” he said nonchalantly as he walked away, swinging his arms, the empty beer can still clutched in his fist.

God, that guy was weird.

“Mango-ginger beer,” Nox called judgmentally. He lifted his Coors Banquet. “Hey, you do you, man.”

Lucas huffed a laugh and shook his head, stood, and made his way toward the group where Nox was chatting. “Some guy named Kru gave it to me.”

Nox’s blond brows lifted high. “Some guy named Kru,” he said, and nudged Torren in the ribs. Torren was just staring at him with an unfathomable look.

Clearly he was missing something. “Well, this has been weird,” he mumbled. “I’m going to take off soon.”

“Aw, no running tonight!” Nox said, pulling him in against him. “We’ve already got plans for you.”

“I’m not fighting Torren.”

“Not sober, you won’t,” Nox murmured, tilting the mango-ginger beer toward his lips.

Lucas chuckled and shrugged him off. “Let me guess, you’ve been making bets?”

“Obviously. But now I see you drinking girl-beers and I’m second-guessing my bets.”

“Dude, you bet against me?” Torren demanded.

“Naturally.” He snickered at Lucas. “This guy.”

“You bet against someone in your own Crew?”

Nox didn’t have an ounce of remorse as he laughed. “You’re all shackled-up and happy. Lucas is a lone silverback

with no family group, and his life is a disaster. He's made of sexual frustration, testosterone, bitterness, and anger."

"Thanks, man," Lucas said sarcastically.

"No offense, but your life is a mess," Nox said.

"That's good. That's a good jab."

"Do you even get laid?"

"Oh God," Torren said. "Look, Lucas, we're going out to the cliffs. For old times. When was the last time we all got together?"

Lucas shook his head, trying to do the math. A decade, maybe.

"When will we ever be together again?" Jenna asked quietly from where she approached.

Probably another decade, at least.

He sighed and looked from face to expectant face. "What time?"

"Now. The time is now!" Nox crowed. "Fuck yeah!"

"We have one life to live," Jenna assured him. "There is no better time than now. Hold off on running for one evening." She nodded her head toward the left, where his mom was watching him with a soft smile on her face. "It'll make your parents happy to have you in the mountains for a day."

He shook his head. "You can't use my parents' approval forever. I'm old now."

"You aren't old," Jenna said.

“You’re old as fuck, you’ll probably die any day now,” Nox announced as he jogged toward the trucks. “Get in, losers! We have skinny-dipping to accomplish!”

“I’ll send pictures of your naked ass to Nevada!” Torren called behind him.

“I meant skinny-dipping for you. I am paired up, and my frank and beans are only for my mate. I shall be fully clothed. Swim trunks. Swim shirt. River shoes. A parka. Maybe a bucket hat. No one look at me.”

“You’re smiling,” Jenna said as the others made their way toward the trucks.

Caught off guard, he dragged his attention to her. “I smile.”

“I haven’t seen it since we were kids.”

She made her way away from him and let her gaze linger on him a few extra seconds before she jogged toward the trucks.

“You also haven’t seen me at all since we were kids,” he pointed out, but she ignored him.

He ran his hand down his beard and scanned the mingling crowd. Ma was shooing him toward the trucks. He puffed air out of his cheeks and followed Jenna. “You want shotgun?” he asked her. He didn’t know why he did that. She had her own rig, she could drive, she probably had the back roads to the cliffs memorized by heart. The words had tumbled from his lips before he’d been able to stop them.

Jenna skidded to a stop. When she turned around, she looked just as surprised by his words as he felt. “In your

truck?”

He cleared his throat. “No point wasting gas. I can bring you back to your truck later.” This plan didn’t even make any sense.

Jenna’s pretty silver eyes were trained on him, unblinking, as if she was actually considering his offer. She chewed the corner of her full lips. “Okay. You’ll have to kick Kru out of my spot though.”

Indeed, he could see Kru sitting in the passenger’s seat of his rig. “Get out,” he snapped.

Kru kicked open the door and got out, slammed it so hard that Lucas’s truck rocked, and then hopped into Nox’s truck with Torren and Cadence. Ahh, crap. An evening at the cliffs with Cadence. Fantastic. He couldn’t wait to be dragged down memory lane.

Others were loading up into trucks and SUVs too, calling out goodbyes to the party, and none of Damon’s Mountains seemed upset they were leaving so soon. Maybe this was parenting though. Maybe they were just happy to see their kids all hanging out again, like old times.

Ma looked mushy as hell as he followed Jenna to her truck. She pulled a duffel bag out of her back seat, and he waved at his parents. “I’ll be back when I drop her back off.”

“Love you!” Ma sang out.

Dad was just smiling. God, it was good to be back home, but he wouldn’t admit that out loud. “Love you, too.”

A few of the other trucks took off, but Nox lingered, and Lucas could see Torren and Kru arguing. He rolled down his

window and waited for Nox to roll his down, too. Nox pushed a pair of blue-mirrored sunglasses up on his forehead and arched his blond brows. “Yes?”

“Tell Kru to get in here with us.”

“No!” Kru yelled, shoving himself in the crack between the back of Nox’s seat and the edge of the window. “I’m fine.”

“Kru, get in the goddamn truck.”

Kru narrowed his bright-green eyes to slits and then whispered, “Fine.” He punched Torren and shoved the door open, then piled into the back seat of Lucas’s rig. He sat on the front edge of the seat and looked from Lucas to Jenna and back again. “Hey guys.”

“Please put your seatbelt on.”

“I’m a shifter. I will survive a car crash.”

Lucas closed his eyes, counted to three, and said, “Sit back, please. I don’t like anyone that close to my neck.”

“If you growl when you say the word ‘please,’ it doesn’t count as being polite,” Kru enlightened him.

Jenna turned around and shoved Kru’s forehead. “Sit back, dipshit, so we can go!”

Lucas snorted and hit the gas hard enough that Kru went flying backward. He heard Nox whooping as they passed, and then Nox was on his ass, slipping and sliding around every curve right on Lucas’s bumper.

Okay, now he was really smiling. They were catching up to the other trucks ahead of them, and it had been a long time since he’d raced. If he remembered it correctly, and if the side

trails had been kept up, there was a path off the main dirt road that led through the trees.

“Is the turn-off still there?” he asked fast.

“Yes!” Jenna squealed and grabbed the oh-shit handle as he veered off to the right through the trees on a slightly overgrown path.

Nox missed the turn-off and Lucas gassed it as he checked the progress through the trees. He veered this way and that down the slightly winding road they had first cut when they were teenagers. He could hear Nox’s yelling echoing through the mountains.

Jenna was cracking up, and in the back seat, Kru was telling him to, “Veer right, veer right, he’ll come through the trees!”

And Kru was right. Nox took a clear spot and pulled right toward them as Lucas was passing the other trucks. “Shhhhit,” he growled, loving the challenge. There wasn’t room for both of their trucks on the narrow shifter-made road, so he pulled around a tree right as Nox came barreling into his lane.

“Gun it there!” Jenna called, pointing to a small clearing.

He trusted her. He did. He trusted her with his truck, trusted her to know these woods, trusted her to know this shortcut. He went right where she was pointing and took her direction as she guided them back in front of Nox. Lucas gunned it, grinning as he spied Torren’s middle finger through the window.

“Cut, cut, cut! Now!” Kru yelled, and Lucas took the overgrown road to cut directly in front of the other trucks, Nox

directly on his tail.

Nox didn't make it in and had to settle behind an old, white F-150.

“Oh, he's so pissed right now,” Jenna said, giggling.

In the rearview mirror, he could see Cadence sitting in the passenger's seat of Nox's truck. She was pointing to the road, holding onto the dashboard, a big grin plastered on her face. Oh, everyone was having fun now.

Lucas skidded around a slightly muddy curve in the road, fishtailing as he drifted the truck.

“Oh shit, the silverback can drive!” Kru yelled from where he was gripping their headrests. Even Lucas could hear the excitement in his voice.

God, they had lived for this when they were younger. How many times had he raced down this mountain after he'd gotten the keys to his first truck?

He made it to the main road, did a quick check, and pulled out in the opposite direction the others were going.

His phone rang almost immediately, and Son of Kong showed up on the caller ID. The second he connected the call, Torren asked, “Are you running?”

“Kind of. Beer running. Do y'all want anything?”

“None of that girly shit!” Nox called in the background. “Or if you need to get girly shit, at least get those mini umbrellas with them.”

“Got it. Canned margaritas for Noxy-boy. You want anything, Torren?”

“I’m good with whatever. See you guys there. We’ll get the canopies set up.”

“Yep.” Lucas disconnected the call and couldn’t help the smile that lingered on his face. When he felt Jenna watching him, he glanced over at her. She was staring at his lips, a faint smile painting hers. “What?” he asked.

Jenna’s pretty silver eyes lit to his and then down to her hands, which she wrung in her lap. “Nothing,” she said on a breath.

God, she was pretty. He liked the way Jenna filled up his whole truck with that fruity shampoo scent. She felt so big, but she was petite. So comfortable. So...different from what he remembered.

“I used to dream of racing with you boys,” she admitted, shocking him to his bones.

“You did?”

“Yeah! You were older and so cool, and you boys were always souping up your trucks and making them faster and louder, but I just had my Honda Civic back then. I couldn’t keep up.”

“You could’ve hitched a ride. I always had extras in the truck.”

She shrugged and the smile slipped. “I wasn’t one of the cool kids.”

And he thought on that. She wasn’t, but he’d also thought she didn’t want to do the wild things him and the boys liked doing back then. She was quiet and...better. Better than them, too good to climb up in the cab and point out breaks in the

road. That's what he'd thought, at least, but now? Now, he wasn't so sure he could trust his memory of her. His head had been wrapped up with Cadence back then.

He cruised around the curve of the mountain and pulled in at an old gas station that housed so many of his childhood memories. Some of the Crew had worked at and eventually bought Moosey's Bait and Barbecue, and that restaurant had expanded to smaller operations in a few of the local gas stations. This one smelled of smoked brisket the second he pulled into the parking lot, and his mouth watered.

"It's still here," he murmured, half-surprised.

"Oh, they expanded Moosey's," Jenna assured him. "This location isn't going anywhere. Captain runs the pit here."

"Gunner's brother?" he asked. Dang, it had been forever since he had seen him. He had been in the Ashe Crew with Jenna.

He got out and fought the urge to rush around the front of his truck and open the door for Jenna. It wasn't like that between them. He did, however, wait and hold the door to the gas station open for her. She thanked him and bounced in, full of energy as she made a beeline for the refrigerators in the back.

She picked the same gross beer Kru had brought him earlier, and explained that she and Cadence liked them. Lucas grabbed a twenty-four pack of something he recognized, and grabbed a little package of the colorful miniature umbrellas just to mess with Nox.

“I call the purple one,” Jenna said as she waited by him in line.

“Purple is your favorite color?” he asked. The answer was important to him, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why.

“Nope. Teal, but they don’t have teal.”

She stepped in front of him in line to pay for hers, and he studied the mini-umbrella options. The pack in his hand didn’t have teal, but another one did. Quick as a whip, Lucas replaced the one he had with the one that held her favorite color.

“I saw that,” Kru said under his breath from behind him.

Lucas ignored him as he watched Jenna make her way to the back of the gas station where the Moosey’s Barbecue area was located. She sure was pretty.

Kru put a pack of canned margaritas on the counter with Lucas’s beer and grinned at him. “For Nox.”

He huffed a laugh and nodded, then handed his credit card to the attendant and glanced back to see Jenna cutting up with Captain. The Goliath was just as big as he remembered, same smile and everything. He wore an apron, and a smile for Jenna. He was Gunner’s oldest brother, and the son of Haydan and Cassie.

Damn, today had been a roller coaster. Captain looked up and waved, and Lucas waved back.

“I know you, don’t I?” the twenty-something behind the counter said. “You’re Lucas, right? Son of the Boarlander Silverback?”

“Just Lucas, man,” he said, offering his hand for a shake.

The guy was grinning from ear to ear. “Do you know how many of us moved to the area because of you guys?”

Lucas frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The Boarlanders made a safe place for us.”

And now he used his senses. He scented the air and yep, sure enough, the guy was a shifter. Smelled like fur but not dominance. Middle-of-the-road probably, not a monster but not submissive. Lucas had most of the local registered shifters memorized, but he couldn't recall this one. “Good to meet you,” he said carefully.

“You too.” The guy—Ace, his name tag read—nodded respectfully to Kru, and murmured his name. “Kru. Good to see you again.”

“How's the pops?” Kru asked, as he crunched down on a bag of potato chips he hadn't even paid for yet.

“He's hanging in there, thank you for asking.”

“You going to the fights tonight?”

“Aw man, it'll be cutting it close. I'm working the late shift tonight.”

Kru tilted his head toward Lucas. “Just go straight after this place closes.”

“Wait,” Ace muttered, “are you fighting tonight?”

“Hell no,” Lucas said simultaneously as Kru said, “Hell yes.”

“Who?” Ace asked excitedly.

“Silverback on silverback.”

“Fuuuuuck! Torren?”

Lucas growled out a sigh and asked, “How much?”

“On me, man,” Ace said, putting his own credit card in the machine. “I owe you and your family. Your mom helped me and my dad when we settled here.”

Lucas frowned. “Who’s your dad?”

“No one you would know. Just a shifter looking for a safe place to raise an only son when they started requiring us to register. Your mom is Sheriff here. She has bailed us out of registering a half a dozen times.”

“Which means you are something the humans would find interesting. You’re something special.”

“Aren’t we all special?” Ace asked, seriousness in his tone and bright-blue eyes.

Hmm. Well played. If he was a rare shifter, Ace would be a pro at avoiding the conversations that exposed his shifter animal. Fair enough. If Ma had care for this man and his father, he must be good people. Lucas nodded respectfully. “You have a good night, Ace.”

Ace smiled and it was genuine. “Tell your parents I say hi.”

“Will do. It was nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to meet you too...Lucas.”

The way he said his name was reverent, and Lucas didn’t understand the dynamics. “It’s different here,” he admitted to

Kru as they walked toward the Moosey's sign at the back of the gas station.

“It'll make more sense to you soon.”

“Great, you're doing riddles now too?” he asked, annoyed.

“Nah, I'll give you a straighter answer than most. Jenna will, too.”

“And Cadence?” he asked.

“She's part of the machine. She has a job to do, and though it's an honorable job, you will come second to her mission.”

“What's *your* mission?”

Kru shrugged and twitched his chin toward Captain and Jenna. “To eat barbecue, and drink beer, and swim at the cliffs tonight. I live for the moment, Lucas. Yesterday doesn't matter, and neither does tomorrow.”

And there it was—the shut-down. Kru was a Riddler just as much as the others were.

“Why won't anyone just talk in a straight line around me?” he asked as Kru walked away.

“Because you aren't ready,” Kru said over his shoulder before he went and ordered four brisket sandwiches from Captain.

Bright side though? He handed Lucas two of them.

“Thanks,” Lucas said as Kru walked out.

Jenna was watching him, so he said, “That guy is strange.”

“He said the same thing about you,” she told him as she pulled her hair up into a high ponytail.

He caught up with Captain for a few minutes and then made his way out to the truck, respectfully opening the door for Jenna. Not that she needed a man to do that. He’d seen her truck, and if she was capable of welding? Well, she was interesting. Welding took training and interest in such things.

She lowered his tailgate and they settled the cases of beer in a cooler in the back. She made her way to the ice freezer and withdrew a couple of bags, broke them up on the asphalt, and then poured them over the beers Lucas had set in the Styrofoam cooler. It was a dance they danced without talking or planning. Okay, the woman knew how to pack a cooler. Such things shouldn’t be attractive, right? But for Lucas, everything she did wrenched up his interest and made him pay attention to her a little more.

She looked cute with her hair up like that, her ponytail twitching with the movement of her getting in his truck, her eyes looking brighter than they had before. Her animal was near the surface now, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why.

She fiddled with the radio and found a song she liked, then hummed it softly as she looked out the window. He crept the truck down the backroad that led to the flat below the cliffs where the others would be setting up.

When they arrived, he got out and dug through the duffel bag in the back seat for a swimsuit while Kru disappeared with

the cooler. Jenna stood on the other side of the back seat, digging through her bag. She pulled out a string bikini with sparkly teal sequins on it.

“You’re very heavy,” she said softly.

Her words didn’t make sense. “What do you mean?”

“Your animal.” Her soft silver eyes flickered up to his, and then back down to her bag.

“I don’t mean to be.” He was making her uncomfortable. “I’m...I’m sorry. I’ll let you get dressed.”

He backed away and closed the door, but when he turned, she was standing right there in front of his truck, head cocked, staring at him. “You don’t have to apologize here, you know. Everyone feels heavier than me.”

He didn’t know how to respond, or what she wanted from him, so he waited until she found her words again. “You just feel heavy when you look at me like that.”

And he got it. His attention had been focused on her. She felt that. It wasn’t his intention, but she was aware.

He nodded and ducked his gaze to her shoes, then tilted his head and exposed his neck. When his gaze darted to her again, she wore the faintest smile and had a naughty little glint in her pretty eyes. “I think you are the first to ever expose his neck to me.”

“I have no fight with you.”

“You don’t have a fight with anyone here, do you?”

He shook his head. “If Gunner is gone, then no. Besides, I’m too old to want to fight.”

“Lie. You’re a silverback. I would guess you are just hitting your stride.”

He chuckled and ran his hand over his hair, stared at where everyone was gathering at the water’s edge through the trees. “I guess I learned self-control around the humans.”

“Maybe that’s why they want you here then,” she said, her smile slipping from her lips.

“Who?”

“Damon and Beaston.”

She peeled her shirt over her head and gave him her back. He could see her red bra easily, and this was the part where he was supposed to look away out of respect, but she slid him a look over her shoulder that froze him in his tracks. That smile. That inviting smile.

“You’re trouble,” he said, forcing himself to lower his gaze as she unsnapped her bra in the back.

“Everyone here has seen each other naked,” she told him.

“I haven’t seen you before,” he murmured, offering her his back. “We didn’t Change together.”

“I’ve seen you,” she admitted.

He frowned. “When?”

“Right after you and Cadence broke up. You went wild. Your animal was out of control and you kept Changing. You couldn’t go to school for a while.”

He slid a glance over his shoulder, and she was tying the back of her string bikini. “I dealt with that alone.”

“Not always. Sometimes I skipped school too, so you wouldn’t have to be alone.”

His frown deepened as he searched his memory. Everything from that time was muddy and blurry. “No one was with me. I didn’t want anyone around me.”

Jenna pulled her sweatpants down, panties and all, and he forced his gaze away again, clenched his hands as he stared at the pattern of the tree bark right in front of him.

“I was good at being invisible,” she quipped softly. “You weren’t alone.”

“There’s no way your parents would’ve let you skip that much school. I was a mess for a couple months.”

“Ask my dad about it someday. Ready,” she said.

He turned in time to catch the clothes she tossed to him. Jenna stood there in that teal sequined bikini and string bikini bottoms. God, she looked like a model, and the confidence on her made this moment even sexier. She was tan and slender, with perky little boobs pushing against her triangle top. A thin chain necklace with a feather pendant on it graced her throat. She slipped her feet into her slides and gestured to him. “Your turn.”

“Oh, you gonna watch me change? Since you’ve seen me before?”

Jenna tilted her chin up and looked at him down her nose, and there was something so sexy about the way she looked at him. “I don’t steal anymore. I’ll look at you when you invite me to.” She ducked her chin to her chest, offered him one

more flash of silver, and then sauntered down toward the water, her slides clacking against her feet with every step.

His heart was pounding against his ribcage as he watched her leave.

Jenna had been with him during those months?

“Wait,” he said low.

She heard him and stopped, twisted around. “Yes?”

“You saw me at my worst.”

A small smile took her lips. “It wasn’t so bad. I understood.”

“No one could understand.”

“I watched you hurt. I did understand as much as someone could without feeling it myself. I hurt with you. I still think of it.”

He nodded slowly. He hadn’t invited anyone to see him falling apart—or beating the shit out of trees, out of river shores, chucking boulders into the woods, anything to settle the animal. Had she seen him curled up in pain? Trying to figure out if the hurt he felt was breaking a bond or just a breakup? “Why did you watch that?”

“Because only one of you was hurting.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You watched Cadence too?”

“Just for a couple of days. I thought she would need a friend. She did not.”

He swallowed hard and crossed his arms over his chest, like that would make the ache there feel better. “I noticed that

part too. Why did you stay with me? You didn't know me."

She shrugged. "I didn't have to know you, Lucas. You were alone and I didn't want you to be alone. There's nothing more to it. I would've done that for anyone who was going through something heavy."

"Have you talked about it since then?" he asked curiously.

She nodded once.

"With who?" *Please, don't say Gunner.*

"With you. Today. Right now."

Truth. He could hear it in her voice. Fuuuuck, his respect for this woman grew. She hadn't stayed with him for credit. Probably, she would've been fine if he never found out. "You said it was your idea to bring me here." Did it mean she had thought fondly of him over the years? "Why?"

The smile she offered him didn't reach her eyes. "For Gunner."

Aaaah. Everything always circled back to Gunner. The disappointment must've shown on his face, because her soft smile slipped, so he turned his face away from her and changed the subject. "Hey, I'm going to change and grab some chairs. I'll be down there in a minute."

The rest of her smile disappeared, but that was good.

They didn't need to be getting attached, and his animal definitely didn't need to be this interested in anyone who belonged to these mountains.

Chapter Four

Lucas had dismissed her.

Jenna felt slapped for a moment, and her skin crawled. It always did that when she wanted to bail on a social situation.

She wasn't as good at this as the others. A gathering with more than two people had always made her palms sweat, but with Lucas? He was just one person and he had her heart rate skipping around like crazy.

She offered him one last glance over her shoulder as she crested a small hill and headed toward the riverside. She would never forget the look of him after today. He wasn't the same young man who had left the mountains ten years ago. Lucas was a grown, dominant, muscular-as-hell silverback.

He was raw sex appeal, and too interesting for his own good to talk to. Right now, he was standing with his shirt off, six-pack chiseled, frowning down at his phone like he was reading a text message. His thick beard was perfectly trimmed, and his eyes were dark and mysterious, and he had a way of asking these direct questions that made her want to tell him everything. That was dangerous.

His arms were cut with thick muscle and his biceps flexed as he typed something into his phone.

Jenna didn't want to stop staring at the way his abs flexed with his breath, but mother nature had other plans. A tree root was sticking just far enough out of the ground for her to catch her toes on it and pitch forward. She had a split-second to

make the decision—change into her bird, or fall face-first into the dirt. Being the intelligent and agile shifter she was, she chose face-plant.

“Are you okay?” Lucas asked from behind her.

Jenna’s toe hurt something fierce, but she popped up. “I’m great! Never better. Just...inspecting the ants.” She let off a nervous laugh as her cheeks heated to the temperature of lava. “They’re good!”

Jenna turned away, mortified, and made her way down the trail toward the water where everyone was setting up coolers and canopies.

Nox was staring at her with a stupid grin on his face. “Can I ask you a question?”

“No,” she whispered. Her cheeks and ears had to be the color of cherries right now.

Jenna busied herself with digging through the cooler that Kru had brought down and opened one of the beers with shaking hands. Wrong one. Shit! She didn’t like this kind.

“Uuuuh,” she said lamely as she turned this way and that, looking for a place to unload the unwanted beer. “Here!” she said at a ridiculous volume as Lucas came down the gravel path toward them. She shoved the beer at him, sloshing it a little. “I grabbed the wrong one. I’m sorry.”

His eyes had lightened from brown to a gold color, and he felt angry.

“I’m sorry,” she said again as he took the drink from her hand.

“You said sorry twice, but you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Okay, thank you. Have a good time.” Oh my gosh, shut...up!

He just stared at her like she had lost her mind, so she gave him a little wave and made her way into the water to drown herself and disappear forever.

It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay, she chanted in her head as the others around her talked and swam in twos and threes. Why did she have to be so weird? She’d done so well to be all smooth when she had put her bikini on, and all she had to do was saunter away into the sunset, but no. She had to trip and then word-vomit everywhere.

Jenna closed her eyes and heaved a sigh. No matter how much she practiced in social situations, she would never change.

“You good?” came a deep voice from behind her.

She startled hard and splashed defensively, dumping a wave toward Lucas, who stood there with his eyes closed, his lips pursed, and two beers in his hands—the one she’d handed him, and one of her fruity ones.

“I am awkward,” she blurted out. Sometimes it was just easier to say things out loud and get them into the open instead of trying to camouflage it.

When his eyes opened, they were the bright glowing gold of his animal, but he didn’t feel heavy with anger anymore. Now, a grin cracked his face. “So freaking awkward.”

The mortification lessened and she huffed a laugh. “I’m...” She waved her hand at the bank full of people. “Still not a cool kid.”

“Mmm,” he said noncommittally as he handed her the fruity beer, which had actually been shielded from her splish-splash by the teal umbrella he’d put in the open tab. “Did you ever wonder what it was that separated you from the cool kids?”

She puffed out a breath of air and shook her head. “Good social skills, a big vocabulary, any kind of fashion sense, the ability to contour cheekbones with makeup, and a general enjoyment of basic conversations with other living beings?”

His grin had lingered the entire time she rambled. “Social skills are overrated, your vocabulary is fine, and if you look around at the others and then look at yourself in a mirror, your fashion sense is spot-on. You’re the hottest one out here.”

“W-what?” she stammered.

Lucas cleared his throat and said it again in a bell-tone, truth-filled statement. “You’re the hottest one out here.”

She looked from Cadence, with her bright red hot-as-fire bikini and rocking body, to Darah and Jazz and Tris, and all the other shifters gathering on the banks of the river. They were all drop-dead gorgeous.

She looked down at her boobs in her sequined triangle top. She looked...normal.

“But I fall and splash your beers,” she uttered, confused.

“Being clumsy has nothing to do with the way you present yourself.”

Lucas wore navy-colored swim trunks that sat low enough on his hips that the two strips of muscle called the Adonis belt showed. The water she'd splashed on him had beaded up across his chest and abs, and some of the drops raced each other down his tan, smooth skin. He had to be six foot four, perhaps six foot five, but felt even bigger. It was as if she were standing next to a bus. She squinted up at him—at his perfectly-chiseled jawline, high cheekbones, glowing gold eyes, perfectly mussed hair, and the curve of his sexy smile. He thought she was the most attractive one here? “Are you messing with me?”

He cocked his head and studied her, but she didn't know what he was looking for, so she puffed her cheeks up with air and crossed her eyes. “Am I hot when I do this?”

His chuckle reverberated through the air and settled right into her chest. He had a great laugh. Lucas twisted and his gaze seemed to go in the direction of where Cadence was hanging out with Kru and Nox.

A little flicker of something uncomfortable lit up her chest for just a moment before he turned back to her.

“You can go hang out with Cadence if you want. I don't mind at all.”

“And what will you do while I hang out with Cadence?” he asked carefully.

“What I always do.” Sit on the outside, or get sucked into a conversation she never quite gets comfortable enough to contribute to, or trip and fall on a tree root... “Just hang back.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Okay, cool. Cool, cool, cool.” Well then, what were they supposed to do? Just stand here in the water half-naked and make small talk? “Want to chug our beers and pretend we are mermaids and race to the waterfall?” she asked, pointing across the river to the waterfall that cascaded off the cliff.

Lucas shrugged. “I call blue mermaid.” He tossed his head back and sucked down his beer while she explained that, “It’s actually a blue *merman*.”

And then she had to catch up and try to drink her beer quick, before he yanked the can from her hand and trudged back a few steps closer to the bank so he could throw their cans.

“Where are you going?” Nox asked.

“I’m a motherfuckin’ merman,” Lucas called over his shoulder, and dove into the water.

Jenna’s laugh echoed off the cliffs, and she clapped her hands together and dove in too. It was pretty shallow though, so she jammed her fingertips on a rock and scraped her knees, but everything was okay—she was a very fast healer.

In the middle of the river, he hung back and waited for her. “Do you not know how to swim?” he asked.

“I am swimming!”

“You’re dog paddling.”

“This is how some people swim. We can’t all be perfect like you, Lucas. I’m doing the best I can without my goggles.”

“Oh God, please let us go back and get your goggles. I want to see them.”

Jenna splashed him. “You already think I’m the hottest person here, Lucas. If I show you my goggles, you will be addicted. Terribly inconvenient for you,” she huffed, winded as she treaded water. “We can’t have that.”

“Do falcons not like water?” he asked, and damn his grin as he swam backwards in front of her.

“I thought silverbacks were supposed to sink, but here you are, swimming around like a freakin’ tuna,” she muttered.

“If you start drowning, just tell me,” he teased.

“I don’t need your help, I just need you to stop slowing me down,” she said, focusing on her doggy-paddle strokes. She was going faster now and finding her rhythm. Kind of.

Lucas was doing a backstroke now, easy peasy, making it look like he was a professional swimmer. God, he was beautiful. Just cutting through the water with such power and grace. He had been wrong. She wasn’t the hottest person here by a long shot.

He was.

When they were close to the other side, he waited for her on the rocky bottom and pulled her in by her hands as soon as she reached him. He settled her on her feet as soon as the water was shallow enough and then led her down the bank a ways toward the waterfall.

“It’s been years since I came here.”

“To the river?” he asked.

“No, I mean to the waterfall on this side. When I was a kid, all I wanted to do was be under the waterfall.”

Lucas came to a stop, propped his leg up on a big rock in the water, and studied the waterfall. “I was the same. It was the challenge of racing friends to the waterfall and then we would stay over on this side all day long.”

“When you get older, you forget how fun things can be.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

Jenna cast a look back at the other side of the bank. Cadence and Kru and a few of the others were watching them, but they weren’t following.

When she turned back to follow Lucas, he was standing right in front of her, offering her his hand. “It’s rocky here. It smooths out closer to the falls.”

How many times had she seen his dad, Kirk, offer his mom a hand just like this? It brought a smile to her face. He remembered the things his parents had taught him, or perhaps he was just that much like his father—instinctively helpful.

She could see why Beaston talked about him the way he did.

She slipped her small hand into his big one and let him keep her steady as they picked their way along the rocks until they reached the fine-sand bottom near the falls.

“Ready, mermaid?” he asked.

“If I drown doing this, just let me go. Today has been mortifying.”

Lucas belted a laugh. “You’ll be fine. If we did it as kids, we’ll be okay now.”

And they were. She dove in after him and she could see him underwater as she followed him under the heavy stream of the waterfall. Sunlight was streaming through the water, lighting up his skin with highlights and shadows as he swam gracefully under the falls.

She wasn't as graceful, but it was okay. He didn't look back until they were almost near the surface on the other side, so he missed most of her struggle.

When she broke the surface, she inhaled deeply and he was right there, pulling her toward the huge dark rocks in the cavern on the other side of the falls. "Stay here," he told her, and while she allowed her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, he disappeared and returned shortly with an old, neon-blue flashlight. He was beating it against his palm trying to get it to light.

"That battery is long-dead," she pointed out.

He let off a soft rumble that perked up all her instincts. His gorilla was probably monstrous now that he was all grown up and a full silverback.

"Can you see at all?" he asked.

"Umm, I can actually see everything," she admitted.
"Can't swim worth a damn, but I can see everything."

A grin commandeered his face. "Good. This way." He grabbed her hand like it was nothing and pulled her up on the big rocks, then led her to a narrow passageway. When he came to a stop on the name-wall, she could see the confusion in his eyes. He traced his name he'd carved into the stone, and then

traced a few of the others. Vyr. Captain. Darah. Cadence. Harper. Wyatt. “It used to be only my name here.”

“You started a trend,” she said softly.

He scanned the flat rock face. “Where’s yours?”

She clasped her hands and grew silent. She didn’t want to say.

He looked down at her and asked, “Why did you never sign the wall? It looks like everyone did.”

Jenna cleared her throat and plastered a smile on her face. “I never hung out with the crowd when they were signing the wall.”

“You never put your name on here?” he asked again, like he knew she was dancing around answers.

With a sigh, she told him, “I did sign it, just not here.”

He stared at her for a few seconds and then asked, “Where?”

“You want to go back now? I’ll race you for real this time.”

“Where, Jenna?” he asked, his voice infused with such seriousness.

She pursed her lips and gestured to a narrow passageway. With a frown, he made his way to the very back of the cavern, and there, behind a thin rock wall, her name was carved.

Jenna Brown.

And she watched the light die in his eyes when he read the name carved beneath hers.

Gunner.

“Why aren’t these names with the others?” he asked low.

“You have history with Gunner that I don’t share. You both have scars from each other, but I don’t have those.”

“Why, Jenna?”

She sank down, rested her back against the smooth rock wall. “Talking about Gunner makes you angry.”

The echoing sound of him cracking his knuckles filled the small cavern, and then he waited in silence until she spoke again. “I wasn’t invited along when all the kids were having fun, and that was the culture when I got older too. I am just... I don’t fit in, you know? I tried, but I just am not the right shape. I’m not like the others. I can’t talk easily, I can’t connect with people easily, I’m just...different. I got left on the beach when everyone was having their name-carving day. They all took off, and I wasn’t as good at swimming. I tried to follow, but they made it across the river so fast, and no one even looked back to check on me, you know? I watched them. It wasn’t their fault, I was just freaking invisible sometimes. And sometimes I liked that and was comfortable with it, and sometimes I didn’t like it. I was standing on the beach, tearing up because I just felt left behind and it wasn’t just that one time. It was always, but it’s not their fault. It’s really not. They have their own pace and I’m just...slow. I’m just slow, Lucas. I left. Gunner found me in the woods behind our trailer park crying like a little baby, and he got mad at everyone for leaving me out, and he fought like...four people that night. In the middle of the night, he came and knocked on my front door. Not even my window. He didn’t try and sneak me out.

He knocked on my parents' front door and told them he was taking me to the cavern to write my name and for whatever reason, they said okay. And that's what we did. We wrote our names. On the outside. It didn't feel right to sneak in there and put my name by everyone else's. And then Gunner took me back home and he never mentioned that day again. It happened the year after you left. He still had his mind then."

Lucas's face had remained unreadable the entire time she was telling him about that memory, but a few seconds after she was finished talking, he thawed. He uncrossed his arms and sat down beside her. "Your knees are bleeding," he said.

She wiped them and shrugged. "They'll stop soon. I heal fast, just not as fast as you and the bears."

"You okay?" he asked, sliding those glowing bright-gold eyes to hers.

She offered him a soft smile. "Always."

He inhaled deeply and leaned his head back on the rock, stared at the stone wall across from them. "I'm glad Gunner did that. Your name should be in here. You do belong. He did a lot of stuff like that back then."

"I'm sorry for what happened to both of you."

Lucas shook his head. "It was a long time ago. Water under the bridge."

"If it was water under the bridge, you wouldn't react every time you see or hear Gunner's name."

"I don't think I ever figured out how to feel about it all. So I gave it to the animal, but all he feels is anger. So anger is what I go with."

“That’s a hard way to live.”

Lucas gestured to the wall with only her name, and the name of her missing friend. “Being alone is also a hard way to live.”

Touché.

“We’re both just little messes,” she announced.

“Who are you calling little?” he muttered, but there was a teasing tone to his voice that drew her attention to his eyes. And indeed, they had softened and were even dancing with a bit of humor now. Thank goodness.

She got stuck. Stuck in his gaze, stuck in the striking color of his eyes, stuck just inches from his face.

He searched her eyes and angled his head just slightly, straightened his spine like he was actually considering kissing her. Her. Jenna Brown. She could hear the pounding of his heartbeat, or perhaps it was her own, racing.

His gaze lowered to her lips, and she could see it written on his face. He really wanted to kiss her.

But...

Lucas was a mess inside. She could feel the turmoil in him, could feel the up and down, could sense the roller coaster. When he was here, he was on unsteady ground, and it was terrifying opening up to a man on the rocks.

It was terrifying opening up to anyone.

He leaned down an inch, waiting. His eyes drifted back up to hers, asking. Asking what?

He was terrifying. Big, strong, addictive, masculine, dominant, confident, sexy, and he was looking at her like he wanted to drink her up.

He would leave, and she would be left to miss him, and she would. Why? Because she didn't get attached. She didn't allow it.

He was terrifying.

He was...

He...

"You're terrifying," he whispered.

She inhaled sharply and broke their gaze, looked down at her scraped-up knees, body tense.

"I get it," he murmured in the dim light. "I'm a runner too."

"Just let go," she whispered, rolling her eyes closed. And then she angled toward him and pressed her lips against his. She held it for a three-count, and then released.

When she opened her eyes again, the color of his had lightened to gold fire. A small, surprised smile crooked up the very corner of his lips. "This is a bad idea."

"The worst," she agreed.

"I'm leaving soon."

"Yep." She understood. Jenna moved to stand, but he slid his hands to her hips and smoothly pulled her down onto his lap, her legs straddled around his hips. His fingertips went to her neck and cupped the back of her head, and he drew her in like he knew exactly what her body craved. When his lips

pressed to hers, it wasn't the three-second cold kiss she'd given him. It was soft lips moving against each other, the taste of him filling her senses. It was her fists clawing up in the back of his hair. It was him wrapping an arm around her back and pulling her close. It was the gentle brush of his tongue against hers, and a soft moan she couldn't quite help. It was his hard body drawing hers in. It was melting against his skin.

It was feeling, for once, that she was in a moment she belonged in.

Hang the consequences tomorrow. This right here was loosening something that had been constricted inside of her for so long.

God, it felt so good to have a connection.

His hands were everything. He trailed fire across her skin with his touch, down her neck, down her shoulder, gripped her back as she rolled closer against him.

She never wanted this to end.

She could tell the moment he started thinking. The moment his logic kicked in, the pace of his kiss changed. He slowed. He pulled back more, and shortened the kisses. He tensed, and her body responded in kind. *No, no, no.*

“Wait,” he whispered, gripping her shoulders.

Jenna froze. His eyes were closed, and he repeated it again. “Wait. We can't do this.”

“Because you're leaving,” she said.

“Because of a lot of things. I'm...” He shook his head and looked so confused. “You're Jenna Brown.”

Her breath got caught in her throat. “That’s bad.” She was so confused.

“No, no, no, it’s just...we can’t do this.”

“Right.” She pushed up and stood in a rush. “Of course. Because I’m Jenna Brown.” She didn’t understand at all. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“Jenna,” he said low, and she could already hear the apology in his voice.

“No, it’s totally good. I’m great! Can we...” *Fuck*. “Can we just forget this happened? I’m great with secrets. This can be a secret, no worries.”

He stood slowly, a frown painted across his entire face. “That’s not what I mean.”

“I’m Jenna Brown,” she repeated, because her mind was doing its thing. “I’m Jenna Brown,” she whispered again, eyes burning with stupid tears as she cast her attention to her stupid name on the wall.

“Hey,” he murmured, slipping his big strong hands to her arms like he was steadying her.

The chatter and splashing reached her ears then. “They’re coming anyways. It’s good you stopped us. Don’t want anyone to know, so...” She forced a smile and stuck her hand out for a shake. “I’m glad you are back, Lucas.” She shrugged and blinked back tears. “The mountains feel alive again.” God, why had she said that? Shut up!

Confusion written all over his face, he slid his hand against hers for a shake and then she released him and turned, made her way toward the mouth of the cavern.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Of course they couldn't. His feelings were probably everywhere with being back here, being around Cadence, being in the same territory with Gunner. She dashed her hands over her eyes and ignored when Lucas called her name.

No one got to see her like this. No one ever had but Gunner.

She'd asked Lucas if he was messing with her, and her instincts had been right.

She wasn't the girl you took home.

She was the girl people messed with.

The tears streamed down both cheeks and she dove into the water, grateful for the chill of the waves against her cheeks. On the other side of the waterfall, she broke the water and saw the others swimming toward her.

"Hey, where are you going?" Cadence asked from where she swam gracefully near Kru.

"Beer run!" she said in the most chipper voice she could muster. "Anyone want anything?"

They answered but she wasn't paying attention. There was a roaring in her ears and her animal was clawing to escape her skin.

Being alone is also a hard way to live.

Lucas's voice filled her head, and she swam harder, and faster. She wanted to be anywhere but here.

God, that had felt so good. Sooooo good. Someone had touched her like she was worth a damn. Like she was normal.

Like she was a person. And now everything felt worse! She wished she had never kissed him.

She struggled into the shallows on the other side, dragging her legs through the lapping waves as fast as she could.

Yeah, being alone is a hard way to live, but she had been lucky enough to not know anything different.

Now she would want too much.

Now she would yearn.

Now...everything had changed.

Chapter Five

What the hell had just happened?

Lucas stared at the mouth of the waterfall, where Jenna had disappeared. He could hear the others coming, but his body was so goddamn revved up right now. Rage bubbled through his veins and he turned away from the mouth of the cavern, beat his fist against his chest and tried to stifle the snarl in his throat. He hadn't kissed a woman like that since his first love, who was about to walk into this goddamn cave, and everything was so messed up.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he had hurt her. He had hurt Jenna and he hadn't meant to! He hadn't fucking meant to!

This. This was why he couldn't have a woman. He broke everything!

He beat his chest again just to try and stop the ache there. The chatter of the others was getting louder.

Jenna Brown. The way her tone had that hint of disgust in it when she'd repeated her name. He hadn't meant it like that. Had he? Fuck, he didn't know what he'd meant. He didn't freaking know how to process anything he was feeling. His animal was all revved up and wanting something he didn't understand. What the fuck was wrong with him?

It was these mountains.

They messed with his head and made him want things he had no right wanting.

It still smelled like blood in here from her scraped knees. If she knew the monstrous things he'd thought when they'd been together, she would've run sooner. He'd wanted to take her. He'd wanted to pull her little bikini to the side and slid into her and fuck her senseless. Fuck her until she forgot all the things her beautiful, overthinking little brain thought. He wanted to make her head go quiet. He wanted to carve her fucking name right beside his and mark it out on the other wall.

She belonged! Fuck! She belonged here. It was him who didn't.

He strode for the waterfall and made it just as the others were breaking the surface.

"What's wrong?" Nox asked immediately.

"Nothing. I don't know," he said, pacing the edge of the water.

"What happened?" Cadence asked, and it was just the wrong moment.

"None of your business," he growled.

There was immediate fire in her eyes. "Figures."

He shook his head. She had no right to judge him for anything.

"You can't!" she yelled at him, and he rounded on her as the others came out of the water.

"I can't what?"

"You know what! You owe me!"

“What do I owe you, Cadence?” he yelled. “Huh? What? What do you think I owe you.”

Her chest heaved with her anger and she jammed a finger out at the water. “Don’t hurt her. She’s important.”

Silence descended on the cave. He looked from face to face, but he didn’t understand. “If she’s so important, why is her name way over there, while all of yours are there?” he asked, pointing. “Why does she feel so far away from you? Why, after all these years, does everything feel the fucking same? Why is she still on the outside?”

“You think she’s on the outside?” Kru asked.

“Isn’t she?” he challenged him.

Kru and Cadence exchanged some look he didn’t understand. Kru told him, “You should visit where she works.”

It was enough. Enough riddles, enough half-answers, enough guessing what everyone meant. “Won’t be here long enough,” he gritted out, and then dove for the waterfall.

He needed to find her. He needed to explain his feelings. Fuck, he needed to figure out his feelings! He knew he liked her. He knew she was interesting and funny, and he thought she was so fucking cute when she was quirky and clumsy. He knew he hadn’t wanted a woman as bad as he had wanted her tonight, ever.

He needed to erase the disgust from her voice.

He swam for the other bank, barely coming up for breath until he was there, and he slogged out of the waves and onto the rocky bank.

Torren had stayed behind and was sitting in a chair, nursing a drink. “She’s gone.”

“Which way?”

Torren twitched his grim face in the direction of the trucks.

He bolted for them, but something shiny on the ground dropped his heart right to the earth.

A sequined bikini bottom was laying there, and a few feet later, there was her top. He knelt at something white tucked under one of the strings.

He lifted a white feather, speckled with brown, and closed his eyes against a pain in his chest he didn’t understand. He lifted his attention to the sky as he stood, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Long gone,” Torren said behind him.

Lucas ran his hand down his beard and faced the other silverback.

“I’m not good here,” he admitted softly. “Feels like everything rips me up. Outside of here? I know what I’m doing, I know who I am. I’m steady.”

“I know what your job is, Lucas.”

“Everyone knows. I’ve worked for Damon since I left here.”

“I mean, I know what he has you do.”

The hairs bristled on the back of his neck and Lucas stood up straighter. “And?”

“That’s why you feel steady. Bringing people in line. That responsibility to the dragon. Fighting. Fighting, fighting, fighting, always fighting, and you know what? I used to do the same damn thing to keep the animal sated enough so that I could pretend to have moments of normalcy. You can’t go on like that forever. At some point, you have to recognize the dead-end and pick a different road. This is your fork, Lucas.”

Torren used to be a beast. He was the son of Kong, and he’d had just as much trouble controlling his inner gorilla as Lucas had when they were younger and maturing to silverbacks. Now he was different. He just seemed...good. Steady. Happy, even. His story wasn’t Lucas’s story though. Even if he secretly wished for Torren’s destiny to mirror his, that wasn’t how life worked.

Lucas spun the white-speckled feather between his fingertips and leveled Torren with a look. “I’ll see you at the fight barn.”

And then he turned and headed for his truck without waiting to see Torren’s reaction.

He might be paired up and settled with his mate, but Lucas was offering him a beautiful release.

No mature silverback could turn down a good fight.

Chapter Six

Sparks flew.

This was the escape for Jenna—welding. Inside the safety of the welding mask, she could escape the world, and nothing else existed but her and the flame and the metal she needed a clean seam on.

She'd been so immersed in the metal that when someone tapped her on the back, it startled her.

When she turned, she was shocked to find Cadence. She turned off the flame and pushed her helmet back. “Are you okay?” she asked, thinking something was really wrong. Cadence didn't come into dirty places like her shop.

Cadence's eyes were full of something she didn't understand, and the woman shook her head. Her bleach-blonde hair twitched with the movement. “Can we talk?”

“Listen, I've had a rough day, and I kind of just wanted a night to build.”

“It's about Lucas.”

Jenna huffed a breath out of her lungs, and turned her welding equipment off completely. Shhhhit.

She wore baggy protective coveralls, and unzipped the front, assuming no more work would get done on this customer's truck tonight. “I kissed him. It was on me,” she told her. Better to just come out with it and be honest. She'd always been an honest bird.

“Oh, I don’t care about that.” Truth. Cadence took a seat in the dusty chair in the corner of Jenna’s shop. “He said something today that has been eating at me.”

Feeling awkward, she didn’t know where to put her hands, so she just crossed them over her front and nodded. “Okay. Something bad?”

“He asked why you were still on the outside. He was angry. And a part of me got defensive, because I know your role in these mountains. I know how big your life is. But he wasn’t talking about that. At least, I don’t think so. He was angry that your name wasn’t with ours on the wall. He was angry that you are...I don’t know...not included?” Cadence shrugged her shoulders up. “The defensive part of me felt like he was accusing me of alienating you and I wanted to scream, ‘I’m trying.’ But I’ve been thinking about it for the last couple hours and I don’t know if I am trying.”

Jenna swallowed hard. This was the deepest conversation she’d ever had with Cadence. “What do you need from me?”

“I think I need to be asking you that, Jenna. What do you need from me?”

It caught her completely off guard. Her head had been wrapped entirely around Lucas’s rejection and the confusion of it all.

“What do you need?” Cadence asked.

“I...I don’t know what you mean.”

“What do you need to build a friendship? I can do this with everyone on the mountain. They’re easy. You’re work,

and that's not an insult. It's just me coming to you and fully admitting, I don't know how to fucking do this."

"How tooooo..."

"How to be friends. With you. I don't want you to be on the outside. I want you to be with me. I want to understand."

And this was the dream. She'd always dreamed of someone looking deeper and asking questions just like this, and of all people, Cadence was doing it. She'd perhaps been wrong about her in more ways than one.

"You aren't angry with me kissing Lucas?" she tested.

"I probably would've been before he came back. When you're young, your mind builds things up and they feel huge. He came back and I didn't have all those feelings I thought I would have, and that's the proof, you know? The proof we weren't meant to be paired. It was puppy love, not being mated. You know I've dated since him? Since Gunner, too. That was a mess, but I moved on and tried to find my person. And someday I hope I will." She shook her head and looked directly at Jenna as she said, "Lucas isn't mine, and really, he wasn't ever mine. Our animals didn't choose each other. So what do you need from me?"

"I think I need someone to talk to."

"I can do that."

"About boys. About life. About work. Sometimes I really wish I had what you girls have with each other, you know? Girls' nights. Even just feeling included and invited."

The smile that stretched Cadence's face was a tired one, but genuine. "I can be that. I want that too. I bet if you get

practice with me, it won't be as hard with the other girls. That's why you work with the men, right?"

Jenna shrugged. "They just don't make me feel...less than, you know?"

Cadence nodded. "I can see that. Okay." She straightened up and repeated. "Okay. We're in the same Crew now, and it's just you and me for the girls. There's going to be times where I need you. Where I'm sick of the boys' shit and I just want someone to listen and tell me, 'men, am I right?'"

Jenna dropped her head and chuckled. She nodded and met Cadence's eyes. "I'm not good at being loud and involved, but if you need someone at your back?" She smiled. "I've got you."

She could see the gooseflesh lift on Cadence's arms. "I came in here to ask you what you need, and I think you just told me what I needed." She inhaled deeply. "Okay, spill it. What's up with the kiss?"

"Swear you aren't mad?"

"Listen to the truth in my voice. I don't give a fuck. Have a trillion babies with him, I don't care. That man is not mine."

Truth, truth, truth.

Jenna rubbed her nose and leaned back onto a workbench, crossed her legs, and pulled the entire welding mask off. "I don't let myself get close to anyone. Scary."

"But you let your guard down with Lucas?"

Jenna nodded.

"And he fucked it up?"

Jenna swallowed hard and shook her head. “It feels like I did.”

Cadence didn’t respond, she just was silent, so Jenna filled the space with her feelings. “I’m not good with people, and most of the time I don’t understand them. I feel like I’m always doing something wrong, or weird, or awkward. And over the years, I’ve tried so hard to work on the shy parts of me, you know? I try. But I panic when I get into a conversation, and I back away because I have this little voice telling me everyone is more comfortable if I’m not around. And sometimes I know that’s wrong to think, because I’m okay. I work hard and I’m a good teammate at my job and I’m dependable. But as much as I tell myself I’m worth it, there’s this part of me that is heavy and tells me I’m not. Sorry.” She dropped her gaze. “That’s a lot.”

“I think the first thing you need to do is work on your apologies. Those only come when you do something wrong. You existing, or having feelings, or talking about something deep isn’t doing something wrong. Usually people who apologize like that are abuse victims who have been trained to apologize for having feelings about how they are treated, but I know your parents, and I know your Crew. I’m guessing no one has hurt you.”

Jenna shook her head. “Never.”

“So where does it come from? That insecurity?”

“From my personality. I’m shy and submissive in a mountain full of dominants. Explaining how it is for me is... well, it’s pointless. No one can understand.”

“Maybe, but I can try. It doesn’t bother me at all that you are submissive.” She shrugged. “I think it’s cool.”

“Being submissive is cool?” she asked, wiping her burning eyes. Talking about this stuff was hard.

“You’re different, Jenna. You’re a badass, and quiet, but strong. You are looked up to more than you know.”

Her heart was all jammed up right now, and she panted as she tried to hold back her tears. “Lucas said he can’t kiss me because I’m Jenna Brown.” She dashed her gloves across her cheek. “Feels like an insult, and even worse, the insult feels right.”

“Oh girl,” Cadence murmured softly. “You have a vision problem.”

“What do you mean?” she squeaked out.

“You can’t see yourself. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes for just a few seconds, and then you would understand. Your insecurities would be gone.”

She didn’t know what to say. She only knew her heart felt ripped wide open.

“Do you know he went after you?” Cadence asked.

“Lucas?”

“Yeah. I watched him swim to the other shore, and he ran out onto the bank like he was on fire. Torren said he found your bathing suit and one of your feathers, and he had never seen such a raw expression on a man’s face since Vyr learned to control his dragon. Said it ripped him up to see that look in Lucas’s eyes.”

“He found one of my feathers?” she asked softly.

Cadence nodded. “And then he agreed to a fight with Torren.”

“Mess,” she said.

“Total mess. If you go for this one, he’s going to keep you on your toes.”

“I shouldn’t go for him.”

“Disagree,” Cadence said, standing. “That man will burn himself out until something blocks his path and teaches him a different way. That wasn’t my destiny, nor would I be any good at it, but you? You feel big. You have patience because of that personality you talk about like a curse. Sometimes I think a person is built the way they’re built because it will match another person who is also built different.”

“It was just a kiss,” Jenna said softly, eyes on the ground.

“If it was just a kiss, there wouldn’t be tears. Can I ask you something? As your new friend? And we *are* friends, we *are* going to work at this. We *are* going to bond if I have to force you to spend time with me.”

Jenna laughed thickly and asked, “What is your question?”

“Do you want to do a girls’ night with me?”

“When?”

“Now. We’re going to the fight barn to throw back a couple beers and watch a couple silverbacks fight as the finale. Maybe we’ll make a couple bets on them, who knows where the night will lead? We are going to walk to our trailers together, and dress in some titty-shirts. Maybe we’ll meet up

with some cute boys at the end of the night, or maybe not, but either way, we're in it together. Sound like a plan?"

Jenna couldn't help her smile. Cadence probably didn't know how big this was to her, but she had dreamed about nights like this. "Sounds like a plan."

Chapter Seven

“Are we meeting some of your friends here?” Jenna asked as they poured out of Cadence’s Bronco.

“Nope, it’s me and you tonight, girl. Saddle up.”

“Oh. I see Darah over at the entrance,” she said, pointing to the ticket booth out front.

Cadence pursed her lips and blinked her heavily made-up eyes to squint at Darah. Tonight, they had glued false eyelashes to their eyelids and they were both blinking a lot. “That’s coincidence. Let’s make a pact.”

“Okay!”

“We stick together like glue, unless you give me the signal that you need time with a certain hard-headed man.”

“What signal?”

She shoved her finger into a hole she made in the other hand, and Jenna’s cheeks turned bright red. “Look, we ended things really awkwardly. I doubt he will even notice I’m here. Let’s just focus on girl-fun.”

“Girl-fun!” Cadence sang as she pried a twenty-dollar bill out of a black cross-body purse she’d picked to go with her outfit.

Right, they only took cash here. God, it had been so long since she had been to the fight barn. She pulled her wallet out of the tiny black leather purse she had slung across her chest. Honestly, she’d just picked this one because Cadence assured

her it looked hot with her burgundy tank top, ripped-up black skinny jeans, and heeled ankle boots. “Can you see my nipples?” she asked softly, just before they got to the ticket counter.

“No, not even a little bit, but if they pop out tonight, don’t freak out. Just look around and announce, ‘You’re welcome,’ okay?”

“You’re welcome. Right.” Maybe she should go back and grab the oversized hoodie she had thrown in the back of Cadence’s Bronco.

“Chest out, chin up, nipples barely contained, Jenna. We aren’t fuckin’ around tonight.”

She snorted as the ticket-taker gave them a weird look. Inside, the fights were already going with the preliminaries. They recognized a few people from Damon’s Mountains, but Cadence stuck to her word and stayed right with Jenna. As they got matching beers, and matching VIP lanyards so they could sit closer to the fights, she settled into the safety of having someone with her. She scanned the place constantly, and admittedly, she was looking for any sign of Lucas. Cadence seemed to be looking for people too, but when she pointed to the other side of the barn, it was Nox she was waving to. He gestured for them to come over his way, so Cadence led the way through the crowd, weaving this way and that to get to him.

“Duuuude,” he said as they reached him. “You fucked him up!”

“Who?” Cadence demanded.

“That one!” he pointed right at Jenna.

“Me?”

“Hell yeah, it’s awesome. Lucas can’t even be in here while the preliminaries are going on. He wants to fight everyone. They booted him outside.” The excitement was humming right off of Nox.

“You made bets, didn’t you?” Cadence asked in a dead tone.

“So many bets! I’m going to be a millionaire!”

“You can’t be a millionaire off of two-dollar bets, Nox.”

“Okay, dream-sucker. Worry about your own finances. I’m not sharing any of my riches with you.”

Jenna giggled as they traded insults. When she did her scan of the room again, her gaze halted at the open barn doors. Leaning against the open frame, Lucas stared right at her, unblinking, with those lightened gold eyes that said his animal was right at the surface. His face was unreadable. Was he angry?

He melted back into the shadows, and Jenna stared at the doorway, wishing for...wishing for...she didn’t even know how she felt right now.

“Where is Torren?” she asked.

“Check the rafters. He likes to be up high when he knows he’s going to let the gorilla out.” He quickly searched the room and then pointed up to a hay loft. Torren knelt up there, studying the crowd below him.

“They’ll be all right...right?” she asked.

Nox snorted, and that was the only answer he gave. She felt someone watching her, and her instincts kicked up. Across the barn, three men were sitting at the top of a set of bleachers. Chills lifted on her forearms. Kirk sat next to Damon Daye and none other than the red dragon himself, Vyr. They all wore somber expressions that gave away nothing, but on the top of his thighs, Kirk's fists were clenched with tension.

"Vyr is here," she whispered to Nox.

The smile faded from his face, and he cast a quick glance toward his Alpha. "I know."

"Why?" Cadence asked.

"For Torren. Torren is the guardian of the red dragon, and the red dragon is the guardian of him." He slid his bright blue-eyed gaze to Jenna. "Don't worry though. Lucas has his own fire-breathing cheering section."

"Damon?" she guessed.

A tight smile flashed across Nox's face. "Lucas has had the attention of the blue dragon for a while."

"Keep Vyr out of it," she murmured to Nox, deeply disturbed. If either of those dragons got pissed, everyone here would burn, and this was neither of their fight. This was supposed to be for fun, but the stakes felt like they were bigger than she understood. She had a bad feeling, but that always happened when there was too much power in a small space. "Excuse me," she murmured, and ducked around a trio of bystanders.

"Quiet!" a roar came from the ring.

When she turned to look over her shoulder, a giant, sweaty man covered in tattoos without a shirt on was pacing the center of the ring.

“We have something special for you tonight. We have what you have begged for. What you have waited for. You like seeing the tiger fights? The grizzly fights? This place hasn’t seen a fight like this in years. This arena has known the days of Kong! The days of Kirk the Destroyer. It has seen the young blackbacks train and challenge each other. The next generation of Damon’s Mountains have painted this place in blood as they established dominance, and bragging rights, and territory lines. You have seen these two before, but not like this. They have grown in the years they have been away from the mountains.” The man grinned as he circled the outer edge of the ring, looking from face to face as the cheering grew deafening. “You are in for a special treat tonight.” He lifted his voice and yelled, “Who wants to see a silverback fight?”

The enormous fight barn rattled with the cheering and clapping and stomping of the crowd. Her heart pounded against her ribs and she gasped as Torren jumped from the rafters and his gorilla exploded from his skin in mid-air. The entire barn shook as he landed on his hind legs and slammed his massive fists on the ground.

He. Was. Enormous.

The silverback’s eyes glowed green and stayed trained on the open door as he paced slowly back and forth. The crowd went absolutely insane.

“A motherfucking silverback fight!” a man near her yelled excitedly.

The lights flickered and the announcer told everyone to, “Push back to the walls as far as you can. Make room!”

Nox was shoving people out of the way, making a path to the door. “Move or die!” he barked.

She didn’t know about this. She didn’t like it. The cheering, jeering crowd. The size of Torren. The dragons. The fog of heaviness that was settling over the room. It was too much energy, too much intensity.

Her skin was crawling with the instinct to fly far away from here. She needed to see Lucas!

She bolted for the door through the path Nox had cleared, but a sound outside stopped her dead in her tracks. The drumming of a challenge echoed through the barn as a silverback beat his chest.

Torren roared and stood on his hind legs, slammed his fists against his chest, and oh no, oh no! She bolted for the doorway, but she was too late to stop anything. A massive animal was charging toward her. With a yelp, she jumped out of the way of the charging silverback, and as he passed, time slowed.

Lucas looked entirely different and unfamiliar than what she remembered of him. His gorilla stood twice her height, and that was down on all fours! His shoulders and arms were covered in coarse, pitch-black fur, but his back and hind legs had lightened to a silver color. His powerful arms were massive, and when his knuckles hit the ground with each charging step he drew closer to Torren, the floorboards beneath him splintered. He was covered in thick muscle, his

long canines were bared, and his glowing eyes were trained on the ring.

Jenna had heard about the wars.

War had peppered Damon's Mountains in the early days as the Crews had carved out their territory lines and battled with outside forces to claim their right to be here, but this... this wasn't for anger. It wasn't for territory lines. It was just to prove who was the bigger silverback, and the worry in her chest morphed into a cement blockage in her throat that made it hard to breathe.

Lucas bolted for Torren. As both massive silverbacks leapt through the air, Jenna gasped. They collided like two cannonballs, and she was nearly knocked over with the wave of power that emanated from the collision.

There was no posturing. There was no bluff.

There was ripping, hitting, fists slamming, teeth shredding, rip-roaring, fur shaking, everything breaking...

Everyone plastered back on the walls and scrambled out of the bleachers as the enormous animals slammed through the ring barrier and into the seating. It was hard to tell who was who.

Her skin tingled.

Don't. A voice whispered against her ears and she yanked her eyes to the man staring at her from the other side of the barn. He stood alone, eyes glowing green against the shadows. Beaston shook his head. *Don't.*

The falcon didn't listen to advice from grizzlies, and though the human side of her respected Beaston, she was a

Boarlander, and Boarlanders didn't heed the warnings of Gray Backs.

The falcon ripped out of her before she could stop it, and she screeched as she aimed her talons at the silverback war.

Torren was a lighter shade of black. Lucas had pushed him off, and he was charging for him, closing the small gap to engage again. She aimed for his eyes. And just as she reached him...just as she stretched the razor-sharp tips of her talons for his widening eyes...

Something black hit her from the side like a torpedo.

The air *whooshed* out of her lungs as she slammed into the ground. Strong arms went around her, pinning her wings, and she fought against the grip.

“Stop! Fuck! Stop!” Cadence’s voice rattled her head, and she glared at the raven that had leveled her.

Aviana Novak’s massive raven sat on the ground, staring at her, panting.

I'll fucking kill you!

Enough! A voice roared in her head, and she dragged her pissed-off gaze to Beaston. To the dragons who sat there watching the war between the silverbacks with matching gazes. To Nox, who knelt by the ring, barking out orders. To the crowd, veins popping in their necks as they cheered. To the silverbacks who were killing each other...

Fuck all this. Fuck anything that made Lucas bleed.

She scrabbled hard, clawing and struggling to free her wings as Cadence dragged her toward the door.

The last thing she saw before Cadence wrestled her out of the door was Damon. He blinked and lifted his eerie dragon eyes to her. And he did something she would never understand as long as she had breath in her lungs.

Slowly, he smiled.

“Fucking *stop*, Jenna!” Cadence demanded, and threw her onto the ground.

Jenna looked up at her, ready for war, but she froze. Cadence’s arms were bleeding. God, they pouring rivers. And she hadn’t Changed into her white tiger, even though her eyes were the color of blue frost.

Anger wafted from her, but something else did too. Something Jenna couldn’t figure out.

“He’s good, Jenna!” Cadence roared. “He’s fucking winning! Let him win!”

What?

Jenna looked to the open doorway, but she couldn’t see anything through the crowd of humans that had gathered to block her view. They were cheering and yelling.

When she looked back at Cadence, the woman was kneeling, looking her directly in her eyes. “I get it. I used to feel like that, too. You have to let him do this. You can’t fix it.” She pointed toward the doorway. “He can fix it.”

And she wanted to cry.

Jenna wanted to cry.

The falcon didn’t understand human emotion and never had, but in her heart, the human in her wanted to cry. She

hadn't meant to do that. She hadn't meant to attack anyone, but her mind had just snapped.

I have to go. She didn't know how to tell Cadence that, but she had to go. It was all too much and she didn't know what to think or how to feel, but everything was so big right now. So overwhelming.

"He'll be fine." She didn't understand Cadence's smile, but the humans were clapping and whistling and cheering, and a winner was being named.

She didn't care.

She didn't care.

She, Jenna Brown, didn't care.

If she could cry in this form, she would've, but instead, she took flight.

A man had made her Change just by being in some kind of danger, and that wasn't her. What the hell had she been thinking!

She leapt up into the air and pumped her wings, lifted up on the current, and forced herself not to look back. She couldn't see disappointment on Cadence's face right now. She couldn't.

She took to the treetops and then beyond, rose higher and higher, as high as she dared, and closed her eyes as she hit the clouds. Mortification took her. She'd Changed and been her falcon in front of all of those people, and had been put in her place by none other than Aviana Novak, mate of Beaston. And why? Why had she done any of that? It made no damn sense.

She was so embarrassed.

She opened her eyes and took three steady breaths, just trying to feel like she could get through this awful moment.

Jenna didn't like any attention. Invisibility had been her comfort, and what had she done tonight?

God, you're a loser, she whispered to herself in her mind.

Lucas would leave soon. Perhaps that was for the best, because she'd never lost her damn mind like this, and it wasn't a good sign.

She was just a falcon.

What could a girl like her possibly do?

Chapter Eight

“Where is she?” Lucas scanned the barn, but he didn’t see Jenna.

“She’s taking a breather,” Nox murmured.

“A breather where?” he demanded, dodging a trio of humans wanting his autograph.

Nox pointed to the ceiling. “She’s in flight, brother-man.”

A rumble escaped him and he ducked out of range of Nox clapping him on the shoulder. He winced because hell, his entire body hurt.

He glanced at Torren, who stood next to his mate. Candace had made it for his fight. She was stroking his dark hair out of his face, and talking to him low. Torren was entranced with her, and Lucas couldn’t look away from the softness in Torren’s eyes. He and Candace were so tender in the way they looked at each other. Fuck, deep down, he wished for something like that, even for a few moments.

When she cupped her mate’s face and looked over at Lucas, he was worried that she would hate him, but she didn’t. Instead, she smiled ever so slightly and nodded her head in respect.

He didn’t understand the dynamics here, so he nodded to her and ducked out the side door as quickly as he could.

His eyes went immediately to the sky, but Jenna wasn't there.

"She'll go back to her nest eventually," a voice said from the shadows. Cadence.

He turned and there she was—his ex. She held her arms around her waist, and her shirt was stained dark. The scent of iron filled the air. Cadence was hurt.

"What happened?" he asked.

Cadence shrugged. "I caught a falcon."

"I remember...I remember..."

"She was going to save you." Cadence lifted her chin higher into the air. "You know, even at our best, I never wanted to Change for you."

He shook his head. "I don't know what that means."

One side of her lips curved up. "She's made a nest in her trailer. She'll go there when her wings are worn out."

Lucas frowned, and then ducked his head. "Thank you." He didn't know what he was thanking her for, but it felt right. He turned to head to his truck, but she called after him, "Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

She wrapped her arms tighter around her middle. "I'm glad you're back."

"Cadence—"

"Not for me, Lucas." She inhaled deeply and looked heavenward, then back at him. "This place was missing

something I couldn't provide.”

“I'm not staying.”

“Even so. Even if you're leaving, for a little while, this place made sense.”

He pursed his lips and gave a little salute as a goodbye. He wouldn't see Cadence again after this.

“Lucas?” she called as he turned.

“Yeah?”

She held her arms out and exposed the deep gashes on her arms. “I'm glad she's on our side.”

He froze, staring at the half-healed claw marks on her arms. He had seen the speckled white-and-brown falcon aiming for Torren, but she'd disappeared and he'd been immersed in the fight. He just stared at those talon marks in shock. “Why did she do that?” he asked.

Cadence waited a three-count, then lifted her chin higher. “Because I was taking her away from you.”

Chapter Nine

Exhaustion had settled into her bones as she staggered through the woods toward the clearing of Smashland Mobile Park. She had no clue what time it was. Her cell phone was still in her purse, and had probably been stolen from the fight barn at this point. Her clothes would still be in a pile when she mustered up the courage to go there in the morning before work, but there was no way her purse would still be there.

Last night had been so stupid.

She expected darkness when she climbed the final ridge to the park, but her porch light was turned on, and a large figure sat on the top stair of her porch.

Lucas.

She stumbled to a stop. “W-what are you doing here?”

Lucas stood slowly and held up a folded pile of clothes. “I brought back your things.”

Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. “Well, thank you. You really didn’t have to go to the trouble.”

He twitched his head toward the reinvented 1010 trailer. “I’m staying here for a couple of nights. I have to meet with Damon still.”

“Oh.” She frowned at the trailer he would be staying in. “You could’ve just left these on the porch. You didn’t have to stay awake.”

He turned his face in the halo of porch light and she swallowed a gasp. He was bruised and cut and swollen. Still healing from the silverback fight then. His entire body probably looked like that, it was just covered in a black T-shirt and jeans. She stared down at his bare feet, and saw that the left one was speckled with red. It wasn't dried yet. Still bleeding then. He smelled like wet copper.

"I saw you," he murmured, allowing her pile of clothes to drop to his side. Her shredded panties fell beside him, but he only glanced at them, and then back to her. His eyes were glowing gold, reflecting oddly in the light. One was swollen nearly closed. "I saw your falcon. She came for Torren."

She didn't know how to respond, so she only dropped her gaze and exposed her neck.

He closed the distance between them and she tensed. He slowed, lifted his finger gently to her chin, and righted her head. He shook his head slowly. "None of that. You went after a silverback mid-battle. That submissive shit won't work with me. You went for his eyes. I didn't need your help, Jenna."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"Because..." She swallowed hard. "My animal doesn't care about that stuff. She does what she wants. Did you win?"

Lucas studied her face and then nodded once. "Close match."

She couldn't help the smile that stretched across her face. "You beat Torren, son of Kong."

He huffed a humorless sound and dropped his head, relaxed back and sat on the stairs again with a wince of pain. “And every inch of my body feels it.”

“I can help.”

His dark brows drew down. “Help how?”

She twitched her chin toward her door. “Inside, you. A favor for a favor. You brought my things back. I’ll clean you up.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” he rumbled in a gravelly voice that was tainted with exhaustion.

She stooped and grabbed the shreds of her red lace panties off the porch, then took the folded, tattered clothes from his grasp. Her purse was wrapped up in it. Good man.

He followed her inside but hesitated just inside the door. “About earlier. Under the falls—”

“No need. Nothing happened,” she said quickly.

His bright-gold gaze held her captive for a three-count, and then he nodded and murmured, “Okay.”

Good. Good, good, good, they could just keep this easy. “You’ll be gone in two days, back to your life, back to keeping the shifters in line, back to work. And I’ll be here.”

“Doing what?” he asked curiously.

“I’ll be building up my life. That’s what I’ve been doing. It keeps me steady.”

“Why would you need to keep steady?” he asked as he headed to her wood-burning stove in the corner. “You seem like you’re a woman who has everything figured out.”

She'd been heading to the kitchen but tossed a look back over her shoulder to gauge if he was being serious or not. He was turned away from her, placing wood into the heater.

"You really think that?" she asked curiously.

"You know who you are, and you know your place in these mountains. You're kind and helpful, but the way people talk about you, you have some kind of power I haven't figured out yet."

"There is no power in being submissive," she argued.

"Wrong. Do you know what people do when they meet me? When they figure out what I do? When they figure out what I am, and who my father is?"

She grabbed an ice pack out of the freezer portion of her fridge and shrugged. "Cower?"

"Sometimes. Or become instantly defensive. The males usually don't negotiate well once they feel the animal. It makes it more difficult to get simple things done in my line of work, but you? Your submissiveness isn't a hinderance. Not here. If someone is the type of person that will take advantage of your caring spirit and submissive nature, you can weed them out immediately as a viable friend or lover. And if someone looks at your submissiveness as a gift, you can tell who is genuine and good, I'll bet almost immediately. Am I right?"

He was lighting newspaper and tinder he'd carefully placed into the heater.

Hmm. He did see her better than she would've guessed a man like him could.

“Yes,” she said. “In a way, it weeds out the weak.”

“And the weak are the ones who would take advantage of you.”

“Yes.” Clever man.

Lucas stood slowly, carefully, hand resting against his ribs. “My dominance doesn’t weed anyone out. It causes reactions people wouldn’t normally have. I have to get through the defensiveness before I can tell if a person is worth a damn or not.”

Huh. Interesting, and she had never thought about that before. “What exactly do you do for Damon?”

“When shifters were exposed all those years ago and we had to begin registering, and all that human attention was on us, some shifters adjusted. They behaved to keep off human radar. But not all. Some have animals that are too big, or their human sides are shitty. Some hurt people, or draw too much attention to shifters. Damon gives me a name and a job and I see if the shifter is salvageable.”

“And if they aren’t?”

His eyes cooled, and his silence was answer enough.

Lucas Slater was Damon’s enforcer. He was the Blade of the Mountains.

“Will you put Gunner down?” she whispered.

“Depends on if he is salvageable or not.”

“You hate him,” she pointed out, handing him a trio of painkillers and a bottle of water.

He took them easily, and she watched his Adam's apple move with the motion of him swallowing. His neck was thick with muscle and free of injuries. He'd protected his throat well. She was glad he was so good at fighting because tonight, it had served him well.

"I guess it makes sense that you are an enforcer. You are Ally's son. She's the best cop I've ever known. She's a legend around here. Maybe people would find out you are the son of Kirk and be impressed, but for me?" She grinned and softened her volume as she admitted, "Your mom is just as impressive."

He smiled, but winced when the deep split in his cheek threatened to re-open.

She wrapped the ice pack in a dish towel and eased it onto his damaged cheek. "You smell like blood and dominance."

"They should name a cologne after that," he said with a chuckle as he held the ice pack to his face.

She plucked at the hem of his T-shirt and lifted it gingerly to expose his six-pack, flexing with every breath. Up, up his shirt went until she could see the deep purple bruising across both sides of his ribs.

"They're broken," he murmured, watching her face.

"They'll be healed by tomorrow night if we bind them right." Inside of her, the animal was roiling with a building anger she didn't understand. She swallowed hard and shook her head against the urge to Change again.

"You get pissed easily," he observed.

"I do not."

“Yes you do.” His grin was obnoxious. “I can feel it.”

She ignored his taunting and made her way around him, studying his torso, his lats and then... “Ooooh,” she murmured when she saw what Torren had done to his back.

“You should see the other guy,” Lucas teased softly.

“Don’t really care about the other guy right now,” she gritted out. She secretly hoped Torren’s nose healed crooked.

She dragged her gaze down the long gashes that ran down his back. “Canines?” she asked.

“He didn’t fight dirty. He fought like the animal knows how.”

“Defending him.”

He turned enough that she could see his profile. “Text Nox. Ask him to send you a picture of Torren.”

She made a clicking sound behind her teeth. “I don’t want to see,” she grouched. “You stupid boys and your stupid dominance fights and for what?” She let the hem of his shirt fall. “Go shower.”

He was biting back a smile, and that only irritated her more. “It’s not funny.”

“I feel like I’m getting in trouble at school. It’s kind of funny.”

She yanked the ice pack off his cheek and sauntered to the bathroom, turned on the water all the way hot, and waited impatiently with her fingertips under the running faucet for the shower to heat up.

Lucas followed her much more slowly, removing his shirt gingerly as he limped into the bathroom.

The sight of his muscles was also annoying. Why? Because she kept staring. “You know, what is all this for?” she asked, waving her hand in his general direction. “Does a man really need an eight-pack? Really?”

He looked down at himself. “I count six.” He pulled the front of his sweats lower and flexed.

“Enough! Come here.” The water was hot enough. “Wash all the blood off. You smell like a wild animal.”

“You like it,” he accused her.

Indeed, she did feel a little worked up in this small space with him, but he didn’t need to know that she was ridiculously attracted to him in this state. She’d seen him at war. She’d seen him with his focus on maiming. She’d seen his power, his confidence. And now he was here in her home, shirtless and battle-scarred and teasing, and relaxed, and smelling like dominance and blood and sweat, and flashing his damn demigod abs everywhere. This was ridiculous. What was wrong with her!

Jenna scrubbed her hands over her face and stood in a rush. “I’m going to get you some fresh clothes. Where is your stuff?”

He leaned back against the counter and cocked his head, and damn his stupid crooked smile, drawing her in.

“Where?” she demanded.

“In the weird-ass replica of ten-ten.”

She bustled past him.

“Whose idea was it to rebuild that trailer anyway?”

She ignored his question and rushed out the door and into the cool night. On the porch, she rolled her head back and dragged breath into her lungs, closed her eyes against the stars that twinkled down at her. He’d kissed the devil out of her earlier and now he was half-naked in her home.

Today had taken a turn, but for the life of her, she couldn’t figure it if it was for the worse, or the better.

“I have one request.”

Jenna startled hard and her eyes flew open. She nearly screamed when she saw Kru standing right next to the porch.

“Name your firstborn after me. I basically got you two together.”

“We are not together!” she argued, stomping down the stairs. “Stop following me!”

Kru stayed right in step with her. “Did he sniff your panties, do you think?”

“Ew.” She pulled a face at him so he could see how disgusting she thought he was. “He’s not you. Why are you even awake?”

“I’m watching the woods.”

“Watching them for what?”

“For Gunner. Can’t you feel him coming?”

She’d been reaching for the handle of the door to 1010, but she froze, chills rippling up her arms. “No. I don’t feel him

at all.”

“Curious.” Kru shrugged and backed up a couple steps.
“Maybe I’m just messing with you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you?”

“Who knows? Have fun with the monster.”

Her hackles raised. “Don’t call him that. He isn’t a monster.”

Kru dropped his head and laughed. “Ain’t no angels here, darlin’. If the dragon picked him to be his right hand, and he has thrived for years being that? He’s monster enough. That’s why he’s here, right? Who else can control Gunner?” Kru’s smile fell from his face, and a shard of hardness sliced through his gaze. She didn’t understand it, but before she could ask, he turned and made his way across the clearing without looking back. She knew because she watched him until he disappeared in his trailer.

He was so strange.

Monster.

That word rankled her. For all she knew, Kru was a monster. But she’d known Lucas for all her life. Or at least, known of him. He’d been raised well, and raised safe.

She pushed open the door to 1010 and gasped. The living room was thrashed. Clothes were thrown everywhere, his duffel bag was ripped in half and laying in tatters across the arm of the couch. A water bottle had been thrown on the ground so hard, it had exploded.

“I had a moment,” a gruff voice said from behind her.

She should've been startled, but Lucas's voice settled something inside of her instead. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, turning to him.

He was leaning on the open doorframe, a towel around his waist, his dark hair still wet from the shower. His bruises were healing, but they still looked rough. He looked all around the small single-wide. "I never thought I would come back for more than a day."

"Was it so bad being raised here? In Damon's Mountains?"

He smiled weakly and shook his head. "It was the dream until it wasn't."

"You thought Cadence was your mate, didn't you?" she asked.

"Things are different when you're young. We talked about raising our babies here, never leaving this place. Peace for always."

"What happened?"

"My animal hated her."

Oh. Fuck. Stunned, Jenna sank down onto the couch. She was fairly certain he'd never exposed this side of what happened like this before. "How could he hate someone you cared for?"

Lucas shrugged up one shoulder. "It happened over time, little by little. At first that side of me was quiet around her, and then he got bigger. Mouthier. Eventually, when I kissed her, the other side of me wanted to retch. I would try to hold it together. Didn't want to hurt her feelings while I was figuring

out what the hell was wrong with me. It was me, you know? She wasn't doing anything wrong. She was trying to be understanding with my push and pull. Hot and cold. She loved me." He puffed a breath out of his lungs. "I couldn't love her back."

"But...you broke up with her." Jenna frowned, trying to sift through the memories for the timeline. "You broke up with her, and it wasn't until weeks later that you fell apart. I don't understand."

"She hooked up with Gunner to get back at me. We'd always competed. Love, hate, love, hate, and she fucked him just to hurt me."

"But you broke up with her. You said you couldn't love her. So why did you fall apart at all? She was allowed to move on."

"Not like that. Not with him. All it did was make my animal side worse. He hated her more, but he also hated me. I couldn't control him, and fuck, I hated me too. I was a mess, and Gunner was taunting me, and..."

"And you nearly killed each other," Jenna whispered, finishing the sentence for him. She was there when they went to war all those years ago—a young blackback gorilla and an adolescent grizzly bear. "The Boarlanders had to split you up, and it took all of the adults. You disappeared for days after that. I looked everywhere for you."

"Did you?" he asked, his eyes softening.

"Of course. Two days later, you appeared out of thin air and lost your mind in the woods."

“Do you know where I was for those two days?”

“Where?” she whispered, though she could guess the answer now.

“The lair of the dragon.”

And she could imagine it—Lucas in one of the rooms on the lower level of Damon’s mountain-buried mansion. One of the bedrooms with iron bars in the walls. One of the inescapable ones.

“He gave me a choice then. There was no killing on the mountain, but he could see where I was headed and I wouldn’t stop hunting Gunner if I stayed here. He offered me a job that would take me away from here and allow me to see more than the shelter of the mountains. He gave me some time to think on it and those days felt like…” he shook his head, allowing the words to fade to nothing.

Torture.

Leave the only home he’d ever known, or stay and burn from the inside out.

“I think you made the right choice.”

“Everything I had thought my life would be didn’t happen. No plan came to fruition. No dream. It wasn’t my path, and something inside of me broke letting that go. I changed so much in that first year.”

“So did Cadence. So did Gunner. So did I. So did everyone,” she murmured.

“Yeah.” His shoulders sagged. “Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier being here. The longer I’m here, the more it

feels like the goodbye will hurt again.”

“Sometimes hurting is a good reminder that you are still alive.”

The color in his eyes darkened, and a strange smile crooked the very corner of his lips. “You’re interesting, Jenna.”

“You have no idea,” she said cheekily.

“Mmm. Do you know what I did while I was waiting for you to come back here?”

“You definitely didn’t spend your time showering, or binding your ribs, or doing any kind of basic first aid.”

A laugh huffed from him and he pushed off the doorframe with a grunt. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts like hell.” He swatted a moth out the door and closed it, then approached her slowly and sank down onto the couch beside her. “I looked you up on the good old internet. I looked up Falco Flatbeds.”

Her eyes flew wide. “Aaaand? What did you think of my website?”

He rolled his head until he faced her, and his eyes were glowing bright again as he said, “Do you know how fuckin’ hot that picture on the home page is?”

She bit her lip and lowered her gaze to hide her smile. She knew the picture he was talking about. In it, she stood splay-legged, clad in fire-proof coveralls. She’d unzipped them halfway, and shrugged out of the sleeves until they hung down at her hips. She wore a cherry-red tank top underneath, and her arms were covered in streaks of ash. She wore the welders mask, but it had been pushed back, and she stared at the

camera with her glowing silver eyes, and damp waves of hair gracing her shoulders. She held an unlit welding torch in one hand, and her other hand rested on a flatbed she'd been working on.

“I saved it,” he admitted.

She giggled. “I have a different shop now.”

“I know. I found it off in the woods. I found your nest too.”

The smile fell from her face. “What?”

“Why are you nesting, Jenna?”

Mortified, she stood and busied herself with picking up his tossed clothes and folding them neatly.

“I’ll wait. There’s no rush. You can think about it for a while before you answer.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she said softly. “Nesting is personal.”

“You lined it with your feathers.”

“Did you climb my tree?” she demanded angrily. She stood, heat creeping up her neck.

“I didn’t have to. I could see it fine from where I was, and the wind had dislodged some of the lining. Why are you nesting, Jenna?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I think I should go. It’s very late and I’m tired.”

He nodded, but she didn’t miss the disappointment in his eyes. “Run if you like. I do the same thing sometimes.”

She had been running straight for the door, but his words pissed her off. “I’m not running, Lucas. I just don’t owe you anything!”

“Are you pregnant?”

“No!” She clapped her hands over her mouth and squeezed her eyes closed. *Don’t say any more.* She swallowed audibly and eased her burning eyes open. “It’s been good catching up with you, Lucas. There is a first aid kit under the kitchen sink. I’m very tired and have to wake up in a few hours for work.”

He stood and held his hands out, palms up. He did something that made no damn sense to her. Lucas the Blade Slater eased his jawline to the side and exposed his neck to her. “If you aren’t pregnant, then why are you nesting?”

“Because,” she whispered, barely able to get the words over her tightening vocal cords. “Just because I’m not pregnant doesn’t mean my animal doesn’t yearn for something to nurture. I get lonely.” She dashed her knuckles over her damp cheeks and cleared her throat. “I would appreciate if you wouldn’t talk to the others about this.” She turned to leave, then doubled back and whispered, “Thank you,” before she left.

She’d never understood the term “walk of shame” as it pertained to a woman leaving a man’s house after a one-night stand, but boy did she understand that word combination right now as she walked to her trailer and wished upon wish that she could be invisible.

She made it all the way to her front door and inside without looking back at the new 1010. She closed the door

gently behind her and made her way into the bathroom. Lucas's clothes were on the floor. That man was a tornado wherever he went.

She picked them up and folded them neatly, placed them by the front door, then readied for bed. She dressed in her biggest nightshirt, just wanting absolute comfort tonight.

Today had been a roller coaster of emotion.

She didn't shed a tear, didn't let loose a sniffle as she got ready for sleep.

It wasn't until she was safe and warm in the bed that was only just becoming familiar that she let her eyes squeeze closed, and let off a quiet sob. She hugged her pillow close to her belly and shook her head as the tears streamed down the side of her face.

When she heard the front door open, she froze. Fuck, she forgot to lock it. Perhaps it was Kru coming in uninvited again.

She'd left the bathroom light on like she always did, because she had bad dreams sometimes and liked a nightlight. When a figure darkened the doorway, she turned just enough to see Lucas standing there, clad only in jeans. His chin was lowered, but his glowing gold eyes were trained on her. They looked raw, but she didn't understand why.

"Please leave," she whispered.

"I'm sorry," he murmured so low, she almost missed it.

But he had nothing to apologize for. He hadn't done anything other than ask a question.

She wiped her eyes. “It’s okay. Everything is okay.”

She thought he would leave then, but instead, he stunned her as he crawled into bed behind her, laying on top of the covers. He hesitated for a three-count, and then slid his strong arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest. “I get lonely too. Ain’t no shame in that. We can both be disasters, and you’ll never get an ounce of judgement from me.”

She eased her gaze back to the wall and pursed her lips, then relaxed against him. “I’m good at hiding the disaster. And then you come around and mess up my camouflage.”

His deep chuckle reverberated against her back, and he adjusted her even closer against him. “I’m a blessing and a curse, Brown.”

An accidental smile took her tear-soaked face at the use of her last name. They really were both disasters.

“Your ribs are still unwrapped,” she pointed out.

“I’ll live. I’ve been through worse.”

“Worse than a silverback challenge?”

“Ooooh, the stories I could tell you.”

She inhaled deeply, and it caused a yawn. “You have to stay here another night. You can tell me the stories tomorrow.”

“Do you want to go with me to Damon’s?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” she asked, turning her face toward the ceiling fan so she could see him in her peripheral.

“Damon and Clara invited me for a formal dinner at his house. He said I could invite a friend.”

“And you want me to go?”

“Yes.” Truth.

“I have an admission.”

“Admit away, we’re both totally fucked up.”

She giggled softly. “I’ve never been in Damon’s lair.”

He was quiet for a few moments, and then at last, he told her, “You’ll be safe with me.”

You’ll be safe with me.

She exhaled a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. She believed him. “You’re safe with me, too.”

“Yeah, I fuckin’ know. You went falcon mid-challenge.”

She snorted. “It was an accident.”

“Mmm.”

“You don’t believe me?” she asked.

“Our animals don’t make mistakes.” He didn’t say more, just left it at that, and she thought of how he had told her his animal hated the woman he’d thought would be his mate.

Our animals don’t make mistakes.

That felt right.

Her animal hadn’t stopped paying attention to Lucas since the moment he’d entered Damon’s Mountains again.

Chapter Ten(10)

Fuck, everything hurt.

But you know? He would break his ribs all over again to stay still and allow Jenna to sleep peacefully.

She smelled so good. His forehead was pressed against the back of her hair, and after tonight, he could identify her shampoo scent from a half-mile away. Pretty girl. Even prettier when she admitted to her demons.

I get lonely.

Fuck, he understood that down to his bones. Her falcon had been making nests for babies that weren't on the way. How many nests had she made over the years? He would bet his boner Jenna had never complained to anyone about it.

Strong woman.

Strong shifter.

He'd thought she'd stayed here and led a sheltered life, but you know? She'd eked out a career, started her own business, worked with Kong, had worked her way up, and had answered the call when Cadence, who wasn't ever particularly kind or inclusive to her, had asked her to come here. She'd moved her entire shop. She'd built a new nest here. She'd moved into an unfamiliar trailer and committed to driving much farther to work every day. For what? Because someone from Damon's Mountains had asked?

She was a fucking badass.

He smiled in the dark at the memory of her falcon. Much bigger than a regular wild falcon, and speckled white and brown. Vicious. He'd noticed her when her talons were angled for Torren's eyes as she dove for him. He'd been the one to yank Torren out of the way while Aviana Novak had catapulted toward her to stop the attack.

And what had Aviana told him afterward?

She'd smiled knowingly, and told him, "Take care of that one."

And when the mate of Beaston himself said to take care of something, a wise shifter took care of that something.

He'd forced himself to stay awake until she came home tonight because he wanted to be with her. He'd wanted to make sure she was okay, and that she knew no one was upset with her. He'd wanted her to settle the roiling predator inside of him, and she had—almost instantly.

Jenna was magic.

He'd explained to her what had happened with him and Cadence on purpose, so that she never had to question his motives or feelings while he was here.

She didn't know it, but the silverback's attention was trained on her. He was quiet, sure, but he was watching, and even more than that? He would rip any threat to her in two.

And that...that...was something Lucas Slater had never felt before.

He'd tensed just thinking about any harm ever coming to her, and when she made a small sleep sound, probably due to

his arms tightening around her, he forced himself to relax again.

He was still on top of the covers out of respect for her, but he'd never wanted anything more than to be under the sheets with her, his body pressed against hers, the knowledge that she was safe in his arms and had nothing to worry about while she let her body go unconscious. He would protect it.

The animal wouldn't let him sleep.

He laid there, thinking of her, thinking of the kiss they'd shared under the waterfall, thinking about her showing up to his fight tonight, even upset with him. Thinking about how fucking sexy she had looked tonight. Thinking of what a badass she was as a falcon. Thinking of how pretty she looked when her eyes were all full of tears as she admitted that she got lonely sometimes.

Thinking about how when he was around her, he felt less...empty.

Lucas was startled by the sound of her alarm going off.

He shouldn't have been, because outside of her bedroom window, with its open blinds, he'd watched the dark sky lighten to gray in the early-morning hours.

He wondered absently if she was a woman who hit the snooze ten times, or got up at the first alarm. As she snuggled into him for a three-count, then slipped carefully out of bed and hit the alarm "off" button, he gave a private smile. She was going to hate how many times he pressed snooze in the mornings.

Wait, no. Last night was a one-time deal. He was leaving right after Damon's dinner, or meeting, or whatever the blue dragon and his mate had planned tomorrow night.

He watched her stretch in front of the window, and the movement lifted the hem of the oversized T-shirt she'd slept in, exposing her smooth, tan legs. Her hair was perfectly messy from sleep, and he would totally admit he loved her morning look best. She had rock-and-roll hair, all flipped to the side and wavy. She turned with a smirk. "I can feel you watching me."

"Can't help it," he murmured unapologetically.

"I'm going to be a nice friend and make you some coffee."

"Mmm." *Friend*. The word was a splinter. "How about I make us coffee and you go get ready for work."

"You're taking the day off your job today?" she asked cheekily.

"Yeah, no shifters to keep in line here."

"The day is still young."

He chuckled and pushed up in bed, ran his hands down his face. He really hadn't slept a wink and God, his body was sore from head to toe.

"You look less dead," she pointed out as she walked around the bed and toward the door. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and yelped, leaned into her reflection and pressed her fingers under her eyes. He couldn't tell what she was glaring at though. She looked like a goddess. She was gorgeous in full makeup and just as gorgeous bare-faced. He

should tell her that. Sometimes women liked when men said the nice things in their heads out loud to them. “Your ass is perfect.”

Well, there it was. That little gem had slipped out and there was no tucking those words back in his throat, so he just arched his eyebrows and waited for her to respond. She’d frozen with her back to him, but he could see her face in the mirror just fine, so he got to witness the slow smile creep across her lips.

“Pretty girl,” he murmured.

“Really?” she asked.

He nodded. “You know you are.”

She stood and faced him, leaned her ass against the dresser. “Now I know I am to you. I could hear the truth in your voice.” Her cheeks turned a deep petal pink and she ducked her gaze to the carpet. “Thank you for...” She gestured to the bed. “I slept good.”

“Why did you sleep good?” he asked. Could she hear his heart hammering against his ribcage? Why did her answer matter so damn much in this moment?

“Because I felt safe.” She pushed off the dresser and escaped, calling over her shoulder, “I like the salted caramel creamer in the fridge. A ton of it.”

He grinned. Fuck. Yes.

He made her feel safe.

He made her feel *safe*.

He made her feel freaking safe, and for an animal like him, that was important.

He ran his hand over his hair and stood, didn't even wince because right now he was on a total high. Every one of his bones could be broken and he would still be walking on a cloud. God, what was wrong with him?

He was still smiling as he walked past the closed bathroom door, where he could hear the sink running, and as he padded through her living room and into the kitchen. The smile didn't fall until he caught the scent of something familiar, and the animal stopped him in his tracks.

He inhaled sharply. Was that...

He frowned and sniffed again, unsure. It was so faint, and now he was questioning if he smelled him at all.

The hairs raised on the back of his neck as he scanned the room and saw the folded piece of paper that sat on Jenna's kitchen counter.

He trod over to it in a daze. There was no way he got in here without Lucas sensing him. There was no fuckin' way.

The paper made a crinkling sound as he unfolded it.

DON'T HUrT HEr.

Rage crept up his spine. *Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm. You can't Change in her home.*

His sense of smell was right. There was only one person he'd ever seen write in neat, capital letters, all except his r's.

Gunner.

Lucas crumpled up the note and was to the door before he had even registered that he'd moved. The door creaked as he yanked it open, and the rage inside of him roiled on as he stepped into the clearing and scanned the surrounding woods. He didn't smell him at all out here. Lucas bolted around the side of the trailer and checked the woods behind, but there was no one here. He couldn't hear a single heartbeat besides his own and a few birds resting in the trees. He didn't feel watched, he didn't feel any presence.

He was alone out here.

His fist tightened around the note. Whatever Gunner's reason for coming into Jenna's home uninvited was beyond him, but Gunner had left a while ago.

The door of the 1010 replica was hanging wide open, and he jogged up the stairs to check the mobile home. His things were still stacked neatly on the floor near the couch, where he'd placed them last night after Jenna had left. The scent of Gunner was so faint in here, he might have missed it entirely if he didn't know what to look for.

He chucked the wadded-up note into the home and made his way to the bathroom, pulled on a shirt and brushed his teeth, gave himself a couple of minutes to settle the rage. Lucas wiped his face and glared at himself in the mirror. His face still had some bruising on his left side, but the swelling was almost gone. Thank God for shifter healing. He ran his hand through his messy hair and made his way out of the 1010 replica, shut the door behind him. He strode back to Jenna's

home and didn't even bother to lock the door behind him. If Gunner wanted to come back and fight, fucking bring it.

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of some of the anger that was revamping just at the thought of that asshole. To a normal person, they wouldn't see such fault in Gunner's actions. It would look like a friend trying to warn a man off of hurting someone he cared about, but things were different with him and Gunner. That asshole had taunted him until he'd accepted Damon's offer and left the entire territory that had gripped his heart.

Him sneaking in here under Lucas's radar, leaving the same goddamn note he'd left him all those years ago when he'd been dating Cadence, pissed him off beyond belief. Gunner knew exactly what he was doing. He was building a war with the silverback.

"Keep it up, motherfucker," he muttered as he scooped coffee grounds into the Mr. Coffee maker Jenna had sitting on her counter.

"Are you trying to start a fight with my coffee maker?" she asked.

It startled him a little, because he hadn't heard her come out of the bathroom, and fuck, maybe she wasn't as safe as he'd thought. Maybe his senses were broken.

He plastered on a smile and turned. "Just talking to myself."

The smile fell from her face, and a slight frown furrowed her expression. "What's wrong?"

Lie, the animal told him.

In his business, he had learned to dance around truths when he spoke. It was an art to trick a shifter, but here, in the early morning light of her kitchen, he didn't want to trick her.

Lie, the animal said again. Don't put her attention on Gunner. We will take care of him.

Jenna cocked her head, and her eyes filled with an understanding. "Is your animal talking to you?"

"Yes."

"What is he saying?"

"To lie to you."

A slash of pain drifted across her eyes, and he wanted to take it back.

"Gunner was here—" A wave of pain took his head and he winced. Fuckin' gorilla was a pain in the ass sometimes. He forced his eyes open and looked her in the face while he told her, "He left a note on your counter that said 'don't hurt her.' I smelled him. It's his writing. He's been in ten-ten, too. I mean...the replica of ten-ten."

"You can just call it ten-ten," she told him softly. "It has been rebuilt with pieces of the original."

That took him back. "What? How? I thought pieces of ten-ten were spread to the Crews for luck."

"They each donated pieces back."

"But...why? Why would they part with them? Those are sacred."

"Because this Crew needs some luck. It was a decision the Crews of Damon's Mountains, and Kane's Mountains, and

Harper's Mountains all made together. They did it for us. For you, too."

Chills rippled up his spine. Next to him, the coffee maker began dripping coffee into the carafe. The scent was strong and eliminated any last remaining molecule of Gunner's smell. It cleared his head and the gorilla grew quiet again.

"Does everyone know I'm here?" he asked low.

"Yes."

"Why is it so important for me to be here?"

She shrugged up her petite shoulders and shook her head. "That is the question. It's the question that got me to say yes to this place. Cadence led with, 'we need to bring Lucas back to the mountains.' And I took a couple days to think about it, and I remembered the boy in the woods who was falling apart, and I wanted to know you now, as you are." Her cheeks were positively red, and she couldn't hold his gaze, but she muscled through. "And that's why I am here. And that is why I put that article in the newspaper, and that is why I helped bring you back to Damon's Mountains."

"I don't like being maneuvered," he said gruffly.

"Nor do I, and I can imagine this entire time here has been a roller coaster, but since you went against your animal's confusing wishes and were honest with me, I will be honest with you. I don't regret it. I like you being here."

Lucas sighed and leaned back on the counter, crossed his arms. He truly didn't like being maneuvered, but he was having a hard time holding his irritation when she was so pretty, so earnest, so open about her part in this and the

reasons why. It was hard to be mad at her after everything he'd found out—her staying with him in the woods when he was falling apart, her changing her life around to move here just to be a part of whatever storm these mountains were creating, because she wanted to be near him.

The more he learned about shy Jenna, the more important she felt. And if he was honest with himself in this moment... he liked being here too.

“You don't seem disturbed that Gunner was in your home uninvited.”

Jenna shrugged. “I told you. We are friends. He's come into my home uninvited a hundred times. Not this one. My other trailer on the outskirts of Ashe Crew territory.”

“Did you...” How could he ask this without sounding like a dominant prick.

“You have history with Gunner and have been hurt by the war over a female before,” she said smoothly, as if she could read his mind. “That is not something you will repeat now. I have never been intimate with Gunner, have never kissed him or held hands or even had a romantic conversation. He calls me ‘sis’, and to me he is like a brother. If he is telling you not to hurt me, it's the same thing he has told every other male who has pursued me.”

Wait. “What males?” he asked.

She scoffed and reached behind him for a travel coffee tumbler on the counter. “Perhaps I was highly sought after in the years you were gone,” she said cheekily. “I'm very seductive and not awkward.”

“Mmm. That wouldn’t surprise me.” He brushed a strand of her brown waves out of her face and she faced him, cupping the steaming mug of coffee in her hands. “Maybe don’t tell me. Don’t give my silverback names to hunt.”

Her eyes went round. “Is he possessive?”

“Apparently.” He took the travel mug from her and poured the creamer she’d grabbed from the fridge in there for her. “Tell me when.” Sure, she could easily do this for herself, but selfishly he wanted to know exactly how she liked her coffee, and he also wanted to be a part of taking care of a need for her.

Her smile was so damn pretty as she said, “When.”

“Good Lord, woman, you don’t like coffee with creamer, you like creamer with a drop of coffee.”

She laughed and shrugged, screwing on the cap. “I have a big sweet tooth.”

“I could tell from the disgusting beers you drink.”

“Heeey, I don’t judge the piss-beers you like. Let me guess, you drink your coffee black?”

Pouring a mug of his own, he nodded. “Damn right. I don’t have a sweet tooth.” He tossed her a teasing glance. “I have a meat tooth.”

“Ooooooh, and he rhymes, ladies and gentlemen! So you’re saying if I want to seduce you, I should cook you a steak.”

He snorted. “You don’t even have to do that much. You could just look at me. Apparently I’ll get a boner.” He’d been half-mast all morning, and trying to control it.

She had been taking a sip of coffee and nearly choked on it. She hacked a cough and ground out, “What?” in a raspy voice.

“Or kissing me in a cave, or the way your hair moves in the wind, or when you try to claw out the eyes of a foe, or when you wake up all disheveled and stretch in front of the window and expose the perfect bottom of your ass cheeks, or laying against me sleeping, or really if you breathe around me, I want to take you from behind, fill you up, and then arrogantly grin all day knowing you are walking around others smelling like me.” She was just staring, so he amended, “Since we are being honest and all.”

She cleared her throat and said, “Um, I like steak too.”

He didn’t understand, so he waited for her to elaborate.

“I like to eat steak with people sometimes.”

Oh. Okay. “Do you want to eat steak with me?”

“Like a friend-date?”

He could tell the answer mattered to her. He didn’t want to freak her out or push too fast, but he’d learned yesterday when he’d backed out of the kiss that she was sensitive to rejection, and he didn’t want to hurt her again. It was a very thin tightrope to walk, so he said first, “I’m not good with woman-stuff and feelings.”

“Okay.”

“So if I fuck up and say the wrong things sometimes, I need you to remind yourself that I work a job where I’m alone ninety-five percent of the time, and in a war every other week, and my animal has never been good with beautiful things.”

“Okay,” she whispered on a breath.

“How about we call it a friend-date with the risk of me kissing you at the end of the night?”

“You are fun,” she said softly, her eyes on the ground.

He was getting used to her submissiveness. Sometimes when she dropped her gaze, it made her words hold even more weight. His heart was back to pounding. “So are you.”

“You are a gentleman who sleeps on top of the covers and lets me cry, but you can talk filthy, and then go right back to being a gentleman. I like that. A kiss at the end of the night would be okay with me.”

“I’ll pick a place for friend-date,” he said. “What time do you get off work?”

“I’ll be back here at five, but I have to wash a truck I’ve been working on and take it into town to drop it off, if you want to follow me down. And then I can ride with you back here? Sorry, it’s kind of a busy day.”

“Never apologize for your work ethic. Work ethic is sexy.”

“What are you going to do today?” she asked, curiosity tainting her tone.

He just offered her a grin and a shrug. “I have some ideas.”

Just in case she was a woman who enjoyed surprises, he wasn’t going to ruin what he was about to do for her.

“Okay, well...I need to get going. I have a longer drive to work now.” Her full bottom lip was pouting out just a little. So

fuckin' cute.

He got it. He didn't want to separate either.

“Want me to give you a ride?” he asked.

Her eyes went wide. “It's an hour each way.”

“I have some errands around the area. I don't mind. I'll swing back and pick you up after work.”

She answered by immediately grabbing another travel thermos and pouring his mug in it, then topping it off with the rest of the coffee in the pot. “I'm ready!” she said, handing it to him.

He chuckled and watched her sashay her way to the door. She was dressed in jeans that hugged her little curves, and some scuffed-up Red Wing boots with green and tan striped wool socks that peeked out the top. The tight black shirt emphasized her cleavage perfectly, and at the door, she pulled a burgundy beanie over her wavy hair. When she turned and flashed him a silver-eyed look, his heart did this weird flip-flop thing. This woman...this petite, submissive, fierce, intelligent, surprising woman...

He regretted not getting to know her better when they were younger.

He had missed out on time with her.

Chapter Eleven

Lucas was funny!

She shouldn't be surprised, but back when she'd spent any time with him as a young man, he'd been going through a rough patch. Now?

She liked that he teased with her easily, and didn't get his feelings hurt easily, and could somehow tell when she was joking.

"You know," she said from the passenger's seat of his truck. "Sometimes people have a hard time understanding my jokes."

He took a left on a road she hadn't even told him to turn on, and aaaaah, he did remember where Kong's lumberyard was located. "That's probably because you only spoke three words your entire childhood and they don't know what's happening when you make a joke."

She snorted. "I said way more than three words. To myself. In the privacy of my own room while I talked to myself."

He'd held a smile almost the whole way here.

"You smile a lot," she blurted out.

"You didn't speak and I didn't smile, and look at us now, the blabbermouth and the clown."

She laughed and gasped as a song she recognized came on the radio.

“Oh God,” he murmured. “You’re going to sing the whole thing, aren’t you?”

“Not with that attitude.” She held up a pretend microphone and sang the first line. “If it’s broke,” she sang dramatically and then put the microphone to his lips to test him.

He sighed heavily and said, “I will never sing a song like this—you don’t have to fix iiiiiit.”

“Aaaaaah!” she yelled excitedly. He did know the song!

“And if it cost too muuuuuuch...”

She put the microphone to his face again and he belted out, “Ain’t gotta buy them ticketssss.”

Then they burst out with the next eight solid lines together, dramatic hand-gestures involved and everything. When a call came through her phone over the speaker and silenced the song, they both booed.

It was her boss though, so she had to pick up. “I’m twenty minutes out.”

“I figured, but I have Sheila here and she’s pitchin’ a fit about an order. Says she only wants to deal with you.”

“Eek, can she wait twenty minutes?”

“Girl, what about pitching a fit sounds like she can wait twenty minutes?”

Jenna scrunched up her face. Kong had a point. Sheila was one of their big-order clients, and whooo, she could get feisty for a human. “Okay, patch me in to the office.”

“I don’t know how to use this thing,” Kong mumbled as the phone made a bunch of clicking noises. “Did that work?”

“You’re still talking to me,” Jenna said, trying to contain the smile in her voice. Lucas was over there avoiding eye contact with his fist over his mouth, smothering a smile as he drove.

Jenna closed her eyes tightly and swallowed a laugh as Kong went to cussing at the phone. He must’ve been out by the sawmill. That phone was a bit of a nightmare.

“Oh my God, what buttons do I push? I can hear that woman screamin’ from here. She’s lightin’ everyone up.”

“What do the buttons say? I can’t remember.”

“Hell if I know, all the words are worn off. We need a new phone out here.”

“I’m going to call the front office, maybe one of the boys will pick up the outside line.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, pray for us all, she’s the meanest human I’ve ever m—” the line went dead, and she and Lucas burst out laughing.

“I never would’ve thought I would hear fear in Kong’s voice over a human.”

“Well, she is nice to me. The boys probably messed up her order. She runs supplies for one of the big construction companies in the area. She’s used to ordering men around,” she murmured, and cleared her throat as she connected the call.

“Hello?” Royce said on the first ring.

“Hey, it’s Jenna.”

“Thank God. You handle this.”

There was a shuffle of static and then, “Jenna?” Sheila asked. “They just told me you got switched to a later shift, and I can tell you right here and now, everything has gone to shit without you running this place.”

Jenna fought back a smile. “I appreciate that compliment. What happened, and how can I help?”

“I’m missing lumber off my order. And not just a little bit of lumber. This doesn’t even look like my order, Jenna! I was supposed to be loaded and headed to a job-site half an hour ago, and apparently they don’t even have some of my order cut. Everyone’s confused, and no one knows how to pull up a damn invoice here.”

“I have it pulled up right here,” she murmured, studying her phone. “What is the load missing?”

Sheila named a whole lot of stuff that wasn’t on the invoice, and Jenna puffed out a sigh as she logged into the company database to see who drew this order up. Aaaaand there was the problem. “Okay, looks like one of the new guys took your order, and if I had to guess, he didn’t know where the buttons were. The invoice is missing a lot of what you are listing. Can you do me a favor? I’m on my way and am fifteen minutes out. I need you to get Royce to give you some scrap paper. Write down exactly what you need, and I’ll cut you a big deal for the mix-up. I’m truly sorry for it.”

“See? This is why I said I only like working with you. I told them over and over. You’ve never messed up my orders. I

even asked him why the price seemed so low but he assured me he got everything. He didn't!"

"I totally understand the frustration. I can tell you those boys are fast as lightning cutting lumber though, so if you can give your guys a call and explain that this one was on us and that you'll be there an hour late, we'll get it on the truck for you and I'll waive that load fee as well."

"Well...it isn't as good as getting it done right in the first place."

"It won't happen again. I'll text you my new schedule, and you know I never call out. I'll handle your orders from here on out."

Sheila was quiet for a few moments, like she was trying to hold on to her anger, but Jenna knew her. She just needed to exit this with her pride intact.

"I'm truly sorry for the mix-up," Jenna told her, typing into her phone. "I'm putting a note on your account that you'll be dealing exclusively with me from here on."

"Well...I appreciate that. I'll write down the order. See you soon." Click.

"Impressive customer service," Lucas told her.

He looked really handsome with the early-morning light streaming through his front windshield. His eyes were a milk-chocolate brown right now, and his dark beard was cut just short enough to boast his chiseled jawline, and that soft smile on his masculine lips...

She cleared her throat and ripped her gaze away from his profile. *Focus*. She dialed the warehouse line and waited for

someone to pick up. Brian, one of the human hands, picked up on the third ring. “I need Kong, be quick about it.”

The boys knew if she had a stern voice, there was no teasing, just get what she asked done. That’s how the place ran so well. Kong picked up after a minute. “Did you fix it?”

“Remember that guy we fired last week? The new one?”

“Please tell me he didn’t do this.”

“Better him than someone who should’ve known better. Invoice is all wrong. She’s writing down what she needs and Royce is going to run it out to you. I bought us an hour. I need anything she’s missing to be cut immediately. I’m cutting her a break and waiving the loading fee.”

“Yep. Fair. I want to keep her business.” He puffed out a breath. “I was thinking we need some new hires, but quality.”

“I have one coming in for an interview today.”

Kong let off a short laugh. “Of course you do. What would we do without you?”

“Crash and burn?” she asked lightly.

“We’ve got the mill going. See you in fifteen. Sorry for the pre-shift call. No one puts out fires like you.”

“Because all y’all want to do is fight everyone.”

“Not you!”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes to the ceiling of Lucas’s truck. “See you soon.”

She disconnected and finished up her notes in Sheila’s account.

“That’s kind of hot,” Lucas said.

“What is?” she asked distractedly.

“Kong comes to you to fix problems with his sawmill.”

“Nah, just with the lumberyard part of it. He’s on it with the sawmill. It’s the business part of it he needs help with.”

“How long have you worked for him?”

“Oh geez, how long?” she whispered as she logged out of Sheila’s notes. She relaxed back in the seat and thought about it. “I left the mountains for a job when I was eighteen.”

“Wait, you left Damon’s Mountains?”

“You sound shocked.”

“I am. I don’t know, I just imagined you always lived here, in Ashe Crew territory.”

“Just stagnant, every day looking like the last?”

“Not like that. I just...why would you ever want to leave? I didn’t even want to leave.”

“To find myself maybe? I didn’t feel connected to people my age here, and I thought if I could go somewhere no one knew how shy I was, maybe I could do it different.”

“Did you?”

“No. I was just in an unfamiliar place and still shy. I tried for a couple years though.”

“Where did you go?”

A flood of memories washed over her. “I went to Montana.”

“To do what?”

“I was a logger.”

He pursed his lips for a few seconds and didn't respond, but she had to know. “What are you thinking?”

“That's really hot.” He let off an airy laugh. “Seriously, is there anything you can't do?”

“I probably wouldn't be good at war.”

“I mean, you tried to scoop one of your friend's eyeballs out last night just because he was fighting me, so I can't imagine what you would do to an enemy.”

Eek. True.

“Talking to strangers is easy, but talking to people I want to befriend is impossible. Also, sometimes I don't clean my dishes right away, and sometimes I eat Oreos for breakfast, and I don't know how to contour my cheekbones very well, and if I have more than one beer, I'm tipsy because I'm a lightweight, and also, I kiss emotionally-unavailable boys under waterfalls.”

His face had gone blank as she had blabbed on. “Anything else?”

“No. Other than that, I'm perfect,” she joke-lied. “Your turn.”

“Okay. I remain emotionally unavailable because I'm accustomed to traveling so much. My animal is at the age where he is supposed to be running a family group but so far, I have no craving and I'm pretty sure that's because the job I took from Damon when I was eighteen has morphed into my

entire life and has trained my animal to only care about fighting. I don't talk to my parents enough, as someone smart recently pointed out, and I have trust issues from a childhood relationship I should've gotten over years ago. I drink my coffee black because there are rarely creamers in the hotels I live out of, and last night I didn't sleep at all because I felt like I should be..."

"Should be what?"

He cleared his throat. "Forget it."

"Nope, we are being honest. Finish it."

"I didn't sleep because I felt like I was supposed to be protecting a woman who does not need my protection."

"Wait, what? Me?"

He nodded, pursing his lips into a thin line. "Yep, you."

She stared blankly ahead, trying to sort that all out. "You think I don't need protection?"

"You are a badass, Jenna."

She crossed her arms, trying to figure out how to feel about that. "I think that is a compliment, but I always wanted someone to protect me. Or at least someone who wanted to."

"Gunner is protective of you," he pointed out, but his voice was honest. He wasn't taking a jab.

"Yeah, but that's like an older brother being protective. It's not like having a man be protective over you because he wants you, you know?"

"You haven't dated much?"

“I’ve dated some. It just never got deep, you know?” she said, frowning at the open gate of Kong’s lumberyard.

“Why not?”

“I don’t think I know how to be deep with anyone.” It was a big admission, but felt right. She felt as if she was learning something big about herself right now.

He pulled to a stop in front of the front-office building, and turned to her. His eyes were open and honest, matching his words as he said, “You feel deep to me.”

No man had ever had a reason to say the L-word to her, but that word combination felt just as big.

You feel deep to me.

Her eyes felt tingly and her chest felt fluttery, and she was so confused by herself that she dropped her gaze.

He just waited, quiet, allowing her time and space to think. It wasn’t an awkward silence. There was no pressure. He was just allowing her to exist with her feelings until she could speak again.

“No one has ever said anything like that to me before.”

The corner of his lips curved up in a sexy, charming, hot-boy smile. “Good.”

“I’m going to go,” she murmured. “And probably mess up every order and every phone call, and probably trip over my own feet a dozen times today while I mull this over. If I have a cast when you come to pick me up, mind your business.”

His crooked little smile had turned into a full-on grin. “I’ll sign it.”

“How big?” she asked.

“So big that no other male can sign it.”

“Possessive,” she accused.

“Not in general.” He leaned over and pressed his lips to her cheek. “I’ll be back at four.”

His lips were close to her ear, and this would usually be the part where she scurried away and then cursed herself in a bathroom stall for not having the lady-balls to kiss him back. *Be the badass he thinks you are.* Before she could talk herself out of it, she angled her face and pressed her lips to his.

She’d planned a one-second fast peck, and then shoving the door open and escaping and overthinking her entire life for the rest of the day until four o’clock where she would probably have a meltdown of awkwardness when he picked her up, but Lucas had other plans, and those plans included not letting her escape so fast.

His hand slid up her neck and he angled his face and pressed his tongue against hers, and then proceeded to kiss every insecurity away from her frazzled brain until she thought nothing at all. Beautiful silence filled her head, and for a girl like her, that was a gift.

Jenna sank into the moment and kissed him back. Before she knew it, her fist was gripping the front of his shirt and she was wanting more.

A knock sounded at the window, and she lurched back like she’d been caught stealing something.

Royce was standing there with his phone up, taking a damn picture with the stupidest grin on his face. “I needed

proof,” his muffled voice sounded through the window.

“Oh dear Lord,” she whispered, mortified.

Lucas laughed—laughed! Like this wasn’t the worst thing to ever happen. Royce would never let her live this down.

And he would tell everyone! And then Lucas would be ashamed and leave and never come back and—

Lucas’s door opened, and he cut the engine and got out.

“Oh my gosh,” she murmured to herself as she followed suit and poured out of his truck onto wobbly legs. Were her boobs even still in her shirt? Quick check. Yes.

To her absolute confusion, Lucas was now shaking Royce’s hand and oh yeah, they probably knew each other from when Lucas lived in these parts. Royce’s family had lived around here forever.

“I haven’t seen you in forever, man,” Royce said, and now more of the guys were jogging this way, and everything was on fire.

“I have to do work. Get to work. I have work to do. Stop talking. Not you. Me. I was talking to myself. I’m going to go now.”

Royce stared at her like she’d sprouted a wombat on her face, and Lucas was just smiling. Great.

Cheeks on absolute fire, she trod past them and inside, where she immediately opened the blinds. Lucas waved to her, and she let them fall.

Everything was fine.

“He’s a looker.”

“Aaaaah!” Jenna yelled in the manliest scream she’d ever heard.

Sheila was laughing, and pointed to the window on the other side of the door. “The blinds are still open on that one.”

Panting for no reason, Jenna bolted over and closed those blinds in a rush. Yes. Now this was normal. She pushed up one blind to see Lucas walking with a few of the guys back toward the sawmill. Probably to catch up with Kong.

“Is that your new man?” Sheila asked.

Jenna chewed on her thumbnail and lowered the blind again. “I don’t know what he is. Maybe he likes me and maybe he doesn’t, but when he kisses me and sometimes even looks at me it makes my heart beat really fast and my boobs tingle.”

Behind her glasses, Sheila narrowed her eyes. “I think that’s a yes.”

“Work!”

Sheila startled. “Okay?”

“I can draw up a new invoice so you can see the discounts.” She hustled to her office. “Follow me, this way. We are going to my office together, away from the windows. I think I had too much coffee,” she said, gripping her chest. “I might be dying.”

Sheila huffed a laugh and sank down into the chair on the other side of Jenna’s desk. “You’re fine. Sometimes big strong men such as that one have such an effect.”

Jenna swallowed hard and stared through the open doorway at the windows down the hall. “Do you have a mate? A partner? Boyfriend?”

“I forget you’re a shifter sometimes,” she said languidly. “I have been married for eighteen years. Some days I want to strangle him, but most days he’s the love of my life.”

Her heart rate began to settle, and Jenna let off a sigh. Everything really was okay. “He just told me I feel deep.”

A soft smile reached from Sheila’s lips to her eyes. “It’s very special to feel that way. It doesn’t happen for everyone.”

“I never thought someone would say something like that to me.” She chewed the corner of her lip and then admitted, “It’s a little scary.”

“Because you don’t feel the same way?”

“Because he could leave.”

“Oh, that’s an easy fix. You just tie him up and keep him in your basement. That’s what I did.”

Jenna’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“Just kidding.”

She inhaled sharply and let off a laugh. “Oh my gosh, I thought you were serious. You said that so confidently.”

“No, what you do is you trap him.”

“With a baby?” Jenna asked, appalled. Who was Sheila?

“No, with a puppy. You find out his favorite kind of dog, and you buy a little purebred puppy, and when you go to register it, you put all the paperwork in your name. Then you

give the puppy to him, but you let him know if he ever leaves, you get to keep the dog.”

Okay, Sheila sounded kind of toxic.

“Just kidding,” the woman said again. “Men are simple, you just show them your boobs.”

“Okay, that one makes more sense.” And also, *note to self, don't ever go out drinking with Sheila*, because for a split-second there, she was trying to figure out how to ask Lucas what his favorite kind of dog was, and that was not the type of woman she was. She was not a trapper.

The boob thing though—she could do that. Shifters weren't modest and he'd seen her after a Change, and he'd kissed her just now, and this morning she definitely felt a boner pressed against her back, so he probably wasn't repulsed by her B-cups.

“Lucas says he likes German Shepherds,” a voice came over the phone that was definitely sitting on the desk instead of the cradle.

In a rush, Jenna hung up the phone and froze. “Royce must've left the line open while we were working on your account.” Why was she whispering?

Sheila had the most entertained grin plastered across her face right now.

The phone rang and Jenna yelled, “Fuuuu—,” then remembered mid-curse that she was in the workplace and finished with, “—uuudge is my favorite holiday snack.”

“I'm so glad I'm here to watch this,” Sheila said. “You should answer that.”

Gritting her teeth, Jenna picked up the phone. She could tell the call was coming from the farthest outbuilding.

“What?”

Royce said, “He said he also likes pit bulls, but he doesn’t want you to register it. He wants to you to adopt it from a shelter and put your name on the paperwork. Right?”

“Yep,” Lucas answered in the background.

Please let a crack form in the earth’s crust and swallow her up now.

“Oh, and Lucas said the boob plan works just as well.”

“You’re fired,” she ground out.

As she moved to hang up the phone, she heard Royce call out, “You fire me every week!”

She and Sheila sat there staring at each other for a few seconds. The woman wasn’t even trying to hide her smile.

Jenna cleared her throat and sarcastically said, “I’m sure the boys will all forget about this momentarily.”

“They’ll be dressing as matching German Shepherds for every Halloween party from here until the year 2042.”

With a heavy sigh, Jenna turned to her computer and pulled up Sheila’s account.

There was no use arguing with her.

The boys absolutely would.

Chapter Twelve

“I don’t understand,” Jenna murmured. “How did you know what to do?”

Lucas was standing stark against the sunset colors in the sky, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders and triceps flexed with the stance. He was staring at the flatbed truck she’d been working on. “I missed a spot under that fender,” he pointed out.

“It looks better than when I wash it!” She shook her head. “Wait, wait, wait, so you drove all the way back here while I was at work, and you took a chore off my plate?”

“It’s really not a big deal,” he told her, and there was truth in his tone. He truly didn’t believe this was a big task, but to her? It meant so much.

“Now, it’ll be dry when we drive it to town and won’t get the water spots and attract the dirt...” She walked around it slowly. This was a three-year-old silver Ram that a man had commissioned her to attach a flatbed to as soon as he’d paid it off. He worked for one of the lumberyard customers and lived in town.

Lucas had been fifteen minutes early to pick her up. Apparently while she’d been sorting through her workday, he had driven all the way back, helped Kru put an entire new roof on his mobile home, and then pulled the truck out of her dirty shop, washed it sparkling clean, and if she had to guess, he had

towel dried it too. She loved surprises, and this had been completely unexpected. It touched her heart.

“Okay,” she said.

“You’re not mad I went in your shop without an invite?”

Jenna shrugged and shook her head. “My nest I’m territorial about, but my shop has always been an open door for the boys to use it back when I was still in Ashe Crew territory. In fact, now that I’m gone, they’ve probably completely taken over my old shop. One week, and I bet all their stuff is in there. You took work off me.”

“Yep. Happy to.”

“And you took work off Kru.”

“He’s so fuckin’ weird.”

A huffed laugh escaped her. “So weird.”

Lucas came to stand beside her and crossed his arms. “He’s kind of funny,” he said low.

“Sometimes he is,” she agreed.

“And he’s handy. He had all the supplies for the roof and was up there like a freaking billy goat, like he had done a thousand roofs before.”

“Oh, Cadence said he was the one who got all these mobile homes up and running before we started moving into Smashland.”

He snorted a laugh. “Smashland. I’m gonna go out on a limb and assume Kru came up with that.”

“And built the dang sign for it. Okay! So now I have time to go change into something a little different for our friend-date.”

He dipped his head once. “If you want to, but you look hot in that outfit.”

She looked up at him and as always, his smile was soft and his eyes honest. He was good at giving compliments, but he didn’t blow smoke. He said the kind things he thought. In her heart, she believed there was value in a person who did that. His mom did that often too, and it had passed to her son.

“I’ll be ready soon,” she told him, and then hesitated, because, well, she’d been thinking about their kiss all day. “Listen, earlier in your truck, when you dropped me off at work—”

Lucas turned and leaned down. His finger hooked smoothly under her chin and lifted her lips to his. And that gentle finger stayed under her jawline for a three-count before he slid his hand to the side of her neck and closed the last few inches between them.

Jenna melted into him, slipped her arms over his shoulders, and lost herself in this moment. When the kiss became rougher, Lucas eased out of it and rested his forehead against hers, his eyes tightly closed. “Go get ready. I’m going to clean up too.”

It wasn’t a rejection. She could tell because he slid his hand around hers and held her hand as he walked with her through the last layer of woods that separated the trailer park from her shop. He walked with her all the way to her front door and up on the second stair, she turned to him.

She lifted her chin higher, and her animal whispered, *be brave*, as she considered doing this.

“How much did you hear earlier, when Royce had the phone line still connected?”

Lucas rested his boot on the bottom stair and canted his head. “I heard the part about the dog. Kong had left the speaker function on, but I don’t think it was on purpose. It looked like Royce was headed to hang up the phone when we heard you talking. We had just come in.”

“I was embarrassed.”

“You shouldn’t be. I haven’t thought about it since, but I get it. You’re an overthinker and things cling to your head longer than makes any sense to me. That’s okay. I’m telling you, you shouldn’t be embarrassed. I actually...” He straightened and cracked his knuckles and tossed an absent smile to the woods. “I’m doing all this wrong, you know.”

“All what?”

“Being around you. I’m leaving tomorrow night, and what am I doing?” He huffed a breath and said softer, “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“Are you tethering my animal to you?” she whispered.

The smile had fallen completely off his face, and he didn’t answer.

Be brave.

“I know you’re leaving, Lucas. Part of me is terrified, and part of me knows I’ll probably spend a few nights drinking fruity beers by myself at some hole-in-the-wall bar in town

like some old country song because I'm not going to want to be hurting around anyone in this trailer park. I'll want to be alone, and that says something about my feelings for you. I have lived my entire life regretting the things I never said, and I know that probably doesn't make much sense to a man like you, who is so good at saying what he feels and thinks. But you should know a few things before you go." She inhaled a lungful of air, and blew it out on a three-count. "Ready?"

He nodded once, his eyes lightened to that intense gold of his animal.

"Okay. One, I've been looking forward to our friend-date all day. I can't wait to get dressed up and hang on every moment, because for the last couple of days, I've felt alive. I know you think I've got everything together, that I'm some badass woman who doesn't need anyone or anything, but you're wrong. I do have needs. I have wants, too. I know when you leave, even though we've spent just a couple short days together, you are going to leave a hole inside of me that will be my responsibility to fill. And I also know I'm not going to understand how to fill it. You said I feel deep to you. I swallowed those words and I absorbed them, and I felt... happy. I feel happy, Lucas. I feel seen and safe and like I'm worth a damn to a man, and it's something that will be hard to say goodbye to so soon. So I have a request."

"Anything," he rumbled in a gravelly voice.

"Can I get your number? Can I text you? Can I call you on your birthday—which I know to be March third, because I'm the one who sits with your momma while she writes those big letters to you to stuff in your birthday cards every year?"

Can I send you a card too? Can I remind you that not all of Damon's Mountains has to bring you confusing memories? And then can you, after you're done bleeding all the bad guys...when you're old and weary and your body hurts and you want a soft place to land...can you consider here?"

She could see the chills rippling across his forearms plain as day. "You gonna keep a nest for me, Jenna?" he asked gruffly.

She dipped her chin. "I'll keep a soft place for you, Lucas Slater, son of Kirk, Blade of the Mountains." *Keeper of my heart*. "I don't want you to go, but I sure understand your need to. I saw it in your eyes this morning when you realized you were in the same territory with Gunner. You haven't healed yet. You haven't dealt with whatever storm that time created in your animal, and that's okay. I'm complicated too. But maybe someday when you do figure out how to let the past go, you can think about me."

Lucas ran his hand down the short stubble on his jaw and stared at 1010. "You don't know how to put pressure on a man, do you?"

"You want me to beg you to stay? You want me to give you an ultimatum?"

"That's what most women would do."

"What would opening the door to a cage do for you, Lucas? What would asking you to get in that cage make you do?"

He didn't answer, but she could see it written in his eyes.

She finished it for him. “You would run. You are not a man who would do well in a cage. When you figure out this place is freedom...” she looked around and sighed. “When you figure that part out, come back and see it for what it is.”

He took a while to respond, but that was okay. He could sit with his feelings, as he allowed her to do. “Do you still want to go out with me tonight?”

“Yes. I want every minute I can have. It’ll have to last me for a very long time, won’t it?”

“Fuck, Jenna.” He frowned and made a clicking sound behind his teeth. At the woods he yelled, “Fuck! I’m two people. You’re splitting me apart. With you, I’m Lucas Slater of the Boarlanders, but out there in the real world?” he asked, pointing down the road. “I’m someone entirely different. I shed this skin years ago, and you come along and you’re pretty, and you’re open, and I know you’re giving me a gift, Jenna. I fuckin’ know it. I know you don’t talk to other people like this. I know you are giving me trust and asking me to take care of it, and I’m not that man! I’m not!” Softer, he said, “I’m not someone you can depend on,” his eyes pleading with her to understand. “I’m not the man you want me to be.”

“I don’t expect you to be anyone. You’re fine as-is. I like being with the you that is in front of me.”

“I’m fine as-is,” he murmured, repeating her words.

“Yes.”

“Fine as-is.”

She lifted her chin higher and said it louder. “To me, yes, you are fine as-is.”

“Would you think the same if you knew the me that lives out in the real world? Would you be okay with what I do? Would you stick with me as I travel from hotel to hotel at the whim of the dragon, hunting shifters? Would you drown in the talk of whether people are salvageable or whether I need to put them down? Would you be able to keep your happy disposition if you are the one who has to wash the blood off my hands on the weeks I have to do the dirty parts of my job? Would you be okay leaving this place to follow me around while I try to soothe an animal that will never settle?”

She pursed her lips into a sad smile and shook her head. “No.”

“No,” he repeated. “But you’ll ask me to give up everything I’ve built and become the person I used to be in these mountains, and grow stagnant with you?”

The way he said ‘stagnant’ stung. She didn’t feel stagnant. Her life felt full. “No. I’m asking that when you figure out there is more than being the Blade of the Mountains, you give a life with meaning a chance.”

“My life has meaning. I’ve worked my ass off to become who I am.”

He was getting upset and starting to prickle at her words. It was a defensive coping mechanism—she could see it plainly. He’d done this with his parents over the years too. She had to take a step back, take a second, swallow her pride, and try to understand where he was coming from. That’s what he truly needed. He needed someone to not only hear what he was saying...but to listen.

So instead of arguing with him, she stepped down a stair and wrapped him up in a hug. She squeezed him up as hard as she could until the tension in his shoulders relaxed. “I think it’s been you versus the world for a long time. It’s a hard way to live, but I can appreciate the strength you have built while you lived it. It’s a part of you I like and respect. You may never come back here again, Lucas, and for the rest of my life, I’m going to try and understand your need to roam. I’m going to support it. I’ll be a friend for you on the days you come back to your hotel and need something to anchor you. But someday, if you want to put down some roots, these mountains have some pretty good soil.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek and eased back to arms’ length, gripped his shoulders. “You won’t find a fight here.” She knew sometimes a dominant man needed to hear words like those so he wouldn’t look for that fight. She hoped her words settled in his bones.

Slowly, the fire faded from his eyes. He searched her gaze, and after a loaded silence, he exhaled deeply, dropped his head, and gripped her wrists on his shoulders gently to keep her touch there. “I don’t know how you do that.” His voice was gruff and gravelly.

“Do what?”

“I can’t get my gorilla to shut up, and you talk him into silence like it’s easy.”

Her cheeks heated with pleasure, because his words felt like a compliment. She felt powerful for perhaps the first time in her entire life. A big, dominant gorilla quieting when she talked reason?

She'd meant what she'd said—every word. And she did want to spend every minute she could with him until he left. It was tricky to tell a heart to stay in the moment even though she knew he would leave and this would all end, but she felt reckless with him. She was on guard with everyone, but with Lucas? There was something special about him. Something that drew her out and made her feel safe. He made it okay to not be invisible.

She had one more day to be seen.

And so did he.

Chapter Thirteen

“Woman, you forgot your purse.”

“Oh!” Jenna exclaimed with a laugh. She jogged back to the table and grabbed the strap of her purse from its place on the back of the chair she’d just vacated.

Lucas looked hot tonight, and she’d been distracted the entire dinner by his raw sex appeal. He’d changed into a thin forest green T-shirt with a neck and hem that were distressed. He smelled of hot-boy cologne, and wore dark-wash jeans over dark brown Red Wing boots. He was tall and strong and built like a brick wall. His eyes crinkled easily with laughter, and the color changed seamlessly from muddy brown to bright gold. She truly enjoyed every single thing about his physical appearance. Lucas had grown up well, and she wasn’t the only one noticing. There was a bar in the steakhouse, and a trio of ladies kept looking their way. She had teased him about it, but he had waved it off and his eyes never trailed their direction, though his animal had to be hyperaware of their attention on him. Even the fine hairs on the back of her neck were prickled up under the attention, and she wasn’t even the target. He played it off smooth though, probably because he just garnered attention like that in public. And she understood the fascination. This man was built different than the average Joe.

He clapped his hand on top of the doorframe as he ducked underneath and out into the cool night air. She followed, sliding the strap of her purse across her body. Unintentionally, she’d matched him. Green shirt and dark skinny jeans, but

she'd worn cedar-brown ankle boots that had a good three-inch heel on them so she didn't look like such a popcorn shrimp beside him tonight.

It was busy on the small town's main street, and they'd had to park a few blocks up.

"Did you get enough to eat?" he asked, shoving his hands into his pockets and waiting for her on the sidewalk.

"I'm full as a tick. Good Lord, you walk fast," she murmured as she caught up to him.

With a laugh, he crooked his arm out and offered his inner elbow. With a blushing smile, she slid her hand around his arm and felt the tripping pulse there.

"Racing heart," she pointed out.

He looked down at her with a calculating look. "I can see straight down your shirt."

With a gasp, Jenna looked down to check her cleavage, but nope, they hadn't escaped. They were just pushed up thanks to the bra that had promised to enhance her bust by two cup-sizes.

"I'm trying to be a gentleman, but I'll admit I've thought of five different places I'd like to take you tonight."

"The river for a romantic stroll?" she joked.

He twitched his head down a dark alley. "Doggy-style behind that dumpster."

She belted out a laugh, and now her cheeks were positively on fire. "That sounds fun."

A low rumble emanated from his chest, and when she jerked her gaze to his, intensity sparked in his lightened gold eyes. “I think you would be fun in bed.”

“Really?” she uttered on a breath.

A wicked grin took his lips. “I would corrupt you.” There was promise in his voice. Promise, and confidence. “You’re so shy, and blush easily,” he told her as he brushed a fingertip quickly down her cheek. “You react to my body, and I can smell your desire. You would open up so easy for me, wouldn’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

His chuckle was dark and sexy, and she leaned into him and pressed her cheek against his muscular tricep. It was right in this moment that something caught her attention through the big picture window of a dive bar they’d been walking past.

“Is that Kru?” Lucas pulled them to a stop and canted his head at what he saw through that window.

Sure enough, Kru was at the back of the bar, taking a sip out of a glass of beer. He locked his arms on the table that held his drink and just stared at nothing. He looked...haunted. He looked to be alone.

“Maybe he had a bad day,” she said. She wanted to ask if they should go check on him, but Lucas seemed to dislike him, or tolerate him at best, and they were on a friend-date.

He just looked so...lost.

She didn’t have to ask though. Lucas murmured, “Come on,” and led her to the door of the bar.

When they stepped inside, he grabbed her hand and led her through the myriad of tables. It was a dark-wood bar with old street signs all over the wall. She perked up when she noticed the back half of the bar was split into five lanes, and there were couples and trios slinging axes end-over-end at targets against the wall.

Holy moly. “Is this a lumberjack bar?” she asked.

Kru jerked his bright-green gaze up at them, and for a moment, he looked shocked. Then he plastered on an empty smile and straightened his spine. “Look who the white tiger dragged in.”

“Don’t know what that means, man,” Lucas said, offering his hand for a shake.

“Cadence didn’t send you?”

“Nope. Haven’t seen her all day. What are you drinking? I’ll grab us a round.”

The forced smile on his face faltered, and revealed a vulnerability that surprised Jenna.

When she glanced at Lucas’s face, she knew he’d caught it too. His eyes were on Kru like a hawk’s.

“Uuuuh,” Kru said thickly. Something was wrong. He ran his hand over his hair and lowered his eyes to his vibrating phone, sitting next to his nearly-drained beer. Cadence’s name was lighting up the screen. “I just don’t want to talk, okay?”

“He likes Coors,” she told Lucas.

Lucas stunned her by reaching across and gripping Kru’s shoulder. He shook it gently and held him trapped in an

expression she couldn't read.

Whatever he said with his eyes, Kru lowered his head and nodded. "Yeah, okay." He huffed a sigh and flopped gently under Lucas's grip.

"I don't want to fuckin' hear about your feelings anyway," Lucas said as he released him and made his way to the bar. "Suck 'em back into your body, shove them deep down, and let's throw some axes." He turned and ghosted a grin at Kru, and whatever was wrong with him, Kru's smile came back with a little feeling.

He flipped an axe and caught the handle easily while draining his beer, then threw the axe one-handed. The blade split the bullseye perfectly in half.

"What the heck!" she exclaimed. "That was awesome!"

Kru did a little bow and said, "It's my only talent."

"Lie," she sang. "I can hear the lie. Besides, I saw the roof you and Lucas put on your trailer today. Perfection." She set her purse on the table that was backed up against the wall right beside their lane. No one would get past their senses to steal it and besides, she needed her full range of motion. She didn't want to catch the blade on her swinging purse.

She cracked her knuckles dramatically and stretched her neck. "Okay, stud, teach me."

Kru snorted and retrieved the axe. "The rules are one axe per lane. Stay out of the lane until the blade hits the target. If you miss and it comes flinging back, it's your responsibility ___"

“To get the hell out of the way, blah blah blah. Teach me how to bullseye.”

Kru blinked hard. “I honestly think this is the most words you’ve strung together in front of me since you moved to Smashland.”

“I’m shy. I take awhile to warm up. How do I hold it?”

Kru was a patient teacher and she was a fast learner, so by the time Lucas was back with a pair of Coors and one fruity beer—complete with a miniature teal umbrella and a straw—for her, she was at least hitting the target. Kru could keep his trick shots, she needed both hands to throw hers straight.

“Cheers,” Lucas said as he held his drink up. “Cheers to whatever ails us not killin’ us.”

“And! Cheers to an epic night where I’m going to kick both your booties in axe-throwing,” she added.

And those grins on the boys’ faces were getting deeper and more genuine.

The target had round lines leading to the red bullseye in the middle, but it also had lines that split it up like pie pieces, and numbers were written on the outer edge of each section. Kru explained a game called 21, where the first one of them to make it to a combined total of exactly 21 points wins. But they couldn’t go over, or the last throw doesn’t count.

They took turns throwing the axe and writing down their scores, and whoooo she was getting competitive.

“Don’t suck,” Kru told her right before she did her third throw.

She laughed and had to re-align herself and blow out a steadying breath before she threw the axe. “Three!” she added it to her scorecard while Lucas went and retrieved the axe.

The lane next to them opened up, and Kru disappeared for a minute and returned with another axe. He gestured for her to take the second lane, and then the throws started going much faster. The boys stomped her at two games of 21, then Kru explained a game of Humans and Zombies, in which they had to throw the axe for a combined score for both teams. The zombies—her and Lucas—only earned negative numbers, while the human—Kru—was throwing for positive numbers. The first team to drag the combined number to negative fifteen, or positive fifteen, won. That one was more of a battle, and more pressure and fast-paced and hella fun! “I want to do this all night!” She took a sip of her fruity beer and watched the boys playing against each other for a game called Around the World, where they had to hit certain sections in order. That was a total accuracy game, and it was so fun staring at Lucas. He wore a big grin and was trash-talking Kru as he slung the axe. He was really good, and the blade always sunk so deep in the wood. His body was pure power and sex appeal as he positioned the axe over his head and lurched forward, releasing the handle from his strong grasp. *Thunk.*

Good...grief! That man was hot. There were a couple of other groups throwing axes in the lanes on his other side, but he wasn't paying attention to them. They were sure paying attention to him though, and she got it. That man was fine. The guys hated him, the girls probably wanted to date him, and she was just sitting here half-buzzed and enjoying the high of an

absolutely amazing day with a man who had absolutely all of her attention.

He's going to leave us.

The thought came out of nowhere, and she knew it was her falcon worrying over things she couldn't control.

"Stop," she murmured, feeling stung straight through her chest. She took another sip of her drink and glanced at the door.

Cadence was headed this way, her eyes furious.

"You okay?" she asked before the tiger shifter even reached them.

"You ignored all of my calls," she spat at Kru.

Kru turned and huffed a breath, took another throw of his axe and went to retrieve it.

"I have been worried all night!"

Lucas had a frown etched into every facet of his face. "He's a grown man, Cadence. If he doesn't want to answer your nagging call, he doesn't have to."

"Except that wasn't our deal!"

"What deal?" Jenna asked.

"If I'm going to trust you out in public, you have to check in."

"You're not his fuckin' babysitter," Lucas growled. "Grab and axe and join a game or piss off, Cadence. You're harshing our buzz."

"Excuse me?" she yelled.

Lucas turned and faced her full-on, and all the humor left his face. “Kru’s good. You are the one with the problem here. You’re attracting attention. Play or go. Pick one.”

Cadence just stood there, her mouth opening and closing like a landed fish.

“I need to go to the bathroom!” Jenna announced.

Kru scrunched up his face. “Congratulations?”

She cleared her throat. God, how did she do this. “Girl code,” she announced.

Cadence still looked confused.

Jenna pursed her lips. “Cadence, would you like to accompany me to the bathroom. Like girls do? In a flock?”

“Two doesn’t a flock make,” Kru pointed out.

“Shut up,” Cadence grumbled as she followed Jenna toward the bathroom.

“Can you grab another round on the way back from your twin pee-pees?” Kru asked. “I’ve got a tab open, just put it on mine.”

Cadence threw up two middle fingers over her shoulders, but she did follow Jenna all the way to the bathroom.

“Hey,” she said softly, checking underneath the stalls to make sure they were alone. “Whatever the deal is with you and Kru, he’s good.”

“Is he?” Cadence asked blandly.

“I don’t know. He seemed a little upset earlier, but he’s been his normal trash-talking, semi-annoying self for a while

now. Are you guys...”

“Are we what?”

“Are you...you know...banging?”

“Banging?” Cadence asked, enunciating the word slowly.
“Hell no. That man drives me bonkers.”

“Then why are you so upset with him not picking up your calls?”

Cadence inhaled deeply, lifting her shoulders with the gesture, and rested back against the wall, then leaned her head back. There were lots of germs on bathroom walls, but Jenna tried really hard not to point it out. “Today is a rough day for him. I was wanting him to fall apart at the trailer park, not out here in public with the humans.”

“Ooooh. What kind of bad day?”

“It’s an anniversary of sorts. Anyway, if you say he’s okay, maybe it’s good you two reached him before I did.” She chewed her lip and crossed her arms. “Did he call you to come here?”

“Nope. We just saw him walking by.”

Cadence frowned. “Wait, are you and Lucas on a date?”

“Kind of? We’re calling it a friend-date on account of him leaving soon.”

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

“Uuuuh, pretty sure the ex showing up on your first date isn’t supposed to happen. Sorry. I didn’t know you were here. I

was just coming to murder Kru.”

“Oh, didn’t even think about that. You can hang out with us if you want. If you don’t think it’s weird. We actually need one more person for even teams. We can try to kick the boys’ asses. I mean, if you want. No pressure. You’re probably busy.”

Cadence had built up a slow smile while she’d been blabbering on. “Are you asking me on a friend-date, too?”

Jenna shrugged. “I mean, it’s not every day we all stumble into the same axe-throwing bar.”

“Technically, I didn’t stumble here. I tracked his cell phone and sped down here ready to run him over with my truck if he was starting fights.”

“Oh, he wasn’t starting any fights. He looked like he just wanted to be alone when we came in.”

Cadence crossed her arms and looked a little sheepish. “I guess I could throw a couple of axes if you teach me.”

“Kru is the best teach—”

“I would rather piss on an electric fence.”

“Oh.” Lovely. She couldn’t help her grin at the visual. “I would be happy to teach you...on one condition.”

“What condition?” Cadence asked suspiciously, pushing off the wall.

Jenna sidled behind her and gripped her shoulders, then angled her toward the bathroom mirror to look at her reflection. “Maybe wipe the angry off your face before we go back out there. This is a good-vibes-only night.”

Cadence stared at her scowl for a three-count, then relaxed and pursed her lips against a smile. “Fine, but if Kru is buying, I’m getting something top-shelf. My heart is still racing. I thought he wasn’t answering because he was raising hell. I have never gotten to town faster. My adrenaline is still up.”

“Well, you’re off the clock now,” Jenna told her as she wiped her back with a paper towel, hoping to dislodge at least some of the wall germs Cadence had leaned against.

“You’re such a mom,” Cadence said, and when Jenna looked back up at her in the mirror’s reflection, the woman didn’t seem to be joking.

“You’re the leader,” Jenna argued. “I’m just here.”

“Here cleaning up messes quietly while the leaders just stomp around their lives.”

And that seemed like a compliment too, just like Lucas’s words had earlier.

With a baffled look, she watched Cadence open the door to leave, but the woman waited, holding the barrier open, eyebrows arched high as if to say, “Are you coming, or what?”

“Coming,” she said softly, and followed her out.

“I can see why Beaston asked me to bring you in.”

“That part still blows my mind,” Jenna said.

“On that list Beaston gave me, did you know you were the top one?”

“M-me?” she uttered.

Cadence shrugged. “I used to ask myself that too, but now I’m starting to see. Some of us are meant to be leaders, and some are meant to be the glue. You’re glue, Jenna.”

And then Cadence left Jenna staring after her in the hallway, barely conscious of passersby bumping her shoulders as they headed for the bathrooms.

When she thawed out and meandered to her Crew-mate... friend?... Cadence was ordering, “Four panty-dropper shots, and make them extra pink.”

She helped Cadence carry over the four (very pink) shots to the table where her purse rested, unharmed.

There were three women talking to Kru, and Lucas was throwing the axe in the lane closest to the wall. When she set the shots on the table, he turned with a ready smile, and Kru came over complaining that he had to run interference because the women on the next couple of lanes wanted to talk to him and Lucas, but Lucas was an “anti-social asshole.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Lucas assured Kru as he pulled Jenna closer by the waist and kissed her temple. Against her ear, he murmured, “I told them I was with someone.”

Jenna turned and looked at the three women, who were sipping drinks around the table nearest their lane. They were looking in their general direction, so she lifted a panty-dropper shot and dipped her chin. “To pretty girls!”

Cadence lifted hers, too. “To the girls.”

“What about the boys?” Kru asked, scrunching his face at the pink shot.

“And to the boys that break their hearts!” one of the other women shouted from across the way.

Jenna exchanged a smile with Cadence, then tapped the bottom of the shot glass on the table to ward off bad luck and tossed the shot back with her. She set the empty glass on the table and watched as Kru and Lucas cheers-ed their tiny glasses and tossed their shots back. She laughed at the disgusted faces they pulled at the sweet shots.

Lucas set his empty shot glass inside her empty and then automatically draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in, and she melted at the unexpected PDA. Kru threw an axe and hit the dead-center bullseye. Of course.

Lucas patted her butt and murmured, “You’re up,” before he handed her the handle of the axe.

She pointed to the axe hanging from Kru’s grasp and told him, “Can you hand that to Cadence?” Which he did.

And then she proceeded to teach Cadence how to hold the axe, and how to throw from behind the line. She ran her through a dozen practice throws and then challenged the boys to 21.

Guys versus girls.

The night got even more fun. They played boys versus girls for three games and then split up when Cadence’s skills started catching up—Cadence and Kru against Jenna and Lucas. That was her favorite time of the entire night. Lucas was attentive and communicated well. He was positive, and even when she missed her target, he was supportive and made her feel like a queen.

She would never, as long as she lived, forget when one of the human women came up to her at the end of the night of throwing axes with people who felt like friends. She slurred because she was a few drinks deep, but she pulled Jenna in and looked her in the eyes and said, “You two are very cute. That man hasn’t taken his attention off you all night. I know. I’ve watched.”

She didn’t know why, but it meant a lot to her that this slightly tipsy, a-little-bit-stalkery human woman was telling her how lucky she was.

When she turned to look at Lucas, he was smiling privately as he neatly stacked the beer glasses they’d emptied throughout the night. Oh, he’d heard the woman. He could hear everything in this bar. He glanced up at her and his eyes were that soft brown of his human side, and he twitched his head. *Come here.*

She said her goodbyes to the tipsy trio of humans and meandered to him, melted into his side as his arm went around her. Jenna looked up at him and couldn’t help her smile. “Tonight was fun.”

“For me too.”

“Home?” she asked.

The smile faltered on his lips and he dragged his gaze from her, busied himself with grabbing her purse from the table.

“I-I’m sorry,” she uttered quick. “I meant my home. Not yours.”

“I know what you meant.” His smile returned when he looked at her again, but it was missing some of the warmth it had before. “Let’s go to your home.”

It hurt a little—just a little bee sting against her heart, but she felt it. She wished Lucas understood ‘home,’ but some men were built to wander. Of course her silly little soul had chosen one of them to fall for.

Cadence followed them out while Kru settled the tab, and told them, “I’ll get Kru home.”

“I’ll get his keys,” Lucas said, but Cadence held up a key ring and grinned brightly. “Already done.”

“You’re a good friend,” Jenna told her, and Cadence looked surprised. She parted her lips to say something, but the words seemed to escape her, and that was okay. Sometimes compliments surprised the words out of Jenna too.

Lucas pulled open the passenger’s side door for her and she climbed up into his truck. She watched Lucas settle in behind the wheel and shut his door, and she had to tell him. Had to say the words. “Tonight was my favorite night.”

The flash of his white teeth gave her butterflies. With the bar parking lot lights illuminating his chiseled facial features, she could see a slight dimple under his short scruff. He was so handsome.

He turned his head and his lightened eyes bore straight into her soul. “Tonight was my favorite night too. You’re going to be hard to leave, Brown.”

She slid her hand around his strong bicep as he rested his arm on the console and smiled as she looked forward. She

liked the way he'd said her last name. "Good."

He hesitated for a few seconds before he turned the truck on, and when she moved to release his arm, he caught her hand and pulled it back. She could feel his pulse tripping at his inner elbow, and she wondered whose heart was racing fastest right now—hers, or his.

She loved touching him.

As they pulled out of the parking lot and hit the winding roads that would lead them back up into the mountains and back to Smashland, a light reflected in the side mirror, and she could see Cadence settling in behind them. Kru was in the passenger's seat.

It shouldn't have been an important moment, but Jenna was happy. She was riding with the man who had all her attention, and she was beginning to really like the two following them, and she wished this could go on and on. She wished they could have more nights caravanning home.

She rolled her window down and let her fingertips catch the wind as the trees blurred by.

She could feel Lucas's attention on her, over and over, and she squeezed his bicep gently. *I'm okay.*

He slid his big, powerful hand to her thigh and squeezed her back. *Good.*

By the time he parked his truck in front of 1010, it was late—almost one in the morning.

Cadence and Kru got out before them and headed to their trailers. "That was fun. See you tomorrow," Cadence called with a wave.

Kru gave a head nod and disappeared inside.

“He’s sick,” Lucas murmured.

Surprised, she jerked her attention to Lucas. “How can you tell?”

He shrugged up one shoulder. “I can feel it.”

“Sick how?”

He exhaled and dragged his eyes from the trailer Kru had disappeared into. “Head sick. Heart sick, maybe. He’s kicking up my protective instincts, and that only happens around someone who’s gone weak.”

“Am I weak?” she asked.

“No,” he huffed out. Lucas shoved the door open and got out. Before he closed the door, he told her, “Weakness isn’t what has me protective over you.”

She was used to dominant male gorillas. She’d worked for Kong for a long time, and had spent time with him and his mate, Layla. She’d been around Lucas’s parents and had always respected Kirk’s power, but even more so, she respected how he kept it in control around others. Protective instincts were enormous in silverback gorillas, but usually they didn’t kick up until the male was mature and bonded to a group.

Lucas admitting he was protective of her and Kru stirred up something big inside of her chest.

Hope?

Hope was terrifying when it was tethered to a nomad.

She pushed open her own door and slid out, grabbed her purse, and turned to find him standing there, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, eyes glowing oddly like an animal's in the halo of porch light.

He walked her slowly to her door, and such shyness crept over her as she remembered his words earlier. He might kiss her at the end of the night, and the end of the night was here. Yeah, she'd kissed him before, but this felt bigger. She had warning this time. She wanted it.

He was quiet, and paused at the bottom stair as she made her way up to the door. Disappointment swirled in her chest, but she forced a smile. He wasn't even meeting her eyes.

Seconds dragged on and he stared out at the woods and then back down at his boot. "If I..." He shook his head, and those bright-gold animal eyes lifted to hers. He offered a pursed-lip smile. "Goodnight, Jenna."

She nodded, determined to make the rejection easy on both of them. "Goodnight, Lucas."

She pushed open the door and made her way inside, offered him a little wave, and moved to close the door.

"I'll hurt you," he said.

She froze. "You said I'm not weak, remember?"

There were a hundred thoughts flitting across his mind—she could tell. His eyes held panic, and his chest rose and fell with his quickened breath.

"It's okay," she said, but truly, she didn't know what she was saying that about. Was it okay? She didn't feel like it was.

Her heart was racing and her lips were throbbing with wanting, and now he was walking away.

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and shut the door. She rested her palms on the cold wood and settled her forehead against it and tried to remember how to breathe.

He was making the right decision. Don't get her more attached than she already was, and she would be just fine when he had to go.

She blew out a steadying breath and pushed off the door.

Knock, knock, knock.

She startled hard, reached for the door handle, and pulled it open. Lucas stood there, leaned on locked arms against the doorframe.

His eyes were blazing such a vibrant gold, and his hair was all mussed like he'd run his hands through it.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Y-yes."

"Do you..." He shook his head hard and gripped his hair in clenched fists. "Stop," he whispered.

Ooooooh no, his gorilla was in his head. He'd been the reason he'd had to leave Cadence, and now he was talking again around Jenna.

"What's he saying?" she whispered. "Just say it. Get it over with and we can both move on."

His eyes were churning with something she didn't understand.

“Say it,” she whispered, her eyes burning.

Lucas ran his hand down his beard and looked like he was choking on words he was refusing to say out loud.

“I would rather know.”

No answer.

“Tell me!” she yelled.

Lucas’s lips crashed onto hers and he pushed her backward into the house, slammed the door closed with his foot. His hands were strong as he gripped her hips and pulled her upward.

With a gasp, Jenna wrapped her legs around his waist and slid her arms around his shoulders to hold on better. His hard, swollen cock pressed against the seam of her jeans, and oooh, she could tell he wanted her. He walked her into the hallway and she tilted her head the other way, sucked on his bottom lip hard, then parted her lips for him to slip his tongue against hers.

A soft rumble emanated from his chest and he angled her back against the wall in the hallway. His hips ground against hers, and it felt good right there. She gasped for breath out of the kiss and tossed her head back. His lips went straight to her throat, and she could feel his too-sharp canines scrape her sensitive skin there.

A moan escaped her, and she gripped him tightly as he ground against her again, her fists clenching the fabric of his T-shirt.

“Fuck, I need you,” he said in a shaky whisper.

She got it. She understood. She needed him too.

“You can have me.”

He crushed her against him as he yanked her off the wall and strode with her into the bedroom like she weighed nothing at all. He tossed her onto the bed, and holy hell, this was so hot. The bedroom was dim, but the hall light was filtering through the open doorway, illuminating his torso. His muscles rippled as he peeled his shirt over his head. He looked like a demigod here in the soft glowing light—chiseled from head to toe, built like Zeus. The cuts were still healing from his fight, but most of the bruising was already gone. Strong, dominant alpha male, and her body was so ready.

She sat up and scrambled to her knees, pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it next to the bed. His eyes sparked with hunger as he watched her unfasten her bra and toss that too.

He blew out a breath and closed the space between them, pulled her waist in as his lips found the sensitive nub of her breast. Jenna arched for him, angling for him as she watched him suck on her breast in awe. She ran her nails through his hair and told him how good it felt. With a sexy smack, he released her, then drew her other nipple into his mouth, lapped his tongue against it until she was breathless.

He reached into the front of her jeans and slid his hand down her sex, felt her slick folds and then pushed his finger into her. “Mmmmm,” he rumbled. “Good girl, getting wet for me fast.”

Oh God, yes, and he knew how to talk to her? She rolled her hips against his hand and lowered her lips to his ear. “I

want to feel you inside of me.”

He bulldozed her backwards and unfastened her jeans, pulled them from her along with her panties, and lowered down. “Like this?” he asked through a wicked smirk. He wrapped his arms under her thighs and lowered his face to the apex between her legs, then ate her slow. She’d never let anyone do this to her—never wanted to—but here with him, she was safe. She ran her hands through his hair and rolled her hips upward to meet his lapping tongue. Already she felt so good.

He lifted off her and kissed his way up her stomach, gripped her hands and held them above her head. “Or do you mean something different?”

“I mean something different,” she said mindlessly.

She was dizzy under his heady, masculine scent and the weight of his dominance, and felt high as a freakin’ kite with whatever buzz he was giving her body.

“You want me to unbutton my jeans?” he asked softly before he kissed her neck again.

“Yes.”

He released one of her hands and unfastened his jeans. The slow rip of the zipper dredged chills of anticipation up her spine. He shucked his pants, and his enormous dick slid free. Lucas settled it right against her wet sex. So hard. So big.

“Now what?” he asked.

She bit her bottom lip and rolled her hips against his. “Now you can do whatever you want with me.”

A dark chuckle took him and he nuzzled his face against hers. The scratch of his short beard felt good. His powerful hips moved against hers, and the easy slide of his thick cock against her dragged a moan from her lips.

“Want more?” he asked, rolling slowly against her again.

“Yes.”

“How much more,” he asked, poising the head of his thick shaft right there at her entrance.

“All of it,” she pleaded.

“Mmmm,” he murmured against her ear. “Do you know how much I’ve thought about this?” Roll. He was just teasing her entrance, pressing against her clit, turning her boneless. Oh, he knew exactly what he was doing. “How much I’ve imagined your perfect tits smashed against my chest like this? How much I imagined your little wrists in my hands so I could feel when your pulse went faster? How much I’ve thought about how good it would feel to slide into you?” He eased down and pressed the head of his cock at her entrance again. His voice lowered to a whisper against her ear. “How many times I’ve thought about about making you come?”

“I. Fucking. Dare you,” she whispered on a desperate breath.

He eased his face back and slid into her, and God, what a beautiful sight, witnessing a man’s face when he buried himself so deeply into her. He rolled his eyes closed, and gritted his teeth as a soft groan escaped him. “Fuuuuuck.”

Lucas released her wrists and slipped his arm around her back, gripped her hair with his other one, holding her face

angled close to his as he eased out and back into her deep. It felt like every inch of her body was covered by his, and every single nerve ending she possessed was exploding with pleasure.

“Lucas,” she gasped as he went deep again.

“I’ve got you,” he ground out, and there was something so sexy about those words spoken in this moment. *I’ve got you.*

He did. He was working her body to orgasm so fast, so hard. His slick movement back and forth inside of her was building perfect friction and hitting her just right. He slid into her harder, a little faster, harder, a little faster.

“Lucas?” she squeaked out.

“Come on,” he growled. “I want it. Give it to me. Come on my dick, Jenna.”

“Lucas!” she yelped as her body exploded, gripping him hard with pulses of pure pleasure.

She gasped as Lucas rolled her over suddenly. She sat straddled on top of him, taking all of him, and his grip on her waist was like stone as he pulled her hard against him, leaving himself deep inside.

His arm muscles rippled as he pulled her up and down, and muscles in his throat strained as he threw his head back and gritted out her name. She was coming again, she was coming again! Lucas swelled and pulsed inside of her, matching her release as she clawed her nails up on his bare chest.

“Fuck it feels good, fuck it feels good,” he chanted, his hands still strong on her hips as he twitched inside of her.

Jenna rolled her hips with him, dragging out every throb of ecstasy for both of them.

On locked arms, she sagged and stilled, panting, stunned, her body buzzing completely.

When she opened her eyes, he was watching her with a soft smile etched onto his masculine lips. His eyes were still gold, but not as bright as they had been. He slid his fingertips up the curve of her waist and cupped her cheek, ran the pad of his thumb under her eye.

“I like your eyes like this.”

With a slight frown of confusion, she looked over at the mirror over the dresser. Sure enough, the animal was close to the surface and her eyes were churning silver. With anyone else, she would've felt embarrassed at the slip in control. She would've felt too vulnerable, but Lucas just made her feel... pretty. She was comfortable in her skin around him, and that was power.

She huffed a stunned laugh and lowered herself down to his chest, her arms tucked between them.

And when his strong arms went completely around her and held her tightly against him, she closed her eyes at how good it felt. She stayed like that, reveling in the soft *bum-bum, bum-bum* of his heart rate against her cheek as it slowed.

He didn't say anything, only stroked her cheek, stroked her hair, ran his fingers up and down her spine like he was coveting her. He didn't push her to disconnect from him, or leave abruptly. He just stayed there with her, letting his

heartbeat speak to her cheek, allowing his touch to relax every muscle in her body until she couldn't get up if she tried.

She'd never felt anything like this before, and didn't want it to end. Not ever.

And that—she realized—was what he'd meant when he'd said, "I'll hurt you."

Because now things were different. Now her animal loved him. Now her heart felt tethered to him. Now it would be a different kind of hurt when he left.

I'll hurt you.

Yes. Yes he would, but for tonight...for this moment...for right now, all she wanted to do was pretend that he wouldn't.

Chapter Fourteen

He shouldn't be here.

Lucas looked up into the tree and narrowed his eyes at the nest up high in the branches.

It was windy tonight, and the tree swayed slightly, creaking with the movement.

A small twig fell from the nest and as he reached to pick it up, he hated the dark fur that covered his forearm. He hadn't been able to fight the animal tonight, and he knew why he was here.

Please don't.

The animal rumbled and the logical side of him withdrew—grew smaller, weaker. God, he was so weak.

Please. He hated the frailness in his pleading voice. No one would hear him but the gorilla.

The twig snapped in his massive hand.

You'll hurt her.

“No,” the animal said in that gravelly, inhuman voice of his. “You will.”

He choked on his words as the animal strangled him to invisibility and climbed the tree, limb by limb.

He hated the power in every clench of his fist on every branch. Hated the strength he had to pull himself straight up,

up, up. He hated his dark heart when he was the animal. Hated the savageness with which he made decisions.

He had ruined his life here years ago, and now he would do it again. Didn't he see? Didn't he see! *I'm leaving!* He choked on the words as the animal stood to his full height on the thick branch the nest rested on. Jenna's falcon had plucked many of her downy feathers from her breast and lined the giant nest. This was her creation. Her cry for wanting more. Her safe place that no one knew about but him.

As the gorilla's fists slammed down onto the nest, Lucas tried to disappear inside of his mind—not because he was weak, but because he didn't want to watch the destruction.

For some God-awful reason, his vision remained clear, and he felt every sting of every branch as he destroyed the nest. The rustle of leaves below brushed against his revved-up instincts, and he looked down to see her. The gorilla roared and threw the remains out of the tree, then raced the downy feathers down the tree trunk and landed hard on the ground.

A woman with familiar bright-green eyes and long black hair that whipped around her face stared at him with such fury in her eyes.

She lifted a rifle and aimed it at his face. Enraged, he charged her. These were his woods. His. He could do whatever he wanted in his woods.

He skidded toward her, fist raised to slap that rifle out of her grip, but movement behind her stopped him inches away from the barrel.

There was a massive iron cage in the woods, and inside, Jenna was on her knees, her hands tied behind her back, her mouth covered in a gag. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her eyes pleaded something he didn't understand.

He looked back at the woman.

Lucia—the wind whispered her name.

Lucia Novak.

The raven-blooded grizzly. Rumor had it that she was starting to get the 'sight' like her father, and brother.

Lucas was the Blade of the Mountains, but Lucia went by another name.

The second daughter of Beaston was called the Watcher of the Mountains.

Her eyes narrowed at him with hatred as she pulled the trigger.

Lucas gasped and startled awake.

He was drenched in sweat and tangled in Jenna's sheets.

"Fuck," he gritted out as he struggled free. It was just a dream. It was just a horrible dream. His shoulder blades hit the cold plane of the wall. Panicked, he slid down the wall toward the door for the chance at some fresh air. He couldn't breathe!

The vision of Jenna's terrified eyes drove a dagger straight through his soul. He winced at the pain of it. Her tears...

The animal inside of him was riled up, and his skin was tingling with the urge to Change.

“What’s wrong?” Jenna asked as she sat up in bed.

“Nothing!” He held his hand out. “Please stay there.”

Her hair was mussed from sleep, and her eyes swirled with confusion. She crawled up onto her knees, and he could see it again. He could see her in the cage on her knees.

Lucas hit the side of his head to make the roaring stop. “I have to go.”

“Wait—”

“I just need air!” he said, but he could hear the animal in his voice. He was going to Change, and then what? Go for the nest? He had to stop this.

“Please stay here,” he whispered desperately. He didn’t want her to see him like this.

He left her there in bed, her worried questions following him down the hall.

What did it mean? What did any of this mean? He never dreamed.

The cool air hit his cheeks and he shook his head, trying to steady the animal in his head. He picked up the pace and jogged toward his truck.

“I don’t understand!” Jenna called from the open doorway of her trailer. “What did I do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong,” he assured her as he opened the door to his truck. Thank God he’d left the keys in here last

night. "I'll be back in a little bit. Just need a few minutes."
Even he could hear the lie in his voice.

He checked his rearview mirror as he pulled away, and it was another vision of her that would stick with him. She wasn't on her knees crying, but the look on her face would haunt him. Later, when he was in control, he would need to explain that she truly hadn't done anything wrong. He was wrong. He was messed up. He was a motherfucking monster. It was his problem, his issues.

Jenna was an angel who had opened herself up to the darkness in him. She'd given him the gift of her vulnerability and what was his animal doing? Planning her pain?

"What *is* it?" he growled to himself as he ripped his gaze away from her in the mirror and focused on the gravel road leading down the mountain. "Huh? You'll destroy anything I have with a woman? You want to be alone forever? Is that it? Fight everything until you die?"

The animal was quiet, just sitting inside of him feeling bigger than the truck, scratching at his skin.

Fuck him.

Lucas would keep him tucked away until he was far away from Jenna's nest.

The least he could do was protect her from himself.

Chapter Fifteen

Confusion had been her constant companion today.

Jenna shook her head for the twentieth time today and tried to focus on the invoice in front of her. She just kept staring out her office window, and that wasn't solving anything. She needed to focus on work. She could do her falling apart gig when she got home, when she was by herself.

Kong walked past the door to her office and glanced quickly inside. He'd been hanging in the office all day, and he never did that.

"I'm fine," she called. "You don't have to keep checking up on me."

"I can smell your sadness," Kong rumbled as he came to stand in the open doorway.

"Stop sniffing me and go do something productive." She'd tried to say it in a teasing manner, but the smile was absent from her voice.

Kong just stared at her. They'd had to put bigger doorways in this place so he could get through them without ducking as much, and he filled up every inch of that open doorway. He was a beast, and quick to get on the boys when they were losing focus, but with her, he'd always been softer.

"Is it Lucas?"

She sighed, put her pencil down, and stared. "It's me."
Falling for unavailable men.

“I called Kirk.”

“What?” she demanded.

Kong shrugged. “I wanted to know where Lucas was.”

“I’m betting he doesn’t know, and stay out of it. Please. I love that you care, but I want to handle my life on my own. Everything is fine.”

“When Layla says everything is fine, everything is definitely not fine. Everything is on fire.”

She rolled her eyes closed and huffed a laugh, defeated. “It will be fine. Better?”

“I would throttle him, but he’s a son of the mountains. I would have Kirk’s silverback down my throat, and then Ally, and then the damn dragon himself. Still, if you think it’ll help, I can challenge him. This ol’ silverback can still cause some mayhem.”

His offer touched her heart. “Oh, I have no doubt. I don’t need anyone fighting my battles though. He was open and honest. He told me what he wanted and what he needed. I fell anyway.” She nodded, and admitted, “I have no one to blame but me.” She knew he could hear the truth in her voice.

“Okay.” He turned to leave, and then turned back to her. “Do you want a chocolate bar or anything?”

Jenna pursed her lips. That was for periods, but she didn’t really want to discuss that with her boss. Sometimes protective silverbacks needed a job to feel like they were helping, so she nodded and said, “Sure. I would love that.”

His eyes lit up and he did an about-face and jogged right out the front door, calling over his shoulder, "I'm going to find you one!"

And that was a blessing. Okay. She needed to be counting the good things she had going in her life. She had a new trailer. It was in a Crew of total misfits, but that was okay. She had a good job, and another order for a flatbed trailer job had just come through her website this morning. She would have plenty to keep her busy while she was trying not to think of Lucas. She and Cadence were kind of almost friends. And next week was the annual Pizza Roll Barbecue, put on by Bash, who would be grilling hundreds of pizza rolls for everyone. She had things to look forward to. Her life was exactly the same as before Lucas had disrupted it. Exactly the same. No change. Everything was fine.

So why were her damn eyes burning, and her bottom lip quivering? Oh right, because she had opened up to a man and he disappeared before the dawn. Angry with herself, she dashed her knuckles across her damp cheeks and clenched her teeth and returned her distracted attention back to the invoice laying on her desk. There was a stupid tear stain on the signature line.

A low, soft rumbling sound tickled her ears. It got louder by the second, and she stared out the window, trying to figure out what that noise was. It wasn't a truck engine, or any of the machines in the lumberyard.

It got louder and louder, and outside, the small tree by her window bowed under a harsh wind that kicked up out of nowhere.

The entire building was rattling now, and she stood so fast that the chair behind her fell backward. It was so loud, she plugged her ears and ran for the front door.

Outside, it was a tornado, but the reason for it became immediately clear.

A helicopter was landing in the middle of the lumberyard.

What the hell?

She stumbled outside and watched as Kong ran low toward the pilot. He talked to him for a few seconds and then his eyes went directly to Jenna. He twitched his head.

“Me?” she yelled, stunned.

Kong bolted for her, running low under the wind the chopper blades were creating. He made it halfway and then gestured for her to come.

“What the hell is happening?” she muttered as she grabbed her purse.

When she reached Kong, he yelled over the wind noise, “The dragon wants to see you.”

“Damon wants to see me? Why?”

“Mason wouldn’t say.”

Oh shit. Damon had sent Mason, the Beast Boar, to pick her up? She hadn’t even realized he knew how to fly choppers.

“Here,” Kong said, shoving a half-melted candy bar into her hands. “Good luck!”

He jogged off as she stood there with her hands out, wondering what the heck was happening. Good gah, today was

just getting weirder and weirder. She made her way to the chopper, hunched under the pressure of the wind. Kru was in the back already, face somber. Okaaay. Jenna climbed in beside him and took her seat, then put on the headset that Kru handed her. Before she could even ask what was happening, the chopper lurched upward.

She rushed to buckle.

Kru's voice came over the headset. "Dude, if we crash, you can just fly away. You don't need a seatbelt."

"Well, I don't know. I've never been in one of these things. What is happening?"

Kru shrugged up his shoulders. "Hell if I know. If I had to guess? I would say we're headed to the lair of the dragon."

Holy shit. In all her years, she'd never been in Damon Daye's mountainside mansion.

"You gonna eat that?" Kru asked, pointing to her candy bar.

"Umm, I guess not." She handed it over. "Hi, Mason. Long time no see."

"Three weeks, at least," the pilot, and Damon's right-hand man, said over the headset as he guided the chopper toward the mountains.

"How's Air Ryder doing?"

"He and Lexi are expecting another baby." The pride in Mason's voice was thick, and drew a smile to her lips.

"They're coming in for the PR Barbecue next week. All of Harper's Mountains will be here that whole week."

“It’ll be like old times,” she murmured. Except for Lucas. She could see the running written all over his face this morning. She would be surrounded by the people she loved, but not the one she loved the most. “Stop,” she uttered, squeezing her eyes closed.

Kru’s hand squeezed her shoulder in a gesture that was shockingly caring. He gave her a lopsided, sympathetic smile. “Some of them leave,” was all he said.

Great. Did everyone in Smashland know what had happened?

Small towns worked like that—where everyone knew everyone else’s business. By tomorrow, the entirety of Damon’s Mountains would know about her rejection.

She blew out a slow breath and watched the woods below them. It was a familiar sight. She always flew this high when she was Changed.

The sheer cliff face Damon’s home was etched into looked like a postcard. A waterfall trailed down one side, and a huge notch was taken out of the top of the cliff from a war Damon had with a rival dragon years ago. The greenery in front of the entryway at the base of the cliff was perfectly landscaped, and they landed slowly on a helicopter pad a couple hundred yards away from the front door. As she and Kru got out, she could see someone waiting for them just outside the halo of wind generated from the helicopter blades.

Cadence stood there with her arms crossed over her chest. She waved, and Jenna reciprocated.

“Okay, so the dragon has brought in most of the Crew,” Kru said over the noise of the chopper.

Mason cut the engine and slid out, leaving his headset behind. “This way.”

He led them to Cadence and then in through the front door.

“What’s going on?” she asked Cadence, but all she answered was, “An ultimatum.”

Kru exchanged a hell-if-I-know glance with Jenna and then they went to work removing their shoes in the sprawling entryway. It was cavernous, and an enormous black chandelier hung from the rock ceiling. The home was an eclectic mix of bare stone wall and wood. The marble tile beneath their feet was pristine white and squeaky clean.

“Smells like grizzly in here,” Kru murmured under his breath.

“Clara is a grizzly.”

“Different bear,” Kru said.

And that’s when her falcon vision kicked in. Down a long, dark hallway, she saw a familiar pair of eyes reflecting oddly in the dim light. One was silver, and one was blue.

Gunner.

Kru had been wrong. It wasn’t most of the Crew that Damon had gathered here.

He’d gathered all of them.

Gunner’s eyes swayed back and forth slowly, as if he was walking, but he never got any closer. He was just standing

there, shifting his weight from side to side.

She'd known Gunner all her life. Over the years, as he'd slowly lost control, she'd learned much about the new him. One of those things was that he only recognized her sometimes. She could tell from his empty glare that now was not one of those times. She dropped her gaze.

“Head in there,” Mason said softly, his gaze on the bear down the hall. He gestured to the right. “Whatever happens tonight, you are not to interfere. None of you are.”

Kru's frown was on the Beast Boar as he waited for Jenna and Cadence to head into the cavernous room Mason had gestured to. He kept himself between Gunner and the women.

Kru was many things, but she had learned he was protective under all that bravado and joking.

As they made their way through a sprawling great room with an enormous picture window, moose-antler chandeliers, and a stone hearth that stretched all the way up to the thirty foot ceiling, she saw someone sitting by the fireplace with their back to them.

As the woman stood and faced them, Jenna's heart rate kicked up to a gallop.

On either side of Jenna, Cadence and Kru came to an abrupt halt.

Oh, they all knew who she was.

Lucia Novak, middle daughter of Beaston and Aviana Novak, and the only female offspring to have inherited the *sight*.

“Hello, Warlanders.”

It was Kru who spoke up. “We don’t have a name for our Crew yet.”

“You will,” Lucia said in that robotic voice Jenna remembered from their childhoods.

“Let me guess. Warlanders?” Kru asked. “Makes no sense. We aren’t at war with anyone.”

“Aren’t you at war?” Lucia asked. Her face didn’t even twitch as she asked that question. Her eyebrows didn’t move, her lips didn’t curve up in a smile. Her bright-green eyes slid to Jenna and held. “Do you know why you are here?”

She couldn’t hold Lucia’s gaze, so she dropped her own to the polished marble floor. “N-no.”

“You are bait—”

“Lucia,” a powerful voice reprimanded her, echoing through the great room. It was Damon’s voice.

Lucia turned her beautiful face to the side as if she was listening to something, then nodded. “Follow me,” she told the three of them. Then she turned and strode into a hallway, disappearing into the shadows.

“We should leave,” Cadence warned low. “I don’t like any of this.”

“You don’t like it? I just got called bait by Lucia Novak.”

“Why does everyone say her last name like that?” Kru grumbled, shoving past them to follow Lucia. “She’s just a person.”

Cadence's blonde brows arched high and she turned to Jenna. *Because she's a motherfuckin' Novak*, she mouthed. *Do you want to leave?*

Jenna turned to look back at the escape route, but Gunner was standing there, leaned against the doorframe in his human form, looking like he'd put on ten pounds of muscle since the last time she'd seen him. His gaze was completely empty.

Who was the bigger bear? Lucia or Gunner?

A redheaded woman walked past Gunner and smiled at Jenna.

Clara. Clara was the bigger bear.

"Hi," Jenna whispered to Damon's mate.

"You're safe," she told Jenna and Cadence as she rested her hands on the smalls of their backs. "It'll be a bad night, not a bad life."

Cadence arched back and tossed Jenna a what-the-fuck look behind Clara's back, but the red-haired she-grizzly wasn't letting them fall behind.

Gunner was following them at a distance, making the entire mansion feel like it was crushing them.

Between Gunner, Lucia, and Clara, Jenna felt like she was being herded into something big.

Chapter Sixteen

“What am I doing here?” Lucas ground out.

Damon sat across from him at the enormous meeting hall table. His dark hair only had a noble silver streak at the front, though Lucas had no idea how old the dragon truly was. He hadn't changed much over the years. He still looked like he was in his mid-forties. He'd seen his blue dragon though, and he was massive. Even now, Damon thickened every molecule of air in this room. He wondered absently if Clara ever got used to the pressure that clung to the room around Damon.

“You have a wound,” Damon said simply.

Lucas leaned back into his chair and stretched his leg out. A wise shifter never showed weakness in front of a dragon. “I went to the fight barn the other night.”

“I know. I was there. That isn't the wound I'm talking about.”

Lucas lowered his chin to his chest and waited, with no idea what Damon was talking about.

“You carved it into your animal when you were a young blackback, and no one realized how bad it was.”

Aaaah. Gunner. The chair creaked as Lucas leaned forward. He rested his elbows on the table and clenched his fists in front of his mouth. “I appreciate you giving me a way out back then, but the point of me leaving was to move forward. Since I've come back here, everyone keeps bringing

up the past. Surely you can understand that I don't want to live in the past."

"And that was supposed to work. You had a way out, but you are the son of Kirk." Damon's lips ticked up in a fast smile. "Do you know, you remind me much of him? I sometimes think you took the best traits of the Boarlanders, and I have watched you with pride over the years. But as I've watched you handle the jobs that I've given you, over time, my heart has softened for you. At first I thought you were just wanting to be good at the jobs I was giving you, but then I paid attention. You did not revel in the shifters that couldn't be saved. You were fueled by the ones you did save. The ones you couldn't pierce your heart. I could see it. On those bad jobs, I could see you weren't fighting the killers. You weren't fighting the ones who had lost control."

"Who was I fighting, then?" Lucas asked.

"Yourself."

Lucas cracked his knuckles and exhaled a sigh, because it did feel like Damon saw too much. He'd paid too much attention.

"I have an apology to make to someone," he murmured, standing.

"To Jenna?"

Lucas nodded once. "I'm a mess here. Perhaps next time I visit won't be as difficult."

"Sit down, Lucas."

"All I need is the next job, Damon. The next job, and the next job, and the next job until there are no more jobs. I'm

good. I'm steady when I work. I know my place outside of these mountains. You said you wanted a dinner with me, but Clara isn't even here. I don't want to talk about my past or my feelings or let you break down what kind of man I am. You're my boss. Put me to work."

"If you would've healed that wound you gave your animal all those years ago, we wouldn't be here. You failed, Lucas."

He curled his lips back over his teeth. "I've done everything you've asked of me."

"You haven't failed me, boy. You have failed you, and I've thought about it so much. Too much, perhaps. But I aided you in getting here, where you can't even visit home without pain. You can't cling to your pain forever."

"I don't cling to it at all. When I'm outside of here, I don't think about the things that happened. Everyone has shit, Damon. Everyone here has made mistakes, or had something happen to them, or made a wrong move that affected their Crew-mates. Everyone. I picked a mate early, but my animal wasn't ready."

Damon's dark eyebrow arched up. "And then she chose your friend."

Rage was heating his blood. "Gunner wasn't my friend."

"Yes, he was."

Lucas slammed his fist onto the table and yelled, "A friend wouldn't do that!"

Damon remained seated, and silence descended over the room for five breaths. "And that, Lucas, is the wound you

have failed to heal. How can you ever believe in the value of a Crew if you don't forgive him?"

The door across the cavernous room creaked open, and the woman who sauntered through it made Lucas's racing heart lurch.

Lucia lifted her chin higher into the air and looked down her nose at him. He'd seen her in that awful dream last night. She'd pulled a rifle trigger on him. She'd been the reason Jenna was in that damn cage in his dream.

"I was protecting her from you," said Lucia.

Before his questions could part from his lips, Kru came in through the door, then Cadence, Clara, and...

"Jenna," he murmured in surprise.

She wore her hair down today in loose waves. Her full lips were slightly parted in confusion, and her pretty silver eyes swirled with shock as she locked her gaze on his. A pair of skintight leggings clung to her curves, and she wore a simple, fitted maroon shirt with a flannel tied at her waist. She was a light surrounded by shadows. He'd never seen her look so beautiful.

Behind where she'd halted, a giant entered the room, and the scent of Gunner's dominant grizzly struck his senses just as he laid eyes on the shifter that had haunted him.

Lucas's fists clenched at his sides as Gunner leaned against the wall, unblinking bi-colored eyes trained on him.

He didn't understand. "Why are they here?" he gritted out to Damon as Clara came to stand behind her seated mate.

“This is the first meeting of the Warlanders,” Damon said.

Jenna frowned over at Lucia. “Her too?” she asked.

Lucia’s face stayed passive, as if she hadn’t heard Jenna.

“Lucia has requested to come back to the mountains, and her father feels like this would be the best situation for her,” Damon explained.

“Even if I was okay with moving back here, which I’m not, and even if I was okay with the combination of fuck-ups in this Crew, which they all are except for Jenna, and I was okay with giving up my livelihood to come back and fade out in these mountains,” Lucas said. “What in the actual hell do you think I’m going to do in a Crew with that one?” He lifted a finger and pointed directly at Gunner. “It’s a fuck-no on all counts.”

“Great,” Lucia said. “Can I go now?”

“No,” Damon clipped out. “All of you sit down.”

It was Kru who moved first. “I’ll take a seat. I want to see this shit-show firsthand.”

Cadence snorted and followed him toward the table. Jenna hung back and scooted farther from Gunner, who was still staring like a psychopath. She got a few feet away from Lucia and tried to smile at her, then ducked her gaze and with her head down, she scuttled toward the table.

If Lucas wasn’t so fucking pissed-off right now, he would’ve thought it was cute. “I’m out. Damon, let me know when you have a job for me.”

“This is the job.”

“I’m not being the head of some Crew just because you order me to!”

“Then Gunner will be!” Damon snapped.

Well, that drew him up.

Kru raised his hand. “Can we vote? I don’t want to be one of the monster’s minions, if you know what I mean. No offense, Gunner, but you aren’t exactly firing on all pistons.”

Gunner curled his lips back over too-sharp canines as an answer.

“Plus, communication skills are lacking,” Kru added. “And I’m also pretty sure Alphas aren’t supposed to eat their Crew-mates, and he definitely tried to eat me the other day in the woods.”

“That one shot me in the face in a dream,” Lucas said, pointing to Lucia.

“Bet you deserved it,” she said through a smirk.

Okay, she had done it after he destroyed Jenna’s dream-nest. “Can you see people’s dreams?” he asked, creeped out.

“I see nothing,” Lucia said with a shrug. “Or maybe I’ve seen your death.”

“Lucia, enough,” Damon murmured.

“Spoiler alert, you choke on a cheese cracker,” Lucia said.

“Oh my God, this is awesome,” Kru said. “Do me next.”

Lucia twitched her chin toward Gunner. “So far I’ve got that one killing most of you. I survive, of course.”

“Whoa,” Cadence said. “Are you being serious?”

“Probably not, but maybe so,” Lucia said.

“Um, I’m concerned that she’s actually accurate with that,” Kru murmured.

“He won’t hurt any of you,” Lucas gritted out.

Gunner had been glaring him down this entire time, and now a small smile ghosted his lips. “Who will stop me?”

“You fucking know who. Damon, clearly you can see he doesn’t belong in any Crew. You can feel him. You can smell him. He’s sick, and not the kind that goes away. It’s a bad idea to put him in charge of this Crew!”

“Then you do it,” the dragon said simply.

“This isn’t my life!”

“It always was!” Damon barked out, standing.

“I changed that!” Lucas yelled, pounding his fist against his chest. “Cadence changed that! Gunner changed that!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Cadence said, her voice pitched up with anger.

“You didn’t?” Lucas blurted. “Seriously?”

“You broke up with me!”

“I freed you! And before I even had time to figure myself out or try and fix anything, you went to Gunner! You threw yourself at my friend!”

“I was hurt, Lucas!” Cadence yelled. “I was young and I was hurt! He wasn’t just your friend! He was mine, too!”

“So you fucked him?”

“I made a bad decision! I...” Cadence’s eyes filled with emotion.

“Say it. Might as well,” Lucas uttered.

“I wanted to hurt you back.”

There it was. Now they were being honest.

“You know the most fucked-up part of all that?” came a demonic voice from across the room—Gunner. “I didn’t want to hurt either of you.”

“Then why?” Lucas asked. “Why did you immediately go for the girl I had told you I wanted a life with? I had called her my mate. Why did you go for her? Just to shit on me?” he yelled.

“Because I wanted her!” Gunner bellowed, pushing off the wall. “Your animal didn’t choose her! Mine did!”

Truth.

“Holy. Shit,” Jenna whispered shakily. She’d been quiet up until now.

“Wait, what?” Cadence asked in a small voice.

“Do you know what it was like watching the two of you kick the dead horse of your relationship for all those years? Anyone around you could tell you weren’t right for each other. You weren’t bonding like you were supposed to.” Gunner approached slow and jammed a finger at Lucas. “You! You dragged your animal through that relationship because you were stubborn and didn’t want to quit, didn’t want anyone else to have a shot, didn’t want anyone to have her if you couldn’t. I watched it for years, while my animal knew exactly what he

wanted. I was patient. I waited for you to figure it out, and you did. You cut her loose, and she came to me a few nights later. She wanted me to help her go numb, and that's what I did! And it felt good, and it felt right, and I don't have any regrets."

"You don't have regrets?" Lucas asked, his rage simmering through his veins.

"I regret nothing!"

"You were my friend!"

"I never claimed to be a good friend! I am what I am! I take what I want, I do what I want, but you know what happened in the end? You. Won."

Lucas shook his head. That made no damn sense. "I left the mountains. I left my home. I had to put distance between me and every memory I made here. I had to completely start over and pretend I didn't have this huge hole inside of me named Damon's Mountains. You got a shot at what you had always wanted. You had a shot at bonding to the woman you wanted. You got to keep the mountains. You got to keep home!"

"Tell him," Gunner growled at Cadence.

Cadence was staring at the ground, and from here, Lucas could see a tear fall to the marble floor.

"Tell him!" Gunner yelled.

"My animal didn't choose Gunner back." Cadence swallowed hard, and then whispered, "I was no better than you, Lucas."

Gunner's eyes were vibrant silver and green, and the air was thick with his dominance. "The only one who bonded here...was me. And while Damon gave you an escape, my animal set up territory near his mate, who didn't want him back, and I got stuck. You got to leave the memories behind and blame me because it felt better to do that than to call yourself out. And I was here, living my unhappily ever after without a mate, knowing you hated me when I was suffering and ripping a bond from my soul. No one hates you as much as me, Lucas. Not even you. This Crew will be mine. I challenge you for it."

"I don't think we should do this," Cadence whispered.

"I challenge you," Gunner said, sauntering away. He removed his shirt as he went, exposing the scars Lucas had made on him all those years ago. Memories of the awful rage that had consumed him all those years ago washed over him.

"I don't want either of you!" Cadence said, her voice echoing against the tall walls.

Gunner pulled a face. "No one wants you either." Truth. Oh, he had succeeded in pulling that bond, and now it was becoming clear the cost to him. Gunner was sick. He was a shifter Damon would've sent Lucas to visit if he wasn't a son of the mountains.

"Gunner, this is a bad idea," Jenna murmured, following after him a few steps. "I think we need to take some time and decompress."

Gunner turned and bellowed to Lucas, "I challenge you!"

"I don't want the Crew!" Lucas roared back.

“Good. They don’t want you either. I challenge you.”
Gunner paced in the echoing space between the table and the door.

Fury had been pounding through him with every beat of his heart. Lucas knew what he had to do. He’d dreamed of this moment, but things were different now. Now he understood things differently. He’d been given a glimpse of the other side.

Damon had been right—he’d been clinging to his wounds.

So had Gunner.

Sometimes the only way to heal was to get through the hurt.

This wasn’t for the Crew, or for territory. This was to settle the score once and for all.

“Challenge accepted.”

Chapter Seventeen

Lucas peeled his shirt over his head, and a massive gorilla shredded out of his body and slammed two fists against the floor, cracking the marble tiles in dual lines that ended right at where Gunner's massive grizzly was ripping out of him.

"Damon, do something!" Jenna yelled.

The blue dragon and his mate had reached the door, hand in hand. "I am." And then he exited and the door slammed closed behind him.

Lucas's gorilla had to be fifteen feet tall when he stood on his hind legs to beat his chest like this! Jenna stared at him with a mixture of horror and awe as he lowered to all fours and charged the scarred, chocolate-brown grizzly.

Gunner pushed off of his powerful back end and caught the gorilla's charge full-force. The impact sent a wave of pressure through the room that knocked them all backward into the table. Jenna cried out as a massive boulder fell from the ceiling. Kru gripped her around the waist and threw her and Cadence backward, then fell to his knees and braced his arm over his head. The boulder fell directly onto him, but cracked down the middle and fell in two massive stones on either side of him.

"What the hell?" Jenna murmured from where she had come to a skidding stop on her hands and knees.

"Lucia, get out!" Kru yelled as the fight raged over toward her side of the room.

Lucia was pulling as hard as she could on the handle of the door. “Clara!” she screamed, beating her fist against the door. “Take the magic off! Let us out!”

“Lucia, move or Change!” Jenna screamed as the battle careened for her. “Move or Change!”

Lucia flashed a bright-green glance over her shoulder, and her eyes widened as she released the door. She disappeared behind the roaring, warring grizzly and silverback.

Shit, she was frozen.

Jenna closed her eyes and let the falcon have her skin, struggled out of the neck of her shirt and kicked up into the air. She dove for Gunner, who was about to crush Lucia. She wasn't going to make it!

Something tan blurred from the side and hit Lucia, and she went flying. A bloodcurdling scream escaped her throat as she sailed through the air.

Change!

Why wasn't she Changing?

Just as she was about to hit the ground, a white tiger leapt through the air and caught her in her powerful arms, twisted in the air, and landed hard on her back, cradling Lucia. Cadence!

And the tan blur was...was...

Holy. Shit.

A monstrous animal roared and pushed the fight away from where he was pinned on the wall with massive paws and powerful arms.

Jenna landed beside Lucia and Cadence, and gawked as the animal slunk toward them.

It looked like a lion, but with no mane. Down its legs were tiger stripes, but the rest of its coat was solid brown. Two-foot-long canines curved down the front of its face, and Kru's ears were pinned back, his eyes on fire as he stalked toward them.

"That's a saber-toothed tiger," Lucia whispered.

"We should move," Cadence growled in that animal voice of her tiger.

"That's a saber-toothed tiger!" Lucia said louder.

"He doesn't have control of the animal!" Cadence snarled.

She kicked Lucia off of her and caught Kru's pounce full-force in the chest, and the tiger battle went savage. Kru's saber-toothed tiger was twice the size of Cadence's white tiger!

Lucia was frozen, eyes wide, panicked.

Change! Why wasn't she Changing?!

Jenna lifted into the air far enough to wrap her talons around Lucia's upper arms and dragged her backward across the cracked marble tiles. She could feel her sharp talons digging into the woman's skin, but there wasn't any help for it.

The silverback slammed the grizzly against the wall, and more rocks began falling like rain around them. They were going to bring the entire damn mansion down!

Something was wrong with Lucia's bear. Right now, Jenna couldn't even smell the fur on her. Lucia might as well

be a human in a shifter fight!

Beating her wings as hard as she could, Jenna half-flew, half-dragged Lucia across the floor to the other side of the room, and then she flapped her wings as hard as she could and dragged Lucia up and up, up to the exposed rafters that helped to hold the ceiling in place. Lucia seemed to understand what she was doing. She reached for the rafter and pulled herself up, draped her body over the exposed beam. “Get Cadence out of there!”

Stay there! God, she hoped the seer understood what she needed.

Jenna pinned her wings and dove for Kru. Lucas and Gunner were tearing each other apart, but that fight was fair. Whatever was supposed to be would be with them. Kru and Cadence’s fight though? It wasn’t fair. Sure, Cadence was giving Kru absolute hell, and she wasn’t backing down an inch, but her white coat was staining red.

Jenna screeched as she slashed at his face with her talons. Kru disengaged and shook his head hard, slinging rivers of crimson from the gashes near his eyes.

Cadence moved on instinct. She bolted for the wall under Lucia’s beam and ran as far up it as she could. *Fuck yes, atta girl.* She knew just what Jenna needed! She just needed help getting there.

Cadence twisted in the air and leapt for the exposed beam. Lucia was reaching out as far as she could, but Cadence’s paw brushed her fingertips and missed.

It was okay! She'd done most of the work. Jenna swooped in and clutched her extended arm, contorted her body mid-air, and used Cadence's momentum to flip her back toward the beam. Lucia caught her and grunted as she used her shifter strength to drag the tiger up. It wasn't pretty, but Cadence scrambled up there and clung to the beam as Kru took a running leap at the wall.

Oh fuck! Time slowed. Kru used his powerful hind end to push off the wall and sailed through the air, arms extended, murder in his eyes as he aimed directly for Lucia and Cadence.

Jenna turned for him, but she was too late. Her angle was off and she wouldn't reach them in time. *No, no, no!*

Lucia was screaming, and Cadence's tiger had her lips pulled back in a hiss, her paw poised to slap at him as she clung to the beam with her other.

Jenna aimed for him, beating her wings frantically, but she wouldn't get to him in time. She wouldn't get there!

Kru's claws extended to encircle Lucia, but just as he began to wrap his powerful arms around her, Kru jerked violently and then disappeared.

With a war screech, Jenna twisted and landed gripping the wall with her powerful talons, just in time to see Lucas throw the saber-toothed tiger against the stone wall.

More rocks loosed from the ceiling and crashed around them. One hit Lucas, but he shook his head and braced for the impact of Gunner, who was charging him.

Gunner was hurt. He was limping, moving like one of his front legs was broken. His fur was wet and matted with blood.

Lucas gripped his neck and drove him to the wall, then roared into his face. He shoved him against the wall again and lifted his fist to finish it.

This. Was. *Tragic*. Jenna adored them both. She understood both of their pain. This was always their destiny—a battle of the monsters.

Gunner had lost.

She winced as Lucas's fist connected. With her eyes tightly closed, she waited for it—waited for the breath to stop, for Gunner's body to slump to the floor.

She waited for it to be over.

But the racing heartbeats continued, and the labored breathing still existed. When she eased her eyes open, Lucas's fist was lodged deep into the cracked stone right beside Gunner's massive head. Their sparking, furious gazes were on each other for three breaths.

Jenna released the stone wall and landed on the table, stunned.

Lucas hadn't killed him. He hadn't.

Instead, Lucas rested his forehead against Gunner's for a moment, then pushed off him and allowed the grizzly to slump to the floor.

Lucas looked around the room—at Lucia and Cadence as they slipped to the floor from high above. At Kru's wrecked body, where he'd Changed back into his human form and fallen below the indentation he'd made in the stone wall. Kru gritted his teeth in pain but stood slowly.

Lucas's gorilla dragged his gaze to Gunner, and then he blinked slowly and looked to Jenna.

She didn't understand the gorilla's expression. His eyes were so full of...something.

He made his way to her, dragging himself to her smoothly on those powerful legs and arms. He came to a halt right in front of her, then lifted his massive hand, and slowly, slowly, he brushed a knuckle down her neck. He searched her eyes, and she could've sworn she understood his thoughts. His feelings. *It's done.*

He turned and snatched up his clothes as he made his way to the door.

He pushed it open easily and ducked under the oversized frame, disappeared as the door swung closed.

"I told you," Lucia murmured as she came to stand beside where Jenna was perched. "Fuckin' Warlanders."

Aren't you at war? Lucia's earlier words drifted through Jenna's head as she watched Gunner get up and shake himself off, then limp toward the door. She watched Cadence, now shifted back to her human form and gathering her clothes. She stood and jammed a finger at Kru, who looked like he absolutely hated himself. "Fuck you," Cadence growled out, and then walked out.

Aren't you at war?

"Thanks for saving me from the *Crew*," Lucia spat out, and then followed the others out.

Now, only Jenna and Kru remained. "Thank you," he gritted out hoarsely.

Jenna cocked her head, unsure of what he meant.

“Thank you for keeping them out of my reach.” He lowered his eyes to the floor, stood, and walked out.

Aren't you at war?

Lucia had been right.

Jenna closed her eyes as realization washed over her.

They were at war with themselves.

Chapter Eighteen

Jenna found Lucas outside of Damon's mansion. He was staring up at the darkening sky, his hands linked behind his head.

He looked so big, so strong, so invincible—even clawed-up and bitten. But the hitch in his breath reached her on the wind. “I don't know what I'm doing.” He didn't even turn around.

“None of us do,” she told him. “We're all trying to figure things out.”

He unlinked his hands and twisted around to look at her. His bright eyes were full of emotion, and he shook his head. “You know. You know what you're doing.”

She let off a thick laugh and dropped her gaze. She wouldn't admit it out loud, but it was because she couldn't witness the pain in his eyes without feeling pain too. Love was many things. That was one of them.

“Things are different than I thought,” he told her.

With a slow inhalation of breath, she closed the distance between them and slipped her hand into his. “I think this should be the last job you do for Damon.”

“Taking over the Crew?”

“No. The last job should be *you*. Figure out that you're salvageable, Lucas. And when you figure it out, come back

home someday.”

He squeezed her hand gently. “You’re the only one who doesn’t pressure me here.”

Jenna shrugged her shoulders up to her ears and watched the sunset with him. He smelled of blood, and pain, and confusion. Messy heads needed space sometimes. “If I begged you to stay, would you?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation.

A smile pursed her lips. He hadn’t said the L-word, but it felt like he had. “I don’t want to earn your resentment, Lucas. I want you to be happy. I *need* you to be happy. I don’t think you can figure out what this place is if you don’t have the chance to miss it.”

“I already did that before.”

“Not like this. Not when you’re in your healing season. You’ll think about us when you’re driving those long roads out of here. You’ll see us in your jobs. You’ll ask yourself what you’re doing so far away from this place.”

“I’ll think about you.”

“I have had so much fun with you.” She rested her cheek against his shoulder and wished things could be different. She didn’t want to say goodbye, but Lucas deserved for her to make this easy. “The wind is calling me.” Jenna forced a smile and made her way toward the woods.

“Saying goodbye already?” he called after her.

“I don’t do goodbyes. I’m saying see you when I see you, Lucas Slater.” She tossed a smile over her shoulder and then

forced herself not to look back until she was deep in the trees.

He stood there for a minute, eyes holding a faraway look in the direction she was. He nodded to himself and made his way to the parking lot on the side, where she could see now his truck was parked. As he started his engine and meandered down the dark asphalt road that led away from Damon's mountain home, the first tear escaped to her cheek. She allowed it.

He'd said an I-love-you by telling her he would stay if she asked.

She was saying I-love-you by letting him go.

She rested her shoulder blades against the trunk of a great tree and listened to the fading of his engine as he drove away from here. Away from her. *Please come back soon.*

With a shuddering breath, she peeled her shirt over her head and let the falcon take her skin. She wanted the animal to see him off, so she could get some closure. So she wouldn't be building her empty nest with him in her mind. As Lucas wound his way through Damon's Mountains, she followed high above. Usually she didn't feel the cold of the wind, but today was different. She shivered. Her wings twitched with the movement, and she dipped in the sky.

When he passed the territory line of Damon's Mountains, she circled twice, watching until his truck disappeared, and then she aimed her wings toward a little trailer park nestled in the heart of the mountains. She passed Asheland Mobile Park, where everything had started. She passed the Boarlanders and the Gray Backs, and when she reached Smashland Mobile Park, the others were returning home. Cadence was getting out

of her truck tenderly, and Kru sauntered out of the woods. He cast a sad smile up at the sky. Gunner limped out of the woods behind him and trudged up the stairs of 1010. He cast a quick glance up to the sky at her, and then disappeared inside. He was hurt, but he would heal.

Lucia wasn't here. She would probably never settle here without a viable Alpha. Plus, something was wrong with her animal. She should've Changed during the fight, and something had prevented it.

What a mess.

Jenna didn't know what they would all do now. Maybe some of them would move off without leadership. Or maybe this would just be home, with no title of "Crew." Perhaps this would always be an in-between stepping stone for them.

Jenna wanted to give Smashland some time and see if it stuck. Besides, she liked the memories she'd made here. Lucas had been here. His scent would linger for a little while, and after she was done feeling sorry for herself, those memories would make her smile.

This had been the worst, and also the best, week of her life.

Gunner had said he had no regrets.

Well?

Neither did she.

Epilogue

“Jenna! Load up!” Cadence called out from where she was loading the back of Jenna’s flatbed truck with an old blue cooler. “What are you staring at? Let’s go! We’ll be late!”

Jenna nodded and told her, “Be right there!”

And then she knelt down and lifted up the small plastic cage. Inside, there was a brown mouse with enormous balls. A smile took her face. She couldn’t help it, all the memories of the random pet field mice in the different trailers at Asheland Mobile Park drifted across her mind and filled her heart. The first mouse in the mountains, Nards, was somewhat of a legend.

The little mouse ran over to the small water dish and took a quick sip, then placed his tiny hands on the plastic cage and stared at her with his big eyes, his whiskers twitching as he sniffed the air. She needed to come up with a good name for him.

“You like him?”

Jenna grinned at Kru, who was sauntering across the clearing with a couple of six-packs of beer in his grasp.

“Thank you for the present.”

“I didn’t get you that. I got you these.” He lifted up a pack of the fruity beers she liked.

“Oh.” She frowned at the mouse and set the cage inside of her doorway. Maybe Gunner got him for her. Or Cadence? Or

hell, Lucia might have gotten it. She had visited a couple of times in the last week, but hadn't talked to them. They could just smell when she was near.

"I'll be back soon," she told the little mouse as she closed the door behind her.

Today was the day.

Bash was throwing his annual Pizza Roll Barbecue for all of the Crews on Damon's Mountains, and this year, the Warlanders had been given an official invite. None of them had the heart to tell him they had all been packing up their trailers and would move on. Kru and Cadence were scheduled to move out tomorrow, but today? Today they were all determined to have a good day.

They had made a pact around the firepit last night. Even Gunner had agreed to it, even though he'd barely talked since the challenge a week ago.

Jenna draped the strap of her purse across her chest and jogged down the stairs. As she settled behind the steering wheel, Cadence climbed into the passenger's side and smiled. "You ready?"

"No," she said softly. "And yes. I don't want today to be over. It'll go by fast."

Cadence shrugged. "Can't stop change, Brown."

Didn't mean she didn't want to, though. As she put the truck into gear, she checked the rearview. Kru had climbed up onto the bed and sat with his back resting against the cab of the truck. That wasn't what had her frozen though. Gunner

was settling onto the edge of her flatbed, and also? So was Lucia.

She frowned and rolled down her window. “I didn’t know you would be riding with us,” she called to Lucia.

“It’s a big day,” she said somberly as she sat by Gunner and stared out at the woods.

Jenna and Cadence exchanged glances. Okaaaay.

Even with everyone here, she had her moment—the one where she missed Lucas. There was a huge shadow over this place now, something missing, something incomplete. Or perhaps it was just something that was missing inside of her.

She missed him terribly.

If he only knew what she had done to the nest in the past week, how big she’d built it, he would think her crazy. Bright side: he wasn’t here to see her unsteadiness. No one should see that part of her. No one should see how lonely she was at night, and how hard she was struggling at work. She just wanted to hide it and be positive and make sure everyone at Smashland was good.

“You good?” Cadence asked.

“You ask that a lot. Too much. I’m great.” Lie. From the eye roll Cadence offered her, she had heard the false note in her tone, but oh well.

Cadence reached across the console and squeezed her hand. She’d been checking on her a lot over the last week, and showing her the affection that was so important to most shifters. She’d stepped in as a friend ever since Jenna had protected her from Kru.

She would miss Cadence terribly when she left in the morning. She had hated every minute of helping her pack up her trailer.

Jenna pursed her lips and tried not to think about it. Not today, when they were supposed to make it one last fun adventure.

To get some fresh air, she kept her window rolled down and let her arm rest outside, catching the wind between her fingers. When she checked the sideview mirror, it looked like Lucia was doing the same. Her mother, Aviana, was a raven, and she wondered if a raven-blooded grizzly ever regretted that she couldn't fly.

Everyone was quiet as they made their way through Damon's Mountains, but she understood. They were gathering mental strength to spend the day pretending that they were all fine, when really, the almost-Crew had fallen apart.

As Jenna crested the last hill to Boarland Mobile Park, the crowd was already gathered.

"I thought we were getting here early," Jenna murmured, confused as she eased the truck to a stop beside a line of others.

"I have something to tell you," Cadence said. Her voice was thick and choked up. Not understanding, Jenna looked over at her to find tears rimming Cadence's eyes.

"What's wrong?"

Cadence's bottom lip trembled. "You should know it's okay."

“What’s okay?” she asked as Gunner, Lucia, and Kru came to stand by Cadence’s window.

“What’s about to happen.”

Jenna shook her head, and followed the line of Cadence’s pointed finger out the front window.

The crowd parted slowly. Her parents, Kellen and Skyler Brown, Kong, Bash, Harrison, Damon and Clara...Beaston... Kirk and Ally. Kirk was smiling and Ally was crying. She was holding Jenna’s mom’s hand, and they were standing shoulder to shoulder. Lucas stepped forward and Jenna gasped. She clapped her hand over her mouth and rested her forehead on the steering wheel in shock, so they wouldn’t see her break down.

Her shoulders shook with her sobbing.

He was here.

He had come back.

Lucas had come home.

He’d come back to the mountains.

Cadence rubbed her back comfortingly. “He called us,” she whispered. “He gave us all a choice. We’re going to do this, okay? If you want to, we can do this. Only if you want to.”

“Do what?” she squeaked out through her tightening vocal cords.

Cadence sniffed and cupped Jenna’s cheeks, lifted her until she sat straight up and then leveled her with a look.

“We’re going to let him make us a real Crew.”

Cadence released her and pushed open the door beside her, then got out and joined the others as they walked up to Lucas.

One by one, they greeted him.

Cadence offered him a hug, and settled in behind his right shoulder.

Lucia bumped him on the shoulder and came to stand beside his left shoulder.

Kru gave him a knuckle bump and came to stand beside Cadence.

Gunner stopped to the side of him without a physical greeting. For a few seconds he stood frozen there like that, looking down at the ground as if he would change his mind. But then he looked over at Lucas and nodded once, then made his way to stand beside Lucia.

And then they waited.

They waited for her.

Jenna's tears were streaming now. She gripped the steering wheel hard, wishing she wasn't so broken up over this moment.

Lucas looked so handsome in the evening light.

He was the person she loved, surrounded by people she loved, and for as long as she drew breath, she would never forget this moment.

Shaking, she pushed open the door and slid out of her truck. She lifted her chin higher into the air. "Are you done running?"

A slow, handsome smile took his face. “I was done running the moment you set me free.”

Behind him, his father, Kirk, shifted his weight, and with full eyes, he pressed his cheek to his shirt. Ally melted against her mate’s side.

Her heart was breaking open in the best way.

She approached slowly, the weight of everyone’s attention on her.

“You’ve come home for good. To Damon’s Mountains?”

Lucas shook his head. “Home isn’t Damon’s Mountains. Home is you.”

“What?” she whispered, stunned.

“I pick you,” he said softly. “My animal does too.” He held out a hand with a closed fist, and when he opened it up, she gasped and pressed her hands against her mouth again to hide the intense emotion.

A single twig rested on his palm. “This is for your nest.”

“Do you know what you are offering?” she asked.

“Yes.” He chuckled thickly. “Do you know how many twigs I’ve picked up over the last week? My truck is full of them. It’s all my gorilla looks for. I tried to leave and see if I belonged out there anymore, but I don’t feel real out there in the world anymore. The only thing that feels real is being here. With you.”

She searched his bright gold eyes—all she saw there was earnestness and raw vulnerability.

Kru cleared his throat. “And with us.”

Lucas rolled his eyes heavenward and admitted, “And with these idiots.”

She giggled along with the emotional chuckles from the crowd.

“What do you need from me to be a good Alpha?”

He canted his head. “Nothing. Now ask me what I want.”

She pursed her lips against a smile. “What do you want from me?”

“Everything.”

“Will you give me everything in return?” she asked softly.

He lifted his chin higher and smiled. “Yes.”

Truth.

“Then I guess there is only one thing left for me to say...”

A knowing grin stretched across his handsome face. “And what is that?”

She plucked the twig from the palm of his hand and clutched it to her chest. She lifted her voice. “I choose you, too.”

He wrapped her in a hug and lifted her off the ground, leaned up and kissed her lips as the Crews of Damon’s Mountains cheered around them. Jenna wrapped her arms tightly around his shoulders, and as they ended the kiss, she buried her face against his neck. Her tears were staining his shirt, but that didn’t matter now.

She’d found him.

She’d found a Crew.

She'd found everything.

She'd found the meaning of 'home.'

She had understood when Lucas said the mountains weren't it. It was a person. It was her.

He was her home, too.

And this...this moment right here...

This was the real beginning of the Warlanders.

Up Next from this Author

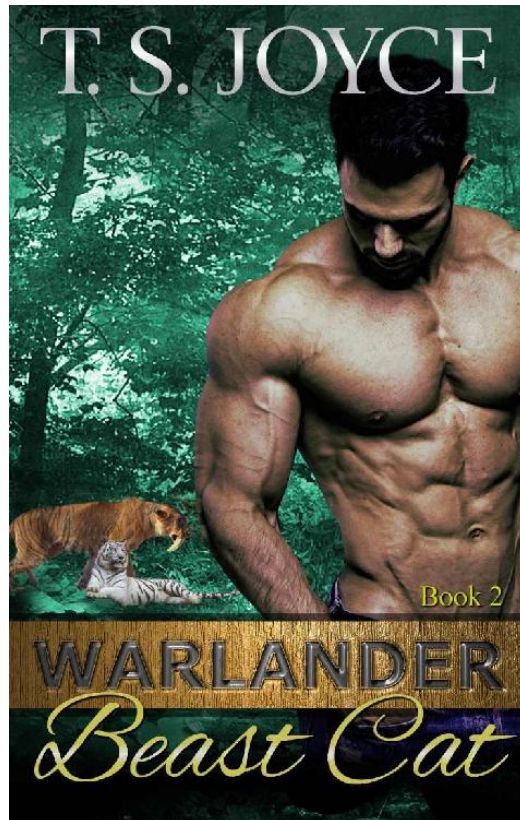
The return to the Damon's Mountains Saga continues in

Warlander Beast Cat

(Warlanders, Book 2)

Coming December 2023

We're finally home. Let's stay here for a while.



For More of these Characters

Go back to where it all began...

Saw Bears

Lumberjack Werebear ([Book 1](#))

Woodcutter Werebear ([Book 2](#))

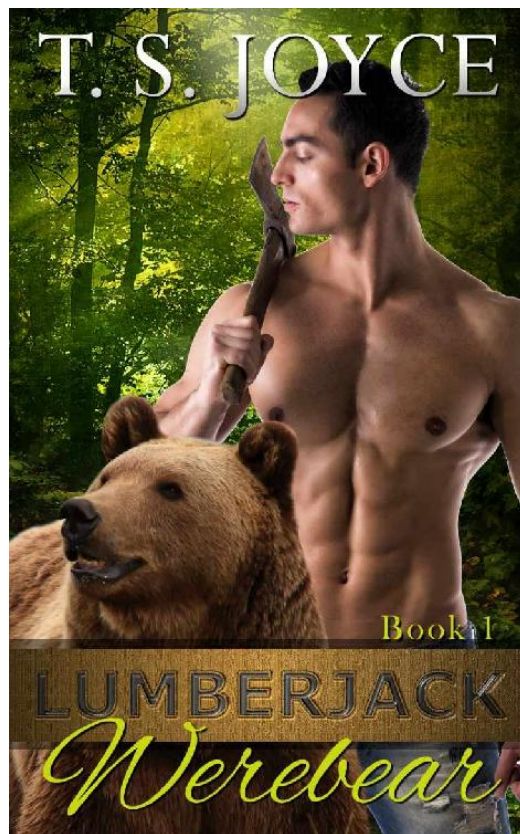
Timberman Werebear ([Book 3](#))

Sawman Werebear ([Book 4](#))

Axman Werebear ([Book 5](#))

Woodsman Werebear ([Book 6](#))

Lumberman Werebear ([Book 7](#))



Newsletter Sign-Up

For new releases, exclusive sneak peeks, and giveaways, sign up for T. S. Joyce's Bear Shifter Romance Newsletter [HERE](#).

More Bestselling Series from this Author

Wolves of Piston

Zombie Wolf of Piston ([Book One](#))

Brother Wolf of Piston ([Book Two](#))

Lone Wolf of Piston ([Book Three](#))

Holiday Flex ([Holiday Short](#))

Traitor Wolf of Piston ([Book Four](#))



The Wolves of Promise Falls

The Fall of Promise ([Book 1](#))

The Rise of Promise ([Book 2](#))

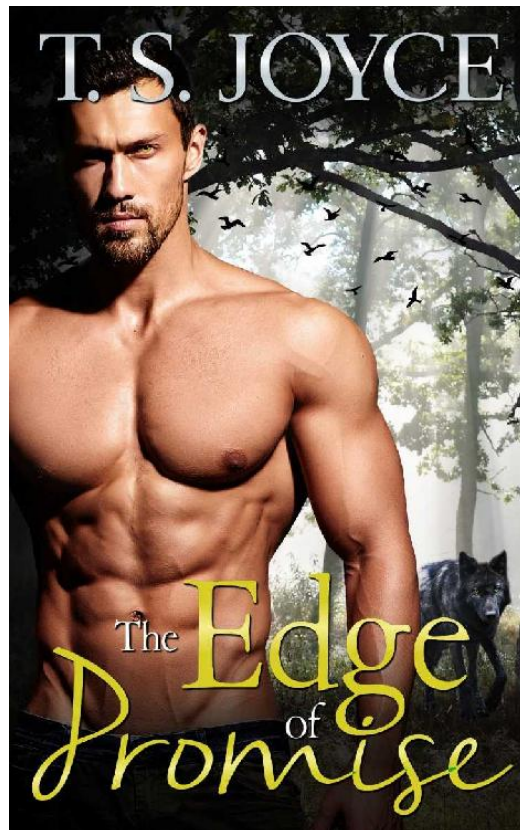
The Blood of Promise ([Book 3](#))

The Mercy of Promise ([Book 4](#))

The Edge of Promise ([Book 5](#))

The Keeper of Promise ([Book 6](#))

The Break of Promise ([Book 7](#))



Oath of Bane

How It's Supposed to Be ([Book 1](#))

How It Has to Be ([Book 2](#))

How It's Meant to Be ([Book 3](#))

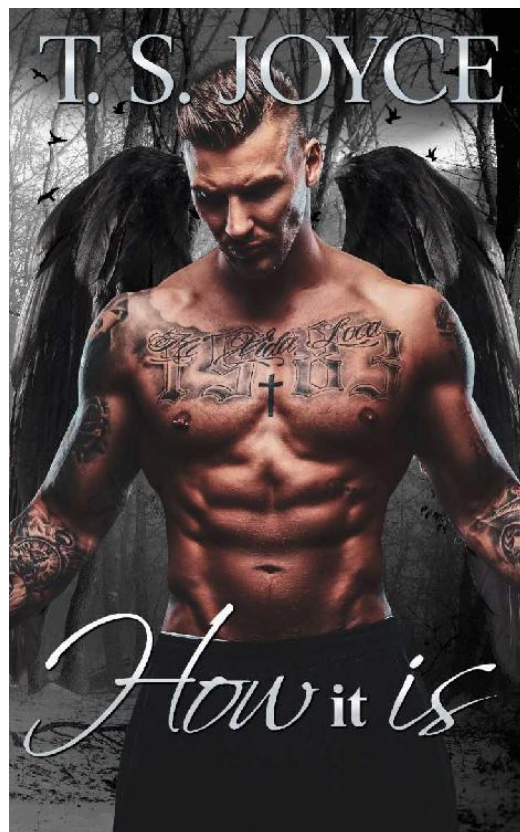
How It Is ([Book 4](#))

How It Will Be ([Book 5](#))

How It Was ([Book 6](#))

How It Started ([Book 7](#))

How It Needed to Be ([Book 8](#))



Battle of the Bulls

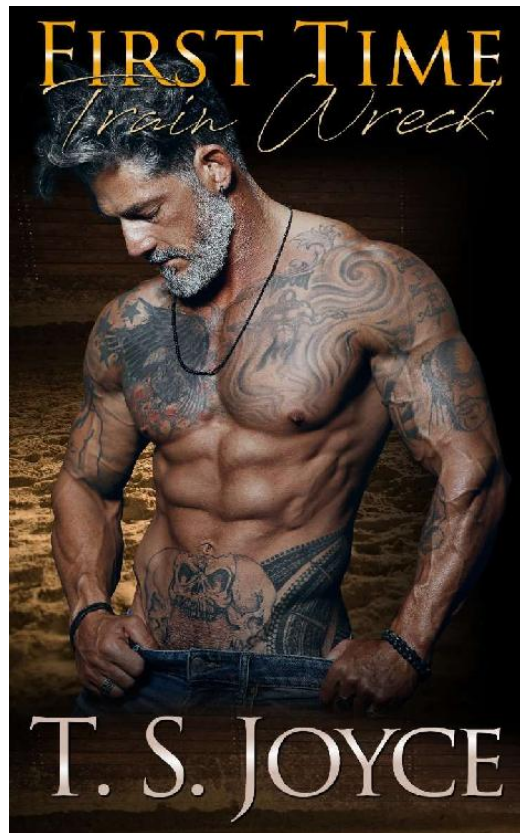
Two Shots Down ([Book 1](#))

Dead of Winter ([Book 2](#))

Quickdraw Slow Burn ([Book 3](#))

First Time Train Wreck ([Book 4](#))

Tuff Enough ([Book 5](#))



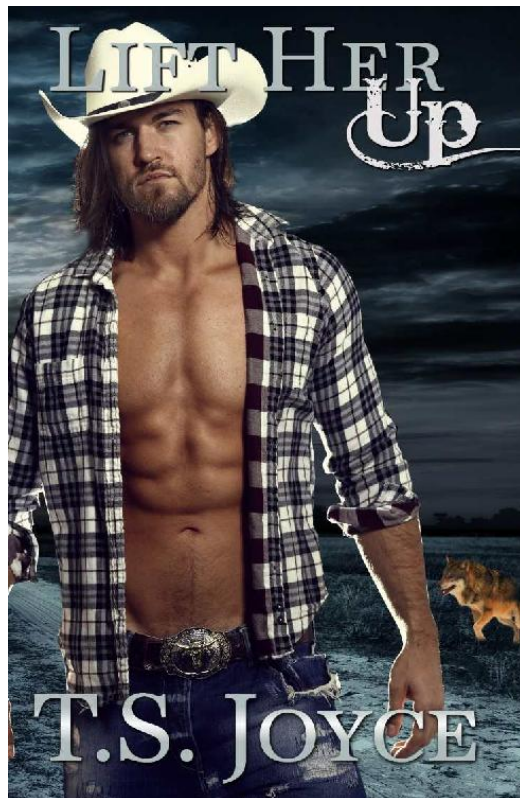
Kaid Ranch Shifters

Steal Her Heart ([Book 1](#))

Make Her New ([Book 2](#))

Lift Her Up ([Book 3](#))

Love Her Better ([Book 4](#))

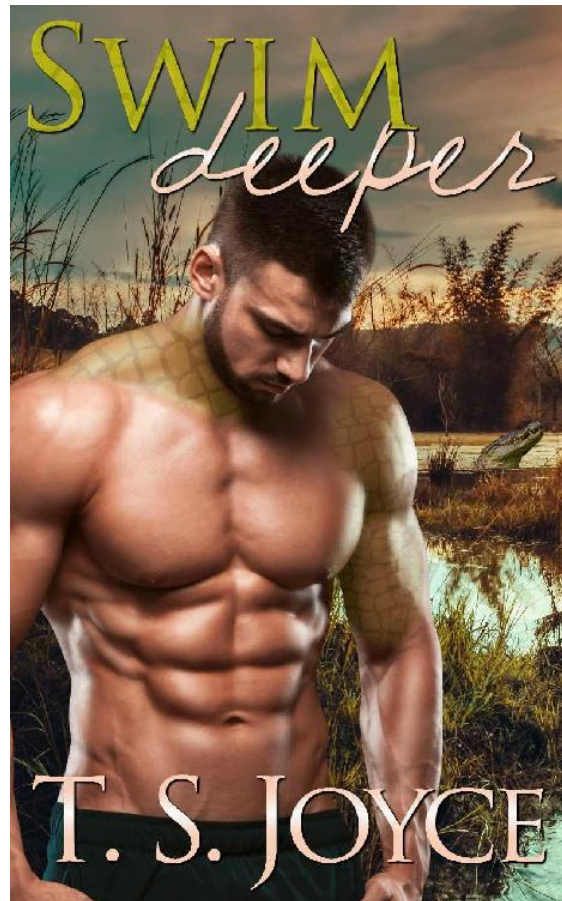


Keepers of the Swamp

Swim Deeper ([Book 1](#))

Dig Deeper ([Book 2](#))

Bite Deeper ([Book 3](#))

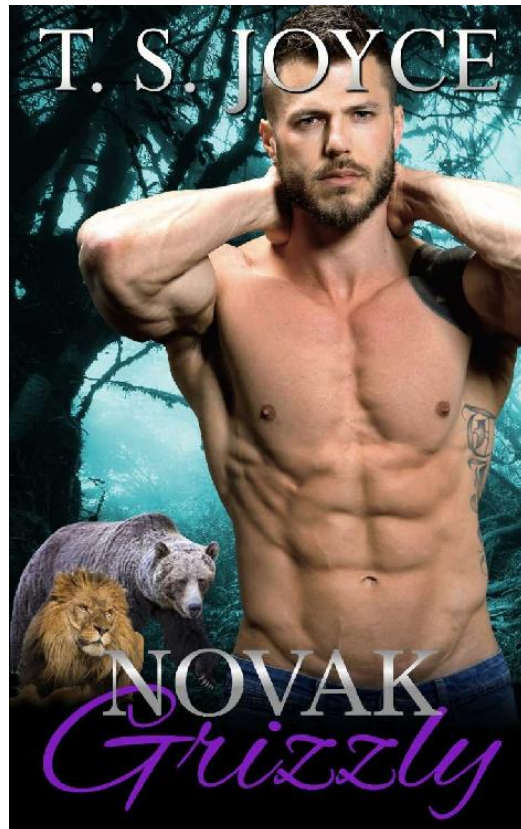


Daughters of Beasts

Novak Grizzly ([Book 1](#))

Beck Bear ([Book 2](#))

Ash Bear ([Book 3](#))

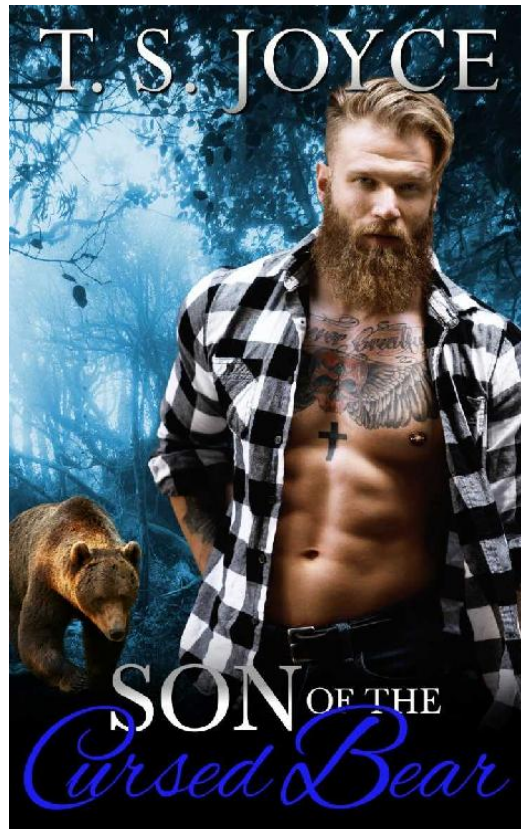


Sons of Beasts

Son of the Cursed Bear ([Book 1](#))

Son of Kong ([Book 2](#))

Son of the Dragon ([Book 3](#))



Red Havoc Panthers

Red Havoc Rogue ([Book 1](#))

Red Havoc Rebel ([Book 2](#))

Red Havoc Bad Cat ([Book 3](#))

Red Havoc Guardian ([Book 4](#))

Red Havoc Bad Bear ([Book 5](#))



Harper's Mountains

Bloodrunner Dragon ([Book 1](#))

Bloodrunner Bear ([Book 2](#))

Air Ryder ([Book 3](#))

Novak Raven ([Book 4](#))

Blackwing Dragon ([Book 5](#))



Kane's Mountains

Blackwing Defender ([Book 1](#))

Blackwing Wolf ([Book 2](#))

Blackwing Beast ([Book 3](#))



Bears Fur Hire

Husband Fur Hire ([Book 1](#))

Bear Fur Hire ([Book 2](#))

Mate Fur Hire ([Book 3](#))

Wolf Fur Hire ([Book 4](#))

Dawson Fur Hire ([Book 5](#))

Chance Fur Hire ([Book 6](#))

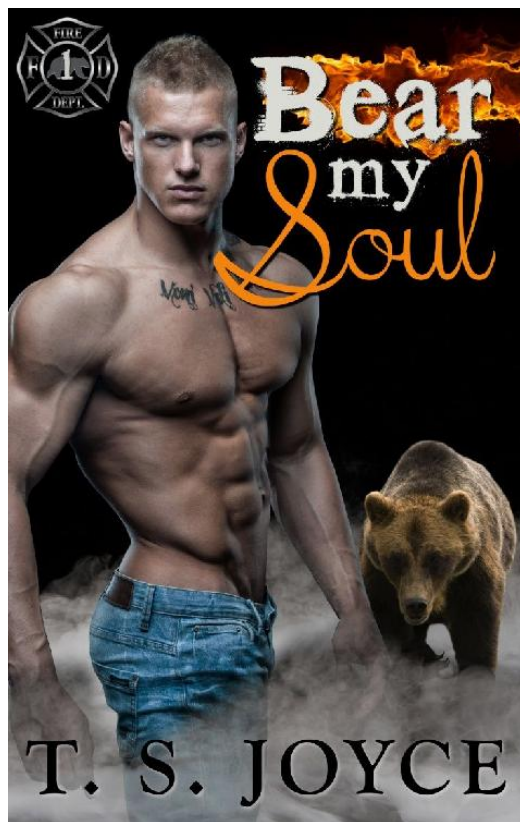


Fire Bears

Bear My Soul ([Book 1](#))

Bear the Burn ([Book 2](#))

Bear the Heat ([Book 3](#))



Gray Back Bears

Gray Back Bad Bear ([Book 1](#))

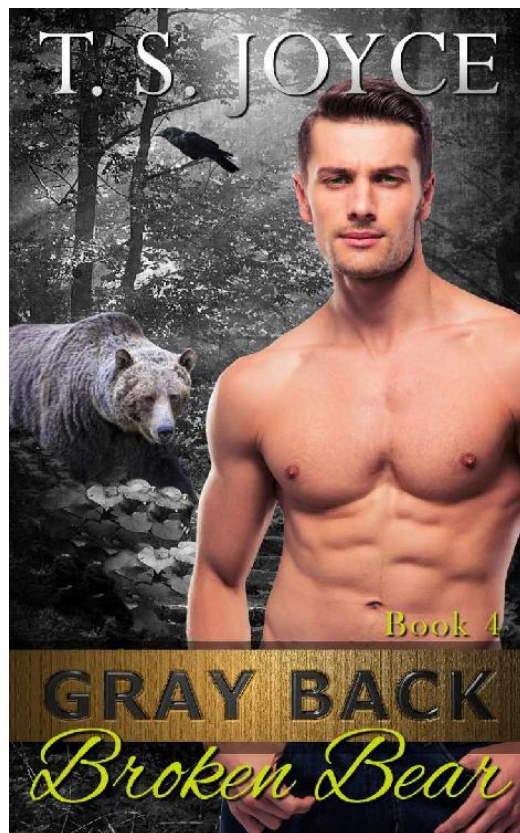
Gray Back Alpha Bear ([Book 2](#))

Gray Back Ghost Bear ([Book 3](#))

Gray Back Broken Bear ([Book 4](#))

Lowlander Silverback ([Book 5](#))

Last Immortal Dragon ([Book 6](#))



For More from this Author

Check out her [The Official Reading List of T. S. Joyce](#)

Or visit

www.tsjoyce.com

or

[T. S. Joyce's Amazon US page](#)

About the Author

T.S. Joyce is devoted to bringing hot shifter romances to readers. Hungry alpha males are her calling card, and the wilder the men, the more she'll make them pour their hearts out. She lives a simple life in the PNW with a mysterious hunkyhubby, a make-shift family, a herd of awesome kiddos, plenty of farm animals, and devotes her life to writing big stories. Foodie, bear whisperer, chicken-momma, pig-wrangler, thief of tiny bottles of awesome smelling hotel shampoo, nap connoisseur, romantic comedy fanatic, zombie slayer, and bite-sized cattle rancher.

Bear Shifters? Check

Smoldering Alpha Hotness? Double Check

Sexy Scenes? Fasten up your girdles, ladies and gents, it's gonna be a wild ride.

For more information about T. S. Joyce and her work, visit her website [here](#).