



KEEPERS OF EXCALIBUR #1

WOLF MARKED

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
TAMAR SLOAN

WOLF MARKED

KEEPERS OF EXCALIBUR

BOOK ONE

TAMAR SLOAN

Copyright © 2024 by Tamar Sloan

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

1. [Elara](#)
2. [Elara](#)
3. [Kade](#)
4. [Elara](#)
5. [Elara](#)
6. [Kade](#)
7. [Elara](#)
8. [Elara](#)
9. [Kade](#)
10. [Elara](#)
11. [Elara](#)
12. [Kade](#)
13. [Elara](#)
14. [Elara](#)
15. [Kade](#)
16. [Elara](#)
17. [Elara](#)
18. [Kade](#)
19. [Elara](#)
20. [Elara](#)
21. [Kade](#)
22. [Elara](#)
23. [Elara](#)
24. [Kade](#)
25. [Elara](#)
26. [Elara](#)

[Wolf Chosen](#)

[The Keepers-Verse is always growing!](#)

[Also by Tamar Sloan](#)

[About the Author](#)

I

ELARA



He's watching her.
She can feel it.

Elara surreptitiously glances over her shoulder, peering into the trees. Laughter surrounds her, tinkling through the late afternoon air as someone darts past her field of vision, bikini strings flapping. But all she can see is the forest, thick trunks staggered like soldiers, straight and vigilant.

No dark-haired guy, his intense blue eyes trained on her as if she's only being on the planet.

She shakes her head. She's getting paranoid. Worse, it's like she expects him to be there.

More people wander past, the giggling girls in two pieces, the guys in swimming trunks with towels thrown over their shoulders. They're planning pizza at someone's house, the girls want to watch a horror movie, the guys are arguing for a Fast and Furious marathon. They wave at Elara and she waves back, shaking her head when someone invites her to join them.

She sits back on the towel stretched out over the rocky ground, reminding herself she's here at the local waterfalls to do what everyone else is—unwind and have a little fun after a long day of classes. She only has a few years of college, and she's going to make the most of it.

Especially when it's been going so well.

Elara wasn't sure what to expect of college. She'd always been quietly confident in high school, but she'd left her friends behind, and she worried she was leaving everything she loved. But college had been pleasant surprise after pleasant surprise. Kira and Jordyn are two of the closest friends she's ever had. There had been more party invitations than Saturday nights. And she actually enjoyed her classes.

Except for him...

Elara consciously turns away from any thoughts of *him*. The guy who keeps popping up wherever she is isn't going to spoil this fabulous afternoon. The low-hanging sun is warm on her bare skin, she just bought this black bikini with its crisscross straps and she freaking loves it, and she's looking forward to the molecular biology talk tomorrow like the true nerd she is.

"Maybe we should get going too," says Jordyn beside her, glancing at her smartwatch. She wrinkles her freckled nose, tucking a lock of her thick brown hair behind her ear. "Oh, I need to drink more water."

Elara grins. It was cool to find someone who's even nerdier than she is. Even cooler is that she and Jordyn became fast friends after discovering they shared a few classes. "Just another half an—"

"Last one in is a three-toed sloth!" calls a voice as they streak past.

Elara watches, a smile playing along her lips as her friend, Kira, shoots past them, her sandals slapping on her heels and her black hair streaming behind her.

"She's crazy," murmurs Jordyn, shaking her head.

"I think that's why we love her," says Elara, the smile turning into a full-blown grin. Kira brings out the fun-loving impulsiveness in anyone who's in her orbit.

Jordyn hikes her hands on her hips. "You still have your shoes on!"

"Keep up, slowpokes!" Kira calls in return, her long legs pumping as she sprints for the edge of the cliff and flings

herself over, her arms and legs wheeling in the air as she disappears over the side.

They've all been here enough times to know the drop-off isn't a big one. The splash a second later confirms Kira's back in the deep pool that is the local swimming hole. The one they only climbed out of less than an hour ago, their fingertips starting to wrinkle.

Elara pushes to her feet and slips out of her flip-flops. "I need to have more water too," she says teasingly, getting ready to run and dive like Kira just did.

"Well, I refuse to be a three-toed sloth." Jordyn grins over her shoulder as she breaks into a run. "They only go to the bathroom once a week!"

Elara bursts into laughter then gets ready to run, not okay with being left behind. She's taken the first leap when a movement catches her attention. She flicks her hair out of her face and almost stumbles when she registers that this time, it wasn't her imagination.

He's there.

Watching.

The dark-haired guy is a few feet into the forest, at one with the shadows as he stands behind a tree trunk. He registers that she's seen him but he doesn't move. He never does. Just looks back at her, not smiling, in fact, frowning a little.

It's creepy. And annoying.

Elara's about to ignore it when Jordyn's splash tells her she's now third. And relegated to being a three-toed sloth who only poops once a week. She narrows her eyes. That's it. She's had enough.

Turning on the ball of her foot, she marches toward the guy. She's going to ask what his problem is. And whether he's aware of the definition of stalking.

The forest engulfs her with the scent of pine and earth as she trudges forward determinedly. She stops several feet in and glances around, looking one way, then the other. A soft

breeze tickles her hair and rustles the pine needles above her. A bird calls somewhere.

She's alone.

Frowning, she checks around the nearby trees, feeling more and more foolish. And frustrated that all she finds are more trunks. This is where she saw him. She knows it is. Her hands on her hips, she peers into the gloomy depths of the forest. Nothing. He's disappeared.

"Elara!" calls Kira. "Get your three-toed sloth ass in here!"

Huffing, Elara turns and stalks back out. The next time she sees him, she won't take her eyes off his brooding face. Then she'll get some answers.

She's just passed the tree line when she glances over her shoulder one last time, wanting to make sure. The forest is just as still and empty of weirdos as it was before. Letting out another annoyed huff, she turns back toward the swimming hole. She won't let him ruin her nice afternoon.

She slams straight into someone, bounces back, and falls flat on her butt.

"Are you okay?" asks a masculine voice as a hand enters her line of sight.

Her eyes shoot up, but it's not *him*. Although he's also tall, and well-built, the guy looking at her as if he's mortified isn't as broad as *him*. And he has light hair, dark blond waves that hang into his now-wide green eyes.

Elara shakes herself for comparing the two of them at all. *He's* no one, just a strange, potential stalker who she never would have given another thought to if he hadn't been following her. She shouldn't be comparing him to anyone, let alone a guy who is polite enough to help her after she accidentally slammed into his chest and landed on the ground, which was definitely her fault. "Sorry. That was my fault. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

He shakes his head, his long bangs flipping into his eyes. "Not at all," he says easily, ducking his head a little.

The action has Elara realizing she knows him, making this even more humiliating. Laith's in several of her classes, although they've never spoken. Although if he'd been some random guy, she could have gone on her way with just an apology, and not had to worry about seeing him again and reliving this little...incident.

Conscious that an awkward silence is stretching out, making this even more, well, awkward, Elara mutters another apology and steps away, surprised to find Laith steps with her, staying in front of her. She stills, but tries to tell herself that it's just because she's weirded out by losing *him* in the forest.

She angles her head, looking at Laith in askance. She doesn't know much about him, other than the fact that he's in several of her classes this semester. That's not uncommon, given the fact the college isn't very big, which was why she knows him well enough to know his name. He's always seemed quiet. Kinda shy. Which is why his action is surprising. She'd expect *him* to do something like this.

Laith takes a deep breath, as if he's gathering his courage. His cheeks are flushed, even though it's her who landed gracelessly on her ass, which has her softening her smile. He seems sweet enough.

"I was just, ah, wondering if you'd like to go out to the movies or something sometime?" he asked hurriedly, ducking his head and averting his gaze.

Elara's eyes widen, and she takes a second to gather herself before she responds. Now she realizes why he looks so embarrassed. He's trying to gather his courage to ask her out. She shifts a little, adjusting the crisscross straps of her bikini across her flat stomach. She barely knows Laith, but she does know there's no real spark of attraction on her part. And she doesn't want to lead him on.

She's going to have to let him down.

"Thanks for the invite, Laith." He glances at her, almost as if he's surprised she knows his name. "But I'm, you know, just focusing on my studies right now."

Laith's gaze slips away, and Elara cringes inside at her lame-ass excuse. She doesn't want to hurt his feelings, but she also doesn't want to give him false hope. "That's cool," he mumbles. "It was a stupid idea, anyway."

Before she can respond, he walks away, his gait stiff and uneven. Elara wipes her hand down her face, sighing.

One guy she can't get off her back.

Another coming out of left field.

When what she told Laith is kinda the truth. She's enjoying college. The freedom. The chance to define herself. To forge a future she's excited about.

"Elara!" This time it's Jordyn calling. "Are you doing your weekly, ahem, ablutions?"

Rolling her eyes, Elara strides to the edge of the water, her hands on her hips. "A week is a long time to be backed up, okay?"

The other two burst into laughter, splashing water at her. Laughing herself, Elara leaps high, landing with a large splash between them. A furious water fight breaks out, Kira quickly showing her competitive side as she launches waves and waves of water at her opponents.

The three of them swim for as long as they can, but soon enough evening is falling and even Kira has to admit that it's time to leave. They climb out and Elara notices it's later than she realized. Long shadows stretch out over the stony ground. The forest is dark, the pointed tops of the pine trees barely discernible against the indigo sky. What's more, there's no one else here.

"Ooh, it's going to be a full moon tonight," says Kira.

Elara glances over her shoulder, seeing the edge of a large white orb peeking over the horizon. "Whoa, how long were we in there?"

Kira arches a black brow. "Wanna stay and do a seance?"

Jordyn bends down to pick up her towel as well as everyone else's. "No," she says emphatically. "I'm not staying

here. I react to mosquito bites.”

Kira rolls her eyes. “Next time, I’ll bring insect repellent.”

Giggling again, they make their way over the uneven ground, going slowly in their wet sandals. Well, Elara and Jordyn do. Kira lost hers after her wild jump into the water. Dripping and with their hair hanging in wet strands around their faces, they make their way back to the small parking lot. It’s a few minutes’ walk, probably a bit longer seeing as none of them have their phones with them. A torch would’ve been handy right now.

“Are you okay, Kira?” asks Jordyn. “You really should’ve taken your sandals off before jumping in.”

“I have no regrets,” Kira replies with a grin. As if to prove her point, she prances forward, using her towel like a billowing scarf as she twirls around.

Jordyn shakes her head. “I’m not sure that’s a very good id—”

Suddenly, Kira cries out as she collapses. Elara lunges forward, snatching at her friend’s arm, but she’s too far away. Kira turns into a heap on the rocks.

Elara rushes over, Jordyn by her side, kneeling beside Kira, who’s sprawled on the hard ground, gasping softly as she clutches her knee. Elara can see she’s in pain, and the rapidly purpling skin on her bare leg makes it clear why. Jordyn kneels next to Kira, and they both wince as something crackles as Kira shifts her knee.

She smiles tightly, although her eyes are watering in pain. “Okay, now I have some regrets.”

Elara smiles crookedly, appreciating her friend’s attempt at humor even though it’s the closest that she’s ever seen Kira to tears. She must be in agony, which means there’s no way that Kira can make the walk back to the car. Elara doubts she and Jordyn will be able to carry her, in the near-dark, over uneven, rocky ground. Not without risking doing more damage. That leaves only one option—one of them has to go for help.

“I’ll go back to the car and use my phone,” Elara says. “There should be some signal there.”

Kira nods as she bites her lip, but Elara can tell that Jordyn isn’t happy with the idea. Neither is she, truth be told, but soon the moonlight will be the only light to see by, and the mosquitoes nipping at them will be the least of their worries. It’s now or never.

“Fine,” Jordyn mumbles. “Just be careful.”

Elara nods, already turning back toward the road. At least there’s a path not far from the swimming hole to the car. True, her wet sandals aren’t doing any favors for her feet, and it’s hard to see as the sunset fades, but at least she knows where she’s going. Going as quickly as she can, conscious that she doesn’t want to end up like Kira, she breaks into a run the moment she hits the sandy path.

Elara reaches the car in record time, glancing down the highway to see if there’s anyone around. Of course, she’s not lucky enough to have someone come along at precisely the right moment, but at the very least she would have taken someone driving by in the long minutes it takes her to dig through the mess in the car and find her phone. And as she finds there’s no signal. And as she realizes she’s going to have to walk further up the highway.

Elara curses under her breath, pulling on a t-shirt and jamming her cell phone into the side of her bikini bottoms. A few quick strides and she’s at the road. She bites her lip as she looks one way, then the other. The highway looks deserted in both directions, no hint of headlights to suggest that help is coming.

She’s about to turn right, the direction back to Mercy City when a high, keening howl splits the night air. Elara stills, her heart hammering against her ribs. They should’ve left far earlier than this. Now there’s a freaking coyote out here or something.

Crossing her arms, she hesitates as she wonders what she should do next. Walk up the highway and try to get a signal?

Or go back to Kira and Jordyn and see if they can carry her out, hopefully without making her injury worse?

Elara doesn't get as far as making a decision. There's a rustle and she whirls around. "Jordyn? Kira?"

But it's not her friends.

It's not even human. Nor is it a coyote.

A large black wolf prowls toward her, eyes glowing the color of amber.

A scream lodges in Elara's throat, trapped by the hard knot of terror that's ended her ability to breathe.

She takes a single step backward, every fiber of her being getting ready to run when the wolf breaks into a run. Leaps.

And attacks.

ELARA



Although consciousness comes slowly, clawing at Elara's mind like a timid puppy, the pain bursts through like a rabid rottweiler.

She gasps at the agony, glancing down at her arms, the point of origin for the millions of daggers shooting through her veins. The second gasp is louder. And it's followed by a whimper. Deep gouges track up the inside of her forearms, jagged and bloody.

The wolf!

Elara glances around frantically, terrified it's only just started. Flashes of golden eyes and ivory teeth echo each one of her frantic heartbeats. Except the beast is gone. She's alone, sitting on her butt in the dirt. Somewhere an owl hoots.

How long has she been out? Oh god, Kira! Jordyn!

Elara goes to push herself up, only to cry out in pain the moment she puts pressure on her hands. She cradles them against her, the smell of blood sticking in the back of her throat. Not willing to look at her injuries again, she braces herself to try once more. She has to get to Kira and Jordyn.

She's just tucked her legs under, hoping the shaky limbs can push her up, when headlights blind her. She lifts an injured arm to shield her eyes, blinking against both the light and pain. The sound of tires slows on the road next to her, and Elara blinks, trying to adjust to the darkness again. A dark blue sedan is only a few feet away. It's a fairly normal car, one she

wouldn't question seeing in the city or driving around campus, but she's not at either of those places.

She's in the middle of nowhere. Injured.

After being attacked by a wolf.

With no idea whether the car door that's now opening is a good thing or not. She needs help. But she also can't defend herself if the person inside is more foe than friend.

A guy steps out, his boot crunching on the gravel. Elara's gaze tracks up the jean-clad legs, then a loose, dark t-shirt that can't hide the muscles beneath. Her pulse spikes once more. Whoever he is, he's tall. And strong.

Her gaze shoots to his face and she gasps.

Him.

Elara blinks. She knew he was good-looking. That was obvious at a distance. But up close, he's downright beautiful. Black hair flops over his forehead, almost brushing thick slashes of eyebrows. His cheekbones are just as sharp and bold, his features slicing down to a sculpted jaw. It would all be a little...angry if it weren't for the cupid bow lips and blue eyes the color of a pale summer sky that have gripped her and not let go.

They study her. Hold her. And yet, give her nothing.

Even this close, he's just as inscrutable. He glances down at her arms and his lips thin. Without saying a word, he spins around and pulls out a towel from the back seat of his car. With one sharp movement, he tears it in two. Elara's eyes widen. Those muscles are definitely not just for show.

Kneeling beside her, he glances at her, those eyes piercing the darkness between them. "I'm going to wrap them up. Is that okay?"

She nods, hissing through her teeth as the pressure of the material makes the cuts burn all over again. Frowning, he wraps the other arm, too, his lips pressed tightly together.

He sits back on his haunches. "We need to get you to the hospital."

Elara tucks her arms back in, even though they've just tripled in thickness. Without the grizzly sight of the wounds, she can pretend they're not hurting as much as they are. "Ah, I don't think so."

For a second he looks surprised, then his frown returns. "Look, those cuts are—"

"What's your name?" she demands, pinning him with her gaze. She has a right to know. He's been following her for weeks. And now he just turned up, coincidentally, when she's been attacked by a wild animal.

His lips flatten even more, as if he doesn't even want to answer that. "Kade."

A nice name. A normal name. A very un-stalkerish kind of name. She frowns. Stalkers probably prefer nice, normal names.

She draws herself up a little, trying to gather some shred of pride as she sits in the dirt, her arms wrapped in terry toweling. "My name's Elara."

He nods and she wonders if he already knew that. "Now that we've got that out of the way, you should get those cuts checked out. I can take you."

Elara shakes her head but before she can talk, he huffs out a frustrated breath. "You can drive if you want, my car's an auto."

Despite the gruff non-communication, he's trying to put her at ease? She shakes her head again, wondering if she knocked it when she fell over. "I can't go yet. My friends are still by the swimming hole. My friend Kira fell and hurt her leg, which is why I came to try and find help. That's when..." She swallows, tucking her hands in closer. Tonight is fast becoming the most confusing night of her life.

"The cuts will heal," Kade says, his voice soft. Almost gentle.

Elara looks back up, connecting once again with light blue eyes. What she finds there startles her. There's sadness. Pain. And soul-deep anguish. And what's even more surprising is

there's a powerful, primal part of her that wants to make it all go away. To see those lush, cupid lips turn up. Smile. Just for her.

With a quick flutter of too-long lashes, he looks away. "I'll go get your friends. You wait in the car."

Before Elara can answer, he scoops her up. She gasps in shock, but Kade doesn't acknowledge it, just tucks her against his solid, warm chest, turns, and slips her into the car, being careful not to bump her arms.

He straightens again. "I'll be back shortly."

Kade strides away, leaving her a little gob smacked. He's gruff and brooding. Yet gentle and almost...hurting.

And has possibly been following her, Elara reminds herself. Was it just a coincidence that he was driving down the highway at night, right when she happened to need him? She doubts he'd answer than if she asked him, but it's something to keep in mind. Just because he's hot, doesn't mean he's not dangerous.

Now that she's alone again, the pain becomes harder to ignore. Her forearms feel like they've been shredded. Nausea churns at the realization she was attacked. By a wolf. What if it comes back... She's lucky all she has is cuts on her arms. Elara finds herself humming gently in an attempt to calm herself down as she waits. It shouldn't take Kade long to get to Kira and Jordyn. Hopefully between the two of them, they'll be able to carry her out.

Thankfully, her prediction is correct. It's less than ten minutes before Kade stalks out of the forest, carrying Kira in his arms, Jordyn looking pale and worried beside him. Elara breathes a sigh of relief as Kade places Kira on the seat behind her.

"I'm telling you, it's not as bad as it looks," she says.

Jordyn climbs in on the other side and puts her seatbelt on. "We'll let the medical professionals decide that." She gasps as her gaze falls on Elara's wrapped arms. "What happened, Elara?"

She gives her two friends a weak smile. “Would you believe me if I said it’s not as bad as it looks?”

“You’ve been hurt!” says Kira as she strains to look over the seat, horrified.

“It’s just a few scratches,” Elara assures them. “A—”

Kade turns on the engine. “I’ve heard that there have been a lot of different animal attacks out here lately. And it was dark. It could’ve been anything.”

Elara falls silent, glad when Kira and Jordyn sit back, despite their frowns. Kade helped put them at ease, but he also stopped her from saying anything about a wolf. Like he didn’t want her to mention it.

Or as if he’s questioning what she saw...

The drive to the hospital is quick and silent. The burning seems to alternate between flaring and abating, like a slow, throbbing strobe. Elara’s not sure if it’s the pain or everything that has her mind whirling, so she focuses on the lights that are becoming more and more frequent as they zip past her window. She just wants to get to the hospital to make sure Kira’s okay. And get some serious painkillers.

They pull into the ER parking lot and Elara’s relieved when two nurses come out, one with a wheelchair. One of them opens the door, noting Elara’s wrapped arms.

“Not me,” Elara manages to say. “Kira’s leg is hurt. She’s the one who needs the wheelchair. I can walk.” She gestures behind her, and the nurses quickly help Kira out.

It’s only once she’s inside and standing beneath the fluorescent lights does she realize that they’re all still in their bikinis. She’s the only one who had the chance to put on a t-shirt. Elara goes to cross her arms, then winces as pain streaks up them, lancing enough to make her eyes water. When a blanket lands on her shoulders she glances up in surprise, finding Kade there.

He frowns. “You don’t want to get cold.”

Elara's about to answer when she sees that Kira's being wheeled away, Jordyn with her. "Text me," she mouths to her and Jordyn nods. They disappear behind opaque sliding doors.

"Is there anyone you want me to call?" Kade asks.

She blinks, pulling the blanket a little more tightly around her even though it hurts to flex her hands. "I'll, ah, call my parents." Not that she knows what she's going to tell them. There's no scenario where they don't freak out.

Another nurse appears, smiling in that universal nurse-smile of theirs. "Let's take a look at those cuts, shall we?"

Elara nods. She walks forward a few steps, finding that Kade's not beside her. She glances over her shoulder to see he's still standing in the same spot.

"They'll take good care of you," he says stiffly. Almost coldly.

Elara's own spine feels like a pole just got rammed down it. Did she really think he'd come with her and keep her company until her parents arrived? When this guy is more like the dark knight rather than some savior in shining armor?

She lifts her chin. "Of course. And ah, thanks for the ride."

Kade turns away without answering, as if he's already dismissed her.

Her cheeks stinging, Elara follows the nurse. She wanted to know who the mysterious guy she's been seeing everywhere is, and she now has some idea—someone she sure as heck doesn't want in her life right now. Or ever.

She follows the nurse to the door Kira went through only a few minutes ago, telling herself to focus on the painkillers she'll be getting soon. She just wants to put this whole night behind her.

But she can't help stealing one last glance as she steps through.

Kade's taken a few steps away and stopped, his shoulders hunched as he talks into his cell phone. He's too far away for her to hear what he's saying, but his frown is the deepest she's

seen so far. The opaque doors close, cutting him off, just as she makes out two words.

“It’s begun.”

3

KADE



Kade paces back and forth in the parking lot, his phone pressed to his ear. Edgy tension is coiling through his muscles as he fights the need to go back inside.

“You’ve done the right thing,” Guy says through the cell, his voice calm and reassuring. “You know why you can’t go back in the hospital.”

Kade rubs his forehead with his free hand, still fighting the urge. Elara shouldn’t be alone right now. He knows how terrifying this all can be.

“You weren’t even supposed to help her in the first place,” Guy says, his voice low.

Kade is already picturing the frown on the grizzled old werewolf’s face. After everything he’s done for him, Kade hates even a whiff of disappointing Guy. His mentor deserves better than that.

He clenches his jaw. “I know.” Yet, he can’t bring himself to regret it. Elara was hurt and terrified. He couldn’t sit back and do nothing.

Guy sighs, the sound heavy with layers. “I’ll call back later. See you home soon.”

The call disconnects and Kade lowers it from his ear, looking at the screen as it goes dark. As if this one lifeline, the one surety he has, is fading to black with it. He has no reason to doubt Guy, he’s been a steady and solid rock through his entire life. After losing everything, there was Guy. On bad

days, Guy is there to make it better. He's like a father to him, and as such, he should be trusted.

With a sigh, Kade sits on the hood of his sedan and opens up his social media, deciding to keep up his research to distract himself. Even if the happy faces are lightyears from how he feels.

Except someone's posted a picture from the falls tonight. In the background he can see Elara and her friends gathered around each other. Elara's face is lit up with excitement, her hands held out animatedly in front of her as she talks to her friends.

Kade growls under his breath and turns the phone screen off, momentarily considering throwing it across the parking lot. He imagines how satisfying it would be to watch the glass splinter and shatter, but he really doesn't want to explain to Guy why he's broken another phone. Feeling guilty at the thought, he slips his cell back in his pocket and folds his arms over his chest to glower at the hospital.

He should be in there, by her side, making sure she's okay. That's what a good guy would do. But he's not the good guy, is he? Not in the slightest. He's been following Elara, watching her every move, making sure he's got it right. He can't be wrong, not again. The stakes are too high.

The guilt too much.

With one foot up on the hood of his car, he spears his fingers through his hair and lets out a frustrated huff. He wasn't supposed to actually *like* her. He was just supposed to watch, get a feel for who she is. But as more time went by, it was less of a job and more of a pleasure.

Watching her get up in the morning, bedraggled and bleary eyed to pour her coffee. Watching her work out in her dorm room, her T.V. blaring club music while she runs on the treadmill. It wasn't easy to get a dorm across the alley from her, harder still to watch her unseen, but Kade has a job to do and he can't let Guy down. Everything rides on this, on *her*.

The sound of screeching tires breaks Kade out of his inner thoughts, and he squares his shoulders as a sedan peels through the parking lot of the hospital and squeals to a stop in front of the emergency exit.

“We have to park the car!” a woman wails. It’s obvious she’s been crying.

“Let them ticket me, I don’t care! Our baby is hurt!” a man shouts as he jumps out of the driver’s seat. They leave the car there, running, with the doors open as they race each other inside. “Elara Holloway! We’re here to see Elara Holloway! Where’s my baby?”

“Her parents...” Kade mumbles as the sliding glass doors hiss shut behind them. A new wave of guilty sadness rushes over him, one that he quickly pushes away again. There’s no time for feeling, no time for regret.

Pushing himself off the hood, he rounds around his sedan and slips into the driver’s seat. The older vehicle roars to life after turning the key a few times. Kade grabs the shift to put it in drive, but he looks over at the seat Elara was in and freezes. There are blood stains on the arms of the seats. Dark, red, accusing.

Kade bares his teeth and slips the car into drive, pulling out of the parking lot just as fast as the Holloway’s pulled in. But it’s rage powering this car. Not concern. He slams his palm into the steering wheel a few times as he runs a red light and roars down the road. He’s headed back to his dorm, back to the safety and anonymity he’s grown so comfortable with.

He doesn’t want to think about what lies ahead, about what happened tonight and what it will mean for tomorrow. No. He wants to go home, microwave a cup o’ noodles, and watch some boring T.V. show until he passes out.

By the time he gets to the dormitories his rage has abated, and when he parks he’s breathing normally again. Casually, he steps out of his car and trots up the stairs to his dorm. He passes a group of freshmen girls who stare at him like starving piranhas and he forces himself to smile and wave.

Let them simper, let them desire. I will never be for them.

He can never be for anyone.

The thought is sobering, and all consuming.

He pushes through the door to his dorm room and kicks off his boots right there. Pulling his shirt off his back with one hand behind his head, he tosses it into the bathroom right next to the front door and makes it into the hamper. In nothing but jeans now, he storms into the little kitchenette of his room and pulls out a Styrofoam cup from a cupboard. He's so frustrated that as he tries to take the plastic and paper lining off of it, he cracks the cup and freeze-dried shrimp fall out and all over the floor.

“For the love of—” Kade palms his forehead in aggravation and grabs a bowl out of the next cupboard. He pours whatever is left of his cheap meal into the bowl, fills it with water, and slams the microwave door closed on it. Once the plate inside is spinning, Kade turns his attention back to the mess on the floor. Somehow, it's not dried noodles and tiny desiccated sea creatures he's looking at, but the mess he made tonight with Elara.

Guilty steps have him walking to a nearby closet, where he pulls out a broom and dustpan, and methodically cleans up the mess he made. Just like he'll do for Elara.

When the microwave beeps and the smell of cheap ramen floods his room, he's finished. He places the broom back in the closet, and fishes his meal and a plastic fork out of the kitchenette before plopping himself down in a recliner and flipping on the T.V.

Infomercials blare immediately, advertising a new kitchen gadget or something, but the screen doesn't have his attention. Across the alleyway, a light flicks on in Elara's dorm room. Jordyn rushes in, looking flustered, and starts opening up Elara's dresser drawers and throwing random clothes into a white trash bag.

She looks scared, worried, tears are staining her face. Did something happen?

Kade jerks up in his chair, spilling his ramen, and races towards the window. He plasters his back to the wall and opens the window slightly to see if he can hear anything. Elara always leaves her windows open, a fact that frustrates Kade more than he'd like to admit.

“I know, Mom, I know. I'm just going to take this stuff to Elara and Kira and come straight home...” Jordyn pauses, listening to the phone she's got pinched between her ear and shoulder as she grabs the stuff for her friends. “I promise, I didn't get hurt. I'm just frazzled! It never should have gone so sideways so fast!”

No, it shouldn't have.

“Yes Mom, I'll be home in an hour. Promise. Come on Mom, really?” A huff of exaggeration. “Fine, cross my heart and hope to die, I'll be home in an hour. I love you too. Bye...”

The door slams as Jordyn leaves the room, and Kade breathes a sigh of relief. She was talking to her mom, flustered about everything that happened, but she didn't say anything about Elara needing more than stitches. She's probably alright.

Kade looks back towards his chair, at the mess of noodles now soaking into the seat, and bangs the back of his head into the wall lightly with a grunt of agitation.

He can't afford to forget what his role in all of this is. He's not the hero, nor will he ever be. He will never be anything to Elara.

The first two lines of the prophecy that he already knows exactly what his role in this has always been filter through his mind, a harbinger of the night he's going to have.

In shadows deep, where moonlight gleams,

A curse unfolds in silent dreams.

.

ELARA



Elara stares at the stitches in her wrists, tracking from the base of her palms and up her forearms. She hadn't realized that the scratches were so deep, at least not until the doctor had pulled out the needle and thread. Then again, she shouldn't have been so surprised. There was so much blood.

And the relief when the anesthetic kicked in had been amazing.

But right now, as her mother leans across the dining table, her eyes crinkled with concern, she needs to pretend the scratches are most definitely minor. She tucks her bandaged arms beneath the table as she tries to pull up a smile. If her mom's hovering now, it will be infinitely worse if she knows how bad it was.

"Tell us, honey," her mom says, pushing a cup of tea toward her. "What exactly happened?"

Elara sighs. Her mom and dad have asked the same question multiple times, as if they can't quite wrap their heads around something like this happening to their daughter. "There was a wild animal and it scratched me. I don't know what it was. It all happened so fast."

She feels awful lying to them, especially since there really isn't a reason for her to lie, but she just can't bring herself to admit there had been a wolf. Strangely enough, she doesn't want anything to happen to it. If she told people, they'd want to hunt it, and she'd hate for an innocent animal to be hurt

because of what happened to her. She was out in the dark, alone. And it's not like it tried to kill her.

Elara's parents glance at one another, as if they aren't sure whether to believe her. Exhaustion falls over her. She's already told this lie more than once, and she's ready to be done with it, ready to rest and be away from other people. She rises from the kitchen bench, careful to keep her injured hands from touching the scarred wood.

"I think I'm going to go to bed."

"Of course, honey."

For a terrible second Elara thinks her mother's going to insist on tucking her into bed. She quickly presses a kiss to her cheek, then her father's, and leaves the kitchen. She is, after all, in college. She only agreed to come home because she didn't want them to worry about her, but as soon as tomorrow comes she'll be back in her dorm room at the college. Tonight is a one-time thing.

She climbs the stairs to her bedroom, glad to be in the familiar safety of her own space, even if it isn't quite as hers as her space at the college. At least here, she has the familiar sense of everything she's grown up with. Her bed's already turned down, ready for her to climb into it, but Elara instead finds herself drawn to the window. Her feet scuff on the soft rugs as she walks over, gently pushing back the curtain. The full moon greets her, now hovering high in the night sky, glowing with enough light that it almost shimmers. It was her one witness to what happened at the falls.

No matter how many times she mulls it over, she still can't figure out exactly what happened. Was Kade following her? That's the only thing that makes sense, given how many times she's seen him over the past few weeks. It's gone past just being a coincidence and is now fully in the realm of creepy and unsettling, no matter how pretty he or his wounded eyes are. And what about the wolf? She knows that logically, Kade couldn't have had anything to do with the wolf attacking her, but the fact that he'd shown up so quickly after she'd been injured is another freaking coincidence.

And those suckers are piling up.

Now that Elara's sure that Kade was following her, that at least has one question answered. Except it opens up so many more. Yes, he followed her. Yes, he'd taken them all to the hospital, which should count for something. And he'd carried her into the car, and put a blanket around her shoulders. But what had he said when he was on the phone as she was being wheeled away?

It's begun.

What does that mean? What's beginning? Does he know what had happened to her? Or had it been nothing to do with her at all, and her shock and anxiety are messing with her mind, when in reality it could have been anything from an assignment for school to a job?

She presses her fingers to her temples only to wince at the pain radiating down her arm. Quickly dropping her hands again, Elara chews on her lip. She hoped things would be clearer after the hospital. Once the pain wasn't thumping through her system. But the more she thinks, the less everything makes sense.

Suddenly, the room seems to brighten and she spins around, wondering what's going on. The lamp beside her bed blazes brighter and brighter, as if someone's turning it up. Before Elara can move, there's a sharp *pop* as the lightbulb bursts.

She yelps, instinctively stepping away as shards of glass strike the lamp shade, others raining down on her feet. Footsteps pound on the stairs and in less than a minute both of her parents are crowding into the doorway, jostling each other in an attempt to get through.

“Honey, are you okay?” her mom gasps.

Elara nods, trying not to move too much since her bare feet are now surrounded by glass. She can feel it pricking the side of her foot and shifts carefully, taking her father's hand as he helps her take a few steps out of the shattered glass.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she assures, clearing her throat when she hears how small her voice is. “Not sure what happened.”

Her mom shakes her head while her dad retreats from the room, no doubt to get a broom and dustpan to clean up the glass. He hates any kind of mess, not that she can blame him. He’s already had one scare today with getting a call from the hospital about his daughter; cleaning up some glass probably feels like the least he can do to control the situation.

“It was probably just an electrical short of some kind,” her mom says, rolling her eyes. “You can sleep in the guest room tonight and we’ll get it taken care of tomorrow. We’ll call an electrician.”

Elara bites her lip as she follows her mother out, stepping carefully to avoid the glass.

An electrical surge would be plausible...if the lamp had been on. But it wasn’t, which just adds another question to the pile.

If it wasn’t a fault, what was it?

ELARA



Elara's woken the next morning by the sunlight streaming onto her closed eyelids like a personal attack. Flipping onto her side with a groan, she fumbles for her phone, squinting at the screen, and then sits bolt upright with a soft gasp. She's slept through all of her alarms, of which there are a ton so this precise thing doesn't happen. Her feet thump on the floor as she flings her legs out from under the covers, scrambling for her clothes. She's already late for her first class, so late that she might as well not even go, but she can probably make it in time for her next one.

The door thumps against the wall as her mother walks in and Elara jumps back, so startled that she drops one of her shoes.

"You get right back in bed, young lady," she says firmly, nudging Elara's shoe out of the way as she walks toward the bed with a tray full of breakfast foods—bacon, sausage, pancakes, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Elara's stomach rumbles in response and she shuffles back toward the bed, mostly because she's so conditioned to do what her mother says, but also out of confusion.

"Why didn't you wake me? I have class this morning."

Her mom shakes her head. "You're not going to class today. Or maybe even tomorrow. You're going to rest and recover." She swipes at Elara's hand gently, knocking her other shoe out of her grip. "Back in bed."

Elara hesitates, but her mother isn't the type of person who takes no for an answer, and besides, she's not wrong. The wounds on her hands would make it almost impossible to take notes anyway, but even though two days in bed won't make the scratches or the stitches go away, it might at least give her a chance to think. About Kade, about the wolf, about everything.

"Fine," she mumbles, lifting the covers and sliding back under them, allowing her mom to lower the breakfast tray across her knees. For once, she'd actually been looking forward to going to class, but there's no point arguing about it now. She has good grades, so missing a few days of school won't kill her, even though there's that molecular biology lecture that she'll be sad to miss. A faculty guest member from a prestigious college has been invited to speak, and of course today would be the day that she gets hurt and can't go to class.

Elara curses gently under her breath as her mother leaves the room, not at her, but at the wolf and everything that's happened after. What would have been different if the three of them hadn't gone to the falls last night? They would have woken up this morning and gone to class, then had a study session afterward and probably gone out for pizza. Instead, she has a stalker, and the memories of a golden-eyed wild animal coming at her.

Elara sleeps on and off throughout the day, only finally waking up when Kira and Jordyn slip into her room. Kira's limping but smiling, announcing that a sprained knee won't be stopping her anytime soon. They both plop down on the edge of Elara's bed as she sits up with a wince, a slow process because balancing on her hands is painful.

Once she's settled, her two friends bring out what they'd been hiding behind their backs.

Elara's eyes widen at the two bouquets of flowers. One of white roses, the other deep maroon. A card pokes out of each one.

"Well?" Kira asks, bouncing a little. "Who are they from Little Miss Popular?"

Elara takes the notes from each of the bouquets and opens the one from the white roses first. “It’s from Laith,” she says quietly. “Saying he hopes I get better soon.”

“Laith?” Kira asks sharply.

“Who?” says Jordyn.

“He’s in some of my classes. Kira’s, too.” Which would explain why Kira knows his name, although not why she’s no longer smiling.

“What about the other one?” Jordyn asks, now also bouncing.

Elara opens the second note and has to suppress a frown. “It also says get better soon. But with no name.”

“Ooh, a secret admirer,” says Jordyn.

Elara places the two notes on her bedside table, knowing exactly who sent the second one and not sure whether it’s creepy or sweet. Maybe Kade isn’t as bad as she thought. Maybe the flowers are an apology. Or maybe he’s taking his creepiness to the next level.

“It’s probably just someone who forgot to sign the card.” She glances at Kira, keen to change the subject. “Are you okay? Is your knee hurting you?”

Kira glances at the white roses then quickly looks away and yanks up a smile. “I told you, I’m fine. I plan on practicing my triple pikes again tomorrow.”

Elara smiles at the joke, letting the topic go even though she’s not convinced. Kira’s knee looked badly injured. “So, what did I miss today?”

Kira rolls her eyes. “Soo much. Just for something different, we spent the day going from one large room full of uncomfortable chairs to another, listening to self-important people talk at us. There’s a reason people call them lectures.”

“Wow,” says Elara. “You really lived it up, huh?”

Jordyn rolls her eyes as she pulls out her phone. “I took notes in any classes we have together. The lecture on

functional genomics was fascinating. I'll email them to you now."

"Thanks."

Her eyes widen as if she just remembered something. "And the molecular biology talk was canceled. Postponed, actually. It's happening at the same time next week."

Elara grins, glad to have some good news for a change. "That's great!"

Jordyn frowns. "I'd better make sure I pack that special notepad I bought, just for this." She taps on her phone. "I'll set a reminder."

"You two seriously need to look at your definition of fun," groans Kira.

Their laughter is interrupted by Elara's mom calling up the stairs. "Dinner's ready, Elara. There's plenty if Jordyn and Kira want to stay."

"We'd love to, Mrs. Holloway!" calls out Kira. In a quieter voice, she says to Elara and Jordyn, "Your mom is an amazing cook."

"True," says Elara. Her mom loves to cook and it shows. "But then again, anything tastes good after college food."

Jordyn holds up her fingers, counting each one off. "Porridge, pasta, and pizza."

Giggling, they descend the stairs and Elara notes that Kira's knee really is looking better. There's a slight limp but nothing else. Despite the pain she seemed to be in last night, it must've been just a sprain.

Dinner with her friends and her parents is fun, at least until Jordyn brings up the flowers and her "secret admirer." Elara's stomach plunges, and she picks at her mashed potatoes. She can't tell her parents about Kade because they'd flip out about it. And she can't blame them because she's flipping out about it too.

What's more, Kira goes quiet again. Quiet isn't a word she's ever associated with her outgoing friend.

“It’s probably just someone from school,” Elara says with false confidence. She doesn’t want her parents to worry, and although Jordyn glances at her and Kira also takes great interest in her mashed potatoes, neither of them says anything, something Elara’s grateful for.

She manages to make it through the rest of dinner without the topic coming up, then excuses herself to head back upstairs, finding she’s tired. With quick hugs, both being careful to avoid Elara’s injured arms, Kira and Jordyn leave.

Up in her room, Elara decides to change into a clean set of pajamas. All she’s done today is sleep, but at least if she gets into something fresh she knows then she’s actually accomplished something. She pulls her curtains closed, pausing when she thinks she sees a flash of movement. But long seconds stretch out with nothing, so she closes them entirely. Probably a neighborhood cat or something.

Elara quickly changes her clothes and then heads back to the window to open her curtains. The second she does, she sees movement again. But this time she knows it’s not her imagination. She saw what it was.

Who.

Kade quickly slips behind the large oak tree across the road, but she’s already seen him. Elara stumbles backward, tripping and falling onto her bed. She cries out as she instinctively puts her hands back to brace herself. He’s here. Kade’s watching her, outside her home.

There’s no room for doubt anymore.

He’s following her.

A potent mix of fear and anger flushes through her. She wants to go out there and tell him to get the hell out of her life. At the same time, she wants to crawl into bed and pull the covers over her head.

Panting with the force of the emotions coursing through her, Elara stares at the curtains. Is he still out there? Watching? Waiting?

And for what?

Her breath disintegrates when the curtains impossibly, undeniably start to change. A deep maroon, the same shade as the roses on her bedside table, is blooming across the beige. Within a blink, they've morphed. No longer the neutral color of her childhood—admittedly, the color she always hated—now a beautiful dark red.

Footsteps pound up the stairs, and Elara tried to compose herself as her parents burst into the room, both of them searching for what had made her scream.

“Honey, what happened?” her father asks, clearly worried.

Elara sighs, knowing she has to lie again. She doesn't want to worry her parents any more than she has to, and if she tells them there's someone following her, they'll never let her leave the house again. She'll have to deal with it on her own, and besides, what had just happened with her curtains is totally unbelievable.

“Nothing,” she says, waving a bandaged hand. “I thought I saw something out the window, but I think it was just a cat.” She tries to keep things as vague as possible. She's heard somewhere that lies are harder to keep straight if you can't remember the finer details.

Her mom squints, glancing around the room, and Elara's breathing stills. Her mom must sense something is different so Elara pointedly keeps her gaze away from the curtains. Her parents already think she's overly fragile because of the stitches. If she tells them that her curtains changed color on their own, they'll have her admitted to the psych ward. Hopefully, her mom won't notice the change in curtain color.

“Honey, what happened to your curtains?”

Elara stops her shoulders from sagging. No such luck. Which means another lie, because the truth isn't an option. She looks down at her injured hands like she's ashamed, which isn't actually far off.

“I changed them because I accidentally ruined them. Sorry.” She keeps her gaze down, knowing she just broke her commitment to be vague. And apart from the apology, which

is genuine, the rest is a total fabrication. She's not the one responsible for changing the color of the curtains.

Although, if it wasn't her, then who did?

Her father sighs, gently kissing the top of her head. "You aren't supposed to be doing any heavy lifting. We would have done it for you." He pulls back to look her in the eyes, and Elara fights not to squirm. "Don't even worry about the curtains. It is no big deal at all. Nothing."

He presses a second kiss to her forehead, and again Elara's struck by how upset her parents must be after the last few days. Her father isn't exactly a physically affectionate man. She hadn't spoken to them since last weekend, and then suddenly they got a call from the hospital that their only daughter had been mauled by a wild animal.

She pulls both of her parents in for a tight hug, closing her eyes as she basks in their warmth and love. Her father's worry, not to mention the lines of tension and fear around her mother's eyes, only confirms that she's doing the right thing by not telling them about Kade. Or the curtains.

"I love you guys. I'm sorry I worried you. I really didn't mean to." She hadn't intended to scare them, or be attacked by a wolf, but it still only feels right to apologize. She sees her dad squeeze her mom's hand gently and the sparkle of tears in Mom's eyes before she snuffles and nudges Elara to lie down.

"All right. Time for sleep."

Elara hides her smile at her mother's bossiness. She always does that when she gets emotional.

This time, her mom does tuck her in, but Elara doesn't object. In a blink, it feels as if no time has passed at all. Her dad is waiting at the door for her mother as she gently leans down and kisses Elara's forehead, as if she isn't nineteen, but is still a little girl. If nothing else, being here with her parents at least makes her feel safer.

What that will mean for school tomorrow, she has no idea, but she'll deal with it then. Elara burrows down in her bed as her parents leave the room, turning the light off. The idea of

sleep is welcoming right now. In fact, oblivion is downright appealing.

Except sleep doesn't come. It takes a little while to find a comfortable position with her bandaged hands, and when she does, she finds she's facing the curtains.

The curtains that are now maroon.

The curtains covering the window that Kade was on the other side of not that long ago.

Tears prickle Elara's eyes as she turns her head away.

What the hell is happening to her?

KADE



The fact Elara's window is so easy to open is both a relief and an irritation. Kade had been watching her from the large oak tree outside her window, but as night descended she was encased in shadow and he didn't feel comfortable being this far away. Why didn't she just go home? Kade can see her a lot easier from his dorm room, but no. She stayed with her mom and dad. Just another thing to be irritated about.

His first step into her room is like stepping back in time; band posters from her teenage years cover the wall. Stuffed animals that look so old and well used that she must have had them as a child linger on her dresser. Kade smiles slightly to himself, picking up a threadbare bunny and stroking its face with his thumb. Her innocence is all over this room, permeating the walls, but the woman who's in the little twin bed in the center of the room is no longer the little girl who grew up here.

Setting the bunny exactly where it was on her dresser, Kade moves to her bed and places both hands on either end of her bed posts. He leans over, watching Elara's shoulder rise and fall as she sleeps on her side. She's content, peaceful. Kade envies her. He envies that she doesn't know what's ahead, that she doesn't realize what's waiting for her on the next full moon. He also pities her, heart and soul, for what's been done.

Elara shifts, making him hold his breath, and rolls over on her back. She stretches, her pretty mouth hinting at a smile,

and then rolls over on her other side. Kade's reaching out before he can help himself, wanting to lay his hand on her ankle and squeeze reassuringly, but he knows he shouldn't. She tries to curl her arms up under her chin and winces, a slight whimper escaping her lips, and guilt nearly tears him in two.

Kade knows he shouldn't be in here. He shouldn't be this close to her, but he can't seem to stay away. He has to do this, to watch her, to keep her safe. Or else. The prophecy says that they need her, that they have to have her, so he must keep her safe. When the time comes, everything will rest on her unsuspecting shoulders.

Kade swallows a sigh of grief and lowers himself to the foot of her bed, pulling his knees up and resting his clenched fists on them while he stares daggers into her wall. This isn't right, this isn't who he is. With how he feels about her, he should be wooing her. Not stalking her like a creep in the night. Why did it have to be her, why did it have to be Elara?

Kade sets his head back on the bed frame and closes his eyes, breathing in the scent that's become more than familiar these past few months. Sometimes he feels like if he can't be close enough to smell her every day that he may fall apart and actually grab her in public. He knows he can't, but god, does he want to.

Kade wants to grab her, pin her to a wall, and show her exactly how he feels about her.

But she's the chosen one.

She's the linchpin to everything.

Without her, none of this will come to pass.

Guy would never forgive him.

Letting Guy down is not an option...not after everything...

Kade's eyes drift closed, his mind sinking into sleep, lulled by the sound of Elara's even breathing beside him. He knows he shouldn't, that he could be caught, but the thought of being with her while he sleeps is too tempting. Too utterly delicious.



A HUFF OF BREATH, hot condensation blowing on his face.

Kade opens his eyes and freezes. There on the dirt are a pair of large cloven hooves. Slowly, he rolls over on his back and his breath escapes his lungs in a painful whoosh of air. An elk stands above him, its antlers large and encompassing as it lowers its head and sniffs again. Kade tries to shrink into his sleeping bag, to seem like he means no threat, when he sees it.

A glint of knowledge in its black eyes, a knowing that no animal should have.

Then, it attacks.

It takes one step back and lunges, spearing its antlers into Kade's sleeping bag and ripping him off the ground as if he weighs nothing. He tries to scream as he flies through the air, but the sound of his pack brother screaming drowns it out.

Kade hits the ground and rolls into a rock, his head bouncing off the hard surface like a rubber ball. In a heap on the ground, he watches with blurred vision as he realizes what's happened. All around him, the pack is being attacked. The elk is there, standing tall with blood dripping down its antlers, but all around him are animals of every species. And all of them are attacking Kade's pack.

"Shifters!" someone screams, right before their voice is cut off with a gurgle as a jaguar rips their throat out.

Kade's trapped in his sleeping bag, his vision blurring more and more as blood drips from his temple and into his eyes. His whole pack, men, women, even the children, are being slaughtered.

He thought they outran them, the shifters. He thought they got away, but here they are. They found them anyway.

Feebly, Kade struggles against the confines of his sleeping bag, trying not to see the gruesome sights all around him illuminated by the roaring fire.

“Why?” Kade screams at the elk as it starts towards him again. He must be their leader, he must be in charge. He seems completely focused on Kade, on killing him and him alone.

The elk shakes his head and huffs in irritation. He paws the ground and lowers his horns again, ready to ram him into this rock.

Ready to kill him.

Kade closes his eyes tight, unable to do anything to defend himself, and waits for the killing blow.

Howling.

Howling coming from everywhere!

His eyes fly open.

His head is held high, whipping from side to side as the howls close in all around. He rears up, pawing the air, and bugles a sound of retreat.

But he doesn't get away.

Kade watches as a huge wolf, bigger than he's ever seen before, leaps over him and sinks its teeth into the Elk's face.

Everything is a blur of animals screaming and blood spraying as a pack of wolves Kade doesn't recognize converge on the camp. The shifters are running for their lives, some not making it away, their bodies returning to their human form as they die.

The elk bugles, thrashing his head and yanking the wolf from side to side, but the massive wolf doesn't let go. With a cry of pain the elk rears up, kicks out at the wolf, and finally dislodges the animal.

Except the wolf doesn't come away hurt. In fact, he comes away with the Elk's eye and cheek hanging from its jowls.

The Elk rears back again, but instead of kicking the great wolf, it shifts into a giant raven and takes flight. Screeching into the air, it sounds for its followers to retreat, crying a mournful sound at those dead and dying below.

The wolf lets out one final howl before turning to face Kade. It spits out the flesh of the elk as if it's disgusting, and as it approaches him, it shifts back into a man. Caring hands reach out to Kade and cup his face, addressing his wounds before the stranger reaches down and starts to let Kade loose from his sleeping bag. He holds Kade's shoulders down as he addresses the shallow puncture wounds up and down the younger man's torso from the Elk's horns.

"Your sleeping bag saved your life," he says.

Though it's painful and Kade feels as if his brain is rocking in his skull, he manages to shake his head.

"No, you saved my life..." Kade whispers.

The man nods sadly, his dark brows pinching together over darker eyes. "Only your life, I'm afraid. We weren't fast enough—"

Kade sits up with a start, looking around. Everyone's dead. The only wolves still standing are those he doesn't recognize. A sob rises up in his throat, the last sob he'll ever cry. The last bit of weakness he'll ever let himself show.

They're all dead.

The pack who took Kade in when he killed my family, they're all dead.

The last time Kade saw a slaughter like this, is when he did it to his own foster family.



HE'S EIGHT YEARS OLD, sitting in front of a Christmas tree. Kade and his foster siblings are ripping open presents with abandon, glee filling our faces. Tommy gets a BB gun, Jane gets a new makeup set. Kade opens up his present and sees the one thing he asked for, the one thing he'd always wanted, but no foster family ever cared enough to listen.

With glistening eyes Kade looks up at Bill and Rosy, their smiles so bright and eyes just as misty as his. They listened.

They actually love him. Kade's hands hover reverently over the art set and the two pads of sketch paper they came with.

"That's a girl's present!" Tommy laughs, pointing at Kade with his BB gun. "Are you a girl, Kade? A little sissy girl who likes to color?"

"Tomas, that's enough!" Bill warns him, and Rosy moves over to Kade to hug him around the shoulders.

Tommy is their kid, and he doesn't like having foster siblings.

"I don't like to color, and I'm a girl!" Jane snaps to Kade's defense, putting her hand on his foot.

"You certainly paint your face enough! Ha ha, just a pair of girls. I didn't know my parents brought two girls home for Christmas!" Tommy laughs, cocking his BB gun and pointing it straight at Kade's chest. "Prove you're not a girl, Kade. Cop this BB right to the chest. If you can take it, you might just be a boy!"

"Tomas, no!" Billy roars.

Except he's not fast enough. He lunges forward to stop his son, but the BB gun fires and the little metal ball hits Kade straight in the chest.

Pain rips through him, pain that shouldn't be this bad.

Kade can feel Rosy's hands on his shoulders, his face, but then she screams. Kade feels like he's being ripped apart, like every bone in his body is breaking.

And then Kade tastes blood.



KADE JERKS AWAKE so fast he almost screams. Sitting up on Elara's bedroom floor, he clutches his chest as he scrambles backwards towards the wall. His fear is making his heart beat out of control, and it takes all the control he can muster to roll his body out her bedroom window before the sound of his panic wakes her.

He hits the ground outside her window with a loud thump, the wind knocked out of his lungs. He doesn't move. He lies there, unable to function, unable to breathe, until his phone vibrates in his pocket.

Kade sucks in a labored breath, pain blooming in his ribcage, and reaches into his back pocket to pull out my smartphone and read the message.

She's the one, there's no doubt about it. You did the right thing. Now make sure she doesn't get away. Make sure she's ready for this. I'm counting on you.

Kade's mind flashes back to the night Guy saved him, and he sees Guy in his mind's eye as he reads his text. Kade owes Guy his life, he owes Guy his very existence. No matter what happened to Kade, no matter what he's done, that is the one constant in his life.

Kade will not betray him.

He will fulfill the prophecy.

ELARA



Elara stops outside the college cafe, about to draw in a deep breath only to stop herself. She really should know by now that's not a good idea. Then again, a week ago, she wouldn't have thought twice about doing it...

She takes a step toward the door, conscious she's running late, when a car backfires and she startles, her hand flying to her throat. Elara looks around, trying to find where such a surprising sound came from only to register there's no car nearby. The college cafe is tucked next to the library, a pretty little courtyard in front of it. She stills as she realizes that the car that backfired is a parking lot away, too far for her to actually hear the noise that it made. What's more, the students wandering past show no sign of having heard it.

Elara presses her hand to her chest, trying to settle her pulse. It shouldn't be possible for her to hear something that far away. Just add it to the list of things that make no sense since...since she was scratched by the wolf.

Since that night on the side of the highway, everything has changed. Nothing big, more so lots of little things. The car backfiring is a classic example. She suddenly hears things she shouldn't be able to, as well as seeing things that are entirely too far for human eyes to see. Her sense of smell is heightened to the point of nearly making her nauseous every time she passes the trash cans outside of the mess hall, an area that she avoids whenever she can. What's more, the scratches healed quickly, so quickly that the stitches had already dissolved

before she could get back to the hospital to have them taken out. All that's left are faint white scars. She's not sure if she's relieved there's no more evidence of the attack. She wants to just forget it and move on.

At the same time, it's the only proof of what's feeling more and more like a catalyst. A critical point where her life has taken a new trajectory. A defining moment she didn't want.

Elara shakes her head, telling herself she's being dramatic. Her emotions are just as haywire as her senses at the moment. The attack unsettled her more than she realized.

Conscious she's stopped just a few feet from the cafe door, she straightens her spine and walks toward it. This will pass with time.

It has to.

She's just put her hand on the door when she glances over her shoulder. The movement's become reflexive now. Almost a habit. Although she doesn't know why she bothers. There's no sight of him.

Kade's disappeared. She hasn't seen him since that night outside her bedroom window.

Pushing through, Elara knows she should be relieved. A part of her is. Another part can't help but wonder why.

Before she can think any further on it, she's assaulted with all the reasons she purposefully didn't rush to get here on time. So many sights. So many sounds. And the smells... Fragrant coffee, warm muffins—raspberry and macadamia—overwhelming, too-sweet perfume.

"Elara! Over here!" Kira waves from near the back, ignoring the glances her furious motion elicits.

Keeping her breath shallow, Elara makes her way over. She covers her wince at the thundering sound of a barista banging out coffee grounds and someone else shouting to a friend to find out whether the croissants are gluten free.

"I can't wait for tonight," says a hushed female voice somewhere to her left. "I've bought chocolate sauce and

everything.” This time, the words are whispered, the excitement obvious.

Flushing, Elara rushes past. There have been so many conversations over the past week she’s been privy to that she really wished she wasn’t.

She reaches the table and quickly sits down, conscious of the bead of sweat trickling down her spine. She feels like she just ran a gauntlet. A sensory one.

Jordyn glances at her smartwatch. “You’re late,” she says, more as an observation. “That’s not like you.”

It’s true. Elara prefers to be punctual. In the same way she prefers to be honest. Yet, both of those have become harder and harder of late.

She sits down, brushing imaginary hair out of her face. “Sorry. I got caught up.”

“We have class soon,” says Jordyn. “It means we’ll have to keep this quick.”

“Keep what quick?” asks Elara. Has she forgotten one of their birthdays?

Kira leans forward, her crossed arms on the table. “Spill the beans. What’s going on, girl?”

Elara works hard to keep her face neutral. She’s about to play dumb when she registers their serious, resolute faces. Of course her two closest friends have noticed something. She won’t be bluffing her way out of this.

She’s going to have to choose her words carefully.

Except she’s never had this much trouble focusing before, and she’s starting to wonder if perhaps the shock of being attacked by a wild animal has done something to her mind. That would explain the hallucinations she’s been having. “What do you mean, what’s going on?” she asks, stalling.

“We’ve noticed a change in you,” says Kira, her voice uncharacteristically soft. Almost gentle. “And we’re worried about you.”

It's a simple statement, one that even Elara has to take notice of with her issues focusing, and she swallows as hard as she flushes. They're right, of course. She's never had this much trouble before. And yet, some part of her objects to being confronted like this, and she forces down the urge to growl. The reaction only scares her more. Since when does she growl? It's not a normal thing, and she wonders if she should go to see someone.

Like a psych hospital with a nice, padded cell...

Because it's more than having trouble focusing. If she told Jordyn and Kira she's having trouble with that, they'd just tell her that it was something to do with the attack, which might have been true. But then there's the curtains changing color, which certainly hadn't been a hallucination because her parents had seen it too. She can't tell them about that. She just can't.

Conscious that too much time has passed, Elara glances at them. "I know, I don't know what's wrong with me lately. I just can't help it." Not a lie, but also not the whole truth. But how can she tell them the whole truth? They would never believe her. Heck, she doesn't even believe it herself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

Almost exactly the same thing that she had told her parents, which feels more like an omen than anything else. These are all people who love her, all people who want the best for her. And yet here she is, lying to them. Her gut clenches as she can feel her world slowly unraveling.

Jordyn and Kira glance at one another, as if they aren't sure exactly what to do with what they just heard. Not that Elara blames them. She's all over the place at the moment.

"You'd tell us if something was up, wouldn't you?" Kira asks.

"Of course I would," says Elara, working hard on keeping her gaze steady. "I think it's just taking me a bit to catch up after missing a couple of days."

Kira opens her mouth to speak but Jordyn's cell phone starts trilling. "Next class," she announces.

Kira rolls her eyes. "No one has their timetable scheduled into their reminders."

"Obviously someone does," says Jordyn primly. "And she hasn't been late for a class yet."

"I've got a free," says Elara. "I might get myself one of those delicious smelling muffins." Another lie. Her churning stomach can't handle the thought of food right now.

Jordyn and Kira stand up and sling their bags over their shoulders. "Muffins?" Kira asks. "I hadn't noticed they had any."

Elara shrugs, hoping her cheeks aren't as red as they feel. "I got a whiff coming in. Maybe they'd just got delivered or something."

With Jordyn rushing the goodbyes—she likes to get to the lecture theaters ten minutes early—the two girls leave.

Elara folds over the moment they exit, dropping her head in her hands. The sounds of the cafe crash around her, spoons clanging on plates, the medley of voices, someone's keys jangling in their hand.

She's slowly going crazy.

"Hey, it can't be that bad."

She looks up, surprised to find Laith beside her table, holding a takeaway coffee cup. Caramel from the smell of things.

Elara smiles weakly. "Hey, Laith."

He frowns. "Is everything okay?"

Tired of the lying, she shrugs. "It could be better." Remembering her manners, she tries to focus. "Thanks for the flowers, by the way."

Laith flushes, his shoulders hiking up an inch. "Sure thing." He glances down at her arms, now practically blemish-

free, confirming that word had got around about what happened. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks," she says, knowing she's repeating herself, but struggling to find words. Someone just sprayed mouthwash into their mouth two tables over the mint is particularly overpowering.

"Do you mind if I sit?" he asks softly.

Elara hesitates. There's a sweetness about the guy that's endearing. At the same, he asked her out and she turned him down so she wouldn't lead him on. She doesn't want to give mixed messages.

He lifts his hands, including the one with the coffee. "Just as friends. You look like you could use the distraction."

Elara smiles. "You're right." She waves toward the seat across from her. "Please, join me."

Laith folds his tall, lean self into the chair. "So, you're doing a science major, too?"

She nods. "Just a general stream at the moment, until I decide what I want to specialize in. Genetics interests me the most."

"Food technology, myself," he says. "Probably nutrition."

Elara angles her head, surprised, but also thinking it seems to fit, somehow. "Laith," she says slowly. "That's an unusual name."

He grimaces. "My parents own a large health food chain. They like to think of themselves as alternative."

"It's a cool name. Far more memorable than something like Elara."

Or Kade.

She mentally shakes herself that he's crept into her thoughts again. She hasn't seen him for a week and she's still thinking of him.

"Maybe if I was cool, it would be fitting." He ducks his head, picking at the edge of his takeaway cup. "But that's not

how anyone would describe me.”

Elara finds herself genuinely smiling. “I decided when I started college I’d define me.”

Laith’s gaze jolts to hers. “You did?”

She shrugs, not wanting to pretend she has this all figured out. “Seemed like a good opportunity. New start and all that.” She wrinkles her nose. “I’ll let you know how it’s going.”

She thought it was going well.

Now, she’s not so sure.

Laith grins. “Looking forward to it.”

Elara smiles back, glad she accepted his invitation to join her. Laith’s obviously one of the good ones.

A movement in the corner of her eye catches her attention and she glances past the few patrons inside and through the large windows at the front of the cafe. The courtyard has the usual number of students wandering past, some sitting on the grass or chairs, chatting. Nothing is out of the norm. Impossibly, her gaze sharpens even more, drawn to something across the other side.

Kade.

He’s standing at the mouth of an alley, watching her.

Elara shoots to her feet. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

“Sure—”

But Elara doesn’t hear the rest of what Laith says. She’s already out the cafe door, determined not to let Kade out of her sight. The guy is a modern-day Houdini with his disappearing acts.

She jogs across the courtyard, then the narrow street used largely for local traffic. Just as she suspects, Kade’s already walking away with long strides. Elara runs even faster, launching herself into the alley. She needs answers.

She stops the moment she enters, almost smiling at what she sees. The alley is a dead end, and Kade's slowly turning around, his handsome features twisted with annoyance.

Elara plants herself at the mouth of the alley so he can't get past, hoisting one hand on her hip. "Why are you following me?" she demands.

Kade stalks toward her, his dark brows pulled low over his stormy blue eyes. Elara almost takes a step back as his movement suddenly feels ominous. Predatory.

But she doesn't.

In fact, she starts to feel annoyed. A growl climbs up her throat, almost as if she's rising to the challenge.

He stops a few feet away. "Excuse me," he says, the politeness a contrast to the scowl scrunching his face. "I'd like to get past."

Elara digs her heels in. "I asked you a question."

His lips thin in a way that's fast becoming familiar, and for a terrible second, she thinks that maybe she's totally wrong. Maybe he doesn't know. Maybe everything has been one weird coincidence. After all, she hasn't seen him for over a week.

He looks away. "I can't answer your questions."

She blinks. What does that even mean? "Then what can you tell me?" she snaps.

Kade's jaw sets and he steps around her, clearly intending on leaving whether she likes it or not.

"What's happening to me?" She means for the question to be a demand like the first one, but it comes out in almost a whisper. The thread of desperation is obvious.

Kade stills. "You'll know at the next full moon."

His blue eyes hold her for long seconds, almost as if he's thinking of saying more, but instead he brushes past her, striding out of the alley.

Elara blinks, not sure what to process first.

There's the scorching sensation where his arm brushed hers.

There's the knowledge that Kade knows something.

And there's the frustration that he has no intention of telling her.

ELARA



Elara's never tried to find Kade before, not really. She always assumed that it was because he was good at hiding, but now she realizes that she just hadn't been sure what she would do if she found him. But when another week passes and she doesn't see him again, and the strange oversensitivity doesn't go away, she decides it's time for the *stalkee* to become the *stalker*.

Thankfully, she has supportive friends, one of whom also happens to work part-time in the records office.

"So, will you do it?" Elara asks.

Jordyn stares at her in shock. Kira does as well, which is no mean feat. Not that Elara can exactly blame them. She knows that they're worried about her recent change in attitude, and asking Jordyn to sneak into the records office and track Kade down doesn't help.

They both know that Kade's been following her, and they probably think that she's going to kill him. She's not sure what she's going to do when she finds him, but she's tired of feeling like she's about to jump out of her skin, like she can't breathe because of all the noises and sensations around her. She wants answers, and it turns out convincing Jordyn to help her get them is not as hard as she expects. Maybe she senses this is important. Maybe she hopes this will have Elara returning to some sort of normality.

She sighs as she looks at Elara, then nods slowly. "Fine. I'll text you when I get the info." She grabs her jacket and

heads out the door, leaving Elara holding her phone in a grip almost tight enough to shatter it.

A watched pot might never boil, but a watched phone does eventually chime, and Elara nearly tosses her phone into the ceiling when it does because she's so startled by the sudden noise.

The answer is short and simple: *veterinary science*.

Elara smiles to herself—being well-liked around campus is going to be handy. She knows someone in the veterinary science program, and a few quick texts yield two Kades in the veterinary science program. Now, at the very least, she has a plan of attack.

The next day, she heads to the veterinary science labs, keeping nonchalant as she strolls past. The first has a class, but no Kade. The second has her heart lurching.

Kade's sitting at one of the benches at the back, some sort of lab paraphernalia that strangely resembles Mouse Trap before him. He's deeply engrossed in a textbook.

Not looking at anyone in particular, Elara casually walks in. She slides in the seat next to him, keeping a wary eye on the teacher as Kade jerks his head to look at her, then sighs when he realizes who it is.

“What are you doing here?” he hisses.

She leans back on the stool and crosses her arms, the picture of nonchalance as she pretends that she is perfectly fine with sneaking into a lab that she has no place being in. True, she's a student at the college, so technically she has every right to be here, but somehow she doubts that the professor will appreciate her sitting in without permission, especially if she's distracting one of the students.

“I want you to tell me what's going on,” she says tightly. Despite her act, there's a ball of nervousness in the pit of her stomach at the thought of being caught. All Kade has to do is raise his voice and say something and she'll be kicked out.

Instead, he shakes his head as he focuses on the beakers in front of him. “There's nothing to tell you.”

Again he doesn't call her crazy, which makes her think he knows more about what's happening than he's letting on. If he really has no idea what's happening, then she's fairly sure he would have called her crazy. She certainly would have.

And yet, he doesn't say anything. Those lush bow lips of his are pressed tightly closed. It makes no sense, and she grows even more frustrated as he refuses to answer her, or even look at her.

How can she make him see what this is doing to her? That she's terrified she's started the slow descent into insanity?

Frustration coils through her muscles, hot and tight. If Kade knows something, she has a right to know it. And it all started the night she was scratched. The night he was there.

She's about to say exactly that when the beaker in front of Kade begins to overflow, blue liquid spilling over and hissing as it hits the Bunsen burner below. As if a switch has been flipped, all around her, the same thing starts to happen with the other beakers. Elara shoots to her feet, swallowing hard. This can't have anything to do with her. It can't.

But as panic climbs up her throat, it gets worse. The blue liquid boils violently, bursting and spitting liquids over protesting students as they scramble backward. The flames of Bunsen burners flare up, glaringly bright as Elara shrinks back, Kade coming to stand beside her. His fingers twitch toward her, as if he's instinctively trying to protect her, but he doesn't touch her.

The shadow of something huge appears on the wall to her left, something with fangs and tall ears and a long snout. If she didn't know any better, Elara would say it was a wolf, but that makes no sense. There's no wolf in here, nor anything to make the shadow look like one, or even anything to make a shadow that big.

She gasps as her fingers begin to ache, the nails burning as if something's trying to burst out of them. It feels as if every one of her senses is on high alert. She can hear every single person in the room breathing, feel their heartbeats as they pound faster and faster. The spilled chemicals fill her nose

with an acrid scent, almost as much as the flames of the Bunsen burners, still burning so high she's surprised that they haven't set off the fire alarms yet.

"Elara."

Her frantic gaze shoots to Kade. She needs to say something. She wants this to stop.

She needs him to help her.

He grips her arms, his thumbs stroking her skin. "Elara, it's okay."

Elara slams her eyes closed, clinging to those words. *It's okay*. It's not, and it doesn't feel like it ever will be, but she lets them sink in.

It's okay.

When she opens her eyes again, everything's gone back to normal, right back to the irritated students glancing around at their ruined lab. If not for that, she might have thought nothing happened, but everyone is eyeing her.

Humiliation burns Elara's cheeks. Again, there's that strange urge to snarl, something she's never had the compulsion to do before the wolf scratched her.

Everything started then. Her gaze flies to Kade's. It all started with him.

It's not possible, but...what if Kade *is* the wolf? It's the only thing that makes sense. He was there when she was scratched by the wolf, or at least nearby. He even mentioned some animal attacks that had been happening. But that's not possible, is it?

Nothing about this whole situation is possible. She doesn't believe in the supernatural, but she shouldn't be able to hear everyone's heartbeats, her curtains shouldn't change colors, and a chemistry lab shouldn't almost explode just because she's upset. But every one of those has happened.

And as Kade simply watches her thinking all this, she notes he's not freaked out. Not surprised. And still not talking.

Tears of frustration prick at Elara's eyes, and she shoves at him. If he isn't going to tell her the truth, then there's no reason for her to stand here and feel the stares of everyone else in a lab burning into her skin.

"You know what's happening." *You did this*, she almost screams, even though it's totally irrational and not fair. "So either tell me what's going on, or..." She pauses, fighting the urge to stamp her foot in frustration like a little girl. There is really no ultimatum that she can offer that will motivate him, especially since he's totally ignored her thus far.

His non-answer is proof of that.

Elara whirls on her heel and stalks out of the lab, barely making it outside before the tears finally overflow. She tucks herself into a small alcove where no one can see her, one of the perks of coming to such an old college; there are plenty of places to hide.

The tears flow freely, and Elara doesn't try to stop them. It feels good to just let herself do what she needs, instead of having to worry about what everyone is going to think about her. She cries as she lets out all of the fear and pain of the last couple of weeks, the fact that she can't understand anything that's going on.

Kade's been following her for weeks and she's so mixed up she's wondering if he's potentially done something worse. Strange, inexplicable things keep happening. She's lied to her family and friends about it all because she doesn't even understand it herself.

Everything hurts, and Elara does her best to let it all out, tears flowing down her cheeks as she places a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound, just in case there's anyone around. Some part of her hopes that Kade will follow her out and feel guilty enough to offer an explanation, but the rest of her is relieved when he doesn't and she's left to cry in peace.

It takes almost half an hour but finally, she hiccups to a stop and leans her head back against the cool bricks of the building, taking a breath to try to gather her thoughts. She feels drained. Exhausted.

And more confused than ever.

Yet, one thing is becoming more and more clear.

Kade is connected to all of this. Why had he been following her for weeks before she was scratched by the wolf? Had he known something was coming?

Can he explain the curtains changing color? What just happened in the lab?

Elara pushes to her feet and walks down the hall, wiping at her cheeks as the questions fire through her mind. Is whatever he is just as impossible as everything else that's happening around her?

She stops, smiling apologetically when someone behind almost crashes into her. That would mean Kade...isn't human. Her eyes widen and her breath disintegrates as one final question gains substance.

Surely Kade didn't do this to her.

Did he?

KADE



Kade drops to the ground, sliding between Guy's legs on the wood floor and coming up behind him before he has time to turn. He lunges, locking his arms around Guy's neck and trying to pull him off his feet.

"Impressive!" Guy commends, but then reaches and grabs the back of Kade's head.

In one quick, devastating move, he throws him bodily over his head and Kade falls flat on his back. He hears the hard wood groan under his weight right before Guy comes flying down, elbow readied to smash into his solar plexus.

Kade rolls, kicking his legs around and swooping Guy's feet out from under him right at the last moment. Guy tumbles to the ground, laughter echoing in the room, and for a minute they both lay on the ground and pant.

"You're getting better," Guy says, giving a thumbs up from the floor next to Kade.

"Maybe you're just getting old?" he quips back, laughter making the corners of his mouth tilt up.

"Low blow, little wolf. Low. Blow." Guy rolls to his knees, bracing his fists on the floor and ginning through sweat-soaked hair. He's everything Kade aspires to be—strong, powerful, menacing. Kade's not there yet, but soon.

Soon he should be able to beat him.

Guy rises to his feet and holds a hand out to Kade to help him up, and he takes it. Before he's fully on my feet, Guy's left hand is swinging and wind rushes over Kade's head as he ducks at the last second. He's coming on strong again, fists flying as Kade ducks and blocks every blow.

The fact Guy can't seem to hit him has Kade feeling untouchable, undefeatable. So he steps forward instead of retreating. He ducks a blow, then comes up from underneath, landing a punch on Guy's left side and making him grunt on impact.

"Cheap shot!" Guy shouts.

Kade laughs, rolling his eyes as he brings his fists up to defend himself. "You always said shifters don't fight fair, so why should I? Kill or die. That's our motto, right?"

"If that's how it's going to be..."

The sun slips behind the mountains in the distance, igniting the entire boxing studio in the harsh orange light of sunset. Kade raises his arm to his eyes and winces, completely missing the movement as Guy attacks. He's shifted in a wink, and the great wolf that launches itself towards Kade is as much of a surprise as anything he's ever seen.

Guy angles down, his powerful paws pinning Kade to the floor as his teeth snap and froth right above his neck. Golden eyes, pupils dilated in rage, watch Kade's reaction. Gauge what he's going to do, and for a split second he can't decide. It's a split second too long.

Guy lunges forward, teeth clamping around Kade's arm as he raises it to defend myself. Guy rips his head back and forth, dragging him bodily across the floor.

"Guy!" Kade screams, batting at his head with his free hand as he feels like he's about to rip off his arm. Panic swells, panic like he hasn't felt since that night at the camp.

Panic like Elara must have felt when the wolf attacked her.

For a second the studio is gone, replaced by forests. Kade sees Elara walking down the road, calling for help, and then she turns. Her terrified eyes are on the wolf. She's trying to

run, trying to get away. Her screams echo in Kade's mind as they spill out of his own mouth now.

After what seems like a lifetime, Guy drops Kade in a trembling heap on the floor. He scrambles away from him, his back hitting the mirrored wall behind him as he holds his arm to his chest defensively.

Guy shifts back, towering over him as he stalks forward. He's backlit by the raging sunset, the only thing Kade can see is the bright shine of his white teeth as he grins. "You want to fight like you're fighting an enemy, boy? Be prepared to defend yourself the same way."

Guy kneels before Kade, grabbing his injured arm and tugging it away from his chest before he can protest. He yanks it up, examining it, and Kade's mouth goes completely dry. There's no blood, not a single puncture. There are red marks that will bruise, but Guy never broke the skin when he attacked.

"From now on, we duel as if it's real. You want to be prepared? Come at me with everything you got. It's time." Guy nods as he stands, looking towards the sunset over the hills. "It's a full moon tonight. Is she ready?"

"Can anyone ever be ready when they don't know what's about to happen?" Kade's words come out as bitter as he feels, even as he didn't mean to voice them.

Guy raises an eyebrow and glances at Kade from the corner of his eye as he folds his arms over his chest. "It's what we must do," he says stoically.

"It's not right. I could have prepared her, I could have—"

"You could have ruined everything, *boy!*" Guy snaps, waving his arms out as if demonstrating everything at risk. "Everything I've planned for, everything that must come to pass. If you do not get a hold of your emotions, it will all fail."

Snarling at him, Kade makes his way across the studio and grabs his shirt and jacket, pulling them both on without removing his glare from his mentor's face. When his backpack is slung over his shoulder, he tips his chin up at him. "After

tonight, she'll know. After tonight, you can't stop me from helping her."

"You need to let it go, there's no future in this for—"

"Don't say it, Guy. Just don't *fucking* say it!" Kade clenches his fists at his side and glares at the ground. "I'm out of here. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Stay away from her, kid. It's not worth it. She's not worth it."

Kade doesn't dignify him with a response. He turns and storms out of the building, jogging over to his car and unlocking the door before ripping it open roughly and jumping in. He grips the steering wheel hard, slamming his palms into it over and over again.

He can't bear to watch this all go wrong one more time...

He sees flashes of Melody, half transformed and dead. Her body mangled and eyes open, showing nothing but white.

He sees Gregory, fully transformed but weak, stumbling to the edge of a cliff and tumbling to his death because he was afraid of Kade.

He sees Alissa. She never even transformed, she never got to the full moon. Her wounds became infected and she died in her dorm room all alone.

This will not happen to Elara. Elara is the right one. Guy said they're not wrong this time. Kade refuses for them to be wrong this time.

He turns the key and the engine roars to life, jerking the sedan into reverse and pulling out of the parking lot so fast that the tires smoke and leave black tracks on the ground. He glances up, seeing Guy run out like he's trying to stop him.

He won't let him.

The horizon is getting darker. Soon the full moon will crest and no new wolf under its light will be able to prevent the change. Elara won't be able to stop it, and if she's not somewhere safe...

He refuses to even think about it.

Her mom and dad.

No, he said he refuses!

They're dead on the floor, slaughtered under a Christmas tree.

That's what happened to Kade, it will not happen to her!

You did this... It's your fault...

No, no, it's Guy's fault!

Keep telling yourself that, kid.

Kade takes a corner so fast the right side of the car's wheels leave the ground, but he doesn't care. He has to get back to the dorms, get back to Elara, before it's too late.

It's been too late since you decided to stalk her. It's been too late since the night at the falls. It's been too late since she enrolled in college!

He turns his stereo up as loud as he can get it. Rock music blares, so loud his ears feel like they're bleeding, but finally he can't hear himself think. Finally, there's silence in his mind, and he can focus on what he needs to do and not his overflowing lists of regrets.

Kade's tires screech as he pulls into the parking lot at the dorms. He jumps out of the car without even turning it off and runs towards Elara's building. He takes the steps to the front doors two at a time and rips them open, plowing through a group of young girls who were just about to walk out.

"Not cool, dude! No chick's worth that much angst!" one of them yells, but he ignores her. The steps to the upper floors are to the right, zigzagging up and up to the fourth floor where he'll find Elara. He makes it to her door, not even thinking about what he's going to say or how he'll explain himself, and knocks loudly.

No answer.

He knocks again, so hard he can feel the door reverberate under his fist.

Still now answer.

He rears back and kicks the door in. It breaks and splinters, falling on the ground in a heap of hardware and broken wood.

“Dude, what the hell?” Kade hears from behind him, but it doesn’t matter.

He steps through the threshold of Elara’s dorm room for the first time and is encased in the smell of *her*. Warm amber lotion sits open on her bedside table, her blankets ruffled and unmade on her bed. There’s food plated, untouched, and cold in her kitchenette, but there’s no sign of the woman herself.

“Umm, hello, psycho?”

Kade turns, glaring at a very tall woman behind him. He expects to look down, but ends up looking up, and up. This woman could be a linebacker, but where she’s tall and strong, she’s also beautiful with long white blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

“Elara isn’t here, and thank god she isn’t. What do you want from her, little psycho? I swear if you’re planning on hurting her...” The behemoth of a woman lets her voice trail off as she cracks her neck and pops her knuckles at eye level with his face.

“Where is she?” Kade snarls, squaring up to her.

“Far the hell away from you, psycho!” the giantess snarls right back.

“You don’t understand, it’s a matter of life and death!”

She narrows her eyes, and he sees a flicker of doubt flash in them for a moment before her shoulders sag. “She hasn’t come back from her parent’s place yet, I—”

“Thank you!” Kade shouts, slipping past her and dashing down the hallway and back down the stairs as fast as he can.

“Hey, asshole, what about her door?” the giantess screams behind him, but there’s no time to answer.

Elara is out there, alone, terrified. She’ll be in pain like she’s never known, and she deserves an explanation. She

deserves to be prepared for this.

She *deserves* to never have met him.

IO

ELARA



Elara leans out her window, drawing in a steady breath. Except it doesn't help. Her entire body aches, and she has no idea why. She was going to get her stuff together tonight, get ready to move back into her college room. But at the moment she's in too much pain to even consider trying to leave.

She squints, angling her head to gaze up at the moon. Her vision starts to turn yellow, and for a second she thinks it's the windowpane tinting the view. But the window's open. There's nothing between her and the world beyond. And when she lifts her hand in front of her face, the yellow is on her skin as well. Breathing a little faster, she turns and narrows her eyes at her bed, and the strange filter turns her sheets a sort of jaundiced tan color.

It's her, not her surroundings.

Suddenly, Elara doubles over with a gasp. Pain roars through her body, so deeply ingrained it feels like it's starting in her marrow. She stares in horror as first her fingers, then the bones of her wrist flex and twist, agony burning through every joint. She clamps a hand over her mouth with a gasp, fighting to contain her screams as they claw their way up her throat. If she does, her parents will come running, and there's no way that she'll be able to explain what's happening to her. She doesn't even know herself.

There are more snaps and crackles. Surely it can't be her bones. This time they're in her feet and hands, as if

something's rearranging itself in there. Elara stumbles across her bedroom. She has to get out of the house before something even worse happens. She can't shake the feeling that something terrible is happening to her. Something dangerous. She can't be around her parents right now.

She has to get out of here. The walls are contracting around her. The air feels too thin to breathe. The need to get out is overwhelming.

She snatches her keys from her nightstand and heads for her window, her shaking fingers fumbling with the latch. Her parents are downstairs in the living room watching a movie, and there's no way she can walk past them and pretend nothing's wrong. She feels like death warmed over, and she suspects she looks worse. Nausea is climbing up her throat as sweat beads over her skin. That leaves only one option—going out the window.

Her car is parked on the street, so if she can get there without her parents looking out the window and seeing her, she might be able to leave without them ever noticing that she's gone. It feels like her body is one step from shattering like glass, and that's going to worry them more than anything. She just needs some fresh air. She'll be back before they ever know that she's gone.

Elara slips out the window, carefully placing her feet so that she can slide down the tiles of the roof and go to the edge. Thankfully it isn't a far drop, but it feels like it, even as she lands on the bushes that soften her fall. Pain ricochets up her legs and she lays there for long seconds, breathing hard. Everything hurts so badly at this point that she can't pick out what hurts the worst. It feels like she's just one big throbbing mass of agony.

Crawling on all fours, she shuffles away, poking her head up toward the living room window to make sure that her parents aren't looking back at her. But their backs are to her, watching the rom com on the TV. Once she's past, Elara rises gingerly to her feet and hobbles toward her car, giving a sigh of relief as she sits down and takes the pressure off her legs, which feel like they're about to snap as well.

It's only once she's pulled out of the driveway that she realizes she needs somewhere to go. And quickly. It can't be where there are people. The thought of anyone seeing her like this is terrifying. There's only one place that she can think of that would be safe for her—the forest.

And strangely enough, it calls to her. There's nowhere she wants to be more right now.

Elara concentrates on driving, her sweaty hand slick on the steering wheel, praying that she doesn't wreck her car before she gets there. The lights from other cars feel too bright and she has to squint. The whole world is still a jaundice yellow. She needs the shadows of the forest. The solitude. The quiet.

The drive is a blur, but relief courses through her veins when she pulls over beside the edge of the nearby trees. Her whole body feels too warm, like she has a fever, and she stumbles out of the car. She half runs, half staggers her way into the tree line. Her car will be fine there, and she can't shake the feeling that the forest is the safest place for her.

Darkness engulfs Elara along with the strong scent of pine. She falls to her knees, sobbing as the relief becomes overwhelming. She doesn't know why, but this is where she needs to be right now. She just needs to breathe—

She cries out as the pain explodes. Rockets through her veins. Blasts apart every cell. Everything is changing, twisting and rearranging like a puzzle box made of muscles and bones. Long, bristling fur sprouts from her arms and legs, and she drops onto all fours, staring in horror as long claws sprout from her fingers, her hands shrinking and morphing into paws.

A tortured cry climbs up her throat, but all that comes out is a savage howl.

A ray of moonlight spears through the branches, blinding her and she knows no more.

II

ELARA



Elara blinks awake, her fingers fumbling in the dirt of the forest. Her skin feels as if it's crawling, and it's only when she feels the leaves in her hair, and everywhere else, that she realizes that she's completely naked. She gasps, quickly curling up to cover herself. What happened to her? She can't remember anything about...had it been hours, or days? She has no idea how long it's been, or why she's out here among the trees. She looks around dazed, noting the pale light filtering through the branches. She's in a forest. And she needs to find her clothes.

Please let her clothes be here.

Still aching, Elara pushes herself to her feet and shuffles forward, glancing around frantically. She sees her t-shirt hanging on a low branch, then her shorts several feet away to her left. Her clothes are here, but they're spread out over a wide area. Her hands shake as she scrambles to put them on, feeling vulnerable and exposed. It's only once she's dressed that she has a good look around. She blinks, doing a small turn, trying to understand what she's seeing.

She's surrounded by claw marks and paw prints that are larger than anything she's ever seen. Has she been attacked by a bear? She looks down at her body, finding it unscathed. Nothing hurts. She has no injuries. No sign she was attacked by an animal...or human. None of it makes any sense at all.

Elara heads back to her car, parked at a sharp angle on the side of the road. She's not sure what else to do, so she heads

back to the house. Maybe a shower and strong coffee will help her sort out her jumbled thoughts.

She doesn't realize that she'd left without telling anyone where she'd gone until her parents rush out, her mom yanking her into a hard hug that feels like it might be rearranging some bones. That triggers some sort of memory, but not enough to penetrate the surface of her daze. The whole night is a blank.

Her mom pulls back and frowns at Elara. "Where were you? We were worried."

Elara hesitates. Telling her parents that she woke up naked in the forest with no memory of how she got there is most definitely not a good idea. Instead, she mumbles something about having gone out and then realizes there are the other vehicles in the driveway.

Kira and Jordyn's cars are parked there, and her heart sinks. If her parents were this worried about her, then clearly her friends were too, and she doesn't have any more of an answer for them than she does her parents. Except her friends won't let up until they push her into admitting more than she wants to. Her parents are trying to give her plenty of space to be an adult, but her friends know her better than that. They'll know that something's wrong the second she steps through the door.

Kira and Jordyn rush outside, both of them pulling her into a hug and then into the house. Her parents glance at one another, then retreat to give the girls their privacy.

Kira glares, but her face softens as she pulls Elara into a hug. Elara hugs her back, wondering at the glare. Is Kira angry that Elara gave them a scare?

"I was calling you all night," Kira says as she pulls back. "You scared us to death."

"I was just out and I forgot my phone," Elara says uncomfortably. She can understand they were worried, but it feels like a bigger deal than it needs to be. Come to think of it, she's actually glad that she left her phone in her room last night, because there's no guarantee that she would have been

able to find it after waking up naked. She would've had more explaining to do.

A thought strikes her. Why were her friends looking for her? Why were they worried? Surely something else didn't happen last night... "What happened? What's wrong?"

Kira glances at Jordyn, her lips thinning. "Laith was attacked by an animal last night, just like you were. He's in the hospital."

Elara's breath disintegrates, holding herself very still as the shock ripples through her. Laith was attacked last night. By an animal.

The same night she has no recollection of.

But there's no way she'd hurt anyone. Except with no memory, she can't prove she's not the one responsible. What if she had done something terrible to him? She could have killed someone, and she would never know.

"I'm going to go see him in the hospital," Elara says, turning away. "Just so that he knows that someone understands what he's going through."

The excuse must be believable, because Kira and Jordyn just nod. In some ways, it's not a lie. Elara's someone who can understand what Laith's going through, because she went through it too. With a rushed goodbye—so that no one gets a chance to ask too many questions—Elara hops back in her car and drives off.

The trip to the hospital is quick and tense. There's something wrong here that Elara can't shake. Too many pieces of the puzzle that don't fit. But she has to make sure Laith's alright. The alternative isn't one she's willing to imagine.

Laith smiles as he sees her poke her head nervously around the door. Elara walks in, working hard not to wring her hands. She bites her lip as she registers he's covered in scratches just like the ones she'd had. Except there's more, and they're not just confined to his arms. There's white gauze everywhere, down his arms and on the leg sticking out from the white sheet, as well as small bandages on his face and neck.

His smile widens. “Hey, thanks for visiting me.”

His words just make her feel worse. He shouldn't be smiling at her. Not if her worst fears are correct.

“Hi,” she says, finding her throat tight. She sits on the chair beside his bed, now not sure what to say.

“It's great to see you.” Laith shifts, then winces as the bandages pull. “Guess it's my turn to feel the scratches. Gotta say, I'm not a fan.”

Elara cracks a smile, even if it's a reluctant one. “Yeah. I wouldn't recommend it either.” She laughs softly, putting her hands under her legs. It's partially because she feels a little uncomfortable, but also because she doesn't want him to see that her stitches are completely healed, and have been for quite some time. That's not a normal thing, and right now, she needs to be normal.

Elara sighs and shifts closer to the edge of the chair. She needs to know what happened. She needs to know if she's responsible. If she's the one who caused this, she can't let it happen again. Laith seems to be okay for the most part, but there could be a next time. She has to figure out what happened so she doesn't kill anyone.

“How did you get attacked?” she asks casually, trying to play it like it's nothing at all, when in reality it could be the difference between her being the culprit and it being someone else.

He sighs. “That's the same thing the animal control officers asked me this morning, just like they probably asked you. I pulled over because I saw a car on the side of the road and I thought they might need help.”

Elara winces, glad that Laith leans back and closes his eyes, so he doesn't see it. He's talking about her car. And he pulled over to help. Although she has no idea where she was or what she did in the forest last night, all signs are pointing to it having been her who attacked him last night, even if there's no memory of it. All that she can remember from last night is

a sense of pain and change, although she can't put into words what that means.

She shifts, wanting to apologize, but knowing she can't. If something is happening to her, then it's better that she doesn't draw attention to herself. At least not until she knows more about what is going on.

"A wolf came out of nowhere and clawed the crap out of me," Laith continues. "I managed to call 911, but they never did find the person the car belongs to."

Of course they hadn't, because she came out of the forest this morning, climbed in and drove home. She's surprised, and considers herself lucky they hadn't towed it as part of a crime. Not that there's necessarily a crime here, since Laith had only been attacked by a wolf. There's no proof that anything out of the ordinary happened, which is the only thing saving her bacon right now.

Unless someone finds out about last night...

"Well, I'm just glad you're okay," Elara says warmly. That's the other thing saving her bacon. Not to mention, she's not sure she could live with herself knowing she seriously hurt someone. "Let me know if you need anything." She reaches out and gently squeezes his hand to comfort him. If she's responsible, then that's the least that she can do.

Laith smiles briefly. It's hard to believe that just a few days ago he had asked her out on a date, and now he's sitting in the hospital, and she might have been the one to put him there.

"Thanks for coming to see me." He watches her from under his lashes, and she smiles softly. Surely he realizes there's nothing but friendship between them? There's no spark, no chemistry.

Not like there is with Kade.

Elara suppresses a frown, unhappy that he's intruded into her thoughts again. She doesn't need any more mysteries in her life right now.

There's a soft knock at the door and Elara turns to see a police officer standing in the doorway, holding up a notepad

like a white flag of surrender. “Sorry to bother you, but I need to speak to this young man here.” He nods toward Laith, and Elara hurriedly stands and heads for the door, waving at Laith as she leaves.

She has to work on not breaking into a run as she makes her way down the corridor. Her heart is thumping and her palms are sweaty in a way that’s oddly familiar, but she’s not sure why. She presses the button for the elevator, crossing her arms and then quickly uncrossing them in an effort to look natural. If she looks like she’s in too much of a hurry, then the officer will think it’s strange. She can’t afford to be connected to what happened to Laith.

Still, Elara can’t help but panic as she heads out of the hospital and goes back to her car. The edgy, jagged feeling spikes as she realizes that eventually Laith is going to hear, or figure out that it’s her car that he stopped to help. The college campus isn’t that big, and people are entirely too nosy.

It’s only a matter of time.

Elara stops outside the exit, her breathing harsh in her ears. Something’s wrong, terribly, awfully wrong, but there has to be a plausible explanation for all of this. Although she has no idea what it would be. Everything seems to lead back to her and the wolf scratching her.

And that’s not even the biggest problem here. If Laith does eventually figure out whose car it is that he stopped to help, then she’s screwed. And what if he tells the police? Then they’re bound to realize that she was attacked as well, and then they’ll want to know what she was doing in the forest last night, and she doesn’t have an answer for them.

There was no reason for her car to be anywhere near the forest at that time of night. She doesn’t even know why she was there.

Elara’s breathing becomes faster, even as her throat constricts. Her whole world is falling apart. Fracturing. And she doesn’t know how to keep it together. She knows she needs to stay calm, but she can’t. The truth is, she’s terrified.

Suddenly, there's a loud crack. Almost like a gunshot. Elara spins around, seeing the window in the door behind her has broken. And then the one beside it. And the next one.

She slams her hands over her ears and crouches down, instinctively knowing what's going to happen next.

The windows explode like a bomb just detonated, spraying glass all over her and the pavement. Someone screams. People run.

Yet, Elara doesn't move. In fact, she curls even tighter into herself.

Something is happening to her.

Something bad.

And it's only a matter of time before someone gets hurt.

I2

KADE



Kade's head jerks upwards the moment he hears the first crack. He's sitting on his car, staring at his phone as he waits to catch a glimpse of Elara. Is she alright? Did she make it through the night unscathed? Why did she come straight to the hospital?

He hadn't been able to find her last night, as hard as he tried. Every minute had been counted by frantic heartbeats. Every hour felt like an eon. But he wasn't able to find her.

He wasn't able to be there for her.

But now, as he looks up at the splintering windows of the hospital, his eyes land on Elara. She's right next to the windows, looking up in sheer terror as if she knows exactly what's about to happen. For a second, Kade swears she locks eyes with him, but then the glass shatters.

He's on his feet and sprinting before another thought can form. He watches her duck down, curl in on herself, and it takes all of his self-control not to shift, there and then. She's curled up in the fetal position with a frame of glass all around her. Her hands are covering her ears and her eyes are squeezed shut.

Glass cracks and shatters further under Kade's feet as he bends down and reaches for her. His hands are trembling, but he forces himself to touch her, to grip her shoulder and make sure she's alright.

"Elara?" he whispers, trying not to startle her.

She blinks, looking up at him with confusion, denial, and then—fury. Kade frowns, grabbing her forearms and helping her to her feet. He refuses to make eye contact again, and he can feel his face darken as she continues to stare at him as if he's some puzzle she needs to figure out. She steps closer, and Kade steps back, holding his arms up in front of him to tell her he means no harm.

“Why are you always around?” Elara whisper-shouts, her hands clenched and tight. “When I look for you, you're nowhere to be found. But when something is happening, you're right here!”

Slowly, Kade lowers his arms to his side.

“What is going on? Am I doing all this? Kade, you need to tell me! I know you know *something!*”

Her voice is pleading, tearing at his heartstrings. He curls his lip in disgust, but not at her, at himself.

“What's wrong with me?” she wails, leaning closer until her hands land on his chest. They're warm, trembling, terrified.

Kade sighs, taking a deep breath, before he wraps his arms around her shoulders and pulls her close to him. “None of this is your fault, there's nothing wrong with you...” he says quietly, using the moment with her in his arms to take a deep breath of that warm amber lotion she had on her nightstand.

“Then why is this all happening? Last night I—and now Laith?” Elara shudders, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Kade's surprised, but that isn't the emotion most prevalent. He knows a guy named Laith. He was the one who was watching Elara just as closely as he was at the waterfall. He was the one who asked her out... Kade stiffens, pushing her back at arm's length, and looks down into her eyes, trying to control the dark anger that shouldn't be smoldering in his gut.

“What does Laith have to do with any of this?” Kade says his name like it's a personal insult, a curse word, something disgusting to never be uttered by anyone.

“He was attacked by a wolf! Just like me!” Elara hisses as she grasps his forearms. His hands are still glued to her shoulders, holding her away.

“That’s not possible—” he starts, but Elara isn’t done talking.

“I don’t know what happened to me last night, but I drove to the woods and—and I don’t know! When I woke up I was naked, my clothes were everywhere, and there were these huge paw prints! Laith—”

Kade growls as his name passes her lips again and she narrows her eyes before she continues whispering.

“Laith saw my car and pulled over to see if anyone needed help, and he was attacked by a wolf! Kade, I know you know something, and you have got to stop avoiding me! I need answers!”

Kade drops his head between them and lets it hang. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. He should be elated, Elara’s the child of the prophecy. Except her fate lies with someone else. It hurts more than he anticipated.

More than it should.

“Is she alright?” someone asks.

Kade looks up to see a crowd of nurses and pedestrians gathering.

“Are you alright?” he asks, looking into her eyes again.

She looks down, looks all over her body, and then looks back at him. “I’m not hurt, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“She’s fine, I’m going to take her home now,” he tells the crowd, and then with one quick move, his hand on her shoulder slides behind her neck and he walks her outside like he’s her boyfriend. Someone tries to stop them, but when their shoes crunch on the glass beneath them, they don’t continue.

As soon as they’re back outside and into the brisk autumn air, Kade tugs Elara over to his car and pins her to the passenger door with his hands on either side of her. “Rule

number one, never go to the hospital, ever,” he growls low in his throat.

“What? What are you talking about?” Elara reaches forward to push him away, but he smashes his body into hers and holds her against the car harder.

“Rule number two, never get caught!”

Elara is breathing hard, and it takes everything in Kade’s mind not to focus on the way her small hands curl around the fabric of his shirt on his chest.

“What are these rules for, Kade?” she whispers, pulling her face closer to his and licking her dry lips.

“For survival, Elara. Mine, yours, all of ours.”

“All of ours? Whose? My friends and family? You? Whatever we are?”

He starts when she says ‘we’ and pulls away. There will never be a ‘we.’ The prophecy has decided. Dragging his hands through his hair, he turns his back on her and starts pacing. He misses her warmth against his body already, but he can’t think about that now.

“For everyone, Elara. Everyone and everything. You need to just listen to me and do what I say, understand?”

“No!” Her eyes narrow and she folds her arms over her chest defiantly.

“*No?* What do you mean, *no?*” Kade snaps, rushing back into her personal space and putting his nose so close to hers it is almost close enough to kiss her.

“No, I will not obey my stalker, Kade!” She tilts her chin up defiantly.

He pinches that defiant chin between his thumb and his knuckle and angles his head like he just might kiss her—god knows he wants to. “You will do what I say, Elara. You will get in my car, you will let me drive you back to your dorm, and you won’t tell another living being about what’s happening to you.”

“I drove myself here, I can drive myself back, you—you ass!” Elara snarls, pushing him away so hard that he stumbles back a few steps.

“Fine! Have it your way, do it your way! But don’t come crying to me when your way doesn’t work and you need help!” Kade hisses between clenched teeth and walks around his car, yanking the door open.

She should go to Laith.

“As if you can stay away from me, Kade. We both know you won’t. Try not to follow too close behind me. If I see your headlights, I’m slamming on the brakes!”

Kade punches the top of his car and jumps in the seat, peeling away from her so fast she has to jump out of his way to avoid getting her toes run over.

“Jerk!” she shouts.

Kade ignores her. He pushes his foot all the way down on the gas pedal and roars out of the hospital parking lot like a demon out of hell.

So, she survived. She’s the one. She’s the most irritatingly smart girl he’s ever met.

And she’s chosen her mate.

He’s vexed, pissed, positively loathsome about everything that’s happened. But there’s nothing he can do, nowhere he can go to avoid what’s about to go down. The next two lines of the prophecy hiss through his mind.

Amid darkness’ dance, the cursed shall rise,

To claim and vanquish, the eternal prize.

13

ELARA



Elara watches Kade peel away, leaving black tire marks on the road. She hates that her skin burns everywhere he pressed himself against her. She hates that she hasn't turned away, even after he's disappeared around the bend.

She hates *all of this*.

Of all the things that are confusing right now, why does it have to be how she feels about Kade? He's following her. He's keeping secrets.

Yet, at the forefront of her mind is the way his finger and thumb gripped her chin. The way her lips tingled just at the suggestion of his nearness. What the hell is wrong with her?

Huffing, she spins to go back to her car when the sound of a recorded voice has her stopping. In part, because the words "Today, we are not sad bitches, we are bad bitches," just filled the air, but mostly because there's no one around.

Angling her head, Elara realizes she can hear bells tinkling, too.

The clacking of heels precedes a wild mane of honey blonde hair appearing over some cars. The woman swipes the screen of her phone, cutting off the ringtone that just announced any sad bitches should have themselves a nappy-nap and get a snack. "Yes, of course I've organized that." She huffs. "Oh, you mean Laith."

Elara pauses at the mention of her friend's name.

The woman strides across the parking lot toward the main entrance of the hospital, the autumn-colored layers of her skirt billowing with each step. Her white dress shirt is crisp and bright, brushed by the biggest earrings Elara's ever seen. Ones adorned with tiny bells.

The woman stops. "What do you mean, the kombucha order has been delayed?" She runs an agitated hand through her mane of hair. "You know we need that delivered, Ranch."

Elara knows she shouldn't be eavesdropping, but she doesn't move. Technically, she shouldn't be able to hear this conversation, except she's developed freakishly good hearing. If things were different, she would never have heard Laith's name. But they aren't, so here she is.

The woman spins on her nude pumps. "I'm coming back. We'll need to fly to Belarus immediately." She shakes her head. "I'll send Laith a text. I've already spoken to the doctor and she said he'll be out tomorrow. He'll be fine. I've already stocked the fridge with those delicious gluten-free muffins we're launching next week."

Elara's eyes widen as she watches the woman hurry away in a flutter of skirts and a jingle of bells. She's pretty sure she just saw Laith's mother.

Leaving before she even saw him.

Gravitating back toward the hospital before she's really conscious of what she's doing, Elara slips back inside. She makes her way to Laith's room, her chest hollow and aching.

She stops as she reaches it, registering he's asleep through the window. Elara leans against it, her head pressed to the glass. Laith's blonde locks brush his forehead, his handsome face relaxed and almost vulnerable. His bare shoulders, toned and muscled, are visible above the sheet pulled up to his chest. Along with the white gauze covering his wounds...

This is who she may have hurt?

What kind of monster is she?

She makes a vow, then and there, to look out for Laith, no matter what happens. Somehow, inexplicably, they're in this

together.

“Delivery for Laith Landon?” asks a voice behind her.

Elara turns around to see a young man carrying a large bouquet of flowers and bottles of what suspiciously looks like kombucha at the nurses’ desk. The nurse sitting on the other side waves toward Laith’s room with barely a glance.

“You have a lovely day, too,” the young man says cheerily before turning away.

His eyebrows hike up when he sees Elara standing there, then quickly drop to waggle at her. Elara pushes away from the wall, spins, and quickly walks away. She’s far from interested.

Life’s way too complicated as it is.

She hurries down the corridor, also not wanting to intrude on the moment Laith learns his mother’s jetting off to Europe rather than visiting her son while he lies in hospital, recovering from an animal attack. All the more reason he needs a friend.

Hopefully one who wasn’t responsible for putting him there.

Elara’s just exited the doors to the hospital when an ambulance pulls into the emergency bay. She ducks as the sirens feel like they’re piercing her eardrums, now walking faster. She wants to go home. Away from overwhelming sights and sounds and smells.

Away from guilt and confusion.

She ducks her head even more as she acknowledges she won’t be escaping the last two.

There’s a clatter and a groan as a gurney’s unloaded from the back of the ambulance. A doctor rushes out, lifting their stethoscope from around their neck. “What have we got?”

“Male, mid-30s,” the paramedic reports. “Found unconscious at the edge of the forest. Deep lacerations to his torso and arms, likely from a large animal. He’s conscious but in a lot of pain. Blood pressure is sixty over forty, signs of shock.”

Elara's suddenly frozen. Not another person. She couldn't have...

She turns, wishing the coppery scent of blood didn't just hit the back of her throat. The doctor's leaning over a man on the gurney. He lifts the sheet covering the man's torso and although he's blocking Elara's view, she doesn't miss the way his shoulders tense. "What kind of animal would make those sorts of wounds?"

Her stomach plummets even further.

The paramedic adjusts the drip that's already connected to the man's arm. "Patient claims it was an elk."

The doctor reels back. "A what?"

"An elk stag." The paramedic shrugs. "I suppose those horns can be pretty dangerous."

Suddenly, the patient's hand whips out to grab the doctor's arm. He tries to sit up, but groans in pain and falls back onto the gurney. Garbled, whispered words tumble past his lips. A moment later, his head flops to the side as he falls unconscious.

The doctor gently places the man's hand back under the sheet. "What did he say?"

The paramedic shrugs. "No idea. He's been mumbling the same thing since we found him."

"Examination room seven," the doctor says, looking like he's still trying to wrap his head around what he's about to treat. "We'll need comprehensive bloods. Including for all the usual recreational drugs."

The patient's wheeled inside the hospital, leaving Elara reeling. It was an elk attack. Although that's even more unusual than the wolf that attacked her, she's pretty sure this has nothing to do with her memory lapse last night. She should be relieved.

Except...

She hunches her shoulders, wondering if this is going to be her new way of walking everywhere. Like she's trying to

protect herself from reality.

Because that's the terrifying part about all of this. It's real. She glances back at the hospital, wishing this could be relegated to the world of fantasy or imagination.

But she can't. Not when she heard the man's words.

And for some reason, they're on a loop in her mind, as if they're familiar. Like a nursery rhyme she knew as a child or a song she used to know but has forgotten.

Even though they make as much sense as everything else that's happening around her. Still, she finds herself mouthing them as she climbs into her car and drives home.

In realms above, where shadows play,

The sword endures both night and day.

I4

ELARA



Elara heads back to her dorm, deciding to get her stuff from her parents' place later. She parks her car and trudges up the front walk, exhausted but somewhat afraid to sleep. After all, she doesn't remember anything from last night. What if she does something even worse if she falls asleep now?

The key clicks in the lock to the main foyer and Elara hears the scuff of footsteps behind her. She clenches her fist, holding her keys between her fingers, ready to defend herself. If she goes inside now, no doubt the safest place for her, the person behind her will be able to come in too. They're too close. She can smell them. Practically hear their calm, steady heartbeat. It's better for her to face them out here in full view, so that if something does happen, there will be witnesses on the street.

She turns slowly, ready to hurt someone if they so much as make the wrong move.

The man raises his hands, his mouth twisting as he smirks at her. Clearly he doesn't think much of her keys as a defense mechanism, but Elara doesn't particularly care. If anything, she's furious. She's tired of people underestimating her, lying to her. No more lying down and letting them walk all over her.

"Who are you? What do you want?" She straightens her shoulders and tilts her chin, trying to make herself as big as possible.

Of course, it's nothing compared to the guy in front of her. Dark haired and dark skinned, he's a few years older than her. He's also a powerhouse of muscle with strange gray eyes that almost seem to glow, watching her as she glares back. She doesn't have to be polite, something that she's trying to remind herself of. He's standing here on the sidewalk in front of her dorm, somewhere that he certainly hadn't been invited to be.

"My name is Denzel. I'm the leader of the local werewolf pack," he says steadily. "And I need to speak with you."

Elara blinks. Blinks again. Then shakes her head, letting out a dry laugh. The man's insane.

Actually, it's a nice relief that someone is even crazier than she feels at the moment. Yet, when she meets his gaze again, it's steady. Calm. As far from crazy as she would expect. As if he believes every word he just said.

She draws in an unsteady breath, wishing she'd gone inside now. "Look, we all have our own truths—"

"I can answer all your questions about last night."

That has Elara's mouth snapping shut. The one thing she wants right now is answers.

And Denzel knows it. He watches her, a black brow hiked in challenge.

The choice is whether to pick up the gauntlet.

Elara crosses her arms and lifts her chin. "Fine. Hit me with your crazy theories."

She knows she's being obnoxious, but she's tired of being jerked around by people, especially ones who show up just long enough to mess things up for her. If this Denzel thinks he has answers for her, then she'll listen to him.

Purely because she's desperate.

Maybe there will be a grain of truth amongst his crazy talk of werewolves.

But he shakes his head, glancing around. "Not here. Follow me."

With another glance that's pure challenge, he turns and walks down the street. Elara hesitates, knowing this is downright dangerous. The last thing she wants to do is leave the safety of her dorm, but she also isn't going to invite him in. Exactly how desperate is she?

She thinks of the curtains.

The beakers in the lab.

The glass in the windows exploding.

Laith.

Still clutching her keys, no matter how lame a protection they might be, Elara follows Denzel. He doesn't look back once, either knowing she's there or not really caring whether she's following—or both—as he turns right at the end of the block.

Making sure her cell phone is easily accessible in her pocket, Elara maintains several feet between them. Her pulse is thrumming, her breathing loud in her ears.

This is either a very good idea.

Or a freaking terrible one.

Denzel takes a sharp left and she realizes he's gone into the small park tucked between a house and a corner store. He sits on a nearby bench, his eyes unerringly falling on her. He knew where she was the whole time.

Sitting down, Elara's careful to give as much space between them as she can without being in danger of falling off the bench. If she has half of her butt hanging over the edge, then that's her business. She keeps her feet tucked lightly beneath her, bouncing a little on her toes. She's ready to run the moment she needs to.

There's almost no one else in the park—a couple with a young child at the swings, a jogger who just stopped to do some sit ups—and Elara isn't sure if she should be worried or relieved. On the one hand, it's a good thing because if anyone hears what they need to talk about, they'll think Elara's crazy. She's not entirely sure that she isn't, but she'd like to hold

onto the pretense of sanity for as long as she can. On the other hand, who the hell is going to help if Denzel attacks her?

The jogger passes by, sweat running down his face and breathing hard.

Denzel leans back, his broad shoulders seeming to grow. He stares ahead as he speaks. "As I said, my name is Denzel," he says. "And I'm the Alpha of the local werewolf pack."

Elara's eyes widen. For all that she's considered that something might be happening to her because of having been scratched by the wolf, it's still hard to consider that werewolves are real. Her logical mind refuses to believe it, and she can't fight back a snort. "There's no such thing as a werewolf."

Denzel turns to look at her, smiling gently, which is a refreshing change from his smirk but somehow concerns her even more. "Have you noticed anything weird happening around you lately?"

Elara swallows hard as she flashes back to the strange events that have been happening lately. Plus, there's the heightening of her senses, the fast healing, and that's only the stuff she's able to remember. Unlike waking up naked in the forest. They're all the reasons she's here, willing to listen.

And yet...the explanation is too fantastical.

Especially when the suggestion is she could be one of them.

Denzel doesn't wait for an answer before his smile widens even further, clearly trying to put her at ease. "I know you were scratched by an animal on the last full moon. That's when all this started, right?"

Elara nods, not quite sure what he's getting at, but she has a bad feeling about it. Dread is a cold, hard lump in her gut. The truly terrifying thing is that somehow, inexplicably, impossibly, it makes sense.

Denzel gazes back out onto the street, keeping his voice low. "Under normal circumstances, when humans are

scratched, most of them don't survive. A select few do, and they shift at the next full moon."

Unbidden, memories assault Elara, triggered by Denzel's words. Last night, her vision turned yellow as she stared up at the full moon through her window. Last night had been a full moon. Then there was the pain. She closes her eyes as images pepper her mind. Claws stretching from her fingertips. Fur breaking through her skin. A mournful howl climbing up her throat.

Shit. Denzel's words are making a scary amount of sense. She was scratched by a wolf, and the scars had healed remarkably quickly. Strange things have been happening around her, things that she can't explain. Last night was a full moon, and she woke up the next morning naked in the forest with no memory of how she got there.

Everything is falling into place.

Although Denzel's still gazing straight ahead, she can feel him watching her. Assessing her reaction. Whatever he senses, it seems to give him the green light to keep talking. "The interesting thing is that werewolves don't display any other properties apart from the ability to shift on a full moon. But if a werewolf scratches a witch, then that changes everything."

Elara shifts a little on the bench seat, not sure she's ready for more interesting information.

"Because if they become a wolf on top of being a witch, then you add a layer of complexity. One that would explain all the strange magical things that are happening around you." Denzel slides a glance her way. "You were a witch before you were scratched."

Elara shakes her head, but he doesn't seem to care about the fact that her mind is currently being blown. That she needs to draw a breath...or fifty. Instead, he continues to speak, and she sits numbly, listening.

"But neither of your parents are supernatural. I know, because I've checked."

Elara frowns. That's creepy, but he's still talking, so she doesn't want to interrupt him, even if he's being just as much of a stalker as Kade.

“Which means I have to be wrong about you being a witch. I think you must have been turned somehow.”

She shakes her head. “What does that even mean?” she asks, not quite sure she understands what he's saying.

“There are two types of werewolves. Those who are born with the gene—if both of their parents are werewolves, or even just one of them, they will be born a werewolf ninety-nine percent of the time. And then there are turned werewolves, which happens when they're scratched or bitten. Like you. Turned werewolves are a witch or a human and the wolf qualities are just added on. But you're a human with wolf qualities, and somehow witch qualities have been added in there as well.” It's his turn to shift a little. “It makes no sense. This is uncharted territory. It means that some wolf has managed to add witch abilities to you as well, which shouldn't be possible.”

Elara feels like she isn't really keeping up her end of the conversation, but she has no idea what to say to any of this. It's all too much. Too impossible. And it makes her weird, even by werewolf standards.

Yet the only thing that could make sense.

Denzel glances at her again and she wonders how pale she is. “We were originally witches who experimented on themselves. They wanted to shift shapes. Some of them decided to tie themselves to the full moon and became wercreatures, drawn to the power of the wolf. And some of them became shifters, which are just like werewolves except they aren't tied to any one species. Nor are they tied to the full moon.”

Elara works hard to process the information. That makes shifters seem more powerful than werewolves. They can shift whenever they want to, into any animal.

“Yet you were scratched by a wolf and somehow have even more enhancements.”

“Who?” Elara asks, the one word scraping past her tight throat. According to Denzel, she’s a werewolf and a witch. A combination that came about in ways that shouldn’t be possible. The one unanswered question is, who? Who did this to her?

As if he can sense the question, Denzel frowns. “I’m fairly sure there’s a rogue wolf roaming around the city and they’re responsible for the other animal attacks as well. I checked up on the other victims, but none of them shifted. They’re all humans like you, but you’re the only one who managed to transform. You survived.”

Elara gapes. The others died?

“I don’t remember any of it,” she says, shrugging helplessly. Even the fragments that she managed to dig up about her vision turning yellow and last night being a full moon were a struggle, let alone anything else.

Denzel nods. “When someone transforms into a wolf, they become animalistic and tend to forget their human alter-ego. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. The memories will come back, eventually. If you train, that will happen sooner.” He holds her gaze squarely. “And that’s why I want you to be part of my pack.”

Elara hesitates. She’s overwhelmed and apprehensive, and she has no idea what she should do. She wants to run. She wants to hide. She wants to go back to that fateful night at the waterfall and go home while it was still light.

But she can’t turn back time. Nor will running help. Denzel’s words, as crazy as they are, might be the best explanation that she has yet. There’s a strange sense of relief... alongside the numb shock. Still, she has no way of knowing whether Denzel can be trusted. He might be the one who turned her, for crying out loud.

Unfortunately for her, he’s not done yet.

“With your status in uncharted territory, it also courts danger if you get on the wrong side of the shifters. Something is coming and we must be prepared for it.” With that ominous note, he hands Elara a card from his jacket pocket. “Take some time and think about it. Just not too long.”

Elara stares down at the card in her hand as he leaves, tapping it gently against her opposite palm. Can she trust Denzel? More to the point, does she have a choice?

Because if she rejects his offer, then she’s left on her own to figure all this out.

And that feels more dangerous.

I5

KADE



Guy disappears behind the bush in front of Kade. It's dark, but the waning moon sheds enough light for even a human to see clearly. They've been patrolling the outskirts of the city for hours now, searching for the enemy. Kade knows that somewhere out here they lay in wait. He will never let them hurt this city, never again.

He follows Guy through the dense brush, both men so skilled in the art of tracking that neither makes a sound nor leaves a single track in their wake. Like shadows, they stalk, one after another, all their senses focused on the forest around them. They'll hear the enemy before they see them, but if they've been out here a long time, they may smell them first.

"We're getting closer, I can feel it," Guy whispers, holding out a hand for Kade to stop. "Remember, we need to question them. We need to find out what they're up to. It's life or death, Kade. We need to keep our wits about us."

Kade only nods, keeping silent and to the shadows as he obeys his mentor without question. Guy has never steered him wrong, and he would follow him to death's door and through it if he told him it was necessary.

They stalk slower now, crouching low to the ground as they keep their senses peeled. Shortly the acrid scent of a fire using wet wood stings Kade's nose, and within a few more steps the glow of the flames can be seen through the foliage. The pair crawl over to a stone outcrop and lay on their bellies, overlooking the small party of shifters below.

“I’m telling you, I saw it with my own two eyes!” a man yells.

A group of men and women are sitting around a fire, various shifters in their animalistic forms roaming just beyond the edges of the light.

“She’s the one we’ve been looking for. Why won’t you believe me?”

“Because the last person who would ever find the chosen one is you, Carl,” a woman snaps, rolling her eyes as she strokes a cat on her lap.

“Shut it, Sadie, you don’t know shit,” Carl growls.

“I know that any shifter who can only change into a rat would never be given the honor of finding the chosen one over our leader. You’re the scum of all shifters,” Sadie says, her brow arching with her cocky insult.

“Well, when I tell the boss I know who the chosen one is, I’ll be more important than you or your husband will have ever been!” Carl shouts, jumping up and clenching his fists at his sides.

The cat in Sadie’s lap stands and hisses before shifting and getting in Carl’s face. “You’re drunk, Carl. You should know better than to insult my wife. Why don’t you go fetch some water, and while you’re at it, drown yourself!”

“You tell him, baby!” Sadie says, coming up behind her husband and wrapping her arms around his chest.

“It’s Elara, I know it. One of these days you’ll all regret treating me like this!” Carl whispers. “I bet my life on it!”

“You know what a cat’s favorite snack is, Carl? Live rats.” Sadie giggles and shoos Carl away. “Scamper away, little rat, before my man decides you’re his next meal.”

At Elara’s name on the enemy’s tongue, Kade goes preternaturally still.

“They know?” he whispers, disbelief tinging his voice.

“It was only a matter of time,” Guy hisses, crawling away from the edge and back to the cover of the forest.

Kade follows, his head spinning. Panic is brewing deep in his gut, panic that tells him to run to Elara. To save her, protect her, but in the end is it not him that put her in danger?

“I have to go. I have to warn her, Guy!” Kade insists.

“No, you don’t,” Guy snaps, turning on Kade with fire in his eyes. “Elara’s important, but she can’t know that yet. We have to go question Carl and find out everything he knows. Follow me.”

“Guy! What if they believe him?”

“They won’t, he’s a rat,” Guy says simply.

Kade and Guy skirt around the clearing where the group of shifters have holed up, following Carl as he carries an old tin bucket towards the river not far away from the campground. Once he’s out of the light, the men flank him and trap him between them and the river.

Carl crouches down to fill the bucket.

And Guy strikes.

Like a shadow of a blade, Guy flies through the air and lands on Carl’s back, forcing his head underwater. When the struggling stops, Guy lifts him out of the water and locks his arm around his neck, his other hand over the mouth gasping for air. He turns him to face Kade.

“We have questions,” Kade says, his voice rough and gravelly. “If you answer them, you may get to live. Do you understand?”

Carl nods, his eyes wide with fear as he struggles to breathe past Guy’s hold.

“If my friend uncovers your mouth, you will not scream.” He hardens his voice. “Or you’ll die.”

Carl nods again.

“If you refuse to answer our questions, you’ll die.”

Carl nods again.

Kade turns his head slightly to look at Guy, who slowly removes his hand. Carl draws in a deep breath, water dripping down his face from his sodden hair, but then stills. His nostrils flare.

He spins around to face the man who was holding him. “You—”

There’s a sudden flash of darkness in his mentor’s eyes. Something Kade has never seen before. In a lightning-fast movement, he reaches out, grabs Carl’s head and savagely twists in one quick motion.

Carl drops to the ground, dead.

Kade staggers back in shock, blinking at his mentor in confusion. “We needed to question him!” he whispers. “You said we had to—”

“Shut your mouth, boy!” Guy roars. Behind them, the sounds of the camp cut off to eerie silence.

“Guy! What are you doing?!” Kade demands.

“There can be no witnesses!” Guy hisses, then turns towards the camp. “I told you I smelled a rat. Look at him, in the dirt where he belongs.”

Kade spins on a heel at the sounds of hooves and paws coming their way. As one, he and Guy men pull out automatic pistols and aim them at the coming attackers. Kade can smell Sadie, a sleek lioness, and he can see her mate by her side who’s taken the shape of an imposing lion. They’ll work as a team to tear them apart, he knows it.

Bang! Bang!

Two shots and the lions drop to the ground dead, bullet holes between their eyes.

“Shoot, boy!” Guy shouts.

Kade aims his weapon and fires.

With expert marksmanship, the pair unleash their weapons without mercy. An antelope with its horns lowered to gore

Guy is shot by Kade in the side. A gorilla jumping off a rock outcropping falls backward with a gaping hole in its chest. Two men, still human, try to run but Guy takes out the one on the left and Kade kills the one on the right.

Dead silence falls over the clearing, the only thing that can be heard is the steaming of the heated weapons and the dripping of blood. Kade turns to his mentor, confused and unsure. He never once regretted taking down a shifter, but this was a slaughter. Plain and simple.

A bird chirps from the tall grass and takes flight, but without looking away from Kade, Guy aims his pistol and fires. Destroying the bird in mid-air. “Could have been a shifter,” Guy explains before holstering his weapons and walking back towards the forests surrounding the clearing.

“Guy?” Kade calls after him.

But Guy doesn't turn. “You want to protect the girl, well she's protected.”

“And the questioning? You said we couldn't kill him, we needed information,” Kade insists. He runs up next to Guy and grabs his shoulders, turning the older man to face him. “Tell me why we just killed a whole unit without getting any information.”

“We got what we came for!” Guy yells, shoving Kade back forcefully.

“And what did we come for, really? Because it wasn't to question the enemy, was it?”

“We came to find out if they knew anything they shouldn't and they did. So we killed them,” Guy explains as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

“And what about how they found out about Elara? What they plan do with that information? We need to know!”

“Would you rather Elara be dead?” Guy snaps, turning to face Kade with his finger inches from the younger man's nose. “Would you rather we let them live, and then they believe the rat and go after Elara? Is that what you want?”

“No, I—”

“Then stop questioning and obey me!” Guy roars.

For a minute Kade just stands there, shoulders slumped and jaw slack. Never once has Guy ever raised his voice to him. Not in all the years he’s been with him.

Guy sighs, putting his hands on Kade’s shoulders and pressing his forehead to Kade’s. “Trust me, my boy. I’m doing everything we have to do to keep that poor girl safe. I won’t ever let her down, she’s too important.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Guy?” Kade asks.

But he’s already turned and walked away.

I6

ELARA



Elara returns home, no longer comfortable sleeping in her dorm, shoving the business card into her pocket. Part of her wants to immediately say yes, but she needs to sleep on it. She's shocked at all the information Denzel had given her, but that's not her biggest problem at the moment. How has her life changed so quickly? It felt like ages ago that she was scratched by the wolf, but despite everything that's happened since then, not much time has passed.

All she knows is that things will never be the same.

How can they be, now that she's learned witches and werewolves exist? If her visit with Denzel has done nothing else, it's at least convinced her she should believe in magic, since that's the only explanation that made sense here.

But doing that opens a whole new can of holy-heck.

As she climbs into bed, Elara tries to grasp this new, uncertain future. What magic is she capable of? What will happen at the next full moon? What will joining Denzel's pack mean? Shaking her head, she pulls up the covers and settles down. She needs time to process. To grasp it. To not hate what's happened to her.

She never wanted this. Would never have chosen it.

But it's happened.

She's different now. She'll never be the same.

After half an hour, Elara sighs in frustration and flings off her covers, finally resigning herself to the fact that she can't sleep. The house is quiet, meaning her parents are asleep, but she doesn't want to wake them. Pretending she's okay would be too hard now. So she pads to the back porch and then out the back door, her bare feet soft on the stained wood.

Her eyes widen as she realizes her mother has turned it into some sort of garden, something that had never been back here before. Especially when her mother's never particularly been one for gardening, or perhaps it's been here for weeks and Elara hasn't been home enough to notice it. Her lips twist in a wry smile. At the same time, her mother is famous, or perhaps infamous, among her family and friends for choosing a hobby, sticking with it for a few weeks while she almost obsessively dedicates her life to it, before becoming bored with it and moving onto the next thing. There was scrapbooking, macrame, the French horn, paper quilling, tap dance classes, handmade jewelry, foil art, and decoupageing everything from picture frames to their dresser.

Elara considers the wet grass and her bare feet, then shrugs to herself and steps off, not caring if she's going to get her feet wet. She has to admit, when her mom throws herself into her latest craze, she goes all out. There are flowers everywhere, and it makes the yard seem like a sort of jungle paradise, even if she's pretty sure most of these flowers don't come from the jungle. The red, blue, purple, yellow, and green flowers all shimmer in the light of the waning moon. However, out of all of the flowers in the yard, there's only one that draws her attention. It's a sort of silvery purple, and it almost seems to glow in the light of the moon. She pads closer and reaches out, tempted to pull it closer to her face so that she can see if it has a smell.

Her fingers brush a petal and she yanks her hand back with a hiss, startled by the sudden pain in the tips of her fingers. Frowning as she holds her hand to her chest, Elara looks more closely. There were no thorns that she could see, nor anything else that would explain the sudden burning sensation in her fingers. She breathes through the sudden burst of unexpected pain, trying to understand what just happened. She flips her

hand over so that she can see the red marks on the tips of her fingers, already fading away as if nothing had ever happened. Another example of how quickly she heals, which is a good thing, because that seriously hurt.

Another thing Denzel is right about, or at least something that makes sense after what he said. Her mouth twists. She was hoping not to think about that stuff for a few minutes.

Straightening, Elara looks around. She can't even touch a pretty flower without something weird happening. Is this what her life will be like? Confusing. Scary. A secret from everyone she cares about.

She's about to turn and go back inside when something catches her eye. Slowly turning, she narrows her eyes, registering how well she can see in the pale darkness. Something moved across the walkway that passes the back of their house. Eyes flash in the night.

Kade!

He's still watching her!

Elara jogs to the steps down from the porch, getting to the back gate as quickly as she can without waking anyone. Except by the time she gets there, Kade is gone. Just like all the other times. She looks one way down the path, then the other. There's no figure jogging away. No movement at all.

Elara almost stomps her foot in frustration. How does he keep disappearing like that? He's always there one minute and then gone the next. It shouldn't be possible...unless he's a wolf like Denzel.

She rubs her upper arms even though she's not cold. Maybe she imagined it, another trick her mind is playing on her. Maybe she wanted him to be there. So he could be the one to answer her questions, instead of Denzel.

Shaking her head, Elara makes her way back up the steps of the porch, making sure she doesn't brush any of the pretty flowers. Even if Kade knows something, he's been seriously unhelpful by refusing to tell her anything. Denzel has been far more forthcoming with information.

Not to mention he hasn't been nearly as suspicious.

Kade turned up the night she was attacked. He took her to the hospital, making that weird phone call as she was taken away, saying something was beginning. What was beginning? Then there's the following her. He won't stay away, but he also won't get close.

Elara stops halfway up the stairs to her room as another thought strikes her. Do Kade and Denzel know each other? Are they working together? Does Kade know about the danger that Denzel is talking about, or is he the rogue wolf? Her stomach somersaults as another thought pierces her mind.

One of them must have been the one that turned her; it's the only thing that makes any sense.

In her room, Elara quietly closes the door. Her jeans are hanging over her desk chair when she left them. With determined movements, she pulls out Denzel's card then grabs her phone from the nightstand. She's tired of questions with no answers. And the only way that she's going to get any answers is if she joins Denzel's pack.

Kade certainly hasn't turned up on her doorstep, offering to help.

She dials quickly, not bothering to hear Denzel's voice when he picks up. "I'm in."

If that's what it takes to get some answers, then so be it.

She'll do what she has to.

ELARA



As if making the decision to join Denzel's pack is enough to ease her mind, Elara's finally able to sleep. She dreams of blue eyes that are always out of reach, no matter how hard or fast she runs toward them.

She wakes up feeling edgy and frustrated, but at least she wasn't tossing and turning all night. It means she's up, showered and dressed quickly, and out the door before her parents can ask too many questions.

How are you this morning, Elara?

Sleep well?

Any plans today?

All questions she can't answer honestly, which means she'd rather not answer them all.

Plus, she wants to check on Laith.

Now that she knows she's a wolf, she's terrified that she might have been the one to attack him. As much as she'd like to think she'd never hurt someone like that, especially after the same thing turned her life upside down, the chances the attack was a regular wolf are almost impossible; the timing is too close to be a coincidence. Until she knows the truth, she needs to make sure Laith's okay.

The sense of responsibility is overwhelming.

Jordyn and Kira are in Laith's room when she arrives, and Elara hides her surprise. Jordyn smiles at her as she says hello,

and so does Kira, but for some reason, Kira's feels forced. As if she's not exactly happy to find that Elara's here. Telling herself she's getting paranoid, Elara offers them all a smile as she enters the room, watching Laith wince as he pulls on his jacket.

“Hey! Thanks for coming. But I'm fine, honestly. Glad to go home.”

Elara nods briefly, conscious his house is empty. She can't shake a sense of guilt, even if she isn't sure that she's the one who's responsible for this. He's still covered in the scratches, although the bandages are smaller and prove that he's at least healing. She suppresses a frown as another thought rises in her mind. What if it wasn't her? If Denzel's right and there's a wolf out there that's gone rogue, was Laith one of its victims? Are weird things going to happen around him, too?

Kira picks up the backpack sitting on the bed. “I'll carry this for you,” she tells Laith.

“Oh, you don't need to do that,” he says quickly. “I keep telling you, the scratches aren't as bad as they look.”

Kira lifts her chin. “I want to.”

Laith stills as he stares back. “Oh. Um. Sure, then.”

“I knew you'd make the right decision,” Kira says with a cheeky grin.

And yet, as she looks away, a slow flush creeps up her cheeks.

Elara has to stop her eyes from widening. She's never seen confident, out-going Kira blush.

Unless...she has a crush on Laith!

So much makes sense now. The odd glare. Not looking happy to find Elara here. She winces internally. Does Kira know Laith asked her out?

Her mind whirls as she stands back, watching Kira and Jordyn chat with Laith as they wait for him to be released so that they can walk out with him. Laith is human, and Denzel said that most humans don't survive transformation. And yet,

here he is...slipping glances at Kira like he's noticing something about her for the first time.

The full moon already passed a few days ago, so Elara knows that at least for now, Laith is safe. But that doesn't mean strange things might not happen. Or that his memories might come back. The only way to know for sure if he's been turned is to keep an eye on him until the next full moon, which is almost a full month. Elara's gut clenches. That person can't be her. She can't give Laith the wrong idea by being his new shadow. And with everything that's been going on lately and the fact that she has no idea what's going on in her own life at the moment, she's most definitely the wrong person.

Kira's laughter rings out in the small hospital room, not an unfamiliar sound, but there's something different about it. It's a little more...girlish than usual. It's all Elara needs to give her an idea.

Maybe it's time for Kira and Laith to spend a little time together...

The only problem is that she isn't quite sure how she's going to get Kira to watch him without letting her in on everything that has been happening. Elara can barely believe it herself, and she isn't ready to drag her friends into what she's struggling to understand. So she has to come up with something, some reason or excuse that Kira should watch Laith without letting her know what's going on.

Elara pulls Kira to the side. She keeps her voice down, but knows that with as loud and crowded as the hospital is, there's no way that Laith will be able to hear them talking.

"I've got a favor to ask," Elara starts.

Kira glances over her shoulder as if even being away from Laith this long isn't something she wants, then turns back to Elara. "Sure. Shoot."

Elara almost hugs her, there and then. Her unquestioning support is touching. And just what she needs right now. "I'm thinking you should hang around with Laith for a bit, keep an eye on him," she asks quickly, hoping this sounds plausible. "I

know how hard it's been for me, and you guys have been so helpful with my recovery. I'm worried about him."

Kira nods, looking thoughtful. "He's definitely the sensitive kind."

Elara smiles, trying not to make it look too knowing. "He really is. And your upbeat energy is just the thing he needs."

Kira grins, then winks. "So true."

She spins around, her dark hair whirling like a skirt, and walks back to Laith. She leans in and says something to him, making him laugh. Elara leans against the doorjamb, glad at least something's working out. She notes that even Jordyn's taken a step back, pretending to check her smartwatch, yet shooting quick glances their way.

Hopefully she and Elara are watching new love blossom.

Elara's phone chimes and she quickly pulls it out of her back pocket, instinctively tilting it so that no one else could see the name on the screen. She's surprised that Denzel is calling her already, but then again, it makes sense. He's clearly worried about everything that's going on, so he'd want to get her training started as soon as possible. Elara hesitates for a second, then says her goodbyes to Laith and her friends, telling them she has some errands to run. Not a lie, although they have no idea exactly what errands those are.

She's off to talk to a werewolf. And alpha of a pack.

About training to harness the magic within her.

Because she's one of them.

Shaking her head at the impossible turn her life has taken, Elara heads to the location Denzel texted her. She finds herself almost looking forward to it. She finally has someone she can talk to about all of this stuff, about being a wolf and all the strange things that have been going on around her.

Elara pulls up outside an old two-story house, and finds Denzel on the porch, waiting for her. She walks over, steeling herself to talk to him about something she's less than excited to reveal. Although she has no proof that she scratched Laith,

she can't shake the feeling that there's something more going on with the timing of the scratches and her own first transformation. What if she scratched Laith, and there's something that can be done to make sure that he doesn't transform for the first time? Or at the very least she has to tell Denzel in case Laith does shift, as much as that would be the worst case scenario. Denzel said most humans don't survive their first transformation, she'll feel awful if something happens to him because she couldn't control herself.

She has to tell Denzel so she can figure out what's going on, and see if she can help Laith.

It turns out there's a fate worse than what she's going through—death.

She stops at the bottom of the stairs, as if she doesn't deserve to go any further. "I might have scratched someone. A friend," she bursts out, already she's kicking herself for starting the conversation like that. Denzel barely knows her, he invited her into his pack to help train her, and she's already causing problems. "A human."

Denzel frowns as he stares down at her. "It could have been the wolf that scratched you, the one that's responsible for the other attacks. There's no way of knowing until the next full moon."

Elara shoves her hands in her pockets and thinks about it for a minute, not sure that she understands. It's time to find out exactly how patient Denzel is with her countless questions. "Why not until then?"

Surely there's a way to know sooner. The thought of spending a month not knowing what exactly happened and who was responsible isn't exactly appealing.

"Usually, when the new wolves first shift, they're drawn toward the location of the one who turned them. You would have done the same, which means whoever scratched you might have been in the same vicinity."

Elara's eyes widen as she realizes what that means. She might not have been the one to scratch Laith, which would be

a relief. In the back of her mind, she wonders if Kade was there at the same time as Laith.

He'd also been there the night that she had been scratched, and he seems to be following her everywhere she goes, which would mean it makes sense that he was there that night in the forest. A flush spreads over her body as she realizes something else. She woke up naked. How much exactly did he see?

“So the only way to know is if Laith comes to find me on the next full moon,” she muses, trying to keep her mind on the topic at hand. “That’s the only way we can be sure.”

Denzel nods. His expression is serious, and she can’t shake the feeling that he’s disappointed in her somehow, but that’s nothing compared to how disappointed she’s in herself.

He comes down the few steps to stand in front of her, holding her with his dark eyes. “In order to avoid circumstances like these in the future, you need to be able to control your wolf. In your case, you also need to be able to control your witch magic.”

Elara flashes back to the exploding glass and the curtains changing color, and she can tell by his eyes that he’s thinking something similar. Although she isn’t entirely sure she can trust him, he’s the best option she’s got at the moment. “Okay, let’s train.” She glances around. “It’s just the two of us?”

Denzel walks around the house to a large stretch of lawn obscured from the street by the large house. The forest is just beyond, shielding the back and creating a small, private pocket. A quick look around confirms it’s just herself and Denzel. Everything she’s read about wolves is that they’re pack animals. The same should go for werewolves, right? And wouldn’t it make sense that she trains with a variety of people, learning from different perspectives?

“I’ll introduce you to the pack when the time is right,” Denzel says, his voice firm. “I can sense that there’s something different about you, which means that the other wolves will be able to as well. Wolves aren’t really a big fan of things that are different. They don’t like change.”

Elara nods even though she's not sure how she feels about further proof that she's different, even by magical being standards. She realizes she was looking forward to finding a place she belonged, now that normal life has been snatched away from her.

But it looks like that's not going to happen.

She lifts her chin, looking back at Denzel. Not unless she trains and proves there's nothing that different about her. "So, where do we start?"

Denzel nods, indicating for her to come and stand in the center of the grassy area. "We'll start with controlling magic, then do some self-defense skills."

Elara follows, determined to soak up every piece of information.

Because, at the back of her mind, another question has insidiously made itself known.

If the wolves of Denzel's pack don't accept her, what will they do to her?

KADE



Kade hunkers low in the bushes between Denzel's house and the woods behind. He grows low in his throat, his eyes flashing with menace as Denzel helps Elara through different defense tactics. Every time his fingers brush her skin, every smile he gives her, makes Kade's blood boil.

He's been watching over her since he parted with Guy, making sure she was alright. The wolf's bane in her mother's new garden was a surprise he wasn't prepared for, and seeing her get wounded by the plant made him all the more angry that he couldn't tell her anything about what's going on.

"That's right, brace your legs, keep it loose. You need to be ready to defend an attack or dodge at a moment's notice," Denzel says. His hands are on Elara's hips, angling her, making sure she's doing everything just as he says.

Elara herself is so focused on learning that she doesn't seem to notice how large Denzel's hands are in comparison to her hips. How much of her he's touching.

Kade bares his teeth. It should be him teaching her. It should be his hands on her hips. He could be the one who was close enough to smell her strawberry shampoo and sugary perfume. Not this guy. Not any other guy. Just knowing that it can't be him, because he promised Guy to keep his distance, makes him feel like he's going to burn from the inside out.

"Am I doing it right?" Elara asks. Her face has a light sheen of sweat, making her almost seem to glisten as she turns to look up at the older wolf.

“You’re a very fast learner. You’ll be a formidable opponent for anyone before long.”

Elara beams up at him, her trepidation when she arrived all but gone as Denzel praises her.

Kade has to admit that she’s developing faster than he ever imagined. He’s proud of her, but there’s something deeper inside his chest. Something deeper than pride and admiration for the woman he’s been watching so carefully. He feels possessive of her, of the creature she’s becoming. She’s his, after all, is she not? His skin bristles, hair standing on edge as his body tries to shift with his rising emotions.

No, she’s not yours. She was never meant to be yours!

Kade closes his eyes tight, fighting for control of his inner wolf and these misplaced thoughts of possession for Elara. That’s not what he’s here for. He’s just supposed to watch her, protect her.

If there’s anyone fated to be with her, it’s Laith.

“What about my magic? Can you teach me that as well?”

Elara’s voice makes Kade’s eyes flash open again.

“I don’t have magic, Elara, so what I can teach is limited. But later, I can take you to someone who does. Not today, though. You’ve gone above and beyond my expectations in the last few hours, but I don’t want to strain your body. We should stop now and meet again tomorrow, same time, same place.”

“Are you sure? I feel like I’m just getting started,” Elara says.

Denzel lowers his gaze and smirks before letting his gaze dart right to where Kade is hiding in the bushes. “Yes, I’m sure. While you’re on your own though, I want you to focus on honing your wolf’s senses. Especially smell. Here—” he takes a handkerchief from his pocket and hands it to her. “I want you to use this for my scent. Tomorrow when you come here, you’ll have to find me. If you don’t, I won’t train you that day. Or any day until you do.”

Kade is frozen in place, realizing that Denzel's known the whole time that he's been there. The handkerchief is to teach her to recognize scents and track them. He's teaching her to know where Kade is, he's sure of it. Kade slowly backs away from the bushes, proverbial hackles raised.

"I have to find you? That seems a little more advanced than I'm ready for..." Elara's protests fade as Kade puts more and more distance between them.

What Denzel is asking is not out of the ordinary, it's quite smart. Elara will realize quickly that it will be simple, she is just doubting her abilities right now. She'll learn quickly, and Kade will have to be even more covert in his surveillance.

Kade knows what Guy will say when he tells him about this. He'll tell Kade to keep Elara away from Denzel and his pack by any means necessary. Part of Kade really wanted to listen to Guy, to respect him, but if Kade can't train Elara then somebody should. Maybe if she stayed away from the pack and only dealt with Denzel... No, that would never work. If she becomes involved with them, the pack mentality will be too much for her to ignore.

She needs to be with Guy and Kade. That's the only option. Of course, it had nothing to do with these possessive feelings brewing inside him.

Kade follows Elara as she walks home, making sure to keep far enough away so she doesn't notice. She's almost home when she stops and turns her head slightly behind her. Kade freezes, becoming one with the shadows of a nearby tree along the road, watching her.

She turns and looks back the way she came with intense scrutiny before she pulls out Denzel's handkerchief from her pocket and brings it to her nose. The flesh on the bridge of her nose scrunches as if the scent is foul, and then with a determined gaze, she starts stalking back the way she came. Her nose to the air, she passes Kade without even realizing he was there.

"Elara?" he calls out, making her start in surprise. "Where are you going?" He's leaning against the tree trying to look

like he was just there for a rest.

“I knew someone was following me.” She glares at him, her hands on her hips. “What do you want, Kade? Why do you keep appearing everywhere I am? Should I call the police?”

Knowing the facade is over, Kade pushes off the tree and grabs Elara’s arm. He pulls her into the shadows, putting her between him and the tree at her back. “You need to stay away from that man,” he says between clenched teeth.

Elara’s already wide eyes grow wider as her brows shoot up. “Who, Denzel? What do you care? He’s teaching me self-defense, but obviously, *you* already know that!” She yanks her arm out of Kade’s hand and stares up at him bravely.

Kade seethes at the absence of contact and leans in closer. She can’t know that he knows what she is, or that he knows about Denzel, but he has to warn her. She has to know the truth about the alpha and his pack.

“Listen, Denzel...he’s part of a community. A group of people. They’re...they’re like a cult. Once you get involved with them, you’ll never get away. It’s not safe!”

“At least he’s not stalking me like some kind of creep! He approached me in broad daylight and made himself known. You? You just happen to be around every corner!” Elara shoves Kade, but he grabs her hands and holds them to his chest.

“You don’t understand!” he almost shouts. “He’s not safe to be around. You’re not safe with him.”

“Like I’m safe with my *stalker*? Why do you even care, Kade? What is your problem? Let me go!”

“Why do I care?” Kade chuckles darkly before his body reacts on its own. He pushes Elara into the tree and presses his body against hers. With his nose a fraction of an inch away from hers, he tilts his head and whispers. “If only you knew how much I cared, Elara.” Her name leaves his mouth in a passionate whisper, and he watches her throat bob as she swallows nervously.

Elara's body tenses for a moment, and then relaxes. Her heartbeat speeds up and when her eyes meet his, her lashes flutter. "W-what are you—"

Kade leans in. Her breath is so warm and enticing, all he can think about is eliminating the last bit of distance and kissing her.

Elara's eyes are on his, then on his mouth. Her fingers fist around his shirt and she stops pushing him away and almost imperceptibly pulls him even closer. There's heat in her gaze, heat that he can't ignore, heat that he feels low in his groin with the breathtakingly close proximity.

"Why do you care?" she whispers as she asks the question again. Her breath dances over his lips and makes him shiver slightly.

Kade closes his eyes and takes a deep steadying breath before pulling away and breaking the connection between their bodies. He tries to ignore the way she sways from the loss of his support, or the brief flash of pain in her eyes when her fingers brush her lips that he left unkissed.

"Kade?" she calls out.

He turns his back to her, running his hands through his hair and growling quietly.

"Kade!" she demands.

He turns ever so slightly, looking over his tense shoulders at her. "Just remember what I said, Elara. Denzel and his... people? They're not to be trusted."

"And you are?" Elara snaps back.

Kade grins at her wolfishly and starts backing away with a shrug.

"The devil you know is sometimes safer than the devil you don't," he says.

"I don't know you either, *Kade!*" Elara says in a huff, pushing off the tree and walking back home.

I9

ELARA



Elara flips her hair over her shoulder as she walks through campus, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her skin. It's been two weeks since she started training with Denzel, and things have settled down.

And all it took was focus and control

Those are the two words Denzel repeated throughout their training. It's when your mind or emotions go haywire that unpredictable things happen. There's been no more color-changing curtains or exploding glass.

The hours spent using her senses in ways she didn't know were possible, in finding her center, and in perfecting a strike have all paid off. Her body is sore, but her mind is becoming more and more honed. She no longer has that strange urge to growl and can control some of her more animalistic urges. And then there's discovering the magic that lives in her veins.

Elara's not sure whether it's harder to come to terms with being a werewolf or being a witch. Both are fantastical. Unbelievable.

But now her truth.

And over the past two weeks, she's slowly adjusted to that.

Enough that she's agreed to go to the waterfall with Jordyn and Kira. They'd been hesitant when they'd suggested it, and Elara can't blame them. She's not sure what they thought about her strange few days when she hadn't been certain of anything in the world. And things aren't...okay yet.

There's Laith, for one.

Although Kira has been spending time with him and hasn't noticed anything unusual. That knowledge removes a little more weight from Elara's chest. Maybe it was just a wolf attack. A terrible coincidence.

And no Kade.

Elara instinctively checks over her shoulder, seeing nothing but busy students and familiar buildings. A part of her almost misses him. He was a safety-net of sorts, someone who always turned up when things fell apart.

She straightens her shoulders and flicks her hair again. Her emotions have been a maelstrom for the past couple of weeks. That's why she thought that way. And that's why everything kept going wrong. She's learned how to get that under control now.

She doesn't need Kade and his creepy stalker tendencies.

Elara's just about to turn the corner to the cafe where she's meeting Jordyn and Kira when she hears her name being mentioned. She stills, recognizing Kira's voice. And the concern in it.

"Yeah, she was acting a bit...off there for a couple of weeks," says Jordyn quietly.

If Elara hadn't developed wolf senses, she wouldn't have been able to hear it. She hesitates. She knows she's eavesdropping and that she shouldn't. At the same time, there's no way her friends would say this with her present. This is the only way to get an understanding of how they're feeling. Deciding to go with the flimsy explanation, she remains where she is.

"She seems to be feeling better," says Kira. "I'm glad. I was worried about her for a little while there."

"Yeah. I guess it must just have been the trauma from the animal attack. Probably why she asked you to check on Laith to make sure he's okay. She said she knew how hard it is for her and wanted to make sure he's able to deal with it." There's a low giggle. "And now you look at you two. Spending every

spare second together. Maybe you should thank Elara for finally giving you the kick in the butt that you needed,” Jordyn teases.

Elara relaxes. She’s glad Kira and Laith are hitting it off. Unless Laith was scratched by more than just a wolf...

If he shifts on the first full moon, there’s always the chance that he’ll hurt someone else, and Elara doesn’t want to drag her friends into this if there’s anything she can do to stop it. Or worse, he doesn’t survive the transformation. Has Elara set them up just for Kira to be hurt?

She steps around the corner, not wanting to hear anymore.

Things are getting better. They have to be.

“Hey, you two,” she says cheerily. “Sorry, I’m a few minutes late.”

Jordyn jumps like she was just caught peeking under the wrapping paper of a present, while Kira turns around with a megawatt smile. “Hey, girlfriend. We thought you might have changed your mind.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” Elara reassures her.

Both Kira and Jordyn were worried that Elara now associated bad memories here, but she was quick to tell them that’s not the case. If anything, she’s more concerned about the woods where she woke up naked, because that’s where she transformed the first time. The waterfall just happens to be the place she was the night she was scratched by whichever werewolf decided to change her life, something that she still has no leads on. It could be Kade, or it could be Denzel, or it could be someone entirely different. She has no clue, and until her training helps her memories come back, she won’t have one.

She shakes her head, not wanting to go down that thought trail. “Honestly, I’m looking forward to this.”

Which is the truth. A return to some semblance of normality is just what she needs right now.

Jordyn loops her arm through Elara's. "Great. It wouldn't be the same without you."

Kira smiles too, but for some reason, it doesn't feel as genuine. It doesn't quite meet her eyes.

But as they climb into the car, Elara tells herself she just imagined it. At the worst, Kira's still a little worried about her. She's definitely the more perceptive of her two best friends. Somedays, she seems to have a sixth sense for stuff. All Elara has to do is show them she's better. That she's moving forward.

Which is exactly what she intends to do.

They pull up into the parking lot near the waterfall and Elara's not surprised to see another car there. She is a little surprised when Laith's tall form unfolds from it, smiling broadly.

Kira goes over while Elara leans into the car to get her towel.

"Hey," Kira says, the warmth in her tone unmistakable. "I'm glad you came."

"Me, too," says Laith, sounding shy yet happy. "It'll be fun to all hang out together."

Elara straightens in time to see Kira turn away from Laith, possibly to hide the frown that pulls at her brow. She sees Elara watching and quickly draws up a smile. The same megawatt smile from outside the cafe.

"I'm thinking this time I'll walk," she jokes, referring to her twisted knee the last time they were here.

Elara smiles back, not wanting to ask any questions in front of Laith. Maybe her friend isn't as okay with her as she'd hoped...

The waterfall and the forest surrounding it are just as tranquil and beautiful as she remembered, and she's glad that what happened here hasn't tainted this. Elara spreads out her towel and strips down to her bikini, wondering if this is her chance to do that day over again. She'll swim. Laugh. Soak up

the sun. Then go home well before dark, maybe even watch a movie with her parents.

A splash tells her someone's already in the water, and she looks up to find Kira and Laith are gone.

Jordyn shrugs. "Obviously, Kira told him about the three-toed sloth rule." She grins at Elara. "Seeya!"

She runs for the water, her brown hair flying out behind her. The splash a few seconds later tells Elara she's now back to being relegated to weekly bowel motions. But she doesn't care. She laughs and runs, joining her friends in the water.

This afternoon is about fun. Normality. A taste of what her new future will look like.

Which is exactly what she tries to do. She swims. She laughs. She splashes. If Kira seems to swim away with Laith a lot, she pretends not to notice. Her friend obviously wants to spend time with just Laith, and that's cool.

Elara swims until her hands and feet go wrinkly, then climbs out. Jordyn joins her as Kira and Laith decide to stay in. Elara and Jordyn exchange glances and a smile. The couple definitely wants some alone time. Further proof that she's being hyper-sensitive thanks to everything she's been through the past couple of weeks.

Laying back on her towel, Elara lets the sun dry her skin as Jordyn stretches out next to her, pulling a book out of the small bag she brought. Elara wonders if she should've done the same, but as she closes her eyes, she decides that maybe a short afternoon siesta would be better.

The sound of the breeze through the trees reaches her, along with some small animal scurrying up a trunk. Pine needles brushing up against countless others. Even a car passing on the highway despite the distance.

And then she hears voices.

It's Kira and Laith. And it sounds like they're arguing.

Elara tries not to listen in, she really does. But her over-sensitive hearing can't help it. Especially when Kira throws

out an angry accusation.

“You still like Elara, admit it! You’re only getting close to me so you can be with her!”

Elara can hear the tears in her voice, barely drowning the anger, and her heart squeezes.

The last thing she wants is for her friend to be hurt because of how someone feels about her. She wants to tell Kira that it doesn’t matter, that she doesn’t have any feelings for Laith, but she can’t. For one thing, her feelings aren’t the problem here; Laith’s are. For another, she shouldn’t be able to hear them. It’s not a normal thing, and she’s only just now convincing them that she’s getting back to that elusive place.

“I told you,” Laith says, clearly frustrated. “It didn’t even know her when I asked her. I was pushing myself to take a risk!”

A trickle of relief runs through Elara. Laith no longer has feelings for her. Probably never did. Surely Kira can hear the sincerity in his voice?

“Then how come you keep wanting to spend time with Elara and Jordyn? Rather than just be with me?”

There’s the sound of splashing, and it gets closer to shore. “Because I thought it would be nice for us all to hang out! I want to fit in with your friends.”

Jordyn looks up as Laith’s voice gets louder and louder. She glances at Elara, who shrugs. As much as she doesn’t want this argument broadcast to any other people, she’s glad she no longer has to pretend she can’t hear it.

“How do I know you’re not just saying that?” says Kira, the question part demand, part pleading.

She wants to believe Laith.

But she’s scared.

He appears at the edge as he hauls himself out of the water, then spins around to look down. “Maybe because I haven’t tried to see Elara in the past two weeks? Maybe because I

haven't even mentioned her?" His arms shoot out wide. "Maybe because I told you I liked you, Kira!"

He spins around, flushing when he sees Elara and Jordyn sitting on their towels, watching him. They look away simultaneously, but it's too late. He knows they have an audience.

Cursing, he strides past them, a gust of wind seeming to follow him.

Elara pushes to her feet, frowning. Surely not...

But the trees ahead are now thrashing as if they're caught in a storm, despite the blue sky overhead. Laith keeps walking toward them, not seeming to notice.

Or drawn to their chaos.

Elara's frozen to the spot. This is very similar to what happened to her after she was attacked. How has Laith gone so long without showing any signs like she had? It doesn't make any sense. Her first few days she'd been fully surrounded by weirdness, unable to control anything because she hadn't even realized she was doing it. It's been weeks since Laith was scratched, and he hasn't shown a single sign of any abilities before now. She doesn't know how that's possible, but she does know that something strange is going on with him, just as much as it's with her.

Laith's emotions are out of control. And so are their surroundings.

She hurries over to him. "Laith, you need to calm down. Why don't we take a walk and just cool down for a minute?"

She reaches out like she's going to touch his arm, but Kira leaps to her side. "Why don't you back off, Elara?"

Laith shoves his hands into his hair as he glances between the two of them. "She's just trying to help," he says to Kira. "Can't you see that?"

The wind picks up even more, whipping Elara's hair into her face. She brushes it away just as a branch breaks somewhere. Bark flies past, leaves and pine needles peppering

her skin. Behind her, Jordyn cries out that they should get back to the car. Somewhere, a branch snaps.

Suddenly it occurs to Elara, and she kicks herself for not thinking of it before. Everything that's happening around them is a result of magic, the same kind of magic she hadn't been able to control in her first few days after being scratched. But she can control it now, at least a little bit. It might be enough to negate Laith's magic so that they're all safe, even though Kira and Jordyn are here. If she doesn't, someone's going to get hurt before Laith can get control of himself.

She reaches inside herself, breathing slowly as she calls her own magic to the surface, warm and fluid as she raises her arms high. Despite her training with Denzel, it's still a strange feeling, but not as strange as it no doubt feels to Laith, if he can even feel it at all. He doesn't realize he could hurt them, because he probably doesn't even realize he's the one causing it.

Closing her eyes, Elara connects with the magic, finding it in the air around her, then imagines she's putting a blanket over the top of a fire. The thrashing of the trees instantly stops, encouraging her. Her fingers flex, and she imagines the blanket lowering, bringing down all the emotion and chaos with it.

Elara slowly lowers her arms, and the wind drops. The trees stop shaking. Silence and peace cautiously return.

She opens her eyes when she realizes it's a little too silent.

Laith is staring at her, as are her friends. They're looking at her as if she's some strange sort of creature they've never seen before. Elara drops her hands to her sides, swallowing hard. She knew there would be consequences for her actions when she decided to use her magic to subdue Laith, and now it's time to face the music.

And in some ways, she's now unrecognizable to them. There are days she doesn't recognize herself. She's a witch who can wield magic. Imagine if they knew she's a werewolf as well. Admittedly, she just demonstrated a pretty impressive use of magic, but there will be time to preen later. Right now

she's more concerned about the two frightened humans and the one potential werewolf who look like they're going to scream and run for the hills at any second.

She can't blame them. But she also can't let them do that.

To everyone's surprise, Laith faints, crumpling to the ground in a heap. Elara goes to rush to him, wondering if she accidentally did this, or if he's just exhausted and shocked. But a garbled sound beside her has her spinning back to Jordyn and Kira.

Jordyn's mouth is open, a scream obviously climbing up her throat, when Kade appears behind her. With two taps to the back of their heads, he knocks Jordyn the Kira out. The two girls fall into his arms, unconscious. He carefully juggles them to the ground, then spins to face Elara.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he explodes. "Now is not the right time to expose the supernatural to the world!"

He glares at her and she wonders if she's supposed to be intimidated. Even scared.

But she's had enough of feeling like she keeps getting this wrong. Especially when she never chose these abilities or powers. Not to mention she did what she had to keep her friends safe. For a brief second, Elara considers shooting back whether there's ever a good time to expose the supernatural, but another question quickly replaces the first. And it only amplifies her anger.

"It was you, wasn't it?" she snaps, stalking toward him. "You're the one who scratched me."

Once again, Kade's turned up when things have gone wrong. And he not only said he knew about the supernatural, but he just knocked her two friends out with nothing but a touch. Too many pieces fit into the puzzle.

His jaw tightens. "Who scratched you isn't important. Right now, we have to make sure your friends don't remember this. If they do, they could expose all of us." He glances at Kira and Jordyn. "I'll have to wipe their memories."

Elara's hands hike to her hips. He's neither confirmed nor denied that he changed her, which only frustrates her more. There's no way she can trust him.

She steps between her friend's unconscious forms. "Don't touch them," she growls.

"You don't understand. They can't know of the supernatural."

"Is this what you do, Kade? Make people forget whenever you try to cover something up?"

Like he did when he turned her?

A muscle twitches in his jaw as his blue eyes glare at her. She silently dares him to confirm or deny what she just said. To give her *something*. "Fine," he snaps. "It's your choice."

He turns and walks away stiffly, once more not answering her questions. Elara draws in a breath. Then a second, trying to reign in her anger. Right now, she feels like she could go supernova, and that's not something she wants to see.

All of Mercy City will know the supernatural exists if she loses control.

She calms quicker than she expected, which is good. She's not going to let Kade leave their conversation at that. He will give her some answers.

Elara's taken one step when a groan sounds behind her. She turns to find Laith staggering to his feet. He glances at his hands, and then his surroundings.

Finally, he turns to face Elara. "I can't believe this. That was magic. I'm a witch." He stares at her with wide eyes, slowly raising a hand to point at her. "And so are you."

ELARA



“I ’m a witch,” Laith repeats, and Elara draws back as she realizes he isn’t upset or scared. He actually sounds... excited. “That is so cool!” he breathes, once more looking at his hands in wonder.

“Ah, yeah, you are,” she says, knowing it’s lame, but at the same time, she’s never been in this position before.

“What can I do?” he asks her excitedly. “You’ve got to show me!”

“Whoa back there a sec,” says Elara, raising her hands to pat the air in the universal “chill out” gesture. As glad as she is that he’s not totally freaking out, him jumping right to using magic is so not the right play here.

Laith narrows his eyes at her. “You did magic too. Surely you can show me.”

All of a sudden, she thinks she might prefer it if he freaks out. That she could deal with. She’d calm him down, try to reason with him, and explain things, at least as much as she knew. Instead, he seems to be wanting to use magic now, which is a terrible idea.

“Let’s just slow down a bit.” She barely knows how to control magic herself. “It takes time to learn this stuff.”

But she’s not sure Laith even heard her. He starts to pace, eyes moving quickly over the rocky ground. “How is this even possible? I could never do magic before. Did you do this?” He glances at her but then quickly looks down as if the answer

doesn't really matter. He stares at his hands and she sees the slight shift as the magic comes to life, leaves already starting to swirl around them, and she winces. If he keeps this up, someone is bound to notice. They might be the last ones at the falls, but that doesn't mean that no one else will come along. And who knows what they'd see.

"Laith," she tries again. "Look at me. We need to talk about this."

But he ignores her, staring at the trees as they begin to move again. He lifts his arms in the same way she did not long ago, and the trees move even faster. As if he's the maestro and they're the instruments.

"Holy heck, this is so cool," he says in awe.

When he lifts his arms another notch, Elara knows she needs to act. He's so excited about his magic that he doesn't even notice as she picks up a stick, steps closer, and cocks back, cracking him on the back of the head, the entire time praying that she doesn't accidentally kill him. She has no idea how Kade did it with just a touch. She can't see Laith's face, but his knees fold and he sinks forward. She grabs the back of his jacket to keep him from falling on his face, slowly lowering him forward.

Once he's down and still clearly breathing, Elara steps back. Wrapping her arms around herself, she scans her three unconscious friends.

This is not how today was supposed to go.

What's more, what the hell is she supposed to do now?

Chewing her lip, Elara knows she can't afford to flip the freak out, otherwise the catastrophe she just avoided with Laith is going to happen anyway. She needs to think.

Annoyingly, Kade is the first person who comes to mind. But his solution is to wipe their memories, and she doesn't trust him enough to go anywhere near her friends. Not to mention it's all a moot point anyway. She has no way of contacting him.

Which leaves Denzel.

Already cringing, she pulls out her cell phone, surprised to find there's enough reception to send a text.

Bit of a situation. Could use your help. At the waterfall.

He rings back instantly. "Elara? What's...go...on?"

"I can't really hear you—" she starts before the line goes dead.

Denzel must sense the urgency in her message, or somehow know with his wolf senses that she's freaking out, because he's there in record time, glancing around at her three unconscious friends. His eyebrows rise, and she shrugs, still not sure how she's going to explain everything that happened here. It should have been just another day at the waterfalls, but even though it hadn't been her drama that started it, the whole thing was still embarrassing.

"What happened here?" he asks.

Elara wraps her arms around herself again. That's a great question, and now it's time to face the music.

"We were here at the falls and Kira and Laith started to fight, which made Laith's magic come out, and then I had to use my magic to stop him." She hesitates for a second. She hasn't mentioned Kade until now, and she's not sure why. Some misplaced need to protect him? Could she be any more stupid? "Jordyn and Kira were about to freak out when a guy I've seen lurking around, Kade, came and knocked them both out, but Laith was still messing around using magic, so I knocked him out, too." She winces, not liking any part of that story. "And then I called you."

"A guy's been lurking around?" The way he says it makes him sound as if he's not all that surprised.

"Yeah." She shifts uneasily. "He picked me up after I was attacked. And now it's clear he can do magic. I'm starting to wonder if he's the one who turned me."

Denzel hums gently, rubbing his chin as he thinks. "If this Kade knows about the supernatural, then he could be a problem. But I'm not sure whether he's also the wolf that scratched you."

Elara nods, hating that the uncertainty is back, but also glad there's someone else who knows about this now. Denzel should be far more rational and impartial about this. He won't be confused by the strange sense of safety she experiences around Kade. Nor is he likely to notice what a hot, brooding hunk he is.

"I'll make sure that the pack keeps an eye on him," says Denzel, still looking thoughtful.

A pang pierces her chest. He's talking about his pack. The pack she's not allowed to meet because she's too unknown. Dangerous. Possibly wrong.

None of those are words she would ever have wanted to describe herself with.

The pack that Kade, who turns out to be a werewolf too, warned her away from.

Shoving away the unwanted thoughts, she squats down beside Laith, who's still flat on his back. He looks peaceful enough that she checks his pulse to make sure that she didn't, indeed, accidentally kill him. A strong steady heartbeat flutters against her fingers. He's just sound asleep, and other than waking up with a killer headache, she's pretty sure he'll be none the worse for wear. Although that's when the questions will come. It's going to be seriously hard to explain why she had cracked him on the back of the head with a stick, so she has until he wakes up to think of a good reason.

"All supernaturals have to decide who can know of their true nature," says Denzel, predicting her next question. "You'll have to decide what you're going to tell them."

Elara glances at her two friends. They've seen too much. She's going to have to give them the only possible explanation.

The truth.

Another conversation she's not looking forward to.

She looks up at Denzel. "As far as I can tell, Laith's showing all signs that he's going to turn at the next full moon," she says. "We have to make sure that he survives it," she adds

fiercely. If she's the one who did this to him, she's responsible for making sure he stays alive.

"He's also showing magical tendencies," points out Denzel. "Which is a worry."

Elara ducks her head so he can't see her wince. She doesn't know Laith very well, but she's pretty sure she would have noticed if he had shown any signs of having magic before now, especially in the last few weeks when she's been so sensitive to it. She's seen absolutely nothing, and that lulled her into a false sense of security. She's paying for it now.

She glances up at Denzel. "Maybe he was a witch before?" Maybe she just didn't notice it. If he was born a witch, then maybe he's just better at hiding it than she is.

He sighs, raising his shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I don't know. It's also possible that he was given evolved capabilities like you were."

That's a nice way of putting it, enough that it makes Elara realize that she hasn't told him about using her own magic to stop Laith in his tracks. Will Denzel be proud of her for finally learning to control it, or will he only focus on the fact that she used magic in front of her human friends? Despite her excitement, she decides to back off and just stick with what she's already said, so she doesn't make it any worse.

"So, how will we know? I mean, I highly doubt that Laith's going to answer any questions I have after I just cracked him on the head."

And that's being mild; she'd be lucky if it didn't cause another magic meltdown when Laith wakes up and remembers, but she still doesn't think that she had any choice. He's going to get them all in trouble if he doesn't get himself under control, and it hadn't been like she could just ask him to stop what he was doing so she could call the leader of her werewolf pack, especially since he doesn't even know about werewolves in the first place. Witches and werewolves in one day might be too much for him to handle.

That means it's up to her to handle this. She'll just have to tell Jordyn and Kira the truth. And Laith.

"We'll have to find out," Denzel says resolutely. "There's a way to check his family history. If he does have magic in his family, then at least we'll know how to deal with him."

Elara pushes to her feet. "That sounds good," she says, feeling a little relieved.

Denzel turns away. "If he doesn't, then we have an even bigger problem."

Yeah. That means that neither of them has any magical blood in their families, and a rogue wolf is going around and turning them into half-wolf, half-witch hybrids without their consent.

Even worse than that is a thought that she can't quite get out of her mind, no matter how hard she tries. If this rogue can take a perfectly normal human and make them half witch and half wolf, then what's to stop them from making something worse?

KADE



As he walks away from the infuriating woman he's bound to protect, Kade tries not to let the fact that she figured everything out herself annoy him. He bristles, kicking rocks and clenching and unclenching his fists over and over as he storms away. Something in him tells him not to leave, to stay and protect Elara from herself, but he can't bring himself to turn around and face her.

Panic grips his heart. He's worried she'll hate him for this, that she'll never speak to him again, and at the same time, he's worried what will happen if Guy finds out he intervened and revealed his true nature. Kade revealed he has magic too and he knows from the time Elara's spent with Denzel that she knows not all werewolves do.

It was a stupid mistake, one that might cost him everything.

The wind starts to pick up again and Kade turns just in time to see Elara knock Laith out with a stick. That makes him grin. Even if she doesn't know how to use her magic as well as Kade does, she figured out a way to incapacitate the guy. He steps towards her, thinking she changed her mind about the memory wipe right.

Except she pulls out her phone and calls Denzel.

Hot, raging jealousy pierces through Kade's heart. Elara knows he's here! She knows he offered to help! Why doesn't she call out to him? Why would she call Denzel, who he explicitly warned her against trusting?

He storms forward, ready to demand just that when it hits him. A smell he could never forget, something so ingrained in his mind that a chill runs up his spine and stops him in his tracks. Eyes wide, Kade spins, looking for the source of the scent.

She can't be here...not after all this time...

Incense and sage, the jingling of copper bracelets, the curtain of her hair as she knelt over him in the closet.

His eyes scan the forest, fear rippling through him as if it's still that night, rather than so long ago. Against his will, he shifts, becoming a wolf to protect himself. He starts running back the way he came when he followed Elara here. If this is real, if his senses are really telling him *she's* here, then he's as good as dead.

As he runs, images play in his mind on repeat. Christmas, his foster family...the blood when he woke up...and the smell of *her* when she arrived like a specter on the breeze.



KADE COWERS in the closet among the jackets and shoes of his family. The family who now lay dead on the other side of the door. All he can smell is blood, all he can see is red. Images flash before his eyes, his sister screaming, his father lunging for him.

None of it makes any sense.

A knock at the door has his sobbing go immediately silent. He does everything in his power to scoot farther back into the musty shadows and hide behind the coats, but there's nowhere left to go. His back hits the wall and freezes him in place.

"Hello? Sister dearest? Where are my favorite nephew and niece? It's so quiet in here, are you guys still—" Her sentence is broken by a shrill scream. "No! No, no, no! Goddess... why?"

Sobs echo through the house, rattling in Kade's traumatized brain.

“Wait, where’s the little boy?”

Kade hears the woman scrambling around the living room. There’s jingling as she walks, the sound of her heels on the hardwood floor, and the deafening squelch when her shoes leave the puddles of blood.

“What was his name... What did she tell me?”

There’s the sound of beeping coming from her cellphone, and then a breathy sigh as she whispers his name.

“Kade? Baby, are you here? Are you alright? Auntie Coraline is here! Don’t be afraid, I’ll protect you, baby! Come out!”

Kade doesn’t know this woman, there’s no way he’s coming out. She smells different from anyone he’s ever smelled, a heavy scent of smoke emanates from her. Every time she passes in front of the closet, he can smell sage and lavender, rosemary and thyme.

The next time she passes in front of the closet, she pauses. “Oh...oh no...” He watches her shadow as she crouches. Long black sharp nails slide under the door and come away bloodied. “Please, mother goddess, do not let that little boy be dead in here...please let one of them live, please...”

The door opens with a slow and ominous creak, drawing Kade’s eyes up.

The woman who opens the door looks a lot like his new mommy, but darker. Her long black hair falls in waves to her waist, her black lacy clothes flowing around her as she falls to her knees in front of him.

“Blessed mother, he lives!” Her pale hands reach for Kade, like talons coming in for a deadly strike. She pulls him from his place on the floor in the closet and cradles him against her chest. “Oh my sweet child, you poor baby...” She strokes his head, cooing to him quietly as black makeup stains her cheeks with her tears.

“What happened, Kade? Will you tell me?”

Kade can handle it no longer, his resolve to be brave cracks and he wraps his arms around the woman and wails. His body is wracked with sobs, shaking and trembling in her arms as she rubs his back and soothes him. The jingling sound came from the copper bracelets stacked on both wrists. The smell of smoke clings to her clothes and hair. She smells like comfort, like safety.

Slowly, she pulls Kade away and puts both hands on his face, looking deeply into his eyes. Kade looks back, losing himself in her clear blue eyes. He could love this woman, love her like a mother. He tries to pull her close again but her hands suddenly go rigid. Kade blinks, trying to pull his head away, but her long sharp nails dig into the soft flesh of his cheeks.

“Abomination...” she whispers, denial and pain darkening her once beautiful eyes and twisting her features. One hand slides to the back of his head and grips his hair like a vice, and the other slashes across his mouth in one quick swipe.

Kade cries out in confusion, his terror spiking again. Her hand came away from his face bloody. Dripping blood, even. Once kind eyes blaze with fury and hatred, and as she stands she pulls him up with her and holds him up in the air by his neck.

“You did this?” she screams, flinging him to the ground amongst the piles of shredded bodies. “You? You killed them?” Darkness pools around her feet, and the sound of whipping wind begins outside. There’s a crack of thunder, a flash of lightning.

Kade shields his eyes from the raging storm outside and screams, “I don’t know! I don’t know what happened! Please! Please?” he cries, crawling to her feet as the room darkens.

When he looks up again, the woman’s eyes seem to be glowing electric blue. Her hands are raised, talons sparking and arcing with electricity.

“Reveal your true form, monster! Reveal the beast that you are!” she roars, her voice inhumane. Her hands drop, reaching for him like the claws of an attacking eagle, and

electricity shoots from her fingertips and strikes Kade. “Show me the monster that killed my family!”

Kade’s body buckles, back arching too far. His bones crack, and his skin splits. A scream of pure agony rips from his lips and seems to shred his very existence.

When the pain stops, his screams are no longer human, but a mournful howl.

Terrified, Kade looks into the woman’s eyes as she kneels in front of him and sees himself in their reflection. He’s no longer a boy, but a blood-stained, gangly dog. He whimpers, trying to back away from the sight, this lie, but the woman snatches his scruff and hauls him into the air again.

“Werewolf!” she shrieks, horror and malice leaking from her every pore. “Abomination! You will suffer for what you’ve done!” Her free hand curls in on itself, a ball of energy forming in her palm. “I curse you, creature!” she roars, then slams the energy into his chest.

Blistering pain explodes inside him, filling his veins with lava-like intensity. He tries to scream, but the only thing that comes out is a garbled yelp.

Suddenly the front door flies open, and a dark figure is silhouetted by a flash of blinding lighting.

“No!” the woman gasps, dropping Kade and taking an unsteady step back.

Kade has only a brief glimpse of the man cast in shadows as he steps over the threshold.

“What have you done?” the voice snarls.

Kade doesn’t stick around to hear more. With his body freed he scampers onto his paws and runs for the back door. He can hear crashing behind him, splintering wood and breaking glass. The woman screaming, the man roaring, but everything fades as he bursts through the back door and into the raging storm.

The forest behind the house seems to reach out and attack him, branches scraping his face and eyes. Leaves and pine

needles get stuck on his blood-soaked body as he runs blindly for his life. He doesn't look back. He can't. Not now, not ever. She'll catch him again if he does. She'll catch him and finish what she started.

Kade's chest hurts so bad that it's throbbing with every pained step he takes. Scars like lightning bloom from where she touched him, scars that pulsate with her dark magic.



KADE BURSTS through the door of Guy's compound so hard that his body rolls across the floor on impact.

Guy is at his desk in the corner of the dark room. He jumps up so fast that the desk topples, scattering paperwork and computer parts everywhere. Guy leaps over the mess in one swift jump and runs across the empty room to slide to his knees in front of Kade. His hands grip Kade's massive wolveren head and steadies him.

Kade's eyes are wild, his breathing rapid and pained. There's a blue glow emanating from his chest, pulsating with power.

Guy looks at it, parting the fur and frowning and the mark the witch gave him all those years ago, the scar that has never glowed since the day she cursed him. Guy touches the scar and draws his hand back with a pained hiss.

Kade whimpers, leaning his head towards Guy and pressing himself against his chest.

Guy gently strokes Kade's fur and releases a heavy sigh.

"What have you done?"

Kade freezes. The memory of the man breaking down the door, those same words coming out of his mouth all those years ago, pierces the panic and terror.

All this time, was it Guy that saved him then, too?

ELARA



Elara leans against the wall of the corridor she's in, watching the door of the lab further down. The class is about to finish. Which means Kade will be coming out any moment.

And this time, she's going to get him to talk.

She adjusts the books she's holding as she frowns. Denzel and his pack have been watching Kade for almost two weeks, and all he does is go to college and then home. As far as the wolves can tell, he's not even following Elara anymore, and she's as relieved as she is frustrated. Why, when she finally has backup, does he suddenly back off?

Not only does it make her look crazy, but it also means he's not doing anything suspicious.

So now she's stalking him, determined to get answers. She's already tried to accidentally bump into him a couple of times, but he never seems to see her, then side steps at the last second. As if he knew she was there all along. And each time she tries to start a conversation, he simply turns around and walks the other way.

He's the most infuriating guy she's ever met! It's like *he's* avoiding *her*!

The first students filter out of the lab and Elara waits, nervous energy pulsing up through her legs. Kade's always the last to leave. Always alone. She's been following him long enough to know that.

The bulk of the students exit, one girl laughing loudly, and Elara knows it's time to move. Hitching up the books she's carrying, she walks forward, smiling at anyone who bothers to make eye contact. She's just a girl, walking to class, toting the stack of reading material she just got from the library.

The trickle of students dries up and she holds her breath, knowing Kade will be next. She has to get the timing just right.

Kade exits, one hand shoved in his jeans pocket, the other holding the strap of his backpack. His shoulders are hunched, his gaze down, a dark lock of hair flopping over his forehead like a privacy screen.

Elara walks a little faster, stepping around the student who exited before Kade. Almost feeling like she's getting a run-up, she aims for him. Kade keeps walking, not looking up, not showing any sign he knows a determined missile is coming straight at him.

But a moment before they're supposed to collide, he shifts slightly to the left, avoiding any collision. This time, Elara's ready for it. She jolts as if the crash really happened, and the five textbooks she's juggling go flying.

They'll hit the ground and if Kade has any manners at all, he'll be forced to stop and help her pick them up.

Except there are no thuds as spines hit the linoleum. No slaps as covers land on the floor.

With lightning-fast movements, Kade catches every one of them.

Elara straightens, working to keep her mouth from dropping open. She barely blinked and now he's holding the texts, jostling them neatly on top of each other as if they'd been in his hands all along. He holds them out, eyebrows raised. "You almost dropped these."

For some reason, that just pisses her off even more than she already is. Kade's clearly supernatural. He knows something about what happened to her.

He's possibly *what* happened to her.

And he's acting like she barely exists after being everywhere she was all the time.

"I want to talk."

"Can't," he says, his body tensing. "I've got somewhere I need to be."

"You need to be here, answering my questions," she snaps, anger simmering in her veins.

Kade shakes his head, taking a step back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Elara quickly steps forward, recovering the distance between them. "You sure as hell do. I want to talk."

"I don't," he says curtly. He shoves the books out but Elara doesn't take them. They're the one thing keeping him here right now.

Except Kade glances around, a low frown pulling his dark brows down. He spots a chair just behind him beside the wall and he strides over and places them down. He straightens, and for the briefest of moments, he hesitates, the muscles across his shoulders tensing.

But then he hunches forward and starts to walk away.

Like hell he is.

Elara leaps forward, surprised at her speed, and wraps a hand around his upper arm. The moment she does, they both freeze.

There it is. What she's determinedly ignored each time she's bumped into him. The sizzling warmth at the slightest touch. The heightened awareness of every inch of his muscled body. The tantalizing wish that she could gaze into his indigo-blue eyes for just a little bit longer...

But this time, everything is far more intense. She can feel the way his biceps harden. Heat. Almost quiver under her touch.

Kade glances down at where her hand's holding him. Then looks up. Elara's breath had already disintegrated, but now it's

like it never existed. His indigo eyes are hurting. Almost bruised with the amount of pain they're holding.

And yet, they're hot. As if the heat of their touch has reached there, burning away the wound she doesn't understand.

"Is it something I've done?" she says, shocked as the whispered words slip out. She's gone from angry and demanding to pathetic and pleading. But that one touch strips away the anger, revealing what's underneath. The questions that have been clawing at her consciousness.

Is he angry with her? Disappointed? Because she exposed the supernatural?

Because somehow, he knows about Laith?

Because he's watched her for weeks and didn't like what he saw?

"It's not you, Elara. It never was and never will be." His eyes flutter closed as his jaw works. "None of this is your fault," he grinds out through clenched teeth.

She has no idea what that means. In fact, his words, whatever this is between them, only confuse her further. And she's never wanted to understand anything more.

Kade looks away, snapping the connection that had been built between them. "Please, let me go."

Elara withdraws her hand, torn at the agony she can hear in his voice. She's about to ask what's going on when he strides away. Almost runs. Like he can't get away from her fast enough.

She's left standing in the corridor, blinking.

She's no closer to answers.

A million more questions just blossomed alongside the strange new emotions that were just born.

ELARA PLANTS her hands down on the picnic table she's sitting at with Kira and Jordyn. "I need to force his hand."

Jordyn glances up from her notebook where she was furiously scribbling, looking alarmed. "What?"

"I can't do this anymore," she huffs, the run-in with Kade less than an hour ago still achingly fresh in her mind. "I'll do some magic! He'll have to step in to do something! He won't be able to ignore me then!"

"Whoa, slow down there, Hermione," says Kira. "You didn't bring your wand."

Between her and Jordyn, Kira accepted the news of Elara's werewolf and witch status the quickest. Jordyn keeps saying she wants to do a little more research before she gives an opinion.

It had been hard seeing their faces as they woke up that day from being knocked out and Elara had to explain to them that what they had seen was real, that both she and Laith have magic. She sort of eased them into the fact that they were werewolves as well, figuring it is easier to prove that she has magic than it is that she turns into a wolf on full moons, especially since she isn't even sure that Laith will do the same. It had been a relief for the truth to be out there, but also terrifying.

Overall, though, Elara has to admit they've taken it quite well. They didn't scream or sob or say they never wanted to see her again.

Jordyn reaches across the table, gently putting her hand on top of Elara's. "Don't do it. You're still learning about all of this."

Elara sighs. Jordyn's right, but she didn't see the strange mix of anger and hurt in Kade's eyes. She didn't get the sense it wasn't Elara he's angry with.

"We'll figure it out," says Kira. "There's no telling what will happen if people find out about magic. I highly doubt the other witches or wolves or whatever will appreciate that very much."

Elara groans as her head sinks into her hands. Another solid point. Elara's so new to this, but there are surely people who have been hiding this their entire lives, and she highly doubts they'll appreciate her messing things up for them. The pack she's never met will remain strangers. What's more, they'll probably hate her. She sighs, then thumps her head onto her arms and groans.

"And what would your parents say?" Jordyn asks gently.

Elara looks up, pushing the hair out of her face. That truth hits the hardest. Kira and Jordyn have already promised they won't tell anyone, especially her parents. They mean everything to her, and she's not ready to drag them into what's happening in her life at the moment, at least not until she gets things under control more.

"Thanks, guys," she says softly. Their support is just what she needs right now. Without them, she'd be a lone buoy, stranded in this storm that's now her life.

Speaking of worlds turned upside down, she glances at Kira. "How's Laith?"

She smirks. "Better than you. He seems to think this is the best thing that's ever happened to him."

Elara's gut clenches. Only time will tell whether that's the case. They're all in a holding pattern.

Until the next full moon.

"That's because he doesn't have Kade stalking, then not-stalking him, confusing everything," she groans.

"Come on," Kira says suddenly, tugging on Elara's arm. "Kade's on your mind too much lately. We need to get you away from him, and since we're all done with classes today, we're free to distract you."

Smiling, Jordyn gets to her feet and packs away their books, then links arms with Elara, one on either side. Elara starts to protest, not that they're listening. Yes, it's true that they're all finished with their classes for the day, but what Kira didn't mention is that they all have tests to study for. Their plan had been to study in the sunshine for as long as they

could—a nice vitamin D dose while cramming. Instead, her drama is pushing them into doing something else, and it only makes Elara feel guiltier.

“I’m fine. It’s fine. We have studying to do.” She knows full well that isn’t going to work to convince them, but she has to at least try.

But Jordyn and Kira are too good of friends to let her stew over something that’s stressing her out, so it’s no surprise she ends up back at her parents’ house, with Jordyn in the kitchen making popcorn so that they can all watch a movie.

As they settle down, Elara’s once more grateful for their sweet support. Maybe she’ll be able to convince them to study a little bit later so that the whole day isn’t ruined by her borderline obsession with the person who she understands least of all.

Elara’s friends are right that she needs to stop thinking about Kade, and normally, she would just ignore him, but he could be the reason Elara’s like this. The reason she turns into a possible monster she can’t seem to control. The reason her whole life has flipped upside down.

And he makes her feel things no one else ever has...

Elara needs to get her answers, but she can forget just for one night, right?

The girls laugh and talk through one of their favorite movies, *10 Things I Hate About You*. When it’s over, Elara feels much more like herself, her earlier troubles shoved far to the back of her mind.

She grabs the remote to turn off the TV, but she stops in her tracks. A breaking news alert streaks across the screen.

Elara goes pale as she listens to the details the dark-haired reporter is giving, occasional video shots in the upper corner of flashing police lights and yellow crime scene tape.

“A strange crime spree has struck Mercy City and surrounding areas. Heists of every bank began earlier today and continued with very little leads on who is responsible.”

The screen cuts to an earlier recording of an interview with an eyewitness—a man with glasses and a beard who looks as if he’s seen a ghost.

“I don’t know what’s going on in this city, but I’m almost scared to fall asleep now. I swear it, I saw with my own eyes, a man changing shape!”

Stunned, Elara glances at her friends, feeling this time she’s the one who has seen a ghost. Thinking back to something Denzel told her about shifters, she knows this has to be supernatural.

“Elara, are you okay?” Kira asks, coming over and placing her hand on her shoulder.

The touch pulls her out of her thoughts. “Something’s wrong here. I need to call Denzel. Maybe he knows something.”

Both Jordyn and Kira look confused as Elara grabs her phone and leaves the room, hoping Denzel will have some answers or an idea of what to do.

If it’s war, now that she’s a wolf, she’ll have to fight too.

ELARA



“Are you sure you’re going to be alright here?” Jordyn says quietly, leaning in for a hug.

Elara pulls away and nods. “I should be plenty safe inside the house, and I won’t leave alone. I just need to figure this out. Something seems off.”

Jordyn’s worried eyes strike Elara with guilt, but this is her life now. It’s easier for her friends to accept the fun parts of her newfound abilities, but it will likely take longer for them to understand the danger and mystery associated with it all.

Jordyn and Kira leave, and Elara dashes to her bedroom, shutting the door and pulling out her cell phone.

As soon as the other line begins to ring, Elara mutters under her breath, “Pick up, pick up.” She won’t blame him if he doesn’t—Denzel is about as busy of a wolf as it gets, and he does an awful lot for her already. But she lets out a sigh of relief when she hears his voice.

“Elara?”

“Have you seen the news?” She practically jumps down his throat as she paces back and forth next to her bed, not even knowing if she can handle what Denzel might have to say.

“I have.” He pauses, and the dramatics are almost too much to bear. Elara’s about to say something she’ll regret when he continues. “There seem to be shape shifters who have arrived in Mercy City. These heists were orchestrated by them.”

Elara wracks her brain for any reason a supernatural creature would have for robbing a bunch of banks. Money, sure, but it seems an extreme risk for just some cash. They probably could have scared the crap out of some unsuspecting victims and gotten money thrown at them rather than hitting banks.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Elara murmurs, her hand running through her hair absentmindedly in her worry. “Why would shifters want to do that?”

“The shifters were looking for something. They stole something from one of the banks. It wasn’t money.”

There he goes with the cryptic talk again...

“So, what is it? What does it do?” Elara asks, flopping down onto her bed. It’s a lot to process considering she’s just getting used to being a part of a supernatural community. Stealing an object means it has to be something valuable and likely magical. Magical objects seem more like something out of a fantasy novel than real life.

“I think it’s some kind of powerful object, but I don’t know what. Whatever it is, though, it means nothing good.” Denzel’s voice turns dark, and a chill runs up Elara’s spine. “Shifters and weres have always been butting heads, but something’s happened with the war between the species. It’s become heightened in recent days.”

Elara pushes herself down into the softness of her bed, trying to feel real and ground herself. It’s what she feared when she first saw the news story. She’s a new wolf finding herself wrapped up in a worsening war between species she barely understands, and there’s still the mystery of her magical powers. Something she shouldn’t have since, according to Denzel, neither of her parents seem to have a gene for it.

“What do I do? To keep myself safe?” Elara asks, her voice coming out in a nearly inaudible squeak.

“That’s what your training is for. It’s just become a little more important,” Denzel says, a little too casually for her liking. “You use what you learned to protect yourself, and you

keep practicing. In the meantime, with the full moon coming up, we need a plan.”

Elara blinks. Is it that close to the full moon? She instinctively looks toward her window, that strange crimson color still taunting her. “That means Laith might turn or...” She doesn’t finish the sentence. She doesn’t want to think about the alternative and how she might handle it if it’s her fault.

“I can feel your apprehension through the phone. I know this will be like a test for you, Elara, and for Laith, but it must be done. I have an idea, if you can trust me.”

Elara scoffs, knowing there’s no choice but to trust Denzel. He’s the only person who’s been willing to help her or be honest with her in any way. No matter how hard she’s tried to get a word out of Kade, he won’t tell her anything, making his presence that much more infuriating. Denzel is powerful, and an ally if not a friend. He’s the only one she could fully trust about this, right or wrong.

Elara takes in a deep, sobering breath. “Of course. What am I going to have to do?”

“I’m not sure your last turn was ideal,” he says, and she laughs nervously.

“That’s an understatement,” she mutters.

“Laith, as you’ve mentioned, lives in a huge mansion outside the city. His turn will be in a more controlled environment if he stays put. So we’ll have to help him go through his first shift there.”

Elara cringes, thinking about how scared Laith will be. How scared she’ll be if she’s being honest.

The sounds of Elara’s parents returning from a date night filter up the stairs, the door shutting behind them and locking still a little disturbing to her newly heightened senses.

“Elara?” Her mother’s voice comes from the hallway. “We’re home. Are you awake?”

Elara covers the phone with her opposite hand and hollers back, “Yes! Just hanging out in my room.” She hears her parents whispering sweet nothings to each other and other intimate messages she’s more recently privy to, thanks to her super hearing.

She cringes and lowers her voice. “So, if I’ll be turning in the woods, how am I going to be able to help Laith?” she asks.

“If you’re the one who’s responsible for turning Laith, then he’ll make his way to you. It’s instinct. You end up finding the wolf who sired you when in wolf form, especially the first time.”

Except she didn’t. Another oddball move to chalk up.

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” Elara admits. “It’s a little creepy.”

“Creepy as it may be to you, it’s natural to us. Werewolves have the idea of hierarchy and connection in their blood. You’ll get used to thinking like this the more you’re with others like yourself, Elara.”

She tries not to comment as she knows very well there’s nothing and no one out there like her. Denzel is simply being kind.

“Okay, so I basically just wait and see if Laith comes to me in the woods while you go to his house to see if you can ease the transition and we hope he survives?”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Elara switches her phone to the other ear. “What about Kade, though?” *Ugh, why does he have to come up in every conversation?* “What if he’s around, too? Then, we won’t know whether it was me or him who turned Laith.”

Denzel’s growl of complaint seems to reveal he feels the same way about their shared nuisance. “I’ll watch for him. We both need to try and keep him away if possible. But unless Kade is right next to you, it shouldn’t interfere too much. Laith will still come straight to you if it was you who turned him. Kade, for now, is irrelevant.” Hearing the frustration in Denzel’s tone lets Elara know Kade will be dealt with

eventually, once they address the more pressing problems. But is that what she wants?

The thought of his eyes on her makes her long to see him again at the same time it frustrates her. She shouldn't be conflicted about someone who treats her that way.

“Okay, got it,” she responds. “I better go, though. I don't need my parents asking too many questions.”

“Fair enough. Have a good night, Elara.”

Elara nods and hangs up, going to her window. Pulling back the curtain a little, she looks at the waxing moon only to catch a glimpse of a figure standing across the road, looking right back at her.

She gasps, shutting the curtain and catching her breath, her heart beating wildly in her chest. Then, she slowly opens it again and instantly recognizes the dark figure—Kade.

He's watching her again.

Elara lets the curtain go and runs to her door, listening only a second to hear her parents preoccupied, and then heads for the door to the house. She rushes out to the road, determined to catch him this time, but stops in her tracks to find him already gone.

Damn it! What is his problem? She doesn't understand why he would creep up on her and watch her only to vanish when she notices him and yet has no desire to tell her anything useful. If he wanted to keep a secret, that's a funny way to do it.

Elara clutches her fists tight at her sides. She wants to hate him. She should hate him, but her anger instantly deflates back into listless curiosity as the wind blows her hair back. Despite everything, she can't bring herself to feel that way.

If she's going to be honest with herself, she's just lost and wishing for him to finally stop watching her and start talking.

Elara reaches the back porch, then silently slips down the stairs. She moves through the backyard her mother transformed, skirting the purple flower with the power to hurt

her, and quickly makes her way to the front of the house. She reaches the oak tree across the road, not surprised to find no one here. The waning moon casts dark shadows beneath as she stops and narrows her eyes.

Denzel was impressed when she was able to track him the following day with just the scent from his smelly handkerchief.

Kade doesn't stand a chance. His scent, slightly spiced, a little wild, is one she'll never forget.

Elara closes her eyes and draws in a deep breath. She smells the oak tree, the earth beneath her feet, the wood of the fence several yards away, the beef stroganoff in someone's kitchen. And beneath it all, something faint. Something undeniable.

Something she breathes in deeply, enjoying the sensation of making it a part of her.

Moving forward on instinct, Elara follows the scent. She passes the oak tree, wrinkles her nose at the scent of trash from beyond an adjacent fence, then arches her brows when she realizes someone's cooking chocolate cake. Yet . It's a gossamer thread she doesn't plan on letting go.

She reaches the small playground tucked among some suburban houses, then stops beside a sprawling pine. Its scent is strongly resinous, practically sticking to her nostrils, yet green and earthy. And still not powerful enough to cover the scent she's tracking.

"I know you're there," she says quietly.

Kade drops down from above, landing with barely a sound. He straightens and glares at her and she wonders if he knows how devastating he looks in the barely-there light.

He looks dark.

And dangerous.

And like just the thing she wants to take on.

KADE



“Seems like Denzel taught you something useful after all,” Kade growls as he spins around, intending on walking away. With his back still to her, he rubs the scars on his chest beneath his shirt and zips up his jacket just in case they start to glow again. Everything has been so out of place since he smelled Coraline in the middle of the woods. His doubt about Guy’s role in his life makes him question everything he’s ever known.

All he knew when he left the compound tonight was that he needed to see Elara, and now here she is. Still brimming with questions, questions he’s been told not to answer. Except an insidious thought creeps in.

If Guy won’t tell me the whole truth, why should I listen to him and lie to Elara?

“Denzel is the only one willing to teach me anything!” Elara snaps back, storming up to him and grabbing his elbow to turn him and face her.

Kade lets her turn him, but he doesn’t give her room. He presses into her personal space and makes her back up nervously, not letting her get too far. He grips her elbows with both hands, as she holds onto his forearms and swallows.

“You want to talk, Elara? You want the truth?” He knows his eyes must be raging because she flinches away from looking at him. “You’ve got me now! I’m here, I’m talking!”

“Was it you?” her voice is small, her eyes downcast.

He can feel her body tremble in his grasp and it makes the hairs on his arms stand up.

“Was it you who attacked me at the falls, Kade?” she straightens her shoulders and faces him head-on, her chin tilted up bravely.

“What if it was me, Elara? What would you do?” Terror that she’ll run from him screaming, or that she’ll hate him, makes him stiffen and brace himself for her fury.

“I would ask why. I would ask why you were following me even before that night. Ask why it seems you intended to change me, as why you ran away and shifted and came back for me after you hurt me yourself.” Instead of pulling away, Elara closes the distance even more. Her eyes are glued on his, her breath ragged and hitching with every word. “I need to know why, Kade.”

“I can’t—” he starts, snaking his hands up to her shoulders and pulling her imperceptibly closer.

“Can’t what, Kade? What can’t you do? I’m not going to be afraid. I’m not going to be angry! I just want answers. I just want to know why you did this to me!” Her eyes are beginning to tear up, and when a single drop slides down her cheek, Kade’s eyes flash back to her.

He wonders if she can see the pain in his gaze. The desire to tell her everything. The ache to be near her and never part. “Elara,” he breathes, wiping the tear from her cheek with his thumb and cradling her head in his hand.

“Kade?” A sob escapes her throat and she grips the lapels of his jacket and pulls him closer. Their bodies are touching now, the warmth of proximity seeping through their clothes and sparking that feeling inside like embers of a fire.

“I want to tell you everything, I want to be with you at all times. I can’t explain it, but I need...” his voice trails off as he searches her eyes. He lets his other hand slip from her shoulder and land on her hip, pressing her tighter to him. “I never want to be away from you and it’s tearing me apart.”

“Then stay with me.” Her voice is so quiet as if she can’t believe she’s actually saying it.

“You don’t know what you’re asking, I just—Elara, I can’t.”

Her hands snake from his lapels to the back of his neck and clasp him.

He can feel her fingers tracing the scars from Coraline’s nails all those years ago, but she doesn’t say anything. She stares deep into his eyes as she locks her arms around his neck and leans her head on his chest.

“Kade, please...” she begs.

Instinctively, protectively, Kade wraps his arms around Elara’s back and pulls her slightly off the ground with the strength of his hug. He buries his face in her hair and breathes deeply. She smells so fresh and clean, nothing like the smokey evil of the witch who cursed him. The witch who passed her powers to him. The powers that now run through his veins, and Elara’s.

“What’s happening to me?” she pleads for answers, for clarity.

“When I can, I will tell you everything. I’ll hold nothing back. I swear.”

“Why not now?” Elara pulls back, staring pleadingly into her eyes through lashes wet with her tears.

“It’s...not time. Not yet.” Kade sighs, pressing his forehead to hers and taking in everything about this young woman who has tantalized him so completely. He was never supposed to develop feelings, never supposed to care. Watch her, and make sure Guy’s plan comes to be.

But now, with her in his arms? Guy’s plan is the furthest thing from his mind. Her body against his is clouding his reasoning, making him want to be lost in her very presence.

Elara tilts her head up, brushing her nose against his and releasing a small whimper.

Kade tenses, everything in him begging him to take her mouth with his and taste that whimper with his tongue. He shouldn't, it's not part of the plan. It's not what he's supposed to do.

"Kade," she whispers, rubbing her nose against his again. "Kade..."

The way she says his name is making him crazy. Speaking to some carnal beast inside him that makes him want to claim her.

"Elara," he chokes, angling his head so their lips line up with each other, the trajectory obvious. "I want... Can I..?"

"Yes."

He can barely hear her, the blood rushing in his ears drowning out almost everything as his emotions seem to take over his rational mind.

He leans down, setting her on her feet, and running his right hand up her back to tangle in her hair. "Elara..." he whispers, and his lips brush hers ever so lightly.

Elara lets out a surprised moan and molds herself to him, deepening the kiss.

Kade's world explodes in color behind his closed eyes. Everything he's been through until this moment means nothing. Her plush lips against his erase it all, everything. His arms tighten around her, tongue venturing the crease of her mouth.

Elara starts at the feeling and jerks back, her eyes holding questions she won't voice.

"You make me forget everything, Elara," Kade murmurs, leaning in again and pressing a chaste kiss to those delicious lips again.

"I, I just..." she blushes, stepping out of his arms and wrapping her arms around herself.

"What's wrong?" he asks, stepping towards her.

"N-nothings wrong, it's just... I..."

“You regret it?” Kade lets his hands fall to his side and ball into fists. How could he be so stupid? How could he let his attraction to her push their boundaries? What has he done?

“No, no it’s not that! It’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain anything.” Kade turns on his heel and starts stomping away. “I get it.”

“Kade! I don’t regret it! I like it! I love it! It’s just, it’s so much... And what am I making you forget.” She lets out a groan. “Please don’t go. Please?”

The begging desperation in her tone makes him freeze in place. He can feel her coming closer even before her arms snake around his waist.

“I don’t know what this is, why I’m drawn to you... I’m scared, Kade...”

Kade turns and wraps his arms around her. He rests his chin on the top of her head and closes his eyes with a sigh. “I don’t want you to be scared, Elara. Not ever.”

“Will you walk me back home? It’s dark and I didn’t tell my parents I was going anywhere...”

Kade only nods before he wraps his fingers around her hand and begins to walk back toward her house. They step into the backyard, into the garden her mother planted, and stop under the cover of the large maple tree. He tries to let go of her hand, but she grips it in her other and pulls him close again. He can’t refuse her, his body answers her unspoken question and he seals his lips to hers with a breath of relief.

“Why does this feel so right?” Elara asks as the kiss breaks and she rests her head on his chest.

Kade doesn’t know why, or how to answer.

They both hear the front door open and her mom’s voice when she calls her name.

“I have to go,” she says, but she doesn’t pull away.

Kade looks towards her home, where her human parents live. They have no idea the world they truly live in, have no

idea what he's made their daughter. He swallows hard. He never should have let her see him, but for the life of him letting her go now feels like it might kill him.

"Will you stay and watch over me, like you always have?" she asks.

"Always..." Kade says, looking deeply into her eyes before kissing her one last time. He pulls away finally, reluctantly, but in the corner of his eye, he sees the wolf's bane. "There's something I can tell you, Elara."

"Yes?"

The excitement in her voice makes him wince. It's not something vital, something she wanted to know, but it's something she needs to know.

"That flower there, the purple one?" he points to it and watches Elara's face scrunch up in distaste.

"I don't like that one. It's pretty, but it burns."

"It's wolf's bane. Highly toxic to our kind. Please, stay away from it. For me?" he brings her hand to his lips and kisses her knuckles gently.

"Why would my mom plant something poisonous?" Elara gasps.

"She probably doesn't know. Humans don't know anything about the supernatural world, and that's how it should stay. Elara, your parents...you'll have to protect them from the truth."

"I know, I'll be careful, I—"

"No, you don't understand. You have a wonderful family, which means you have so much to lose." Guilt unlike anything he's ever felt grips his heart and squeezes. He made her the thing he is, the thing that killed his family, the thing that was cursed by the witch. He did this to her, he's risking everything she holds dear, and for what? For Guy?

Kade drops her hand and turns away.

"When will I see you again?" Elara calls out.

“I’m always here, Elara. I’m always with you.”

Until I won't be.

The final lines of the prophecy are all that accompany Kade as he walks away. It was a twist he didn't see coming, but one that intuitively feels right. One that explains everything.

In stone its sheathed, a binding depth,

Only broken by a love that's death.

ELARA



Elara sets her purse in her passenger seat as the sun begins to set. According to the story, she told her parents she's supposed to be studying with her friends and then heading over to Laith's house for another movie night.

Lying is too easy. She hates that she has to do it, but her friends were already hard enough to get on board with what she is now. Elara can't imagine trying to explain to her parents she's a wolf and has magic. She can't bear the thought of the expressions on their faces. Horror. Dismay. Then grief as they conclude she's lost her mind. They'd believe the best thing they can do is send her away. Have her admitted.

Her worry isn't just about hiding what she's really doing, though. It's about if the plan will work and how the turn will be. She knows the first one didn't go well. She'd panicked and possibly turned someone else into a werewolf. It isn't something she wants to repeat. She's already living with the consequences of that. Denzel keeps telling her with all the training she's done with him she should be able to better control her mind, especially with him and his pack around to share sight with her, something she just recently learned wolves can do. But she still has doubts. Even if there's a small chance she can't control herself, the consequences could be catastrophic.

Crawling under her skin, though, are thoughts of Kade. She's beginning to believe he'll be a part of her life forever, although always on the fringes. Elara is sure that's why she's

so obsessed with him—his mysterious behavior and lack of communication.

Until last night when he'd given her a glimpse. The closest to an answer he ever has.

Elara brushes her fingers over her lips, wondering if the echo of the heat will ever leave. Their kiss had been...soul-scorching. She felt Kade's searing passion, his strength, his barely-there restraint. But she also felt his pain, the anguish she'd already suspected, the one he tries to hide. She's never felt more cherished or safe.

Or like knowing the truth about him is the only thing that matters.

She shakes her head. She can't afford to think like this. Not when she should hate him.

Not when she possibly will when tonight is done.

Starting her engine, she knows what she needs to do next before calling Denzel. She needs to implement her own plan, one that won't have anyone looking at her car with suspicion this time, and one that involves solving some of the Kade mystery once and for all.

Elara drives the car to the shopping center across town and parks near the back of the lot. Behind her, in her rearview, she can see the edge of the forest separating Mercy City from the next town over. That's where her night will begin.

Where it will end remains to be seen.

She pulls out her phone, leaning her head against the headrest of her bucket seat as she forces air to move slowly in and out of her lungs.

Dialing Denzel's number, her body shakes with nerves, knowing it's close to time. Will it hurt? Will Laith make it through the transition? All the thoughts swirling in her head nearly cloud her ability to form the appropriate words when Denzel picks up.

"Elara, are you ready for the full moon?" he asks.

She can't help but chuckle darkly. "I don't know if there's a good answer to that question, but I've left my house and parked my car near the southern woods. You said the pack's out and going to help, right?" she asks, hoping they'll be willing to go a little further to help her even though she's not an official member yet.

"Yes, just in case."

"Good. I have an idea, and I'm going to need some help, if one of your pack members might be willing." Elara chews her lip, glad Denzel can't see her face. She needs to be confident, but challenging her mentor and only possible friend in this new life isn't something she's too keen on. It could lead down a path of loneliness and confusion even worse than she's already been facing, but she has to be strong to get answers. That way, maybe she can put Kade behind her. Or even better, force him to respond to her.

"My pack isn't something for you to just use, but tell me the plan and I'll consider," Denzel growls. "Remember, we don't have a lot of time."

Elara glances up at the moon starting to dominate the sky. It reaches its apex in an hour, something she knows thanks to a handy tracking app on her phone. "You said there's some connection between a wolf and their sire which is why you think if Laith turns, he'll come to me no matter what. Would the same work the other way around? Would the sire sense the wolf they created?" she asks, holding her breath for the answer.

"Hmm," Denzel says thoughtfully. "It often works that way if the wolf sired is in danger. A sire can track a wolf even easier if he or she has turned them. So, in a way, it might work. What are you thinking, Elara?" he asks, caution lowering his tone.

"I'm going to need someone to injure me. I'm hoping my sire comes to my rescue." She draws in a steadying breath, wanting to do this, yet terrified at the idea. "I'll be gone, so whoever arrives will need to be detained. I'll learn who turned

me, but if I'm on my own somewhere else, we'll see who Laith runs to."

Will it be Kade who arrives at the location she was injured?

And will it be her who Laith searches for?

Elara rubs her brow. She's fast learning that having answers is as scary as not having answers.

There's silence on the line for a few moments, and Elara wonders if Denzel's hung up on her, offended by her plan. But then, "It's not a bad idea. I'll have two of my pack members meet you at the edge of the forest. Once you're bleeding, you need to run and get as far as possible while still maintaining your cover. And please, focus on tapping into the wolves' sight. It will help keep you in your head. Pack or not, we can't manage you, Laith, and...your sire all at once."

Elara shivers, afraid she won't be able to control herself even with all of them there to ground her, but she has to try. "Understood."

She pulls the keys out of the ignition and gets out of the car, slipping her purse into the trunk. Tucking the keys into her pocket, she hopes she'll be able to find it and her clothes again once she turns back into a human.

With her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes on the moon, she treks toward the edge of the forest, ducking under the tall trees and into the cover of darkness where she can wait for Denzel's pack members to arrive.

Leaning against a trunk, her body tingles as the moon becomes fuller and higher in the sky. She feels full of unused energy and longs to run. Instead, she channels that into tapping into her mind the way Denzel's described in the previous week leading up to the full moon. Their training had taken a turn, focusing on pack mentality and using the shared sight just for this moment.

She finds Denzel first, since they have a connection and sees that he's in the area surrounding Laith's large house

outside of town, far north from where she awaits her own transformation.

Luckily, Laith's parents are out of town like always, something she confirmed talking with him two days ago. Denzel's sight pans out, showing four other pack members with him, wolves of varying colors forming a perimeter around the house.

Elara breathes a sigh of relief knowing Laith will be kept under control.

Assuming he survives.

"Don't even question it. He'll live," she tells herself as the crunching of leaves alerts her to having company.

A man and a woman break through the trees, assessing her.

"So, you're the new wolf," the woman says, cocking her head to the side. She already looks more animal than human somehow with a squished nose and wild black hair.

"You'll want to go ahead and strip, leave your clothes here. You can find them later, but if this Kade guy is really who turned you then the more scent you leave behind, the better," the male says.

Elara blushes but knows there's likely nothing embarrassing or sexual about seeing a fellow wolf naked. All of them shed their clothes when turning.

She nods nervously and begins to strip, and they do the same. Cool air glides over her skin, raising goosebumps, quickly followed by a warm full-body blush. Behind her, she hears the others do the same, but for some reason, it only makes this more awkward. Right now, there are three naked people just hanging out in a forest, and she's one of them. She loops one hand over the opposite elbow, feeling foolish even as she covers her breasts.

But then an ache ripples through her spine, and she knows the change is coming. She also discovers she's looking forward to it. In fact, energy is coursing through her in the most amazing way.

The female wolf, older and more experienced, is a woman in one breath and a wolf in the next, hulking and brown. She rears up on her hind legs as Elara grits her teeth and comes down on her arm, scratching her and drawing blood.

Elara's fingernails grow into claws involuntarily in response to the pain, so she clamps her jaw tighter. Grimly, she watches her blood drip onto the ground, splattering in black splotches.

The shift begins for the male as well, just as fast as the woman. They stand side by side, watching and waiting.

Elara takes a step back and stumbles, conscious she's hovering between human and wolf. It has her heart thundering and stopping all at once. And then she's tipping over the edge. Parts stretch, others shrink. It feels wrong, yet infinitely right.

She howls in pain as her injured arm begins to elongate and turn into a wolf's forepaw. She shudders as bones rearrange and muscles reconnect. Within the space of heartbeat, the need to run is overwhelming. Clinging to the sight and her sanity, Elara bolts. Paws hit the ground, but she stumbles again, bones cracking and splitting the silence of the woods as her transformation completes.

It's a pale gray wolf who streaks between the trees.

Elara's eyesight shifts, the darkness clearer, the urge to run taking over again as the pain subsides. She looks up at the full moon and throws her head back, a howl climbing up her throat and piercing the night air.

She's an apex predator, and her body knows it. In fact, as a squirrel scuttles away, she realizes the forest knows it. Raw power pulses through her veins.

"Keep it together," she tells herself as she reaches for the sight again, slowing her run a bit as she makes her way to the opposite edge of the woods.

She stops beside a fallen tree, the soft scent of moss tickling her sensitive senses. A vision of the brown female wolf fills her mind, meaning she must be seeing this through the male's vision. The view snaps sharply to the right, stilling

as a movement catches his attention. Another wolf appears, so black it's barely discernible against the night. It stops, noting it's not alone, the edge of its lip lifting to reveal a white canine.

Yellow eyes glare as the wolf steps forward and sniffs at her clothes, left in a pile at the trunk of the tree only feet away from where her blood stains the ground.

Her sire arrived.

And somehow Elara knows with absolute certainty that the magnificent animal they're looking at is Kade.

Rooted to the spot, she blinks as she tries to process this. She suspected. Deep down, a part of her knew. But now that she has irrefutable proof, it still hits here like a meteorite.

Kade is the one who stole her normal life. He changed everything. Forever.

But why?

She snaps herself out of her stupor, remembering that her turning may have been only the beginning of a series of ripple effects. Laith would've shifted by now.

In this form, she finds it easier to flow from one alike mind to the next and easily finds Denzel as a whimpering white wolf flops out of a window only to be cornered by five other wolves.

Laith's alive!

That's something at least.

His yellow eyes look sad, and a pang of guilt hits her hard as she watches him look around, skittish, before the wolves back away, giving him space.

Just like Elara, they're waiting to see where he'll go. Elara is north. Kade is south.

Laith breaks into a run, heading east and the pack follows, no doubt also ensuring he doesn't head back to the city and alert humans to them. The shifters have done enough of

exposing the supernatural lately. Something they'll have to address eventually.

But Laith suddenly stops and sniffs the air, and Elara can tell he's running on pure instinct. Will he forget all this too, like she did the first time?

Slowly, but with growing force as he's feeling more and more sure, he turns north.

And then he's running again. Far faster than before. With far more certainty.

Suddenly, Elara feels it. That tether. The one between sire and turned wolf. She can't even describe it, but it tugs at her as she sees Laith skirting the edges of the forest, never once heading in the direction of Kade.

It's all the proof she needs. She's the one responsible for Laith.

And she's instantly afraid he's going to hate her for it.

ELARA



Elara freezes as the fear climbs up her spine, her throat, tries to swallow her mind. She turned Laith. She's a monster.

And he'll never forgive her.

One word pierces the tight, panicky feeling.

Kade.

He's the one who started this. And right now, he's on the other side of the forest, two of Denzel's wolves watching over him. This is her chance.

She hesitates, conscious she should stay and tell Laith the truth. He shouldn't come back into his human body alone. She remembers how terrifying that was. But Denzel steps forward, jutting his head to indicate the direction Kade is. He thinks she should get answers, too.

Silently, she sends them a request. *Take care of him.*

Not giving herself time to change her mind, Elara twists and breaks into a run, heading south.

With the moon still giving her extra energy, she takes off, heading for where she'll find her clothes, car keys, and Kade. She slows as she approaches it, realizing the minute she shifts, she'll be naked. A tremor ripples through her at the thought. Just then, the moon slides behind the thick clouds and Elara uses the flimsy opportunity. She morphs back in her human body, surprised at how seamless it felt.

She glances down and grimaces. There's dirt and grass caked to her hands and digging into her fingers and toes, leaves tangled in her hair. She doesn't know if she looks more like a nature goddess or some wild creature.

She's pretty sure it's column B.

Suddenly feeling vulnerable, she starts pulling her hair forward trying to cover as much of herself as she can. She gets a chill at the idea of putting her clothes back on in front of Kade, but she has to go one way or another. She wants her answers bad enough to deal with it.

Elara senses him and slows down, padding lightly on the forest ground. She feels Kade's eyes on her as she comes into the clearing, hiding her surprise to find he's human. And just as naked as she is. His jaw is set in hard lines, and she dares to meet his eyes only for a moment, watching him drag his gaze over her body before turning his head away.

Her body tingles with the way he was looking at her, the memory of their scorching kiss rising unbidden. She numbly reaches for her clothes and gets dressed quickly, smoothing out her hair the best she can.

"We need to talk," she says, turning back around to Kade, who still won't look at her.

Instead, a growl comes from deep within his throat. "I'm not saying anything with them here," he grits out, eyeing the two other wolves.

Elara nods to them to let them know they can leave. Not needing further prompting, they race away to join the rest of the pack in the direction Elara came from.

She lets her eyes drift over Kade and hates how her heart beats so fast looking at him, how the simple act draws a blush up her skin. At least the dark should hide that. "Don't you have clothes with you?" she asks softly, knowing he can hear the way her heart pounds because she can hear his too.

"Maybe I do, but I couldn't exactly get to them with those two twitching every time I breathed." He moves to the side, though doesn't take his eyes off of her.

She follows him, trying not to get too close, afraid she might do something rash. Whether that would be punching him or kissing him, she isn't quite sure. There's a pull there, the sire bond maybe, or maybe something else...

Either way, she knows better than to act on it. He turned her against her will, and he's in much more control as a wolf than she is. She doubts it was a simple mistake. He's been stalking her and refusing to talk. He's practically a monster.

Nerdy girls don't fall for monsters.

Kade finally breaks eye contact when he leans down to grab his shirt from a crumpled pile of clothes discarded a few yards away.

Elara doesn't glance away for a moment, telling herself it's because she's afraid he'll run again. Then, both of them fully dressed, they stare at each other for an eternity.

"You can't hide things from me anymore," Elara says, fracturing the heavy silence. "There's no point. This proves you turned me. You came when you thought I was hurt."

"Who knew trying to come to your rescue would get me in trouble," he scoffs darkly, his eyes glinting in the waning moonlight.

"No, you don't get to do that. I've given you plenty of opportunities to answer my questions," she says, her voice rising as she steps closer. "Instead, you stalk me and then run away like a coward when I get close. I'm done with this. I deserve the truth!" By the time she's finished, she's yelling, standing toe to toe.

Kade's chest rises and falls quickly as his nostrils flare with his own anger, though there's something else there too, like a buzzing in the air between them.

Elara takes a step back, wanting to avoid it.

"Yes, I turned you," he says softly. "I made you what you are. Are you happy now, Elara?"

The way her name sounds on his lips, even as he growls it out in frustration, makes her stomach heat up. But she shakes

her head, hot, angry tears stinging her eyes and threatening to spill over her cheeks.

“No, I’m not happy. You ruined my life, Kade!”

He flinches at her yelling, and Elara wonders if he actually feels remorse.

Kade shifts on his feet, his muscles rippling with the simple movement. “A war is coming. A war that will expose the supernatural to the world, and there’s only one way to stop it.”

Elara blinks, knowing the war he’s referring to—the one with the shifters, but how does that excuse anything?

He sighs, his shoulders seeming to settle an inch lower after. “I sensed a strange power in you, Elara. Turning you almost wasn’t a choice. It was...fated.”

“And the other animal attacks?” she demands, unwilling to acknowledge the sympathy trying to make its way into her heart. “What about the other people who died?”

His gaze drops. “They were supposed to turn, too. But they didn’t, and I don’t know why.” He glances down at his hands, lifting them palm up. “Their deaths are on my hands.”

Kade’s voice strains at his admission. Elara wants to reach out to him, to grab his hand, touch his face, comfort him and his vulnerable, crumpled heart. But she crosses her hands over her chest. She can’t give in to whatever this is. Kade has killed. He’s forever altered the trajectory of her life, whether she wanted him to or not.

Elara takes a step back. Then another. “I can’t trust you, Kade. Not after all you’ve done. I can tell you regret it, but I... just can’t.” She chokes out the last two words. Her insides scream at her in turmoil, not knowing whether to turn her back and never talk with him again or allow him to beg for her forgiveness and give it willingly.

Kade nods solemnly. “The smart thing to do is stay away from me.”

What the hell does that mean?

She shakes her head, planting her feet on the dirty ground. “Even if a war is coming, you had no right to turn me into something I didn’t want to be.” She draws in a steady breath. “I don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

It’s likely the biggest lie Elara’s ever told, but it’s for the best.

Kade opens his mouth to respond, but she puts a finger up to stop him. “And now I’ve turned poor Laith. Do you realize that’s two lives you’ve—”

“What?” Kade gasps, staggering back.

She frowns. “You heard me. The first night I shifted, I scratched Laith. We just confirmed it when *he* shifted for the first time.”

Kade takes another unsteady step backward. His face is pale in the darkness, his eyes wide. And wounded. Elara catches herself before she can take a step toward him. Even after everything, she still wants to comfort him? What is wrong with her?

Kade’s shoulders drop. His chin rises an inch. “For what it’s worth, three lives have been destroyed tonight.”

Elara opens her mouth to point out that wasn’t what she was going to say, but she quickly clamps it shut again. Maybe he’s right. Right now, it feels like her heart has been decimated.

She turns on her heel, the tears coming freely as the moon descends, indicating the night is almost over. On one of the most painful nights of her life. She dashes away a tear before it can fall. For some reason, knowing Kade could hear it land on the forest floor feels like an admission of how much she’s hurting.

She picks up the pace, heading back to her car and fighting every nerve in her body not to turn back around. Despite everything, walking away feels wrong.

Even though she finally knows the truth. Kade turned her.

And that a war is coming.

One she's determined they will never face together.



Ready for the next installment in the Keepers of Excalibur series? Check out [WOLF CHOSEN!](#)

<https://mybook.to/WolfChosen>

*In shadows deep, where moonlight gleams,
A curse unfolds in silent dreams.
Amid darkness' dance, the cursed shall rise,
To claim and vanquish an eternal prize.*

*In realms above, where shadows play,
The sword endures both night and day.
In stone its sheathed, a binding depth,
Only broken by a love that's death.*



**KEEPER
CHRONICLES**



WOLF CHOSEN



Elara thought the truth would do what it's supposed to—set her free. Yet knowing what she is and why spins her world into even greater turmoil.

She discovers echoes of a bloodline entwined with mythical tales, the true power of the enemy, and her pivotal role in the prophecy destined to save everyone she cares about.

Except everything that feels right is supposed to be wrong, including the undeniable pull to Kade. Amidst the shadows of secrets, hidden enemies and

unlikely allies, their love is more forbidden than ever.

With each day, a supernatural war draws closer. But Elara can't do it on her own. Who is the love fated to be by her side?

*Passion ignites, destinies collide, and Elara's journey takes an exhilarating leap into a realm where love is both a beacon and a curse. Lose yourself in the captivating paranormal romance, *Wolf Chosen*, today!*

[GRAB YOUR COPY HERE](#)

<https://mybook.to/WolfChosen>

THE KEEPERS-VERSE IS ALWAYS GROWING!

Exciting news! The Keeper Chronicles will continue to grow, with each new addition adding to its epicness. Each interlinked series will have you falling for unforgettable characters, being swept away by captivating romance and thrilling adventure, and re-visiting old friends (you'll discover all your favorites popping up when you least expect it!).

It's like your very own choose your own adventure! Where will you go next?

Keepers of the Chalice

A vampire. A huntress.

A cure that will change everything.

Check out Book 1, Vampire Unleashed, [HERE](#).

Keepers of Grail

The legendary Holy Grail is real.

Yet everything known about it is a lie.

Check out Book 1, Gates of Demons, [HERE](#)

Keepers of the Light

Angels and demons have battled for millennia.

Their inevitable war has begun.

Check out Book 1, Hidden Angel, [HERE](#).

<http://mybook.to/HiddenAngel>

ALSO BY TAMAR SLOAN

PRIME PROPHECY SERIES

He failed to shift like every one of his ancestors.

Until he met her.



KEEPERS OF THE GRAIL

The legendary Holy Grail is real.

Yet everything known about it is a lie.



KEEPERS OF THE CHALICE

A vampire. A huntress.

A cure that will change everything.



KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT

Angels and demons have battled for millennia.

Their inevitable war has begun.



KEEPERS OF EXCALIBUR

A fated love. A cursed wolf.

A supernatural war only they can stop.



DESTINED DEMIGODS

Love that defies the gods.

Powers that define destiny.



ELEMENTAL GAMES

Elemental powers. Deadly Games.

No escape.



THE SOVEREIGN CODE

Humans saved bees from extinction...and created the deadliest threat we've seen yet.



THE THAW CHRONICLES

Only the chosen shall breed.



ZODIAC GUARDIANS

Twelve teens. One task.

Save the Universe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tamar hasn't decided whether she's primarily a psychologist who loves writing, or a writer with a lifelong drive to make a difference. She must have been someone pretty awesome in a previous life (past life regression indicates a Care Bear), because she gets to do both. She divides her time between helping families and writing emotion driven YA stories set in amazing imaginary worlds that surprise even her.

The driving force for all of Tamar's writing is sharing and connecting. In truth, connecting with others is why she writes. She loves to hear from readers. Find her on all the usual social media channels or her website, www.tamarsloan.com where can download one of her books for free.

(Seriously, I LOVE hearing from you guys!)

