



HER PROTECTOR  
**BEARS**

LAURA WYLDE

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## MIRANDA POV

I can't wait to see my gorgeous soon-to-be husband, Brady Clover, I thought excitedly as I drove toward Lake Arrow where he was out fishing for the day. Just like he did every day. *Perhaps with this awesome picnic and the champagne I have packed, he will finally be ready to talk about setting a wedding date.*

It had become a bit of a joke between everyone who knew us. Not that anyone ever *really* got to know me and Brady for long, because his work always had us moving around the country like crazy, chasing the next best fishing spot. He told me that was one of the pluses of working for himself. He didn't need to report to anyone, so he could pick up and take off wherever the fish took him. It was fine... I mean, I didn't mind it too much. It made our lives adventurous. And his free spirit was what drew me to him in the first place, so I couldn't exactly be mad about it now, could I? Since we never struggled financially, I could only assume that he knew what he was doing. So I went along with it.

But just because he couldn't commit to one place for us to live, didn't mean he would never commit to me. It wasn't like a wedding was the biggest deal, because we already shared a six-year-old son. Timothy would always keep us together. But I had to admit, I was ready to swap the flashy diamond engagement ring for something simpler, like a wedding band.

I wanted to take that next step. The idea of being Mrs. Clover thrilled me to the core. I just wanted to be tethered to

him for the rest of my life. I couldn't wait for the world to know he was mine and I was his. That we were *us*.

I checked my watch, glad Brady and I were going to have a good few hours alone together before I had to pick up Timothy from school. It would give us the perfect chance for any deep conversations that needed to be had. Whatever they might be about.

Especially here—Lake Arrowhead was something else! Gorgeous, glittery water shining in the sun, mountains piercing the sky, and dark green trees adding a glorious peacefulness to the atmosphere. I could see why Brady particularly liked fishing here. It was so private, so intimate. There was a real feeling like the rest of the world didn't even exist. It was so remote, I started getting some naughty ideas.

What if I laid the picnic out on the grass, giving us plenty of space to roll around together? Outside, but hopefully where no one could see us. I liked the idea of it a lot. I couldn't contain the smile spreading across my face.

I climbed eagerly out of the car, glad Brady wasn't in sight for the moment so I could get all of this ready to really surprise him. I hoped he was going to love it. He had been stressed out recently—I could only assume the fishing wasn't going great for him—so I wanted to do my best to remind him that he still had Timothy and me no matter what.

Humming to myself, I soaked up the sun shine and the happiness of the atmosphere, feeling really positive about this. Life had gotten so complicated recently, so busy, it was going to be nice for us to take this time to be together, just the two of us.

When we first met, I had just graduated from college, and I was working part time in a coffee shop as I tried to plan my next move in life. It really felt in that moment that the world was my oyster and I could do whatever I wanted, *be* whatever I wanted.

Perhaps it was that hopefulness, shining out like a beacon, that drew the sexy elusive fisherman back into the coffee shop every single day. The people I worked with told me he only

came in for me, but I was too shy at the time to accept any kind of compliment. I hadn't exactly gone through college getting endless attention from guys. I kind of blended into the background, preferring to focus on my studies.

But Brady never gave up, and one day, he shocked me by kissing me over the counter in front of everyone. From that moment on, I was his, and it had been the best time of my life. Even all the moving around wasn't that much of a problem because I got to be with him.

Although, cool as I was with the free spirit, practically I didn't want it to last forever. Timothy was going to need to settle down somewhere soon to help him with school. That was something else I would have to discuss with Brady once we had a wedding date set.

A tight knot formed in my stomach. Talk of settling down made Brady think he wouldn't be able to chase the best fish all the time, but he was going to have to think about his family at some point...right? There had to be a part of him that was already well aware of that. I hoped.

I stepped back with a slight frown playing on my lips. Was this good enough? I really wanted this to be perfect, to show Brady just how much he meant to me.

Splashing, from the lake below the hill I was standing on, captured my attention. Excitement bloomed in my chest. It had to be Brady!

I spotted his boat and parted my lips to yell out to him, so he would know I had come to make his day better, but a weird feeling stopped me. I just watched and waited, a strange sense of anticipation and trepidation flowing through my veins.

What was he doing? Why did Brady look so...strange? It was almost like there was a dark aura surrounding him and it freaked me out to see it.

It took every ounce of will power I had not to scream as a shock of red hair flopped over the side of the boat. Did Brady have a woman in his boat with him? Was he using the secluded

nature of Lake Arrowhead to get kinky with someone who wasn't me?

I was in shock, and my knees buckled underneath me. How the hell could I have been so naïve, thinking Brady and I had this amazing relationship, planning a wedding, just for him to cheat? And what about Timothy? How could he do this to his son?

As I realized that my family was about to break up, or had already broken up, depending on how I wanted to view it, I couldn't breathe. It didn't seem to matter how much air I tried to suck into my lungs, it didn't make a difference. I couldn't stop feeling so horrendously dizzy.

Brady Clover had cheated on me. The world as I knew it had just turned upside down.

What the hell was I going to do now? Brady didn't like me having a job, which he said was because of the constant moving around, but I knew was a male pride thing, because he wanted to take care of *his woman*. But now that left me with very little money. Plus, I didn't really have anyone I was close to, so I was really alone. And now that this had happened, I was about to be even more alone.

"What the fuck?" I couldn't stop myself from muttering as Brady lifted the redhaired woman as if she weighed nothing, but it wasn't in the throes of passion. A bitter ball of bile lodged itself in the base of my throat as I noticed she wasn't interacting with him at all.

She was lifeless, her skin having no color to it. Holy shit. What the hell was Brady doing with a dead woman in his boat? And why was he stroking her cheeks like he had some kind of sick connection to her? I found myself backing away as a million questions flooded my brain. None of this made any sense; I couldn't make the pieces fit at all. But I was trying my hardest.

And then he tossed the lifeless body over the side of the boat and smirked to himself as he watched her sink. Like she meant nothing to him, like she was just a rock.



I did *not* know who Brady was, that much was clear.

It was also strikingly obvious that I needed to get the hell away from him, and *now*. If he could potentially murder a woman and toss her over the boat, there was no telling what he would do to me. No one was safe with a man like that.

Once I managed to wrench my gaze away from the scene of absolute horror unfolding in front of me, I ran back to my car without looking back. I didn't want to see him again, ever, not even to confirm that the sight I had just seen was true. My gut knew it was. I needed to get Timothy out of school and get out of here before Brady got to him. I wouldn't put it past that man to do *anything* now.

"Fuck," I muttered. My heart was beating so hard against my rib cage and I hoped I could keep from getting sick on the drive to Timothy. Nothing would keep me from rescuing my son. "Fucking hell."

How had I missed this? I raked my trembling fingers through my hair as I tried my best to work it out. I must have been so dumb and naïve. Who the hell lived with a killer and didn't know it?

I was struggling to see straight. The dizziness and confusion had my eyes all blurry. Or maybe that was the tears about to race down my cheeks. It felt like my heart was exploding in my chest. I wasn't sure it would ever beat normally again.

Why would he kill that poor woman? What the hell is wrong with him? Maybe the rumors about him were true. All of them. I hated that I had ignored them because I had stars in my eyes, but I was seeing clearly now. When we first started dating, there were whispers that he had been estranged from his bear pack because of his greed. He stole money from his own pack and betrayed them terribly, causing them to turn their backs on him completely. Stealing was *unheard* of in the shifter community, especially within one's pack. If that story was true, then it was understandable why he had been sent away.

I found it hard to believe at first though, because Brady never seemed to have any trouble with money. From what he told me, his job paid well, so I couldn't work out why he would do such a thing.

Brady explained it away, saying he chose to leave the pack, and I stupidly believed him, giving myself all the excuses in the world. I was young and in love, I thought I knew better. Basically, I thought that our love would grow to be so strong that I could tame him and keep him happy.

How wrong I was. That could not have been further from the truth. Now stealing and being estranged from the pack were the least of my worries...

"Oh my God." I clapped my hand over my mouth as something else struck me. Something I really did not want to think about. But how could I not? Not now that I knew the truth.

We always moved to small towns, lake towns, which I thought was for the fishing. But there was always an incident, she-wolves who ended up drowning in said lakes. We moved as soon as the news of a death broke. Brady always told me we needed to move because of the fish.

Fuck, now I knew all too different. I knew things I did *not* want to know.

Brady was killing people. Women. Innocent she-wolves.

*She-wolves like me!*

The man I thought I wanted to marry was a murderer. A serial killer. What the fuck was wrong with him? And what the fuck was wrong with me? How did I miss this?

I needed to get Timothy out of here before one or both of us ended up at the bottom of a lake. I didn't know where the hell I was going to go, what we would do, or how I would explain all of this to my son, but the practical side of things didn't matter right now. I would just take things one step at a time. The most important thing was keeping us alive.

We needed to run. Fast.

## COLE POV

The sun shone so hotly it burned my shoulders. Not that I minded the heat, it made the outdoors the best place in the world for someone like me. Someone who ached for freedom and open space, which could be found in abundance here in a national park. Vast, was the word often used to describe it, and that was a word I liked.

I wandered along one of the trails left for me to patrol, drinking in the gorgeous atmosphere. There was nothing better than the scent of the grass in the sun, as far as I was concerned. Especially when it was peaceful and only the sounds of animals and nature surrounded me.

“Cole?”

I let out a little groan. Just as I was settling in to the peace of the day, a call from the front desk came in on my radio, reminding me I wasn't just here to cruise the park. That this was my job these days. A very different job to the one I once had.

“We need ya. There is a hiker lost on one of your trails. To the east.”

Instantly, I snapped in to action. “Got it,” I called back through the radio.

Nothing else needed to be said, everyone knew that once a mission was passed on to me, I wouldn't stop until it was completed. Especially when someone was helpless and needed me. No one left behind, that was my motto.

I shook my body out and started to shift, allowing my animal to rise to the surface. There was something very relaxing about becoming my other self, the alpha bear who stood tall and always did what was right. There were many times when I felt more comfortable as a bear than as a human. Perhaps because I could relate better to others as an animal.

I liked going off of my instincts and senses, putting human thoughts on the back burner sometimes. My nose knew what to do before my brain even needed to tell it. I started sniffing the trail, trying to pick up any scents that should not have been there.

I wasn't on the right trail, but I was on the east side of the national park, so it didn't take long for me to pick up a scent that was laced with fear. The lost hiker, it had to be. I padded quickly on my paws, making my way across the park as fast as I could go.

*"Sergeant!"*

Oh God, I didn't want to hear that voice right now.

*"We can't leave him behind, we need to find him. He's in the flames somewhere."*

My blood ran cold as memories rolled in thick and fast. I thought my human thoughts were silenced in my bear form, but the faster I ran, the quicker they chased me. I thought I was getting much better at leaving my past as a Navy Seal behind, and that dreaded last mission, but here it was coming to haunt me yet again. A ghost I couldn't ever get rid of.

*"Tim, we need to get Tim. And Michael and Dan!"*

But the bombs kept dropping and the shots kept firing. I quickly became overwhelmed with the desperation of the situation, with the horror that crept through me because I knew that while I never wanted to leave anyone behind no matter what the situation was, if we went back in there, into enemy territory, I would lose more men. I couldn't handle that.

*"Sergeant, we need you to make a decision. Now."*

My eyes burned as I thought about the way my brain froze in that moment, fucking us all up. That was the moment I

knew my career in the armed forces was over. If I couldn't continue to lead, if I couldn't tell my men what needed to be done, then I was done.

Tim, Michael, and Dan were left behind on that day. Shot, presumed dead. All because I didn't know what to do in the heat of a horrible moment.

I would never be able to forgive myself for that, as long as I lived, which was why I needed to follow this trail of fear now to make sure I got this hiker rescued.

A whimper played on my ears, amping up the fear. I followed the sounds, the smells, the footprints in the mud. It didn't take me long to find the gentleman with a backpack firmly fixed to his back and a water bottle clutched between his fingers as he slumped down on a log, looking defeated and afraid. He was lost for sure.

“Oh God!” The guy jumped when he spotted me. I guess the sight of a giant brown bear looming toward him put him on edge, so I quickly shifted back to reassure him I wasn't a wild animal coming to tear him limb from limb. “Oh, are you the rescue?”

I shot him a grin and nodded, pushing all those horrible memories away. I did not want to think about what happened that day. I had a job to focus on now, one I knew I could do.

“Sure am, buddy. You're safe with me now. Let's get you back to the park entrance. Then we'll get you checked, make sure you are okay, and send you on your way.” I held up my hands to silence him because I already knew what he was going to say. The same thing that they always said. “I know, I know. You feel fine and you don't want to be looked at, but that's what we have to do.”

He pursed his lips and nodded, accepting what I told him. I blew out a breath of relief. With a bit of luck, things would get smoother from here on out.



IT HAD BEEN A LONG DAY, LONGER THAN I THOUGHT IT WAS going to be, and I couldn't wait to sit my ass down in my usual seat at Rovers Inn for my well-earned post-work drinks. This was a small town with a lot of the same characters involved in their normal routine, and I knew who I was about to see as I took my seat.

So I had to admit I was pretty surprised when I spotted someone new sitting in the seat next to me. We made eye contact, and I stared at her for a beat too long, my heart racing.

But that wasn't just because she was new, it was also because there was something so strikingly beautiful about her I could hardly catch my breath. She was absolutely stunning. Mind-blowingly so. Bright blonde hair that stood out in a crowd, kind green eyes that had a lot of emotion dancing behind them, and a smile that looked absolutely adorable on her sweet heart-shaped face.

It took every scrap of strength that I had to tear my gaze away from hers before I got lost in her eyes. Truth be told, we were probably only looking at one another for a second, but it felt like a lifetime. The effect she had on my body was unreal. It was almost as if all the organs in my body had been dead ever since I left the military, and one glance at her had them all sparking back to life in a very excited way.

"Hey there, Cole," the bartender, Angela, called out to me. "The usual?"

"Uh, yeah, sure." I swallowed hard, feeling a bit off, like my feet weren't quite touching the ground anymore. The foundation that my world had been built upon had been whipped away. How did one second have me knocked off my feet like this? It was wild!

I tried my hardest not to keep looking at her, but it was impossible. She had this magnetic quality about her that continually dragged my eyes her way no matter how much I tried to resist. Thank goodness she was no longer looking at me.

"Been one of those days, huh?" Angela asked me knowingly. "Summer season is when all the tourists come out

the woodwork and make it hard on you by getting lost.”

“You could put it that way...” I wasn’t giving her much, but I honestly couldn’t get my head on straight.

Angela tossed her head back and laughed. “Ah, so you’re going to be another one eyeing up the newbie, huh? This has been going on all day long.”

That caught my attention. “What do you mean? You know anything about her?”

“Only that her name is Miranda and she’s new here. She seems quiet. I don’t know how she’s coping with all the attention she’s getting.”

I spun on my chair to check her out again and saw a couple of skeezy local guys trying to flirt with her. It didn’t seem to matter how uninterested she looked, they weren’t giving up. I fucking hated guys like that. Like, just take a God damn hint already. I could feel my protective bear rising to the surface, wanting to save her from whatever those assholes were doing.

“She’s definitely got some drama going on,” Angela whispered dramatically. “She was getting a bunch of phone calls earlier, and they were making her very upset. I bet she’s a damsel in distress type, running away or something.”

God damn it, now my protective side was almost overwhelming me. I could hardly contain myself, the pressure was building up inside me so badly. I was pretty sure Angela could sense that, because she kept on talking, encouraging me.

“I definitely don’t think she’s going to be looking for attention from men if that’s the case. She isn’t going to be wanting a relationship, especially not from that sort of guy...”

I rose to my feet, my heart thundering in my ears as I stormed toward the table where the guys were sniffing around the new woman like dogs.

“Get out of here,” I growled angrily. My tone of voice meant business, and even the dumbest of idiots could get it. Both guys turned slowly to face me like they were going to snap back, until they caught the darkness in my expression.

“She doesn’t want you here, and neither do I. Get the hell out of here.”

“Actually, I was just going,” she said as she jumped to her feet. “I don’t want to cause any trouble or anything. I need to get home, so...”

“Then I will walk you to your car,” I insisted, not taking no for an answer. “You don’t want to bump in to any unsavory characters while you’re leaving.”

The guys knew I meant not to follow us or they wouldn’t leave in one piece. I didn’t trust them as far as I could throw them.

It wasn’t until we were outside the bar and on the way to her car that she spoke up again. “Thank you for that. I couldn’t seem to get rid of them with anything I said. I guess some guys don’t know how to take ‘I don’t want a relationship’ as an answer.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right about that one.”

“I’m Miranda, by the way. It’s nice to meet you. Nice to see a friendly face.”

“Cole.” I nodded in her direction. “I could say the same thing about you.”

That much was true. It had been a long time since someone made me smile like this. I wasn’t sure what it was about her. She just had this energy that burned off of her in endless waves, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

We stood by her car for a moment as pinkness stained her cheeks. I so wished I could fish around in her brain and see what was going on inside, but of course all I could really do was offer her a smile and hope she was happy now.

“Thank you again.”

She leaned up to kiss me on the cheek, to thank me once more, but I couldn’t stop myself. I let my playful side get the better of me. Without even thinking about what I was doing, I tilted my head to one side and caught her lips, just the edge of



them. But it was enough to have my heart exploding like a freaking firework. Holy shit, she really was something special.

“Can I see you again?” I asked, because I hadn’t wanted something this badly in a very long time. Even the feeling that this wasn’t going to go the way I wanted it to didn’t deter me. “Just for drinks or something?”

“Just for drinks.” She smiled and nodded. “Because this she-wolf doesn’t want to get involved in anything while my life is still very messy.” Miranda might have let out a little laugh, trying to play this off as a joke, but I could see there was a deeper meaning to those words. I learned so much from that one sentence. She was a wolf shifter, which got me tingling more than I thought it would, and she was running away from something. Or someone.

“Just for drinks,” I reassured her. “That sounds good.”

“Okay, great. Let me give you my number and we can arrange something later on.”

I handed her my phone, and as she typed in her digits, I could feel an intense energy burning between us. Something new and very thrilling.

As we parted ways and I watched her drive away, I felt my heart skip a few beats. There was something about Miranda that made me feel special. I couldn’t wait to see where our next date, even if it was only a friend date, led. I had a feeling that wouldn’t be the last time I spent time getting to know the beautiful new blonde in town.

## IVAN POV

I usually didn't mind working with private clients who had money to burn, even if their noses were stuck up in the air and I could sense them looking down on me like I was less than them. It was water off a duck's back. Being through what I had in life, seeing what I had seen, people like that didn't affect me.

But there was something about this asshole that really got to me. My skin crawled as he talked to me, I couldn't stand to even meet his eyes.

Unfortunately, he was a paying customer, so I was going to have to give this job my all no matter what. Because that was what I did, that was what made me so freaking successful running my private security detail firm. Because I would do whatever I needed to for that paycheck.

"So, you believe *all* your holiday rentals have been broken in to?" I asked as I glanced around the lake to see the gorgeous little homes this man rented out to people on vacation. "Has something of value been taken from every single one?"

"I can't be certain, but there seem to have been some items removed. To me, the inventory doesn't seem *quite* right." Mr. Thompson clicked his tongue with irritation. I wasn't sure if that was at me, or at the situation itself. "And they have definitely all had someone inside them who wasn't supposed to be there. I don't know what the intension was, and that makes it worse. I need to know if it's a criminal who wanted to steal the stuff to sell on, or if it's a business rival trying to

figure out my secrets to my success. I know it makes a lot of people angry that I'm doing so much better than they are, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Sure thing." I gritted my teeth, refusing to get worked up about why a rival business owner would do this. Or maybe they would, what the hell did I know? "Well, I will take a look now and let you know what I find. What scents I pick up on and what it means."

"Great..." He was already backing away from me. The idea of me shifting and becoming the dark bear everyone knew me to be was too much for him. Even if that was the very reason he hired me. I knew there was a reason I didn't like him. Well, another one. Anyone who couldn't stand animal shifters was prejudice for no reason. "I will let you get to it. You have my number, right? Call me if you need anything at all."

I brooded as I watched him walk back to his car and then drive away at the speed of light. It would have been laughable if I wasn't already so irritated. I could feel my nostrils flaring and my heart skipping a few beats, and not in a good way.

"Fucking asshole." My fists curled up into tight balls by my sides as I tried to cool down the intense anger rushing through my veins. It was a lot, but I could deal with it.

Once I felt like I was more in control of myself, I allowed myself to shift, letting my bear free. What was awesome about that was the way my emotions immediately shifted to something more animalistic and simple. I could deal with that a lot easier than human emotions.

I raced from rental to rental, noticing a strange scent in each one, but I lost track of it very quickly. Perhaps my nose wasn't as good as I thought, or maybe this person was used to covering their scent. Either way, my instincts told me it didn't belong in this place. I'd have to remember to search for the scent in town. Maybe he was right about his suspicions and this was some business rival or something. That would be pretty lame.

The more I looked at the homes, the more I realized the reason I felt a little on edge was because I was jealous. I wanted a home like this. Not a bunch of them, just one for myself. Something peaceful, by the lake, all calm.

But I would never confess that to anyone because it sounded too much like I was looking for domestic bliss. I had a reputation as a playboy, and I was more than happy for that to follow me around because that was easier. But that didn't change the fact that there was a part of me that did want more out of life.

If I wasn't in my bear form, I would have let out a deep sigh of frustration because I was at a bit of a cross roads in my life, and I honestly wasn't too sure which path I wanted to follow. I knew there was more out there, but making that decision and getting my hands on any of it was easier said than done.

I hated being stuck, but I wouldn't talk to anyone about it. It was something I needed to figure out on my own. Once I finished this mission.



DEON'S DINER WAS A STAPLE OF THE TOWN FOR A REASON, and it was because Deon was awesome, had a great laugh, and his food was great. Well, as great as a greasy diner could be. That was why I headed here as soon as I was done at the lake houses.

"Deon!" I cried out happily as I burst through the double doors with a smile on my face. "How are you? It has been far too long since I've had one of your bacon sandwiches."

Deon laughed good naturedly and mock saluted me. "I suppose you want a coffee and a milkshake with that, am I right? I know it's been a while, but I'm sure you haven't changed."

I winked and slipped into my usual seat at the counter. Thank goodness no one was in it. Even if I didn't come here much, I liked having a seat that was just for me. It made me

feel like I belonged here, which was not a sense I ever got anywhere else. I'd been through a lot in my life, and been many places because of that. The military was like that. Military personnel belonged everywhere, but somehow nowhere. There was no sense of home. Not like I got here.

“You know it. Tell me what’s going on, Deon. What have I been missing out on?”

I barely listened to the usual town gossip, even though I knew for sure this was the best place to get it. Everyone bared their soul to Deon, whether he wanted to hear it or not. I guess I just wasn't in the mood to take it all in right now. But having it in the background was nice. It gave me a chance to look around and see who else was here.

Just the usual suspects. Old Will, the ex-fisherman, who told haunting tales of the water, even if you weren't in the mood for them. Whether these tales were true or not was often up for debate. Patty and Selina were also here, drinking cup after cup of tea as they liked to do on their lunch break from their office just around the corner from here. Michael too. He was one of the boys who left Twin Lakes after high school with big dreams of conquering the world, but soon found the world a shitty place to be, so he came running back.

Then the diner door swung open, adding a new face to the mix.

My heart flip flopped wildly as I took in the stunning blonde with eyes so sparkly I was immediately drawn to her. I wanted to jump up to greet her, even though I had absolutely no idea who she was.

She was definitely new in town, and it had been a long time since there was a new face in Twin Lakes. I sucked in a breath and held it, unable to take my eyes off her. I was probably staring like a crazy person, but I couldn't help it.

“Oh, hey there.” At first I thought she was waving at Deon, but it quickly became obvious she was looking at me. Weird. The way she was smiling at me was really bright.

“Hi.” I waved awkwardly, just because I wasn’t expecting that. I needed to snap in to flirtatious mode and fast before she edged away from me. “How’s it going?”

“Good, thanks. I was just coming in to get some coffee before the rush gets the better of me. I have so much to do, as per usual...”

She took a seat beside me, and the warm energy burning off of her helped me relax. She was definitely one of those super friendly people who got along with anyone and everyone.

“Oh, nice. I’m just having a bite to eat in between assignments.”

Deon set my plate down in front of me, then took the woman’s order. Thankfully, he seemed to have met her before, and called her by name. Miranda. It suited her. Deon looked as starstruck as me as he grinned at her. Was that just because she was new, or was there something special about her that captivated us all?

“So, how has work been?” Miranda asked me. “Have you been busy today?”

“Oh yeah, always busy. You know how it is. Twin Lakes has a lot going on.”

She tossed her head back and let out a musical-sounding laugh that I found so infectious I couldn’t help but join in. She really was intoxicating.

“Well, I like the way it doesn’t have a lot going on. I think that’s the best thing about it. Places with lots of drama often suck me into that, and I don’t have the heart for it.”

I ran my eyes all over her face, trying to imagine this shining beauty in a city, but I really couldn’t see it. She didn’t have the hustle and bustle in her. I sensed her thriving in the fresh air of the countryside, a bit like me.

Perhaps it was just the way that my brain had been today, thinking about my own little piece of domestic bliss in a lake house, that had her sitting in the picture as well.

Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me? Who had I become today?

I couldn't stop watching her out the corner of my eye, enjoying the way she looked lost in a daydream for a moment, probably imagining a wonderful future just like I was. Although she had only just met me, some random guy in Deon's Diner, so I couldn't imagine I featured in any of her fantasies. I was on my own with that one.

"Anyway." Miranda took a couple sips of her coffee as she checked her watch. "I'm running a bit late. I better get going, but thank you again for everything." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, blanking any questions I might have had for her from my brain. "You're a super star. I will see you on Saturday night. Seven o'clock at the Trattoria, right? Looking forward to it already."

"Uh..."

"See ya!"

"Yeah, right... I will see you soon."

Whoa, did she just ask me on a date? Now that was hot as hell. I wasn't even about to question it, not that I was given a chance to do so anyway. She was out the door, and on her way to wherever she needed to be. But not without giving me a nice glimpse of her ass on the way out. She had curves for days, and a body which I hoped I could see more of over the weekend.

"Wow." I turned at the sound of Deon's voice to find his eyebrows wiggling suggestively. "That was pretty cool. Looks like you have a date this weekend, playboy."

People were going to find out about that because it had happened at Deon's, but I really didn't care. I was so thrilled that Miranda was so into me that she asked me out without even asking for my name. But she had obviously come from the city where things were faster paced, so I could go with the flow. I liked it a lot, and it only sparked new passion within me. I was already waiting impatiently for Saturday night to roll around already so I could see her again

“Looks like it.” I grinned back, unable to contain myself. “Let’s see how that goes.”

I tucked in to my lunch eagerly, relishing every bit of the bacon sandwich, no longer worrying about Mr. Thompson or anyone who decided to look down on me. Who gave a shit? Certainly not me, because I had a date lined up with the most captivating woman I had ever seen in Twin Lakes. Who knew this day was going to turn out so damn good? Maybe I wouldn’t have been so quick to complain if I knew things were going to go my way after all.



## SIMON POV

I inhaled deeply, soaking in all the calming scents as I stepped inside my apothecary store in the bright early morning sunshine, trying to prepare myself for another great day. Sometimes the smell of my shop saddened me because it brought back the feeling that I hadn't always done this alone. I tried my hardest not to think about my wife, Kat, dying in the horrific manner she did, murdered by a rogue wolf simply because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but every so often it was a knife to the chest.

The apothecary was her dream really. She was the one with all the spiritual knowledge and the ability to heal. As she spent our days together teaching me everything she knew, I never thought one day I would take over all of it.

Any time that bolt of sadness hit, I twisted it around into happiness instead. I knew that was what Kat would have wanted. As a ray of sunshine who brought joy to everyone's lives, the last thing she would have wanted was for me to be upset.

It was terrible that she died, but she also lived a wonderful life, so it was best for me to focus on that instead. That was why I kept the smiling picture of her on the wall in the shop, to keep her spirit alive always. I liked to have her beside me in one way or another, even if it wasn't in the way I wanted. After five years, it was still good to feel her presence and sense she was happy with the way I was living my life

“Morning, Kat.” I smiled up at her as I stretched my arms high. “I didn’t have enough time for yoga this morning, so my chakras are all out of whack. I don’t think it’ll be bad enough to have my whole day ruined though. We’ll see how it goes.”

I inhaled deeply once more, making sure to be more mindful with this breath, before I stepped behind the counter and started counting out the money in the register to make sure I had enough for the day. Although whether it was going to be a busy one or not, I couldn’t be sure.

Cara could come back for more lotion for her back pain. I knew that had been troubling her recently. And then there were the Thompsons who wanted to keep it under wraps that they liked a few herbs to help spice up their love life. As if it mattered if others knew. It was nothing to be ashamed of. Although I suppose in a small town like Twin Lakes, it was easy for gossip to spread and hard to dampen it down once more.

I looked up at the sound of the bell over the door ringing, wondering who was coming in this early in the morning. Even though I was always here early, I didn’t usually get many visitors until after midday, so this was a surprise. Even more so when I saw who it was.

The beautiful newbie in town. Miranda. I’d seen her around and heard a lot about her because she was the newest fascination. But I hadn’t yet had a chance to speak with her. I wondered what she could she need from my store.

“Hello there.” I smiled brightly at her, immediately getting a good vibe from her. “I’m Simon. How may I help you?” I stepped forward with my hand outstretched.

“Nice to meet you, Simon,” she replied taking my hand in her smaller, more delicate one. “I was wondering if you might be able to help me with something calming. Like...I don’t know, a soothing tea or something. Is that the sort of thing you’re able to do?”

I let out a little chuckle. “That’s what I specialize in. I have helped a lot of people with anxiety and things like that, so

whatever you're struggling with, I can find something for you."

"I don't know if it's anxiety." She sighed. "I'm just still adjusting to everything."

I offered her a seat in the café area set up in the corner of the store, another one of Kat's amazing ideas, while I boiled the tea. I watched Miranda out the corner of my eye for a moment, trying to gauge just how much she wanted to talk. I was pretty good at reading people, which was a massive help in this line of work, and I could tell Miranda had her walls up high and didn't want to let me in.

"So, how are you finding your new town?" I asked, starting a conversation to let her lead the way. I guess I would have to figure it out as we went along. "Do you like it?"

"Twin Lakes is great." I could sense a hesitation in her words, but it wasn't linked to the town. There was something else causing this angst within her. "I'm glad I'm here. Everyone has been friendly so far. It seems like a great place to be."

"I think so too. It truly is a great place to live. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

That was actually true. I could have moved after Kat died and started again somewhere without all the memories making my heart hurt, but I stayed because Twin Lakes was special.

Once I had the pot of chamomile tea prepared, I took it over to her and was hit with a smell I wasn't expecting. The scent of a wolf. A she-wolf.

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up when she smelled it too. "Hey! I'm from the Waning Moon pack."

"Regal Moon." This gave us something to bond over. "Wow, this is special. It's great to have a she-wolf in town."

As the smile spread across her face, I felt a deep pull between us. Something new and exciting. Attraction. Holy shit, I hadn't felt anything close to this level of attraction in a while now. It was deeper, more intense, perhaps because she was another wolf.

“Here, drink this,” I instructed as I slid the mug over to her. “But I’m going to make something for you to take home as well. Something I know will help.”

Now that I knew her scent, I knew there was something better I could create for her, something that could really relax her. That brought joy to my heart unlike anything else. I caught sight of Kat’s picture as I headed to the counter where all my supplies were, feeling her acceptance. She would like Miranda, I was sure of it. If Kat were still here, I could just imagine them sitting around the table together chatting eagerly and happily.

“So, you think you’re going to stay in Twin Lakes?” I asked eagerly, hoping she would say yes.

“I hope so, yeah,” Miranda nodded slowly. “It seems like a great place to settle down. From what I have heard, people leave but always come back, which says a lot.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s true. People usually do come back. Especially shifters like us. I think there is a real acceptance here that draws people back.”

I didn’t know where she had been before, but I hoped that was enough to twist her arm. I had a feeling her smiling face would be a win for Twin Lakes. She certainly couldn’t make anything worse, could she? Not when she was so gorgeous and sweet.

“That’s good. I would like that. It’s nice to be accepted. We have—I have moved around a lot.” I took note of the way she corrected herself quickly. I wondered who this “we” was, and if the other person had anything to do with her weird energy when she came in. But I couldn’t ask because it wasn’t for me to know if she didn’t want to tell me. “So it’s nice to think of somewhere as a little more permanent. I would like to call somewhere home forever.”

“Right, right.” I poured the concoction in to a glass bottle for her to take home and took it over to her. “I’m sure that will help you feel a lot happier, and I hope this helps you out too.”

“Oh, that smells good.” Miranda inhaled and almost melted under the scent. Good, that was the effect I wanted it to have on her. That meant it was going to assist her in feeling much better, which brought a warm glow to my chest. “Thank you for this. How much do I owe you? Let me just find my wallet; I know it’s here in my bag.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry. That’s a freebie. I just want you to try it and see how it makes you feel. If it does help, then let me know and I will make you some more.”

Anything to bring her back here. Anything to make sure she was around me some time soon. Actually, there were other things that we could maybe do together as well. It didn’t have to be in a dating capacity, just as friends to see how it went.

Although, as I got closer to Miranda and breathed her in, I wasn’t sure things would be able to just stay friendly. There was an intense, overwhelming feeling of chemistry between us.

“I do yoga on Sundays. Here, in the store.” I laughed as I glanced around. “I know it doesn’t look like there is room for it at the moment, but I always manage to make it work.”

“Like a yoga class?” she asked doubtfully.

“Oh, no, nothing so formal. It’s more just a space for yoga. Sometimes other people join me, sometimes I’m on my own, but I just wanted to let you know it’s happening in case it’s something you are interested in.”

She furrowed her eyebrows in deep thought, which had my heart hammering against my rib cage. Anticipation surged through my body, causing me to worry she was going to reject me. I wasn’t sure why, but I just knew if she said no, it would crush me.

“I do love yoga,” she finally drawled. “But I don’t know if I’m good enough at it. It’s been a while since I moved my body in that way. I don’t know if I’m flexible enough.”

“Hey, don’t you worry about that, I’m no good either. I just love the way it makes me feel.” I hoped that was enough to encourage her, and it seemed like it was.

“Yeah, okay, maybe I will. I’ll see what I have going on this Sunday. I don’t think I have anything, but I will see.”

That wasn’t a concrete answer yes or no, but it was better than nothing. I took that happily and nodded. I could just imagine how much I could get to know her at yoga. Especially if it was just me and her there. Usually, I looked forward to people coming to the store on Sunday for yoga, but this week would be different. There was only one face I wanted to see, and it was the one in front of me right now.

“Great. And how do you like the chamomile tea? Is it working?”

“It’s absolutely perfect, just what I needed. I’m feeling so much better. Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Our eyes connected and my heart raced and my stomach flipped over with excitement. The butterflies flapping in the pit of my stomach grew to the size of birds. My feet might as well not have been touching the floor I was so happy. I didn’t realize how long it had been since I felt like that until now, when it hit me like a sledge hammer.

This she-wolf could just be the woman I needed to have in my life. The person who could make me feel truly special. I almost wanted to say something to her, to let her know the effect that she was having on me, but I couldn’t quite find the words. I guess it was probably for the best, but I did wish I could say something to make her understand that she had impacted me in a way I wasn’t expecting.

It killed me when I heard the door swing open, bringing in another customer. Cara, coming for more back pain lotion. I had a feeling she’d be in today, just not this early. I wanted more time with Miranda.

But she was already looking at her watch and heading for the door, explaining that she needed to be somewhere else. I wasn’t going to get a chance to get to know her more today. As she vanished out of sight, taking that beautiful scent with her, I held on to the hope that I would get to see her on Sunday and

everything would be much better then. Because she was the most interesting person I had met in a very long time.

I focused my attention on Cara, but Miranda was still in the back of my mind, and I had a feeling she was going to be there for a very long time. At least until Sunday when we were, hopefully, back in the store back together working out and seeing what happened.

## MIRANDA POV

I stared over the top of my newspaper at Timothy, who was eating breakfast happily and smiling as he played with his toy. I was pretending to read the local news, but really I was checking that my son was okay. He seemed it, but I needed to be sure.

“So, Timothy, how was your first week at your new school?”

“Good. I made two new friends, Luke and Ben. I like them a lot.”

“Oh yeah?” That flooded me with relief. Because we had moved around so much for Brady and his “fishing”—which I was trying my best not to think about anymore now that I knew what that asshole was *really* up to—he struggled to make friends easily. I suppose there had to be a part of him that wondered if there was a point to making friends if we were going to be gone in a heartbeat.

But now that he knew we were going to be staying here for a while, it seemed that he had let his guard down and met some friends. Thank goodness. The more my son settled here, the happier I was going to be with everything.

He hadn’t asked about his father once. I hadn’t really said anything about why we were running off without Brady, but he just seemed to accept it. I thought it was weird at first, but as time passed, I realized Brady never really showed Timothy any love or attention. He was just there, not really in his life.



That was a shocking revelation for me. How the hell had I missed so many red flags when it came to the safety of my son? What did that say about me? That I was a complete idiot?

If I hadn't tried to organize that picnic, I never would have known who Brady was deep down and then he would have become my husband. That scared me more than anything else. To think that I almost got myself really trapped, totally unable to escape. I might have even gone on to be one of his victims one day. Another she-wolf at the bottom of a lake somewhere.

*Fuck, don't get caught up in that*, my brain screamed at me, and I automatically reached out for the soothing drink Simon had made for me. That man was a genius. The chamomile tea he made for me in the store was one thing, but this was something else. It was almost like it was created to suit me exactly. I wouldn't put it passed that man. He seemed to have a special talent that he was really humble about. It was so sweet.

Because Timothy and I were here now, in Twin Lakes, and there was nothing left to panic about. Brady wasn't going to be able to find me, I was sure of it.

I looked down at the newspaper and actually read the words in front of me. I couldn't help but be surprised when I noticed bad news. I didn't think Twin Lakes was the sort of place that could have bad news. It was so beautiful, so peaceful, and the people seemed extremely friendly. But no place was truly perfect, and I needed to know what was going on if I was going to live here.

There had been a string of burglaries near the lake. I wasn't sure why, but that made my heart race. Maybe because I knew what happened in lakes. At least when my ex-fiancé was around. I tried to read the article without thinking about my ex, but picturing someone sneaking around a lake and behaving like an asshole just brought me back to *that* horrible moment. Me, sitting on the mountainside, watching Brady, the man who had wrapped his arms around me so many times and made me feel loved when no one else could, throw a body into the lake as if she meant nothing. As if she were worthless.

I knew I would never recover from that, because how the hell could I? But if this could trigger me, then who knew how long I would really need to be okay again.

I shouldn't have been flirting with anyone, even if I knew it wouldn't go anywhere. First there was Cole, who I was supposed to be seeing tonight at dinner, who knew I didn't want a relationship, but who had kissed me anyway. And then there was Simon. There had been no outright flirtation with him, nor had he asked me out on a date, just to do some yoga with him, but I felt the surging energy between us anyway. There was something so much more there and I knew we both felt it.

I hadn't been here for a very long time, but I already felt like I'd dug myself a hole I wasn't going to be able to get out of. As I glanced over at Timothy and noted again how happy he was, I felt terrible because he loved it here. I wasn't going to allow myself to ruin a place he was really starting to see as home.

I would have to make sure I kept my distance from Cole and Simon, so they knew nothing could happen. And nothing *could* happen. Because I couldn't trust myself and my judgement anymore. Plus, I still had a lot of healing to do.



I GLANCED DOWN AT THE RED DRESS I'D DECIDED ON FOR dinner tonight, still unsure if this was the right thing for me to be wearing...or even doing. But I reminded myself it wasn't a date, just two friends going out for dinner.

"I think I'm going to cancel tonight," I muttered to myself. "I can't do this. This is stupid."

"No way, Mom." I jumped as Timothy's voice filled the room. "You look so nice. You have to go out. And Michelle is really fun, she has already played Snakes and Ladders with me."

I forced a smile on my lips because I didn't want my son to see how nervous I was. Michelle was a great girl. The

neighbor's daughter, who I was lucky enough to run into on my second day in Twin Lakes. She immediately offered up her babysitting duties should I need them. With her parents next door, I felt like I could really trust her with my boy. The fact that they instantly got along only made it so much better.

“Yeah, I know you guys are having fun. I'm just nervous.”

Timothy walked over to me and held my hand. The look he gave me was so sincere that I wanted to weep. “But, Mommy, if you're going to live here, you need to have friends too. I have Luke and Ben. I don't want you to be lonely.”

My heart sunk. Timothy really saw me in a way I wasn't expecting. He noticed that I was lonely. Did he know I had been that way for a while? I kneeled down so I could be eye level with him and tried to smile. It was getting harder and harder the more choked up I became.

“I'm not going to be lonely, sweetheart. Not when I have you.” I grabbed him and pulled him in for a hug. I so didn't want any of this to have a negative impact on him, but it seemed like I couldn't keep him out of it all. “You are my baby boy, and I will never be lonely with you by my side. I couldn't be because you're my whole world.”

“Mom,” he protested while wriggling away from me. “I'm not a baby anymore.”

I giggled, suddenly feeling a little lighter. “I know you aren't. But you are mine.”

Excited to get back to his games, Timothy took off running, calling out to Michelle as he went. I guess there was no way out of it now. He wanted to spend the evening with the babysitter, which meant I needed to get out of here. Even if my heart was freaking racing, I had to make it out. If anything, it would give me another side of this town to experience. I really did want to get to know it better.

I said my goodbyes and headed out, the cool evening air whipping around me as I walked. I had to admit there was something even more beautiful about Twin Lakes when it was bathed in an evening glow. The trees seemed to stand a little

taller, the houses glowed with more pride, the quaint, small town feel intensified in a wonderful way.

I loved it here, I really did. So much more than anywhere else we had ever been. I already felt a sense of belonging, of wanting to make the most of the town, and not just for my son, but for me too. I deserved to be somewhere I could be happy.

“...I know, at the lake. Isn't it crazy? Who would have thought...?”

I caught a portion of a conversation between teenage girls as I got closer to the restaurant. Intrigued, I slowed down and pretended to do a little window shopping so I could hear what else they had to say. They must have been talking about the lake house burglaries I read about this morning.

“The note is the worst part. *I'm here, bitch*. Imagine writing that on a dead body.”

I shook my head and picked up the pace again. They were talking about something else, I realized, not the burglaries. But that didn't stop a lump from lodging itself in the base of my throat, because what they were talking about was too close for comfort. Hearing the words “lake” and “body” in the same sentence had my brain going to a place I didn't want to linger. But what if it was Brady? Had he left a note on that body for me? I had no idea how he would have found me, but at this point, I wouldn't put anything passed him.



THE RESTAURANT WAS WELCOMING, AND THE WAITER couldn't stop smiling as he led me to the table where I was going to be meeting Cole tonight. It would have been enough to make the nerves ebb a little if they were only about Cole, but there was something more clinging to the atmosphere now. Whispered words that wouldn't stop affecting me.

*Lake... Body... Note...*

It wasn't just those teenage girls discussing it, it was everyone. All around the restaurant. It was enough to make me

run home again. The only reason I didn't was because I felt like I was being encased in ice, unable to make any rational decision either way. Probably because this was something I was scared of, so to have it coming to fruition was too much for me to bear.

It couldn't be true, could it? There couldn't be another dead body in the lake. Brady couldn't be killing women and chasing me down at the same time. It was just too stupid. Too much for anyone to handle. I'd escaped him, why would he come back?

Someone, maybe a waiter, brought me a drink. Cold water. I didn't think I even said thanks, I was so lost in my thoughts.

"Miranda, there you are. Good to see you."

I jumped at the sound of my name. I had all but forgotten I was meeting Cole here tonight. I had to admit that his warm smile helped ground me in reality a little bit. I rose to my feet and tried to force myself to grin right back. I knew it would look weird and strained, but I needed to make some effort. I didn't want Brady to ruin more of my life—even if he was here and killing again just to torment me.

"Cole, hi!" My voice came out strained, and I cleared throat before speaking again. "How are you?"

He furrowed his brows. "Cole, huh?"

All of a sudden, something strange happened. Which was saying something because today had been full of strange things. As Cole stood in front of me, he also started to walk toward the table in a lighter grey suit. Both Coles looked confused, which made me feel even more confused.

There were two of him, and I couldn't stop from looking from one to the other repeatedly. What the fuck was going on? What the hell was wrong with this town?

## COLE POV

“**W**hat the fuck are you doing here?” I barked at Ivan. I had been looking forward to this date all week long. What the fuck was he doing here trying to ruin it? There had always been a competitive edge to my relationship with my twin brother, but this was taking it a step too far. I hadn’t even seen him since meeting Miranda, so how could he know about tonight? And why would he want to do this to me? “Get out of here, Ivan.”

“Ivan?” Miranda whispered, the color leaving her cheeks. Oh great, now she was uncomfortable. Not the best way to start a date.

“I’m here for my date with Miranda.” Ivan jutted his chin out defiantly. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Red mist descended in front of my eyes. I couldn’t stop myself from grabbing Ivan by the shoulders and shoving him roughly, almost knocking him into the table behind him.

“Cole, fucking calm down.” Ivan rose up fast, trying to make himself look like a big man in front of Miranda. Not that it was going to work. Not a chance in hell. “I’m here for my date with Miranda. I don’t know why you’re here. You’re being crazy.”

Before I could speak up for myself, he swung his fist back and slammed it into my face. A burning heat surged through my cheek, adding to the red mist. I couldn’t stop myself from lashing out and attacking him just as hard. This anger came from such a place of disappointment that I couldn’t ignore it.

Meeting Miranda had been the highlight of my week, and I was so looking forward to having a great time with her tonight. For my fucking twin brother, of all people, to get in the way...it sucked.

Ivan and I were close, even if it didn't feel that as we fought in the middle of the restaurant, but not the way it seemed other twins were.

"Stop, stop." Miranda leapt up from her seat and stepped between us as best as she could without getting hurt. "Please don't do this. This is my fault. I'm the one who made a mistake."

*Mistake?* That was an icy cold word that made me turn to Miranda, only to see pain in her eyes. What did she mean? That the whole thing was a mistake? Or just this right now?

"It was you in the diner." She pointed to Ivan, her cheeks flaming red with humiliation. "I'm so sorry, I thought it was Cole. We knew each other from the bar and I just assumed—"

"Oh God." Now it was Ivan's turn to freak out. "I wondered why you were coming on to me so strongly. Now I know why. Because you thought I was him."

He met my eyes and we both blanched in humiliation. How had we let things get out of hand like that? I guess because despite the competition between us, we had never been mistaken for one another before. People in Twin Lakes knew us too well for that. They saw the differences without even trying, even in the way that we carried ourselves. In the military, we were stationed at completely different bases, so there was never an issue there. It was just poor Miranda who hadn't had the chance to get to know either of us enough. What the hell did we do now?

"Actually, if you wouldn't mind both taking a seat for a moment..."

It was only when I stopped drowning in anger and really listened to Miranda that I noticed her voice was trembling. She was afraid. Was that just because of me? Because of us and the

fight? I never should have lost my temper. It made me a real asshole.

“Sorry, Miranda.” I slid into one of the chairs, and my brother sat back down in his. “I didn’t mean—there isn’t any excuse for any of this. We shouldn’t have fought like that.”

“Yeah, no, that’s not...” She seemed sad all of a sudden.

After our little twin shit show, I wasn’t sure I could make her feel better again. The date had already gone down the drain, and I wasn’t sure there was anything I could do to claw it back.

“I just wondered if you guys had heard anything,” she swallowed hard, “about a body.”

“Oh...right.” I hung my head low. Here we were fighting like assholes and Miranda had a real issue here. Of course it was going to scare her to have these rumors circling around Twin Lakes when she had just moved here. “I heard about that. I don’t know if it’s true though. I haven’t seen any official reports on it or anything.”

“It’s true,” Ivan said grimly, making me cringe. I was trying to make Miranda feel a little calmer about everything, but he was much less tactful than me. “There aren’t any official reports, but I have been doing some investigating. A body was definitely found.”

Miranda’s eyes widened like saucers. “A woman’s body? A...a she-wolf?”

Ivan shrugged. “I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “I don’t have any details or anything like that. I just know that someone was found dead.”

Things like that just didn’t happen in Twin Lakes. Ever. It was a peaceful town, everyone got along for the most part, and murder was practically unheard of.

“I’m worried.” Miranda twisted her hands around in her lap, anxiety coming off her in waves. But then I remembered how she had confessed to me that she was a she-wolf. She had to be worried that she was in danger. Especially in a town



where she had just moved and she didn't know a soul. She didn't know if this was a safe place.

"I understand." I leaned forward and caught her gaze. "But you will be fine. If you want, we can look after you, so you don't need to worry about anyone coming for you."

I looked at Ivan, who was nodding. Miranda could actually be the person to bring us together if we let her. That would be awesome.

"No, it's more than that." This time it was Miranda who leaned in a little closer, so that she couldn't be overheard as she spoke. "There is a reason I'm here, and it's more than just wanting a fresh start or whatever everyone assumes about me. I'm actually...running."

"Running?" Ivan asked. "What do you mean?"

She couldn't look at either of us as she replied. "My fiancé. Ex-fiancé." The way she corrected herself made me very nervous. "He wasn't the man I thought he was. He's a...a violent man who I saw throwing the body of a she-wolf into a lake." A shudder tore down her spine at the memory. All I wanted to do was hug her tight, but I was frozen to the spot, shocked at what she was telling us. "Which made me realize that everywhere we had lived, a dead body was found in the lake just before we left."

"Whoa, really?" Ivan's eyebrows rose. "And now you're here..."

"But not with him," she insisted quickly. "As soon as I learned the truth about him, I ran away and brought my son, Timothy, with me so that we could be safe."

*Timothy... Tim.* Instantly, I was taken back to that horrible place where I lost my friends. Sickness rose up in my chest, and it took every bit of energy I had to not let it spill free. Fuck, this was a very complicated mess. But again, my protective side exploded free around Miranda. I just couldn't stop myself from worrying about her.

"But I'm terrified he's found me. Ivan, was there really a note?"

Ivan bit down on his bottom lip before speaking. “You mean *I’m here, bitch?*”

There were tears in Miranda’s eyes as she nodded. “Yes, because now I’m thinking that must be for me. He has to know I was there that day. At Lake Arrowhead. That I saw him. I left our picnic behind when I ran away in a hurry. He might have even seen my car driving off, I don’t know. I was just trying to get Timothy away from him.”

Every time she said her son’s name it was like another dagger to the heart. But there was also a small voice in the back of my brain wondering if this could be some kind of redemption for me. If this was a Timothy I could actually save from the danger.

“If you think this could be about you, then we need to go to the police right away,” Ivan insisted, thankfully being the one of us who could think straight. Because my head was all over the place. “We need to give them a chance to solve this murder. Especially if this guy is a serial killer. We have to get him behind bars where he belongs.”

Miranda slumped her head forward and rested it in her hands. It wasn’t long before her shoulders started shaking with tears. Poor Miranda. She did not deserve to be in this situation. This date could not have gone any worse if it tried. But I wasn’t mad about it anymore, I just wanted to envelop her in a warm bear hug.

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I rose up from my seat and threw an arm over her shoulder, hoping I could at least offer her some comfort. Even if it wasn’t much. She didn’t throw me off, which was at least a sign that she didn’t hate my guts. Good.

“Listen, Miranda, I think we should go to the police right now,” Ivan continued carefully. “Because the more time they have on this case, the better chance they have of solving it. I know it might be a bit of an emotional time at the moment, but we need to try. Especially because I think it might be linked to the burglaries I have been working on at the lake. If I can tell the cops what I have figured out—”

“Right now?” Miranda murmured without lifting her head. I felt so bad for her, I rubbed her neck, hoping I could do something for her.

“You want him gone, don’t you?” Ivan pushed. “If he is locked up, then you’ll be safe. That bullshit note is troubling. I don’t like the look of it at all.”

“And Timothy,” she murmured, nodding to herself. “He has to be the most important person to me right now. I don’t think Brady will go after his own son because he didn’t care much about him when we were together, so I’m pretty sure I am the target, but I need to keep him safe.”

She sucked in a couple of deep breaths and eventually lifted her head and nodded. “Okay, let’s do this. Let’s go to the police, because if this *is* him, then he needs to be stopped. I can’t stand the thought of him murdering other women. I already feel like this one is my fault.”

“You do?” I asked, shocked to my very core. “Why would you think that?”

“Because I ran,” she said sadly. “I was so scared, I didn’t even think about going to the police. I could have saved her life, whoever she was.”

“Miranda, you could have been his next victim. No one would blame you for running away. No one. You can’t be blamed for a murderous scum bag.”

There was a lot more I wanted to say about this ex-fiancé of hers, but I wasn’t sure it was a good time to do so. It sounded to me like a trauma bond had been created, and that wasn’t something that would sever right away. Until she said more herself about the situation, I had to keep my mouth shut.

“I’m an idiot,” she wailed. “For all of this. I feel so stupid. I hate it.”

I rubbed her shoulder, but I wasn’t sure it was helping. I was starting to think Ivan was actually being better in this situation. I wasn’t going to step aside and give up on Miranda, but I could also see why she wasn’t interested in a relationship

at the moment. She had to get over her old one. I could wait for her; I knew she was worth it.

“You have an in with the chief of police, right?” I asked Ivan. “So why don’t you take Miranda there now and get this report done. Like you said, the sooner the better.”

Miranda met my eyes questioningly and I nodded.

“Okay,” Ivan agreed carefully. “Let’s go.”

It made my heart a little sad to know I was about to be left out of this one, but it was what was right for Miranda, and right now she was all I cared about. Once all this was taken care of, I would prove to her that I could show her the world.

## IVAN POV

**M**iranda didn't say a word as I drove her to the police station, not that I could blame her. What the hell could she have to say after all of that? My mind reeled with it all as I tried to come to terms with it, process it somehow.

The date I had been all smug about all week long was actually some big mistake. An embarrassing error that we couldn't come back from no matter how hard we tried. That stung. She thought she was going out with Cole, and I just didn't exist in her head. As soon as she called me by my twin brother's name, my blood went cold and I knew I was in trouble. But then it only got worse.

"Sorry for the scuffle," I said awkwardly to break the tension somewhat. "It can get a bit heated with between Cole and me sometimes. We're both just passionate and hot heads. But it never means anything. I know some people find it odd though."

"It was a bit much," she admitted weakly. "But I can see how much you two love one another. You must have a really close bond."

"Hmm, deep down," I admitted honestly. "But not so much on the surface. We're a bit competitive and on edge around one another. I don't really know why, we just have this weird energy. But there is definitely a deep connection."

Miranda nodded as if she understood this, but she couldn't possibly have a clue, not really. I found it weird myself, and I was in the middle of it, so I knew she had to think it was

strange as well. But I didn't want to get any deeper into it because I really couldn't explain it. It was as if there was something undiscovered in our sibling relationship that would only come to light later on. If only we could be patient and wait until we understood it.

But Cole wasn't exactly known for his patience, and neither was I, so it was going to be a long road until we got there. Wherever *there* was.

"Okay, here we are." Thankfully, there was no need to discuss this further because we had arrived at our destination. It was time to focus on what was really haunting Miranda—her ex-fiancé. "Are you ready for this?"

"Not really," she confessed with a weak smile. "But like you said, I have to do this. The sooner I get the information to the police, the better chance they will have of finding Brady."

"You really think this might all be linked to him?"

She offered me a weak one-shouldered shrug. "I don't know, but I do know what he's capable of, and he really does need to be behind bars so that everyone can be safe." There was a real seriousness to her words that showed she really did think the man she thought she loved was capable of doing something so heinous. She was about to put herself more at risk to save others. She was brave, truly impressive woman.

"Want me to hold your hand?" I half joked as we got out of the car.

"Can we link arms?"

*Oh!* She actually did want to hold on to me. That was nice. I offered her my arm and she took it eagerly. I had started to think that I only imagined the chemistry between us because I so badly wanted it to be there and while Miranda thought I was someone else. But it was still here. Still strong.

This probably wasn't the time or place to really be thinking about that, when I knew what was going on in her life, but I just couldn't help myself. What did it mean? She was on a date tonight, whoever she thought that she was going out with, so that was a step in the right direction.

“Ivan, you’re back again?” Owain, the chief of police, said as Miranda and I walked in, pulling me from my thoughts. “I thought you had to rush out of here after dropping off the finger prints to get to your big date...” His words trailed off when he spotted Miranda on my arm. Thank God, because I didn’t need to be even more humiliated by the foolish mistake I’d made tonight. As his face turned a funny shade of ashen, I shot him a crooked smile. No good date ended at the police station. Everyone knew that much.

“We just wanted to have a little talk with you if you have the time.”

Owain could tell by the intense look in my eye that I was being deadly serious. Thank goodness we had worked together a lot in the past. It meant we could communicate without words in a much more effective manner.

“Is this something we need to go in my office for?”

I nodded.

“Okay, follow me.”

I could feel Miranda trembling as we walked down the hallway. She probably didn’t want to do any of this for fear it might bring more danger her way. But I was confident this was the best way to handle it all. For herself and her son.

My twin brother and I might have struggled to agree on things, but I was pretty sure that neither of us was going to argue about protecting Miranda. She needed it, and we both clearly liked her enough to care. We would make sure she was fine. Together.



“DO YOU THINK THE CHIEF OWAIN TOOK ME SERIOUSLY?” Miranda asked as we climbed back into my car a little while later, much more emotionally drained than we were before. “I couldn’t tell if he was really listening to what I was saying about Brady...”

“Trust me, he was taking you seriously,” I did my best to reassure her. “He knows I wouldn’t have brought you in if it wasn’t something to be really worried about.”

She sighed deeply and rested her head on my shoulder like it belonged there. I couldn’t help but feel like it did. There was something so perfect about the way she fit me.

“I will take you home now. I’m sure you need to get back. It’s been a long day.”

She looked up at me gratefully. “I do want to check in on Timothy.”

I knew Miranda had been in constant contact with the babysitter, so there weren’t any issues with her son, but it was still a bit of a nerve-wracking drive. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how horrible it would be if he wasn’t okay. Poor Miranda was shaken up enough.

“Thank you for being so kind tonight,” she suddenly said. “I know I messed up by inviting both you and Cole out to dinner, I just had no idea you were twins. I’m very embarrassed about it all.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, immediately reassuring her. “It’s not an issue, and you aren’t to blame at all. When we met in the diner, I should have guessed you weren’t talking about me. I was just so...” I paused for just a moment, before deciding that honesty was the best policy. “Blinded by you.”

“You were?” There was a note of joy in her tone that I liked a lot.

“Oh, absolutely. You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

The atmosphere thickened around us, but the silence wasn’t awkward. I could sense Miranda rolling my words around in her head. I guess that must have been what emboldened me to ask a really hard question.

“I have to ask you, Miranda, who would you have chosen to go out on a date with had you known Cole and I were twins? Who do you like best?”



That sucked the air out of my car. Shit, that might have been a bit much. I didn't mean to take things too far. But I couldn't take the words back no matter how much I wanted to.

"I...I don't know," she finally whispered back. "I mean, I met Cole in the bar and he saved me from some creeps, which is how the whole date idea came up. Although I did tell him at the time that my life was complicated, so I wasn't looking for a relationship or anything like that. Something I'm sure he better understands now."

I nodded despite the fact that I knew it wouldn't trouble my brother. If he had his eyes set on someone, he would stop at nothing until he at least got a date to see if there was a spark there. What a shame that we both had our eye on the same woman.

"But you, Ivan, have been so kind to me tonight. You have looked after me and I really do appreciate it. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm not familiar enough with either of you to make a snap decision like that."

My disappointment sunk me for only a second. This wasn't something to be sad about, this was an opportunity. "Well, you have plenty of time to get to know us both more."

"I do?" Her eyes twinkled with delight. "Even knowing how complex everything is?"

I gave her a playful wink. "Nothing is too complicated for me."

I pulled into her driveway and watched as she bit down on her bottom lip for a moment. The cogs in her brain were spinning wildly, I could almost hear them.

"You know, tonight was kinda ruined," she finally declared. "And I really do want to get to know you a little better. Did you want to come inside? Have a drink with me or something?"

I nodded eagerly. No way in hell was I going to pass up an opportunity like this. I climbed out of the car and followed her to the front door. The only time awkwardness overcame me

was when Miranda checked on her son and then sent the babysitter home for the night.

I knew that kid, she lived next door, and she knew me too, so the gossip would likely spread like wildfire through the town. It would reach Cole before I could tell him myself, but I wasn't going to allow him to get in the middle of this. I really thought that Miranda was special.

She led me into the kitchen quietly and poured us both a drink, but by this point the room was drenched with lust. The night had taken another crazy turn and I got the impression that neither of us were thirsty for something to drink. Miranda might have opened up her heart to me and let me know that her life was too insane for her to think about something serious, but the way that she was looking up at me through her eyelashes let me know she wasn't worried about blurring any lines tonight.

My heart pounded, my mouth ran dry, and my whole body lit up with the thrill. All I wanted to do ever since I first saw Miranda in Deon's Diner was get my hands on her, and now it looked like she wanted that too. I wasn't here to make her life worse, only better.

By the time we'd closed the gap between us, the magnetic pull yanking us together was too strong for us to resist. Temptation got the better of us. We crashed together, our lips meeting in the middle, causing fireworks to explode between us. Tasting Miranda was even better than I expected.

The kiss quickly turned hot and heavy. It was as if we had been trying to keep our hands off of one another all evening and now we just needed to claim what was ours. My hands knotted in her hair, and Miranda groaned in ecstasy as she clutched my shirt, rolling her hips against me. I knew she wanted more from me, just as I did her. But I was going to be patient. My rock-hard cock could wait until the timing was better.

But that didn't prevent my eager fingers from slowly trailing down her body as she leaned against her refrigerator to keep her upright. Her gasps of pleasure as I traced my fingers

over the tops of her soft thighs spurred me on, and I tugged her soaking wet panties to one side so I could finally feel her. Miranda was fucking phenomenal.

She was so hot and wet, all for me. I buried my face in her neck and hair, inhaling every delicious inch of her scent as I finally plunged my fingers deep within her. Miranda's back arched, she cried out with pleasure as I pierced her. I could sense the pressure within her, guiding me exactly she wanted to be touched, the way she wanted me to thumb her clit to bring her to the peak of her orgasm, the way she needed to be held as I kept her at the edge so she could savor the bliss for just a couple of seconds, before pushing her over and into heaven. Experiencing what I was sure had to be a much-needed release.

We had a connection, and in the heat of the moment, I could really feel that. I hoped that through the throes of pleasure, she could sense it too.

The way she started kissing me frantically in post-orgasmic bliss suggested as much, but I was trying my hardest not to get too carried away. Just because I knew how to touch her, didn't mean she was going to fall in love with me. Yet. I wasn't the only man in her eye line, and I couldn't forget that.

Although I was starting to feel like the only man who could win.

## SIMON POV

I checked my watch for what felt like the hundredth time, trying not to get too caught up in whether she was going to turn up or not. Even though deep down I knew my happiness depended entirely on Miranda coming to yoga.

We never confirmed it, and I hadn't seen her since that very first time she came into the apothecary for her chamomile tea, so there was every chance she had forgotten. But I had the store set up just in case, and I couldn't help but wait with heavy expectations on my shoulders. It was so much that I couldn't even bear to look at Kat. If my wife were here, she would be laughing at me for being so stupid. I could almost sense her doing so now.

"Hello?" I heard her soft voice just after the ding of the door, and my heart instantly leapt into my throat. "Simon, are you here? Sorry if I'm late..."

The ray of sunshine that was Miranda entered my store and immediately settled the anxiety swirling within me. She was as useful as any of the concoctions I brewed here.

"Ah, Miranda, it's so nice to see you."

"I have so much to thank you for, Simon," she declared as she spread out her yoga mat on the floor in the space I had created for us. "That tea you made me to take home was perfection. I will definitely need some more of it, although I insist on paying this time."

I grinned. How could I not with a compliment like that being thrown my way? "I'm glad to hear it. Once we finish our

stretches, I will brew you up some more. You certainly seem a lot more balanced today.”

I watched her inhale deeply, filling her lungs, before blowing out a breath of relief. “Well, it has been a crazy week, so I’m glad to see that I at least look calm.”

My lips turned down in to a frown. “Yeah, it hasn’t been a great week for anyone in town, really. Not the best time for you to try to get used to Twin Lakes. It really isn’t always like this. I usually think the police don’t have anything to do, but with the robberies and the murder, it’s been a bad time. I don’t know what is going on at the moment.”

It had been very troubling. I didn’t like drama, it never brought anything good, and I hoped it wasn’t so much that it sent Miranda packing.

“That’s why I need this yoga session more than you know,” she said with an awkward laugh. “My son, Timothy, has always struggled to make friends before we moved here. But he is playing at a friend’s house this morning, so I figured it was a good time for me to get out of the house and relax.”

She didn’t mention her son when she was here before, but I could see her being a bad ass mother who would do absolutely anything for her child, no matter what it took, to make sure her son was safe and happy. Not the easiest thing to do right now.

“Well, let’s get started, then. Get those muscles stretched out so you can be even more balanced.”

“Perfect.” She smiled and nodded. “Thanks so much, Simon.”

I led us through a nice flow, but it was a little hard for me to focus with her gorgeous curves moving easily in the most flexible of ways. She was intoxicating. Tree, warrior, snake... she moved easily through the positions, like it was as natural to her as breathing. I was impressed. This was a yoga session that certainly had my heart racing.

“That was amazing,” she said once we were done, a big, beaming smile on her face now. “I really enjoyed that. We

should do it more often.”

“For sure.” It was hard for me to play it cool and to keep my eagerness inside, but I didn’t get the impression that Miranda minded. She just seemed to like me for who I was. “I enjoyed that as well. But now I have your tea to brew, if you have the time?”

I didn’t want to make her late to pick up her son, but as Miranda took a seat and lazily stretched herself out, the wolf within her satisfied, I knew we had time. Time I was very keen to use to my advantage to get to know her at last.

“So, Miranda, how are things in Twin Lakes for you? Aside from all the horrible things that have popped up, of course.”

She furrowed her brows in confusion. Oops, I didn’t mean for her to start thinking about the negative stuff going on in town. Guilt flowed through me as I racked my brain for a way to make it better.

“I really like Twin Lakes,” she cautiously replied before I could change the subject. “And I know my son does as well. But I’m worried about everything happening. I will admit it makes me want to move somewhere else to escape it. But then I keep thinking about danger being everywhere. There isn’t any way to escape it in this world, is there? It’s just one of those inevitable things.”

My eyes drifted to my picture of Kat. I understood that better than anyone. “It’s true, but that’s why we need to make sure we embrace every moment of life.”

I poured Miranda a cup of tea and bottled up the rest for her to take home. “So, have you been dating in Twin Lakes?” I asked as I handed her the drink.

“Why, have you heard something?” she said with a laugh. “I know what small towns are like.”

“I hear all sorts of things,” I replied with a shrug, trying to stifle my smile. “But I don’t believe anything until I hear it directly from the source.”

Rumor had it she had accidentally scheduled a date with the twins, Cole and Ivan, and that had caused a bit of a scene at the restaurant. I would have loved to have seen that in person. I could just imagine the twins getting in to a scuffle. It might have only happened the night before, but she was right, gossip was wildfire in a small town like Twin Lakes. There was no controlling it, and it often got out of hand, bending the truth to make things more exciting.

“Well, I’m going to guess you heard about Cole and Ivan, then.”

I nodded. “How did things end up? Were you okay?”

Her cheeks reddened, which told me there was a deeper story there. I expected a twist of jealousy to make an appearance in my gut because I had a crush on Miranda too, but it didn’t happen. I wasn’t a jealous wolf by nature, we never really were, but I thought I might be because of the spark Miranda had ignited within me. I thought this might put the flame out, but somehow it only made it shine brighter.

“It turned out fine,” she finally admitted. “It was a nice night.”

I found myself mesmerized by the way she started to rub her shoulder. It was such a simple act, but because she was so stunning, it was erotic as all hell. My hands itched to take over, but I wasn’t sure I was allowed to do so. I had to wait for her to ask, to give me consent to go anywhere near her. The last thing I wanted to do was push her away.

“Hey, you don’t have anything for tight shoulders, do you?”

It was like she could read my mind! I leapt up from my seat and raced over to the shelves to grab the perfect concoction for her. “This will do wonders. Do you want me to take over?”

“Are you offering me a massage?” She cocked a knowing eyebrow. “Because that is not an offer I will turn down. I’m sure you’re an expert with your hands.”

I couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a double entendre, but it sure as hell came off that way. A shiver of anticipation raced down my spine as she angled her back toward me. Holy shit, she was hot as hell. Absolutely beautiful, and I couldn't stop myself from salivating with need before I even touched her.

Brushing my hands over her skin was utterly electrifying. I was drenched in desire, struggling to breathe, but I knew I had to keep on going. For her.

"Wow, you really are good at this," she murmured, rolling her head back, her eyes sliding closed with pleasure. My heart damn near stopped beating as I caught a glimpse of her stunning angelic face. "Oh my God, Simon, this feels amazing."

Pleasure swelled in my chest. Just with her words alone she was sending me spiraling toward the edge. Especially with the way my name sounded on her tongue. Fucking hell, that was seduction personified.

I could see my hands trembling with need and desire. What the hell was happening to me? I was on the edge, my wolf wanted to burst to the surface, to claim this woman, and it was so hard to remember this was just a massage. I was just helping Miranda with a sore neck.

"Mmm, Simon." It didn't help that she seemed to want more from me too. She angled her head toward me, looking up at me expectantly. "God, you're fingers..."

I couldn't take it any longer. I needed so much more from her, and even though it was probably impolite for me to do so, I dipped my head down and swept her up in a kiss. A kiss so delicious it somehow managed to surpass all my expectations.

With that, we gave up the pretense of a massage and she spun around to kiss me harder. Need and desire rocked through me as she rose to her feet and crashed that beautiful body of hers up against mine. I held her tight to me, and she responded enthusiastically.



Her wolf was coming to the surface also, her need primal and animalistic. We ran on instincts when we were like this, which became very obvious as the clothing between us was ripped away. Who knew where the hell it was being tossed, and who cared?

The more of Miranda's body that I got to see, the more my pulse pounded and throbbed. I knew that if I didn't have Miranda soon, I was going to die. Her fingers curled around my thick erection, stroking me, and I could erupt at any moment.

"Fuck," I grunted as I lifted her up onto the table, spreading her legs for me. "You drive me wild, Miranda."

Her scent was so intoxicating, I wished I could taste absolutely every inch of her, but impatience claimed my wolf. I didn't have the power to control myself the way I wanted. I needed her so badly it actually ached deep in the core of my being.

I held her close to me, resting her head on my chest, as I pushed my way into her, inch by inch, moaning with ecstasy as I did. This connection was intense and overwhelming. I could sense Miranda acting on the same incredible sensations. Her wolf was as free as mine.

The sound of our bodies clapping together echoed through the store. Her body was stunning, her legs wrapped around my waist was phenomenal, and the feel of her lips on mine had me soaring into fucking space.

It had been far too long since I'd felt like this. Since my heart had exploded in such a way. I rested my forehead against Miranda's so I could stare deep into her eyes, to see the pleasure as it ricocheted through her. Seeing her on the edge and knowing she was about to tip over into the endless abyss of orgasm made it damn near impossible for me to contain myself. The shudder started at my toes, curling them under, then stiffened up my thighs, and tickled the pit of my belly. I couldn't stop from repeating Miranda's name over and over again like a prayer as eventually we reached the peak together, screaming out as we tumbled head first into desire, all while

clinging on to one another as if we were the only people left on the planet. Truth be told, that was how it felt. When I was around Miranda, no one else in the world mattered. I could only see her.

“Wow,” she whispered breathlessly as we leaned into one another, catching our breath together. “That was amazing, Simon. You are amazing.”

I grabbed her cheeks and pulled her in for another kiss, needing to savor them for a couple of seconds longer. She eagerly kissed me back with a hunger in her matching my own. Our wolves twisted around one another and held each other in a way only wolf shifters could understand.

When we pulled apart, staring into one another’s eyes, I wasn’t sure what was going to happen next, but this truly felt incredible. This moment of sheer, unadulterated joy was worth anything that might come afterward. I didn’t want this moment to end.

## COLE POV

**T**here was something in Ivan's eyes I didn't like one bit. I'd had a tight knot of anxiety in my chest ever since I left the date, encouraging Ivan to take Miranda to the police station.

"THANKS FOR MEETING ME," IVAN SAID SERIOUSLY, ALREADY frowning. "I think we need to discuss Miranda and everything that's happening with her."

"After that date? Yeah, there's a lot we need to talk about." I threw my hands in air in frustration. "I just can't figure out why you were there. Did you seriously not realize she was talking to you as if you were me?"

He stared at me in shock before he replied. "I wasn't really talking about that. I meant the fact that she thinks it's her ex-fiancé who killed the woman who was found in the lake."

Guilt flooded me. I was a little too worked up about the whole date thing, causing me to put the real issue on the back burner. Of course we needed to focus on the murders first. Especially since Miranda was likely in a lot of danger.

"Right, right, of course." I nodded as if I hadn't forgotten all about Miranda's sad confession. "So, what happened when you got to the police station? What did the chief say?"

Ivan sighed heavily. "He's going to look in to it. I've also got him convinced that it might be linked to the burglaries."

“And how is Miranda coping with all of this? Is she doing okay?”

Ivan shrugged. “I don’t know. I think she’s struggling with it all. She doesn’t feel safe.”

“We should do more to protect her,” I muttered. I really did feel like shit for the way I hadn’t cared enough about anything other than the competition with my brother. I really was an asshole. I was starting to wonder if I even deserved her. Not that it was enough to make me back down.

“I was going to suggest the same thing, say that we should ask her if she wants us to be around more so she isn’t alone. I mean, she’s new here in town, she doesn’t know anyone but us. Well, I mean, she probably does, but I still think we should \_\_\_”

“Before we get to all of that, I think there is something I should say,” Ivan interrupted me, and my chest felt tight once more. I had a feeling I knew exactly what Ivan was going to say, but that didn’t make it a bitter pill to swallow. “After I took Miranda home once she’d talked to the police, she was all emotional and worked up. I went inside with her and things... got heated.”

*Fuck.* I wanted to scream. This was all too fucking much. I was the one who originally met Miranda and had an instant connection with her. If she hadn’t accidentally run into Ivan in Deon’s Diner and mistook him for me, Ivan wouldn’t have even been at the trattoria. Miranda and I would have had a nice date and I would have been the one who went home with her.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my cool as rage rolled through my body. It wasn’t fucking fair. I really liked Miranda. She was the first person I had really felt that spark with in a very long time. Maybe I should have taken this moment bow out and let Ivan take his shot with her, but I honestly did not want to give up on Miranda. I just knew she was worth fighting for. Even if I had to have this battle with my brother.

“Before you lose your mind, Cole, just know that Miranda really does like you. I know things got a little crazy with me and her, but I know she has feelings for you too.”

All the anger I held toward Ivan shone in my eyes. He had to feel it, had to sense it was there, but he didn't back down. He glared right back at me, accepting the challenge.

"Well, whatever," I said with a blasé shrug, as if I hadn't just stared my brother down with contempt. "We need to concentrate on keeping Miranda safe. Also on making sure the cops catch this killer. What do you know about it? Did you find out if the burglaries are linked?"

"The fingerprints are being tested as we speak. The system just takes time."

That always frustrated me, but now it made my teeth grind together with a burning hot rage unlike anything I'd ever felt before. How could the police take such a long time to deal with shit when there were actual lives in danger here? Miranda's life at that. There had to be other she-wolves out there frightened as well, waiting for the predator to chase them down.

"Okay, well, I will go to Miranda first." I needed to see her. To really see her. I couldn't let Ivan anywhere near her until I knew what was going on with us. "I'm sure you have work to do. I can head over to Miranda's now and let her know we are going to be there for her so she knows she's safe. I don't want her to worry anymore."

Ivan nodded, accepting this, but I wasn't sure he was happy about it. This awkward tension between us wasn't going to shift until we knew what was going on. I wasn't about to pressure Miranda, but I really hoped she didn't take a long time to pick me.

We separated, him going his way, and me going mine. Hopefully this awkwardness wouldn't last forever, and with a bit of luck, it would even bring us closer. It would be nice to have an actual twin bond with him. It had been a long time since we'd gotten along so well.



“I ACTUALLY HAD A GOOD TIME TODAY.” MIRANDA GIGGLED as we ended our hike through the fields on the outskirts of town. “Thank you for getting me out. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere today because I have been feeling so low, but you were right. Sunshine did lift my spirits. You know what you’re doing. I’ll make sure I listen to you in the future.”

I reached out and touched her cheek gently, grateful to see a bit of color there. She looked so pale and sad when I first saw her. She didn’t even want to hear me out about Ivan and me looking after her. It seemed like she had changed her mind about everything and instead was thinking about running off again, hiding from *him*.

It was just lucky that she couldn’t afford to leave, because it meant we had a chance. We could look after her and keep that asshole ex-fiancé away from her.

“You’re looking happier,” I said with a smile. “Any time you want to go out for a walk like that, I’m up for it. We can have a really great time whenever you want.”

The soft smile playing on her lips made my heart sing. This was why I couldn’t give her up, no matter how much Ivan liked her, because this was the closest I’d felt to real adoration in a very long time. The most intense feelings I’d ever had coursing through my body. I could not get enough of Miranda.

“Well, I better get home. Timothy will be home from his play date soon, and he’ll be wanting dinner, so I—oh my God.” She clapped her hands to her mouth. “Shit, look at that. My car tires. They are all slashed. This has to be him. He’s found me.”

I looked toward her car and saw exactly what she was talking about. All four tires had been cut like a crazy person had been attacking them with claws. This was the work of an angry mad man.

“Shit, we need to get you inside,” I said. “Call the cops. Get someone out here.”

“My life in Twin Lakes is going to be all about the police,” she groaned, but thankfully she let me lead inside her home. “I

hate this, I was supposed to be getting away from drama when I came here. I picked Twin Lakes to settle down in because I got a good feeling from it. I felt like it would be better for Timothy as well. But now I don't know."

She headed into the kitchen, so I followed her, wondering how soon I was going to have to prove how much I could take care of Miranda. Because if this piece of shit had been to her home and fucked up her car while she was out with me, he was definitely hot on her trail and could act out at any given moment.

Miranda grabbed herself a glass of water with a shaky hand, before pouring one for me. She was still trying to be the good hostess, even with her life in disarray. I stepped in, grabbing her arms to prevent her from any more busy work.

"Don't worry," I whispered calmly. "It's going to be fine. All of this is going to be fine. You don't need to worry about any of it. I am here to take care of you, and that's what I will do."

She blinked her eyes, clearly trying to fight back tears, but that only spurred me on further.

"You take a seat. Rest, relax as much as you can. I will cook dinner for you and your son, I will contact the police and get them here to take a report, and I will keep watch."

"But what about what you need to do?" she asked with her head cocked to one side. "You have already done so much for me, I don't expect you to do more. I can't ask you to do more. This is my mess and I am the one who needs to get out of it..."

I silenced her by crashing my lips to hers and stealing the kiss I had been wanting ever since I first laid eyes on her. Whether it was the right timing or not, I wasn't sure, but she leaned into the kiss and returned it with enthusiasm. She definitely liked me too. My hands slipped up into her hair and I pressed my body up against hers, really letting her know just how much she meant to me. Because this wasn't just a kiss, I wanted so much more from her, I wanted everything.

Miranda and I leapt apart at the sound of knocking on the front door. Electricity continued to burn and fizzle through us, but we had to ignore it for the time being.

“That will be Timothy.” She swallowed hard. “He’s home now, from his play date. I better go answer the door so he doesn’t worry.”

I nodded emphatically. “Right, and I will get started on dinner.”

“Make enough for yourself,” she insisted. “Please stay.”

Having dinner with Miranda was one thing, but spending time with her son...how would that go? I didn’t have much experience with children, and certainly not ones with such triggering names, but I guess I was being thrown in the deep end and I would just have to see how I reacted.

I really wanted it to go well because I wouldn’t stand a chance with Miranda if her boy hated me. I would be shown the door in a heartbeat, and understandably so. It wouldn’t be right for me to be here if I didn’t make her whole life better.

When Timothy raced past the kitchen, offering me a wave as he went, instantly I felt the ice melting away from me. How could I be so worried about a kid who was so sweet my heart melted? His sunny demeanor caught me off guard, a bit like hers.

“Hey,” I called out weakly, now wanting to actually impress him. “How’s it going?”

The house shifted from a quiet, peaceful environment to a bustling hive of activity now that Timothy was home, and that was something I actually wanted to be a part of. I thought I thrived in my alone time because I had lived by myself for such a long time, but now I wasn’t so sure. This I wouldn’t mind. Having a family around me could be kind of nice.

I caught Miranda watching me more than once as I cooked, and I could feel the burning energy still there, the chemistry and the memory of that kiss lingering. I wondered if Miranda was going to want me to stay the night, to see what happened between us. God, I was getting ahead of myself. It was hard



not to when Miranda was so beautiful and captivating, luring me in by the minute. Making me yearn for so much more, for absolutely all of her.



## MIRANDA POV

“Who is that man down the stairs, Mommy?” Timothy asked me sleepily as I lay him down on his bed after a long evening. “I know he’s Cole, but who...?”

I held in a breath, wondering how I was going to explain this properly to my son. I had ripped him away from his father, for good reason, but he didn’t know that. Then I brought another man into his life, a man he didn’t know and had no reason to trust. How did I explain this to Timothy in a way he would understand and wouldn’t scare him?

“Cole is helping us by protecting us for a while. Guarding us.” I stroked Timothy’s hair, praying this wouldn’t be something that hurt him. “It might not be just him. A few people might do it. Just to make sure we are safe, that’s all. We have to be safe.” We didn’t have to go in to detail right now, we could wait and see what questions he had later on. It was bound to be a lot.

“Okay.” Timothy murmured, his eyes already closing. Sleep was coming for him, whether he was ready for it or not. “Thank you, Mommy.”

I sat with him for a few moments longer, waiting until I definitely knew that he was sleeping. Timothy’s breaths deepened, his facial expression relaxed, and I really hoped he was living a wonderful life in his dreams, because reality was closing in on us by the second. And I didn’t like it one bit.

A lot had happened since I got to Twin Lakes, and not just the death of another poor she-wolf and my slashed tires, but with other guys.

I didn't come here with any intension of finding a relationship or friend with benefits or anything like that. I just wanted to fly under the radar and keep to myself. But that hadn't quite happened. Instead, I kissed Cole, more than once, then I mistook his twin brother for him, creating a scene in the Italian restaurant. Then things got hot and heavy with Ivan, which felt amazing at the time, and incredibly right as well, but now it was all very confusing and conflicting in my brain. And that was without even considering Simon. I couldn't forget what happened with him. We actually had sex, which was crazy when I thought about it. I was just do caught up in the heat of the moment that I threw caution to the wind. That wasn't like me at all. I wasn't that woman, ever. But I had to admit it felt damn good to have fun for once.

I'd been committed to Brady for far too long, and I didn't even know him. Why shouldn't I have fun and enjoy myself for a change? God damn it, I deserved it. As long as I didn't get too attached and end up making things harder for myself. But I could already sense myself slipping, falling into something I shouldn't. I bit down nervously on my thumb nail and tried to focus. Not that I could come to any conclusion. Not before I heard the clicking of my front door opening and closing.

Was that Cole leaving? Or someone coming in? My heart pounded anxiously as I raced down the stairs, forgetting all about my nerves. I was constantly living in survival mode, my flight or fight instinct leaving me on edge at all times.

"Cole, I..." My breath hitched in my throat. It wasn't just Cole in my living room anymore. Ivan was beside him, a concerned look plastered on his face. I imagined Cole had filled him in on the tire slashing incident. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you were here too, Ivan."

As I looked between them both, I couldn't help but notice all their differences now. It was crazy to think that I had actually mistaken them for one another. Yes, they were

identical, so I suppose one glance would be sufficient to mistake them, but knowing them better, I knew Cole's expressions played easily on his face, whereas Ivan seemed more reserved.

They were the same, but so different. It only increased my very selfish need to have them both in my life. Now that really wasn't like me, but I guess Twin Lakes was bringing out a different side to me. A side I didn't know existed before. A side that I kind of liked.

"I know you have already reported everything to the police," Ivan insisted with a worried smile. "But as soon as I heard from Cole, I knew I had to get here right away. I hope that's okay with you."

I nodded slowly. "Yeah, of course. The more protection I have, the better."

I swallowed hard because the nerves were zig zagging through my system. The last time we were all in the same room together, shit got weird, and I wasn't prepared for that right now. I had already had an insane enough day as it was.

"Well, that's what we need to discuss," Ivan insisted. "Taking care of you, making sure you aren't alone while all of this going on. We're just working out our schedules."

"Oh really?" I took a seat in the chair across from the couch where they were sitting. How the hell was I going to get a moment to myself to work out my feelings if I was with them all the time? Then again, I didn't want to spend time without them. "I don't want you to go out of your way for me. I know you already have a lot going on with your own lives."

"We are here for you, no matter what," Cole insisted, with Ivan nodding beside him. "We want to do this and there isn't anything you can do to stop us. So, let's all work out our schedule together to make this work. We have to keep *him* away from you."

This wasn't us committing to a relationship or anything like that, but it felt dangerously close. And that made me feel terrible about Simon. Was this something I needed to tell them

about? It wasn't like we had a commitment, so it had to be fine. They couldn't be mad at me, could they? I hadn't done anything wrong.

With Brady, toward the end, everything I did was wrong. I just had to remember that these guys weren't Brady and I hadn't actually done anything wrong.

“Cole and I have already been working out our days, but we need to know more about your schedule so we can be sure we aren't in your way or anything.”

I pushed all of my worries out of my head, refusing to freak out over nonexistent panic any longer. It was better for me to lose myself in the present moment, rather than thinking about a future that might not even be there.

We talked through the schedule until we had a decent plan set in place. My head was spinning with it all, but I trusted the twins with my safety. I knew that if anyone could make sure I was looked after, it was them.

Funny how a man I had known for years had become my enemy, but people I had known for a very short period of time I could easily put my life in their hands and be happy. I just hoped I could put the same faith in the chief of police, because I knew Ivan had full faith in him. But I just wasn't convinced he was taking me seriously.

My tires didn't slash themselves, and it wasn't something that I would do. It was a targeted attack, aimed directly at me, to send a very specific message to me. They had to at least understand that much. At least, with Ivan by my side, I hoped so.



I SMILED AT IVAN, WHO HAD DRIFTED OFF TO SLEEP ON THE couch. He must have been through a long day with work and then my drama. I couldn't help but feel bad about it all.

“He's going to be fine,” Cole whispered. “Don't worry about him. He's glad to be here. I know he wants to help you

as much as I do.”

“Thank you, both of you,” I whispered back. “I don’t know what I would do without you at the moment. This is so messy and you have just made it so much easier for me.”

His lips were just about to twist up into a smile, but I didn’t get to see it. The whole room, no, the whole house, was plunged into darkness as my electricity cut out.

“What the hell?” I complained quietly, not wanting to disturb Ivan who had already been in a pitch black room, so didn’t need to be woken up by any of this.

A growl emanating from Cole was the only response I got from him. Before my eyes could even adjust to the darkness, I heard his feet padding rapidly from the room. He was running, taking off toward the front door, but I wasn’t about to leave him alone. I followed him. A motorbike was burning down the street, one I could only imagine belonged to the dreaded man I was trying to hide from. He was still trying to torment me, even with Timothy and me inside the house, which meant he wouldn’t back down.

He was going to do everything that he could to make my life a living hell. Until I was one of those women at the bottom of the lake. Leaving Timothy all alone. Or worse, with him.

But I couldn’t express any of this to Cole because he had already ripped from the shackles of his human body. His bear burst free as he ran down the road to chase after the bike. After *him*. The last thing I wanted was for my two worlds to collide in such a horrific way, but this was all out of my control. There was nothing that I could do about it.

“Fuck,” I muttered as I raked my fingers through my hair, losing sight of both of them. “Fucking hell, this is a nightmare. Why can’t he just leave me alone?”

I suppose the only thing I could do was get the electricity back on while I waited for Cole to return. Whether he would bring Brady back or not, I wasn’t sure, but I had to be prepared for everything. At this point, anything was possible.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for me to find the fuse box in the basement, and to notice that the switches had been flicked down into the *off* position. That meant it didn't take much to get the lights back on, but also that it was a purposeful act. Someone had done this on purpose to haunt me. *Him*. I turned from the box and found Cole panting breathlessly behind me, his eyes dark and hungry.

“What happened, did you find him?”

“Not yet,” he growled. “But you don't need to worry about that. I have his scent now and I will not stop until I get him. He isn't going to be able to hurt you, I swear.”

Before I could question him or ask him anything at all, his mouth was on mine and he was taking all his passion out on me. I could feel how much he wanted to get Brady away from me, and I appreciated that. I felt so safe with his arms wrapped around me, holding me tight.

I barely knew what was happening before Cole turned me around and sat me down on the stairs. With an intensity in his gaze that was even more powerful than the way he looked at me on the hike, he tugged my pants down and ripped my panties off at the same time.

This man wanted to eat me alive, and my God I wanted to let him.

His eager nose nudged my thighs apart, opening me up to him, and even though I knew this was only going to complicate things even more, I was more than willing to be distracted by him. I tossed my head back and let my legs fall apart, drawing his lips closer to me.

The anticipation was crazy. I knew it was going to be so that I wanted to scream out his name before he had even connected with me. The hot streams of his breath had me doused in flames already. I was half whimpering, half purring.

*Oh fuck!*

Then all thoughts left my brain as his tongue finally connected with my core. He circled my clit hungrily, eagerly. He was relentless and sent an onslaught of pleasure



ricocheting through me. I could barely breathe, never mind speak.

This was so different to the way Simon made me feel as he fucked me, and it was nothing like Ivan's fingers. How was I going to decide when all the men surrounding me were unique and special, making me feel things I never had before?

I wasn't about to make any choices right now, because I was on the edge of Cole's tongue, about to lose my damn mind. I truly didn't think I would be able to handle it.

And then it hit.

It hit me like a tsunami, hard and fast, swallowing me up whole and consuming every single part of me. I wasn't connected to the planet anymore, I was floating through space, on cloud fucking nine. Cole was electric. The way he set me on fire was incredible.

What the hell was I going to do? Everything was so insane around me. But there were parts of this that felt so good, I didn't want it to end.

I never wanted it to end.



## COLE POV

I did not get a wink of sleep all night long, and not just because I was on first watch, waiting for that prick on the motorbike to come speeding back around, but also because I had just been rejuvenated in a way I never expected.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. The way the very beautiful Miranda looked as she came hard all over my tongue was an image I wanted to commit to memory. She was stunning, absolutely gorgeous, and even more so at her most vulnerable moment. It felt amazing to me that I could do things to make her feel good, even when she was at the shittiest point of her whole life. I wanted it to keep happening.

“Good morning.” Her sweet whispering tone made my heart skip a beat. Was it always going to be like that whenever I was around Miranda? I hoped so. “How are you?”

I rose from the window seat and crossed the room to hold her in my arms in her sweet little baby blue pajamas. But as I tilted her chin up to look at me, I could see hesitation there in her eyes. She was worried.

In the dark of night, it was fine, but now I could tell she was worried about getting caught. She didn't want Ivan to see us because she knew it would hurt his feelings.

As I tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, it hit me how sweet she was. How perfect. But she didn't need to worry about anything like that, which Ivan and I would make her see.

“So, last night...” I started, and her eyes widened with shock. I guess she wasn't expecting me to dive right into it,

but I called it like it was. She was going to have to get used to that from me. “Last night was amazing. It was one of the best nights of my whole life.”

“Really? But it was just...me.” She rested her hands on her chest. “I’m not someone special. I’m sure you have women throwing themselves at you all the time.”

I shook my head. “I have never experienced anything like last night before. It meant so much to me. More than I can even explain.”

She leaned into me and I felt her fear melting away. I held on to Miranda for a little while before I even thought about saying what I needed to next. I had a feeling those words were going to alter her mood all over again. But I had to say something. I couldn’t leave this hanging in the air.

“Miranda, you know how shifter romances aren’t always traditional?”

She looked up at me curiously.

“We are much freer with our feelings than non-shifters, right? And don’t think that relationships need to look any specific way for them to be real.”

“Right...” She had confusion and curiosity written all over her face now. But she wasn’t backing away, which had to be a good thing, right? I hoped so anyway.

“Well, I know there have been some feelings between you and Ivan as well, which I wouldn’t want to get in the way of. I’m sure your chemistry with him is something worth exploring also.” I paused for a moment, but she didn’t respond. “So, if you want to keep exploring this with the both of us, I’m fine with that.”

“You’re *fine*?” She sounded a little horror struck. “You are fine with me dating you and your twin brother? I know we aren’t worried about traditional relationships, but won’t that cause issues for you and Ivan? I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

I grinned and shrugged my shoulders. “Trust me, you won’t. I actually think this will be great for all of us. It doesn’t

have to feel pressured or anything like that. I know you're just coming out of something really complicated, but I was thinking we could just have some fun and see where this chemistry takes us. But it's totally up to you. The ball is in your court. I don't want you to worry about anything at all. Seriously."

She bit down on her bottom lip, but it didn't stifle the smile that was coming. She was a sexy little minx. I could see how much she wanted this, which was actually awesome. If Ivan liked Miranda as much as I did, I knew he wouldn't have any kind of issue with the sharing side of things. It would be fine.

Would the competitive edge still be there with Ivan and me? Probably, but that might only make it all even more exciting. I wasn't about to shoot down any possibilities.

"We will have to talk to Ivan about it," she whispered with a little giggle. "But I think that could be a lot of fun. Hell, I certainly need the distraction from all the shit in my life at the moment. I'm sure you can see that just as much as I can."

I grabbed her and pulled her in for a powerful kiss that nearly knocked her off her feet. I felt more confident to do so now because we had a bit more of a plan in place.

"Hey, what's going on?" Ivan asked. This probably wasn't the sight that he wanted to wake up to, but we just couldn't help it. "Kissing without me? I have to admit, I'm a little mad I'm missing out here. You just let me sleep right through it, I can't believe that!"

I wasn't worried because he hadn't exactly been thinking about my feelings when he hooked up with Miranda behind my back. But we were about to change the narrative of this. I was going to let him know that this was going to be good for all of us.

"Ivan, Miranda and I were just talking about taking this exploration further."

"You two?" he said, sounding pained. So much so that I was actually glad Miranda and I had decided to try having a

more shifter-like relationship. Much as I was up for the competition, I didn't want him to end up really upset. "Just you two?"

"No, we mean all of us. There is no reason for either of us to stop dating Miranda."

"And you are okay with this?" The question wasn't aimed at me. "Because if you aren't..."

"I think I would like to keep dating you both, yes," she whispered, redness staining her cheeks. "If that's alright with you guys. Because I know this is complicated and my life is already messy. So I wouldn't blame you for wanting to get away."

Ivan didn't hesitate. I stepped away so he could take Miranda in his arms and reassure her with a kiss. I honestly expected a spike of jealousy, but weirdly I got nothing. Knowing that I could also claim a piece of Miranda made this so much easier to bear. It was really the best arrangement for all of us.

"Well, Cole, you better get to bed," Ivan said with a smile as he stepped over to the coffee maker. "You have work soon, don't you, Miranda? And it's my turn to keep watch."

I hadn't had any sleep, and that would catch up with me whether I liked it or not. At least now I didn't have to feel jealous about leaving Ivan alone with Miranda. Everything was good.

"I think I'll go home for that. Unless you would rather me stay here?"

Miranda's eyes shone with delight as she let me go, knowing it was all okay. "No, no, you go. I need to wake Timothy up and get him ready for school before I'm off to work. You don't need to worry about a thing. We've got everything covered here."

I caught Ivan's eye and was pleased to note a sense of joy there as well. He was going to have a really good day with Miranda.

I would be back once I'd slept and checked in at work just to make sure all was good there. I would be back in Miranda's arms, and hopefully between her thighs once more, setting her on fire, soon enough.

That was an image that was going to stick with me the whole day, getting me through it. Her with her head tossed back, moaning in bliss. Moaning my name in pleasure, desperately reaching for me, clawing at me, needing me. I could not wait to have her in that state again. I meant what I said, it was the best night of my life and it wasn't even about me. Only her.

Now that was a revelation for me. Something I had never experienced before. But all of this was new to me. New and very exciting. I couldn't wait to see what happened next.



I FELT GOOD AS I WALKED AWAY FROM THE NATIONAL PARK, knowing everything was fine at work. I'd been worried that my personal life might affect my job, but not at all.

I yanked my ringing cell phone out of my pocket and hit the answer button, barely even registering the name on the screen as I did. After a gruff hello I realized it was my brother.

“Cole, you need to get here quick. The store has been broken in to...”

Shit, I knew what he meant by the *store*. Miranda's work place. I didn't even hear whatever Ivan had to say next, because I was running. This wasn't how I wanted to see Miranda again.

If that asshole was back and about to cause even more issues for Miranda, he could be certain that I wasn't letting him get away with it. Not a chance. I didn't run fast enough to catch him because I was so worried about leaving Miranda alone. I had this horrible sense that he was going to go back for her. But this time it would be different. This time, I would not give up until I could wrap my hands around his scrawny

little neck and make sure he never bothered Miranda and Timothy again. I would save this Tim.

I was out of breath when I crashed through the front door of the store to find Miranda in Ivan's arms, weeping softly. What a fucking bastard. How could he keep doing these things to her? Did he not care enough about Miranda to just leave her alone? I already cared about her so much that if that was what she asked of me, I would back off right away, no questions asked. I wouldn't want to see this sad look in her eyes for even one second.

"What happened?" I demanded as I crossed the store, closing the gap between us. "What did he do now?"

"A man..." Miranda said between sobs. "I thought he was just a customer, so I barely paid any attention to him. I don't think I even looked his way. Not really. Not until he came to the register and I noticed he had his whole face covered..."

"Was it him?" My heart was thundering like crazy in my chest in anticipation of her answer. "Was it Brady?"

"I don't know," she admitted sadly. "I thought it was at first because his voice...it sounded like his voice, but now I don't know because the body shape wasn't right. There was something off about him. It could have been just a burglar and I attached the voice to him because I've been so scared about him finding me. It was all a blur..."

I looked to Ivan, who shrugged helplessly. "I was watching, but I didn't see anything. I didn't get a chance to get to him because it just looked like a normal transaction from out here. By the time I realized he had taken the earnings, it was too late. The smell though... I caught the scent of the guy, and it reminds me of the scent I found in Mr. Thompson's vacation homes. I think we can assume there is a serial thief around."

I had to hold anger. I suppose it wasn't Ivan's fault that he didn't see what was going on, but I knew that wasn't a mistake I would have made. Not a chance. No one would fool me. But I couldn't get caught up in that now. We had to take action and keep Miranda safe. That was more important.



“So, what now?” I demanded, still trying to control my rage. “What’s the next move?”

“Now I have to wait for my boss to get here,” Miranda sniffed. “The police too. And I need to work out who it is. I don’t know *why* Brady would come here just to steal, unless it was to torment me... but he has been accused of it in the past.” That realization seemed to hit her as hard as it did me. “He was kicked out of his wolf pack for stealing...”

This *bastard*. What the hell was he playing at?

“Okay. You stay here, Ivan,” I insisted, “and I’ll go out to see if I can find this asshole. I don’t want him to get away again. He isn’t going to get away with this again.”

“But what if it wasn’t him?” Miranda said, but I shook my head.

“I’m going to get whoever it was. Stealing isn’t right either, so I’m going to get that money back so you don’t end up losing your job over some greedy bastard.”

Miranda might not have been one hundred percent convinced it was Brady, but I was. I just got a bad vibe from that piece of shit. I was also pretty sure it was his nasty scent clinging to the air. I needed to follow that trail before it went cold.

I took off before anyone else could say anything, shifting into my bear. It wasn’t the easiest to follow Brady’s scent, and I wasn’t quite sure why, but even if I needed to go all over town to hunt Brady down, I would make sure I found him. No matter what.



## IVAN POV

I folded my arms across my chest as I watched Miranda working away, smiling at customers and treating them all well, as if she hadn't been through a horrible trauma earlier on in the week. I couldn't believe how brave she was. She didn't have to be back, but she was. That just showed how resilient she was. I was impressed with Miranda, but worried about her as well. I didn't want her to be so brave she fell into danger.

Of course, I blamed myself for everything. If I had been more alert, I would have noticed that man wasn't acting normally. If I had been watching better, if I had noticed the change in her body language, if I had been more like Cole, nothing bad would have happened. That was why I was determined not to make the same mistake again.

I jumped when my cell phone's ringtone blasted out, shocking me because it was so loud. I yanked the device out of my pocket and quickly hit the answer button. The sound was a distraction, and that was the last thing I wanted right now.

"Hey, Owain, how's it going?" I didn't take my eyes off of Miranda as I spoke to the police chief. I wouldn't, no matter what he told me.

"I have some news for you, Ivan." His grim tone struck me hard, like he had something bad to tell me. I didn't know if I was fully ready for that.

"About the burglaries?" I gulped, preparing for the worst, whatever that might be.

“And the murder.”

I held my breath. I kind of knew what was coming, but it didn't sting any less when the chief spoke next.

“Their fingerprints are a match. So, as you suspected, the perpetrator is the same.”

I gripped my phone so hard to my face I was pretty sure I would leave a mark behind. This was what we had all put together, wasn't it? That the scent at the vacation homes and Miranda's work matched because it *was* a serial thief. The wolf who had been removed from his pack was also this criminal, here in Twin Lakes.

“And what about Brady Clover?” I asked. “Have you been looking in to him?”

“We are following all the leads that come our way, Ivan, but we don't want to zero in on just one person at the moment. We need to cast a wide net. We have to cover every angle to make sure nothing is missed. You know that's how investigations work.”

I furrowed my eyebrows, trying my hardest not to lose my mind with Owain. He was just trying to do his job, and I did respect that, but I had a very important agenda, and that was keeping Miranda safe. Nothing else mattered but her.

While I wanted the case solved and Twin Lakes back to normal, with its residence no longer in this weird state of worry because of the crime spree, Miranda was the most important person in the world. I would do anything to keep her safe.

“You need to bring that guy in and at least get his fingerprints, Owain. We can't let someone else be killed. Especially when we know what he did to her.”

The details were more gruesome than people really knew. The sexual assault, the way her face had been ripped apart, the damage done to her insides...it was horrible.

“We are going to put Twin Lakes into lockdown as much as we can to keep everyone safe until we have more information,” Owain said, mostly ignoring my suggestion.

“This crime spree does not seem to be stopping. It’s getting out of hand.”

I silently groaned to myself. “Okay, so what do you want me to do?”

“You have been spending a lot of time with Miranda, right? Since she seems to be a target of this, you just need to keep an eye on her.”

“Fine, I can do that,” I replied, but it didn’t feel like enough. “But I really do think you need to take my advice and really look into her ex-fiancé. Because there is no way it isn’t him.” I wanted to actually catch Brady to make sure he couldn’t do anything to harm Miranda again. But if Owain insisted that they were on it, and that whoever was committing these crimes would be stopped, then I was going to have to take a step back and let them do what they needed to do. Just because the Twin Lakes Police Department didn’t normally have to deal with a crime spree like this and weren’t used to murders either, didn’t mean they couldn’t deal with it.

I ended the call, then fired off a quick text to Cole so he could know what was going on. Funny how Cole and I had actually gotten a bit better at communicating over the last few days. The competitive edge to our relationship had taken a back seat because we both had the same goal—caring for Miranda and Timothy. I didn’t think it would ever feel this easy, but Miranda had managed to bring that out of us.

I glanced up as soon as the message was sent to see Miranda staring at me with confusion. Even through the window, she could tell something was off. I didn’t want to go in the store and update her while she was at work, especially when she was already tense; it could wait until she was back home. I had a bomb in my hand that, unfortunately, would be dropped on her lap.

*I’m sorry, Miranda. Don’t shoot the messenger.*



MIRANDA PACED UP AND DOWN IN HER KITCHEN, BITING HER nails down to nubs, anxiety rolling off her in waves.

“Timothy will be okay,” Cole did his best to reassure her. “He’s probably better off at his friend’s home. The police will be secretly watching the building anyway.”

“I know, I know,” she groaned. “He’s safer there than here if Brady comes after me. I just can’t help but worry.”

Cole caught her up in a hug and tilted her face up. Miranda pushed herself up onto her tiptoes and crashed her lips to him. Again, they were kissing right in front of me, but this time there was no jealousy gripping me. It was kind of fun to see this happening, knowing that Miranda wanted me as well. My pulse raced faster at the memory of her beautiful face when she came. God, she really was stunning.

I might not have been jealous, but I did want to have Miranda in my arms as well. I crossed the room and stepped up behind her, burying my face in the crook of her neck and running my hands down the delicious curves of her body.

“Oh wow,” she moaned, leaning back against me as Cole dropped to his knees in front of her. My hands automatically cupped her breasts, massaging her, as Cole’s lips traveled up her thigh toward where I could only imagine she was aching to be touched. “Cole, Ivan...”

Hearing my name on her lips made me hard. I was trembling with desire already, my eager fingers tugging down her dress a little so I could play with her nipples. Tugging and teasing her as Cole peeled off her panties with his teeth, my erection began to strain against my pants. Fuck, this was hot as hell and I wasn’t sure I would be able to contain myself.

Miranda’s knees buckled when Cole kissed her clit. I guided her down to her knees, staying behind her the whole time, then rested her against me and watched in awe as the power of Cole’s tongue caused her to buck and writhe with desire.

I was so intoxicated by the sight in front of me, I didn’t notice Miranda’s hand until she brushed against my rock-hard

cock, trying to get my zipper down. She wanted me free, but wasn't at the right angle to be able to do so.

*You can have me*, I thought as I rushed to unbutton, unzip, and then push my pants down.

Miranda surprised us both moving onto her hands and knees. Her lips were so close to me, and I could see the flames of desire burning in her eyes. She matched the gnawing hunger in my own body.

“Oh fuck,” I mumbled as those plump delicious lips of hers wrapped around me, her tongue brushing long strokes against my hypersensitive tip. “Fuck, Miranda.”

I knotted my fingers in her hair and guided her head downward until she hit my base, with her eyes fixed on me the entire time. Never had I ever had the privilege of getting my eyes on such a sexy sight. I could only see her, in my head the rest of the world melted away, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel the way she rocked back and forth as Cole's tongue continued to plunge inside her from this new angle.

Vibrations hummed along my cock as she drank me in, pleasure rolling through her at the same time. Everything about the way she kept circling her tongue around me was maddening. I wasn't sure how much longer I was going to be able to contain myself.

Miranda pulled back, leaving me soaking with her spit. “I need to fuck you, Ivan, I want you inside me.”

She didn't hesitate, and Cole and I weren't about to fight her. Much as we were both hungry animals, aching for more, we knew this was all about her. Miranda turned her back to me, then lowered herself onto my cock, allowing me to spear her.

*Fuck*. My toes curled with bliss. The feel of her wet, tight pussy clamped around me had my head spinning. I knew she was going to feel phenomenal, but I wasn't expecting it to be other worldly. *Fucking hell, she is special. So God damn special.*

While rocking back and forth on my lap, thrusting on top of me, increasing in pressure and intensity, I noticed her holding on to Cole, lowering her lips onto him. She seemed to know exactly how to make this work so we were all involved, so no one felt like a third wheel at any moment. There was something about this that made me ache for more. So much more. I never considered the concept of sharing before, and even when Miranda mentioned it a while back, I didn't think it would look like this, but it was hot. It was exciting. I loved it.

The positions changed every so often, with Miranda taking the lead at all times. I couldn't keep track of what was happening and who was where, all I knew was that it was fucking phenomenal. Feeling Miranda orgasm over and over again, on my fingers, on my tongue, on my cock, and watching the same occur with Cole was electrifying. When it was my turn, it was the most powerful orgasm I had ever experienced. It was a sensation I never wanted to end, and it seemed like it was never going to.

All I could think about as I came was her. Miranda's beautiful smile, her sweet face, the way her plump red lips looked wrapped around my cock. It was *her*; she was the elusive "one." I was sure of it now. That didn't mean I knew what was going to happen, but I knew it was what I wanted. And not just in the throes of passion either. It was easy to get lost in emotions in the heat of the moment, but this wasn't that.

By the time we were all emotionally and physically spent, we collapsed on the floor next to one another, with Miranda in the middle giggling wildly. That sound was so much better than her crying with anxiety. I couldn't resist pulling her in for a hug, even as Cole's arms enveloped her from the other side.

Actually, that made it even better. It was good to know that Miranda was protected on both sides, that we were both here for her. I hoped that with our bodies surrounding her, she felt safe. She had been in danger for way too long.

Well, no more. She wasn't going to have to worry about this again. We had her back. Yes, I had fucked up once and let that man get away, but never again.



“Should we head up to bed?” Miranda asked, still laughing.

“You don’t want dinner first?” Cole chuckled lightheartedly. “Get your energy up?”

“Oh yeah? What do you think I’m going to need energy for?”

As Cole wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, I couldn’t stop the excitement from blooming in my chest all over again. Perhaps this night wasn’t over yet. If there was more to come, I was more than up for it because it was exactly what I wanted and needed. I sucked in a breath and smiled at the both of them, glad to see them both as caught up in this craziness as I was.

There was a light at the end of this tunnel, the possibility that something could really come of this. What that would look like in a practical sense, I wasn’t sure, but I knew that if anyone could make it work, it was us, and in Twin Lakes as well. A town full of shifters was welcoming of everyone. That was why I wouldn’t, *couldn’t*, ever leave.

Especially now.



## SIMON POV

I'd had a skip in my step ever since last Sunday. My whole being had been different since I had that wonderful yoga session and everything that came after with Miranda. But that didn't mean I was expecting her to come today.

I could tell our hot wolf sex was more of a one-time thing, and that was actually okay with me. It was physical lust that we needed to explore before it got the better of us. It was our wolf sides that connected, and that was something we just needed to get out of our systems.

One thing it did show me, though, was that I was finally able to move on from what had happened to me in the past. Losing Kat had taken a big chunk out of me, apparently more than I had realized. I might have dated and messed around a bit since my wife was killed, but it was never anything serious. It was never going to be anything serious and I knew that deep down. I wasn't ready for any of that at the time.

But now I felt like I was ready for something more, and that was a truly uplifting feeling. A really great one that made me feel lighter than air. If Miranda ever came back to me for some more tea, I would make sure to thank her for that. For absolutely everything she had done for me.

I spun around at the sound of my door opening. I was not expecting that. I truly thought I'd be doing yoga alone. My eyes widened when I saw an all too familiar smile beaming back at me. Had I been mistaken about everything?

“Miranda, hi!” I didn’t really know what to say now that she was face to face with me. “I didn’t know that you were going to come today. How are you?”

“I hope you don’t mind.” She bit down on her bottom lip sheepishly. “I like yoga, and I don’t have anyone to do it with but you. I hope that’s okay.”

The thick sexual tension that clung to the air the last time she was here wasn’t there. There was just a cool, calming, friendly vibe between us. It made things so much easier and more pleasant. We could just *be*.

“Yeah, of course, that’s fine.” I grinned. “Yoga is always better with other people.”

I admired the curve of her body as she laid down her mat, but it wasn’t in the same way as before. The connection wasn’t as overwhelming as it had been. I could only imagine that we had crossed paths for a reason, but not for a happily ever after type of thing.

We didn’t talk much before or during the yoga session. We focused solely on centering ourselves and giving our bodies exactly what they needed. The silence was far from awkward though. It seemed more like we had been in one another’s lives for a long time, and that we had managed to build up this bond easily. Another reason I knew Miranda and Kat would have been friends. Hell, Kat had probably sent her to me from wherever she was now to make sure I wasn’t alone and that I found a way to move on for real.

“Hey, would you like to take a walk with me?” Miranda asked me once we had come to the end of our session, both of us calmer now with our hearts beating slower in the magical way only yoga could achieve. “Take some tea out with us for a walk around the park? It’s such a lovely day. We should take in some nature, maybe talk about some stuff.”

I nodded slowly, knowing that there was plenty I needed to say myself. I had to explain why things weren’t going to progress with me and her. I could tell she felt the same way, but I figured it’d be better to put it all out in the open. Open communication worked best.

“Sure. I will go make the tea.”

Miranda worked on some breathing exercises as I brewed, which had me wondering how things would be after we talked. Would our friendship be able to survive in this way? Because I liked it like this. It was nice to have another wolf to talk to in Twin Lakes. As long as there were no residual feelings between us, I didn't see why not. As long as we both accepted that it was just a one-time thing, then there shouldn't be an issue.

I would bring it up as we strolled around the park. It would give us something else to discuss other than the crime spree, which it seemed everyone in town was obsessed with. Fear was running rampant and the gossip train wasn't making anything better. People were just getting other people upset and making things so much worse, altering details as the information went from person to person. It was hard to know what was the truth anymore, and I was drained from discussing it.

THE SUN WAS BRIGHT AND HOT AS WE STEPPED OUTSIDE. TWIN Lakes was a beautiful town, beloved by everyone who lived here. Which why everyone was so confused that someone wanted to ruin it all for us.

“So, I guess there is something I need to tell you,” Miranda said tentatively as we reached the grassy area of the park. It was gorgeous here with all the flowers blooming. I kind of wished I could shift so my wolf could run around, but I was in the middle of a conversation. Even if Miranda was a wolf herself, and an understanding one at that, I wouldn't be rude. “It's a bit awkward, but things have been...progressing.” I could tell she was doing her best to choose her words very carefully. “With Cole and Ivan.”

“Oh!” I wasn't sure why that surprised me, but it did. I knew she had been on the awkward date with them that turned in to a fight, but that was it. I could see it, though, and I had no reason to doubt that it would go well. “That's cool. I'm happy for you.”

“You are?” Miranda’s lips twisted up into an awkward smile. “Because you don’t have to say that if it isn’t the truth. I do feel a little shitty about it all. Like I’ve just dropped you.”

I reached out my hand and took hers to squeeze it lightly. “I don’t feel that way at all. I promise you. It kind of feels like we were meant to come together for a brief moment, like two cosmic forces on a collision course. But just because the fire is now just embers doesn’t mean we need to end things between us. We can still be friends.”

“Friends.” She squeezed my hand right back. “I would like that. Because I really do like you. I think you’re a great guy, and your friendship would mean a lot to me. With everything that’s going on, I need all the friends I can get.”

“Well, you have me for life, that I can assure you of.” I pulled her in for a hug. “And I want to thank you as well. For enlightening me and making me feel amazing about myself. You really did unlock something within me that I had locked away for far too long.”

She cocked her head to one side and examined me closely. “Because of the picture of the beautiful woman on the wall in the apothecary? The one with the bright eyes?”

“Ah, you noticed her?” I chuckled. “It’s hard not to, I know. She was my wife.”

“Was? Do you mind if I ask what happened to her? Only if you want to tell me.”

I didn’t usually like this topic of conversation because it left me in a dark place, even if I only focused on the good parts of my relationship with her, but now I wanted to let everything out because I knew Miranda would get it.

“She was killed five years ago on New Year’s Eve.” I swallowed hard. “By a stray wolf who had severed himself from his pack. A desperate wolf who I guess can’t fully be blamed for what he did.”

“No, don’t take the blame off of him,” Miranda insisted. “Don’t do that. Because these wolves make the decision to go

rogue. They make their own choices and they need to be held accountable for them. They *have* to.”

I nodded understandingly. “Is that what happened with your ex-fiancé? Was he one?”

She shuddered, the mere mention of him apparently too much for her. I didn’t want to bring him up, but at the same time, it was going to help me get a better understanding of her.

“Yeah, he’s a rogue wolf also,” she admitted. “Not that I saw it as a red flag at first. But then it seems like I missed a lot of red flags I should have spotted.”

All of a sudden, an ice cold thought struck me. Were we both talking about the same stray wolf here? Was Brady the one who killed Kat? A part of me really wanted to ask Miranda so I could finally fill in that missing piece of the puzzle, but I stopped that small part. I listened to the much bigger realization that if I brought this up, it would only give poor Miranda more guilt to live with. None of this was down to her, but she carried that blood on her hands regardless.

I suppose it didn’t *really* matter. The out come was the same.

“Well, you can’t blame yourself for that either,” I reminded her instead. “Because we are all blinded by feelings at some point in our lives. It’s unavoidable.”

She mused on this for a moment, looking like someone who didn’t quite know how to word what she wanted to say next. “Is that what you think I’m doing?” she finally, tentatively asked. “With Cole and Ivan? Do you think I’m being blinded by them?”

I let out a low, throaty chuckle. “You know what, I really don’t. Not at all. I know they might seem rough and ready on the outside, their military background easy to guess at, but they are great guys deep down. Both of them. Cole is more out spoken, Ivan is more subtle, but they both have amazing qualities, which I’m sure is what drew you to them in the first place.”

“Yeah, you might be right about that. I do like them equally for different reasons. I’m just worried that my life is such a whirlwind and I’m dragging everyone in to it.”

I rested my hand on her shoulder to reassure her as best I could. “No one would be dragged into it if they didn’t want to be a part of your life. The twins obviously care for you a lot, as do I, which is why we all want to be there to help you. And not just you. I mean, whatever is going on here, if your ex-fiancé is involved, we all need to be careful.”

“I hate him for that.” She shook her head angrily. “I hate Brady for everything he has done to me, but even more I hate him for what he has done to everyone else. The she-wolves he has killed, the fear he has put into people... it isn’t right. He needs to be punished for all of it.”

“Yeah, I get it. I hope he’s brought to justice.” I leaned in and kissed Miranda’s cheek. She was important to me and she had helped me. She was always going to be a big part of my life, no matter what.

“Hey! Miranda, over here. Come over here for a moment.”

We both jumped as a booming voice echoed across the park. I knew that voice and so did she. It was one of the twins. Cole, I imagined. Had his jealous streak come out just because I grazed my lips over Miranda’s cheek? It was only a friendly kiss, but maybe even that was too much for him. I could understand that; I would feel the same way about the girl I liked.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to let you know that I have body guards at the moment.” She laughed as she waved at Cole. “They are trying to make sure I’m safe all the time.”

“That’s really nice of them. How are they going to feel about me?”

“Well, I haven’t exactly said anything about us,” she confessed with a blush. “Because I didn’t quite know where things stood with us. But it isn’t going to be a problem. Maybe we should go over there and clear the air with them.”



I shook my head. “I don’t want to get in the way of you guys. You have a lot to discuss and work out. I’m just going to head back.” This wasn’t something I was doing because I was afraid of Cole and Ivan. It just wasn’t my place. I’d already gotten in the middle of their relationship without even realizing it. If I wanted to remain friends with Miranda, then I needed to take a step back. There was no way I wanted any of that jealousy flung my way when it didn’t need to be.

***Bang!***

What the hell was that?

“Oh my God!” Miranda screamed loudly as we both watched in horror as Cole slumped down to the ground. “It’s Cole. He’s been shot.”



## MIRANDA POV

I was frozen to the spot, the whole world stopping around me as the loud banging sound ricocheted through the park and Cole slumped to the ground. This was my fault. If Cole had never met me and wanted to protect me, then Brady wouldn't have gone after him. Because this *was* Brady, I just knew it. He was behind all of this, and it was all to torment me.

At this point, I just wished he would come after me directly. Why was he going after the people around me? Just to keep me scared? This was so fucked up I didn't know how to react.

“Come on.” It was Simon's voice that got through to me in the end. He managed to pierce my shock with his caring. He was just about to walk off and not get involved with my new relationship, but seeing Cole harmed was too much for him. “Come with me, Miranda. We need to check on Cole.”

He took my hand and yanked me with him. I was glad because I really did want to move so I could help.

“Cole, we're coming!”

Where was Ivan? As far as I knew, he was with Cole today, working on their communication and making their relationship even better. For me, I suppose, but for themselves as well. But maybe it hadn't gone well, because Ivan was nowhere to be seen.

“Fucking hell,” Cole was yelling out in agony as he held his arm. “What an asshole. We need to get Ivan away from

him before he gets shot too.”

“Where is Ivan?” I asked as I bent to check Cole’s arm. It was hard not to cave to the dizziness as blood spurted everywhere, all over me, but I held myself together for him. “What happened? What did he do? Where did he go?”

Cole pointed, and thankfully Simon raced off in a heartbeat, shifting into a beautiful dark-colored wolf. Two of them might stand a chance at taking Brady down.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry,” I wept as I held on to his arm. “This is my fault. He’s after me and he must have seen you around me and that’s why he’s attacking you.” I didn’t feel like Cole could even hear me because he was writhing with pain. What I needed to do was take action and call an ambulance to get Cole to a hospital so he could get treated.

“Shit, I’ll call 9-1-1.” I had to let go of Cole’s arm to make the call, which made his blood gush out even faster. The metallic smell of it was overwhelming. I could hardly stomach it. I turned away from him so he wouldn’t see my tears as I made the call. Cole had mustered up his inner strength to look after me, so I could do this for him. “I need an ambulance, please. There’s been a shooting at the park. We need someone here as quickly as possible.”

I dropped the phone to the ground when I knew an ambulance was on the way and turned back to Cole. “I’m here for you. Let me hold you while we wait. This might look bad, but you’re going to be okay. I promise you. As soon as they get here, things will be fine.”

He threw his head back and yelled in pain, his cry ripping through my heart, shredding me in to a million pieces. Tears gushed down my face and I couldn’t stop them even if I wanted to.

“Okay, I think I can hear the ambulance,” I reassured him. “Don’t worry, help is coming. They will be here for you any minute and everything will be fine.”

But it wouldn’t, not really. It was going to be fine for a moment, but not forever. Because Brady was just going to

keep coming for me, wherever I went. He wouldn't stop looking for me, hunting me down, torturing me like this. He wasn't ever planning on letting me live a normal life, and that hurt more than anything.

Everyone who crossed my path would end up with a target on their back. Simon saying that people wouldn't get involved in my life if they didn't want to didn't make it any better. Nothing would make this better.

I kept telling Cole he was fine, but I wasn't convinced. There was so much blood, and I was incredibly worried about him. I kept thinking about the worst possible outcome and it was ripping my heart apart. If he died now, then any possible happiness I could have had with him and Ivan was out the window.

That was what Brady wanted, wasn't it? For me to have nothing and no one. For me to always be on the run, afraid of his next move. For Timothy and me to be miserable. This was why he was torturing me. Not killing me, *yet*, but reminding me that I was never going to escape him.

Once the ambulance reached us, everything seemed to blur. I had no idea what was going on, who was talking to me, or what was happening to Cole. But that was probably for the best because it was a sensation I needed to get used to. I was never going to be in control of my life again. Ivan and Simon were off somewhere, potentially battling Brady, who was crazy and had a gun. Cole was harmed, in the back of an ambulance, being whisked off to the hospital.

And I was just here, stuck in limbo, covered in blood, with a cracked cell phone, and a son who needed to be picked up from his friend's house soon. I was going to have to get myself together because there was no way Timothy could see me like this. It would freak him out, and that was the last thing that I wanted to do to my poor boy. He had already been through enough, and he was about to go through a whole lot more.

As I slowly rose to my feet and I tried to plan my next move, all I could think about was the damage this was going to do to my son. He *loved* it here, had made the very best friends,

and I could see him coming out of his shell and gaining some self-confidence. I really didn't want to have to strip that away from him. I hated Brady for doing all of this to him. Forcing us to leave a place both of us really wanted to be.

Timothy wouldn't understand why we were leaving yet another town, especially one he was enjoying living in. He was going to hate me for this, and I wasn't even the one who had caused the issue. But that was my job as his mother, to protect him and to take the blame when he didn't like something. It sucked when I was the one who was actually trying my best, unlike Brady, but it seemed like my suffering was nowhere near done.

Knowing that didn't make it any easier. It didn't make the tears stop flowing violently down my cheeks. I wasn't sure that I would ever be able to hold myself together. Yet I would have to find a way. I had to have some inner strength. Even if it meant finding the strength to leave a place that we both wanted to spend the rest of our lives. It was the only way Timothy and I would survive all of this.



“HOW DID COLE GET HURT, MOMMY?” TIMOTHY ASKED ME for what felt like the hundredth time. “That doesn't make any sense to me. Isn't he supposed to be the one looking after us?”

I swallowed hard, wondering how on earth I was going to explain this to him. He was far too young for me to tell him the whole truth, and he wouldn't want to hear about his father being the sick son of a bitch that he was.

“There was a bit of an accident, that's all.” It wasn't much, it definitely wasn't enough, but it was something. It was an answer that would keep him content for the time being. I just hoped things didn't look too bad once we got inside Cole's hospital room. I did not want poor Timothy to see so much blood. Actually, I'd wanted to leave Timothy at home with Melissa, but I guess he sensed how upset I was because he

refused to leave my side. It wasn't ideal, but then none of this was.

Both Simon and Ivan were at Cole's bed side, which at least meant I finally knew where they were and that they were both safe. I couldn't resist running to them to give each man a hug. It didn't escape my notice that there was tension in the set of their shoulders. I could only assume that meant there was bad news coming my way.

"You didn't get him, did you?" I asked quietly. It wasn't like I was disappointed in them or anything, I completely understood what they were up against. I was merely upset that he was still out there, posing a threat to me and everyone in my life. "I guess that's it, then."

I strode over to Cole, so grateful to see his eyes open, I could have cried. Instead, I did everything I could to hold the tears inside while I hugged him. "You scared me, Cole. I did not like seeing you that way."

"Hey, it takes more than a stupid bullet to take me down." I appreciated the way he was trying to joke it off, but it was challenging for me to laugh at his attempt. "Especially when it only hit me in the arm. The injury isn't that bad at all. I'll heal soon."

I gave him a knowing look. It was likely going to take longer than he was thinking, but at least he was definitely going to recover.

I knew now that I was going to have to take Timothy and run. We couldn't stay here like this, endangering others. If I kept running, I wouldn't have a chance to get close enough to anyone for him to hurt. If I only had Timothy and myself to worry about, it would be better for everyone. It would crush me to leave Twin Lakes, but I guess I didn't deserve anything nice. I'd made a bad choice in Brady, and that would haunt me forever.

If only the police would do something about him, lock him up and throw away the key because of everything that he had done...but I was starting to get the feeling that he would get

away with it forever. Some people could just do whatever they wanted.

Cole turned to focus on Timothy for a moment, giving me a chance to step back and observe. They had been growing close, which I thought was awesome since Timothy needed all the positive male role models he could get. But now I felt guilty about it. It was going to make us leaving that much more agonizing. I never should have settled down in one place. Not for any length of time.

“HEY, MIRANDA.” IVAN GRABBED ME AND PULLED ME TO ONE side. “What did you mean before?”

“Huh?” I stared at him blankly.

“When you said, ‘I guess that’s it, then.’”

I didn’t think he’d heard that. I hung my head low, knowing I would have to say this sometime anyway, so there was no time like the present...even if I wasn’t ready.

“Timothy and I have to leave. Before anyone else can get hurt.” I could feel Ivan’s eyes boring into me, willing me to look up at him. “I feel so guilty about what’s happened to Cole, and I can’t wait around for it to happen again. It isn’t right.”

“No way.” Ivan’s response was so emphatic, I couldn’t stop my head from snapping up and looking at him. “You aren’t going anywhere. We can’t let this bully win. You can’t keep running from him and having him follow you. You will spend your whole life looking over your shoulder. I can’t have that. We’re going to get him, Miranda. I mean it. I won’t let him get away with this.”

Couldn’t he see that wasn’t happening? Couldn’t he see that I had no choice but to run? I wanted to make him understand that this was the only way we could all get out of this alive. But I could tell that wasn’t going to go down well. Not when he was in a frame of mind where all he wanted was revenge.



I couldn't be here for revenge. None of us could. It wouldn't work. Not with Brady.



## COLE POV

I was going to get even. No fucking doubt about it. There was no way that I would just sit around and let that nasty piece of shit think he was going to get away with what he did to me. Not a chance in hell. Thinking about him being so God damn brazen made me furious.

“You need to calm down a little bit, Cole,” the nurse said with a laugh as she loosened the blood pressure cuff on my arm, “or we won’t ever be able to let you out of here. It’s been two days already. Do you really want to stay longer?”

I couldn’t calm down, though. I was just so angry, and the more I thought about it, the angrier I became. How dare he? And now he had me out of the picture, just where he wanted me, locked away in this stupid hospital room while he could get away with whatever he wanted. If I found out he even breathed near Miranda while I was in here, he was dead.

“Yeah, I’m trying.” I tried to laugh, but the sound came out much too strangled to really be believed. No wonder she was giving me a strange look. “It’s just hard, that’s all.”

“I know for a man like you, who’s always busy and in the middle of something, it has to be a challenge, but I really do need you to cool down a little or this isn’t going to work out. Until your blood pressure is settled, they won’t let you go home and you’ll have to spend another night in here. Not that I think the nurses mind...” She winked, but the compliment didn’t land. Normally, I would have loved hearing something like that, it would have lifted my spirits, but that wasn’t the

case here. I had absolutely no interest in flirting with anyone. I just wanted to be home with her.

I couldn't stop thinking about Miranda, about the way the world shifted the moment I spotted her sitting alone in the bar. There was a protectiveness and a possessiveness inside me that I couldn't control. I immediately knew that she was mine.

And now, at the worst point in her life, I was trapped here away from her.

Ivan hadn't told me much, but I could see the light fading in his eyes when it came to Miranda's fears and her need to run away. She was independent, she was strong, and she would give everything to keep her son safe. If that meant running out of Twin Lakes, then she would. That was the hardest thing about being here, knowing there was nothing I could do to stop her.

"Close your eyes," the nurse suggested. "Think of something, or someone, that keeps you calm and happy. Then let me try this blood pressure again."

There was no way this would work, not with so much red-hot anger surging through my veins. But as I took her advice and let Miranda's face fill my mind, the tension in my muscles did melt away a little. Her smile, the softness surrounding her, the hungry wolf brimming within her...all of it made her that much more thrilling to be around.

But it wasn't just Miranda. I couldn't stop thinking about Timothy as well, that sweet wide-eyed boy who didn't have any of the devil within him, which was amazing considering who his biological father was. He needed stability, calm, a decent life. I knew Miranda didn't want him to leave this town because he had friends here and seemed happy, but none of that would last with Brady around. He wouldn't let anyone be happy.

"Good!"

My eyes popped open when I heard the nurse's pleased tone.

“That’s much better. I think I can take this to the doctor and get you discharged.”

“I can go now?” I almost jumped up with excitement. Freedom at last, thank God.

“No, no. Not yet. The doctor has to sign off, but it won’t take long.”

I sunk back on the bed and watched as the nurse left the room, snatching my freedom away with her. It was good that I could go, but I wanted to go right now. I glanced down at my sling and sighed. I was down but I wasn’t out, and at least I would be able to fight. I wasn’t letting Brady take that away from me. Fuck that guy!

I rested my head on the pillow, knowing things took a long time in the hospital, even if the staff said they wouldn’t. Time seemed to move differently within these buildings. That was just the way it worked. For now, all I needed to do was rest and continue thinking about Miranda because that made me happy.

So happy that I knew I wanted to keep her here in Twin Lakes with me. With Ivan as well. There was absolutely no reason we shouldn’t be together when it felt as amazing as the other night. This was a town full of shifters, and no one would bat an eye at our relationship. If Miranda found the strength to stay, there was nothing keeping us apart. No reason we couldn’t explore what we shared earlier.

I was going to get rid of Brady one way or another.



I BLINKED A FEW TIMES AGAINST THE BRIGHT WHITE LIGHT AS I woke up again. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, I just thought I would rest while the discharge paperwork got sorted out, but I guess I drifted off.

As I stretched my one free arm up high and let out a giant yawn, I sensed a new presence in the room, one that made the

hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge. But in a good way.

“Miranda, you’re here.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. “I didn’t know you were still here. I had the horrible feeling you were gone.”

Her lips twisted down in to a frown. I didn’t like the way her eyebrows knotted together like she had something heavy to tell me. My blood iced over and my heart damn near stopped beating because I wasn’t sure I could handle this. If she was about to give me the worst news possible, I didn’t think I would be able to hold it together.

“I did think about it,” she finally admitted. “Because I hate putting other people in danger. I hate the fact that Brady is coming after me and taking down people like you along the way. It’s really hard for me; it makes me feel sick.”

“But we *want* to help you,” I jumped in. “We wouldn’t do it if we didn’t want to. We hate the fact that someone is putting yours and Timothy’s life in danger.”

“I know, I know. Trust me, I have already heard all of this from Ivan. He won’t let me hear the end of it. Even when I try to make him see things from my point of view.”

Good, I was glad Ivan hadn’t allowed her to slip through our fingers while I was stuck here. That might have been the final straw. Things might have been running a little smoother with us recently, but I wasn’t about to completely let my walls down with him until I knew we were on the same page. Just in case.

“But anyway, I guess for the time being I’m staying,” Miranda relented, much to my relief. “I don’t want to put Timothy in even more danger by being on the run with him. Me, I wouldn’t mind facing down that asshole, not that I would likely defeat him, but Timothy...I can’t let anything happen to my boy. So, I would rather be surrounded by you, Ivan, and Simon.”

“Simon?” I asked quickly, because I didn’t want to let this moment pass. We really did need to talk about Simon just so I

could be sure where we all stood. “You and Simon...?”

Miranda bit down on her bottom lip coyly, a sight I was becoming way too familiar with, an image of her that I was head over heels in love with. “Yes, Simon and I slept together.”

A tight knot of jealousy coiled bloomed in my chest, so opposite to how I felt about Miranda being with Ivan. I couldn't control the sadness I felt.

“One time, not long after I got here. I think we connected on many different levels, because a big one being we're both wolf shifters. I was lost and vulnerable, and I think he was as well. Still reeling over his wife being killed and not quite finding his feet since that moment. It just happened, it was a heat of the moment thing.” She let out a little giggle. I couldn't quite tell where she was going with this, and I felt like I couldn't breathe until she finished explaining it all. “We're just friends now, and both of us are happy about that. There isn't any attraction there between us anymore. That's what we were talking about in the park today.”

Relief washed over me in waves. Simon was just a friend of hers, and that was honestly incredible. Clearly, he cared about her a lot and wanted to protect her, and she really needed a friend in her life. but the fact that there wasn't a romantic threat there made me feel safe in my relationship with Miranda.

“And you and me?” I asked with a twinkle in my eyes. “What about us?”

Miranda slipped her hand into mine and laced her fingers together. “You and me...there is so much more there. The feelings are intense. Overwhelming, almost. I don't want you and me to be just friends at all. But...but the same goes for Ivan. I know that's insane, and maybe I should be able to contain my feelings, but that isn't the way. I want you both.” Her cheeks burned red as she looked to the floor. She was embarrassed, and that was just adorable. There was nothing for her to be humiliated about here.

“Ivan and I want the same thing. You know that, right?” Thankfully those words were enough to bring her gaze up to meet mine once more. “We adore you and Timothy. It might not be a typical family, but we want to be a family with you.”

“You have talked to Ivan about this?”

I shook my head. “I don’t need to. I know my twin brother, and I know exactly what he wants. I see the way he looks at you, and it’s the same way I do. We want you.”

Miranda kissed my hand, and love for her surged through me. I honestly didn’t know it was possible to feel this way, to have this intense love. I was addicted to it and I never wanted to let it go. I never wanted to let her go. Ever.



“SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO FIRST?” MIRANDA ASKED ME when we finally stepped out of the hospital and into the sunshine. It might have only been a few days, but it was so torturous it felt like a life time. “You haven’t exactly been locked away, but I bet it feels good to be free. To be able to move around and stuff. I can only imagine how much you want to do.”

I turned to smile at her, the glorious feeling of being able to go wherever I wanted washing over me. “I want to take a run, but as a bear. I want to shift. Is that okay?”

Miranda nodded eagerly. “I don’t shift very often, I don’t ever really have a reason to do so, and I guess deep down I kinda knew Brady hated it, but I would like to shift with you. It’s been a very long time, but I could go for a run as well.”

“Really?” I could feel myself lighting up. “Then let’s do it.”

She held out her hand to me and I took it as we headed toward the park. I couldn’t get enough of the idea of getting to see Miranda’s wolf. It was one of the things that was still mysterious to me, and now I was lucky enough to get a chance.



We got to the park and I stepped back to witness the woman who had my heart beating fast shifting into the animal within her. I was in awe of her. Light fur, matching her hair, covered her lean and strong, absolutely beautiful body. I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I witnessed those piercing eyes of hers in animal form. Miranda was playful, I could feel it, which was amazing considering everything that was going on around us. All the danger, all the horror, and she was still able to be in a good mood.

I couldn't wait to let my bear free, and once I did, we started to run through the grass, giving in to our animal instincts. It felt absolutely amazing. Thank God we could have this beautiful moment together.

I didn't know how many other beautiful moments we would get together before we had to face off with Brady, but I was going to savor every second of this while I could.

Miranda and I acted like cubs, playing around in the park, and it was honestly better than the medicine they gave me in the hospital. Perhaps that was what love was supposed to do, bring joy in even the hardest of times.

If so, then I was all for it.



## IVAN POV

“Okay, Owain, what do you have for me?” I asked grimly as I sat opposite the police chief. “What are we going to do next? Because fucking Brady Clover is still out there.”

I was supposed to be with Miranda right now, picking Cole up from the hospital, but a call from Owain brought me here instead, so I was hoping we finally had some news on this asshole. It fucking killed me that he was still out there somewhere, doing whatever the hell he wanted to whoever the hell he wanted. Not good since he was a psychopath.

The only good thing was that it seemed Owain was finally focused on the right lead. He had exhausted all others, so there was only one way to go.

“So, I followed your advice,” Owain replied, “and I looked into the military angle. You were right, Brady did have a short career there, so I dug deeper.”

“I thought as much.” Miranda hadn’t said it outright, but I got the impression from some of her stories that her ex-fiancé had once been in the military.

“He was honorably discharged under some strange circumstances, but I have found out what.” He paused for dramatic effect, with me staring at him like he had lost his damn mind. This was *not* the time for theatrics. “He showed too much prejudice against the shifter members of his team, to the point where he was harassing them and making their lives a living hell.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. I wasn't expecting this at all. "Whoa, that's... that crazy. Where the hell did that come from?"

"His family," Owain replied grimly. "His very human family. Pure blood, they call themselves. Generations of racists against the shifters. They are part of that old fashioned thinking which believes 'animals' shouldn't be allowed to mix with humans."

My stomach churned. To think that *anyone* still thought like this was sickening. It happened, but I was sure I wasn't the only shifter who didn't want to acknowledge the existence of this blind, pointless hatred.

"So, Brady grew up with those beliefs then?" I asked, knowing that definitely didn't excuse it, but it would help me to understand a little bit.

"He did. In a wealthy, powerful human family so he was always allowed to do whatever he wanted, especially when it came to these sick, twisted beliefs."

"Oh no," I groaned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"In the reports I have managed to find about this about this, it seems Brady has twisted his views in a specific way over time, and he has a lot of disdain for she-wolves. His anger all seems to be targeted towards them. Male shifters aren't a problem to him, it's the women. He sees them as *less than*. A misogynistic view that seems to have come from his overbearing asshole of a father. Rumors of this bad behavior has followed him throughout his whole life, but it's escalated. It seems like his family has always paid his way out of things, until more recently. Perhaps why he has resorted to stealing to try and keep up his lifestyle without their constant support."

I didn't feel any sympathy for him. Plenty of people grew up in less than ideal circumstances and didn't grow up to be absolute monsters. He made the decision not to better himself.

"Anyway, he was sent on his way from the military, and then the Dark Bounty Pack disowned him. The final nail in his coffin was put in by his mother."

“Oh God, I bet that didn’t help his hatred of women,” I shot back dryly.

“Yeah, it definitely made him worse.” He looked like he had something he didn’t want to say, but he was going to have to. There was no point in hiding anything from me, even if I was emotionally entangled in this. I needed to know it all. “And then he met Miranda. From the research I have done into Brady Clover’s life, which isn’t the easiest thing because he doesn’t stay anywhere for too long, he didn’t know she was a she-wolf before they got together. She isn’t one for shifting much, so he just never found out.”

A thick lump of emotion lodged in my throat. I felt horrible for Miranda. How the hell was she supposed to know Brady was a sick fucker with a hatred for she-wolves? I honestly wasn’t sure how she had managed to survive for as long as she did with him.

“By the time he found out, she was already pregnant, which I guess stopped him from doing anything terrible to her.” That answer gave me a clue to the truth, but it wasn’t enough. “Coincidentally, it seems to me that this is the time his family cut him off. Whether they discovered his she-wolf bride, or just got sick of his behavior, I’m not sure. But this all escalated things a lot. I can only assume that he didn’t want to kill Miranda because she was pregnant with his baby.

But he did go on to kill other she-wolves...something I don’t have full evidence of yet, but I definitely believe it. I compared the places Brady and Miranda moved to every time a she-wolf was found in a lake and the location of the murders, and I can see the pattern.”

I gasped as the realization hit me. “So, Brady was killing other she-wolves because he couldn’t kill the mother of his child? That’s so messed up.”

“You see some fucked up things when you are a police officer. It isn’t the easiest job.”

It was unthinkable, at least to me. I couldn’t imagine anyone doing such terrible things to another person, even after my stint in the military. I would never get used to people being

so horrific and being such monsters deep down. It didn't sit right with me and it never would.

“So, where do we go from here?” I threw my hands in the air in frustration. “How do we get the guy? I don't want to wait until he acts again. We can't have another she-wolf dead.”

The next one could be Miranda. He seemed utterly determined to ruin her life, so I wouldn't be surprised if that meant she ended up at the bottom of a lake somewhere too. Not that any of us would let it happen, but for a guy who had been getting away with it for such a long time, anything was possible.

“Since we don't know where Brady is at the moment, there isn't much we can do. Unless you think you might be able to track him.”

I jumped up eagerly, grateful that I would finally have something to do. I hated all this sitting around and doing nothing. It was sickening. “Definitely. I will get right on that.”

“Actually, Ivan, you really shouldn't get involved,” Owain warned, even though he probably knew that I wasn't going to listen. “You're far more emotionally invested than I would like, and I wouldn't want that to get you hurt. I don't want you to eagerly throw yourself in front of a bullet because your heart overrules your head. I have seen it happen before, and it gets ugly quick. I don't want that to happen to you.”

I rolled my eyes. I got that he cared about me and my safety, but I was going to do what I thought was right, even if I did end up just another sad story he would go on to tell other people as a warning. “That isn't going to happen. That will just make me fight harder. I would have thought you'd know that about me. I won't let anything happen to Miranda.”

“That's exactly what I'm talking about. Don't put yourself in danger like this.”

He was wasting his breath, because I was already back away toward the door, ready to go ahead with what I wanted to do. I knew what was best, and nothing would hold me back. Miranda was worth it, and my feelings for her were so strong

that I would keep her safe no matter what. Maybe Owain had never felt a love like that before.

“I will be in touch once I have something for you, Owain.”

“But I don’t think—”

I closed the door closed behind me, shutting those words away. I had a mission I needed to complete now. I planned on getting to the hospital quickly to try to be there when Cole was let out. He was going to be happy we had a mission to work on, something to distract him from his arm being hurt. He wouldn’t want to sit around and wait to heal. Luckily, his wounds wouldn’t affect him as much in his bear form. He would be able to do what he needed to do.

It didn’t take me long to get to the hospital, but disappointment soon caught me when I saw the room Cole had been in was empty. It was a good thing, I suppose, but also a little disappointing. I was going to have to wait to share all the information I had until I got to Miranda’s home. I was certain that was where they had gone. Cole had barely been to his place ever since we started protecting Miranda, same as me. The only time I had left her side was to have my meeting with Owain.

I drove fast to Miranda’s. Thankfully, I could hear voices inside, and I was happy to know that Cole and Miranda were indeed here. I knocked eagerly, excited to get to check in on my twin brother. I went into panic mode when he got shot. I’d raced after Brady, but I was worried about Cole the whole time.

“Ivan!” Miranda cried out. “Come in, you don’t have to knock. You know that. I should have given you a key already. Remind me to get you one sooner than later.”

It was nice to know that I would always be welcomed in Miranda’s home. But even if she gave me a key right now, I would still knock until Brady was gone.

“Guys, how is everything?” I asked as I followed Miranda into the living room. “Are you both okay?”

“I am, but I’m glad you’re here,” Cole replied. “Because after I got out of the hospital, we went for a shift run, and I caught a scent—Brady’s scent—in one of the rentals on the outskirts of town.”

“Not one of the lake houses?” I was shocked. For some reason, even though I knew they were all empty at the moment because of the burglaries, I thought he was there anyway, lurking about.

“No, the ones toward the mountain. He wasn’t there at the time, but I really think that’s where he might be staying. We need to make a plan so we can get to him.”

“I know the real estate agent that deals with those properties. I can find out if one of them has been rented to Brady Clover. Then we’ll know for sure.”

“Are you talking about Gemma?” Cole asked pointedly, reminding me what I could be digging up here. “Because I can go and speak with her if you want.”

Miranda darted her eyes between us, not understanding. Truth be told, I would have preferred it stay that way. I didn’t need her to know about my past. This was the problem with living in a small town like Twin Lakes, the past was always there. It was inescapable, even when a new person came along who didn’t know a thing about it. In Twin Lakes, they would find out no matter what. I didn’t want Miranda to find out from someone else.

“She’s my ex-girlfriend,” I finally explained, knowing there was no escaping it. “But from years ago. It wasn’t anything serious, it’s just a bit awkward, that’s all.”

“Why?” Miranda asked, needing more. I could understand that, she had been with a guy who lied to her throughout their whole relationship. I had to be completely honest with her.

“She thought that it was a lot more serious than I did. It got a bit...stalkerish for a while.” Her eyes popped wide. “But it’s fine now. She’s with someone else. It’s just a bit...” Shit, this wasn’t going over well at all. I didn’t want to put Miranda in an even more awkward position than she was already in. “You



know what, Cole, you go see her. Take a picture of Brady with you and find out what's happening there. I will stay here with you, Miranda. I have something I need to discuss with you anyway. Some things I found out when I was talking to Owain at the police station."

I caught Cole's eyes and nodded so he understood that all was fine. Miranda just needed to know the full truth about the monster she was with once upon a time. She wasn't going to want to hear it, especially not about the rape and the discharge from his pack. I would also have to let her know that every murder was supposed to be her. It was going to suck, but it was best that she knew.

"Right, I will get this taken care of." Cole got up and started heading for the front door. "Just stay here until I get back. Until I have spoken to Gemma and we know for sure that Brady is staying there. I just...I don't want to have to be worried about you guys while I'm there."

I held up my hands in surrender. "We aren't going anywhere."

"Only to pick Timothy up from school," Miranda reminded us. "But aside from that, we will be here. I promise you we won't do anything stupid."

Her mentioning Timothy made me hate Brady all over again. A little boy shouldn't have such a monster as a father. Why was Brady such an asshole? Why did he have to play all these games and do all this shit?

He needed to be punished. I was going to make sure that he was.



## SIMON POV

I wasn't sure if I was welcome here since I hadn't been invited. But there was such a strong part of me that wanted to check in on Cole, to make sure he was okay after the shooting incident, and I couldn't relax until I did. He was home from the hospital now, which had to be a good sign, but until I saw him with my own eyes, I wouldn't be able to let it go.

So, with a nervous, shaking hand, I worked up the courage to knock on the door. I wasn't sure what response I would get, but I was about to find out.

"Oh, Simon." Miranda looked stunned as she swung the door open, but not upset to see me. "Come in. It's been a minute, hasn't it? Come chat with us."

*Us.* That meant the twins were here as well. Good. I followed her inside and into the kitchen where Ivan was sitting, clutching a mug of coffee.

"I thought Cole was out of the hospital now," I said.

"Yeah, he is," Miranda reassured me. "He's doing much better now. He's actually out on a bit of a mission, going to speak to a real estate agent about a home we think Brady might be staying in."

I breathed out a sigh of relief. Cole had to be doing much better if he was out helping Miranda already. I bet he couldn't wait to get back out there to do something productive after having to spend some time in the hospital.

“So, Ivan has been filling me in on some terrible things. More things than I thought I had to deal with,” Miranda said as she handed me a mug of coffee.

Now that I was looking at her a little closer, I could her eyes were swollen and red like she had been crying. What the hell was happening now?

“Oh no, I’m sorry, Miranda. That’s awful. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“It’s just Brady,” she said with a helpless shrug. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to keep going with him being this way. With the evil that is deep within him.”

I swallowed hard. “What do you mean? What else has happened?”

She sighed loudly, sounding defeated. “Well, it turns out Brady was in the military before he met me. For a while anyway. Until he got caught being prejudice against shifters. Something that he has been acting on his whole life without me knowing. All of this is just racism and a bunch of fucked up family values. It’s horrible.

That made me feel sick to my stomach. What a bastard. I hated guys who thought they could just go through life doing what they wanted to whoever they wanted without worrying about the consequences.

“It’s worse,” Ivan said. “He didn’t realize Miranda was a she-wolf at first. Not until she was already pregnant. Which is why he killed other women.”

“He doesn’t see them as women,” Miranda cried out, agony rolling off her tongue. “He sees them as lesser beings. Not even human. It makes me ill to think that I was with him. That I thought I loved such a monster. What is wrong with me?”

Luckily, I brought a bottle of Miranda’s special calming tea with me. I pulled it out of my bag and handed it to her. She gulped it down like it was the air keeping her alive. Shit, this really was bad. I felt terrible for her. I wished there was something I could do.

“Don’t worry.” Ivan wrapped his arms around Miranda, which made me feel a bit better about everything. At least she had him to comfort her. “This isn’t your fault. You aren’t the monster, he is. He’s obviously good at charming people and tricking them. She-wolves are known for their smarts, yet he has managed to get lots of them on their own and with their guards down to be killed. So, there must be something about him.”

“I suppose so,” she murmured sadly. “But that doesn’t make me feel less foolish.”

“What are we going to do?” I couldn’t sit back and do nothing. I cared about Miranda, she was my friend, and I cared about the people in this town as well. No one deserved to be killed just because some sick fuck had an issue with she-wolves. “How can we stop him? Do you guys have a plan? Or do the police have a plan? We need to get this guy off the streets now.” Actually, it was something that should have been done years ago. No more time could be wasted.

“No, no, no.” Miranda held her hands up. “You aren’t getting mixed up in this, Simon, you can’t. I’m stressed out enough with everything going on, I don’t want to be worried about you as well. I have put you through enough.”

I shook my head. “I have made my decision, I know what I want to do. I am going to help with this no matter what. I know you might not want me to be in the middle of this, but I already am. I refuse to do nothing while danger comes for you. That isn’t what friends do for one another.”

It was almost a relief when there was a knock at Miranda’s front door, and that Cole was back. He shattered the building tension that could have exploded into an argument between Miranda and myself. Because I wouldn’t back down, and I sensed that she wanted to keep me safe. Even though it was absolutely my choice if I wanted to be kept safe or not.

“Hi, Simon.” Cole didn’t seem surprised that I was here, he simply accepted it easily. “I talked to Gemma and it seems like there *is* a guy staying in the cabin we went past. Someone rented it who matches the picture I showed her, but it wasn’t

rented under his own name. I guess that's why the cops haven't tracked him down yet."

"Fuck," Miranda whispered. "So it really is him. He is here."

"Yeah, but don't worry," Cole replied with a smile. "This means we know where to find him. We can plan around that."

She was shaking, trembling all over, and Cole wrapped his arms around her to hold her close to his chest.

"We just need you to tell us everything about him," Cole continued. "And I know that might be painful for you, Miranda, but it's the only way we are going to be able to figure out his weaknesses."

She sucked in a sharp breath, not looking too pleased, before she nodded. "Okay, I will go through everything with you guys, but I don't know if he has any weaknesses. Clearly, he's very manipulative. I suppose he's great at killing since he does that all the time. I don't know how we will manage to defeat him, even with all of us working together."

She glanced around at our determined faces, seeing that we weren't going to back down, and that Brady couldn't scare us however much he wanted to. Ultimately, there was only one of him. We were going to be just fine.

It was in that moment that Timothy came bounding down the stairs with a happy smile on his face. He didn't take much notice of us all in the kitchen. I guess he was getting used to everyone protecting him now. That was nice, as long as he felt safe and secure.

"I think it might be dinnertime," Miranda said with a weak laugh. She was trying her hardest to make this normal. "Is everyone hungry?"

Sitting down to dinner together gave us more time to knock out some plans and figure out what we needed to do next.



SITTING AROUND THE TABLE, JUST THE FOUR OF US, AFTER Timothy had finally gone to bed full and happy, brought the tension right back to the surface of everything. We knew we needed to do something about Brady, but it was hard to figure out what.

“Is there anything we can use against him? Any way we can lure him to us and catch him by surprise.” Cole asked Miranda.

I watched on anxiously as she chewed the inside of her cheek, trying to think of something. If Brady didn’t have anything we could use against him, it was a good thing we had numbers on our side. Surely there was only so much he could do with three of us ready to take him down with the backing of the police.

Then again, Cole, Ivan, and I were all there when he shot at Cole, and we couldn’t capture him. This wasn’t going to be easy for any of us.

“Me,” Miranda finally admitted with a tremor in her voice. “I guess I am his weakness. He wants me, doesn’t he? So if we utilize that to our advantage—”

“No way.” Cole bolted to his feet, obviously getting what Miranda was suggesting way before Ivan and I did. “You are not going to be the bait. Are you kidding me? We are trying to keep you out of danger, from being another body in the lake.”

I hated that idea just as much as the twins did. I couldn’t lose my friendship with Miranda. Not like that.

“What else do you suggest?” Miranda shot back with fire burning in her eyes. “Because I want to fight Brady as well. I don’t want him to keep killing she-wolves because of me. Because his fucked-up hatred makes him think he can. I also don’t want him anywhere near Timothy, so I want to help. You might not like it, but that doesn’t matter to me. Not one bit. I know what I want to do, and what will work. I know Brady wants me, and I’m also very aware that he has one upped us before because we have not been ready for him. We haven’t been expecting him. It’s time to turn that around and do it back

to him. *He* needs to be tricked for once, and this is the way to do that. By using me as bait.”

Cole shook his head, but I could see Ivan faltering somewhat. He seemed to be coming around to Miranda’s way of thinking. Perhaps he had his military head on now and he was thinking about it in a more logical way.

I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t like it, but I also recognized the sheer determination in Miranda that wasn’t going to go away. She was the sort of woman who would do whatever it took to get her way. Especially when she thought she was in the right, which I got the sense she did here.

“I will go to the area where Brady is staying and pretend to be lost or something, I don’t know.” Miranda shrugged, her eyes darting between all three of us. “But then we will be ready for him. Us and the police. I can even get him to confess, which will make the whole case even stronger, especially if we can record it. That way, when you guys finally get the jump on him, they will have to arrest him and throw away the key.”

“But you will be in danger,” Ivan whispered, his heart breaking despite the military side of his brain trying its hardest to win out. “We will be so worried about you, it’ll be horrible.”

Miranda smiled when she saw she was starting to win him over. Despite his protests, he wanted to hear what she was actually saying, which had to be a good thing. I honestly didn’t know what was best, and this wasn’t really my time to have an opinion. But whatever Miranda decided on, as her friend, I would do everything it took to keep her safe and alive. That much, she could be sure of.

“I won’t feel like I am in danger, though, not with you guys protecting me.”

“I don’t like it.” Cole shook his head fervently. “I don’t like it at all.”

Miranda leaned back in her chair. “If you have any other idea, I would love to hear it. If not, I don’t see what other



choice we have. This is what we have to do. You know I will do *anything* to make sure that no one else is killed and to keep my son safe. If I have to put myself in danger for a little while, so be it. I don't think Brady will use his gun on me. I'm sure his plans for me are much more brutal. That gives you all time."

I did *not* like looking at it in that way, even if Miranda was probably right. This was all very scary, but I guess we knew that it wasn't going to be a walk in the park, so we couldn't complain now.

"We *will* keep you safe," I promised Miranda, just in case she needed that confirmation from me. "No matter what, you will get out of this unscathed. I promise you that."



## MIRANDA POV

I hugged Simon at the door as I said what felt a bit like a final goodbye to him, which was crazy since we had plans to enact the following morning. But the plans were potentially deadly for all of us. The sooner we put our plan in to action, the better.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked him sadly, trying my hardest to read the expression plastered across his face. “Because I don’t want you to get hurt, Simon. I don’t want anything else bad to happen.”

He grabbed me and pulled me back in for another hug. He really did have the warmest, sweetest hugs I had ever known. I was so grateful that we still got to be friends after everything that had happened between us. If we all got through this, I knew that we would be in one another’s lives forever. This bond would last no matter what.

“Miranda, you are important to me,” he replied firmly. “And there is also a part of me that needs to do this to help come to terms with my past as well.”

“What do you mean?” Curiosity got the better of me.

“Well, I couldn’t save Kat. I wasn’t there when she got attacked. There was nothing I could do. But I have always felt guilt anyway. Like that wasn’t a good enough reason. I should have been better for her, I should have been there, I should have saved her.” He swallowed hard, and in that moment it was challenging for me to bite back my emotions as well. This was hard to hear, to know that he had been struggling for such

a long time. “I can’t go back and change that, but I can help you now. That’s what I want to do.”

I couldn’t argue with that logic no matter much I wanted to. If he wanted to make up for something from his past that definitely wasn’t his fault, who was I to deny him that? I would just have to make sure nothing happened to him.

“I understand. And thank you. I will see you in the morning, then.” I leaned in and kissed him lightly on the cheek, grateful to have come to Twin Lakes and met all these amazing people.

Simon nodded, gave me a reassuring smile, and left my house. Seeing his smile actually helped make me feel a little calmer, which was a miracle considering what tomorrow was going to bring. In the morning, I would finally have my showdown with Brady. But at least I wasn’t going to be alone. I would be with three men who cared about me deeply.

Eventually, Simon was out of sight, so I closed the door and headed for the living room, where I found Ivan and Cole sitting on my couch in deep and quiet conversation. I was happy to step back and just watch them for a moment.

Thank goodness they were okay now and much closer than they used to be. None of this would have been as easy without them talking like this. And not just this thing with Brady. But all of us in a relationship of sorts, presuming there was going to be an *us* after all of this. There were deep and intense feelings there, but would it be enough to pull us through? I guess we were just going to have to get through this mess with Brady first, then we could figure it out.

“Oh, Miranda.” Ivan’s face lit up when he finally saw me in the doorway. “You’re back. Was Simon okay? I bet he’s anxious about tomorrow.”

“Yeah, he’s alright. Just a little nervous. But aren’t we all?”

Cole’s face was dark with unease. He wasn’t happy with any of this, and he wasn’t afraid to let me know. I wasn’t sure how I was going to make him understand that I could do this. Was I ready for it? No, but that was only because I didn’t think

I would ever have to face Brady again after that dreadful day at Lake Arrowhead when I saw him with the dead body. But that wasn't going to stop me. It didn't matter if I didn't feel brave enough to face him. I was going to do it anyway.

“Cole, don't do this to yourself,” I said as I closed the gap between us and perched on his lap. “You know it's going to be fine. I have sworn to you that I won't do anything that puts me in danger. I'm just going to work toward getting him locked up. The end goal is worth it.” I leaned down and pressed my lips to his, kissing him with the reassurance I needed him to feel from me.

Cole wasn't resistant, he happily kissed me back, losing himself in my lips for a moment. Thank goodness I could find a way to ease his pain somewhat. It was going to be fine. *We* were going to be fine because we had to be. There was no other way this could end.

I pulled back and rested my forehead against his so I could stare in to his eyes. Emotions flew through his eyes, and I could see the struggle there.

“I just worry about you,” he whispered, his breath tickling over my lips. “I have fallen in love with you, Miranda. I can't stand the idea of anything bad happening to you. I want you in my life forever.”

I slid my eyes closed as I took in those words. He loved me. Hearing him say it was nothing I would ever get tired of. I wasn't expecting to fall in love again, especially not with twin bear shifters, so soon after my traumatic relationship with Brady, but did that make it wrong? It couldn't. Not when it felt so good.

“I love you too, Cole,” I replied, then crashed my lips to his once more. I craved to this, not wanting to fight it because it was perfect for me. “You have no idea how much.”

As the kissing intensified, I felt the warmth of Ivan slipping up close behind me, his hands running up my body. I hadn't forgotten he was there, he was always a part of what was going on between Cole and me, but I had to admit that

having him physically connected to me was incredible. I leaned back into him, resting my body against him.

“I love you too, Miranda,” Ivan whispered as he stroked my hair off my neck and brushed kisses all over me. “Nothing will ever be able to change that. Nothing and no one.”

All of a sudden, all the stress that had been clinging to the atmosphere around us melted away. Sure, we had a hard task ahead of us in the morning, but that didn't have to matter now. Not when I twisted my body around so I could kiss Ivan too.

It wasn't long before clothing was peeled away and our naked bodies intertwined with one another. Hands, teeth, lips, tongues were everywhere, setting us alight. I was more than happy to give myself over to the sensations and to experience this bliss that only these two men could give me. Not because I was worried that we could lose each another tomorrow, because I was trying my hardest not to think those sorts of terrible thoughts, but because I wanted to savor as much happiness as I could while I could do so. Before things took a turn. Before I had to face the demons of my past so I could go on to explore the wonders of my future in Twin Lakes with these two amazing men who I could not get enough of. I wanted to touch them all over, to feel them everywhere, to get to know their bodies as well as I knew my own. As well as they seemed to know my own, because the way they touched me had me addicted.



*WHAT AM I DOING?* I THOUGHT TO MYSELF AS I CLUTCHED MY backpack tight, forcing my feet to keep walking into the woods even though this place had such a bad vibe to it that it scared the living shit out of me. After the amazing night I had last night, this all felt so insane, but it was a necessary evil I had to go through, no matter what.

*It will be fine.* I kept trying to convince myself of that as nerves zigzagged through my system. But I couldn't make myself believe that because the thought of seeing Brady again

was so terrifying that I could hardly stomach it. I tried to play it cool in front of Cole, Ivan, and Simon because they had been worried enough about me, but I couldn't lie to myself. I was freaking out.

I had wanted to marry Brady. It really wasn't that long ago that I was going to ask him to finally set a date. It was so bizarre to be here now, hating that psychotic rapist and killer and in love with two men who absolutely adored me.

I headed down the path toward the house Brady was staying in while he was in Twin Lakes. Isolated and remote, freaking scary but also the way he liked to live his life. For obvious reasons.

Thank goodness Timothy was at school. Michelle was going to pick him up, just in case things got really crazy here in the woods. Not that I was planning on being here any longer than I needed to be. But even with Simon, Cole, and Ivan following me and watching out for me, there was no telling which way this was going to go.

“No.”

The single word chilled me to the bone. My breath caught in my throat and my heart stopped beating for a while. I knew this was it, the moment I had been waiting for, but now that it was here, I was too scared to turn. The moment I laid my eyes on him, this would get real, and I was scared for that.

*Do it for Timothy, I reminded myself. This is for him, all for him.*

For my son, I turned to look at the stranger who was once the love of my life, the man I followed around the country because I trusted him and thought his job as a fisherman was important to him, to our family.

“There is no way,” he said, bemused, then tossed his head back and laughed nastily. “Have you not been getting my warning notes? Have you not figured out that I've come to get you back? I cannot believe you came here alone, without your body guards. This is just...well, it's meant to be, isn't it? For

you to be doing whatever it is you are doing right by my little house.”

“Hiking,” I whispered back, knowing he probably wouldn’t buy it. “I didn’t know those warning notes were for me. I thought it was just a crime spree.”

Brady’s smug smile would have really gotten to me if I wasn’t playing him. “Oh, you really are naïve, aren’t you, Miranda? But you always have been. Of *course* that was all me. It always has been me. I thought you would have figured that out by now. You didn’t even realize that it was me in your store that time? Thanks for the cash, by the way, that kept me going.”

“Is that what you always did?” I whispered. “Steal? Because I thought that we were living an honest life.”

He tossed his head back and roared with laughter. “You should just be glad that I got so good at the stealing. That was what kept us going. That was what allowed me to do all of this.”

Thank God I had my recording device on. Now I just needed to get him to admit to everything more specifically. I really needed this to work out in my favor.

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously. “All of what?”

Brady stepped closer to me, and it honestly took every ounce of strength within me not to recoil. He disgusted me now, I despised him, but I couldn’t let that show.

“Don’t act like you didn’t see me at Lake Arrowhead with my red-haired friend.”

The memory hit me like a wrecking ball. How could this asshole be so callous about all of this? He even smiled a little brighter as he talked about the dead red-haired woman in his boat. The she-wolf who did not deserve to die.

But I would get justice for her, no matter what.

“You know I threw her overboard once she was already dead. I saw you running away.” His words were now being whispered in to my ear. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried



not to panic as I prayed the recording device was picking everything up. “I knew then that I would have to kill you too. I never wanted to, you were the one she-wolf I was planning on leaving live. At least until Timothy is an adult. But you fucked that up, didn’t you? And now I need to make sure you don’t tell anyone anything about me and where we have been. The trail of bodies I left behind. Because I am *not* going to get caught now. Not until every she-wolf is dead and under water as well. Because that is the only place for them. You were always going to go there too, but I guess you’re just getting your invitation early.”

“Why?”

He grabbed a clump of my hair and tugged it. “Because you’re fucking monsters, all of you. You trick innocent men like me and get me to marry you before we know that you are just a disgusting beast.”

*Fuck.* Heat burned through my left side, like a weird sharp pain that didn’t seem to have a source.



## COLE POV

I glanced over to Simon, who was listening to the live feed of Miranda's recording device intently. I could pick up on some of the words that asshole was saying, so I knew the confession Miranda wanted was happening, but that did nothing to calm the burning heat racing through my body. I was angry and frustrated. Fuck that guy, I wanted him gone *now*.

The ache in my shoulder intensified with my hatred of him. It was as if my body wanted to remind me further that it was time for him to die already because of what he did to me.

Unfortunately, Ivan and Miranda didn't agree with me that death was the right outcome for him. They wanted him arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to prison, where he'd have to pay for his crimes. While that would give the families of his victims the truth and the justice they sought, it still didn't make me feel any better.

"Calm down," Ivan whispered when he sensed me trembling, on the verge of shifting. I couldn't let my bear out yet because the moment I did, I would lose all control. "It's fine. She is fine. Let Miranda do this. Let her make this right."

My fists balled up by my sides. I understood all that, but that didn't make me okay with the fact that Miranda was out there alone with him able to touch her.

"Something is happening." The edge to Simon's tone was horrific. I snapped my head around to him with my eyes wide open. "Brady is admitting to tons of stuff, and using that as

threats, but Miranda is...I don't know. She sounds strange. I can't put my finger on it, but there is something—”

That was all I needed. I wasn't holding back any longer. If there was something going on with Miranda, then it was time for us to break up this little scene and go to her. I could hear Ivan trying to say something to me as I headed for Miranda's location, but I couldn't make out any of the words. A red mist had descended over my eyes, and I was enraged. Surely we had enough of a confession to lock up this piece of shit.

As soon as she was in sight, I could see what was wrong with her. All the color had drained from her cheeks and she bent double, holding her side. She looked so afraid as she sunk to her knees, which was why it was my turn to take over. He had intimidated far too many women for my liking. “Don't worry, Miranda.”

She didn't answer me, but she did meet my eyes for a moment, showing me the intensity of her worry.

Fuck that, it was time for this asshole to die.

My bear exploded free. There was no holding my animal back when he saw that Miranda was frightened. I caught Brady by the shoulder with my teeth and shook him hard. I pierced his skin and caused him to bleed, but it didn't feel good enough. It wasn't enough revenge. I was at boiling point and I wanted him to dead.

I had gotten the jump on him, but our carefully laid out plan had gone to hell, and it wasn't long before Brady had a gun cocked and pointed at my head.

“Fuck you, Miranda!” he yelled, his voice trembling with rage. “Fuck you! You let me think that you were out here alone, and now look what you have done to me.”

His shoulder was harmed, but not as bad as mine. I had a bullet through mine. Plus, I couldn't stop thinking about what he had done to Miranda, how he had ruined so much of her life. I lunged at him again, ignoring the deadly weapon in his hand. I would get him to drop it anyway, so it didn't matter. I snapped at him, and then again, only managing to nip his skin

because he was more aware of me now, but I wasn't going to stop.

I HAD MORE ANGER THAN I THOUGHT SURGING THROUGH MY body, and it was getting out of control. I didn't know if I was going to be able to stop. Even knowing that the police were around, here to arrest Brady as soon as he said enough, I was going to do what I had to do in order to protect Miranda.

A roar sounded behind me, one I knew all too well. Ivan was here too, giving up on his "follow the plan and do what Miranda wants" idea. A wolf came too, and I had to assume it was Simon. I hadn't actually seen him in his animal form until now.

"You...you are all abominations," Brady screamed, his cheeks bright red with his rage. It seemed that his hatred was now toward all of us, and not just rooted in misogyny. "All of you. You...you shouldn't be anywhere near me. You aren't worth life. At all. Someone needs to put you all down."

He pulled the trigger, not really aiming the gun at anyone now. It seemed like he couldn't work out who he wanted to shoot first. But it didn't matter anyway. There was something wrong with the gun, nothing was coming out of it. We really did have the upper hand now.

We circled him, we three beasts, as the gun shook out of his hand to the floor, because it was useless to him. Whether that blankness in his eyes now was from pain or fear, I wasn't sure, but I also didn't care.

"You are disgusting. I don't even have the words for what you are..."

I bared my teeth at Brady and lunged toward him. He jumped back, just out of my reach. Tears shone in his eyes, but he wasn't the sort of man comfortable enough with himself to let them fall. That was part of his problem. Toxic masculinity.

"I don't want—I just want Miranda." Brady rose his hands above his head in a surrendering gesture, but snapped them back down just as quickly, seemingly thinking better of it.

“She is my wife, or she will be my wife. She is the mother of my child, and she took my son away from me.” He darted his eyes between us all, spinning as he went. I wasn’t sure which animal scared him the most. I hoped it was me, because I thrived off that fear in his eyes that said he knew what I was capable of. “I just want my family back, there is no need for all of this. There is no need for any drama. I don’t want there to be a mess.”

I wanted to ask him why he’d hurt Miranda if that were true, but I couldn’t communicate with him properly as a bear. I could, however, threaten him physically some more. I easily knocked him to the ground, but the gun didn’t slip out of his hand. I wasn’t afraid of him, but he was more powerful than me with a gun in his hand.

“Please, let’s talk about this. Become human again and we can discuss it like adults. There is no need for all of this craziness.”

I didn’t think any of us were going to respond, because Brady did not deserve it, but, much to my surprise, Ivan’s voice boomed out.

“You do *not* get to speak to Miranda again. You don’t get to do this...”

While Ivan talked to Brady, Simon grabbed Brady’s leg and tugged, scratching the shit out of his skin with his teeth as he did. His blood spurting everywhere didn’t affect me at all. He deserved it. This was for all the she-wolves who didn’t deserve to die. Who didn’t deserve to meet Brady and to get caught up in his net of lies and deception. Including Miranda.

I lunged, no longer thinking straight, not caring if everything really went to hell and Brady ended up dead. That didn’t bother me one bit. I was a primal animal who was thirsty for the death and blood of a person who didn’t deserve life. Who was a waste of fucking air and only lived to kill other women, she-wolves.

This was *it* for him now. It was over.



I BLINKED A FEW TIMES, TRYING TO ADJUST TO THE LIGHT. This wasn't what I was expecting to wake up to. I thought I was in the woods, by the cabin Brady was renting, making sure he didn't hurt anyone else.

"Brady." I bolted up, panic lightning bolting through me. "Oh fuck..."

"Hey, hey, hey." Simon rested a hand on my shoulder, trying to push me back down in what I now realized was a seat in a waiting room somewhere... No, not somewhere, in a hospital. Shit, how did I end up in this building again? "Don't panic. Miranda is fine. You don't need to freak out or anything."

"Miranda..."

As I said her name, a new, horrifying memory hit me hard. In the woods, we were all so concerned with getting Brady that none of us noticed the puddle of blood forming around Miranda. That fucker had stabbed her in the side, and she had become too weak to even tell us.

"The surgery is done," Ivan confirmed. "She's just getting some rest now and then we can go in and see her."

"Surgery? I don't like the sound of that."

Ivan rested his hand on mine and smiled calmly. "She's a fighter, Cole, you know that. She's going to be just fine."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but silently berated myself for allowing Miranda to become the bait. Yes it got us to Brady, but she got hurt. She was never supposed to get hurt.

"What about Brady?" I needed to know that all of this hadn't been for nothing.

"Do you not remember?" Simon asked me.

I shook my head.

“As soon as we got Brady on the ground and unable to move, Ivan called in Owain. The police intervened and now Brady is in jail.”

“He is?” I tried to roll that around in my brain to see how it made me feel, but I honestly wasn’t sure. I suppose it was the best outcome for everyone, but it felt hollow. There was still a part of me that wanted him dead. “So, what’s going to happen next?”

“The evidence is overwhelming. Miranda did exactly what she needed to and got all the proof they needed. He admitted to a lot of the murders. The police believe there are more, but there is time now to investigate and question him.”

The way Simon was smiling was infectious. I couldn’t stop myself from joining in. He was happy with the way that it had all turned out, so I suppose it was best for me to do the same thing. I *was* irritated that the revenge didn’t feel quite right, but it was good, it was enough. Brady would have to answer for everything he had done. He’d rot in prison for the rest of his life, so that was something.

BUT UNTIL I LAID MY EYES ON MIRANDA, I WOULDN’T BE able to accept that this was finally over and we could finally move on with our lives.

How *were* we going to move on with our lives? Practically? That was something we hadn’t had a chance to discuss yet. But if this really was done and Brady was gone forever, we were going to have all the time in the world.

“Thank you, Simon,” I replied, referring to absolutely everything he had done for all of us. He wasn’t just a close friend to Miranda, but to Ivan and me as well. This was a bond that would definitely last for our entire lives, I was sure of it. “I appreciate you.”

“We both do,” Ivan agreed. “We wouldn’t have survived without you.”

We shared a knowing smile that strengthened our bond. We had been through an ordeal that other people could not



understand, and that meant something real. Something powerful and overwhelming.

Once we were out of this hospital, I was pretty sure we would finally be able to have something like a happily ever after. All of us, in our own little way. How crazy was that? I couldn't wait for it.



## IVAN POV

**O** *ne Month Later...*

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” I CHUCKLED AS I PLACED another box inside Miranda’s living room, which was getting fuller by the moment. “Cole and I don’t need to move in...”

Miranda couldn’t wipe the smile off her face as she looped her arms around my neck and pressed her lips to mine. “You know I want you living here. I need you living here. You and Cole both make my life so much better. You’re here all the time anyway, so I want you guys to just stay here already. We’ve talked about this before.”

“I know, I know.” God, I loved looking into her eyes, it was everything to me. *She* was everything to me. “We have talked about it a lot, but the reality of it might be different.”

She giggled in a delightful way, looking like she was soaring on cloud nine. “Timothy will be very unhappy if you back out now. He can’t wait to have you and Cole around more.”

While Timothy had not seen much of the danger, it had not escaped his attention that something was going on between his mother and Cole and me. He had to understand that we had been there to protect his family. But I didn’t get the sense that the only reason he wanted Cole and me around was to keep his mom and him safe. We got along really well. Timothy had

opened up a lot to us over the last few days and was starting to see Cole and me as permanent fixtures in his life.

I loved that. I never realized that I wanted kids until all of this happened. Then again, I never thought I would end up in a relationship like this. I never really planned to end up in any relationship, so I never thought about what my life would look like with someone by my side, a family. But I was really pleased with the shape everything was taking. It was wonderful, unexpected but incredibly wonderful.

“Okay, well, I wouldn’t want to let Timothy down,” I said with a chuckle. “So I guess Cole and I will need to get all unpacked and organized before he gets home from school.”

“Are you talking about me?” Cole asked as he entered the room with a box on his shoulder, carrying it as if it weighed nothing. Showing off, I was sure, but that didn’t irritate me, it made me laugh. “Because I’m not going to take up too much room, I swear.”

Miranda and I looked at the stack of boxes and laughed. We were already filling up the house, but if it was what Miranda and Timothy wanted, then that was that.

“We need to make sure we don’t take up too much room before Timothy gets back from school. We don’t want him to come back to all of this. It’s a mess.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know. Don’t worry, it’ll get done.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to Miranda’s. He could not stop smiling around her. “How are you doing?”

Miranda nodded and smiled. “I’m doing really good, thank you. Much better than I was before. Having you two living here is just incredible. I can’t believe how amazing my life has become. When I think about what it was like before, compared to now...”

She glowed as she talked about her life now, which was a really great feeling. To know that she had seen the light at the end of the tunnel as she escaped from the hell she had endured with Brady. The asshole that was now going to be locked away forever.

The police were still trying to get all the information they could from him about the murders of she-wolves. Brady didn't want to talk as eagerly as the police officers might have hoped he would, but they were getting there. Slowly but surely. I had a lot of confidence in Owain and the police officers in this town. They would solve these crimes and keep Twin Lakes safe once again.

“Come on, let's get everything unpacked,” Miranda said happily. “Then we can get our real lives started. I really didn't think this would happen. Even when I tried to settle here in the beginning, I didn't think that it would really last.”

Thank God Brady didn't take her away from me, from us. The fact that he could have made my stomach flip over painfully. I knew for sure that I wouldn't have been able to breathe if she left. I wouldn't have been the same man.

“But now it looks like Timothy and I are here in Twin Lakes forever. Thank goodness.”

Cole slipped his hand into one of hers, and I took the other, uniting us all. We were all grateful to have Miranda here with us, and Twin Lakes was a better place for her presence. She was also good for my relationship with my twin. I couldn't think of a time when things were this good for us. Cole and I had our own demons, but being with Miranda helped to heal us. We were all helping one another. It was perfect.

WE ALL TURNED TOWARD THE DOOR, WONDERING WHO MIGHT be knocking in the middle of the afternoon.

“Oh! Simon,” Miranda realized. “I forgot he said he would pop in before his date tonight. He wants to show me what he's wearing and make sure he looks good.”

“Do you know who the date is with?” Cole asked eagerly.

“No, he never told me and I didn't ask. I figure he will tell me when he's ready to talk about it.”

Miranda went to answer the door and it wasn't long before Simon waltzed in with a big, excited grin on his face. Despite

living here our whole lives, aside from the time we were in the military, Cole and I didn't really know Simon before everything that had happened with Miranda. We knew his wife had been killed, but we didn't know the true horror of the story. We knew he had been through a lot, but we had no idea how dreadful it was.

The bond we had created was the one good thing that had come from Brady being here. It was a friendship that would last forever no matter what. Funny, really, when I thought about how things happened. How Simon could have been a threat to Cole and me and our happiness with Miranda. But he was one of the best people I knew, and as Cole slung an arm around his shoulder to greet him, I could tell he felt the same way.

“Looking good, Simon. Tell us all about your date.”

Miranda headed into the kitchen to make coffee while we discussed Simon's upcoming date. Whether this woman was going to be the love of his life or not, I wasn't sure, but it was good that he was getting back out there and enjoying himself. I saw a shine in him that wasn't there before. He really was happy to move on from what had happened to him in the past, and to finally live his life once more.

“Did you hear the big news today? About the court case and everything?” Simon asked Cole and me.

I sat up a little straighter since this was about Brady. It had been hard to wait for things to progress with him, for us to know what was going to happen. I hadn't even asked Owain for a couple of days because I was sick of being disappointed with nothing. But it seemed like something had happened since I last checked in.

“What's going on?” I demanded sharply.

“Brady has decided to plead guilty, so there isn't going to be a trial.”

“Really?” Cole gasped, shocked.

Simon nodded. “To six murders. Even more than Miranda first thought. Horrible, I know, but I think this is going to be a

good thing because it means Miranda won't need to be retraumatized by having to serve as a witness for the prosecution. We can all move on."

That was a really big statement. It wasn't like our lives had been on hold the whole time while we waited for this to happen. But now that it had happened, it really was huge. I couldn't stop grinning as I realized how much better I felt.

"We are going to have to celebrate that!"

None of us knew that Miranda had finished making the coffee until she appeared with a smile as wide as mine on her face. She handed us all a mug with a skip in her step.

"Don't you think we need to celebrate this?" she repeated. "Brady is pleading guilty, which means he will be locked away in prison forever. There won't be any more issues and Twin Lakes and everyone in it will be safe again."

I was grateful to know that we could go back to how life was before was before. My job would go back to being straight forward and simple. Hell, maybe I would even take on a few shifts at the national park with Cole. Life was definitely going to be safer for us all.

"We can't go out to celebrate tonight because I have my date," Simon reminded us. "But we can go out this weekend. That would be amazing."

We nodded in agreement, happy to do that, but also really pleased that we could spend the evening as our little family. Our first night living together was going to be really special. We sat for a little while longer, chatting and laughing, and drinking our coffee, but soon Simon had to go, and Cole had to leave to pick up from Timothy from school. He was getting really excited about this new role in Timothy's life, so it was only Miranda and me in the house for a little while.

We would have these moments now that we were living together. They might be few and far between because Cole would also be a part of this, but I would always treasure them. I crossed the room to take her in my arms and hold her to my chest.

“I really do love you, Miranda. I hope you know that.”

She leaned against me and rested her head on my shoulder. “You know I love you too, right? You and Cole have made me the happiest that I have ever been.”

We hugged for a while, during which time I imagined our future together. Our happily ever after where we would expand this family and have more love between us in the very lovely town of Twin Lakes, putting all these horrible memories behind us, never to be thought of again.

“I’m looking forward to having a more peaceful life here as well,” she murmured, her words vibrating along my chest now. “With you and Cole, Timothy too. It’s going to be amazing.”

“Oh hell yeah,” I laughed. “But it might not be too peaceful with Cole and me. You know that, right? But it’s going to be good chaos, so you don’t need to panic.”

Miranda lifted up her eyes to look at me, smiling as she did. I couldn’t resist dipping my head low to bring my lips to hers, to seal our love some more. As our mouths connected and fireworks exploded in my stomach, I knew there was nowhere else in the world I would rather be.

Life had a funny way of working out. This was far from what I expected, it was nothing like I thought I wanted, but it was utterly beautiful. I felt like the luckiest person on the planet, and I hoped both Miranda and Cole felt the same way. After all, this was forever.