

A. K. GRAVES

A man with short, dark hair and a serious expression is the central focus. He is shirtless, revealing a large, intricate tattoo on his chest that features a bird, possibly a phoenix, with wings spread, surrounded by floral and vine-like patterns. The background is dark and atmospheric, with a large, bright, textured sphere (resembling a moon or planet) on the right. The left side is filled with a pattern of white stars and a dark, jagged silhouette that looks like a map or a decorative border. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with highlights from the moon and the man's skin.

HIS  
CRUSADE

BOUND BEYOND BLOOD  
BOOK FIVE

# HIS CRUSADE

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*For Grandma Camp.*

*Thank you for all of the visits where we played board games  
and ate biscuits with chocolate gravy until it was so late  
Grandpa had to warn us about black ice and deer. You were  
the southern flare in my very Michigander life, and I will  
always be grateful for your abundant warmth when things got  
cold. I know if you were here you'd be promoting my books  
better than anyone else could, even though the covers alone  
would make you blush. I miss you terribly and love you  
forever.*

*I'll see y'all over yonder.*

*This book is for you.*

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# LITTLE SHIT



## RONNY



*Ashland, Oregon. Seven Years Ago.*

**M**an, it's hot today.

Hot and humid, but also dry and suffocating.

Or maybe that's just the overwhelming smell of cow shit.

The suffocating part, not the hot part, because as far as I know, cow patties don't *actually* contribute to the weather in any form except for making the humidity extra gross. And it probably adds to the way the moisture in the air slicks the grass.

*Can cow pies do that?*

*Make the ground slippery without actually stepping on one?*

You'd think the hay bails would counteract it and soak up some of that steaming manure's natural juices but I guess not—it just makes the hay slippery too.

*What the hell is wrong with me that this is the kind of crap I'm thinking about during summer break?*

I should be thinking of going to the beach, begging my parents for a weekend at an amusement park, meeting friends at the county fair, or maybe even a party in the mountains, right? So what's my deal?

I'm the son—first born, I might add—of a cattle rancher, that's what's wrong with me.

Caldwell Farms has been Ashland's biggest source of free range, organic, cruelty-free beef, pork, lamb, and poultry for the better part of fifty years, thanks to my dad, and he isn't going to let something as silly as *summer vacation* get in the way of fulfilling my destiny to take over when—more like *if*—he retires.

And while I don't hate working with the animals, don't hate riding horses or wrangling the strays, I don't even hate getting my hands dirty or doing the hard labor that comes along with ranching, I *do* hate the idea that this is what Ron Caldwell expects my legacy to be, summer break or not.

Maybe *hate* is too strong of a word.

I'm really proud of my dad, of my family and the way he's built us a solid life that meets every need and then some, but I'm not him.

Can I run the ranch if he has to go to Eagle Point or somewhere else close by for a day trip to look at new livestock? Yep.

Can I talk shop when people come out to place orders whether they be personal or for a local store or restaurant? Totally.

Can I keep the livestock safe and happy even when there is a surge in foxes or coyotes, maybe the occasional mountain lion or bear poking around looking for a free meal? Hell yes, but the real question is, do I want to do any of that?

*Nope.*

I have to, I know I do because if I don't help my dad on the ranch then that means he'll be working it alone dang near twenty-four hours a day. Despite the fact that he would do it happily, Ron Caldwell would wind up moving into the pasture with the steer because my mama would skin him alive for being gone so long before she turned her wrath on me.

*I'm not looking to get a wooden spoon to my ass.*

Fourteen-years-old or not, Mary Caldwell would tan my hide before I had the chance to blink, and since Isaac is still too young to do much more than tend to the chickens and pigs

—he’s seven—and gods forbid she lets my dad take up Uncle Colt’s countless offers to help, that leaves yours truly to spend my entire summer vacation working without pay when I should be hanging out with the few friends I have left.

Correction.

The *one* friend I have left.

The one friend I have left that’s so close to just giving up like everyone else has, it’s a wonder Ricky still even bothers talking to me at all.

To say my mama is overbearing, overprotective, and overly involved would be the understatement of the century but calling her a *psychotic helicopter mom* doesn’t seem very respectful.

At least that’s what Colt told me when I called her that last time I saw him.

*I think it’s spot on, though.*

Now, don’t get me wrong, my mom is a great lady. Mary Caldwell loves big, runs a tight ship, and makes sure my siblings and I have the best of everything—Isaac is the oldest of the four younger pups, David is five, Ruthie is three, and Hannah is almost one—as long as it doesn’t make us greedy or ungrateful, and I appreciate that, but she’s also flipping nuts.

I can’t learn to drive until I’m seventeen, can’t get my license until I turn eighteen because it *isn’t necessary until you’re an adult anyway*.

My curfew, if you can call it that, is seven o’clock, which I don’t even bother telling anyone because it sounds like I’ll have to rush home from whatever I’m doing so my mother can give me a bubble bath, put me in footie pajamas, and tuck me into my race car bed right next to Isaac and David.

And no, I don’t actually have a race car bed.

I don’t have a cell phone or my own computer either. I have to use my dad’s dinosaur of a Mac in his office if I need it for school, and even then I’m not allowed to be alone in the

room in case I *end up in a chat room with sexual predators* or have some *disturbing desire* to look up porn.

Something I couldn't do even if I wanted to because my dad's desktop is still on an Ethernet line that takes approximately one thousand years to load the entire Google homepage before you can even type in the search bar.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

My mama is so overprotective she won't even let me hang out with *my uncle*. My uncle who is her only *brother*.

She gets downright furious if I bring up his name, and if Mary Caldwell suspects I might try to sneak off to hang out with Colt, then she comes as close as possible to locking me in my bedroom without actually doing it.

And I don't understand any of that crap at all.

Uncle Colt is basically my favorite person on the planet and it's because he is cool as hell, pretty fun, and he treats me like I'm closer to being a man than having my diapers changed.

Not to mention he's also technically my Alpha, and the fact that Colt has gone out of his way to form a bond with me while teaching me everything he knows about everything is pretty badass, too.

*And he lets me cuss.*

One thing Colt won't tell me though, is why he and my mom don't get along anymore.

He says it's because it's not entirely his story to tell, but I think it's because it hurts him in a pretty deep way that, despite being wolves and needing to be with family, to be with a pack, my mom won't even let Colt into our house.

Not for holidays or nothing.

One time, he stopped by right after Hannah was born with a figurine he carved from oak, a bouquet of flowers, and cigars to celebrate my baby sister's arrival, and the minute my mom smelled the smoke from my dad's stogie, she hopped out of

bed, marched out to the porch, and took a swing at Colt with an umbrella.

My dad had to make her go back to bed since she was only a day and a half out from having Hannah, but my mom screamed and yelled at my uncle from inside the house until he left the flowers and wolf pup statue on the step then disappeared into the woods.

I saw the whole thing and even though it wasn't the first time—I have three other siblings whose births resulted in the same sort of incident between *family*—I've seen my mother go bananas on Colt, it was the last time I decided to put up with it.

I just wish I could apply that kind of attitude to everything else my mom tries to control.

Hence why Ricky is my last friend standing just waiting for a strong breeze to knock him down, too.

No one likes putting up with Mary Caldwell's bullcrap for longer than necessary, and that *crap* makes it impossible to be friends with me.

That and the fact that I still haven't really come into my own yet, not in the same way other kids my age have.

I know it won't truly happen until I answer the call of the moon, but puberty has not been kind to me, and that coupled with my personality, hobbies, and interests, let's just say it's amazing Ricky is still around at all.

I shot up like two feet between this summer and last, pushing me right around six-foot but I'm still as skinny as a rail and despite working the ranch, I'm also very gangly. I have weird patches of facial hair trying to grow on my cheeks and chin while they dance around the acne breakouts that happen with a fiery vengeance at least once a week. My voice still occasionally cracks, I grow out of my clothes at an unnatural rate and even though I put forth my best effort, my hair looks like I stuck all ten fingers into light sockets and left them there for hours.

True friends don't care about the way you look, you say?

Sure, true friends shouldn't care that I've been going through puberty for three years with no end in sight, but they also shouldn't care about the other crap that goes on inside my confused and hormonal brain either.

Like the fact that I am a huge fan of romance novels.

Or the fact that I love chick flicks.

I play chess.

Try out for a part in every play at school as well as in the community.

I know show tunes and songs from most musicals and sing them while I work on just about anything, including my homework during study hall.

I cosplay for everything from comic con to renaissance festivals—Colt sneaks me out to those whenever he can—and make my own costumes, as well as do my own makeup.

Basically, I'm nerd personified, and you tack on my 4.5 gpa in all advanced classes and my lack of driving permit, well, yeah, it's a miracle Ricky is left at all.

Doesn't matter that I made wide receiver on the junior varsity football team, third base for the varsity baseball team with a batting average of .370, or have always placed at least second in track and field.

Doesn't matter that I work on cars and motorcycles, or build crap with my uncle.

Doesn't matter that I also like action and adventure flicks, as well as horror or psychological thriller novels.

Nope, none of that matters in the least because I'm only seen as the awkward, nerdy loser who smells like cow shit who's never had a girlfriend, let alone kissed a girl; a loser who's mama still hasn't cut the umbilical cord after fourteen damn years.

All in all, I won't be winning any popularity contests anytime soon.

*I'm awesome.*

With a grunt, I unload the last bail of hay from the truck, wipe my hands on my jeans, then tilt my head back and close my eyes with a sigh.

*Just one person, Universe.*

I'm just asking for one person who gets me, one person I can call a true friend and accept me for everything that goes on inside my head despite how unusual it may be.

I don't think that's too much to ask and I never ask for anything anyway.

Just this.

Just—

My eyes snap open and dart to the herd as they start mooing like there's a wolf among them—ha!—and shifting around frantically before one cow takes off toward the far side of the pasture along the tree line.

*Crap.*

Crap on a flipping cracker.

Looks like my day just got a lot longer.

I start after her, recognizing immediately that this is the heifer who just recently gave birth to her first calf, which is nowhere in sight and most likely the reason she's taking off toward the woods like her ass is on fire.

So I run to match, try to catch up, and when I finally do, she starts pacing in front of a break in the fencing big enough for her calf to squeeze through.

*There's another thing I'll have to add to my ever growing list of crap to do before the sun goes down.*

"It's ok, girl." I stroke a hand down her side and peer into the trees to see if I can spot the baby. "I'll find her, don't you worry. Just stay right here and we'll be back in no time."

With a few more reassuring pats, I step through the splintered wood and march through the trees on *Mission Baby Cow* like it's the thing I was born to do.

I may not want to take over my dad's ranch, but I love animals, and being half Cherokee means I'm grateful and respectful to them every step of the way.

"Well, hello, little baby. Are you lost?"

I stop dead in my tracks as my head spins toward the sweetest, softest voice in the entire world the second it meets my ears.

"Aren't you just the cutest little thing? Just a little baby. Where's your mama?"

Oh gods, and she has a slight southern drawl that warms my entire body from the inside out.

I take a few steps, slower this time until I come to a small thicket, the entrance blocked by a peach shaped rear end covered in a pale yellow sundress.

If I didn't already struggle with spontaneous boners, the party happening in my pants would be downright mortifying.

Plus, her back is to me so I have time to get it under control.

"Come on out here, sweetheart. That's it. I'll help you out of this prickly thicket and we'll go find your mama."

Ok, maybe not quite enough time, but I'm trying.

Trying really hard to pray the tent in my jeans into submission but I'm failing because that rear end is backing toward me; and it's connected to long tan legs and cute little feet with pink painted toes tucked into blinding white flip flops.

*I love pink.*

Like, *really* love pink.

Just another of the weird personality quirks that make me *Mister Popular*.

"Come on, honey. That's it. Just follow me and we'll find your mama together. Good girl. That's a good girl."



Oh dear gods, that rear end is backing toward me fast, and if I keep staring at it I'm gonna get caught red handed and flushed, with a very inappropriate boner.

*I need to get her attention so she straightens up.*

Yeah, if I just clear my throat or something, surely this girl will straighten up and turn around, probably slap me for staring at her butt with a hard-on, and that will hopefully take care of said hard-on.

*Stupid puberty brain.*

“Uhm...” I do actually clear my throat before it goes totally dry when she does in fact straighten up and turn around slowly.

*Blonde.*

She's blonde.

Long blonde waves that cascade around her shoulders and flow down her back in the lightest honey ripples, the early afternoon sun reflecting off them like gold and ivory with a touch of copper.

And her eyes, oh man those wide surprised eyes are the darkest shade of blue known to man, a galaxy of stars dotting the rich blue abyss while they blink rapidly at me from behind huge tortoise shell glasses that are sliding down her freckled nose onto her red-stained cheeks.

This girl is hands down the prettiest girl I've ever seen.

I mean, she is so super pretty, hot really, in her pale yellow dress with her spun gold hair and outer space eyes.

And I'm pretty sure I just scared the crap out of her because those eyes are as wide as dinner plates, which means my boner is definitely gone, but my palms are sweating and now I'm worried she might scream.

I hold up my hands and raise them slowly to prove I'm not a threat. “I didn't mean to startle you. I was looking for the calf and heard your voice, followed until—”

“Chitty Chitty Bang Bang?” She pushes her glasses up and leans toward me as she squints, and I get the faintest whiff of magnolia.

I barely stifle a groan, blink at her, tilt my head like a confused puppy, then a hot shock of terror rips through me when I realize what she’s talking about.

“Uh…” I glance down at my shirt, the one with Chitty Chitty Bang Bang on it—the car, not the words—then blow out a sigh and brace for immediate ridicule. “Yeah… I…”

Her face breaks out into the most gorgeous smile I have ever witnessed, complete with dimples. Then this girl starts to belt out the words of the title song, opening her arms with flare then clasps her hands together against her chest before she hits me with one hell of a finish.

My jaw drops.

She claps and beams a smile at me.

I blink.

A bug flies into my mouth and I choke.

She looks suddenly panicked and like she might try to give me the Heimlich.

*Oh my gods, I think I’m in love with a stranger.*

She can’t be any older than me, and that’s a bit of a stretch since she looks like she may actually be a year or two younger, but she just sang, albeit a little off key, the words to one of my all time favorite musicals because she recognized the car on my t-shirt. *And* she’s gorgeous, and was sweet-talking a baby cow.

Yep.

This chick is my soulmate.

“Are you ok?” She blinks those dark-as-night eyes at me. “I know my singing isn’t great but I love that movie and I can’t help but sing the songs every time I think about it no matter what I’m doing. I seriously love that movie—most musicals actually. Have you ever seen *Seven Brides for Seven*

Brothers? I love the dancing and the singing and the crazy way they all fall in love. It's just so sweet but who the heck names their daughter Dorkus? I mean, my parents got all kinds of creative with naming us, but Dorkus? That's rough." She takes a deep breath, her whole face turning tomato red then she holds out a hand toward me. "I'm Nova, by the way."

I continue gaping at her like an idiot but the baby cow moos, which is thankfully enough to pull me out of my stupor. "Ronny," I grunt as my palm slides against hers and turns my whole arm into a bolt of lightning. *Damn her hands are cold.* "Ronny Caldwell, and that's Brownie."

Nova follows my nod to the calf trying to eat the hem of her dress. "She's so dang sweet! Aren't you, Brownie? Just the sweetest little baby all alone out here in the woods."

"She got through the fence on our property. Her mama is very worried about her but I'll make sure Cookie knows her calf was in good hands."

Jesus, that smile is blinding.

"You have more cows?" Nova's dark eyes flicker with glee. "Can I see them?"

"How old are you?" I blurt like a jerk because I don't want to be the guy who leads some little girl out to a pasture then get my dad in trouble for kidnapping or some crap.

"I'll be fourteen in December." Seemingly unfazed by my totally rude question, Nova's smile grows. "How old are you, Ronny Caldwell?"

"Fourteen, almost. Another two weeks and I'll be fourteen."

"That's wild!" she squeals. "My brothers turned fourteen in January! All four of us are the same age!"

I look around slowly, a little concerned that these brothers are imaginary, or hiding in secret to ambush me the second I let my guard down. "Cool..."

"They should be around here somewhere..." Nova goes up on her tip toes and searches the woods in front of us. "We were

exploring, trying to find something to do, but I wandered away like I usually do then I found Brownie and forgot all about—oh! There they are. Hey, y'all! Over here!"

I follow her line of sight and flapping arm to see two dudes trekking toward us with identical scowls on their faces that morph into identical sighs of relief the second they see Nova.

"You had us worried." Tall, kind of gangly blonde dude on the left grunts. "We've been looking for you for about twenty minutes." He scans his sister head to toe then those dark green eyes flick to me. "Who's this?"

"Yeah, don't be rude, Nova Rain. Introduce us to your friend." Tall blonde gangly dude on the right grins.

*Twins.*

She has twin brothers that, aside from the lengths of their hair, are completely identical, and Nova almost looks like she could be their triplet.

*Crazy.*

She takes a few steps forward, grabs each of them by the hand, then drags them toward me. "This here is Ronny Caldwell and his baby cow, Brownie. He has a farm with more cows!" Nova drops her hold and claps, and I feel my lips lift into a small smile.

*She's very animated, and I like that.*

Twin on the right scans me head to toe, then his sister, then turns back to me for a beat before his dark green eyes light up. "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!" He points to my shirt. "You like that movie?"

I nod slowly and swallow hard. "Yes... it's a favorite."

Twin on the right claps just like his sister did then nudges twin on the left. "He's ok in my book. You stumbled on a gold mine here, baby sis."

Nova rolls her eyes. "Eleven months and y'all still act like it's eleven years." She turns to me and smiles. "These are my brothers, Sigma, or Sig for short"—she motions to the twin on the right—"and Vega." Twin on the left.

“You all have astrological names?” Apparently I’m also spectacular at pointing out the obvious.

Vega nods real slow and narrows his eyes. “You got a problem with that?”

My brows shoot up and practically touch my hairline. “No! No, not at all. It’s really cool, actually, way more interesting than my name.”

He stares at me another few beats then nods as if he talked himself into believing me. “Our parents are pretty cool.”

*Uhm, ok?*

Not sure what I’m supposed to say to that, but Vega doesn’t look like he wants to pull my balls out through my mouth anymore so that’s good at least.

“Are you here with your parents? Vacationing in Ashland or something?”

Vega shakes his head, his longer blonde hair fanning out a bit, but Sigma speaks. “Nah. We’re here visiting our aunt for the summer. Gonna be heading back to Mississippi at the beginning of September.”

“Right on.” How haven’t I met them before now? *Oh right, because I’ve been stuck on the ranch since school let out.* “Your aunt lives here then?”

The twins nod in sync, and Nova practically squeals. “Yes! Aunt VivaDee has been in Oregon for about fifteen years now, but this is the first time we’ve stayed the summer with her. It’s been amazing!”

“VivaDee? Miss VivaDee Baker of Vivacious Words?”

All three of them blink then smile in unison.

It’s weird, but I kinda like the obvious closeness the siblings share.

“That’s her. You know our aunt?” Sigma asks with a huge smile. “Isn’t she just the coolest?”

I nod and give them my own grin. “She is, and her bookstore is my favorite place in town. I spend hours there

after school or whenever I have time to spare from the ranch. Her selection is unmatched.”

“You’re ok, Ronny Caldwell,” Vega grunts unexpectedly. “Books and musicals are our thing, so if you’re into that shit, too, then you’re ok by me.”

This grumpy dude likes musicals too?

*Huh.*

Never woulda thought.

“And you’re real cute, looking all flustered right now,” Sigma throws in for good measure, making my entire face light up like a neon sign. “Too bad you probably don’t play for the other team, otherwise, I’d probably hit on you.”

“Uh... thanks?”

Vega rolls his eyes with a hint of a smile as Nova shoves Sigma. “Siggy, you’re too much.” Then she giggles, pushes her glasses up her nose, and looks up at me from under her long blonde lashes. “Can we see the other cows?”

I push a hand back through my shaggy hair and sigh. “Yeah, but I gotta fix the fence where Brownie got out first. My dad will crap his pants if I don’t, especially for what he’ll consider *idle time*. If you guys don’t mind waiting—”

“We can help,” Vega says as he shocks the crap out of me. “Sig and I are pretty handy, ‘specially if someone tells us what to do.”

Sigma nods. “Yep. Absolutely. We help our daddy back home with repairs all the time. Shouldn’t take too long to fix up your fence with the three of us working on it, and then you can show Queen Nova Rain your animals.”

I blink. “Really?”

All three of them nod.

“Ok... sure, yeah, that’d be great. I don’t have a whole lotta time to hang out though. After I show you guys the cows, I have to tend to the other animals—”

“Other animals?!” Nova squeals and claps *again*.

Another slow nod and a smile. “Goats, chickens, pigs, sheep. Couple turkeys but they’re ornery little jerks. Few ducks. Bunnies and barn cats. It’s a real zoo at Caldwell Farms.”

“Yay!” Nova continues her happy claps as her brothers smile, then she slips the loose sash from around her waist and fashions it into a lead for Brownie. “This is the best day ever!”

We start back toward my ranch, Nova chattering the whole way about animals and musicals, Sigma throwing in his two cents occasionally about a song or movie as Vega stays mostly silent, his stare shifting between me and his sister occasionally with the faintest grin.

Apparently, if you have a crappy enough track record and plead with the universe to send you someone that gets it, she takes pity and sends you three people to make up for it.

*Now let’s just hope the fact that they’re from Mississippi doesn’t ruin one of the best things to happen to me in a long ass time.*

## CHAPTER I



# HEROIC MY ASS

## RONNY



*Ashland, Oregon. Present Day.*

“Last call,” I grunt as I wipe down the bar, my eyes scanning the crowd at Bill’s that’s still pretty fucking active for almost two in the morning.

Not that it’s surprising.

Bill’s is always busy, but considering it’s the Saturday after Thanksgiving, right before all the college kids head back to school after break, it’s even more packed and rowdier than usual.

Wild Bill’s definitely picks up even more on the weekends, which is great for me since it brings in a lot of tips that go directly into my building supply fund, but with the extra drunks stumbling around, it looks like Travis and I are pulling in a few hundred bucks each tonight and that makes it totally worth breaking up fights and cleaning up the many spills.

And even though I’m still not back to one hundred percent after helping my aunt and uncle take on a mad doctor and his damn experimental lab a couple months ago, it’s been nice to return to some level of normalcy.

I took personal time off school and attended as many of my classes as I could remotely while we were in Wyoming, took a few more days to heal after we got home before I went back in person, but my time has been since has been split between helping Colt and Lark track down that slimy son of a bitch, Kentworth, and catching up on my studies that I’ve been wound pretty damn tight.

I'm just glad Kady and Bill know everything going on and gave me more time than I needed before I came back to work.

And it definitely helps that they're both understanding and invested in my *extracurricular activities* with my aunt and uncle; otherwise, all the time I spend spaced out or texting Colt would get me into deep shit for sure.

It kinda sucks that I haven't had much time for anything else, though, because all of my pent up frustration and racing mind could really use a night out with my friends or some sort of mindless outlet to unplug and reset.

"Excuse me. Can I get another Sex on the Beach before I close out my tab?"

I shift my gaze from the cracked tile floor to the end of the bar, more specifically to the cute blonde at the end of the bar, and grin.

*Bingo.*

This chick has been making eyes at me all night, and while I don't normally look for an outlet at work, I think I just found one.

"Sure, sweetheart. Coming right up."

She giggles, a little forced, then bats her false lashes at me.

This chick isn't really my type—although I am a sucker for blondes—but she's cute, and I'm pretty sure she's visiting from school because I've never seen her before. Which means this is definitely a one and done type of deal if I can close it.

I chuckle as I start mixing her drink.

*If.*

Not to sound cocky, but ever since I answered the call of the moon, I haven't really had much trouble with the ladies.

I finally hit my maximum size—six-foot-five and half, and two hundred and eighty three pounds, thank you very much—and now the scruff on my cheeks is even and trimmed into a super tight dark blonde five o'clock shadow. My hair is still a mess, but keeping it under a beanie or bandana adds to the *bad*

*boy* vibe I know this chick is digging, so no complaints about my mop really.

Probably helps that I have my markings for my status, packs, and tribe too, the ones down my entire right arm just like my dad and similar to Colt's, except his is his left arm and throat since he's Alpha and mated to Lark.

Chicks dig what they consider tattoos and throw in my build—I'm built like my uncle and his side of the family, so I'm pretty goddamn big for a wolf—the fact that I usually take my motorcycle to work and don't talk much while I'm here. Yeah, I don't struggle to find random and sporadic willing participants for a night of unattached fun.

Which is great because one night is all I can offer.

I may have physically gotten to a point of confidence and comfortability that I was previously lacking, but most girls don't dig everything else I'm into if it goes beyond one night.

Not to mention, I can't give them my heart either because someone else already owns that shit, so unused it remains until I figure out what to do about it.

And since the blonde bombshell who has my heart—definitely *not* the chick at the bar—is currently in a relationship, I've given myself permission to play the field and maybe blow off some steam after a hellacious few months.

I set the fruity mixed drink on the bar with a wink. “What's the name on your tab, sweetheart? I'll cash you out.”

She giggles again, takes a sip, and tries to make a sexy yummy noise. “Bethany.”

Yeah, definitely from out of town.

*Perfect.*

“You got any plans after your drink, Bethany?” I tap a few things on the screen, give her the total, and grin as she slides her number over with her credit card.

“Not really.” She smiles, her brown eyes a little glassy. “Do you have any plans after work?”

My grin grows a bit as I nod, hand over her card and tuck her number into my pocket. “Thought maybe I’d see what a certain cute blonde was up to, maybe go somewhere a little quieter so we could get to know each other better.”

“That sounds nice.” Bethany bites her bottom lip, something I generally find very sexy when a different blonde does it but right now it’s not really working for me. “What time do you get off?”

*As soon as fucking possible.*

But I don’t say that.

Nope, I just keep grinning and throw her another wink. “Give me twenty minutes. I’m sure Travis won’t mind closing with the girls tonight.”

Bethany nods and giggles into her straw. “Should I wait for you or...”

“Where you parked?”

“Out front. Red mustang convertible.”

Stupid choice for a ride in Oregon, especially this time of year since we already have a ton of snow, but whatever. Not my problem, and at least it’ll be easy to pick out when everyone else starts leaving.

I nod toward Travis at the other end of the bar. “Give me a few to make sure he’s set, then I’ll follow you to your place.”

“I’m staying with one of my girlfriends but she’s at a party on campus so she won’t be home until morning. Her boyfriend goes to SOU.”

“Small world.”

“You’re a student at SOU?”

“Sure am. How come you didn’t go to the party with your girlfriend?” Hey, I may be looking for one thing in particular from this chick, but I’m not a jackass. Doesn’t hurt to be nice and get to know my one night stand a little.

Bethany shrugs then giggles again, the sound starting to grind on my nerves. “Not really my scene. I like more *intimate*

gatherings.”

Miraculously, I manage not to roll my eyes.

At least we’re on the same page about what this is. She was obviously looking for a hookup before heading back to wherever she came from, and I’m more than happy to accommodate.

Sorta.

She’s cute, and with her short blonde hair and a little bit too-skinny body, Bethany definitely checks off a few of my boxes for a one and done, but I’d be lying if I said my dick was getting into the game.

*Must be tired or some shit.*

It is still my first few weeks back to work, after all, I’m sure it’s just that since I’m choosing to ignore the rock sitting in the pit of my stomach telling me something is wrong.

*Definitely need to blow off some steam with this chick and I’ll be good as new.*

With one more wink because she seems to like it, I leave Bethany and find Travis chatting up a redhead. “Dude, you good to close on your own tonight?”

He frowns for a second, then nods toward his own conquest. “Was hoping you’d be willing to close tonight.”

I smirk. “You still owe me at least three closings, Trav. I’ve covered your ass more times than I can count.”

“Oh, come on, man.” He sighs. “I’ll give you half my tips. Just cut me a break.”

“Nope. Gonna cash in on one of those IOU’s.” I nod toward Bethany who’s slamming her drink before pulling her coat on. “Got plans tonight.”

Travis looks at her, grins, then nods. “Fine. I got you, but I want it on record that I now owe you two.”

“No problem.” I slap a hand on his back with a chuckle. “Appreciate it. I’ll see you tomorrow.” My gaze swings back

to Bethany. “Gotta grab my coat then I’ll meet you out front. My truck is in the back lot.”

“Ok.” She grins, her brow lifting in question. “Meet you out front...”

“Ronny.”

“Meet you out front, Ronny.”

By the time I’m dressed for the bitter cold and pulling out of the alley, the little red mustang is already waiting just passed the exit.

I turn right and follow her down the road, her car creeping through the snow because it isn’t made to handle it, that bitter feeling in my gut growing.

*Man, I must really need to get laid tonight.*

There aren’t any sparks or anything with Bethany, but she’s cute and willing so that’s a plus, I just can’t seem to get on board with this.

Either I’m in desperate need of action because my body forgot how to be attracted to anyone except one person in particular and needs a reminder, or something is very wrong in the universe somewhere and I don’t really want it to be either of those things.

After about twenty minutes, we pull up to an apartment complex on the south side of town, definitely one SOU students can afford and typically fill to the max.

It’s nice, charming in a subtle way, but it has nothing on my cabin or the compound.

I like living on Dragovihk land, like being secluded while not totally isolated, like being surrounded by nature and shit. Even though Ashland is small, city life isn’t for me, never has been and it’s exactly why I don’t live closer to campus.

I cut my engine and watch Bethany get out of her car, the chunky heel of her peep toe boots sliding in the white powder covering the ground.

Yeah, I could never do more than one night with a chick who drives a mustang and wears boots like that in November.

She might be cute, but I have a feeling Bethany is also a bit vain, and probably an idiot.

Thoughts I physically shake from my head while I get out of my truck and start giving myself a pep talk as I head toward where she's waiting by the front door.

*You got this, Ronin.*

*You totally got this.*

*Sure, she's not our dream girl, but she's cute and she's willing.*

*It's just one night.*

*One night you desperately need because you haven't gotten off with anyone other than yourself in months.*

*You need this, and you'll feel a thousand times better, and once you feel better you'll be clearer, more capable of helping Colt and Lark, you'll be able to focus on that and school.*

*This is going to help you so much.*

*Besides, you like having your dick played with by cute blondes, and since she's all about a hookup, Bethany is probably pretty good in the sack.*

*You need this so don't blow it by getting caught up in your head.*

"Hi," Bethany breathes as I stop on the step below her. "Wow, you're tall."

"Big where it counts, sweetheart."

She giggles at my corny line, chews her lip, then presses up on those stupid boots and kisses me.

She tastes like alcohol and wintergreen, not a combination I'm turned on by but when her tongue pushes into my mouth, my dick twitches and thank fuck he's finally noticing what I'm trying to do for us.



“Mmm, you taste yummy,” Bethany says with a heavy lidded smile before she turns to the door, unlocks it, and pulls me inside. “I bet all of you tastes just as good.”

Thank the gods, my dick heard that and decided to swell just a bit.

It'd be pretty fucking embarrassing if he played dead through this whole ordeal.

“*Not ours,*” my wolf grunts with serious attitude. “*She isn't ours.*”

Inwardly, I roll my eyes, and follow Bethany's rather flat ass toward the elevator. “*No, but I'm not going to become a monk just because we haven't found our mate yet. I have needs, man.*”

He snorts. “*Need our mate. Not Bimbo Barbie.*”

I stifle a laugh and step inside. “*I know, but cut me some slack. You have to be just as frustrated as I am. This will be good for both of us. You let me get in one good orgasm with this chick and I'll let you run all night tomorrow after work, deal?*”

“*Bimbo Barbie better be good,*” my wolf snorts. “*Don't want to do this over and over until you claim our mate.*”

“*We'll find her when the time is right.*” And when I get over the blonde bombshell that I can never be with but owns my heart all the same.

My wolf decides to ignore me with a huff, lays down, and closes his eyes, and I breathe a sigh of relief that he's willing to let me do this.

*Fucker can be a real cockblock when he wants to be.*

“So, are you a SOU student too or maybe—” My words die in my throat as Bethany slams me into the wall of the elevator, fists the front of my jacket, and shoves her tongue so far down my throat I might actually choke.

*Jesus, I wasn't expecting that.*

I don't mind it a little rough, I am a wolf after all, but I'm taking baby steps to get my dick in the game here and the abrupt invasion isn't helping the way it should.

Not until Bethany reaches down and squeezes my junk through my jeans.

"Mmm," she hums with my bottom lip in her mouth. "You really are big where it counts."

*Ok.*

Maybe that's what I needed.

Having her aggressively rub my cock while we ride up the elevator has definitely piqued his interest, and thank the gods, I'm getting hard.

*I spoke too soon.*

Well, I was getting hard but now she's rubbing a little too aggressively and since I'm going commando, my dick is sending up an SOS like *help! She's rubbing the skin off! Help!*

So I take charge, grab her hands and spin so she's against the wall, pin them above her head and press my hips to hers. "You like it rough, Bethany?"

She nods, shuddering as I run my nose up the side of her neck—something I immediately regret because I do not like her perfume. "I do," Bethany pants, her hips rolling against mine. "I like it hard and rough..."

*And, we're back.*

Not completely, but I've got a decent semi going so this should all work out ok.

Especially as the elevator dings and the doors open, and Bethany leads me toward her friend's apartment while she swings her hips and tries to seduce me.

Tries and fails, because once 4B is open, Bethany yanks me inside and starts kissing me again but this time it's too aggressive and sloppy, uncoordinated, and our teeth clash multiple times.

*Man, this is not going the way I want it to.*

“You’re so hot, Ronny,” she coos as she shoves my coat off. “I want to lick every inch of your skin, trail a path over every bit of muscle and suck your schlong like it’s a Tootsie POP.”

Well, if she hadn’t called my dick a *schlong* he’d be a lot harder right now, but thankfully, all is not lost because apparently he can look past that insult in light of the promise to get sucked, even if that is *definitely* not going to happen.

Bethany drags me further down the hall, throws open a door, and pushes me inside a guest bedroom, and I guess she’s a neat freak because the bed is made with hospital corners, and everything looks very sterile.

Another tally in the cons column.

I like blonde bombshells that also happen to be mini tornados, a messy little thing because her mind races constantly and she gets distracted while cleaning which just turns everything into a bigger mess.

Something I need to stop thinking about if I want to actually get laid.

In the blink of an eye, Bethany has her coat and my shirt off, her clammy palms running through the smattering of dark blonde hair over my chest. “Oh, I like a man that’s all natural.” Then she tugs the hair and I wince. “So hot.”

*Abort mission!* my dick screams as she does it again, and I’m inclined to go along with him.

Again, I am a fan of rough sex, had some and liked it for sure, but I’m not so much of a fan of having my chest hair strategically ripped out in the name of an orgasm.

I have a funny feeling Bethany is *not* the good kind of crazy.

“You are so fucking hot, Ronny.” *And she needs to widen her vocabulary.* “I just want to lick you from head to toe. I bet you have sexy feet.”

Uh... *what?*

I mean, my feet aren't bad, especially for a dude, but I don't know if I'd call them *sexy*.

My blonde bombshell says they're *pretty*, but I doubt that means she wants to suck my toes like Bethany just whispered in my ear.

*Gross.*

But I grunt something that sounds like I'm into this and finally take a breath when she backs up and pulls her shirt off. "I'm going to go change into something more comfortable, then I'll take my cup out so I can ride you raw."

That is also *definitely* not happening.

I'm not that stupid, so I have never had sex without a condom, and not just because I'm not looking to gain an STD or illegitimate love child.

And what the fuck kind of *cup* is she talking about?

Whatever, it doesn't matter because I'm not sure I'm even going to go through with this now.

"Fuck." I blow out a breath, lift my beanie and scrub a hand through my hair. This is a disaster, hopefully a salvageable disaster, because I really need to get laid, but I'd like to be completely in tact when I do.

*This was a bad idea.*

It's been forever since I picked up someone at the bar and the last time didn't bode well either.

I should have just closed and let Travis go home with that redhead, then jerked off in the shower before bed.

Damn, I wish I'd sent out a text to get Sig or Vega to be on standby. They'd totally call with some fake emergency to get me out of this, but I was too busy worrying about my gut feeling and how full my balls are that I didn't even do that.

*Shit.*

Shit on a goddamn shingle.

Maybe—

Purple Rain starts blaring from the back pocket of my jeans and I thank the gods for small miracles. “Nova, thank gods, I was just—”

“Ronny...” She snuffles into the phone and my heart drops to my nuts. “I’m not bothering you, am I?”

*Fuck me, she’s crying.* “No, Peach, what’s up? Are you ok?”

“A-are you s-sure? I don’t-don’t want to interrupt if-if you’re busy or something.”

“Never too busy for you, Peach. What’s wrong? Where are you?” I’m already searching for my shirt because that crazy blonde threw it across the room and now I’m absolutely leaving. “What’s going on?”

“P-promise you aren’t in the middle of s-something.”

“I swear on my entire collection of JR Ward signed paperbacks that you did not interrupt anything that is more important than you.”

A sad little chuckle meets my ears. “Ok. C-can you come pick me up?”

I find my shirt, yank it on and head for my coat by the front door. “Where are you?”

“The frat house.”

“Ok.” I cringe and grit my teeth. “I’ll be there in ten. You want me to wait out front?”

Another hard snuffle from a girl who should never be in tears. “Can y-you come all the way in? I-I’m in a closet and... and I...” Nova completely falls apart and starts crying even harder.

“I’m on my way, Peach. I’ll call you when I get there so you can tell me where to find you.”

“O-ok, Ron-nny,” she sobs. “Th-thank y-you.”

“Anything for you. You know that. I’m on my way.”

The only reason I hang up is because if I talk to her while driving in the shit covering the roads I'm going to crash my goddamn truck. Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, makes my peach cry like that without dealing with me and her brothers, so you can bet your ass there will be hell to pay when I get to that fucking frat house.

“Hey! Where are you going?!”

I throw open the front door then glance back at crazy standing in the hallway wearing... oh gods, she's into furies because she is dressed like a fucking monkey... totally dodged a bullet here.

I won't yuck anyone's yum, but I don't get down like that and if she busted that out without a conversation about her plans for tonight, there is no telling what else this chick had in store.

“Emergency. Gotta go.”

Bethany screams at me as the door clicks shut, and I don't even bother with the elevator, just run down the three flights of stairs and haul ass out to my truck.

I don't know who was stupid enough to fuck with Nova, but judging by her tears and the fact that she called me from the frat house, it's most likely her boyfriend.

Who will be no more than a smear on the pavement when I'm through with him.

“I'm here, Peach,” I growl into the phone fifteen minutes later as I jog the front steps of Delta Delta Delta. “Tell me where you are.”

“Upstairs. Linen closet at the end of the hall.”

*Gods, I'm going to murder something.*

“I'm on my way.” I shove through the bodies outside, the smell of weed and cigarette smoke thick around the open front door.

I must look like a man on a mission, one who'd kill in order to complete it, because the second I hit the foyer, the

entire first floor goes silent and the crowd parts to reveal the staircase.

“Second or third floor, Nova?”

“Third,” she whispers. “Turn left at the stairs.”

“Copy.”

A small giggle, the kind that makes my heart skip a beat, comes through the phone. “Such a hero.”

“Just for you, Peach. No one else gets my hero treatment.”

Nova snuffles a few more times. “Are you close?”

“Just got to the third floor.” I’m basically yelling into the phone over the heavy pulse of horrible club music but I want Nova to feel connected to someone who cares right now, she obviously needs it. “All the way at the end?” There are less people up here but I can definitely hear them getting it on behind the closed doors—thank you, shifter ability—and when I see a door at the end of the hall pop open a smidge, I can’t help but feel relief. “That you, Peach?”

“Yeah.” Nova sighs. “Thank you, Ronin.”

My heart flips again as she says my full name in that slight southern twang. Nova is the only person besides her brothers and Colt who’s allowed to call me that, and it isn’t because I hate my name. I love it, and only people I love get to use it.

I grip the door knob and pull hard to reveal my sweet little peach curled into a ball, knees pressed to her chest, her body tucked under the bottom shelf lined with towels. And she’s wearing real fucking snow boots with a parka. My peach is smart.

“Hey.” She blinks up at me with those galaxy eyes, red rimmed and a little puffy behind her John Lennon style specks.

“Hey,” I grunt as I slide my phone back into my jeans. “You wanna get outta here?”

She nods and reaches for my outstretched hand. “So bad.”

“Let’s get you home then.” I pull Nova to her feet, scan her and make sure she isn’t hurt, which she isn’t physically, then

immediately tuck her into my side. “What happened, Nova?”

She shakes her head, sniffles, and presses her face against my chest. “Not here.”

“Ok. You need to get anything?”

She just shakes her head.

Her head that I can't help but press a soft kiss to. “I got you, Peach. I'm here and I got you. No more big bads for my girl.”

Nova wraps her arms around me and squeezes tightly as we start down the stairs.

She doesn't look up, doesn't even lift her head, just stays plastered to me while I lead her out of the stupid frat house, all eyes on my peach the entire time.

And that shit leads me to believe whatever went down, went down publicly, because Nova doesn't generally draw this kind of attention.

Yes, she is the most beautiful female to ever live so she gets stared at a lot.

Yes, she is just as dorky as I am so she gets stared at a lot for that, too.

But to have members of multiple sororities and fraternities staring at her while snickering and whispering among themselves typically doesn't happen, especially if she's with me or her brothers cause we scare the fuck out of all of them, so whatever happened was bad.

Nova clings to me right up until we get to my truck, barely lets go when I lift her into the cab, and the minute I'm in the driver's seat she leans over the center console, wraps her arms around my right one and leans her head on my shoulder.

With a sigh, I shift into gear then head toward her aunt's place, crawling along the pavement because it started to snow again and the roads are even slicker than before, but also because I want to know what happened.



Something Nova must feel because she holds my arm a little tighter. “I caught Ricky in bed with another girl.”

I hop a curb and curse, almost hit a streetlight then get shit straightened back out while white knuckling the fuck out of the steering wheel.

Yes, Nova was dating Ricky, *that Ricky*, Ricky Schmidt, my only friend until she and her brothers came along.

He met them that first summer they visited Ashland and he definitely had the hots for Nova then, but it wasn't until they came out this past summer to stay permanently that he tried pursuing her.

They've been together about four months, maybe five, and I always suspected Ricky had an ulterior motive for dating Nova. Which makes me sound shitty I know, but I've never shared that with anyone. I just grinned and bared the way that asshole took complete control of her life and progressively made her more and more miserable.

“Didn't you go to the party with him?” I'm going to blow a goddamn gasket. Yep. I'm gonna pop some blood vessels for sure, but I need to be there for this girl right now and I will if it's the last thing I do.

Nova nods against me. “We got separated after beer pong so I went looking for him. Found him balls deep inside LouElla Crabtree.”

“Gross.” I cringe and Nova giggles. “I'm sorry, Peach. So sorry.”

“That's not even the worst part.” She sighs and runs her hand down my arm, traces the markings on the back of my right hand then links our fingers. Which of course is the exact moment my dick decides to go from zero to sixty in one second flat. *Great timing, asshole.* “After I busted him, Ricky had the nerve to finish railing her skinny ass into a stranger's headboard, pull out and come all over her back then yell at me for interrupting.”

“Jesus Christ... Nova, I...” *I am going to kill Ricky Schmidt.*

“Then he hopped off the bed, pulled up his pants and followed me out into the hall and started yelling at me about how if I wasn’t such a prude he wouldn’t had to screw other girls. He said *girls*, Ron. Plural.” She snuffles then nuzzles my shoulder. “When I pointed that out, he laughed, said he was only with me to make you mad and could hardly stomach hanging out with me because I’m a loser just like you. Then he called me a freak that probably has disgusting orgies with you and my brothers before he had the nerve to breakup with me. And he did all of it in front of the entire party.”

Yep.

*Ricky is a dead man.*

And I fucking knew he was only dating Nova to get under my skin.

*Bastard.*

I swallow the ball of rage in my throat and squeeze her fingers a little tighter as I pull onto her aunt’s street. “That when you called me?”

“I slapped him first, but yeah.”

My eyes go saucer wide as I glance at her. “You slapped Ricky?”

Nova giggles. “I sure did. Slapped him good and called him a motherfucking bastard right before I burst into tears and ran upstairs. Don’t feel bad about it either.”

“That’s my girl.” I kiss the top of her spun gold hair with a chuckle. “Why didn’t you call Vega or Sig?”

“Vega and Ainsley are with Aunt VivaDee at a book fair in Portland. Won’t be back until tomorrow night, and Siggy had another date.”

*Ah.*

Last resort.

Doesn’t make a difference to me, though, I still woulda been there no matter what.

“And I only wanted to see you,” she whispers into my coat. “You always make me feel better.”

My heart stops, then barely stutters back to life in my chest.

Gods, does she have any idea what saying something like that does to me?

She must, because then Nova squeezes my hand. “Plus, you actually listen to me. My brothers woulda stuck me in the car then turned tail and found Ricky before squashing him like the bug he is.” She snorts. “And yeah, I know you want to do that but you woulda listened when I said no and not made things worse. You care enough to make me the focus and not him.”

She’s dead fucking right about that.

“So, what did I interrupt?”

I frown down at the top of her head as we pull into her aunt’s driveway. “Nothing, Peach, I told you that.”

Nova tilts her head and peers up at me over her glasses. “Your shirt is on inside out and backwards, and I can smell the perfume, Ronny. I know what that means.”

I shake my head with a grin. “You didn’t interrupt, you saved me from what no doubt was going to be another terrible life choice.”

“Good.” She beams a breathtaking smile. “This perfume smells like shit.”

I bark out a laugh that turns into a sharp hiss as Nova unbuckles, pushes up and starts rubbing her face all over my shoulder, chest, and neck. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to cover up that stink with my perfume. I smell way better than that cheap hussy.”

*She is not wrong.*

Nova smells like everything that’s good and right in the world. Magnolias and pecan pie, campfire and toasted

marshmallows, sunsets and mountain mist with a touch of pure vanilla bean and a hint of peppermint.

She smells like life itself.

“You want me to walk you in?” I choke out as she sits back down. “I hate the idea of you going inside that enormous house alone.”

Nova pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes bouncing between mine. “I didn’t love Ricky.”

Frowning, I nod slowly. “Ok...”

“I just want you to know that I was crying ‘cause he embarrassed me, not because he broke my heart. It wasn’t his to break.”

Man, she is killing me tonight.

It would be so easy to lean over and cup her cheek then kiss those bright pink lips as I slide my hand into her satiny hair.

But I won’t.

I won’t because if that ever did happen I don’t want it to be because I’m the first guy she comes across after breaking up with her scumbag boyfriend.

I’m not going to be a rebound, not even for Nova.

“I’m glad, Peach. You’re so much better than him, and when the sting of embarrassment wears off, you’ll be good as new. Better even, for shedding his dead weight.”

“I know.” She gifts me with a beautiful smile then knocks the air out of my lungs. “Will you stay with me, Ronin? I don’t want to be alone tonight, and there isn’t anyone else in the world that makes me happy like you do.”

Jesus, she is slaying me hardcore, but I nod. “If that’s what you want, of course I’ll stay.”

“We can eat ice cream and watch musicals in my bed until we put ourselves into food comas.”

We've done that multiple times over the last seven years, just me and Nova or all four of us, for various reasons good or bad, but tonight... tonight it feels different.

It feels like Nova is asking me for something else, something I'm not sure I can give her but want like hell to try.

"I already said yes, you don't have to bribe me with show tunes and peanut butter fudge swirl."

"Consider them a bonus." She giggles then hops out of my truck, my eyes following her puffy parka and heavy snow boots before my brain catches up and I get out too.

*Yeah, I'm fucked.*

That blonde bombshell I mentioned earlier? The one that owns my heart?

It's Nova.

Nova Rain Baker is the girl of my dreams, and I've been in love with her for seven goddamn years.

So what's stopping me from laying claim to the most amazing woman I've ever met?

She also happens to be one of my best friends in the entire world as well as the younger sister of my other two best friends in the whole world.

I don't want to risk losing any of them because I'm in love with Nova, and you can bet your ass it's killing me worse than her words just did.

*I am totally fucked.*

## CHAPTER 2

**WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS,  
CONTINUE PINING**

## NOVA



I am channeling my inner Garfield this morning.

I feel lazy and tired, sluggish and totally blah. I'm almost annoyed with life itself while I slink through the halls to my creative writing class. A class I normally look forward to but my *I hate Mondays* attitude is ruining that too.

It ruined my four a.m. *don't worry, you still have two and a half hours to sleep* alarm because I was super grumpy and accidentally turned off all of my alarms then overslept by an hour.

It ruined my traditional Monday morning fancy latte and pastry from Krazy Kady's because *overslept* and had to skip it, then settled for the crap in the food court pretending to be coffee.

It ruined my customary walk through the flower shop a few doors down from Kady's because even though I tried to go in still and get the magnolia fragrance I like to dab all over everything, they just sold the last bottle and said they wouldn't have any more of the oil until next week.

I bought lily instead and it smells like poop. Flowery poop, but poop nonetheless.

After that, I gave up my morning rituals and went to school, but I couldn't find any parking on campus close to my first class—Brit Lit—so I decided to park close to my final class of the day—Advanced Drama—then decided the long walk would do me some good. But instead of clearing my head in the crisp morning air, it started snowing buckets, and



by the time I was finally inside the building I was sopping wet and frozen to the bone.

And that led to a detour to the bathroom where I spent way too long under the hand dryers trying to warm up and dry off, so I wound up locked out of my first class.

Which is why I spent that two hour block back in the bathroom crying and cursing the gods of college campuses and alarm clocks because obviously this is the universe's big fat *fuck you* on top of a horrible weekend.

Well, not *all* horrible.

Mostly, but I can't say it was *all* horrible when Saturday night was one of the best nights I've had in forever.

*After my breakup with Ricky the Peckerhead, anyway.*

Gods, I was so angry, so embarrassed, so utterly humiliated at finding him with LouElla that it didn't hit me until I was on my way home that those were the only feelings I had about the whole thing.

I wasn't jealous.

I wasn't heartbroken.

I wasn't even a little sad.

Just angry and embarrassed over the way it all went down.

I mean, I knew I wasn't in love with Ricky but I kinda liked him. I thought he was cute, sorta enjoyed spending time with him, but I never even came close to feeling love for him, not any kind of love at all.

Especially not the kind of love I have for my heroic rescuer that stormed into the frat house to save me at three o'clock in the morning with a very sexy *don't fuck with my peach* look on his gorgeous face.

With a sigh and a silly grin, I finally sit in my seat almost all the way back in the auditorium.

*Ronin.*

I giggle at myself because I'm a dork and totally sighed his name in my head, but that's fine. Ronny is so worthy of my sighs and swoons, beyond worthy, really, and he totally upped his game Saturday.

I know he was with a girl when I called him but the immediate urgency in his gravelly voice, the intense concern and take charge attitude made my heart beat a million miles an hour, and I suddenly didn't give a shit if he had his dick in her mouth or not.

Ok, I'm lying.

I absolutely give all the shits where Ronny puts his dick but I pretend I don't because never in a million years would Ronny put his dick anywhere near me. No matter how bad I want him to.

I want him to give me his dick *and* his heart, the former just as big and beautiful as the latter, I'm sure.

So maybe I'm a little bit glad my phone call cockblocked him but it wasn't my intent, and I'm super grateful Ronny came to my rescue.

Even more grateful that he drove me home and stayed the night, and didn't leave me longer than it took for one of us to use the bathroom, even when his uncle called at the ass crack of dawn looking for him for their early morning run.

And I won't lie and say I didn't love how grumbly Ronny was when he talked to Colt in his sleepy voice and told him they'd go for a run later before he hung up, threw his phone across my bedroom, and rolled over to cuddle me for another two hours.

*Ronny gives great cuddles.*

Alas, great cuddles and unmatched friendship of the deepest variety is all I'll ever get from Ronin because he's my best friend and that's all he'll ever be.

*I just wish that didn't hurt worse than breaking up with the peckerhead.*

Not that I should really be dating, anyway—Ronny or anyone else. My brothers and I moved to Ashland permanently for a reason and that reason is super important, the most important, and deserves my entire focus.

Too bad I can't stop thinking about what it would be like to really be with Ronny after seven years of pining for him.

When we first met, I was totally smitten. A cute boy that lived on a ranch—even if it was the kind that raised animals to eat—and loved Chitty Chitty Bang Bang absolutely spoke to my inner nerd, and the more I got to know Ronny those last few weeks we were in Ashland, the more smitten I became.

I couldn't wait to come back the next summer, and when we did, Sig, Vega, and I spent almost everyday at Caldwell Farms working the ranch and hanging out with Ronny and his family.

Well, his dad and his siblings or his Uncle Colt, anyway. His mama didn't seem to like us that much—me especially.

But still, every summer was like that, and they were the best summers of my life, summers I looked forward to more than any romance novel or musical I'd ever waited for, and as time went on, what I felt for Ronny blossomed into the worst kind of crush a girl can have.

*A one-sided crush on her best friend.*

Right up until the summer we turned nineteen and Ronny looked the same but different too.

Hell, he looked fucking hot and it was everything I could do to keep myself from jumping him whenever I had him alone.

He's always been good looking, but after that last growth spurt or whatever he went through, Ronny went from cute and handsome to downright lethally sexy, and lord have mercy, my panties were never dry around him again.

It definitely didn't help that he had suddenly turned into an alpha male while also being way sweeter than before, which I honestly didn't believe was possible, but it's how I knew Ronny and I would never be more than just friends.

He was too protective, too attentive for it to be anything other than deep platonic love, one almost bordering on the sibling variety, and since he's also best friends with my brothers, my hopes of simply just kissing Ronin Abraham Caldwell fizzled to a low hum.

It's also when I finally realized I was completely and totally in love with the boy who'd never love me back.

And since our friendship is so important to both of us, I pushed aside my dreams of forever with my beautiful bestie as something more and started trying to date in order to forget them.

Something that clearly didn't work and has only led to more reasons to love Ronny, and a list of shitty ex's like the peckerhead.

*What can I say? I'm not exactly the best at devising solid plans.*

With a yawn mighty enough to come from a lion, I check my phone to make sure it's on silent then notice I have about ten minutes until class starts, which also means my trio of big grunty boys are going to be late.

And that means Vega is most likely in the library scouring its vast collection of archives for info on our entire reason for moving to Ashland, Siggy is probably in a dark corner somewhere making out with the flavor of the week, and Ronny, well, I'm not always sure what he's up to, but that's just because this is the first time we've been with him during any season other than summer.

I've loved getting to know his habits, though.

Ronny gets up way too early for someone who works at a bar multiple nights a week just so he can either help his dad on the ranch or work out in some way with one of his many uncles. Turns out Colt isn't his only uncle, just the only one that shares blood, and I adore how close his family seems to be.

After that, Ronny goes to his mama's house for breakfast but only if it's a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Friday, then takes his

younger siblings to school before he hits Vivacious Words for the scoop on upcoming releases from my aunt then heads to Kady's to help with the morning rush.

On those days, Ronny has a later start to his school schedule, and once he gets out of class he goes home to help his dad some more before his nine p.m. shift at Bill's.

Mondays and Thursdays, the four of us have the same class schedule—Brit Lit at eight, Creative Writing II at ten-thirty, and Advanced Drama at two-fifteen—and usually grab lunch together off campus somewhere.

After classes, Ronny goes home for a little while and apparently *gets shit done*, whatever that means, heads to Bill's by six and works until closing.

Most Saturdays and Sundays, Ronny works the early all day shift at Kady's, has a short break from five to nine, which is when he usually tries to hang out with us, then works—*again*—at Bill's because those are big bar nights.

The only day Ronny has off from both jobs is Friday and he usually spends that *getting more shit done* before catching up on his studies, or sometimes going out to act like a twenty-one-year-old man.

I respect the hell out of Ronny for his work ethic and drive, but he has to be exhausted with a schedule like that, especially since the only day he has to sleep in is on a Sunday, and after Colt called him at five-thirty a.m., I doubt our definitions of sleeping in are even remotely similar.

And now that I'm thinking about it, I totally sound like a stalker.

*Nah.*

Just a best friend who is secretly in love with him and worries about his well being.

*Yeah, that sounds better.*

Another glance at my phone shows it's time for class to start and my three boys are still MIA.

So, I do what I always do and send up a flare.

**ME: Professor Carpenter just walked in. Where are you guys???**

**VEG: Around the corner. Got caught up in the library. Coming in hot, lil sis.**

I roll my eyes but smile because that means Vega is probably running down the hall with a load of copies in his arms because he refuses to use any kind of backpack.

Such a boy, that one.

**ME: Well, hurry up! He's giving me the eyeball because all three seats around me are empty!**

**VEG: T-minus five, and I'll be sliding in the door.**

**SIG: Ditto. Tongue wrangling that cute little brunette had me losing track of time. So glad I wore a scarf, pretty sure Lyle gave me a hickey!**

**ME: I have concealer in my bag. I'll fix you up once we take our break.**

**SIG: You are my favorite baby sister ever.**

**ME: Also your only baby sister. By eleven months.**

**SIG: All the more reason you're my favorite. We're practically triplets.**

**VEG: Hall monitor in Doonesbury. Looks like she has a stick up her ass just waiting to beat any late comers with it.**

**SIG: Yuck. That chick needs to get some D. Always so cranky and who the hell grows up to become a hall monitor for a college?? Girl needs a big fat D to make her see things more clearly. Veg, Ron? You up for making our lives easier? Lord knows I can't afford another ten dollar fine for being late without an excuse.**

**SIG: Maybe if I show her the hickey she'll let me slide?**

**ME: Or maybe you should quit playing tonsil hockey with every available boy in between classes!**

**VEG: I second that. Coulda used some help making copies.**

**SIG: My skills are in high demand. I can't leave my fans disappointed. It would be a serious injustice to not deliver the goods.**

**VEG: Ronny there yet? He hasn't answered any of us.**

**SIG: Maybe he found his own flavor between classes?? Where you at, Ronin?**

**ME: Ronny? Are you on your way?**

I chew my lip, and push my glasses up my nose. It's not like Ronny to ignore our group text, honestly. Ever since he got a phone—when he was seventeen and spent the entire year prior begging his mama—he has never ignored or missed a single text or call from any of us. It's how we were able to remain so close each time we went back to Mississippi.

With a sigh, I lean down toward my bag to grab my notebook, check to make sure I have the concealer that Siggy will need, and when I go up right, I jump.

A go-cup from Kady's comes down into my line of sight first and settles quietly on the little half desk I flipped up to take notes on. A small white bag with the bright pink logo joins it, followed by the little bottle of magnolia oil I couldn't get when I went to the flower shop.

I blink about a hundred times then look up, way up, to find Ronny crab walking past me to the seat on my left.

“Sorry I'm late,” he whispers as he slumps in the chair that's too small for him. “Made a quick stop between classes.”

I blink at him then glance back to my half desk, my entire face burning with a blush that promises to be the fiercest one I've had yet.

A small smile pulls at my lips, one I try to hide by biting my cheek, and when I look back at my rescuer, I chew so hard I almost draw blood.

Ronny is in a solid black hoodie with paint stains, a pair of grey sweats that leaves very little to the imagination—*whoa, lord have mercy*—and his big, clunky snow boots are untied and barely hanging on to those pretty man feet.

He doesn't usually dress too different but the fact that Ronny is in sweats and a little disheveled probably means he had a long night last night and is as tired as I feel, but he brought me presents anyway and that makes my heart do all the stupid things. Especially because he looks amazing right now.

“Did I miss anything?” he whispers again as he pulls his notebook out, flips a few pages, and sets down his pen then, because apparently my best friend wants to incinerate my panties before lunchtime, he flips his hood down to reveal he isn't wearing his normal beanie. Ronny is just rocking a mess of the most amazing dirty blonde curls that are sticking straight off his head in glorious loose spirals.

*Yep.*

My panties are now ruined, and my heart is racing, and my stomach is flipping like it's an Olympic gymnast.

*How does one man do all this to me without even trying?*

Ronny turns toward me when I don't answer right away, lifts one perfectly thick eyebrow and smirks. “You ok, Peach?”

“Uh...” I clear my throat and force myself to engage in normal human conversation. “Yeah, sorry. You didn't miss anything, Professor Carpenter has been talking to Milton since he gave me the eyeball, so we haven't started yet.”

“And you're ok?” His Caribbean blues search mine as he frowns. “You missed Brit Lit.”

I nod and drop my eyes but they land on what is no doubt my Monday morning hazelnut-vanilla-cinnamon swirl latte with whipped cream, caramel, and chocolate sprinkles. And it makes my heart swell a touch knowing he went and got that



for me. “Rough start this morning. I overslept and then everything sorta went downhill from there.”

Ronny’s eyebrow somehow goes higher as he waits for more explanation, probably worried I ran into Ricky the Peckerhead or something, but I just chew my cheek and stare intently at the bag from Kady’s that probably has the fluffiest croissant known to man slathered in rich butter and blackberry jam.

I might be sorta stalking Ronny but he knows my habits just as well. Part of that whole *best friend* thing.

“I spent that time in the bathroom...” My gaze flies to his as I grimace. “Not because I’m having tummy trouble! Oh gods, no, my tummy is fine. Right as rain and then some. I just —”

“Miss Baker.” A voice at the front of the auditorium booms. “If you’re finished updating the class on your lack of *tummy trouble*, I’d like to move on to more class-related topics.”

My head swings toward Professor Carpenter as my entire body blushes. He’s giving me the eyeball from hell with a scowl on his wrinkly face.

*Oh. My. Gods.*

He heard me.

My professor and the whole class heard me tell Ronny I was in the bathroom for two hours but not because I have the shits.

They heard all of that and now I just want to sink into my seat until it swallows me whole.

*I’m completely mortified.*

I may chatter away to Ronny and my brothers, my aunt and Ainsley, but that’s pretty much the extent of my gum flapping. I can’t handle talking to strangers or speaking up in class, hell I can’t even order my own drive thru or takeout.

I totally freeze and just blush until there’s so much blood in my face I get lightheaded, and the fact that I screeched my

lack of tummy trouble to a packed auditorium has me about two seconds from passing out.

Until a big, warm arm slides around my shoulders and tucks me into a hoodie covered chest that smells like the woods and soap and lemon and promises of endless orgasms, anyway.

“Ignore him, Peach,” Ronny whispers into my hair. “You can tell me all about your morning when we go to lunch.”

Which doesn’t happen until after I sit through class with my face firmly hidden in Ronny’s chest, only moving a bit to sip my fancy latte or eat my favorite pastry. I don’t even move to take notes or look at the slides on the screen in front. I’ll borrow Ronny’s if I don’t die of embarrassment in the near future.

And when Vega and Sig finally showed up twenty minutes late, I barely acknowledged them, but I didn’t miss the hushed conversation between my favorite boys where Ronny said to leave me be, or the way my brothers had one of their weird twin conversations while they stared lasers at me and Ronny.

They do that a lot actually, stare at the two of us while talking to each other in their heads.

Maybe not *really* talking, but I swear my brothers share more than those twin superpowers you read about, and not just because of our genetics.

Needless to say, my second class of the day went about as well as the first one.

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“So...” Vega sighs a couple hours later as he scoots into a booth at Four Square, a cute little diner next to Aunt VivaDee’s store. “You wanna tell us why you spent all of class hiding in Ron’s sweatshirt?”

I push my glasses up my nose, glance at Ronny as he scoots in next to me, and try like hell to refrain from hiding there all over again. “Not really.”

“Nova Rain Baker, you best get to telling us what happened this morning,” Siggy scolds. “And so help him if it has anything to do with Ricky...”

“No, no!” I blurt. “I haven’t seen him since Saturday.”

“Good.” The three grunt in unison.

I love these boys, love them so much, but when they’re all staring at me like this, waiting for me to spill my guts, I can’t help but get a little stage fright even with them.

So with a sigh, I relent. “I accidentally shut off all my alarms this morning, didn’t get to make my usual stops and purchases, and then I got all wet in the snow because I couldn’t find any parking.” *Shoot, this is embarrassing.* “Which is why I was in the bathroom so long, trying to dry out with the hand dryers, but I missed Brit Lit and now Professor Carpenter probably thinks I have IBS.”

My brothers raise identical brows, eerily similar green eyes bouncing between me and Ronny, who is chuckling while he looks over the menu. “Peach blurted she wasn’t having stomach issues in the middle of Carpenter trying to start class.”

“Ah.” Sig laughs. “Well, that, baby sis, is a helluva start to your day. I propose we skip real food and go right for milkshakes to cleanse the bad juju.”

Which would never in a billion years happen during any meal these three were sitting down to.

And they prove that tenfold by the way my six-foot-three twin brothers order half the menu while Ronny orders the other half, milkshakes included, and I just get a grilled ham and cheese with fries.

*Big boys eat lots.*

Once the food arrives, we dig in, a comfortable silence around our table while they polish off every last bite, and just when I have a french fry covered in my delicious strawberry shake poised for devouring, Vega makes me damn near choke.

“You decide what you wanna do for your birthday yet, Nov?”

“Oh yeah!” Siggie grins and rubs his hands together like the diabolical mastermind he is. “Twenty-one on Saturday, gotta celebrate somehow.”

“I don’t want a party,” I groan as I trail my fry through the whipped cream. “I just want to have dinner at home with you guys, VivaDee, and Ainsley, then legally drink my weight in peach schnapps.”

Ronny chuckles and nudges my elbow. “That hardly seems like a celebration since that’s basically what we did when I turned twenty-one.”

“And since neither of you could party with us when we did”—Siggie grins—“we have to go all out and make this a night to remember.”

“I’ve had enough of those recently.” My eyes drop to my plate on a grunt. It’s not that I don’t appreciate what they’re saying, or want to acknowledge my birthday, but I really want to avoid the possibility of running into Ricky or LouElla.

Again, not heartbroken or jealous, just completely humiliated. Having your boyfriend of four and a half months bang another chick in front of you before telling basically everyone on campus he never wanted to be with you in the first place leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

Something my sweet as pie BFF is clearly in tune with because Ronny says, “We could always hit up that club in Eagle Point. It’s supposed to be pretty cool, not too scene but fun, and I heard Saturday night they run a ladies’ choice drink special.”

*Gah, he’s so perfect.*

And he also knows how much I love dancing.

“We don’t have to go that big...” But apparently I’m wrong because all three of them are frowning at me. “It’s just another day.”

“Bullshit,” Vega grunts.

Siggy nods. “Complete bullshit. December seventh is the best day, it’s Nova Day. We have to celebrate the day the best girl ever was born.”

My gaze shifts between my brothers then I take a chance and look at Ronny, who is staring holes into the side of my head.

“I did take Saturday and Sunday off...” He smirks. “Be a shame to waste the time if I’m not celebrating with my girl.”

Be still my heart.

*His girl?*

Gah.

*Way to lay it on thick, Ronin.*

I mean, I know he doesn’t mean much by that, he’s always called me that since I’m the only girl in our group. Unless you count Ainsley, but she’s older by a few years and doesn’t always get to hang out with us.

But still, the way those crystal blue eyes darken a bit before they sparkle like a lagoon in the morning sun, making me want to believe he meant it in a different way.

*Maybe that’s what I’ll wish for when I blow out my birthday candles.*

I’ll wish my hardest that one day Ronny will see me as more than his best friend, more than his best friends’ little sister, and actually claim me as *his girl* for real.

*Silly, naive girl.*

“Ok.” I sigh. “You guys win. We’ll go to Diesels Saturday night, after dinner with VivaDee and Ainsley.”

“Who is also going to stay and dance her ass off with us.” Siggy smiles. “Big cuz needs to get out there and live a little. She’s probably in need of some D just as bad as the hall monitor.”

Vega grimaces. “Quit trying to give everyone D.”

“Never!” Siggy thrusts his fork into the air. “D is the best medicine and all those in need should receive a hearty dose!”

Ronny laughs, his sexy deep one that gives me goosebumps. “I gotta split. Have to hit the hardware store before Drama.” He gets to his feet and throws a wad of cash on the table. “Lunch is on me today. I’ll see you guys in a bit.”

I watch as he gives us all a smile and nod, then my eyes immediately zone in on his amazing bubble butt in those damn sweats, probably drooling like a rabid dog while I do. A rabid dog that is totally busted when Ronny suddenly stops, turns and heads back toward us.

“Hey.” He quirks a brow at me as I try to recover and act like I wasn’t just caught staring at his dick outline. “You mind if I bring someone Saturday?”

The air whooshes from my lungs, my heart dropping to my stomach before it basically pounds in my ears. “Yeah, no, sure. Of course. That’s totally fine. I’m totally fine if you bring someone to the club. We’re just gonna drink and dance and stuff. It’ll be great. The more the merrier. Absolutely. Of course. Yeah—” I yip as Siggy kicks me under the table, so I nod at Ronny’s beautifully confused face.

“I don’t have to, I just thought...”

I flap my hand at him, force a smile, and turn back to my shake. “No problem. Bring whoever you want. It’ll be great.”

“Ok...”

“Ok.”

Ronny blinks, shakes his head, then pushes his big ole hand back through his hair. “See you guys, I guess.”

“See ya!” Chipper is hopefully how I sound because the alternative would be devastated.

Ronny wants to bring a girl to my birthday party, probably the girl with the shitty perfume, and I’m pretty sure this is what heartbreak feels like. *So much for birthday wishes.*

“What the hell was that?” Sigma hisses as Ronny disappears. “You went all crazy pants over him asking to bring

someone.”

“Did not.” I scowl because I totally did. “It just surprised me. I didn’t know Ronny was seeing anyone seriously, but I don’t care who he brings as long as he’s there. He’s our best friend, after all.”

“Mmhmm.” Sig crosses his arms, definitely not buying my brand of bullshit as Vega leans toward me and searches my face. “You ever gonna tell him?”

“Tell who what?!” Screeching seems to be my thing today. “I have nothing to tell anyone ever!” I need to change the subject. I’ve always thought they knew how I feel about Ronny but neither one of them have ever so much as hinted at it. It’s just been an unspoken thing, probably because they feel bad for me since I’m obviously a train wreck and will never be with the man of my dreams. “So what did you find at the library?”

*Yes, that’s good, switch to that.*

Vega squints at me, shakes his head, then sits up straighter. “Kentworth Labs was never in Oregon but the last known place was Wyoming. According to what they had on record, the lab blew up a couple months ago and no one found Kentworth amongst the wreckage.” He grabs the stack of papers he’s been carrying loose. “Didn’t find any bodies at all, actually, so they’re assuming the buildings were empty.”

“But we don’t believe that.” I scan the articles he’s referencing as a boulder starts to roll around in the pit of my stomach.

“Nope.” Sigma reads a few pages too. “But it’s hard to believe there were survivors...”

I swallow hard and try not to cry. “So what about the other stuff?”

Vega flips through the stack and pulls out an older article, one from a few years ago about a huge fire in the Siskiyou forest. “Look at this.” He points to the way the ground is charred like an asteroid hit and the trees that are totally

destroyed. “And this.” Another photo from the lab explosion with similar patterns.

Eyes bouncing between the two, I lean down then gasp, “*Dragons?*”

He nods. “One for sure.”

“So VivaDee might actually be right?” Siggy grabs the photos and brings them close to his face. “There might actually be shifters in Ashland?”

“Yeah, and get this.” Another few pages has Vega handing over deeds, birth certificates, marriage licenses, and social security numbers. “All of these appeared in the courthouse records over the last few years, started getting filed around the time that fire happened.”

Five marriage licenses with Dragovihk as a last name, a Toth and a... “Paddock?!”

Vega nods. “I have a funny feeling Ronny’s uncle might be a person of interest.”

“No way. No.” I shake my head like mad. “If Ronny were a shifter he woulda told us.”

My brothers both arch a brow and look at me like I’m nuts.

“Just like we told Ronny that we’re different too?” Siggy smirks. “Come on, Nova. You know all of us are secretive as fuck. No matter how much we love each other—or in whatever capacity—we don’t generally go blurting that shit out.”

“Yeah, but...” Well, he is right. We don’t talk about what we are, and I can only assume shifters are the same. “So you think there is a centralized group of shifters living here in Ashland and they somehow had everything to do with what happened to the lab?”

Vega nods. “And if we want to find Mama and Daddy, this has to be our starting point. We need to figure out what Ronny knows, if his uncle was somehow involved in all that, and if he has an in with that mysterious group.”



“And how do you propose we go about that?” My stomach twists and turns with so much unease I might puke. “It’s not like that’s an easy topic to broach.”

He shrugs. “Dunno, but maybe if we can talk him into letting us see his new place or something...”

“Because it’s so close to his uncle’s place...” Siggy nods. “It might work. Then we can just snoop around without being all *‘hey man, you know any people that change into animals? Seen a crazy lab and mad scientist who liked to kidnap people like them? Why are we interested? Oh, just cause we’re people like them, too, and our mama and daddy were taken earlier this year when they were trying to buy a house closer to our aunt, who is also a supernatural critter by the way. Wanna still be friends?’*”

“Ronny wouldn’t judge us,” I whisper, not because I don’t believe my words because I do, but because it seems impossible that we’ll ever find Mama and Daddy after exercising every possible lead we’ve had since they disappeared just after the twins’ birthday. “And he’d try to help.”

They both reach out and take my hands, squeezing in a way that makes my fingers tingle like always.

“We’re gonna find them, Nova.” Vega nods firmly. “Come hell or high water, we are gonna find Mama and Daddy and bring them home.”

I sniffle, holding onto my brothers a little tighter but don’t speak.

There aren’t words, none we haven’t already said, and though I haven’t lost hope, I do feel a little hopeless. Our searching has turned up very little, but I can’t give up on finding our parents because roles reversed, they wouldn’t give up on finding us.

The bell over the front door dings and we all look toward it as if Mama and Daddy will stroll right in, but instead, it’s that little high school teacher, Mr. Newman, I think, and he’s heading toward the counter at a pace any turtle could beat.

*Poor old man looks whooped.*

But just when I consider getting up to give him our booth so he doesn't have to hop up on a stool, my hands turn icier than normal right before my brothers grip goes vice-like, their eyes rolling back to a filmy yellowish-green and their chins dropping to their chests as a multi-tonal shriek rips from their throats in a headache inducing rumble before it hits a pitch that shatters all the glass in the diner.

*Shit.*

Mr. Newman is going to die, bless his heart, and it is time for us to go.

*Shit.*

## CHAPTER 3

# FUZZY ICE

## RONNY



Nova has been giving me the cold shoulder all week, and it is slowly driving me insane.

Ok, so maybe *cold shoulder* is a little extreme, but things are definitely off between us and I can't figure out why.

Vega and Sig are fine, nothing weird with them, but every time I try to talk to Nova about anything other than school, she pretty much blows me off.

At first I thought maybe she was mad about my suggestion for her birthday party.

Yes, Nova is absolutely a nerdy introvert like me but she loves dancing and music, and I know she'd enjoy parties and clubs more if it wasn't for all the people, but I thought it was really a good idea.

There will be people, sure. Lots of them since it'll be a Saturday, but Diesels is in Eagle Point and I figured that meant there was less chance of running into anyone she knew, especially anyone that was at the party last weekend and saw how Ricky treated Nova.

Sig has been reassuring me that my suggestion was happily received and his sister has actually been getting more and more excited about going to the club as the week's gone on, but something is still off.

Which is why I assumed I'd done something else to upset my peach.

She won't go to lunch with us anymore, claiming she needs to study, or she goes to the library with Vega during our breaks, but I know her schedule and she doesn't have any midterms for another two weeks so that's bullshit.

When Nova responds to my texts, they're short and not her normal chapters, kinda like she's avoiding going beyond the surface, and that's only if I get an immediate response. Otherwise, it's a half-assed *sorry I missed you, catch up later* before a whole lotta radio silence.

And gods forbid she gives me any indicator on what she wants for her birthday, not that I really need her to tell me, I already bought her a new Kindle Paperwhite after I sat on her last one, and I loaded it with all of the books she's been adding to her TBR but her seemingly uninterested replies are eating at me.

I even surprised Nova with another fancy latte and pastry yesterday at Brit Lit because I thought maybe it'd be an ice breaker, but she just gave me a tight lipped smile and sat between her brothers.

It isn't like Nova to keep shit bottled up, not with me anyway, and I'm about one more curt nod or polite text away from blowing a fuse.

“You with us, Ronin?”

I lift my eyes from the beer can I'm crushing between my palms to meet Colt's stare. “Sorry, what?”

“That's what I thought,” he huffs. “Where's your head, Beta? You seem awfully distracted.”

Lark walks over and sits on the couch next to me and grins as she ruffles my hair. “*Mahassani*, I do believe our nephew is having girl trouble.”

I roll my eyes with a barely hidden grin.

Not because she's right, which she sorta is, but because I love hearing Lark call me her nephew.

I've never been closer to beating my uncle to death than I was the first time I saw them in a room together. The way he

tried like hell to deny their bond and muster the strength to reject her again? That shit set me the fuck off.

I get why he felt the way he did, but goddamn, the bond between Colt and Lark is practically palpable, something you can almost see, and when he tried to fight it, tried to reject her as his mate and Luna, well, I about lost my shit.

Thankfully, it didn't take long to get his head out of his ass. They mated almost immediately after that, and having both Lark and Colt in my life has made it a hundred times better. Especially since he and my mom are trying to patch things up now too.

Little by little, but they're getting there.

And I'm a lucky son of a bitch to be Colt's Beta, his right hand and closest one to him outside of Lark in terms of our pack hierarchy.

I'm still convinced they may be swingers with Zan and Frankie, though, and no matter how much I love the four of them, I never want to be *that* close to any of them.

"Is it a female?" Colt asks, those wolf eyes roaming my face. "You find your mate?"

I shake my head, blow out a breath and sigh. "Nah. Just worried about a friend."

"A female friend?" My aunt wags her brows. "Maybe your Nova you're always talking about?"

"I thought we were supposed to be talking about our next moves with Kentworth?" Cause I do not want to get into all the baggage that surrounds my unrequited love for my best friend.

I guess it's not really baggage per se, just drama I'm trying to avoid.

Being hopelessly in love with my best friend means I'd be risking our friendship for the possibility of something more, something that may not even work out the way I want it to and despite the way I frequently manage to convince myself it's worth the risk, I'm not really sure it is.

Then there's Sig and Vega to think about. They are my best friends as well, the only guys who have ever taken the time to get to know me, accept me, and stick around in spite of it, and I don't really want to jeopardize that either. And even though *best friend's little sister* is one of my favorite romance tropes—probably because I can relate—it doesn't mean it would work out that way for me.

Pursuing my feelings for Nova could result in the loss of three of the most important people in my life, and I'm just too chicken shit to try.

Besides, what happens if I find my mate while Nova and I were dating? A mate bond between wolves is instantaneous and I'd only end up hurting her if my mate randomly appeared, something else I'm too scared to risk.

I would literally rather do anything in the world than hurt my peach, and that's why we have to stay best friends. It's the *only* way to avoid any negative outcome.

*Then why does it hurt so goddamn badly to think about forever without Nova by my side as something more, as my everything?*

"Oh, honey, he has it bad." Lark sighs as she wraps me in a hug. "Just look at his face. Our Beta is in love."

Another eye roll. "You know as well as I do wolves can only truly love their mate."

"And who's to say this girl you're hung up on isn't your fated one?"

I snort. "Yeah, ok. Nova is my mate and I'm a USA Today top selling romance author."

"So it is Nova!" Lark smirks. "You've been hung up on her for a long time, right?"

*Shit.* I didn't really mean to say that but oh well, it's out now, so whatever. "Yeah. Seven years. Basically since the moment I met her."

"So she could be your mate..." Colt leans against the wall in their cabin and pins me with his stare. "Wolves give insta-



love a whole new meaning.”

“It’s one sided.” This is the last conversation I intended to have today. *Or ever.*

He lifts a brow. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“Seven years of nothing but friendship says otherwise. Besides, she isn’t a wolf so—”

“Nope,” Lark says as she slams her hand over my mouth. “Do not even say that. You know damn well our mates do not have to be wolves, just look at the rest of our family. Dragons and tigers, humans and demons, fae and vampires. Mates come in all shapes and sizes, and just because she hasn’t made a move does not mean Nova isn’t interested, or your mate.”

“Not to mention, since she isn’t a wolf, her feelings will be harder to interpret.” Colt grins. “Strong and fierce but hard to understand, and probably a little scary for a twenty-year-old girl. I’ve seen you two together and I would put money on Nova reciprocating your feelings.”

“Just stop, all right? It’s bad enough I feel something more than friendship for her, I don’t need you two putting thoughts in my head that Nova could be my mate. I mean, wouldn’t I know if she is? Or at least my wolf would know, wouldn’t he?”

Lark shrugs. “Not necessarily. If she’s human maybe, but honestly, there could be any number of reasons for you to feel strongly about your mate without putting the exact name to it, without knowing beyond a shadow that she’s your mate.”

“Like what?” Beause watching each of my uncles pair up has proved otherwise.

“Well... if she’s just as resistant to the feelings as you are, that could hide the bond some. Or if she’s something other than a human. There are some species that don’t experience the mate bond until they touch or kiss or have some level of intimacy between them.”

“Which just proves Nova isn’t my mate.” I frown because this sucks. “We’ve hugged, held hands, slept in the same fucking bed, and despite the fact that I feel like my entire body

is hooked up to a goddamn car battery, Nova doesn't seem to feel much of anything."

Lark looks me in the eye. "But have you kissed?"

My face heats, my heart beats a little faster, and my dick twitches in my jeans. "No."

"Sirens relied on kissing, banshees... harpies..."

I shake my head. "But Nova isn't any of those things. Although..." This conversation has brought me back to the question I still haven't asked either of them. "Nova's birthday is tomorrow and we're going out, the four of us and their older cousin. I was wondering if you two and Zan and Frankie would maybe come with?"

"Why?" Colt frowns. "Seems counterproductive to have your uncles show up at a club with you and your friends. Total killjoy."

"Especially if you want to get the girl." Lark gives me a nudge as she winks.

I push a hand back through my hair. "You know how much I love Vega, Sig, and Nova, but something has always been a little... off, I guess. Not in a bad way, but it's like there's something else, something they aren't telling me, and that feeling has only grown since they moved here. Vega is constantly doing some kind of research for a project he won't tell me anything about, they won't talk about their parents, they won't tell me exactly why they moved to Ashland. Again, none of it seems terrible but something is going on and I thought maybe between you and Zan..."

"We'd be able to get a real read on the situation." Colt nods. "I get it."

With the way I've been feeling, this unease that has been lingering in the back of my mind any time Nova isn't directly in front of me, I'd want Vok and the dragons there too, but that's not really an option.

Vok and Cora just found out she's pregnant again, and between that and their twins, there is no way for them to come

out to a club. And with the dragons still in Europe, they aren't an option either.

I also might have a little hero worship toward Colt and Zan, but whatever. Colt is the most perceptive fucker I know and his demon bestie is capable of sensing damn near any creature of mysticism since he's old as fuck and has met them all. Between the two, I have a feeling I'll get a better idea of what's going on with my best friends, and I definitely don't need shit clouded with thoughts of Nova potentially being my mate.

*Too bad they already are.*

I mean, I basically fell in love with Nova the second we met, maybe even the second I heard her voice, but I was almost fourteen and hormonal so I never really thought it was more, not until later anyway.

And by later, I mean seconds later when she serenaded me off key with a song from one of my favorite musicals.

Then there's the way my entire body responds to her, the simplest touch sending a current of high voltage electricity through every traitorous inch. The way I vibrate from head to toe, the way I'm simultaneously hot and cold, covered in goosebumps and totally keyed up.

I think about her every second I'm awake, and dream about her when I'm asleep.

I know I'm overly possessive, protective to the point of almost smothering, and I'm so in tune with Nova and her feelings it's like we share a soul or some shit.

Then there's my love life, or lack thereof—single and celibate when Nova is single, a bit of a playboy when she's in a relationship because I can't even wrap my head around being with anyone for more than one night since it never feels right, not the way it's supposed to. It doesn't feel like it does when I'm with Nova so why couldn't she be my mate?

I can try to make excuses and say I'm questioning all of this and acting like an alpha idiot because I haven't found my mate yet, but this stupid conversation has me thinking that

maybe it's because I already have, that maybe I found her when we were kids and she's been right in front of me all along.

Which brings me right back to watching my uncles find their mates and how it wasn't just some one sided thing; how their bonds were clear even to the most ignorant of creatures from the moment they met.

If Nova is my mate then wouldn't someone else see our connection? Wouldn't she feel it, even a little?

*Fuck.*

Fuck, this shit is too much.

I can't keep circling around the *what if's* and *why not's*. It's only going to cloud my already foggy brain and possibly ruin my most important relationships, keep me from helping Lark and Colt, and drive me fucking insane from trying to figure it all out.

My life is not some romance novel, it's not a best-friends-to-lovers or best-friends-little-sister trope with a happy ending where I get to keep my friends, get the girl, and live a perfect happily ever after.

*Real life doesn't work out that way.*

"We'll be there," Colt grunts with a look that says I'm a dumbass.

"Thanks." I nod and sink back into my seat. "I just want to be sure they're ok. It's not like any of them to keep things from me."

"What exactly do you think they're keeping from you?"

I shrug. "Not totally sure. Something about their parents, something about... I dunno, just *something*."

"You think they're like us," he states rather than asks because *perceptive fucker*.

"Maybe, yeah. Not shifters, but like us."

"Which is why you want Zan to come with."

Another nod. “Even if he doesn’t pick up on exactly what they may be, I know he sees things, little things that will at least indicate something more than human. And between that and your crazy talent for picking up on that kind of thing without trying, maybe I’ll get some answers.”

“So you’re really convinced your friends aren’t human?” Lark smiles softly and gives my knee a pat. “Why now?”

“I’ve suspected for a while, since the year we turned nineteen. When they came back to Ashland that summer, Sig and Vega had a growth spurt that was comparable to what I went through after I answered the call. They went from tallish and lanky to fucking beasts, still a couple inches shorter than me but big as hell, and since they’d already gone through puberty the same time I did—”

“You figured it was something more.”

“Yep. And Nova... Jesus, when I saw her that year it was —*she* was otherworldly.” It’s totally true, and the only way I can really describe the way she went from a total knockout to blonde bombshell sex kitten with a spark that could set the world ablaze.

“We’ll figure it out,” Colt grunts again as he turns to the cork board. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out and make sure everything is good with your friends. In the meantime, we do have business to discuss.”

The change in Lark is immediate as our Alpha starts pinning pictures to the wall.

She went from nosy and caring aunt to a hurt and vengeful Luna in no time flat, and if this wasn’t so important, didn’t mean so much to her, I’d try to suggest Colt and I do this alone.

Lark wouldn’t allow it, though.

She’s too invested, too angry to even consider it, and she has every intention of resolving this shit after the way things played out a few months ago.

Not to mention, Lark is scary as hell.

I love her, don't get me wrong, but I have yet to meet a female that makes me wither with one simple look the way she does, and I'm not sure if it's because she's my aunt, my Luna, or just plain Lark.

“After Zan...” Colt glances at Lark, a look so full of warmth and love, a look that asks for her forgiveness for the words he's about to say and emits so much *I've got you* even I feel it. “After he did what he did with the bodies we recovered, he was able to determine how many are unaccounted for.”

Being a demon, specifically one who collects souls, Zan was able to *feel* what was left of the innocent souls amongst the carnage at Kentworth Labs, and his ability to do so was how we were able to find and identify what remained of the bodies of those held captive. Thanks to him, we were able to recover those poor people who were mindlessly and mercilessly slaughtered once the doctor met the *other*.

He hit some sort of master switch that immediately put the lab in self destruct mode, which set fire to all three halls as well as most of the hospital and consumed those who were still locked up at the time. Not everyone was in their cells but that didn't stop him from doing it, and the ones that were suffered unnecessary and painful deaths.

It almost makes it easier to swallow the fact that Akecheta's biological parents were killed the way they were: quick and relatively painless. They didn't suffer physically and thanks to the fact that they were in the hospital portion of the facility when shit hit the fan, we were able to recover them and give them proper burials here on Dragovihk land so they would always be close to the son they barely knew. The son who is flourishing despite the way he was brought into the world. The pup that Zan and Frankie are going to raise as their own and make sure—along with Lark—he knows how brave and strong his biological parents were.

For all the fucked up shit that went down, Chet is definitely a bright spot in all that darkness, the darkness that is still looming despite our best efforts.

And obviously Zan's morbid and emotional work has paid off because now we can see for sure who we still need to find.

"Obviously, Kentworth got out, along with his head nurse and a few of the guards." Colt points to their photos then moves to the next. "Colleen Whittaker, black bear shifter. Roger Burgess, puma shifter. Cory Johns, wolf shifter. Natalie Van Dyke, vampire." He smiles softly at Lark again. "Bella and Wes. Those six are the only ones unaccounted for and we will find them before Kentworth has the opportunity to rebuild."

"Not much left to rebuild on," I grunt, anger swirling in my gut. "Fucker took care of eliminating most of our people."

Lark gets to her feet and stares at the photos as she walks over. "Which is why he's still going to try to come here. At the very least he knows we have a demon and dragons, knows about Colton's curse and the way I can control it. He knows exactly what made me so interesting to him in the first place, and that's enough for him to try to come after us despite how few his numbers are. I'm just glad Vok and Cora stayed back, if they'd have come with us, Kentworth would already be knocking on our door. Zan alone is enough to entice him."

"Which is why we need to find them first." Colt moves to the map full of pushpins and circled X's. "He was particular in who he chose to save, which definitely supports the fact that he's going to try to rebuild, but we need to know where he may attempt to do that. We've already eliminated anywhere we know he worked or lived prior to starting the lab—"

"Which means there has to be some kind of secondary location, somewhere Kentworth had as a fail safe if something like this happened." I push a hand back through my hair. "He wouldn't be running blind with three shifters, a vampire, a sorceress, and a banshee. It's too dangerous and he's not that stupid."

Lark nods. "Not to mention he'd need a way to still keep them restricted. If he didn't have a secondary lab or a way to keep their restraints active, it would be entirely too easy for any one of them to kill Kentworth and escape. He had to have

known exactly where he was going, had to have the means to transport so many dangerous people without a serious threat presented. And he'd need a way to protect Natalie from the sun as well. If he wants her for research, he can't let her have any exposure."

"So we broaden our search. We've hit all of Wyoming and the surrounding states, but we need to go further, somewhere more remote, possibly not even in the U.S." Colt's wolf eyes bounce all over the map as he scratches his chin. "If he crossed a border somewhere, there's a good chance there would be some sort of record of it, even if he was able to avoid patrol looking too closely at his cargo."

I get to my feet and grab the folders meant for me to take back to my place. "And that pretty much leaves Canada because he would still be in route to Mexico, and all considering, that's just too risky."

"Right." He crosses his arms, looks between me and Lark then nods. "I'll get started on border check-ins, tap into surveillance footage and their files. Vok and I should be able to get through it all pretty quick but in the meantime—"

I nod back. "I'll see what I can find out about Kentworth's personal ties to Canada. His family was loaded, I'm sure they had resources beyond what we're already aware of."

Colt nods and claps a hand on my shoulder. "Thank you. Don't work too hard, though, it's your only night off and you have a party to be ready for tomorrow."

I can't even force a smile at that.

Nova has been so weird lately that I'm not even sure if she wants me there. I'm actually considering skipping dinner with her family because I don't want it to be as awkward as the rest of our interactions have been, and I don't want to ruin it for her because of whatever I did to upset her.

I'll probably go home and get drunk instead of working on anything, wallow in my self pity for a bit while I pine over a woman I can never be with, then do the research Colt needs tomorrow.



And that'll be a perfect excuse to skip out on dinner with the promise of meeting them at Diesels later since I still want Colt and Zan to get a read on my friends.

I may be nursing some brand of heartache that I'm totally unfamiliar with, but I still love Nova and her brothers enough to make sure they're ok.

It just sucks that after all the talk about mates and shit I'm not totally sure *I'm* going to be ok.

Fated one or not, I'm still so in love with Nova that it burns right down to my marrow.

## CHAPTER 4

# PARTY POOPER

## NOVA



With a deep breath, one I'm trying desperately and failing to take through my tears, I wipe under my eyes then splash a little cold water on my cheeks.

This is not how today was supposed to go but I guess I really only have myself to blame.

I know it's immature and childish, but I was so rocked by the idea that Ronny wanted to bring a girl to my birthday party that I've been a complete jerk to him all week.

It's stupid, I know it's stupid, my brothers keep reminding me it's stupid, but I can't seem to control the way the deep seeded hurt has crept through and turned me into a big old jealous monster complete with temper tantrums and bouts of tears. None of which I have any right to experience because no matter how bad I want him, Ronny isn't mine.

Not once since I've known Ronny has he been with a girl in any serious capacity, never has he introduced us to any of them or suggested we hang out with one of his lady friends.

Whenever I'm in a relationship, that's when Ronny *dates* but you can hardly call it that. I'm not silly enough to think my best friend does anything more than *love 'em and leave 'em* since we never get to meet them, nor am I dumb enough to think he's just celibate. But, when I'm single, so is he, and I'm just stupid enough to have convinced myself it's because Ronny secretly loves me the same way I love him, and that our mutual singleness is because we are both secretly hoping to be together but are too scared to make a move.

Now I've let that fear rule me too long, and the boy I want forever from is bringing some hussy to my birthday party.

He's probably with her right now, most likely having crazy good sex and that's why Ronny didn't come to dinner. He was busy *coming* elsewhere.

A fresh wave of tears roll down my cheeks at the thought, and I grab my phone, open our thread, and reread what he sent me this morning.

**RONNY: Happy Birthday, Nova! Not gonna make it to dinner tonight. Sorry, Peach. Something came up so we'll meet you at Diesels around 9.**

I'm half tempted to cancel altogether, to tell Ronny I don't want him to come and I definitely don't want one of his cheap floozies there to spoil my night, but I can't.

Not when he wouldn't understand my jealousy or why I'm being so mean and emotional, especially when I've never given him a reason to think he's anything more to me than my best friend.

Which is why this hurts so damn bad.

Ronny is everything to me.

He's not just my best friend, he's absolutely everything, and I've always hoped we'd wind up together in the end.

And that's silly for multiple reasons other than never hinting at being in love with him.

After a week of blowing him off and being snippy, Ronny's probably even questioning our friendship.

I know my brothers are.

They've been hounding me nonstop over my shitty attitude toward our sweet, swoony bestie, and that's only made everything worse, which is why I broke down and confessed to them that I'm in love with Ronny and am basically devastated over the thought of him bringing a girl tonight.

Neither one of my brothers were surprised, and shockingly, they weren't pissed.

I thought they might be, I've read enough brother's best friend romances to know that was a serious possibility, but instead, Vega and Siggy just said it was about damn time I owned it and told me to stop being such a bitch to Ronny.

I haven't, though, and now he's not coming to my birthday dinner, the one I'm supposed to be eating right now but have spent most of the time in the bathroom crying, and he's probably going to be weird and standoffish at the club because of how I've been acting.

He'll probably spend the entire time dancing with the girl he brings, grinding and groping, stealing kisses in the corner or even banging in the bathroom.

And I may not know what Ronny's kisses are like, but I do know he's a great dancer, which would be enough for me to kiss him in a dark corner or bang him in the bathroom, in love or not, but I'm hopelessly in love with him so it's way worse.

And that's why I need to get my shit together.

Ronny doesn't love me back, probably doesn't look at me any differently from the way my brothers look at me, and that definitely means he isn't my divined like Siggy stupidly suggested.

If he was, I'd be more to him than what I so clearly am pigeonholed to—a best friend for life.

I straighten my shoulders, take a deep shaky breath then wash my face and get ready to start reapplying my makeup.

*Can't go out for my twenty-first birthday looking like a trashy raccoon—no one would be attracted to that. Except maybe Maddox Deveroux...*

We met that hulking man and his friends at a gas station on our way to Ashland a couple summers ago and since it didn't seem to faze him that I smelled like I'd been in a car with two stinky boys for hours on end, looked like I hadn't slept in a week, and was crabbier than I've ever been but he *still* hit on me, I'm sure Maddox would be attracted to me looking the

way I do right now. Hell, he'd probably just put a paper bag over my head and call it good.

*Ugh.*

And now that I need to accept my relationship with Ronny for what it is, I'm more determined to make sure someone finds me attractive, even just enough to dance with me once or twice.

I'm not very good at putting myself out there, and I don't have much confidence in the way I look or how I am, but that changes now.

*Tonight I'm going to look hot as fuck.*

Yep, I'm gonna make Ronny as jealous as he makes me, or try to anyway because it would mean he'd have to have more than platonic feelings for me, which he doesn't. And I'm definitely going to make sure that peckerhead Ricky knows what he's missing, too. Prude my ass.

Not that I'm hoping to run into that sorry excuse of a man. I'd be content never seeing him again honestly, but still, all the men in my life need to know I'm a strong, independent woman, one totally capable of seducing a stranger for a one night stand and I'll be damned if I don't make that happen tonight.

And since it's been ages since I've had sex, ever since my last boyfriend in Mississippi, I'm making it a goal to put myself out there and get noticed by a man, one who will see me for the sexy woman I am and not the kid sister or prude girl I'm always made out to be.

Yep, this is the new Nova Baker.

*Sex pot extraordinaire.*

Capable of seducing men for one night stands and happily going home with them for a bit of no strings attached action.

Firm in my new plan, I throw open the bathroom door and march over to my closet.

I'm currently wearing just a simple t-shirt and jeans but that won't do tonight.

So I strip down to my underwear, decide to scrap the boy shorts and plain bra for a lacy thong and matching bustier, bright pink and sexy as hell with enough lift to make my B-cups almost look like C's.

Then I wrestle my giant hips and ass into the tightest pair of jeans I own, my favorite ones that are ripped a bit over the thigh and knee, the ones that make my pear shaped self look more curvy than normal and give me an actual womanly figure by showing off the junk in my trunk I usually try to hide.

I thumb through my shirts and land on a black halter crop top covered in dark sequins that shimmer a deep blue, one that scoops low enough to reveal my minuscule cleavage and rides high enough to show a bit of my less than toned tummy. It's not abs, but it's sorta flat and still kind of tan, and that's good enough for me.

Next I pull on a silvery cardigan, one that's a bit sexy but will keep me warm until I'm drunk and dancing because *December in Oregon*.

For a few minutes, I debate on wearing cute but functional boots or sexy ankle-breaking stilettos since it'll be snowy and sloshy, but ultimately end up in my Louboutin Bianca booties as a compromise. My feet will be as warm as I can get in designer boots but the sky high heel, red sole, and sleek design scream *throw my legs over your shoulders and fuck me hard*, so they will hopefully achieve the goal of my overall look.

Satisfied that I no longer look like some nerdy bookworm who will stick out like a sore thumb, I head back to the bathroom and continue my own personal makeover.

My hair is first.

I take down the messy knot at the base of my head, finger comb my waves then decide to put the ass length disaster into a high, sleek ponytail.

Twenty minutes of teasing and spraying has it looking full and voluminous the way it should, another ten to curl it, shake it out and tease some more to make it look sexy even to me, then I get started on my makeup.



Only to stop and make another drastic, impulsive decision. One of many I intend to make tonight.

I take off my tortoise shell glasses and pull out the contacts I have never ever worn.

My vision is perfect, better than perfect really, but ever since I was little I've had to wear glasses because of the way my eyes look.

It's a part of who I am, *what* I am, and it means that I've had to hide it since I was old enough to start school.

My irises aren't actually irises at all.

They're shadows.

Swirling, moving, changing shadows that swim in the center of my eye, and without the lenses my mama created for me they scare the pants off of everyone.

With the glasses or contacts, my eyes just look like a very dark blue, the darkest blue ever, and they help create the illusion of a pupil, something else I don't have.

I have all the other parts: cornea, lens, retina, all that crud, but I don't have an iris or a pupil because that's how I was made. They aren't needed.

Doesn't mean it isn't weird as hell to look into a girl's eyes and see basically a hole filled with shadows that are constantly moving.

Something not one soul outside of my family knows, and in order to keep it that way I have to wear the glasses, or in this case, the contacts.

Once they're in, I blink about a million times because it's weird as hell to have them in for the first time, but it'll allow me to go heavier than I normally do with the makeup.

Which still isn't that heavy.

Thick liner on the top lid that forms a perfect wing.

A very subtle gray and silver to make the lids smoky.

False lashes that aren't over the top but make mine look a little fuller and not invisible like the real ones without any mascara. My lashes are thick and long but they're blonde as hell and unless I wear mascara it looks like I don't have eyelashes at all.

I actually contour my face, use highlighter to give myself a warm and natural glow, then top everything off with a dark red lip and gloss that match the soles of my booties.

A few dabs of my favorite magnolia scent, a long silver chain with a book locket on the end—Ronny sent it to me for Christmas last year but it's my favorite, so oh well—a couple of bangle bracelets and dangly silver earrings complete the new Nova Baker look.

A look that hopefully gives off the sexy, confident woman vibe I'm going for and not the cheap call girl I see staring back at me.

*Oh well.*

No time to change, and if I want to get over Ronny and prove to myself I can be carefree and casual, then this is how I'm going to do it.

I add one more layer of hairspray, something that could be fatal if the club catches fire, then spritz my face with a setting spray I actually stole from Siggy a couple weeks ago.

My stomach flips with anxiety as I scan the stranger in the mirror but I don't let it get to me, don't change my clothes or wash my face again.

Nope, I hold my head high, repeat my uplifting words about being a strong, confident badass, then head out to join my family downstairs.

A low whistle hits my ears a few steps from the bottom and I look up to find VivaDee staring at me with a huge grin.

“Lord have mercy, girl, you look like sex in the flesh.”

I blush like crazy but square my stance. “Thank you.”

Her dark green eyes move over every inch as she folds her arms and cocks a hip out. “Who you tryna impress tonight?”

“No one.” I lift my chin in defiance. “Just decided to try out a new look for my birthday.”

“Uh-huh...” A brow lifts. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were hunting for a little man meat this evening. ‘Specially since you hardly touched your dinner. Must be awful hungry.”

“Nope. I did this”—I point to my face—“for me. I wanted to feel pretty so I ran with it. It’s not for anyone but—”

“Holy shit!” Ainsley blurts as she comes around the corner. “Nova Rain, you look incredible!”

My blush hits level one thousand, and I bite the inside of my cheek then smooth down my top. “It isn’t too much?”

“Girl, hell no!” She moves to the foyer and slips on her shoes. “You look hot as fuck.”

I frown when I realize she’s wearing scrubs and slipping on her snow boots. “You’re working?”

Ainsley shoots me a sad smile. “Just got called in, baby cuz. Big accident on the highway, all hands on deck.”

My frown grows because this really sucks.

No Ronny.

No Ainsley.

Next my brothers will bail and I’ll be left spending my birthday at a club with my aunt because she wouldn’t want me to be alone.

“Hot damn!” Siggy blurts at the same time Vega grunts, “No fucking way.”

They both stop at the end of the stairs, looking so super handsome, and a lot like our daddy.

Sig’s hair is shorter, swept to the side and gelled to perfection, his face void of any stubble, his dark green eyes dancing. He’s wearing a tight purple button down, sleeves rolled to the elbow and tucked into jeans almost as tight as mine, a dark wash with some aging above his black Timberlands and a belt to match.

He grins at me, then Vega before he grabs his black cardigan from the hook, pulls it on then wraps a gray scarf around his neck. “You look like a woman on a mission to get some D.”

“No,” Vega grunts as he steps into his less pristine Timberlands. “No D.”

I roll my eyes but smile as he doesn't tie his boots, doesn't fix the cuffs of his distressed jeans, the ones that are just the right fit to show off his athletic build without climbing up his ass the way Siggy's do. He's wearing a baby blue button up with tiny little slate gray mountains all over it, a white collar and cuffs that are also rolled to his elbows, the shirt untucked and unbuttoned to just below his collar bone. His thick, shaggy hair isn't quite as long as another boy I refuse to think about, but Vega gives zero shits about how it's styled, so as usual, it's a disaster but the girls love it, especially when he crams a beat up flannel hat with ear flaps on his head.

For some reason they go wild for that lumberjack vibe and since we are originally from a state with much warmer winters, we layer like crazy and with his stubble, scowl and size, Vega is definitely mountain man material.

No layering for me tonight, though.

Tonight I'm throwing on my peacoat over my sweater and calling it good because my parka is not sexy.

Dressing for snow and cold is *not* sexy.

Pining for a man that will never look at me like I'm a woman and not his best friend's little sister is *not* sexy.

I am going to be the opposite of all of that tonight.

Freezing cold, but totally hot.

Heartbroken over a boy I can't have, but single and ready to mingle.

That will be twenty-one-year-old Nova Baker tonight.

I'm turning over a new leaf.

“Go put more clothes on,” Vega grunts again. “No D.”

Siggy shoves Vega's coat at him with a laugh. "It's her birthday, Veg. If Nova wants D, let her have it." Then he frowns. "Unless the D you're after isn't attached to our sexy bestie. I'm afraid I'll have to agree with Vega if you're going for anyone other than Ronny's D."

I scowl at them both, march down the stairs and pull on my coat. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just dressed to go out and have fun. I don't need any D or the man attached to it in order to do that."

VivaDee lifts a hand for a high five. "Preach, sister! That's why I booted Ainsley's daddy right after we did the deed!"

"Mom!" My cousin slams her hands over her ears. "I am so sick of hearing you talk about that."

"What?" VivaDee giggles. "I knew I was fertile, your sperm donor was hot and talented, he didn't want forever, we made you, and I cut him loose. He wasn't my mate and I wanted a baby. No harm, no foul."

Ainsley rolls her eyes, gags, then pulls on a big knit cap. "I know, and I don't care that you did that, I just don't need to hear about it. Especially since Dad and I talk now."

"Which is all the more reason for you to be comfortable with things. Calvin has been a good friend to you, welcomes whatever kind of relationship you want from him, and it also happened to open up the door for him and I to reconnect in the only way that worked between us. He doesn't want commitment from me, I don't want anything but D from him, it—"

"Gah!" Ainsley flaps her hands. "Stop! Things are good, you are a great mom, Calvin is a good friend, and I'm happy with how my life has gone but I do not need to hear about how my parents are friends with benefits!"

VivaDee tilts her head side to side. "More like acquaintances who have monkey sex and share a daughter."

My cousin gags. "Stop!"

"What?" My aunt laughs. "I'm just saying, until I find my mate I am not dead, and the same goes for Nova Rain. She's

young and beautiful, fun and sweet. If she wants to go out and have some unattached fun until she finds her divined, then who's to stop her?"

"Me." My brothers grunt in unison but Sig adds, "But only if it isn't Ronny."

My phone buzzes in my clutch and I start fishing it out with a huff. "Last time I checked, it's my birthday and my vagina, and whatever I decide to do with either of those things is totally up to me..."

**RONNY: Gonna be a little late. Traffic is backed up real bad. I'm sorry, Peach. I'll be there though, just running behind. ☐☐☐**

I scowl at my phone before I turn it off and shove it back in my clutch, mind made up. "And tonight I am going to get hammered and find a random D to sing Happy Birthday to me while he nails me in the bathroom of that club!"

I'm marching out the door to Vega's truck before anyone can stop me, VivaDee cheering me on from the doorway, both of my brothers gagging while Ainsley laughs her butt off.

And I keep repeating that to myself the whole ride to Diesels, saying it over and over in my head while I order four shots and two mixed drinks for myself when we get there. I memorize the words as thirty minutes turns into forty-five without any sign of Ronin Abraham Caldwell.

I even change the words to most of the songs I've danced to so they're powerful affirmations about how I need to get over him, about me being sexy, desirable, and will in fact find some D to have fun with tonight.

It almost works too, right up until I'm on the dance floor, arms raised above my head, my hips swaying and doing all kinds of seductive shit before a hot trail of molten lava rolls down my spine and lands directly between my thighs.

I turn slowly and my breath hitches when my eyes lock on those Caribbean blues.

Ronny is by our table talking to Vega, but he's looking at me.

*Scratch that.*

He's not looking at me, he's devouring me with his eyeballs, and goddamnit, it is not part of the *stop pining for Ronny* plan to be instantly turned on by him.

Especially when he nods his beanie covered head in my direction, does another full body inspection before he pulls that full bottom lip between his teeth and smirks.

*Gods. he looks so fucking hot.*

Baby doll pink button down, rolled, untucked and unbuttoned just like Vega but it's absolutely delicious on Ronny, not sloppy like my brother.

I can even see a little of his dark blonde chest hair poking out the top and that makes my traitorous vagina scream *his D! We pick his D! Ronny has a great voice! He would totally sing us happy birthday while he banged us in the bathroom!*

But that won't ever happen, even though my gaze wanders the rest of him; the lighter ripped up jeans that make his thighs look like tree trunks, make his calves look like... I don't know what, but I want to lick them. Which is weird, I'll admit, but his calves look great in those jeans. And just like my brothers, Ronny is also wearing Timberlands that land somewhere between Sig and Vega's but they're the traditional color, and goddamnit, why does he have to be so fucking hot?

Just the right amount of scruff on his cheeks.

Eyes like warm, clear lagoons I want to spend hours swimming in—I'd even drown in them with a smile on my face.

Perfectly kissable lips, jaw cut from stone.

A body that no amount of clothing can hide.

Tattoos.

Tan.

Hairy without being Sasquatch.

Manly without even trying, still maintaining a little bit of boyish charm as well as an ignorance to how amazing he is.

Ronny is fucking perfect, but he isn't mine.

Something I'm reminded of as he straightens up with a gorgeous smile when not one, but *two* stupidly beautiful women walk up and hug him.

*Of course.*

Just because he said he was bringing someone didn't mean it was only one girl.

*Why not bring two?*

A brunette with a perky rack, and a redhead who's got legs for days.

Best of both worlds.

*Well, fine then.*

If Ronny is going to dance and kiss two different gorgeous women, then I'll just find someone to take my focus away from that.

I give him a super fake smile as his gaze clashes with mine, ignoring the heat pooling between my thighs, throw in a finger wave for good measure before I spin around and start looking for my next dance partner.

*Ah-ha.*

Trendy emo boy dead ahead.

He's cute.

Dark hair, man bun, kind eyes, Buddy Holly specs, nice dresser.

Not that any of that matters too much since I'm only going to use him to make myself forget about the man I'm in love with, and yes that makes me a total jerk, but judging by the way the emo-guy has been staring at me since we got here, I doubt he'll mind.



With all the sex appeal my buzzing brain can muster, I saunter over to the bar next to him, making sure our arms brush as I lean over and order another two shots from the super cute bartender. Who is a girl, fyi. Otherwise she would have been my first choice. I like her freckles.

“Sorry.” I giggle as I bump into emo-man-bun. “I’m a little tipsy.”

He grins and turns to face me. “No problem, babe.”

Inwardly, I cringe.

*Babe* is super unoriginal.

Nothing like Peach, or Nova Peach, or Princess Peach or any of the adorable and thoughtful nicknames Ronny has given me over the years.

Something I absolutely should not be thinking right now, or ever.

“I’m Nova.” I try to ignore the swirling in my tummy that says this guy is not my happily ever after, not even my happily ever right now either. “Today’s my birthday.”

“No shit.” His grin widens, something that redeems him some because it makes him cuter, especially since he has braces and for some reason that puts me at ease. “Well, Nova, whose birthday is today, I’m Norm and those are on me.”

He nods toward my shots as the bartender puts them down, and even though they’re going on Vega’s tab, I just smile. “Thanks!” I slam them in order to find my courage, blush anyway, and try to bat my lashes like a pro. “Wanna dance, Norm?”

“Hell yeah.”

His hand finds the small of my back when I turn, and again, I have to ignore how wrong it feels to be with him, and definitely stop myself from comparing his touch to Ricky’s which felt pretty much the same—awful in case you’re wondering, hence why we never had sex—or Ronny’s, which lights me up like the Fourth of July every damn time.

I can't keep doing this if I want to get over my best friend, can't keep comparing every last thing to something Ronny does if I want to make Norm my no strings fun for the night.

And as he pulls my ass against his hips when we're on the dance floor and starts moving in a way that does not match the song at all, I pray to the gods for strength and bite the inside of my cheek because two steps in proves Norm is a terrible dancer.

But I improvise and try to lead, matching his movements with more fluid ones and after a few minutes of fumbling, we find a rhythm that works for now.

"You're really hot, birthday girl," Norm whispers in my ear, his breath minty and full of alcohol. "Super fucking hot."

I giggle and pretend like I'm flattered but don't respond.

Nope, I just keep dancing and try to get through this because if I don't then I'll only end up proving I'm destined to be in love with Ronny forever which means a life of celibacy and loneliness is in my future for sure.

With a deep breath, I lean back into Norm, loop my arms around his neck and try to relax but apparently that's just not in the cards.

I'm wound so tight I could pop, and it only gets worse when I glance across the room.

Colt is at the table with Ronny and Vega, both of the latter staring at me like they're fucking pissed, Colt pressing a kiss to the brunettes temple as she scans the club.

That must be Lark.

I mean, it better be or else Ronny brought his uncle to the bar to cheat on his aunt, but he'd never do that so it must be her.

And when the two share a look like one I've seen from my mama and daddy, yeah, that definitely confirms it's Lark.

Which means the redhead is for Ronny.

And that makes sense because she is everything I'm not.

Literally everything.

I give them another little finger wave as I amp up my movements with Norm, trying to melt into him but it's awkward and forced.

Ronny scowls at me hard, which makes me a little happier than it should, then leans toward the redhead when she says something to him before they both look at me.

*Boy, she's hot.*

Definitely the kind of woman Ronny should be with, thus proving I'm not even on his radar.

Except that scowl has me confused.

But I'm absolutely tipsy so whatever.

The song switches from whatever techno remix it was to Ed Sheeran's *Shape of You* and I can't fight the squeal of glee that bubbles up out of my chest. "I love this song!"

Norm grins as his hands land on my hips. "Yeah? Let's keep dancing then, babe. I love the way you feel against me."

Forgetting Ronny and his stupidly hot date, I throw myself at Norm, wrap my arms around his neck and press us close, which is when I realize he definitely meant what he said judging by the little bit of movement going on in his skinny jeans.

*And I mean little.*

Maybe he's drunk too, and only half hard?

Maybe he's not into this at all but is trying because he might be able to get laid?

Or maybe he just has a tiny dick and I'm about to be super disappointed on my birthday if I go through with this?

Gods, I'm an asshole for thinking any of this. Size does not matter. I was just hoping for something more exciting from my first one night stand.

"You're so hot, babe." Norm pulls me closer, his hands wandering to my ass as he grinds against me.

*Yep, just a tiny dick.*

A tiny dick that is very hard but I can still work with that. It's super wrong for me to be so judgy anyway. Size doesn't matter so long as they know how to use it. Maybe he's really good at everything else, like going down on a girl, in order to make up for whatever else he could be lacking.

Maybe I'm too drunk to go through with this because now I'm being mean about a guy I don't even know who seems nice enough. And maybe it sort of terrifies me to think about having a guy with braces eat me out for the first time in my entire life.

That could be totally scarring.

Literally *and* figuratively.

Norm squeezes my ass hard and leans toward my ear. "What is it gonna take to get you to go home with me tonight?"

Well, that was super forward.

And pretty brave honestly, so color me impressed.

But just when Norm's fingers move to the top of my jeans and barely caress the skin of my back, a big warm hand lands on my arm and firmly but gently rips me away from him in a spin that puts me face to face with a massive pink chest.

"Not happening," the chest grunts.

I blink several times at the chest, the little bit of dark blonde hair peeking out, the tiny little hot fudge sundaes that make up the pattern on the fabric.

This shirt... I know this shirt. I helped pick out this shirt! It was a birthday present back in September, one from me because I liked the design.

Oh gods, and I know this chest, the delicious divot in the collarbone, the thick neck with the perfectly accentuated Adam's apple that is bobbing with something I'd call jealousy on any other man, the tight clench of his sharp jaw right along with the muscle ticking in it.

My eyes travel further until I'm looking at the most kissable lips on the planet, the unmistakably Cherokee nose, the crystal clear Caribbean blue eyes that are trying to kill Norm with a look alone.

And I could never argue the origin of the hand on my wrist trying to pull me behind that gigantic body, purely based on the ten thousand volts running through every inch of my flesh and centralizing right in my clit.

*Oh hell, it's Ronny.*

Ronny who is pissed, and he's going to start a fight with a boy that's half his size... over me?

If I wasn't so sure this was alcohol induced, I'd be swooning so damn hard right now.

But first I need to know what the hell is going on and make sure my bestie doesn't kill Norm.

"Ronny..." I lift my hands to his rock hard pecs, pushing just a bit as I try not to lean in and inhale his scent. "We were just dancing."

"Hardly." He still isn't looking at me, and when I glance back at Norm, I swear he's about two seconds out from peeing his pants. "This joker can't dance for shit."

"Sorry, man," Norm squeaks as he starts backing up. "Didn't know she was your girl."

"I'm not—"

"Well, now you fucking do," Ronny grunts as he tugs me further out onto the dance floor.

Anger, hot and heavy, creeps up my neck because what in the actual fuck was that?

I'm not Ronny's girl, despite the ache in my chest—and vagina—over the idea of him claiming me as such, and for him to do this, to stop me from having fun on my birthday after he ditched our dinner then had the nerve to show up with a date, sends me into a damn near blind rage.

I swear if he were anyone else I woulda slapped him for...  
“Oh my gods, you’re cock-blocking me!”

“No,” he grunts and continues to drag me toward our table.

But I stop and stomp my foot like a petulant toddler. “You are! This is payback for last weekend, isn’t it?”

Ronny turns slowly and meets my hard stare dead on. “I’m not cock-blocking you.”

“Bullshit, Ronin Abraham Caldwell! You are too cock-blocking me, and you’re doing it because it’s exactly what I did to you last weekend.” I poke his super hard chest then plant my hands on my hips with a huff. “Well, I didn’t mean to interrupt your night and I sure as hell didn’t do it on purpose. You didn’t have to pick me up, not that it matters because obviously you found another flavor of the week to bring to my party.”

He frowns as his long legs quickly eat up the space between us. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The redhead.” I motion toward the table he’s blocking. “Obviously my phone call didn’t throw off your mojo, so why you feel the need to throw off mine is beyond me. I was just trying to have fun, doesn’t mean I was going to take Norm up on his offer, and it’s none of your goddamn business if I did.”

“The redhead?”

I nod cause I’m too mad for words.

The man I love more than anything is single handedly ruining my twenty-first birthday, and now I just want to drink all the booze, black out and let my brothers drag my unconscious ass home.

Oh, but now he’s grinning, smiling like the cat who got the canary, as he advances toward me slowly, and it is making my lacy pink thong so wet I should be embarrassed.

Especially when he stops with maybe a half inch of space between us, those eyes going a shade darker, getting a little hooded and as his nostrils flare I feel my blush burn right down to my toes.

Can he *smell* me? Smell how turned on I am? Does Ronny know that I want to climb him like a tree? Does he know how badly I want to kiss him, to know what his lips taste like, to feel them against mine in what no doubt would be the most incredible kiss ever to happen?

Does he know and... does Ronny want that too?

“Dance with me.”

I blink up at him repeatedly. “What?”

“Dance with me, Peach. I know you love this song and it’s almost over.”

Another series of blinks that probably have some Morse code layered in them because I’m almost speechless. *Almost*. “Why the hell would I dance with you? You brought a date, go find her and dance til your heart’s content. If you’d wanted to spend time with me then you wouldn’t have blown off dinner, and you definitely wouldn’t have brought a half-assed relationship attempt to my party.”

Bile rises in my throat immediately because that was mean, super mean, and definitely fueled by jealousy and hurt, and probably liquor.

I’ve never talked to Ronny this way—never.

We’ve never had any kind of disagreement, let alone fight or conversation that lead to such bitchiness from me, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

Which must be why Ronny stops me instead.

With a grin sexy enough to set my panties on fire, he closes the space between us, ghosts his fingers down my bare arms, then in a flash, spins me so my back is pressed to his front.

Slowly and totally in time with the more up beat music, Ronny dances us around, my traitorous body falling in perfect sync with his until we’re facing the table again.

Siggy is back and he has a very good looking guy with him, one he is absolutely putting the moves on but he still

manages to give me a smile and wink when he sees me dancing with Ronny.

Vega is staring at us with a smirk that says he approves but will kill either of us if we fuck up whatever is going on between us, and to his right are Colt and Lark, something that is absolutely undeniable by the way they're slow dancing to a not so slow song. And when my eyes finally land on the redhead, well, I about shit.

“Your date is dry humping a surfer thug!”

Ronny chuckles in my ear, his mouth dangerously close to the sweet spot just below it. “That’s my aunt.”

“No.” I damn near moan. *Do I sound breathy? Gods, I definitely sound breathy.* “The redhead.”

“The redhead is my aunt, too. My Aunt Frankie, and the surfer thug she’s dry humping is my Uncle Zan, her husband.”

“Oh.” I sigh and melt a little into the man of my dreams as a week’s worth of tension rolls right off my shoulders and lands like a boulder on the floor. “I’m an asshole.”

Another deep rumble against my back has me fixing to evaporate. “I wanted you to meet them, and thought tonight was a good time for that.”

I nod as the song changes and damn, the universe must be trying to get me to ride this man like a pony because it’s another Ed Sheeran song, *Perfect*, the song I want played at my wedding when I have my first dance with my husband.

“I’d never bring a girl to your party, Peach.” Ronny turns me around so I’m facing him. “I wouldn’t do that.”

With a sigh, I close my eyes and rest my head on his shoulder, relishing the way he lifts one hand and settles our joined ones over his heart, the other splayed across the small of my back in a way that has his fingers kissing the top of my jeans. Ronny sways us perfectly to the music, presses his cheek to the top of my head and gah, I’m swooning so damn hard right now I could just die.

*This is perfect.*



“You are perfect,” he whispers and I momentarily panic that I said that out loud. “My most perfect peach.”

I tilt my head back and meet his eyes, a thousand emotions swirling in those deep blue lagoons.

The space between us crackles and pops with an intensity I’ve never experienced while we stare at each other and dance, the club disappearing to leave nothing but him and I.

I watch on bated breath as his gaze dips to my lips, as Ronny runs that sinful tongue along his lower one, and just when I’m positive he’s going to kiss me because he feels this too, feels the incredible pull, the extremely deep connection, he averts his eyes as the song finishes then puts too much space between us.

“You, uh...” Ronny clears his throat and adjusts his beanie. “You need another drink?”

I nod and drop my eyes so he can’t see the tears. “Yeah, sure. That’d be great.”

“You got it.”

Then he stalks off toward the bar, my heart hanging somewhere between perfect and broken beyond repair.

I really thought he was going to kiss me, truly believed Ronny felt everything I was feeling too.

It was silly really, to think for a split second that maybe we could have that beautiful, perfect fairytale moment, one that would surely be followed by confessions of love and forever, then maybe some crazy good sex, sex like I’ve never had before, but those are just silly dreams from a silly...

My thoughts stutter when I finally pry my eyes off the floor to find Ronny apparently having a very intense conversation with himself while he waits to order our drinks.

He doesn’t look mad really, just... disappointed and frustrated?

No, Ronny looks like he’s kicking himself and I can only assume it’s because he wanted to kiss me as much as I wanted him to, and he didn’t do it.

That's what I hope anyway, especially when he looks back at me briefly before launching into another relatively animated one sided argument.

And that makes me smile despite the tear that rolls down my cheek.

Maybe those dreams aren't so silly after all.

## CHAPTER 5

HELL HATH NO FURY..

## NOVA



I 'm not sure where it falls in the rule book about being in love with your best friend and obsessing over his whereabouts, but I am this close to making Vega give me Ronny's address so I can drive out to his house, break down the door, and punch him right in the junk for ghosting on not only me, but all three of us for almost a week.

Hold on, that's not entirely accurate.

Siggy got a text Sunday afternoon from Ronny that said he was going away for a few days and asked him to relay anything he misses in class that wouldn't be posted online, then asked he get his work from his other classes, the ones none of us take with him, as well.

*Then* Ronny ghosted all of us, and I'm not buying the crap about going out of town, not completely.

Yes, Ronin Caldwell is known for occasionally disappearing but not without communicating that to all three of us, usually going as far as to have some kind of get together beforehand.

Yes, just a few months ago after his birthday, Ronny disappeared for almost two weeks with very little contact during that time, and only in the form of sporadic *I miss you guys* text messages to our group, as well as a send off where we got way too drunk and the four of us slept under the stars in the bed of his truck after talking well into the night first.

No, Ronny does not have to check in with me because I'm not his mama or his girlfriend, but dammit, I am not ok with

hearing absolutely nothing from him for almost five days, especially when the last time I saw him I wound up more confused than I've ever been.

It's been ages since my birthday and the kiss that almost happened, almost a week since my heart damn near broke then sewed itself back together with the threads of some stupid hope that Ronny was just as torn up over the *what ifs* as I was.

Things were a little awkward when he brought me my drink, but that was soon forgotten, and we danced and drank right up until the club closed, the four of us falling back into our comfortable little bubble with ease.

The only difference was the heated looks my best friend kept sending me, the intense appraisal of how I was dressed, the extra possessive attitude he somehow adopted, and that made the kiss that almost happened a little easier to deal with.

I just assumed it meant Ronny was as conflicted, confused, and as turned on as I was, but still too scared to make a move.

Even so, we had so much fun, and I absolutely loved getting to know his aunts and uncles in a different kind of setting.

Colt is Colt, no different from how he was the first time we met, except maybe happier since he's married to his goddamn soulmate, and Lark, she is awesome. She's a real badass beauty that said exactly what she was thinking—no matter how uncomfortable some of her comments about Ronny and I made me—and she was all about learning the different dances we were doing.

Frankie was a blast, and I loved the way she and her husband, Zan, bickered and bantered back and forth, the hilarious jabs and quips that didn't even hide how much they love each other, but Zan, for all of his stupidly abundant charisma, left me even more curious about Ronny's extended family.

There was something about him, something my brothers and I were very drawn to, and not just because he's a total babe and tons of fun. It was like... like something inside my

head recognized him as more, and I kept trying to talk to him to figure out what that was.

Not that I was successful.

I still have no idea why we were drawn to Zan, but we are, and I'm hoping we get to spend some more time with him soon. But that means Ronny has to get his head out of his ass first.

I'm not sure if he's ignoring me because we almost kissed and now he feels weird, or if he really is just gone and super busy.

My gut says it's both.

I believe Ronny had to go out of town for some secret reason, but I also believe he is weirded out by what almost happened between us, and it's driving me insane.

And now that I know he should be back home, I'm damn near ready to explode because he still hasn't reached out to any of us.

*Fuck it.*

I jump up from my bed, snatch my phone and wallet, then shove them into the pocket of my hoodie as I march out of my bedroom right to Vega's.

"Address!" I bark as I throw open his door, my eyes narrowed the way our mama's would when she thought the boys were watching porn.

Vega lifts his head from his Advanced Calculus book, an easy smile spreading over his handsome and scruffy face. "Bout damn time."

I roll my eyes. "I want his address, Vega, and I want it now. I'm done with this ghosting bullshit."

"You don't need his address." He lifts a brow in challenge and smirks.

He's right, I don't need a specific address, but I'm not going to entertain his suggestion unless I have to. "Address."

A single, slow shake of his head.

“Vega Hail Baker, don’t you even try to tempt me to—”

“You haven’t done anything like that in months. It’ll be good for you.”

“No.” I stomp my foot because I’m the baby and I can. “I will not invade his thoughts that way. It’s rude!”

Vega rolls his eyes. “Not rude if you look for one thing in particular. Focus on that one thing, then *poof*”—he wiggles his fingers in the air for dramatic effect—“you hitch a ride on a shadow and end up on his front porch.”

“What are we talking about?” Siggy strolls in looking way too dapper for a guy dressed in nothing but a pair of flannel pajama pants. “Something about riding Ronny?”

“No!” I huff. “I want his address because I’m sick of him not talking to us.”

“And you want to ride him.” Sig grins as he flops down on the bed next to Vega. “Hell, *I* want to ride him, but that would be super weird since he’s straight, and obviously your divined.”

“Stop saying that,” I snap, because he really needs to. Those kinds of comments only make things worse. “Ronny is not my divined, I do not want to ride him, and even if I did, I’m way too pissed that’s he’s ignored us for a week to even consider it.”

The boys share a look that says I’m full of shit and they know better, then lean back on their elbows in completely identical positions.

Damn them.

“Fine!” I throw up my hands in defeat. “Maybe I have feelings for Ronny, something you already know, but I am not going to act on any of them because we are just friends. He doesn’t want me and I don’t want to lose him, which is why you need to give me his address so I can go over to his house and karate chop him in the balls!”

They both cringe and cover their junk, but Sig smirks. “You don’t need it.”



“I’m not going to do what you’re suggesting.”

He frowns. “Why not? You haven’t practiced any of your skills in months, and that’s probably part of the frustration you’re feeling. That and not riding Ronny on a regular basis.”

“I haven’t practiced because Mama isn’t here to make sure I don’t do something stupid like, I don’t know, accidentally raise the dead or summon a demon that could end life as we know it.” *Man, I’m snippy.* “You both know how risky it is for me to do any of that without supervision. I’ve only had a few years of practice with Mama’s help and without her it’s way too dangerous.”

“Not necessarily.” Vega sighs. “You just need something that belongs to Ron, some personal item that would let you find its origin, and then you could see where the shadows are, hop on one, and get to his place without ever having to use GPS.”

“No.” I glare like a jerk. “Not happening.”

“Isn’t that Ronny’s sweatshirt?” Siggy grins like an asshole because yes, damnit, it is.

“Just do it, Nova.” Vega meets my eyes and gives me a soft smile. “We will find Mama and Daddy, but just cause we haven’t doesn’t mean you can ignore your gifts. They wouldn’t want that, and shadow transport is innocent enough to practice without bringing about the end of the world.”

I park my hands on my hips and narrow my eyes. “You really aren’t going to give me his address, are you?”

Vega shakes his head once.

“Not fair.” I stomp my foot again, slightly hating the way they bring out the baby in me. “I just want to check on him, try to figure out why he’s ignoring us, or at least you two. He’s probably ignoring me because—”

“He was stupid and screwed up the perfect chance to kiss you?” Siggy grins. “I mean, I’d be all kinds of embarrassed about blowing a shot at kissing the one person I want more than anything ever too, so I get it.”

“That why you kiss every man with a pulse?”

Sig rolls his eyes. “Don’t take out your frustrations on me, baby sis. You know how it works for us. I’ll never find my mate if I don’t plant my lips on him first, and why not enjoy the ones who aren’t my forever in the meantime?” He wags his brows and shrugs a shoulder. “Us Baker’s gotta lock lips in order to determine who belongs to us, so why not make it fun?”

“At least Vega isn’t smooching and banging his way through Ashland.” Cause he’s really not. My oldest brother is much more selective about who he spends time with, and I’m pretty sure he’s only hooked up with one girl since we moved to Oregon, something I find very sweet because he could have his pick easily. Vega’s just a bit of a romantic like Mama and me, so he’s secretly looking for his fated one instead of broadcasting his dick like it’s breaking news.

“Whatever.” Siggy waves me off as he nudges Vega. “This isn’t about where I put my lips or my dick, not even about the cobwebs collecting on Vega’s. This is about how you’re pissed off at Ronny because he’s your divined and you won’t accept it, ‘specially now that he’s on another of his secret missions without contact right after y’all blew it.”

“No more talk of divined and my best friend.” The scowl I send them is one that would make Daddy proud. “Are you gonna help me check on Ronin or not?”

Another perfectly in sync shake of their heads.

“Fine, but if my shadow transport thing creates some kind of black hole, I hope it sucks both of y’all in for forcing me to try!”

Vega smiles, small but bright. “It won’t, Sissy. You ain’t giving yourself enough credit. Before Mama and Daddy disappeared you almost perfected it, so you’ll do good.”

With a sigh, I drop my eyes for a beat and fiddle with the ends of the sleeves of my hoodie. “I’m nervous.”

I am.

I've never used any of my gifts anywhere outside of our house in Mississippi or practiced any of my powers without our parents around, and I'm worried that the only reason I didn't do any of the horrible things I'm potentially capable of was because they were there.

My gifts are like my mama's, but different.

If we were witches like everyone incorrectly thinks, she'd be the white witch to my black magic, but that's all tall tales and misconceptions.

We're just in different sub-categories of a broader classification, one that is constantly referred to as witchcraft by those that don't understand it.

And honestly, I barely understand it because my abilities didn't hit their full potential until I was seventeen and they came in hot when I accidentally resurrected my best girl friend's grandma at her funeral in Mississippi.

Talk about terrifying.

All I did was hug Violet, tell her how sorry I was that her grandmama was gone, and that I wished she was still with us, and that casket started to open just like one from Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video.

Thankfully, Mama was there and discreetly handled whatever the hell I did, but to say that didn't leave me leery about what I can do, well, that would be a steaming pile of bullshit for sure.

Which is why I suddenly find myself being squished between my brothers, the nerdy filling to their perfect twin sandwich.

"Don't be nervous, Sissy," Vega says as he hugs me tightly. "You've got this."

"Sure do," Sig says from my other side. "You are the most badass little sorceress ever to live, and you will shadow hop better than anyone before or after." Then he lets go, gives my long loose ponytail a tug, and grins. "Now go get our devilishly handsome bestie and set his head right."

“Ok,” I whisper as they sit down. “Just don’t tell VivaDee. She’ll have a fit if she knows I’m doing this without her.”

They both cross their hearts and wink.

*Gods, I love my brothers.*

They are definitely my biggest fans.

Them and the big jerk I’m about to go slap some sense into.

I check to make sure my phone and wallet are secure inside the pocket of my—well, *Ronny’s* hoodie, take a deep breath, and close my eyes. I roll the ends of the sleeves into my fists, focusing on the soft fabric between my fingers, the smell of woods and lemon and man, focusing on the imprint Ronny made the last time he wore the sweatshirt.

It’s dark at first, it always is, but as I continue reading the threads of fleece and cotton, a dim light starts to glow and I see other clothes, hangers, shelves, a few shoe boxes, and two separate doors.

I somehow know it’s the door to my left I need to go through, so I will that one open and a brighter light spills into the closet.

A simple kitchenette meets my mind’s eye, one that shares space with a partial living room, a small dining area, and finally a big ass bed against the far wall. The studio cabin is sparsely decorated, the furniture pulled away from the wooden walls, clear tarps draped over most of it save for the appliances and bed.

I look around in search of shadows to use, ones that would be less weird than transporting myself to Ronny’s closet, but there’s so much natural light streaming in I can’t find any, and my skills aren’t quite sharp enough to get outside.

Looks like I’ll be coming through the closet whether I like it or not. I just hope Ronny isn’t sitting on that big old bed because it will scare the shit out of him when I march through the door.

My body starts to tingle, my skin itches, goes colder than normal and before I can rethink this, I'm nothing more than tiny little particles soaring through space, my surroundings zipping passed so fast I can't track them enough to get the directions I'll need to get back home.

Minutes later, I'm being pieced back together quickly, my legs wobbly and a touch weak, and I go down on my butt with a small thud into a stack of shoe boxes with a row of huge, delicious smelling t-shirts hanging in front of my face.

*I did it.*

*I shadow hopped my way into Ronny's closet without destroying the world!*

Quietly giggling like an idiot, I pull out my phone, pleased the Apple product is also still intact, and fire off a text to make sure I didn't send my brothers into a black hole.

**Me: I did it! You guys ok?**

**Veg: All good here, baby sis.**

**Sig: Yep! All is well! Still intact and proud as hell. I just love watching you turn into sparkly little fireflies like you do!**

**Me: Glad you're ok. Thanks for believing in me.**

**Veg: Always.**

**Sig: Always. Now send us a pic so we know you're ok too.**

And because they are my big brothers and would kick my butt if I didn't, I take a selfie with Ronny's wardrobe and send it to them, cheesy grin and all.

**Sig: Ooo, I love that shirt. Steal it for me.**

**Veg: Wouldn't fit you. Ron is bigger than you.**

**Sig: Maybe I just want it so I can sniff Ronny whenever I get the itch.**

**Me: Stop being a creep. I have work to do.**

I make sure my phone is on vibrate, carefully get to my feet, then lose sight of that work as I look around the immaculately organized closet.

Apparently Ronny has a touch of OCD.

Or just super organized, which makes more sense because with his life, he can't not be.

His shirts are all sorted by style and color, dress shirts together, t's separated into the type of collar, whether or not they have a design on the front, sleeve lengths, etc. It's impressive really, even more so when I look across the walk-in to see his pants and shorts done the same way with a small section in the back for work clothes.

If I wasn't so pissed at him, I'd find this cute.

But I am and that's enough to get my head back in the game. I press my ear to the door, listen for movement outside the closet and when there's none, I open it slowly to see exactly what I did in my mind except the only light is the soft glow from the fireplace in the corner and the moonbeams shining through the trees into the windows.

No sign of the boy in question, but he's been here recently for sure. Ronny's duffle bag is on the bed, open and half packed, his backpack next to it along with more clothes laid out waiting to be folded or worn.

And I know I shouldn't, but I can't seem to stop myself from creeping into the studio space, my eyes soaking up every inch of my best friend's personal domain that I can because I've never been here before, and might never be again after breaking in.

For looking like a bit of a construction zone, it's very clean, simple, and organized. The counters and small table are bare of anything but a single glass and Ronny's keys, his

couch and recliner, the coffee table and TV covered by tarps. He has one long dresser under the windows, the tarp pulled back and a drawer open to reveal his collection of pink ankle socks.

I smile as I walk further inside, get right up to the dresser and lean down to look at the multiple framed photos.

Colt and Lark, Zan and Frankie. His mama and daddy, little brothers and sisters. There's an old black and white picture of who I'm assuming are his grandparents in full Cherokee attire, a beautiful picture that is in one of the bigger frames here. There are several pictures of people I don't know, a set of five brothers, no doubt that's what they are with their big builds and shared features, what must be their wives and kids with them. There's a picture of Colt and Zan, the five, two more men that could be related to some of them, all the women—a few of them pregnant—and kids. It's almost like a big family photo with Ronny in between his uncles on the porch of an enormous mansion, everyone dressed nicely and looking so happy. I can tell this picture was recent, maybe sometime in the last month or two, and it makes my heart so glad to see so much happy looking back at me, just knowing that my best friend's family is big and oozing with love.

I wander further and my smile grows when I see another cluster of frames, faces I know and love grinning behind the glass.

*The four of us.*

One selfie every summer from the first time we came to Ashland right up until this past one, the way we've grown and changed is clear, though our shared love only gets stronger with each photo.

There's more pictures from this year—the renaissance festival, San Diego Comic Con, Ronny's birthday, and Halloween. There's one of him with the twins looking all dapper and cute in the suits they wore for the community play—Death of a Salesman—one I took at the final performance.

There's one of my brothers and I at the Paint and Pour Sig talked us into doing, our horrible paintings held under our

flushed and tipsy smiles. Ronny was there, but he took the picture because he didn't want to *embarrass us* by being in it with his *masterpiece*.

It wasn't half bad but I'd hardly call the landscape a masterpiece, even though it's hanging on my bedroom wall.

My heart swells when I get to the last picture, one in a bright pink frame, one that actually gives some credibility to Siggys claim that Ronny and I might be more than just friends.

It was the night before he left for two weeks, the night just after his birthday, and it's just me and him.

Us sitting on the tailgate of his truck, Ronny behind me, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist. We're cheek to cheek while I'm squeezing his hands, my head thrown back laughing and the smile on his face, the way Ronny's looking at me instead of the camera... it's a look you don't give someone that's just your friend.

Especially with the way our legs are dangling over the edge of the tailgate, our thighs pressed close, Ronny's stupidly pretty bare man feet brushing under my much girlier ones. There isn't one inch of us that isn't touching and the extreme joy, the happiness and contentment that is so obvious on both of our faces has me closer to making a move than I ever thought I'd be.

*Maybe there's more to us than just best friends after all?*

I shake away the thought because I'm supposed to be mad at him, then stroll to his bed, my curiosity at an all time high when I see several folders spread out on the fluffy black duvet.

*Hmm.*

They aren't from school, that much I know, but they are definitely full and since I'm nosy by nature, I reach out and peak in the first one.

*Colleen Whitaker.*



I frown.

There's a name, a photo, what almost looks like a missing person report—something I'm all too familiar with—and several other papers with matching stats.

Birth certificate, copy of her license and soc card, a marriage license that's from the sixties. I really shouldn't keep looking and just when I decide I might stop, something catches my eye.

*Black bear, #798*

It's scrawled in Ronny's chicken scratch, but I'm a pro at reading that so I know without a doubt that's what it says, and that makes me super curious.

So I slide it over and open the next folder.

*Cory Johns.*

The same info is inside: important papers, photos, all that jazz, and I quickly go to the back.

*Wolf, #912*

*What the hell?*

Before I know it, I'm flying through the next two.

*Roger Burgess. Puma, #579*

*Natalie Van Dyke. Vampyr, #1004*

I go to open the last two then do a double take.

Does that say *vampyr*?

*Sure does.*

Ronny's handwriting is bad, but not bad enough to misinterpret *that*.

With an almost urgent type of fear, I grab the last two, put them side by side and take a deep breath.

I don't know why I'm nervous but suddenly I am. I'm so nervous I don't even flinch when I hear a doorknob to my left turn and click.

My hands shake as I reach out then flip open the last two files and for a minute I can't even process what I'm looking at.

*Westley Baker. Banshee, #1177.*

*Bella Baker. Sorceress, #1178.*

I blink about four billion times, battling the instant tears while trying to make sense of the files in front of me, but I can't.

I don't understand this at all, not even a little, and that only gets worse when I pry my now leaking eyes off the photos on the bed and shift them to the door of what has to be a bathroom just as Ronny comes strolling out in nothing but a goddamn towel and his AirPods.

*My brain is officially fried.*

Between the files and a nearly naked Ronin, who, sweet baby Jesus, apparently has his nipples pierced and no idea I'm in the room, I might just spontaneously combust.

I've never seen Ronny like this—never.

For all the summers hotter than Satan's nutsack we spent out here, never once did we do anything that would require him to be shirtless let alone almost naked in front of me, so I have never seen any of what I am right now.

And hellfire and brimstone, Ronny's body is absolutely perfect.

Unfortunately, I can't really appreciate it as much as I'd like to because I basically scream, "Why do you have pictures of my parents?!"

Ronny spins from the doorway, his hand flying to his heart, his eyes wide as I've ever seen them, but they almost seem to flash... white? "What the fuck, Nova! Jesus. You scared the shit out of me!"

*Oh gods, those are barbells with little pink metal studs at the ends.*

He has pink nipple rings and his tattoo *does* go from fingertips to shoulder blade just like I thought.

And between the water droplets on his beautiful tanned skin and the ungodly amount of muscle over every inch of his body, I have zero words when I should be spitting them rapid fire, so I just fucking point to the bed.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

*Jerk.*

That's no way to greet your best friend you haven't seen in days, but I'll be damned if I can say that.

Nope, I'm angry and confused, turned on like I've never been in my life, and apparently my brain is now mush.

*Wonderful.*

Ronny stares at me in total confusion for a few beats, one hand holding onto that towel like it's a freaking anchor, the other shoving back through those sopping wet curls on his head with a sigh. "What are you doing here, Peach?"

*Oh you know, breaking into your house cause I'm pissed at you, snooping through your shit, soaking my panties and probably my sweatpants because you are hot as fuck, all while I wonder why the hell you have files on my parents. Just normal bestie stuff.*

Still can't talk though.

He looks at me a little longer then follows my still pointing arm. “You went through my shit?”

The look of hurt would mean more if his *shit* didn’t have my parents in it, which is finally enough for me to get the words out. “Why the hell do you have pictures of my parents?”

Ronny’s brow furrows adorably before his gaze bounces between me and the files. “Shit.”

“Yeah, shit. Big shit, Ronin! I’ve been looking for my parents for months, and imagine how weird it is for me to find files of their personal information sitting right here on your awesomely sexy bed!”

Ok, so I can talk and I’m mad, but I’m not really making sense. Just making an ass out of myself when I need to do anything but that.

“Your parents?” He looks at the files again then blows out a breath. “I am such an idiot.”

“Yeah!” I shout, because I believe it, but probably not for the same reason he’s saying it. “A big one. I came out here to yell at you but now I don’t know what the hell to yell at you because of this!” I flap my hand at the files then shove my glasses up my nose. “Explain.”

“Wes and Bella are your parents... gods...” Both hands dive into his hair, tugging it by the roots as his towel slips a little on those narrow hips and holy molasses Ronny has an Adonis belt. How did I not know this?

Wait.

No, I should not be focusing on that, not at all.

*Get it together.*

“Wes and Bella Baker of Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Together thirty-eight years this passed May. Mama and Daddy to Vega Hail, Sigma Storm, and Nova Rain Baker. Missing since February of this year!” I accentuate each fact with a hard point toward the files. “Now tell me why you have those!”

Ronny sighs, walks around the other side of the bed and snatches his phone. “Take a seat, Peach.”

“No!” I screech. “I will not sit down until you answer my goddamn question. My parents have been missing for months, *months, Ronny*. I need to know why you have files on them because if you don’t tell me, I’m not sure I should... should...” And now I’m bawling.

A damn burst and the flood gates just whooshed open, a river of tears pouring out of me and I am crying so hard because I’m confused and worried that my best friend, the boy I’m completely in love with, has something to do with why my parents are missing.

“Nova...” Ronny quickly rounds the bed again and immediately pulls me against his very naked chest. “Nova, baby, please don’t cry. Gods, I’m such an idiot. I should have known, should have made the connection sooner. Please don’t cry, Peach.”

*But now I can’t stop.* “Why... w-why do y-you have th-those?”

“Because.” Ronny takes a deep breath and holds me tighter. “Because we’re trying to find them.”

“Wh-what?” I tilt my head back and meet his eyes. “What are you t-talking about?”

He leans down with a sigh and presses a kiss to my forehead. “We’re trying to find them—Colt, Lark, Zan, basically my whole family, and I. We’ve been looking for your parents as well as the others since I got back from Wyoming in October.” Ronny searches my eyes and lifts a hand to my cheek. “Since we got back from blowing up Kentworth Labs.”

My knees buckle right before they turn to jelly and I sag against him, but Ronny is apparently a superhero. He scoops me up in his arms before I hit the floor, walks the two steps to the bed and sits down with me on his lap, his arms around me once again.

“I didn’t know their last names until this past weekend, didn’t have the information I needed to connect the dots until

then, and even when I did I still didn't see it." Ronny starts rocking us and swaying back and forth a bit. "I went out of town to follow a lead, one that turned up nothing by the way, and since I've been so focused on finding Kentworth before he can hurt anyone else I didn't realize Bella and Wes were your mom and dad. I'm so sorry, Nova. I should have known, should have told you. I—"

"It's not like I call them by their names." I sigh against his skin that I'm fighting the urge to lick. "You still probably wouldn't have made the connection if you'd heard them all the time."

I feel him shake his head and bury his nose in my hair. "You look like them. Now that I know, I can see it. If I'd have had my head on straight I would have known, and I would have told you."

"So..." I hold Ronny a little harder, trying to find my footing and pull my strength from his. "So they aren't—"

"No," Ronny says with so much conviction I have to believe him. "Your parents are missing but that's it. Zan was able to confirm it. Those six along with a few guards, a nurse, and Kentworth himself are all still missing, and you can bet your ass we will find them."

A few moments pass as my best friend just holds me while I cry, holds me until I stop then speaks with a slight smile in his tone. "Are you a banshee or a sorceress?"

I giggle because gods, this is weird and I'm relieved, but my emotions are a mess. "A sorceress."

"Ah." Ronny kisses the crown of my head. "I always knew you were special."

"Whatever." I snort against his sexy chest hair. "Does this mean you're..."

"I'm a wolf, Peach."

*Be still my racing heart.*

I'm in love with a wolf shifter.

*Gah.*

“Your brothers?”

“Banshees.” I sigh.

“That explains a lot about Sig.”

Another giggle has me nuzzling into him. “Colt?”

“Yeah. Colt and Lark, my mom and dad. All wolves. Colt’s our Alpha.”

“Explains his eyes. Thought he looked different from last year.” I burrow further into Ronny and run my nose along his collarbone as I enjoy the way we can talk about this just as easily as everything else despite how weird it is or the many questions I still have. “Zan too?”

“Not a wolf, not a shifter, actually.” One more tight squeeze from me has Ronny clearing his throat as something very big and hard pokes my butt. “You should a... you should call Vega and Sig. Get them out here so we can tell you everything.”

Quick as lightning, he sets me on the bed, gets to his feet and turns away from me for a second before he hobbles around the bed to the clothes he laid out.

And now I’m super confused, worried, scared, a little giddy, and kind of aroused—shocker—because I think I just gave my best friend a boner.

When I came over here to tear him a new asshole, I did not expect to find out Ronny and his family have been on a secret mission searching for my parents and the same scientist we’ve been trying to track for months.

And I definitely didn’t expect to realize that my best friend is at least physically attracted to me enough to pop a boner while I sat in his lap, nothing but a towel hiding what I’m desperate to explore.

But all of that actually happened, and I can’t help but smile at the various types of hope I have now. The hope that Ronin and his family will help us find ours, hope that maybe we aren’t destined to be just best friends for the rest of time, hope that today maybe sparked a new chapter in the book I’ve been

desperately trying to write, a happily ever after finally within my reach.

Or maybe I'm just stupid enough to believe this won't end in a heartbreak bigger than I can wrap my head around.



## CHAPTER 6

**TRUST IS A FRAGILE  
THING**

## RONNY



Vega has not stopped pacing since the twins got here.

I'm pretty sure he's going to wear a path in the floor of Vok's den, maybe even set it on fire with how fast his feet are moving, or possibly just burn everything down with the terrifying scowl that hasn't left his face once since his tires tore up the dirt drive.

Nova called them as soon as I grabbed my clothes off the bed, and while she had a conversation I could still hear all the way in the bathroom, I excused myself to get dressed. But not before I did something I both regret and had no choice but to do.

Thanks to my dumbass thinking it was a good idea to console her while I was basically naked, my dick got harder than it's been in months, so hard I jumped back in the shower and cranked that shit all the way to cold in order to get myself under control.

It didn't work.

Nope, my dick just stood straight up, flipped me the bird, and basically said *I'm not going anywhere, buddy, not unless you put me exactly where I want to be, so get used to being hard non-stop until that happens* which is what lead to the most awkward jerk-off session I've ever had, complete with the girl who stars in every single one of my fantasies sitting on my bed approximately twenty feet away.

If I wasn't already going straight to The End for all the bad decisions I've made, that one guaranteed my spot for sure.

I did what I had to do, I really didn't have a choice, and of course that's when my wolf started to weigh in after being abnormally quiet for the last couple of weeks.

*Mate.*

*We need our mate.*

*Go to her.*

*Claim her.*

*Only our mate can make this better.*

He kept saying shit like that the entire time I took care of business and it only sent my fantasy of finally being with Nova into a whole new realm of fucked up, and I shot my load all over the tile wall in about two seconds flat.

Then I proceeded to bang my head against said wall because what the fuck is going on with me?

Ok, so I know I've been in love with her for years and she's basically my own personal version of wolf shifter catnip, but I can usually control myself way better than that.

It probably didn't help that I was in nothing but a goddamn towel while she sat in my lap, her beautiful peach of an ass cradling my dick perfectly, and if I'm not mistaken, Nova is either wearing a thong under those neon pink sweats or absolutely nothing at all because I could swear I felt the heat of her core burning my skin just as clearly as if the cotton and terry cloth weren't even there.

Almost, anyway.

And I sure as fuck could smell her, just like I did at the club.

Which is exactly what resulted in the boner from hell, that and the way she kept burrowing into my chest, the feel of her smooth as silk skin against mine, that decadent scent of hers all up in my nostrils.

It was fucking torture and a total wonder that I didn't shuck my towel and shred her pants in order to find out what

was waiting underneath them before giving in to what I want most.

Thankfully, my girl is all class and didn't say anything about my hard-on I know she had to feel, nor did Nova poke fun at the way I had to walk around the bed or to the bathroom because of it.

Then again, she isn't Sig, and he would have pointed it out the second he noticed then made me relive the embarrassment until my last breath.

And even though she had calmed down some, stopped crying at least, and didn't point out my boner, Nova was a little standoffish when I came out of the bathroom.

I heard most of her responses to Vega while they were on the phone, but I can't help but think he's just as skeptical about my family's involvement in their parents disappearance as Nova was at first, and now I'm worried that he told her to keep her distance before he and Sig got here.

I get it, I do.

It surprised the hell out of me and had to shock all three of them that I have knowledge of Kentworth Labs and the fact that their parents were missing whether I realized it was them or not, but I have a funny feeling the trust we've established over the last seven plus years is now hanging in the balance until they know for a fact our intentions are good.

All of which is supported by the way Sig is sitting on the loveseat with Nova, an arm protectively around her shoulders while Vega paces in front of them, a physical shield between his two younger siblings—Sig by three minutes and Nova by eleven months but still—and the rest of us.

To say that doesn't sting a little would be a lie, but I'm still hopeful that once we talk, things will get back to normal.

As normal as it can get anyway, now that we know certain things about each other we were all obviously hiding, and that's only if I can get passed the paranoia I'm feeling over whether or not Vega somehow knows I jerked off to images of his sister while she sat a few feet away.

*I'm such an asshole.*

“Where should we begin?” Vok asks as he settles onto the corner of his desk. “I’m assuming the three of you have many questions.”

Vega stops abruptly, spins and levels me with a hard scowl. “Proof.”

My brows lift and I blink.

Yeah, he’s pissed at me.

Suspicious.

Probably hurt.

All understandable responses, but it isn’t like I kept this from them on purpose, not the part about their parents anyway.

“Proof of what?” Colt starts folding the sheet that was covering the entire wall full of photos of the eleven hundred plus prisoners of the lab, shots Frankie took of the facility pre and post explosion, articles he collected over the years and our research since Lark got here. “This seems to be proof enough.”

He nods toward the wall but Vega just keeps staring at me. “I want proof that you aren’t involved somehow, that you are what you say you are.”

*Yep. Called that shit.*

Doesn’t matter that we’ve got years of friendship between us, Vega is too shocked and hurt to let that cloud his own personal connection, his skepticism or his own research.

Cora rolls her eyes with a smile. “I swear it doesn’t matter how old or what species, all males of mysticism are broody alpha-holes.”

Sig snorts but Vega shoots him a glare that absolutely tells him to shut the fuck up, and boy, that hurts too.

“Well, I’m a fae so I don’t really have a way to prove much.” Cora grins. “I could grow a tree in the middle of the den if I have to, but we just laid new carpet so I’d rather not.”

Vok chuckles. “Not to mention it would exhaust you in your condition, my angel.”

“What about them?” Vega nods toward Zan and Andrej on either side of her—the dragon flew home specifically at my request to be present for this shitshow since he helped us a few months ago and I wanted all hands on deck. “What are they supposed to be?”

Zan barks out a laugh. “I just adore your friends, Ron. They fit in beautifully with the rest of us.”

“Drej can’t shift in here, he’s too big.” I sigh and run a hand through my hair under the beanie. “And Zan is a demon so unless you want him to take your soul or suck the vitality out of you, he can’t really prove it either.” Because he hides his horns and teeth in front of people he doesn’t know, and even this won’t get him to change that.

“Convenient,” Vega grunts and folds his arms against his chest.

Something that actually pisses me off. “Look at the wall, man. We didn’t take your parents, didn’t hurt them at all, and we’ve been trying to find them since the lab was destroyed. You think I woulda had Nova call you right away, would have invited you over if we were somehow involved in their disappearance?”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Goddamnit, Vega,” I snap. “You’re like a brother to me, one of my best goddamn friends! I’d never do anything to hurt any of you!”

His stare grows even more fierce as a muscle in his jaw ticks. “Except maybe befriend a couple of banshees and a sorceress to set us up for that sick fuck of a scientist.”

“Seriously? Gods, I get how fucked up this all seems, but you’re really going to accuse me of becoming friends with you just to get you shipped off to an experimental lab? When we were fucking kids?”

Vega doesn’t speak, but his expression says it all.

He doesn't trust me anymore and won't even consider it until I prove we aren't a threat, that we're trying to help and not hurt them.

"Fine," I huff as I step away from the chair I'm leaning on. "Fine, you want fucking proof, then I'll give it to you." With an aggressive tug, I take off my hat and toss it at Zan, then toe off my socks. "I swear to the gods, you are even more bullhead than any of my uncles..." My belt is next and just when I'm ready to drop my jeans, Cora speaks up.

"This isn't really necessary, is it? I mean, look at me and my brother. We don't exactly look normal, do we? Our eyes, our skin, and Havok can just—"

"Nope. It's fine." I reach behind my head and yank off my thermal. "It isn't going to be good enough unless it comes from me, so I'll give him what he wants and then maybe we can get on with the rest of the bullshit he needs to know."

"Vega..." Nova whispers as she leans forward. "Is this really—"

"Let him do it," her brother almost growls. "I want proof that he is who he says he is, that this isn't some elaborate ruse to trap us."

I roll my eyes and chuckle morbidly as I unbutton my fly. "Absolutely. Why put any faith in seven and half years of a bond stronger than blood." Then I glance at my girl. "Close your eyes, Peach. This ain't pretty."

She does and so does Cora, which makes me smile for real because she's doing it for Nova and no one else. My aunts have all seen us shift before and it doesn't move their meters a bit. Hell, I've seen Posey, Lark, Jan, and Grace in the buff too after we all ran together, so it's not like this has any kind of profound meaning, but the way wolves shift isn't as fancy as a dragon. You can actually see our bones break and reset, so between that and the fact that I'd rather not force Nova to see me naked, especially if she doesn't want to, I'd prefer her eyes were closed until this is fucking done.



I drop my jeans to my ankles, step out of them with a huff then scowl real hard as all four of my uncles chuckle. “Shut up.”

Colt lifts his hands with a grin. “Do what you gotta do, Beta. We’ve all seen your bare ass before.”

“Just try not to ruin the carpet.” Vok laughs as Drej grunts his amusement.

“And try to refrain from marking any territory.” Zan’s wearing that sardonic grin that’s basically his everyday look. “I’m sure it will be tempting.” He nods toward Nova cause he’s an asshat. “But save that for a time when you have less of an audience.”

I flip him the bird just before my wolf takes over, my wolf that has been bouncing around in my head this entire time because for some reason he is dying to show off.

And not just for my best friends that he considers his pack too, nope, the fucker wants to show off specifically for Nova and I don’t know what to make of that shit right now.

*Whatever.*

He’s not getting much air time because we have a lot to discuss, and I want to get this over with so we can get to it.

Something my wolf clearly appreciates because I shift so damn fast I’m not sure there was enough time for anyone to actually see it all.

We glance around, my wolf sniffing the new carpet, the furniture, every goddamn thing because he’s never been inside Vok and Cora’s house before, then he greets my aunt and uncles with happy little half-howls, and bows to our Alpha, which makes Colt grin like a motherfucker.

“Young wolves.” He shakes his head, bows in return at my wolf then gives his scruff a hard rub. “I sometimes forget how they’re like overgrown puppies.”

*“Fuck off,”* I send through our mind link. *“He hasn’t gotten a lot of time to run lately, he’s just happy to be out.”*

*“Doesn’t change the fact that he’s technically only about three,”* Colt sends back. *“Better make sure he doesn’t get so excited he pees on the carpet.”*

If I could scowl, I’d be doing it in a way that would make Andrej jealous. Especially when my wolf acts like an idiot and flops on the floor in front of Colt belly up, basically begging our Alpha for all the scratches while offering his neck for no damn reason.

Sometimes it is really fucking ridiculous that we’re two separate entities sharing space.

My wolf is very wise, brave, and he’s strong as fuck, but he also forgets himself at times, definitely when we’re with our family.

Which makes me look like a fucking moron.

*“Enough,”* I snarl. *“Wrap it up so we can salvage some of our dignity and move on.”*

My wolf snorts as he gets to his feet. *“This pleases me, to be with our pack after so long. Let me enjoy it.”*

*“Later. Go show Vega that you’re real then—”*

He doesn’t let me finish because as soon as I say my best-friend-I want-to-punch-in-the-face’s name, my wolf’s joy dims, he growls and shoulders past Vega with a huff before going right up to Nova instead.

He sniffs her socked feet, her legs then her hands that are folded in her lap before he nudges them with his snout.

She opens her eyes slowly, and my gods, the smile she gives us is breathtaking. “Wow,” Nova whispers as she holds out her fingers.

My wolf gives them a little lick, the perv, then immediately sets his gigantic head in her lap and damn near purrs as those fingers bury in his fur.

“Oh my gods, you’re so soft.” She scratches his scruff, behind his ears, gently rubs his cheeks, and snout. “And you’re...” Nova giggles. “You’re so big.”

My wolf is practically beside himself right now from her praise, something I can relate to because damn, it does feel good to have her petting us while the compliments roll off her tongue.

She continues her rough affection, giggling again when my wolf gets way too ballsy and pushes his head further in her lap until his nose is pressed to her stomach, his eyes drifting closed while Nova laughs.

“Are all wolves this big?” she asks, her voice a little distant.

“Just Paddocks. Ronny’s dad is a bit smaller, more like a wild wolf on steroids.” Colt is smiling, the bastard. “My nephew takes after our side in both forms, only a couple inches smaller than me as his wolf.”

“Just like when he’s a human.” Nova is smiling too so that’s good, I guess. And she hasn’t stopped touching us, which I will totally admit to loving way more than I should. “You called him Beta a little bit ago...”

Colt chuckles. “Cause he is. Ronin is my Beta, by birthright and genetics. Destined to be my right hand in every way possible.”

“Awesome,” she whispers with an amount of pride that makes my heart swell. “I just can’t get over how big he is.”

*“Should I tell her that you’re big all over thanks to my genes or...”* Colt sends my way with a laugh.

*“Go to hell. It isn’t like that. Plus, it’s weird for you to talk about my dick.”*

He laughs harder. *“Stating facts, Beta. You were blessed in that department just like everyone else in the Paddock line, can’t deny it since we shifters aren’t exactly modest. I’m sure she’d appreciate the info. Seems Nova is just as smitten with your wolf as he is with her. Might even go as far as to say it’s more than that.”*

*“Fuck. Off,”* I growl at the same time my wolf sighs, *“Mine.”*

*“See,”* Colt says smug as hell. *“He’s claiming her. Maybe you should too.”*

*“She’s my best friend, that’s it. He loves Nova for that reason alone, no different from the way he loves Vega and Sig.”*

“Bullshit.” My asshole uncle coughs out loud to everyone just as another hand lands on our back.

*Sig.*

He decided to pet us too and I can feel my wolf smile, and I can feel his tail start to wag.

*Goddamn puppy.*

“Is it weird that I find Ronny’s wolf just as hot as his person?” Sig laughs. “Definitely wishing he swung both ways right about now.”

“I do,” Zan chimes in. “Although, you’d have to fight Colt for me first.”

“Oooh.” Sigma is definitely shooting Zan a flirty smile, don’t even have to open my eyes to know that. “I’ll have to keep that in mind. I enjoy a challenge. And I’ve never been with a married couple before. Could be fun.”

*Jesus.*

I should have known Sig and Zan would hit it off.

They’re too similar in the ways that don’t count nearly enough for them not to.

Which is why it’s time to get this shit back on track.

Reluctantly, my wolf lifts his head from Nova’s lap, both of us instantly mourning the loss of her touch, and as he backs toward my asshat demon uncle holding my clothes, he damn near shocks the shit out of me.

*“Our mate is beautiful.”*

*“What?!”*

*“She is beautiful. Strong, intelligent. Kind. Our perfect match.”*

*“Who the fuck are you talking about?”*

*“Our mate.”* He snorts and shakes his head toward Nova.  
*“She is lovely. When can we claim her?”*

This is so not happening.

My wolf is just high on being out, just excited about being surrounded by so many people he loves.

There is no way Nova is our mate, no way she’s anything other than my best friend.

I would have known, right?

I would have felt it in some way. Would have fallen in love... oh shit.

*No. No way.*

Nova isn’t our mate, it’s just not possible.

My wolf is just confused, happy, and excited. That’s all it is.

Yeah.

Yeah, that’s it.

He’s just a confused puppy looking for love from those he loves in return.

Yep. That has to be it.

Nova just can’t be our mate.

*“Idiot,”* he growls at me, and for the first time in a while, I have a feeling he’s right.

“Should I close my eyes again?” Nova asks, a permanent smile on her face as she stares at us, those galaxy eyes never straying from my wolf.

Colt sighs. “Probably. For now, anyway. If you’re going to be coming with us, which I’m guessing you are after we talk, you’ll need to get used to seeing us shift though. Depending on the situation, it could be too dangerous to do that every time, and honestly, shifters don’t have much in the way of modesty.”

Andrej grunts in agreement and I inwardly roll my eyes.

If I have any control over it, Nova will *not* be seeing me shift any time soon, and she most definitely will not be seeing my uncles naked either.

Not fucking happening.

Once her eyes are closed and hidden behind her hand, my wolf takes one last, longing look at her with his own eyes, then allows me to shift back just as quickly as before.

Zan tosses me my jeans and I turn away from Sig and Vega, both of them staring at me for entirely different reasons, pulling the denim on before I face the twins and finish dressing.

My stare never leaves Vega's though, not until I put my thermal on, and even then I'm still staring to make sure he knows I'm pissed too.

He should have trusted me, trusted our bond, but he didn't and that shit fucking hurts.

"Was that good enough, young banshee?" Havok asks with an audible smirk. "Perhaps this will help as well?"

When I look at him I can't help but laugh.

He went *full vamp*, the way Lark refers to it, with blood red eyes, his fangs fully elongated and a significant drop in room temp to seal the deal.

But my best friend is too proud to back down, so Vega just gives him a curt nod and resumes staring at me.

*Fuck you too then, buddy.*

If he wants to be a dick about this then fine.

We'll hash out our shit later when Sig and Nova convince us to, but for now we have too much to discuss first.

"How do you know all this?" He nods toward the wall behind Colt as he finally rips his gaze from mine. "The history, the location, the details."

“My mate, Lark, was held at Kentworth Labs for forty five years. She was one of the first prisoners they took and she finally escaped a few months ago before Ronny found her close to the Idaho border. Your mother was one of her cell mates.”

All three of my friends tense, and gods, how I wish I could hold Nova right now.

Hell, I wish I could show all three of them some kind of support but Vega isn't allowing it, probably won't even let me get close enough to try, and that just pisses me off more.

“And our father?” Vega grunts.

Colt nods. “He was kept on a separate hall, males and females of the elite were in special wings, but Lark knows him as well. They were good friends to her while she was there.”

“And they...” Nova snuffles as her eyes move between us. “They didn't hurt our parents? Mama and Daddy didn't suffer any kind of... they didn't mistreat them?”

I glance at Colt and give him a quick, discrete shake of the head.

I absolutely do not want Nova to know how her parents were treated, or the kind of shit that went on at the lab.

At some point she'll want specifics, I know her well enough to know that, but not now. It's enough to know that her parents were pretty lucky in the grand scheme, that they're still alive and probably fighting like hell to get back to their kids.

“All considering, no.” Thank fuck my Alpha is on the same page. “It could have been worse, but your parents were too important to Kentworth to allow anything bad to happen to them.”

Nova sighs and settles against Sig who wraps her in a hug. “Why though? What's he trying to do with people like us?”

“Experiments.” Vega glances back at his sister. “Genetic testing and shit.”

“Ah, the young banshee has done his fair share of research.” Zan smirks. “The mad scientist is indeed

experimenting on people like us, and since banshees and sorcerers of any kind are extremely rare, you can rest a tad easier knowing your parents will be safe for now.”

“For now?” Sigma asks. “What does that mean?”

“It means we need to find them before Kentworth can set up shop somewhere else.” Cora smacks her brother in the gut as she scowls. “As soon as that whacko has the means, he’ll start running his tests again, and when he does, none of us are safe.”

“You searched all these places?” Vega asks from the wall I didn’t realize he walked up to. “Looked over most states surrounding Wyoming?”

Colt nods. “We’ve tracked him to Canada. Most likely Saskatchewan or Alberta since he has a vampire in tow and can’t go far. We were planning on leaving tonight to start looking there.”

Vega nods. “We just need to pack first.”

“No,” Andrej, of all people, grunts. “Not a good plan.”

“Tough shit.”

Drej rolls his black eyes. “You think he won’t want you three too?”

“And you think us three are gonna sit back and let you find our parents without us?” Vega glares back at the dragon and I have to give him credit for not backing down to him. “Not happening. We’ve been looking for them since February, and we aren’t about to give up now, especially when we’re that much closer to finding them.”

Thus commences what will no doubt be the most uncomfortable, awkward, horrendous road trip ever.

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Since Colt and I rode from Great Falls, Montana back to Ashland with Zan—Frankie and Lark sitting pretty at the motel—we had to switch vehicles in order to accommodate



six. Andrej is flying back to Europe to spend the next week there with the rest of the dragons before they come home for Christmas, and Vok and Cora will be helping remotely. But six travelers means we had to pack up then pile into the Durango Zan impulse bought with the justification that he is about to be a dad, and if the way we sat isn't an omen, I don't know what is.

Zan driving with Colt riding shotgun.

The three Baker siblings smooshed together in the second row with Nova in the middle, and my dumbass all alone in the way back.

*Awesome.*

After we left the dealership, we went to VivaDee's house so Nova and the twins could pack and email their professors.

Vok is going to take care of school for them the same way he has for me every time I've left. Nothing that will alter grades in our favor or anything, but this much time off so close to midterms isn't a good thing, so he's going to talk to the dean, work a little of his magic, and make sure we are all put on emergency family leave with a grace period that will cover however long we're gone, as well as make sure whatever can be emailed to us, is. That way our absence doesn't count against us and no one gets suspicious over the time off.

None of my family would allow our personal shit to interfere with an education, and they still expect us to put in the hard work.

We were going to stop by Vivacious Words to tell VivaDee what was going on but Vega changed his mind last minute and decided it was better to just leave her a note with the promise to answer when she called freaking out.

He wasn't worried she would try to stop them, just that she'd want to come with and Vega apparently thinks their dad would kick his ass worse than he's going to already if they dragged VivaDee and Ainsley into this as well, something Sig and Nova agreed with adamantly.

Not that I was a part of any of these conversations.

Nope, not me.

Just Zan and Colt, and Vok and Drej, because apparently, I've been blacklisted from the only friends I had outside of my family.

Which is why I spent the first seven hours of what should be about fifteen sprawled out in the third row, beanie pulled down over my face, AirPods in, and stewing on everything while I listened to the soundtrack to *Wicked*.

Pissed or not, I like my musicals.

*"Come on, Beta. Let's go get some grub,"* Colt grunts in my head as we pull into a gas station.

*"Not hungry."*

*"Maybe not, but your girl could be. Vega's been on the phone the last forty five minutes with their aunt and hasn't noticed they ran out of snacks."*

*"So take Sig in. If I buy them food, Vega might think it's poisoned."* Yeah, I'm acting like a baby, so what. *"And Nova isn't my girl. I'll be lucky if she's still my friend after all this."*

Colt gets out of the Durango and a few seconds later, the trunk opens. *"You're an idiot."*

*"Seems to be the general consensus."* I lift my beanie and glare. *"And that's real rich coming from you."*

*"Must be another Paddock trait."* He smirks. *"Come on, Ronin. I'm assuming you know what all three of them like, consider it a peace offering, and if they doubt your intentions, just make Zan take the first bite to prove it isn't poisoned."*

At this I actually chuckle out loud because Zan is a demon. If anything is poisoned in any way he'd be able to detect it but it wouldn't actually faze him. Hell, he still smokes a fucked up combination of deadly plants from time to time to get high for the fun of it, so Colt suggesting something like that was purely to get a chuckle out of me.

Fucking good dude, my uncle, let me tell you.

*“Fine. We’ll make the food run but you’re buying cause if everything is left untouched since it came from me I don’t want to be the one to waste all that cash.”*

With a huff, I climb over the seat, navigate my way through the luggage and extra equipment we originally came home for, then follow Colt inside the twenty-four-hour quick stop.

“They’ll come around.” He sighs while we stare at forty million bags of chips. “This has to be a mind fuck for Vega and his siblings, a real shock to learn their best friend isn’t quite what they thought he was. And knowing now that we have knowledge that can help them is probably just as hard to swallow. Seems like your friends have been on their own longer than they should have been.”

I just shrug. “Yeah. I mean, I don’t know if Vega will ever come around, he’s a great guy and the best kind of friend, but now that I know what’s going on, I can clearly see that he’s taken on the role of protector, and you know as well as I do, that isn’t something anyone like us gives up so easily.”

“True.” Colt starts grabbing multiple bags as he nods. “But deep down he knows you’re still his best friend, knows that your only involvement in this has been positive and helpful. He can’t deny it, and eventually, he’ll accept it.”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe by the time we’re as old as you.”

My uncle snorts. “Nah. It’ll happen sooner than you think. Especially since Sigma and Nova seem to already accept it, they’re just following big brothers rules because they love and respect him. He’s been handling their shit since February, and Vega is probably the only reason the three of them haven’t completely fallen apart so far. He’ll come around, Ronny.”

I give him a small nod, grab a billion chips as well, then head for the next aisle.

I understand what he’s saying, and while I know Colt is probably right, it doesn’t change the fact that this fucking hurts.

It probably makes me a selfish prick to say that because I can't actually imagine what it's been like for my friends to be searching for their parents on their own for so long, to move through their days in a programmed kind of way while struggling with the fear that they may never see their mom and dad again.

My mom may be ridiculous and overprotective but she's still my mom, and since she's been trying to patch things up with Colt, our relationship has improved some as well. And at the end of the day, I couldn't begin to fathom what it would be like if she were missing.

I just wish my friends would lean on me for support instead of shun me like a Rogue or some shit.

With a sigh, I grab about a dozen bags of jerky, my arms already super full, then head toward the sweets and continue loading up on the junk I know my friends will be unable to resist eating. Zebra cakes for Sig, cosmic brownies for Vega, and those snowball things for Nova.

They may be acting weird right now, but I know for a fact none of them will be able to ignore that shit, so at least they'll eat something before we stop for breakfast in a few hours.

I meet Colt at the checkout, and once I add my pile to his, I can't fight the laugh that forces itself out of me.

Pretty sure we wiped them out of most of their junk food and my uncle even managed to snag a case of water, a twelve pack of coke, and two eight packs of Gatorade.

Five big dudes with at least another eight hours on the road means we need all the snacks, but I'd be willing to bet this won't last until Great Falls. Given the twins actually willingly eat this stuff, anyway.

When we return to the truck, though, my slightly better mood takes a nose dive.

Vega and Nova are all the way in the third row and Zan and Sig are in the second, the two of them huddled close together over their phones typing furiously while they giggle and snicker like little girls.

And once again, that means I'm left to fend for myself in a car full of people I love, most of whom want nothing to do with me.

*Fucking great.*

"I am tired of driving." Zan grins as we unload the bags around him. "Besides, wolves are far better with navigation, and since it has started to snow harder, I thought it best for the two of you to captain this fucked up ship."

Colt just rolls his eyes and gets behind the wheel while I slink into the passenger seat, my heart heavy with a pain I'm sure I don't deserve to feel.

One that is too similar to mourning.

*Fuck.*

We roll out onto the highway, the snow in fact coming down harder, and just when we creep to an almost stagnant pace, I inwardly groan.

Of course we'd hit weather and traffic on a road trip I want to end more than anything.

And of course this is the exact moment my mother would text me.

**Ma: Are you ok? I can tell something is off. You aren't in any trouble yet, are you?**

**Me: We're fine. Just hit a bit of traffic. Why are you up?**

**Ma: Because I can tell my baby needs me.**

**Me: I'm fine, Mom. Just dreading the next leg of the trip.**

**Ma: That's not all, Ronny. What's going on? Is it a girl?**

I roll my eyes because I am so damn sick of everyone asking me that. Especially since my sour mood does in fact

point back to a girl, *the* girl, but also her brothers and the shit we'll be doing once we get to Canada in a few days.

Throw in the weird bullshit my suddenly quiet wolf said earlier about that girl and I've got quite the mess going on in my head right now.

**Me: Everything is fine, Mom. I'll text you when we get to Great Falls.**

**Ma: No. I mean, yes, text me when you get there, and I want my stupid brother to text too, but no, you're not fine, and I can tell it has everything to do with a girl. Probably that Nova.**

Another eye roll.

Mary Caldwell has referred to my best friend as *that Nova* since the first time they met when we were fourteen and I've never understood why. And because I'm already in a funk, I finally decide to ask.

**Me: Why do you always call her that?**

**Ma: Call her what?**

**Me: That Nova. You've called her that for over seven years.**

**Ma: I don't know what you're talking about. I love Nova.**

**Me: Well, that's some bullshit if I ever heard it.**

**Ma: Language, Ronin, and no it's not. Nova is a wonderful girl. She's stunning, and I know she makes you happy.**

**Me: Then why the hell have you always been so rude to her?**

**Ma: Ronny, I am not rude to your friends.**

**Me: Uhm yeah, you are. You've never had them over for dinner, you're always short with them, never engage or try to get to know them, and you're almost always impolite at best to Nova specifically. I want to know why.**

**Ma: You really have no idea?**

At least she didn't deny it again.

**Me: Yes.**

**Ma: Because I didn't want them to take you away from me.**

**Me: What the hell does that mean?**

**Ma: Isn't it obvious, Ronin? The bond you share with that Nova? With them living in Mississippi, I was worried you'd want to leave Ashland, leave me, your father, and the pups, in order to be close to them, and knowing that Nova meant so much more to you than anyone else ever has, the possibility of you leaving to be with her was very real.**

**Me: I've never once talked about leaving Ashland for any reason, let alone moving to be closer to my friends. Why would you think I'd do something like that?**

**Ma: Because we do crazy things when we're in love, move heaven and earth for our mates, and with a heart like yours it only made sense.**

**Me: Jesus, not you too. Nova isn't my mate, ok? We're friends, that's it, and I'm not crazy enough to leave my family for her or anyone else no matter how I feel about them.**

**Ma: You really don't see it? Don't feel the mate bond between you and that Nova?**

*I am going to rip my hair out.*

**Me:** She is my best friend, nothing more. If we were mates I would have known the second we met, definitely after I heard the call, and since there were no neon signs flashing above her head with **RONNY'S MATE** with an arrow pointing to her, I think it's safe to say she's not my forever.

*And now I can't even lie to myself believably.*

One thing this car ride has given me is tons of time to think, and while reflecting on the last seven years, I've concluded that Nova isn't my mate, but I've somehow fallen in love with her anyway. All shit I knew before and despite the potential signs on my end that could mean she was, Nova hasn't indicated in any way that she sees me any differently from her brothers—I'm choosing to ignore the fact that she has been turned on in my presence more than once—and if we were fated mates, she'd feel something other than that for me.

*Nova + Ronny = platonic best friends for life.*

Or however long it takes before Vega forbids us from even looking at each other again.

**Ma:** The longer you deny it the stronger it becomes. You'll see.

**Me:** Quit being all optimistic and cryptic. It's weird. And why the sudden change? If you didn't like Nova when you incorrectly thought we were mates before, why is now different?

**Ma:** Because she's here to stay. I've always worried she'd take you away from me but since she's a permanent resident of Ashland I don't need to worry about that anymore. She'll plant her roots more firmly when they intertwine with yours and the two of you will stay on Dragovihk land, mate, and give me lots of grand pups. No mother could be unhappy with that sort of thing.



**Me: I'm done having this conversation.**

**Ma: That's fine. You don't need to hear this from me, you already know the truth, it's just a matter of accepting it.**

**Me: Done. I'm done. I'll text you when we get to Great Falls.**

**Ma: Ok, son. I'll stop for now, but you mark my words, something is going to happen while you're away and when you come back, you'll be happily mated, or close to it, to your best friend, and the world will be right again.**

**Me: Stop.**

**Ma: Fine, fine. Text me when you get there. Be safe. Make sure my idiot brother texts me too. Love you, son.**

**Me: Love you, Ma.**

I frown as I reread our conversation and decide not to focus on how my mother seems to be another person on board with the whole *Nova could be my mate* insanity, then mindlessly scroll through my NFL app, the news, everything and anything to hush the absurd thoughts I'm trying not to entertain.

It definitely helps me do that when we lurch to a complete stop, the tires of the Durango sliding just a bit on the snow covered pavement and when I look up, my frown intensifies.

Total stand-still traffic.

*Fucking great.*

Must mean there's an accident up ahead because it's about two in the morning and normally the only traffic is in the form of semi-trucks and they typically cruise without issue.

*This trip just keeps getting better and better.*

"Fuck." My uncle echoes the sentiment. "Text Lark, let her know we're stuck."

I arch a brow as he pulls his phone from the cup holder. “And you can’t because...” Not that I mind texting my aunt, but Colt can get weird about her at times, super possessive and paranoid even with us.

He frowns. “Looking for an alternate route. Just text her and let her know we’re backed up, not sure for how long,” Colt grunts as he scrolls. “Looks like there’s another exit about ten miles up but this fucking app says the stand-still is all the way passed it.”

“What should I tell Frankie?” Zan leans forward and pokes his head between our seats. “She is trying to book motel rooms for our larger than expected party, should she hold off until we have a better idea of our ETA?”

“Tell her to hold off for now. I don’t want to pay for an extra room if we don’t end up needing it.”

I roll my eyes as I text Lark.

Neither one of my uncles are hard up for cash, not even close, but you’d think Colt was on the verge of bankruptcy with the way he acts sometimes.

“We can pay for our own rooms,” Vega mutters from the back. “It’s not a problem.”

Zan waves his hand through the air dismissively. “Nonsense. Consider yourselves our guests, all expenses paid until we retrieve your parents and all return home together.”

Vega begins to protest but Sig talks over him. “I’ve always wanted a sugar daddy. This is fucking great.”

“Indeed.” Zan chuckles. “I shall instruct my darling girl to hold off on booking any more rooms, but we will handle all of that when the time comes.” Then he flashes me a wicked grin. “I do believe I’ll enjoy coordinating our accommodations while we are away.”

*Well, that was ominous as fuck.*

Knowing him, Zan will force me to room with Vega the entire time we’re gone just to see if we beat the hell out of each other and how many times. And he’ll probably have Sig

stay with him and Frankie just to see how far he can push my friend, and he'll give Nova a gigantic suite all to herself or some shit.

Sick fuck would enjoy every minute of all of that.

Silence fills the truck, Colt scowling out the windshield at all the other cars, Zan and Sig giggling like idiots over whatever the hell they're doing, the third row absent of any kind of activity save for the sound of Vega's glare because yeah, I can practically hear it.

*This is absolutely ridiculous.*

They're my best goddamn friends and we can't even sit in a fucking SUV together right now without the tension consuming everything, without it making this entire trip almost unbearable. I fucking hate this but now isn't the time to try to change it and to be totally honest, I'm not sure when that time will be.

Who would have thought secrets would ruin three of the most important relationships I have?

In case you missed it, that was sarcastic as fuck.

"Bloody brilliant!" The silence is interrupted as Zan throws open his door then hops out onto the highway, Sig right on his tail.

I frown and watch as they round the front of the truck. "What the fuck..."

Zan is furiously tapping away on his phone and within minutes Sia's *Cheap Thrills* comes through the Bluetooth at a deafening volume, the two asshats rolling their shoulders and shaking their butts before Sigma salsas his way to my door.

He yanks it open with a grin, never missing a beat. "Come on, big guy, I know you love this song."

*I do.*

I really love this song.

It's super fun to dance to and thanks to Posey, I'm pretty fucking good, but what I don't understand is why Sig's all of

the sudden talking to me or starting a dance party on the goddamn highway.

Something he clearly picks up on.

“I’m not my brother.” He smirks, reaches in to grab my hand and pull me from the seat. “We may share most things, but not this. I ain’t hurt, babe, and I’m done letting him make me feel like I should be.”

Now I’m smiling, small, but it’s happening, as Sig and I fall into a dance we’ve done dozens of times since they moved here. “I didn’t mean to keep something so big from you guys.”

“I know.” Sig smiles as I spin him. “And so does Veg, it’s just been hard, you know? Missing Mama and Daddy, worrying about them nonstop, looking for them for months while trying to keep things semi-normal. And Veg stepped into the role as head of the family while trying to make sure everything was good for me and Queen Nova. He’s been stressed and it surprised us, that’s all.”

With a tug, Sig’s hand lands on my shoulder while we go hip to hip. “It’s not just that though. He feels betrayed.”

Sigma rolls his eyes, and continues to salsa like he was born to do it. “He’ll get over it, Ronny. Vega loves you just the same as you love him. We’ll get past this and find our parents together.”

“Maybe,” I grunt as I dip him. “We’ll find your parents, of that I’m sure, I just don’t know if Veg will let this go.”

When he comes up, I spin Sig again, but he lets go and falls into Zan’s arms. “I’m officially cutting in.” The demon smirks. “Your dance card is filling up, young wolf.”

As they shimmy and gyrate out of the way, I see a pair of galaxy eyes twinkling at me from behind cat eye specs.

“Hi.” Nova grins nervously and tugs her parka a little tighter while toeing the snow on the ground.

I swallow hard, my stomach flipping with all kinds of emotions. “Hi, Peach.”

Her smile widens and fuck, that slays me. I had no idea how badly I needed to see that right now. “Wanna dance, Mr. Astaire?”

I can’t help but laugh as I hold out my hand. “More than anything, Ms. Rogers.”

The minute Nova’s hand is in mine, her icy fingers laced with my much warmer ones, something inside me clicks, shifting into place, and everything seems right in the world once again.

The four of us dance to at least three more songs, a few other passengers from neighboring cars even get out to join in, and when traffic starts to move, before we hop back in the truck, we get a huge round of applause and several honks from the rest of the gridlocked drivers.

Colt shakes his head with a smirk as I buckle up, and when I chance a look in the back seat, Nova beams at me and I swear I see a small smile playing on Vega’s face as he gives me the most subtle nod ever.

Maybe we can get past this, get back to normal and not let our secrets ruin something as great as the bond we share.

And so long as I’m not put into anymore positions to jerk off to Nova while she’s within arm’s reach, I’ll be fucking golden.

## CHAPTER 7

# STONE COLD

## NOVA



“Wait, what? You’re joking, right?”

My eyes flutter a bit when the irritated rumble of Ronny’s voice rouses me from sleep.

We’ve stopped moving again, hopefully because we finally hit Great Falls and not because we’re stuck in more traffic. Although, I absolutely loved dancing with my best friend in the snow—I’d do that again in a heartbeat if we’re at a standstill.

It was absolutely killing me to shut Ronny out.

I hated every second of following Vega’s explicit instructions to wait until we knew he’s for real before we could trust him again, but I did it because he’s my brother, I love him, and I know he has our best interest at heart.

Definitely didn’t mean I had to like it, which I didn’t.

I know it was only a few hours, about ten from when I discovered the pictures of my parents until our dance off with Sig and Zan, but it was brutal because I could feel how hurt Ronny was. It hurt me too, and you throw in his obvious pain, the frustration and disbelief, well, I was on the verge of tears until Sig played that song, and I decided I wasn’t going to shut Ronin out anymore.

I was mostly successful but Vega still had me in the way back with him. and with so much space between us it wasn’t like I could do much else to show Ronny nothing changed between him and I.



Not until we stopped for breakfast, anyway, because then I made sure to sit between Colt and my best friend, show my support and faith in a semi-subtle way, then I pulled him aside and just hugged him when we had a few minutes alone.

That seemed to help quite a bit but I know Ronny is still torn up over the way Vega is acting.

And what made my heart do all kinds of stupid crap was the way he said he understood where Vega was coming from to a degree without being too angry about it.

Knowing why my brother was acting like a super douche, that Vega had to take on the role of head of our family while looking for any lead he could get on our parents whereabouts, Ronny said he had a lot of respect for him because of that, that he understood how hard it must be, and how much it probably shocked him to learn everything we did.

Yeah, I might have fallen a little more in love with my best friend when he said that to me next to a dumpster in back of the roadside diner.

We only had about four hours left of our trip at that point, and between the information dump about Mama and Daddy as well as the emotional rollercoaster that accompanied it, I was pooped and wound up crashing on Vega's shoulder.

Which is why I'm pretty confused about what has Ronny all up in a tizzy right now.

"You manipulative, conniving asshat," Ronny growls, at Zan apparently, before he gets out of the SUV and stomps toward the manager's office of what appears to be a motel. "I'll just have to see for myself."

Zan cackles as he and Sig share some weird look, hop out like the little co-conspirators I'm sure they are since the two of them hit it off scarily fast.

I look around and blink, wipe the sleep from my eyes, and notice Veg and I are the only two left in the truck.

"What's going on?" I yawn and stretch some as I sit up. "Are we here?"

Vega nods. “Great Falls, Montana, Sissy.”

“That’s good.” With a giggle, I wipe at the drool stain I left on his sweatshirt. “What’s the problem then?”

“Seems there’s an issue with our rooms.”

I sigh and start pulling on my parka. “Great. As if this trip couldn’t get any weirder.”

Vega just smirks and I can’t help but smile. That dance off helped my big brother come around a bit, and even though he won’t admit it, I know he’s starting to feel bad for the way he’s been an insufferable dick for almost twenty-four hours. Despite everything, Vega loves Ronny almost as much as I do, maybe even more, just in a different kind of way, so I doubt he enjoyed being such a prick to him.

At least I hope so because I don’t want to deal with my big brother when he’s all pissy.

We climb out of the Durango just in time to see Ronny come stomping back out of the office with keys in hand. He’s scowling hard at Zan, his uncle still laughing while Sig snickers next to him, the two unloading the trunk of all our bags.

“You did this on purpose,” Ronny grunts as he hands my brother a key.

Zan grins that evil grin for a minute before he fakes a look of offense. “I’d do no such thing.” He gasps, his performance almost Oscar worthy. “I have no control over how quickly things fill up in this motel, and considering it’s the only one for miles, we’re lucky we got the one extra room.”

Ronny rolls his eyes then looks to Sig. “You really gonna do this to me?”

“Do what?” Siggy smiles and bats his lashes. “It just makes the most sense. There’s only one bed in our room, no couch or even a chair, and they don’t have any available cots.”

“So why don’t you bunk in my room instead?”

I look up at Vega, surprised to see a full blown smile on his face. “They only had one room left?”

“Yep.” He nods. Apparently my oldest brother already knew this and is very aware of whatever has Ronin all flustered. “One room, one bed.”

“That’s fine. I don’t mind sleeping on the floor...” I frown as his smile somehow grows, the scruff on his cheeks doing nothing to hide the dimples all three of us have. “What?”

Vega shrugs as he walks around to help Zan and Sig. “You’ll see.”

“Absolutely not.” Siggy smirks at Ronny. “After seeing you shift at that sexy vampire’s house there’s no way I could keep my hands off of you. That’s just too tempting, Ronin.”

Now I’m rolling my eyes because Sigma is so full of shit. He’s always been vocal about how good looking he thinks Ronny is, but his attraction is only surface deep. Sig knows our best friend is straight and he’d never even consider making things weird by hitting on him in a serious way, he just does it to be funny and nothing more. Sigma loves Ronny like a brother and that’s it, so claiming he couldn’t keep his hands off him is a load of crap.

Ronny huffs. “So what, you gonna force your brother to shack up with me after shooting daggers at me for almost an entire day?”

Vega winces but I’m probably the only one who notices, and quite frankly, I’m glad he’s starting to feel bad. We won’t be able to work together to find Mama and Daddy if they’re still at odds, so him having a bit of remorse is a good thing. It’s the first step to getting back to normal and maybe sharing a room is how they do it.

“Hardly.” Zan closes the trunk as he slings three large military grade duffles over his shoulders. “We don’t need the two of you duking it out before the real fighting begins.” His grin morphs into a rather beautiful smile as Frankie walks out of their room with Lark and Colt. “You, young wolf, will be shacking up with the stunning sorceress.”

Ronny blinks at him, then my brothers, then me.

*Oh.*

He's mad because he and I are sharing a room.

"Seriously?" He swallows hard and looks at me a little longer before he turns back to his uncles. "I don't think that's \_\_\_"

"Bah!" Zan flaps his free hand in Ronny's face while he pulls his mate to him for a kiss that has my cheeks heating, and has me looking away. "It's perfect. It keeps our rooms in a row for easy planning and protection. The Alpha and Luna"—he motions toward the rooms farthest left—"my darling girl and I, the twin banshees, then you and the sorceress. It is a fabulous idea."

Ronny's eyes narrow a beat before he looks to Vega. "And you're ok with this?"

My brother shrugs and gives him a slight grin. "Not my call but it's fine. Don't want Nova on the floor and I don't want to share a bed with you." He starts toward the door marked with a gaudy looking number five. "You're a bed hog."

*He is.*

Ronny is a total bed hog and any time the four of us have slept in the same bed we usually end up either falling off the edges or smashed underneath him while he's sprawled out on top of us. It's why he cuddles me when it's just the two of us. If he didn't, Ronny could easily smother me to death under his ginormous body or kick me off the bed without even trying.

And normally this isn't even a blip on Ronny's radar, the idea of sharing space with me, so why he's all up in arms over it now is kind of confusing. Not to mention it hurts a little bit, too. I guess my not so grand gesture of friendship at the diner wasn't as well received as I thought.

"I don't mind sleeping on the floor." I drop my gaze, push my glasses up, and pull my backpack on. "It's no big deal. I used to sleep on the floor in their bedroom when we were little if I had a nightmare, so it's not a problem for me. And when we hit the next town, I'll just make sure to get my own room or whatever." *Gods, I'm about to cry.* This is so stupid.

Clearly, I'm still tired or something because it shouldn't hurt so much knowing Ronny doesn't want to share a room with me. "I don't mind, really, I'll—"

"No," Ronny grunts and pushes a hand back through his hair under his beanie. "No, Peach, it's fine. You can bunk with me while we're here and we'll figure out the rest later." When I chance a look at him, he forces a smile then sighs. "Let's get you settled. I'm sure you're tired and want a shower."

I just nod as he turns away, my bag in his hand while he lumbers toward room six.

*Well, I guess this is our new normal.*

My best friend of seven and a half years, the man I'm hopelessly in love with, is merely tolerating my presence because he has to while we look for my parents.

I could just cry, but I won't because what good would it do?

That would only lead to an incredibly awkward conversation, one I absolutely don't want to have, and then I'd wind up in my brothers' room anyway, and despite the uncomfortable tension between us, I still just want to be near Ronny.

*How stupid is that?*

With a sad little sigh, I follow him, six sets of eyes watching me the entire time, a few weird smirks from some of them, and now I can't get into that room fast enough.

I don't know what's gotten into everyone but it's almost like they're all enjoying how yucky this is making me feel, like they know something I don't and I don't really like that at all.

*Whatever.*

Before we leave for the next town, whenever and wherever that may be, I'll ask Zan to book me a room to myself so I can avoid this happening again, and maybe by then I can repair whatever is broken between Ronny and I.

Once the door clicks shut behind me, I drop my backpack on the small table by the window and take a look around.

The room is tiny, not that I was expecting much from a motel in the sticks, but it's smaller than I'd like considering my roommate doesn't want me here.

One double bed, something I doubt Ronny comfortably fits in alone, with a small nightstands on either side. A teeny chest of drawers with a 32" TV on top, a luggage stand with Ronny's duffle bag sitting on it, and not much else except the door to the bathroom that's probably the size of a refrigerator box.

I guess last minute search and rescue missions don't allow for much in the way of creature comforts.

*Maybe there's a bathtub I can sleep in.*

"You can take the bed," Ronny grunts, his back to me while he rummages through his bag. "You want the shower first or are you gonna catch a nap before dinner?"

"Uhm..." I still haven't moved from the door and that's probably because the vibes rolling off this man are so heavy with negativity I'm about two minutes from bolting and begging my brothers to put up with me. "I guess I'll probably just try to nap but you can have the bed later. You need it more than I do."

Ronny shakes his head. "Not happening. The bed is yours, I'll shower first then go help Colt do a run through of the weapons while you do whatever you need to do."

"Weapons?" My voice comes out in a barely audible squeak. "You guys brought weapons?"

He nods and sighs like I'm an annoying little idiot. "Had to. When shit went down this fall we weren't prepared enough, and that's how Kentworth got away in the first place. If we'd have been better prepared, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Something that is obviously inconveniencing you."

Ronny lifts his gaze to mine and arches one of those thick brows.

“I mean, I get it’s not ideal to have the three of us tagging along or whatever, since we don’t have much to offer in the way of militant style training, but you are making it abundantly clear I’m a real thorn in your side.”

He frowns. “I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to.” I cross my arms against my chest with a little huff. “All the sighing and shit, the way you basically flipped out over the possibility of sharing a room with me. You’ve never been like this before, Ronny, and I can only assume it’s because I’m cramping your style.”

“*Cramping my style?* What the hell does that mean?”

I shrug, and hold his stare. “Take it however you want. Having a stupid girl with no valuable skills other than proof reading like a champ follow you around while you go all Rambo, getting in the way of your mission. I’m basically a permanent cockblock now that my brothers forced you to share a room with me, so I’ll only make it harder for you to get any between-the-sheets action on top of all the life or death action you’ll be getting.”

*Oops.*

I didn’t even realize I was feeling that way until I said the words, but now that I did, I can’t really deny the fact that Ronny probably hooks up with girls while he’s out of town, and since I’m sharing his room he can’t.

None of that crossed my mind and honestly, between that and the added baggage of making sure nothing happens to me while we look for my parents, it’s no wonder why Ronny put up a fight over me staying with him.

Friend or not, another girl in your room definitely limits the ability for one night stands.

“It’s nice to know what you really think of me.” Ronny scowls as he yanks his hat off then toes off his boots. “Just another asshole player who keeps a steady rotation of pussy on tap.”

His words make me flinch, makes my stomach churn before it drops to my knees.

I don't *really* think that.

I mean, I know Ronny plays the field at times, hooks up with random girls when he feels like it, but I wouldn't exactly call him a player and definitely not an asshole.

But once again, my jealousy and hurt take a front row in all the other messed up shit I'm feeling, so I wind up inserting my foot so far down my throat I'm practically digesting it.

There's no going back, though, and maybe if I keep up the front, keep pointing out the way I'm only making this harder for Ronny, he'll kick me to the curb so I can go to my brothers and lick my wounds without needing an excuse.

"Whatever. You don't want me here with you, and honestly, I don't want to be here if that's the case." I guess lying through my teeth is another skill I actually have because despite everything, I *do* want to be with Ronny. In his life, in his room, in his arms. I just want *him* but the more I say, the less likely it is that any of that will happen.

"I didn't say that," he growls, his Caribbean blues narrowed on my face. "I never even implied it."

I roll my eyes that are super close to leaking. "Right. You're probably thrilled that I'm now a liability to you and your uncles while you look for that scientist, and I'm sure you're just beside yourself with joy over the way you'll need to find alternative methods to get laid in between." I hug myself a little tighter, wishing I could just stop talking even though I can't seem to. "Although, this isn't your first trip away from home for something like this, I'm sure you're well versed in the art of hooking up on the road. You've always been creative, you'll figure it out."

"Is that really what you think? Just figure I can't keep my dick in my pants and prowl for willing participants every time I get the chance? You honestly think that low of me?"

A lone tear slips down my cheek and I swipe it away, dropping my gaze as I shrug.

Again, I don't think that, not at all, but I can't seem to stop myself from saying stupid stuff right now and the hurt I feel



coming from Ronny because of it is almost crushing.

“Fine,” he spits, shedding his hoodie before he grabs his clothes. “I’m gonna shower. Don’t want to smell like I just sat in a car for eighteen hours when I go on *pussy patrol* later.” Ronny steps toward the bathroom door but pauses. “And don’t worry, I’ll make sure I don’t bring anyone back here. Wouldn’t want those *willing participants* going through my intel or anything, I’ll just keep to fucking them in dark alleys until we get back home. Creative license and all that.”

The bathroom door slams and I almost lose my shit.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

First I go bonkers at the club because I thought Ronny was bringing a date, then I basically accuse him of being involved in my parents disappearance, and now I essentially called him a manwhore that uses times of crisis to get laid.

*Gods, I’m a real fucking mess.*

And the worst part is I can’t take any of it back. I’ve probably ruined the most important non-blood relationship I have because my emotions are all over the map and I can’t seem to control myself around the man I love.

*I need to get out of here.*

I need to go for a walk or something to clear my head, and try to come up with a way to apologize for being so stupid and mean, but that won’t be enough, I’m sure.

Hell, I wouldn’t blame Ronny if he never talked to me again after what I just said.

A few more tears roll down my cheeks as I grab the extra key then take off out of the room in search of some way to get my head right.

*This is crazy.*

I’ve always been in love with Ronny, even knowing damn well we can never be together, but I’ve never let it make me act like a total nut job before, which is exactly why I need to get out of here.

I look around, relieved none of the other search party members are mulling about outside, then pull my hood up and start toward the office.

I'm pretty sure I saw a patio over there, and maybe if I just sit and read on my phone or something, I'll calm down enough to figure out how to fix this.

*Maybe.*

“Nova!”

A woman's voice comes from behind me but I ignore it and keep power walking over the slippery sidewalk toward my destination.

“Nova, honey, wait up.”

*Ugh.*

I don't want company right now.

Maybe I'll never want company again.

I just want to wallow in my self pity alone and figure out how to make my best friend not hate me while I bury my feelings for him. Is that too much to ask?

“Jeez, you walk fast for a little thing.” Frankie comes into my peripheral as I slow down a bit. “Hey.” She puts a hand on my arm to stop me. “Honey, what's wrong?”

I sniffle and wipe my nose on my sleeve. “Nothing.”

She frowns. “I might not have super powers like the rest of you but I can tell when I'm being lied to. What's going on, Nova?”

“Just upset about my parents.” That's believable, right? Totally understandable all considering.

Frankie searches my eyes. “Maybe, but that's not why you're crying.”

*Guess not.* “It's nothing, really. I'm just tired and stressed. Probably hungry.”

“Sure, I get that. Seems to be the overall vibe after an impromptu road trip but something happened in the last half

hour, something more than just exhaustion and worry.”

I chew my lip a little, looking around again only to sigh as Lark heads our way. “I’m fine.”

“You lie about as well as your mother,” the beautiful Luna says as she stops by Frankie. “Bella can’t pull wool at all.”

More tears.

Yep, lots more tears leak from my face and I’m about a minute away from telling these two everything because damnit, maybe I need to talk to someone about all my shit.

Especially one who knows my mama well enough to know she is a terrible liar.

“Can we go somewhere else?” I glance back at Ronny’s room, knowing damn well he’s in the shower and won’t be coming out any time soon. “I need some space.”

Lark nods and pulls out her phone. “Sure, sweetheart. Nowhere off site cause the boys will worry but there’s a bar connected to the office. Let’s go have a drink and chat.”

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**A**fter Lark texted Colt—both he and Zan apparently crashed almost as soon as they got settled—to let him know where we’d be, the three of us headed to the bar and ordered a couple appetizers and the fruitiest drinks I’ve ever tasted.

“So, what’s going on?” Frankie asks over the rim of her glass. “Zan said the car ride was pretty tense, but I thought things were a little better when you got here?”

I shrug and drag a potato skin through the sour cream. “They were. At least, I thought they were. I dunno.”

Lark frowns. “So, it’s more than just being worried about Wes and Bella?”

“Yeah. I mean, we’re super worried about Mama and Daddy, have been for months, but it’s become kinda normal, just a part of our days, what with wondering where they are

and if they're ok, and now that we know they were..." I swallow down another wave of tears. "That you saw them as recently as a few months ago, you know them and said they weren't harmed or lost in that explosion, it's put us at ease some. Don't get me wrong, we won't not be worried until we find them but the knowledge that Kentworth valued them on some level gives us hope they'll come home in one piece."

"It should." She reaches out and rubs my arm. "Your parents are amazing and strong as hell, real fighters, and they're definitely fighting so they can come home to you, I have no doubt." Lark smiles around her straw then sighs. "Bella talked about you all the time."

My brow lifts and I can't help but smile. "Yeah?"

"Yep." She nods. "Never by name, they were super protective about details which makes sense now, and it took them about two months before I even knew they had kids, but once Bella started talking about her sons and daughter, she never stopped."

"That sounds about right." My eyes get all watery again as I give her a small smile. "Mama can be a chatterbox at times, 'specially when we're involved."

"She's super proud of you three."

I nod. "We know. Our parents are very affectionate, shower everyone they care for with praise. It's pretty gross actually." Which makes me giggle cause it's true.

Something Lark apparently agrees with because she giggles too. "Your parents are definitely gross. Every time they were together, I thought your mom was going to get pregnant just by looking at your dad."

I laugh a little harder. "Basically, that's how the three of us happened so close together. Mama made Daddy get snipped after me, though, because she didn't want any more babies until we were somewhat grown. I'm not supposed to know that but Siggy is nosy as hell and went through their filing cabinet when we were six."

Both women laugh and it makes me feel a little better.

Not a lot, but a little.

“Mate bonds are no joke.” Frankie grins. “Most potent shit I’ve ever experienced.”

Lark nods her agreement. “Truth. And your parents have one of the strongest ones I’ve come across outside of our clan. I’m shocked Wes let Bella talk him into getting a vasectomy, males typically don’t like any form of protection.” Then the pretty wolf winces. “Not that you want to talk about your parents’ sex life and that kind of stuff.”

But I just shrug with a smile. “We were educated on mate bonds, divined ones, and the birds and the bees way earlier than most. Mama was insistent we understand what all of that means so we were smart and safe until our fated ones came along. Vega and I are a little more traditional in our views on the subject, still want to have normal relationships or whatever until we find our soulmates without running through every warm body we meet. Sig’s a little...”

“More like Zan,” Frankie offers. “Sex is fun, it’s free, and as long as it’s consensual it should be enjoyed whenever possible.”

I giggle and point to the stunning redhead. “Exactly. He’s looser for sure, but I know my brother still wants to find his mate just like Veg and me.”

She leans forward and grabs an onion ring with a curious look on her face. “For those of us less informed on the way banshees and sorceresses do things, can you explain how the whole mating thing works for you guys?” Frankie chuckles. “I’m new to this supernatural shit.”

“Well, it’s sorta weird for my brothers and me. Mama knew Daddy was her divined the minute they met because when they were introduced she had to shake his hand. For her, everything she does is reliant on her ability to touch things.”

Lark nods as she pops a tortilla chip into her mouth. “She said that; said touch was pretty vital in almost everything.”

“Yeah, for her it is. She channels her gifts that way, sends her energy through her finger tips and palms. It’s pretty

amazing actually, and made Bella Baker one hell of a judge of character.” They both laugh but I sigh. “My power is a little like that, too, but we’re completely different. Mama has the ability to summon... I guess you could call it positive electricity but it’s more like a million watt bolt of lightning. She can destroy stuff with it but also repair things with it. I don’t really understand her gifts, she didn’t really use them around us and spent more time teaching us about ourselves than showing us what she can do.”

“So are you three a mix of your parents then? Or...” Frankie asks, totally engrossed.

“Not really.” I smile a little. “My brothers are loud mouth banshees like Daddy and VivaDee, though Vega can usually get a read on someone when he makes physical contact.”

“And banshees do what, exactly?”

“Scream when someone who’s going to die is around,” I say as seriously as possible before I crack up. “Sorry, it’s hard to say that with a straight face.”

“Why?” Lark asks with wide eyes. “Banshees are basically omens of death right?”

“Yeah, sure.” I giggle very inappropriately. “I mean, definitely but they can also emit a scream at a pitch that can deafen people if they want, levitate, sometimes go all see through and ghostlike.”

“And this is funny?” She lifts a brow in disbelief.

I nod. “It is when your brothers worked at a haunted house between the ages of eighteen and twenty.”

“Ah.” Frankie chuckles. “Banshees are also kind of assholes then?”

“Oh yeah. Daddy taught my brothers to scare the pants off of people before they could talk, and once they developed their other gifts, it was game over. With a banshee, most of their gifts don’t come into play until they’re a teenager or young adult, but the death omen scream, the one only heard by those about to die, happens as soon as they’re born. It’s how Mama and Daddy knew the twins were banshees.”

“And you don’t have any of that?”

“Nope. Although, I can hear my brothers scream even though I’m not at death’s door.”

Lark leans toward me with a serious look of intrigue. “How?”

“Daddy thinks it’s cause we’re siblings, but Mama thinks it’s more than that.”

“How much more?”

I knock back the last of my cocktail and start on another. “My gifts... they’re not like my mom’s. I’m something called a shadow sorceress.”

Frankie leans in too as she chews. “Which is what?”

“I can... well, I can shadow hop, basically teleport from shadow to shadow, become kind of a living shadow, shroud an area in darkness and even conjure something called a shadow beast.”

“Cool,” she whispers. “What else?”

I shrug, not really wanting to tell them but also totally wanting to. “I have a touch of necromancy sorcery, too.”

“No shit!” Frankie slaps the table. “Like real, raise them from the dead stuff?”

“Yeah, but I don’t really know how to control it. The only time I’ve done it was on accident, and we were working on harnessing it before...”

They just nod and each give me a reassuring look of comfort.

“So where my mama is more of an elemental sorceress, I’m a shadow one, but we’re alike in terms of needing our hands.”

“Which is how you’d be able to find your mate?” Lark asks with a grin I’m not sure I understand or like.

“Not necessarily. Our abilities may favor one side instead of the other, but it’s possible there are little things from both

we might have.”

Her smile grows. “So that could mean you wouldn’t know your mate unless you kissed him?”

“Yeah...” I’m assuming Lark knows this from talking to my parents, but the look on her face has me weirded out some. “My parents think all three of us are going to need both forms of touch to confirm our mate just because they know Sig has kissed most of the boys that populated our town in Mississippi and never felt the bond. Why?”

“No reason.” She shrugs innocently. “Just curious is all. Your parents seem set in their one route to happiness, and I was just curious if it was the same for you three.”

“Right...” With a frown, I finish my second drink and slump against my chair, a nice little buzz tingling in my brain. “Doesn’t really matter anyway.”

“What doesn’t?” Frankie asks as she sets another drink in front of me.

I pick it up and chug half even though I just started another drink. “How I find my mate.”

“How come?”

“Cause I won’t.”

Lark is still fucking smiling. “You sure about that?”

I nod, firmly set in my status at being alone forever. “Yep. Can’t find him if I’m not looking.”

A few beats of silence pass as I swirl my straw and watch the colors of sunset liquor spin in the glass.

I don’t want to find my mate. I just want a stupid sexy wolf shifter who’ll never want me back and has probably packed up all my shit and dumped it in front of our motel room.

*Stupid sexy wolf.*

Gah, his *wolf*. Ronny’s wolf, who I’ve been calling Abe, was so gorgeous, just as gorgeous as Ronny’s person. I still



can't get over how big he is, probably bigger than my damn car and so soft, the softest ever really.

Those crystal blue eyes belonged to a wolf, but were so like Ronny's I could easily get lost in them.

An almost blondish brown color with white around his face and paws.

When I saw Abe, I wanted nothing more than to curl up next to him for the warmth alone, but knowing my favorite man was inside that beautiful creature too, I just wanted him a hundred times more than usual.

Not that anything will come from that, ever.

I doubt we're even friends anymore after what I said before I left.

"You're frowning." Lark nudges my arm. "Why?"

"Yeah." Frankie chimes in. "You never told us what had you so upset when you tried sneaking out of your room earlier."

"Boys are stupid."

They both laugh but Lark speaks. "Oh sweetheart, you are preaching to the choir."

I scowl and wag my finger between them cause now I feel a little more than buzzed. "Nope way. You two fabulously pretty ladies have perfect men who love you so much you'd have to be dead not to see it."

They both go a little dreamy eyed, and I scowl harder.

At least, I think I am.

I don't really know, but I'm trying to cause they have perfect mates who are hot and caring and love them.

*They can go to hell for that.*

"Nova, honey, one thing you'll have to learn, if you haven't already, is men like ours, like your brothers and Ronny, are even bigger idiots than human ones." Frankie

smirks. “Zan and I fought like hell and had an epic prank war before we finally got our shit together.”

Lark nods. “And Colton rejected me over one hundred and thirty years ago because he thought I deserved better.”

“No!” I gasp like they just told me the world was going to end in five minutes. “That’s prespos... preposs... it’s absurd bullshit.”

She cracks up. “Hand to gods, he did. Rejected me, our bond, all of it. Thought I’d be better off without him.”

“But you’re so perfect together.” Sighing like I’m reading one of my romance novels, I rest my elbows on the table and my chin on my hands. “You’re like the most perfect couple ever. Both of you’s. All four of you’s. Like fairytales.”

“Zan hid over fifty dildos in my house after I cut up all of his clothes,” Frankie deadpans. “We legitimately fought every time we were around each other for weeks. I even let goats loose in his bedroom.”

“Well, that’s crazy.” I hiccup. “Why does love have to be so stupidly complicated?”

“So we don’t take it for granted.” She smiles. “It means more if you have to fight for it, even just a little.”

I scowl into my drink. “Gotta have two willing participants in order to fight.”

Lark lifts a brow. “Something happen with Ronny?”

My eyes dart to hers as I gasp. “Who told you?”

“You just did.” She laughs. “Want to talk about it?”

I shake my head, then nod, then shake it again. “He’s stupid.”

“Well, he does have Paddock genes...”

“Ronin looks amazing in jeans. Or shorts. Or those goddamn gray sweatpants the gods created to torture women with.”

Frankie snorts. “Oh, she has got it bad.”

“I got nothing. Ronny is stupid, he is on pussy patrol, and my pussy doesn’t even make the cut.” I slam my hands over my mouth on another gasp, my eyes wide as I look between the laughing goddesses in front of me. “I did not just say that.”

The red headed one nods. “You totally did.”

“Yep.” Lark giggles like crazy. “You want Ronny to want your pussy.”

“Ugh.” My shoulders sag and the chair sucks me deeper, just not deep enough to disappear. “I don’t know what I want. I want my best friend back. I want him to want me as more. I want to punch him in the throat.”

“So how long have you been in love with my nephew?”

“Since I was born,” I groan because I’m getting drunk faster than normal. Probably because my stomach is void of food and I’m deliriously tired. Whatever. “Since we were almost fourteen.”

“You ever tell him?”

“No!” I whisper-shout. “I can’t tell Ronin I love him and want to ride him like a pony. That would ruin our friendship!”

“Hardly.” Frankie smirks. “If you ask me, the two of you are basically dating without the sex. I’d say telling him would be a great play.”

My hand flaps through the air dismissively on its own. “Yeah, well, your demon husband left you dildos so you have no say.” *That makes zero sense but I’m ok with it.* “Ronny doesn’t want me, and after the way we fought, I doubt he ever will. Plus, it doesn’t matter. He has a probably gorgeous and perfect mate out there waiting for him with her triple D cup titties, toned abs, and mouth made for blow jobs, and I have a divined somewhere in the ether trying to figure out how to avoid ever finding my B cups, huge ass, and never-given-a-blow-job before mouth. We could never be together for real because fate has already designed our paths.” I snort and finish another drink that might not even be mine. “The Maker just wanted me to fall in love with my best friend I can never have to teach me some stupid lesson I still haven’t learned.”

“You ever think Ronny could be your divined?” Lark asks with balls bigger than any male ever.

And I slump so far in my seat I’m almost under the table. “Only in my dreams.”

“So why can’t Ronny be the man of your dreams?”

“Because things like that don’t happen to me. I’m not like you guys.”

Her brow furrows as she looks to Frankie. “Like us?”

I nod, crank my head on the chair and wince. “Perfect. Beautiful. Strong. Confident. Put together. I’m not the kind of girl Ronny deserves to be with.”

Lark rolls her eyes. “You ever think maybe Ronny would disagree with that?”

“No.” I snort into my boobs. “You ever see the girls Ronny brings home?”

She shakes her head.

“Me neither, but I’m sure they’re nothing like me, and everything I’m not. Ronny is perfect and amazing and I’m just...” I scrunch up my face, stick my tongue out, and go cross eyed.

“You’re ridiculous, that’s what you are.” Frankie shakes her head with a smile. “Ron would be lucky to be with a girl like you, to have you as his mate.”

“Yeah, well, it ain’t happening, sister. Not to mention I’d have to probably kiss him to be sure and there is no way in hell he’d let me after I basically called him a slut,” I say on a sigh then yawn. “What time is it?”

Lark sighs too. “After seven.”

“We’ve been here four hours?!” I basically screech. “Holy shit, I’m drunk.”

“Then let’s get you back to your room and pick this back up tomorrow.” Frankie gets to her feet and throws a wad of cash on the table. “We’ll have plenty of time for girl chats over the next week or two.”

They help me out of my chair, dress me in my winter gear like a toddler while I giggle the entire time, then basically carry me back to my temporary room as I serenade them with my horrible rendition of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* because I'm thinking about Ronny, like always.

After a few ridiculously long hugs, they make sure I get in ok, and when I see that the man of my dreams is nowhere to be found, I relax a bit.

Then I relax even more when I kick my boots across the room and drop my parka on the floor.

Only to tense up immediately when I hear a rough grunt from behind the slightly ajar bathroom door.

“Ronny?” I creep closer as I call out his name. “Are you ok?”

Another rough grunt followed by a low moan, and damnit, my panties are wet again.

Which could be super inappropriate if he's in the bathroom trying to sew up a gaping wound or something.

I grimace because *what the hell is wrong with me? Seriously?*

“Ronny, are you...” Like a pervert, I peek through the cracked door, steam filling the shoebox-sized bathroom, the glass shower stall fogged up with a pile of rumped clothes on the floor in front of it.

I guess he's just showering. Which is why I should leave because that is not an image I need to have when I'm rather drunk and very lovesick.

But I keep looking then jump sky high when a hand slams against the glass, a big palm pressed flat against it as Ronny moans again and *oh my gods, what if he has a girl in the shower with him?*

That thought pisses me off, so I push the door open a little more, ready to light into his ass for doing exactly what he said he wouldn't until Ronny moans again, his outline becoming more visible and proves I was wrong cause he's alone.

And *wow*.

*Oh wow, wow, wow.*

It may be foggy and blurry but even that doesn't hide how big and gorgeous his muscles are, how beautiful Ronny's body really is and just when the fog in my brain starts to clear enough to tell me to get the hell out of the bathroom, I stop dead in my tracks.

"Nova..." he moans again, his fingers curling against the glass. "*Fuck.*"

*Oh.*

*Oh boy.*

*Oh my gods.*

My eyes are glued to the shower wall as Ronny grunts, as he shifts himself around, and sweet baby Jesus he is big *everywhere* because I can definitely make out the outline of his cock, the one he is currently palming with the hand not against the glass, and lords have mercy, it is *huge*.

"Fuck... Nova..."

My spine goes ramrod straight as a wicked blush consumes my entire body.

*Does he know I'm here?*

*Shit.*

Of course he does.

Ronny probably heard me call his name, heard me walk in. Hell, he's a goddamn wolf, he can probably smell me, especially since I can practically smell myself at this point because I am embarrassingly turned on by this entire situation.

But even the thought of him knowing I'm here isn't enough for me to tuck tail and run.

Nope, I'm just standing here watching Ronny—my best friend and man of my dreams—jerk off in the shower like it's totally acceptable.

“Goddamnit...” he grunts again through clenched teeth, his hand moving faster over his erection, his fingers trying to find purchase against the glass.

Ok, so maybe he doesn't know I'm here.

That's good.

If he doesn't know then I can sneak away without him ever knowing, and I can act like this didn't happen.

*Yeah, good plan.*

But then why the hell can't I look away?

Ronny inhales sharply and almost hisses. “Fuck yeah. Fuck, Nova, yes...”

*Wait, what?*

He's... Ronny is... *oh my gods.*

Is Ronny jerking off in the shower to... *me?*

“Yes, Peach, just like that...”

Well, unless he calls his right hand peach too, I think I've got my answer, and I have no idea what to do with that.

Ok, so that's a total lie.

I know exactly what my body is supposed to do, what it wants to do, but my head? Completely different story.

And the conflict is why I keep watching; why I watch Ronny's strokes become more urgent, watch his head drop back on his neck, watch his back arch a little until he snaps forward, his chin tucked to his chest while his hips roll into his hand.

“Nova... baby...” He moans. “Fuck...”

Then it happens.

I watch in awe, in the most inappropriately aroused state of lust ever, as Ronin cries out my name one more time and comes all over the glass wall, his whole beautiful body jerking as he pumps every last drop from his cock.

Oh my gods.

*Oh my gods!*

This did not just happen.

I did *not* just watch my best friend in the entire world jerk off in the shower.

Oh but I did, and judging by the slip and slide formerly known as my panties, I liked it way more than I should.

The spray of water that pelts the glass has me hauling ass out of the bathroom, though.

I quickly put the door back the way it was, practically run through the small room then nosedive into the bed, throw the covers over my head and pray to the gods I do not get busted.

Thankfully, I hear Ronny start to grumble to himself, the shower still running, and that must mean he just got in before I came back. He didn't do anything but play with his monster dick yet.

I know from years of waiting on him that he showers pretty quickly but just this once, I'm hoping he won't.

I need a minute, several really, to calm the hell down because if I don't and Ronny walks out of that bathroom, dressed or not, I'll maul him like a crazy woman.

He starts to sing a little, which is a good sign because it means he's just getting his hair wet, and it also means he probably has his AirPods in and didn't hear me at all.

He probably still can't hear me, has no clue I'm even here, and that thought has another taking root in my still drunk—I'm blaming the alcohol, yes—brain.

I peek out from under the comforter to make sure he's still in the bathroom and when I'm sure it's clear, my damn hand finds the waistband of my sweats, traveling under the cotton until my fingers ghost along the top of my panties.

I really shouldn't do this, it's just not right, but I'm so keyed up, so damn turned on I need some kind of outlet or else I'll make a total fool of myself when Ronny comes out.



My finger dips under the lace, sliding over my skin, tracing along the slick lips of my pussy, and holy mother of gods, I am so damn wet it's running down my thighs.

I sigh as I do it again and spread my arousal over my slit, my other hand sliding under my hoodie to cup my breast and pinch my nipple. I bite my lip so I don't moan out loud, twisting my nipple as my index finger finds my clit, the bundle of nerves so slick and swollen that one circle has my hips bucking off the bed.

Another has my pussy practically gushing and a third has the image of Ronny stroking his cock slamming to the forefront of my mind so damn fast I come instantly and harder than I ever have.

My orgasm explodes through every cell of my body, Ronny's name a silent scream on my tongue, my head thrown back into the pillow while my release takes hold in a never ending blast of foreign heat.

*Wow.*

*Just wow.*

I have never come that hard or that fast in my life, and now that I did, the guilt is immediately setting in.

I just watched my best friend jerk off in the shower.

I violated his privacy and tarnished his trust.

Then I ran away and masturbated to the image of him jerking off while he was still in the other room.

*I am going straight to The End.*

I'm a horrible friend, a horrible person, and I don't deserve to be anywhere near Ronny after doing what I just did.

Tears well in my eyes as guilt and lingering lust, love and hurt swirl in my head and my heart. I roll away from the bathroom, pull the blanket up over me completely, and fight off the sobs that want to escape my body.

Why do I have to be in love with a man I can never have? Why does it have to be this way? Is it always going to hurt this

bad? Am I going to be alone forever because I love Ronny so damn much I can't even imagine being with anyone else let alone look for my divined?

The shower cuts off and I tense, keeping my tears at bay the best I can while I pretend I'm asleep.

Gods, this hurts so bad and now I have no idea how I'll ever look at Ronny again.

But if that's the case, if I'm truly convinced we'll never be together, then why was he jerking off and saying my name?

And why do I want what just happened to happen again, except with both of us knowing exactly what's going on, both of us watching while we climax to thoughts of each other and what we could be?

And why does that stupid thought have a little hope blooming in a place it shouldn't?

Gods, I'm a fucking mess.

*I'm never drinking again.*

## CHAPTER 8

**OFFICIALLY FUCKED**

## RONNY



When Colt told the Baker siblings we'd tracked Kentworth to Canada I was a little confused because we hadn't actually tracked him beyond an hour or so past Great Falls. We just assumed he was heading that way, but I didn't question it at the time.

I don't make a habit of questioning my Alpha at all really, not about shit like this, and now that we're following what is clearly the scent of several toxic humans, two mystics that resemble my friends, and a few other smells Colt is reassuring me are shifter, I get why.

He didn't want to worry the Baker siblings further by telling them that the trail dried up for a stretch, that we haven't actually picked up on anything since the beginning of November after three weeks of zero activity from them—something that leads us to believe Kentworth had connections in Montana to people that would hide all of them. My Alpha didn't want to scare my friends into thinking something happened to their parents and I get that, but now we're traipsing through the woods about two hours from the motel trying to pick up any more signs that they came through this way toward the border.

We found a van abandoned and slightly secluded not far from Rudyard, the cargo vehicle seemingly veered off the road somewhere between there and Havre City County Airport with a blown out rear tire.

It was obvious the vehicle was stolen, probably from some sort of moving company judging by the way the logo on the

side was covered crudely with spray paint, and there was a fake Montana plate slapped on the back. Facts proved when Colt called Vok and had him run the VIN number and license plate to be sure.

An ideal form of transportation for multiple people, big enough to carry the roughly twelve to fifteen Kentworth salvaged, no windows save for the windshield, driver, and passenger doors. It was almost light-tight enough to keep the vampire safe but the mess of military blankets in the back indicate they needed a little more in the way of protection for Natalie since I doubt he was considerate enough to provide them for warmth.

Evidence discovered inside the van indicates that everyone is still accounted for, enough empty cans of beans and processed meat to keep those who need it sustained, a very few small blood droplets that prove the vampire was feeding from a male and female human. It isn't anywhere near what these people need to survive normally, especially after seeing how thin Lark was after being at the lab for years, but at least that psychotic doctor is making sure they stay alive for now. There's just no telling how long before we start finding bodies.

Between the elements and the lack of provisions, it'll only be a matter of time before Kentworth is forced to drop some extra baggage, and I pray to The Maker it's not Bella or Wes when the time comes.

Not that I'd prefer one of the other mystics over them, I don't want any of the prisoners on the run to succumb to an untimely end, but it's unrealistic to think we'll find a guard or the nurse first. The mad scientist needs them just as badly, if not more, than the rest, but I'll be damned if I go back to Great Falls with bad news to break to my friends.

Especially now that things are weirder than before.

With a sigh, I continue my search. Colt divided the surrounding fifteen miles between us, him heading north, me south, while we fan out from the van to find any kind of evidence of the direction they took.

I've been pretty focused and on track, but my mind keeps wandering to the way things have been the last two days.

Shit is better with Vega, almost normal with him and Sig. We haven't really discussed the way Veg freaked out but we've talked, even joked a little, and I feel like we're back to where we need to be to make this work, maybe even repair the crack in our bond.

At dinner the first night in Great Falls, Vega and I actually sat down with Colt and Zan, went over everything we've got on the lab in a super civil way while Sig and my aunts listened intently, asking questions or offering input wherever they could.

By the end of the debriefing, I felt like we'd come to an unspoken understanding, one that said we'd back burner our crap until this is sorted out and move on like it didn't happen in order to do that.

Which is how Veg and I ended up shooting the shit the way we did before over beers with my uncles.

It was a relief to get back some normalcy but it didn't last, not really.

I mean, Vega and I are still cool, Sig too, but Nova... that's another story entirely.

She skipped dinner the night we came into town, and when I got back to our room around one in the morning, Nova was passed the fuck out in bed, still curled up under the comforter the way she was when I left.

I was a little worried about her, anxious because we'd fought the last time we were together, but I didn't bother her and just let her sleep despite the violent need to wake Nova up, make sure she ate then ask what the hell happened between us hours before.

I thought we were ok, thought Nova and I wouldn't have any issues because she pulled me aside on the road and basically told me we were fine, but the way she seemed to snap over our room arrangements was super weird, especially for her.

My attitude didn't really help, I know that, but the last thing I needed was to share space with the girl I'm totally in love with while trying to keep my shit in order, and it pissed me off that Zan somehow managed to make that happen anyway.

So taking my frustration out on Nova was a dumb move but the way she responded, the way she almost yelled at me for being a jerk before she accused me of being some kind of slime ball like her ex, was a total shock.

If I didn't know better, I'd say she was jealous, but since I do, it simply meant Nova thinks I'm a piece of shit just like the rest of the guys she's had relationships with over the years.

Her track record isn't very good, and after the shit with Ricky, I'm sure her faith in anyone with a dick that isn't related to her is shot, but Nova knows me, knows I'm not like that, or at least I thought she did anyway. Which is why it hurt so goddamn badly to hear what she really thinks of me.

After I showered off the road trip from hell, I wanted to talk to her, wanted to apologize for being a bastard and reassure her that her thoughts were invalid, but Nova was gone, and for some reason, that only pissed me off.

So instead of finding her and working things out, I grabbed Sig and we went to the closest gym I could find in order to exercise the pissy mood out of me.

I lifted weights until my arms were jelly but that didn't help, so I moved right into beating the hell out of a punching bag for gods knows how long before I ran on the treadmill until I was ready to throw up.

Sig kept trying to get me to talk to him but I wasn't having it, so after he basically dragged me out of the gym, we went back to the motel and I got right in the shower again.

Of course I couldn't just shower though, not with Nova's intoxicating scent all over the goddamn room, and I wound up rubbing one out before I even washed my hair then felt so shitty over it that I stayed in there for at least another half hour.



After beating myself up, I got out, saw Nova crashed out in the bed, and just went straight to the restaurant two minutes down the road.

I did bring her back food, though. I didn't want my peach to go without, but she was still asleep and didn't wake up once until sometime the next morning.

Now, Nova isn't an early riser by nature, I know this for a fact, but she managed to get up, shower, and leave our room before I even started to stir at about six fifteen.

I found her on the patio by the office, hopeful once again we could talk but she was with Lark and Frankie, and judging by the dirty looks they gave me, that was not the time to chat.

Instead, I texted Colt to see if we could go for a run, if there was somewhere we could let our wolves out without being seen, and thankfully, he was two steps ahead of me because we did just that until about ten, then went back for breakfast and to game plan.

Nova wouldn't look at me, and barely responded to anything I said. Hell, she practically ignored everyone at the table, her brothers included, so I quit trying and focused on Colt's directives.

We did a quick weapons training with Vega and Sig, showed them how to use most of what we brought, the twins surprising me with the knowledge and skill they did have that was explained by *being raised in the south*.

After that, we touched base with the rest of the clan, Veg checked in with VivaDee, we worked through lunch on some sort of loose plan and then we regrouped with the females so the twins could ask Lark questions specifically about their parents.

That was hard. Really fucking hard.

I knew it was coming, knew they'd want to know everything about the way their mom and dad were treated and despite Lark's attempt to keep it vague, she wound up telling them everything from the restraints their parents had to wear to the way they were forced to have sex in front of Kentworth

and his team, and finally to the punishments they all endured when the sick son of a bitch was bored.

Sigma almost puked, Vega went so stoic I was worried he had a stroke, and Nova, gods, the way she cried had me seconds away from flying off the handle completely.

She still wouldn't talk to me, though, wouldn't even lift her eyes my way, and Frankie wound up holding her while Nova completely fell apart, while she totally lost any semblance of control she'd had up until that point.

It fucking broke my heart to witness that, and not being able to do a damn thing about it, but something else broke when we fought and I'm just going to have to accept that it can't be fixed.

And when dinner was done, the dinner we ate in Colt and Lark's room so we could talk, I let my girl and her brothers go before my uncle pulled me aside and asked me to come with him to see what we could find at the last known whereabouts of Kentworth's group.

I fucking jumped at that shit so fast it rendered him speechless, and when Colt pressed for details, asked why I didn't put up a fight in order to stay with Nova a little longer, I just shrugged him off, went to my room—which was once again empty—and packed a bag before I sat in his truck and waited for Colt to do the same.

Since it was just the two of us and my uncle is basically like another father to me, he tried to get me to open up while we drove the hour out of town but I didn't say a word because I didn't want to, and honestly, I have no idea what to say.

Nova is the one avoiding me, she's the one who initiated this weird new shift in our relationship, and even though I know we fought, I don't understand why.

I wanted to make shit right with her, didn't want to lose my best friend, but Nova doesn't seem to be on the same page anymore so there wasn't really shit to say about any of it.

Hence why I'm beating myself up, pissed off and sad while I search my grid for any trace of that bastard who seems

to make everyone miserable despite how indirect it may be.

He fucked with my aunt, fucked with my best friends' parents, and now he's fucking with my relationships, and you can bet your ass Kentworth is going to pay for that shit and then some.

*"Over here."*

I look up at the sound of Colt's voice in my head. *"You got something?"*

*"Yeah, and it ain't pretty. I need your nose, Beta."*

I turn and start toward his scent, following it for about twenty five minutes until I find my uncle crouched down in the snow, his hand pawing at something in front of him.

"What you got?"

He glances at me over his shoulder then nods toward the ground. "An ear."

My brows lift as I step closer.

Sure as shit, there's a fucking pierced ear sitting on the ground, a small pool of blood and short trail leading away from it.

*Gross.*

"Need you to scent the origin."

I frown. "Why can't you?" Colt's curse means he's able to scent other shifters, vampires, anything really, so him asking me is weird as fuck.

"I'm not familiar enough with what any of the Bakers smell like." He looks up and frowns. "This doesn't belong to one of the shifters or Natalie, and I can't verify it doesn't belong to..."

*Right.*

Bella and Wes share traits with their kids, genetic markers in their scent that I'd be able to pick up on, and since sorcerers and banshees don't have a distinct smell identifying them as

such, it's the only way to know this doesn't belong to either of them.

*It's easy to hide when you smell almost human.*

I crouch on my haunches next to him, pull a glove and makeshift evidence bag from my pocket, then carefully pick up the ear.

It's definitely female, the size alone supports that, and when I hold it a little closer but not too close to my face, I inhale a breath and cross my fingers.

"It's not theirs." I sigh, relieved it's true. "It doesn't belong to either of the Bakers but it's female."

Colt nods. "I got that, too, just wanted to be sure it wasn't Bella."

"It's not. Scent is totally different from the twins or Nova."

"Good." He watches me drop the ear in the bag and seal it before he takes the plastic and shoves it in the pocket of his coat. "We need to head that way." Colt nods further north. "This shit was torn off, and if it means there was some sort of scuffle, then we may find more."

I get to my feet and snap off the glove. "Hard to tell but I'd say that has been here a couple days. Probably close to when we got back to Ashland."

"Yeah, probably four days, max." He takes a few pictures of the blood. "They still have a bit of a head start on us but at least it's something we can track."

We start in the direction of the trail, the direction the droplets lead, at least ten feet between us while we move along the grid in silence.

This shit is so fucked up.

It was one thing when we stormed the lab, broke in and got a good look at the way those people—my aunt—had been living and all the twisted shit going on in there, but this... this is just as bad, if not worse, because we don't have a solid location.

Too many unknowns still, and the fact that our only lead is a goddamn human ear makes me sick to my stomach.

My stomach that flips and churns almost forty minutes later when I hit a patch of trees, the cluster hardly able to hide the purplish-blue bare feet sticking out from behind the biggest one.

“Colt!” I bellow as I start running. “I got something.”

A few seconds later, I come to a screeching halt at the base of a big ass pine tree, the color completely draining from my face at what I see.

Two bodies, both male, one partially covering the other in a half-assed attempt to hide them.

There’s a thick trail of blood and drag marks, footprints that go back to an area several feet away where two larger pools of deep red stain the snow.

It’s easy to tell that’s where these two were killed, that they obviously fought before they died and were dragged over to the pines in order to be disposed of.

And as much as I want to, I don’t check the bodies, don’t touch anything at all because they are clearly dead, but despite my instincts that want to be sure, I know we need to document this and look around before we do anything.

“Fuck,” Colt grunts as he jogs up to me. “Motherfucker.”

I nod cause yeah, that about sums it up.

“Gods, this is bad.” He pulls out his phone and starts taking more pictures with a scowl. “You get a look at their faces?”

“No.” I shake my head and step closer, my eyes bouncing around the scene. “Can’t see them with the way they’re positioned.”

Colt continues documenting, shooting from a distance, from all angles before he closes in and takes a few tighter shots of the bodies themselves.

He sighs and shakes his head. “Such a fucking waste of life.”

“Yeah, well, we know Kentworth doesn’t value anyone’s but his own anyway.” Putting on another pair of gloves, I glance at my uncle. “You want me to...”

Colt nods. “We need to confirm who they are, get IDs if not, document cause of death. You ok with that?”

“No,” I mumble and carefully step toward what is clearly a guard based on his uniform. “It’s gotta be done, but I’ll never be ok with this shit.”

I square my stance, plant my feet firmly then bend at the waist in order to get a hold on the guard. Between the blood and snow, the top body is basically frozen to the bottom and it takes me several tries to pry them apart without doing any damage, and a deafening pop echoes when I do.

I flip him on his back so they’re side by side, Colt photographing all of it, then step back for a second so he can get closer.

Definitely one of Kentworth’s guards, and Roger Burgess, the puma shifter.

*Thank fuck it’s not Wes.*

Colt begins praying, the words chanted quietly and reverently in our native tongue as he asks The Maker and the universe to protect Roger, to help him find his way to The After safely. He thanks the shifter for his sacrifice, thanks him for giving us a sign, a way to find them and hopefully the others, praising him for his bravery and strength in the time of such great pain. My uncle continues with the prayers of the dead, of warriors fallen, and promises a proper burial so his soul can be laid to rest then asks for forgiveness over how we weren’t able to help him, as well as the need to document this in order to find the others.

While I listen, my eyes scan the bodies, taking in every detail I’ve been trained to find.

The guard was definitely attacked, his throat slit crudely, the wound jagged and gaping. His stomach is torn open too,

guts exposed through another jagged hole, and there's a look of terror frozen on his evil face.

Roger seems relatively unscathed, all considering.

If he was wearing a coat and boots, they're long gone, but the tattered scrubs prove he wasn't hurt prior to death, a single bullet wound to the temple the obvious cause.

I step a little closer, trying to avoid tampering with anything or blocking Colt's shots, but it looks like Roger partially shifted, his hands a bit more animalistic, claws sharp and protruding from his fingers; palms and forearms covered in fur and blood.

"Looks like Roger finally had enough," Colt says as he walks around the opposite side of the bodies. "I'd put money on the marks on the guard matching those claws."

I nod. "Seems to be pretty cut and dry."

"Tell me what happened."

Ever since I was a pup, Colt has done this. He has taught me damn near everything I know in terms of hunting and tracking, sizing up a scene, piecing together details to get the entire story and since we've been doing this shit over the lab, he's honed my skills into something that would rival most forensic scientists and profilers.

I look them over again and notice a little blood around Roger's mouth and for some reason, that clicks everything into place.

"They were trying to find somewhere to go after the van broke down, somewhere to hide until they figured out what was next." I start walking back the way we came a bit, my stare analytical and searching for proof of my theory. "Since the tire blew, the van probably lost control which is how they wound up so far off the road, and it most likely shook everyone pretty good. They probably had to wait for nightfall before they could move, needed to be sure Natalie could travel." I stare out into the woods, staring in the direction of the van, and the ear. "Because it was dark and everyone was most likely scared, Roger took advantage and tried to either

make a run for it or cause a distraction by getting close to the nurse, maybe by faking an injury or something before she was in range then took her ear. He ran then, ran while Kentworth looked after the nurse then had a couple guards go after him.”

“So where are their tracks?” Colt steps next to me and waits silently.

“The other guards covered them. The snow was coming down still so they covered the tracks repeatedly then relied on the fresh layer to hide the rest.”

“And what about the ear?”

I shake my head. “Couldn’t find it. Too dark, too panicked, too much commotion. Probably figured the animals would get it before anyone else found it.” I turn back to the bodies as my brow furrows. “Roger took off in this direction, ran until he couldn’t and when that guard caught up to him, they fought. Since he still has his collar on, he couldn’t shift all the way but he tried and that’s how he killed the son of a bitch. They fought over there”—I point toward the bigger areas of blood—“Roger managed to take him down before the others caught up, and when they did, he was probably still so high on adrenaline he didn’t notice them.”

Colt nods with a grunt. “The kill shot?”

“Close range but not point blank. Most likely a poison bullet to the brain in order to drop a shifter in that state.”

“We’ll get Zan to confirm.” He motions to where I’m staring, where my gut says we need to go. “What next?”

With a sigh, my eyes follow the drag marks back to the bodies. “The others dumped them here in order to hide them, probably the guards as well as Cory and Wes. Forced them to take Roger’s boots and coat, most likely the guards coat too. I’d be willing to bet one of the mystics left their fellow prisoner’s feet exposed for someone to find him.”

“Agreed.” Colt nods. “After that?”

“They had to get out of here, had to find somewhere to hide, and get the nurse tended to.” I frown as I zero in on the drag marks again. “They were running out of time.”



“Which is why they didn’t cover any of this up,” my uncle grunts then almost growls. “Too close to sun up.”

“*Fuck.*” I take off in a dead run, following my gut as I head further north, praying I’m wrong while somehow knowing I’m right.

And not even fifteen minutes later, I prove I am.

Natalie Van Dyke’s body is slumped against another tree, her skin charred where it isn’t almost blue, a bullet hole right between her eyes.

*Goddamnit.*

“At least they had the decency to put her out of her misery before the sun took her completely,” Colt definitely growls. “Such a goddamn waste.”

I just nod.

There are no words.

None.

More death and destruction caused by one man who still has a leg up on us.

He’ll get his though, Kentworth will fucking get his and I will personally make sure he suffers every step of the way.

I leave Colt to take pictures of Natalie, photographing everything between her and the others, my head swimming with so much rage, so much anger that I barely make it back to his truck in a coherent state.

When I return with the Dodge, Colt has Roger and Natalie laid side by side, the two of them looking rather serene all considering, and he’s already taken care of the guard.

Something I’m glad I missed because even though he deserved it, I didn’t need to see my uncle dismember that asshole and scatter his body in order to prevent his soul from ever finding peace. He deserves worse but that’ll do for now.

I drop the tailgate and take out a few tarps, several wool blankets and some rope. One tarp gets spread out in the bed of the truck, and two more laid out on the ground next to Roger

and Natalie. A blanket goes down next, then together, we place their bodies in the center of each, carefully wrapping them in the blankets the way our ancestors would with those they lost, Colt praying the entire time.

Once the blankets are secure, we repeat with the tarps, tie them tight before loading the bodies into the bed of Colt's truck and securing the final tarp around both of them.

He secures them with bungee cords while I pull out the cover to make sure no one can see what we're transporting, trying to make sure they travel with as much respect and care we can provide and after we're done, Colt and I pile in completely silent, and make the drive back to Great Falls with a heaviness that is almost consuming.

*It feels like we failed.*

Feels like we aren't doing anything to help, and the trail of dead is like a slap in the face at this point.

So far Lark is the only one to successfully escape Kentworth's clutches, her and Chumani's pup, and knowing the few remaining survivors went from six to four in such a short period of time makes it that much harder to believe we'll be successful at all.

And with Christmas a little over a week away—an unspoken deadline I've given myself to bring Bella and Wes home for my friends—time is running out.

The dragons will be home, Colt and Zan will want to go back then too even if we haven't found anything, even if it's just for two days, and I'm not sure I'll be able to join them if that's the case.

Despite our mission, I know my uncles will all want to be home, what with the million babies running around, their mates and families to celebrate with.

Frankie and Zan are supposed to be able to bring Chet home from the clinic by then too, Cora acting as his NICU doctor while Henrich flies back periodically to check on his amazing progress.

I know they all want to find Kentworth and the others, end this madness before it becomes a threat again, but they also value family above everything else and the holidays are no exception.

I get that, I do, but if we haven't found Wes and Bella by then I won't be joining in the festivities.

Being with family for the holidays is something everyone should have, and if my friends don't, then I'm gonna make damn sure I'm helping them look until they do.

Besides, my uncles all have too much to lose if this shit goes south.

Mates and babies, lives they've barely just begun and to be honest if anything happened to them while we hunt for that sadistic bastard I'd never be able to forgive myself. And that means it'll be up to me to make sure they all go home while I keep searching with my friends.

Firm in my new plan, the one where I make my uncles go home by the middle of next week if we still haven't found shit, I take a deep breath and shift gears just as we get off the exit to our motel.

“What are we gonna do with the bodies?”

Colt twists the steering wheel in his hands as his eyes narrow on the road ahead. “Gonna have Zan and Frankie take them back to Ashland.”

*Perfect.*

“You gonna go with?”

He gives me the side eye. “Wasn't planning on it.”

“Won't they need your truck?” *Damn stubborn Alpha wolf.*

“We can switch. Zan can drive my truck back to Oregon, I'll keep his here until we go back for Christmas, then Lark and I will bring ours back if we need to.”

It's like the fucker knew what I was thinking.

Probably did for all I know.

*Whatever.*

I'll convince him to let my best friends and I keep looking when and if the time comes, no use arguing over it now.

“Zan gonna do the burial?”

Colt nods. “I texted him before we left. He and Cora will take care of the fallen properly, just like the others, and make sure they're laid to rest with everyone else we took from the lab.”

“Good.” I nod as the motel comes into view. “I don't want Nova to see them.”

My uncle just arches a brow.

And I sigh like my reasoning should be obvious because it fucking is. “She doesn't need to worry about her parents and something happening to them too. I don't want to scare her.”

“That might not happen, Ronin.” He nods out the windshield as we park and when I look, my entire body tenses.

It's a fucking welcoming committee.

All six of them are standing in front of our rooms, anxious looks on most of their faces, Zan looking a touch sad as he holds both Lark and Frankie.

*Way to keep shit subtle.*

And as if this wasn't enough of a spectacle, the second my door is open, Nova rushes the truck, runs right past me to the bed and tries to open the tailgate.

“Show me!” she yells. “Show me it's not them!”

*Goddamnit.*

They must have been together when Colt texted, and knowing my girl the way I do, she's not gonna be satisfied until she has proof that we didn't just bring back her parents' bodies.

“Nova,” I grunt as I slam the tailgate closed. “Nova, Peach, it's not them.”

“Bullshit!” She lunges at the truck again. “Show me it’s not them. Show me right the hell now!”

In the blink of an eye, I have her in my arms, her small form fighting my much bigger one. Nova kicks and struggles, pounds her fists against my chest, pleads and begs for us to show her what she feels she needs to see.

But I hold her harder and bury my face against her neck as I whisper, “Nova, baby it’s not them. I swear to gods, it is not them.”

“Ronny...” Nova sobs, her arms tightening around my neck. “Ronny... my parents... I need to...”

“You don’t, baby. You don’t need to see that. Just trust me. I wouldn’t lie to you, not now, not ever, so trust me when I say it is not your parents in the bed of that truck.”

She continues to cry but stops fighting me, stops trying to get into the bed, and after a few minutes of stroking her spun gold hair and whispering soothing words into the silky strands, I press a kiss to her temple and reluctantly pass her off to Vega.

“She should stay with you guys tonight.” *Gods, this is killing me.* Her pain, her fear, her worry. I feel them just like they were my own and it is fucking destroying me from the inside out. “Don’t leave her alone, make sure one of you is with her at all times.”

Veg gives me a grateful nod as Nova clings to him, Sigma wrapping me in an unexpected hug. “We’ve got Queen Nova,” he says low in my ear. “But who’s got you?”

I squeeze him a bit then let go and force a smile. “Not my first rodeo, Sig. I’ll be ok.”

He searches my eyes and calls my bullshit with one look. “Go shower. Get some rest. I’ve got the spare key to your room, I’ll come check on you in a while.”

After watching the Baker siblings go into the twins room, I run through the plan with my aunts and uncles, confirming that Frankie and Zan will head out tomorrow morning sometime

after breakfast since the best place for the bodies right now is exactly where they are.

I offer to help get things moved around, to help them switch trucks or load up but Lark refuses, sending me to my room to do exactly what Sig said I should and when I come out from the longest, hottest shower I've ever taken, I find Vega sitting on my bed waiting.

“Nova is a mess.”

*Fuck.*

With a sigh, I grab my sweats and pull them on under my towel then use it to dry my hair. “I didn't want her to know.”

He nods. “Neither did we. The girls were out when Colt texted, but as soon as they got back, Nova knew something was up.”

“So she pestered until you told her what that was.”

“Yep.” Vega smiles a bit but it's sad. “I knew she'd want proof, though.”

“You and me both.”

“It's pretty bad then?”

I nod and pull on a t-shirt. “I don't want her to see them. They were out in the cold for days, died in pretty gruesome ways. Nova doesn't need to be exposed to that.”

“She won't be satisfied until she knows for sure it's not Mama and Daddy.”

“Not happening, Vega.” He lifts a brow and I grunt, then scrub a hand over my hair. “Colt has pictures. He can show her tomorrow.”

Vega crosses his arms against his chest and looks at me like I'm a dumbass. “Won't be enough.”

“Well, I don't want her getting up close and personal with dead bodies, ok? You guys have already been through enough, and that will only traumatize her further.”

“It traumatize you?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

My friend shrugs. “You said this wasn’t your first rodeo, can’t ride without getting thrown on occasion.”

I chuckle at his stupid metaphor. “The shit I’ve seen plays over and over in my nightmares, man, but it doesn’t change what I have to do, what I need to do, in order to see this through.”

“Maybe it’s the same for Nova?”

Shaking my head, I grab my phone and charger. “This isn’t some book, Veg. It’s not some story painted in words to evoke emotion. It’s real life and that shit can scar you.”

“I get that but maybe Nova needs to see for herself that it’s not our parents in order to get through this shit. It’s been hard on all of us but Nova hasn’t allowed herself to process. Maybe if she saw for herself that it’s not Mama and Daddy she can start to do that. She’s a lot stronger than you think.”

“I know.” I blow out a ragged breath and drop my shoulders with a frown. “I’m just trying to protect her.”

Vega gets to his feet and claps a hand on my shoulder. “We can hash this out later, but right now, the queen has requested your appearance in court.”

“What?” My frown has to be deeper than the ocean. “Nova hasn’t wanted anything to do with me since we got here.”

“Well, she’s asking for you now. Just come over and sit with her while Sig and I take Zan’s truck to get dinner. We youngins are on our own tonight.”

Which makes total sense.

This shit takes a serious toll on my aunts and uncles, it did last time and this time won’t be any different, I’m sure.

Which is why I relent. “I’ll sit with her but I’m whooped. Gonna hit the sack as soon as you guys get back.”

Vega just grins and throws my boots at me. “What?”

“Nothing.” The stupid look on his face grows. “Sig’s already in your truck so hustle.”

As we leave my room, I see that Sigma is in fact sitting in the driver's seat of Zan's truck, so I flip him the bird, take Vega's key and let myself into their room.

Only to have all the air whoosh from my lungs on a painful sigh.

"Oh, Peach." My words are thick on my tongue as I look at my girl; glasses off, eyes puffy and red, her cheeks tear stained. She's wearing my hoodie, something I didn't notice before, the collar pulled up to her chin, resting just below her quivering lip. "Nova—"

"Will you come lay with me?" Her eyes search mine as well with her never ending tears. "Please, Ronny? Please, come hold me, and make me feel better like always?"

My heart cracks wide open, splits apart and drops to the floor.

I can't say no to her, never have been able to, and especially when Nova is so upset, so clearly shook right down to her bones.

I nod and kick off my boots. "Yeah, Peach, I can do that." Two steps later and I'm climbing onto the bed, my head a disaster while my body operates on autopilot.

As soon as I'm on my side, Nova slides down the mattress, rolls to face me and burrows her way against my body, her lips dangerously close to my now erratic pulse pounding in my neck.

Her fingers dig into the front of my shirt, clutching the fabric tightly as she shoves her knee between mine, forcing my thigh over her hips while she tangles our legs.

Any other time and I wouldn't be able to get through this without some super inappropriate involvement from my dick but right now... right now it's different, and I just need to be there for my best friend.

Which is exactly why I wrap my arms around her as tightly as I can, pull us as close as possible before pressing my lips to the crown of her hair.



“I’ve got you, Peach.” I kiss her head and rest my chin there. “I’ve got you.” And just when I feel her relax a smidge, Nova knocks all the remaining air right out of my lungs.

“Just promise you won’t ever let me go, ok?” she whispers against my throat. “Never let me go. Please, Ronin.”

I swallow hard as I hold her harder. “I promise, Peach. I promise.” *And fuck if I don’t mean that more than any other words I’ve ever said out loud.*

## CHAPTER 9

# SHOWTIME

## NOVA



“No. No way. Absolutely not. Hell no.”

I chew my cheek to keep from giggling as I watch Ronny pace at the end of the bed, attempting to scowl but it’s useless because he’s so damn cute. “Why not?”

He stops and turns toward me with his fingers buried in his hair. “You know exactly why not.” Ronny aggressively pulls his hands free, his wild curls almost standing straight off his head. “You asked, I answered, it’s not happening.”

We’ve been doing this for about an hour now and have gotten absolutely nowhere.

Thankfully, the horrible events of last night helped me get past the inability to look at Ronny without the image from the other day of him in the shower flying directly to the forefront of my mind, and after he pulled up to the motel with Colt and a couple of dead bodies, I wanted nothing more than to go to him. I needed to be near him, to have him hold me and make me feel better the way his presence always does.

We conked out shortly after Ronny got in bed with me and slept right through until this morning, didn’t even get up when the twins came back with dinner or when they switched rooms with us—something I didn’t actually know until I read Siggy’s text a while ago.

I woke up before Ronin did but I didn’t move out of his arms, didn’t do anything but stare at him like a total creep while he slept, and that’s when an idea popped into my head.

Very carefully so I didn't wake him, I extracted myself from Ronny's protective embrace, peed like a woman who'd never had the chance to do it before, grabbed my phone and shot Lark a text to run my idea past her.

She thought it was great, thought it was the best way to get new information at this point, and when she asked Colt and Zan, they apparently agreed. Which is also why the demon and his amazing mate haven't left yet.

"And who made you the boss of me?" I cross my arms and purse my lips, looking around the room for the unknown being who passed me off to my best friend. "I must have missed the memo stating Ronin Abraham Caldwell was now in charge of making decisions for me."

Ronny frowns and damn him, I want to kiss it off his face. Nice to know I went from never wanting to look at him again to right back to wanting to jump his bones every time we're alone.

*I'm such a mess.*

"I'm not making decisions for you, Peach, I'm just trying to protect you." With an adorably defeated sigh, he plops down on the end of the bed. "Explain it to me again."

And I just roll my eyes. "Is thirty eight your lucky number? Is that when stuff finally makes sense to you?"

Now he's scowling and hell, I want to kiss that too. "I'm just struggling to figure out how putting you face to face with a corpse is a good idea."

"Like I said before." I cross my legs pretzel style and push my glasses up my nose. "I am a shadow sorceress. Basically I have a major in anything to do with shadows and a minor in lite necromancy. I don't really know how deep that part of my ability runs but I accidentally kinda sorta resurrected my friend's grandma at her funeral, and Mama was just starting to help me understand how I did it before she was taken."

"Right. I got all that. You're a badass sorceress with the coolest superpowers." *Whoo Lordy that smile, panty melting and full of pride.* "What I don't get is why you want to put

yourself in a situation to have to see, let alone touch, the corpse of one of Kentworth's victims. They aren't pretty, Nova, and the last thing I want is for that sort of image to give you nightmares or make you panic over your parents."

*Gah, so sweet and swoony.*

A little weird that I think this conversation is worthy of such adjectives all considering, but still, Ronny nails the sweet and swoony while still being a sexy protective alpha-hole.

Which officially makes me a lost cause.

Divined what?

Fated mate who?

I'm good, I'll just live my life hopelessly in love with this man, thanks.

"That's just it, though. If I try to talk to one of the... one of the passed on, maybe I can get them to tell me where they were going, what Kentworth's plan was, maybe confirm that Mama and Daddy are still ok. It could really help."

Ronny huffs and messes with his hair again. "We'll find them no matter what, though, Nova. I promise you, we will find your parents, but I don't want it to be at the expense of your mental health. This kind of stuff..." He trails off as a slightly tortured look crosses his so handsome face. "It sticks with you, Peach. Especially when you have a personal connection and know more than anyone should about what that bastard is capable of. It's not good for anyone but it could be really bad for you."

"I appreciate that." I sigh and scoot a little closer so I can look him in the eye. "I appreciate it so much but I can do this, Ronny. It's not like I knew either of those poor souls personally, and while I feel horrible about what happened to them, I can be objective." *Maybe. Probably?* I honestly don't know. "I can use what my mama taught me and focus on one thing in particular, the one thing I need to do without making a bigger mess of things, and hopefully get some much needed information."

He huffs again and this time I let my smile show because I'm pretty sure this incredible man is about to cave.

“What you and Colt did, everything you and your family has done, is exactly how we've gotten this far already but maybe now it's time to let us help you, too. Maybe it's your turn to lean on someone else for a change, let other people support you in order to get to the end goal we are desperately trying to attain.”

“Yeah, but—”

I place my hand on his knee, give it a squeeze and try to ignore the way everything in me tingles from the contact. “I can do this, so let me. Let me do this, let me help you and my parents. It's one of the few ways I can contribute and I would really like to try.”

Ronny sighs again, covers my hand with his and wow, just wow. “What can happen if this goes wrong?”

“I'm not really sure.”

“I don't want you to get hurt.” He turns my hand over in his and laces our fingers real tight. “I would never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

Ronny isn't looking at my face, but his eyes are fixed on our hands as he flexes his fingers, as his thumb smoothes back and forth over mine.

It makes my heart swell with hope, a misplaced hope, that maybe he sees me as something more but I know better, or at least I should. One thing I've learned about Ronin Caldwell is the fact that he's a very affectionate person and this could simply mean he's holding my hand to comfort me, to give me strength as a friend, but it somehow feels... different. This feels like so much more.

I shake my head with a smile as he finally lifts his eyes to mine. “The worst that could happen would be a complete resurrection. I'm not going to try to do that, I just want to talk to one of them without bringing them completely back but worst case I do, and we unfortunately have to put them out of their misery again.”

“I want to talk to your brothers first.” Ronny gives my hand one final squeeze then gets to his feet. “I want to make sure Vega and Sig know what’s going on and don’t have any concerns of their own over you doing this.”

“You’ll let me try?” I ask with way too much excitement. “You’ll let me help and see if this gets us anywhere?”

Ronny nods and shoots me an adorable lopsided grin. “I can’t say no to you, Peach. Never been able to, so why start now?”

I clap my hands and squeal as I bounce on the bed. “I promise this is going to be great, Ronny. You’ll see. I can be valuable; I can help!”

“You’re invaluable, Nova.” He pins me with those Caribbean blues, an almost stern look gracing Ronny’s face. “I have complete faith in you because you’re invaluable to me, but that’s also why I’m worried.”

*Oh, be still my silly little heart.*

“I can’t protect you from nightmares, though. Damn near everything else but if this gives you nightmares...”

I shake my head and give him the most serious look I can muster. “If I can walk in on Sig and his high school boyfriend having oral sex in a position he called the YMCA in the back room of Daddy’s body shop while one of his mechanics jerked off in the corner and watched, then I can handle whatever else is thrown my way.”

And now Ronny looks absolutely horrified. “Gross.”

“Yep.” I giggle. “And that’s pretty tame for Siggy, so...”

“Your brother is a special kind of fucked up, isn’t he?”

Now I laugh, laugh real hard. “He is but I love him just the same.” Then I frown a touch. “That position isn’t that bad though.”

Ronny shakes his head with a chuckle. “That’s not the fucked up part. It’s just weird that some dirty grease monkey was watching two high schoolers go at it, especially if it was at your dad’s shop during working hours.”



“Right.” I giggle again. “So you gonna ask them or do you want me to?”

My best friend scrubs a hand over his scruff, something that he’s let grow in more since we’ve been in Montana, and it definitely doesn’t help keep the drool in my mouth where it belongs. “I’ll talk to them. You go ahead and get changed, we’ll grab a bite to eat with everyone, then figure out where the hell we can go so you can do your thing. Don’t need an audience for this.”

“I actually can’t have an audience at all.” My glasses slip down my nose again as I get off the bed. “I was only able to do my thing with Mama around because it makes me nervous to have more eyes on me while I try.”

“So...” He nods and takes a step in my direction.

Butterflies the size of jumbo jets flutter in my belly, then dip a little lower to a place they absolutely shouldn’t. “Just me and you, if that’s ok.”

“Why not one of your brothers?” Another step toward me.

“They have... they have a hard time being around dead bodies.” I take a deep breath and look way up at my best friend. “That whole death omen thing.”

Ronny nods then reaches out, and oh my gods, maybe he’s going to kiss me. It’s probably not the ideal time since we’re talking about death and whatnot, but I really want him to kiss me. Like, I want him to kiss me more than I want my next lungful of air.

And when his fingertips ghost over my cheeks, my body sways a little toward his and my eyes try to flutter closed but I don’t let them. No, if Ronin is finally going to kiss me I want to see his face, see him every second of the way if he does.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, he gently takes hold of my glasses and lowers them before taking them off completely.

Ronny holds my specs between us, staring at me for the longest time as those butterflies go from excitement to straight

up anxiety until he gives me the most beautiful smile I have ever seen.

“You don’t really need these, do you?”

I shake my head and swallow down the emotions trying to bubble out of me. “Not for anything other than hiding behind.”

Ronny’s smile grows before he so gently caresses my cheek and runs his thumb under my right eye. “Don’t hide from me, Peach. I understand the need to keep certain things secret, but not with me, ok? No more hiding. I want to see all of you.”

My breath hitches as he leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead, my super weird eyes closing as I bask in the feel of his lips on my skin.

*I’m so gone for this man it’s almost worrisome.*

“I’ll go talk to the twins.” Ronny straightens up and smiles as he drops his hand from my face. “Get ready, do whatever you need to do, then we’ll talk to my uncles about how to make this happen.”

I just nod, smile, try not to cry from his sweet words, and watch Ronny step into his boots before walking out the door.

My divined is really going to have to work hard to win my heart, and he’s not going to have to win it from me. No, that unknown male is going to have to work his ass off to win my heart from my best friend because as it stands right now, I will never be able to love anyone the way I love Ronin Abraham Caldwell.

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A few hours later, Ronny and I are riding in Colt’s truck toward the most secluded place they could find without being too far from the motel.

Apparently it’s where Colt, Lark and Ronny have let their wolves run since staying in Great Falls, so if those big

beautiful beasts are able to go undetected there, we should be able to park and work some necromancy in private too.

I giggle at the thought, something that earns me a side eyed smirk from my sexy partner in crime. “Something funny?”

“Not really.” But I’m still giggling. “I mean, it shouldn’t be but this is all just too surreal. Who would have thought after over seven years of friendship we’d be driving to some remote location so I can speak to the dead with my best friend who turns into an absolutely gorgeous wolf?”

Ronny chuckles but I don’t miss the way his chest puffs just a bit. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Then he glances at me and sits a little taller. “You like my wolf?”

“Hell yes!” I shift around in my seat to face him with an excited smile. “Abe is so cool, Ronny. I’ve never seen anything like him before. His color, his eyes and shoot, he is just so big! You think maybe when I’m done you can let Abe out so I can see him again?”

“*Abe?*” He arches a brow and I blush right down to my bones.

“I... I sorta named your wolf.”

“You named him?”

I nod and chew my cheek. “That’s ok, right? Lark said your wolves don’t really have names or anything because they’re just a part of who you are, but she also explained they’re like a separate entity, another whole living being taking up space in your head.”

“They are.” Ronny smiles. “And he likes that you named him.” Then he snorts. “Says I should have done it years ago.”

I clap and bounce around like a weirdo. “So he’s ok with me calling him Abe? You’re ok with it?”

“Yeah, Peach, we like it.” He looks at me again before focusing on a hidden turn. “You know my grandfather’s name was Abraham?”

“Really?” *How did I not know this?* “So your middle name...”

He nods. “After him. I never got to meet my grandparents but my mom and Colt say I’m a lot like my grandfather, like Abraham Paddock, and I wear his name well. And my wolf.” My best friend smirks as he shakes his head. “*Abe* has memories of my grandfather’s wolf so he’s strutting around like king shit over the shared namesake.”

“He has memories of your granddaddy’s wolf?” My nose scrunches as i furrow my brow in confusion. “How does that work?”

Ronny chuckles. “Your guess is as good as mine, but apparently, it’s something all wolves have, memories of family members who have passed onto The After.”

“That’s awesome,” I whisper. “So cool. Does Abe remember everyone’s wolf or just your granddaddy?”

“Hard to say. He’s still young, I only answered the call a few years ago, so I’m still learning everything Abe is capable of.”

“That why Colt called him a puppy?”

Ronny scowls as we take a slight right into the woods. “Yeah. Asshole.”

“Oh stop.” I’m cracking up and I love being like this with him again. “Colt thinks so highly of you, he loves you so much you can see it on his face, and the pride he has when he looks at you or talks about you...” I lean back against the seat with a dreamy sigh. “Colt said you’re his Beta for a reason and I tend to believe that with my whole heart.”

Another puff of his chest has me laughing again. “My uncle is pretty much my hero but I’m no damn puppy.”

“If he considers Abe a puppy, I’d love to see what Colt’s definition of a mature wolf is.”

“Right?” Ronny grins. “My dad isn’t small, but his wolf isn’t as big as mine so honestly, Colt has some real screwed up standards if I’m a puppy and my dad isn’t.”

*Laughing right now feels so good.* “Do your wolves look alike at all?”

“Some. Not a whole lot because the Paddock genes are strong as fuck but my wolf is lighter like his and that’s cause we’re both dirty blonde.”

“And your eyes. That comes from the Caldwell side too.”

Ronny nods. “Yeah, but other than that I favor my mom’s side, which makes sense since she’s a Luna by birthright and Colt is obviously a super Alpha. Paddock DNA pretty much destroys all the rest.”

I giggle. “So your grandad was an Alpha too then? What about your grandmama?”

“She was a Guardian by birth but a Luna by mating. There was always the possibility that Mom or Colt could have been a Guardian too, but my grandpa’s swimmers had other plans.”

Now I’m laughing so hard I snort. “Gods, it doesn’t weird you out to talk about this sort of thing?”

“What? My grandfather’s exceptionally strong semen?” Ronny shrugs, looking totally unfazed. “Not at all. I’m proud of where I come from, proud of my lineage and the only way I’m here now is because my grandparents got it on almost two hundred years ago. Nothing weird about that.”

“My parents are going to love you.” I snort. “Because of our hybrid background, Mama has always been very open about this sort of thing, always wanted to make sure we knew everything that went into making us who we are. And my parents are super gross with a very active sex life for people that technically qualify for AARP benefits.”

Ronny smiles wide and shakes his head. “I just realized we haven’t really talked about our families much since we’ve been friends. Not in a deeper kind of way. How old are your mom and dad?”

“Secrets and all that.” I smile, a little sad I’m sure because he’s right. “Mama is eighty-nine and Daddy will be one-hundred-and-four in March. What about you? How old are your parents?”

“Both pushing two hundred.” Ronny rolls the truck to a stop in the middle of a cluster of pine trees. “Colt’s a little older.”

“Wow.” Then something occurs to me. “Are you really twenty-one?”

“Yeah.” He nods with a chuckle. “My parents had their pups a little later in life. Long story.”

“One you will definitely tell me while we’re traveling all over North America.”

“Sure, Peach. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but let’s get through this first, ok?”

With a deep breath, I nod and unbuckle then throw open my door.

We went over the plan at length during breakfast, the twins on board before Ronny even finished asking. Colt wanted Zan to come with, something about a demon being beneficial while talking to the dead, but I started to panic from the mere suggestion of it and my best friend said it had to be just us.

And that comment earned us a whole slew of strange looks as well as some snickering, but I ignored it.

Well, ok, I *tried* to ignore it but I swear everyone is being super weird when it comes to me and Ronny, and that shit isn’t helping me keep our relationship in perspective at all.

By the time I walk to the bed of the truck, Ronny already has the cover open, the tailgate down, and is crouched next to what are definitely bodies wrapped in a tarp.

His head is bowed next to the one on the left and though I don’t understand his words, I can hear them and they are beautiful, the old words whispered reverently as they roll from his tongue.

“You ready?” Ronny asks me after a few beats, his eyes bouncing around my face before they land on my glasses-less ones. “You sure you want to do this?”

I nod and take his outstretched hand, hoist myself up into the bed of the truck and squeeze in beside him. “I’m sure. I

want to help; I want to feel useful.”

“You’re more than that, Peach.” Ronny starts to untie the rope and peel back the tarp closest to us. “And just remember I’ve got you, ok? No matter what happens, no matter how this plays out, I’ve got you, I believe in you, and you are the most badass woman I know.”

Inside I’m swooning my ass off but I just snort. “I’ve met two of your aunts, Ronin, and if the rest are anything like them, then I probably rank about number twenty on your list of badass women.”

He stops what he’s doing and gives me a stern look. “No one, and I mean no one, outranks you, Nova. Never have, never will.”

Now would be the perfect opportunity to throw caution to the wind, wrap my arms around his neck and kiss the pants off Ronny, but considering we’re sitting in a truck next to two dead bodies, I won’t.

Nope, I’ll just pray for another chance to show my best friend how I really feel about him since he’s sending me all kinds of signals to finally fucking do just that.

Another day though.

*Hopefully.*

“You remember what I told you?” Ronny says after staring at what I’m pretty sure was my lips for too long.

*I do.*

I’m going to try to talk to Roger Burgess, the puma shifter who killed a guard and tried to escape.

He has a little blood around his mouth and a bullet wound in his temple, but there was no exit wound so he shouldn’t be too hard to look at.

And since they were frozen, the poor souls, neither one of them smell like days old death, and Roger will be blue but relatively serene and peaceful in appearance.

All things I’m very grateful for.

I give my best friend a nod and he starts to undo the tarp and blankets covering Roger's head, which is all he's going to uncover for multiple reasons.

My heart rate speeds up as I watch Ronny work, the muscle stopping abruptly when I'm finally face to face with this poor man who's life was cut far too short.

"You ok?" Ronny's voice is low, his mouth close to my ear. "We don't have to do this if..."

Shaking my head I lift my hands and take off my gloves. "I'm ok, it's just really sad."

He kisses my temple as he moves around so he's sitting behind me, my entire body wrapped up in Ronin's protective embrace but I can't take my eyes off of Roger.

He doesn't look any older than thirty, even though I know he was. His hair a sandy brown, face handsome with very symmetrical features, a strong and proud air about him even in death.

The blood around his mouth is minimal, almost looks like it was cleaned up a bit, and the wound on his temple is small, relatively clean as well, and not nearly as bad as I was expecting. What gets me is the part of his collar I can see. That big contraption looks heavy and painful, awkward and unpleasant to the max. I hate that this is what the end of his life looks like, what it was reduced to, but that's exactly why I'm going to do this. I'm going to make sure his death wasn't completely in vain.

"I'm Nova," I whisper as I lift my hands to his cheeks, my fingers trembling as I touch his icy skin. "I'm so sorry this happened to you but my friends and I, we're going to bring you justice, which is why I need your help." I'm not sure if talking to him before I've done anything is the way to go but it feels wrong, feels like I'm violating some sacred code if I don't. "We need your help so we can find the monster who did this to you, the man responsible for so many unnecessary deaths and immense pain." My hands move over his cheeks and his jaw, and once they settle over where Roger should have a steady pulse but doesn't, my palms start to itch. "I need



you to talk to me, Mr. Burgess. I need you to talk to me, tell me what you know, tell me how we can help so that you as well as the others can find peace.”

A few moments pass without any results, nothing but the strange sensation in my hands while they try to tap into the broken threads of this man’s faded life force.

I was afraid at first, scared of what could happen while I tried to do this, but the fact that nothing is happening at all has me getting frustrated.

So I focus all my energy, collect every ounce of my strength and close my eyes, then visualize what I want to do just like Mama taught me.

“Please, Mr. Burgess. Roger. Please talk to me, tell me what I need to know so we can help you.”

My hands continue to itch, the sensations growing into a cold burn, but still nothing happens and I remove them with an irritated huff.

“You got this, Peach,” Ronny whispers in my ear, his arms sliding around my waist. “I believe in you. You got this.”

With a firm nod, I put my hands back on the poor shifter’s neck, close my eyes and focus as hard as I can. “I need you to talk to me, Roger. Please. I need...”

My hands feel like I’m holding a brick of dry ice, the burn so cold it’s hot, the prickles igniting like static electricity times a million and when I’m about ready to pull them back out of fear, Roger’s mouth opens and emits a terrifying scream.

We both wince, but I don’t break contact and keep holding his neck, my thoughts directed solely at communication and nothing more. “Roger?”

“He is coming...” The shifter’s voice is eerie, strange, hollow. “He is coming... coming for the rest of you...”

I swallow hard. “Kentworth?”

“He is coming... he is chasing us... he will find us...”

“Who is Kentworth chasing, Roger?”

“Us... he is chasing us... we will never be free...”

My grip tightens and my resolve strengthens. “Who is he chasing? Who will never be free?”

Roger’s eyes flip open, his stare filmy and vacant. “Kentworth is chasing... people like us... dragons and demons... us...”

“Does he have people like us with him right now?”

“Bear... wolf... banshee... sorceress... us...”

*Oh thank the gods.* “Where is he taking them?”

“Far... running... hiding... chasing...”

“How far? Where are they going?”

“Hiding... Alberta... hiding...” Another scream rises from his lips, something so strange without the expression to accompany it but it’s ear piercing and terrifying. “The banshee screamed... silent scream... death awaits... it waits in the Great White North...”

My pulse is pounding in my ears. “Death waits for who, Roger? When did the banshee scream?”

“Death waits for us all... the banshee screamed thrice... death awaits... cannot run...”

He’s referring to his and Natalie’s deaths, the guard, and as sad as that makes me, I’m also relieved because it means everyone else is alive. Now I just need to figure out what he means is happening in Alberta.

“Where are they going? Where in Alberta?”

“Hell...”

A chill races up my spine as my eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

“They have a plan... try to outrun hell... cannot hide... must escape before it’s too late...”

“Who?” I grip his neck harder and lean forward. “Who has a plan to escape? What’s waiting in Alberta?”

“Death...” He screams again but before I can try to ask anymore questions, Roger’s body starts to shake, starts to convulse and move on its own.

“Nova,” Ronny whispers as he squeezes me. “I think it’s time to—”

“Where are they going?!” I cry. “Where is he taking my parents?!”

Roger keeps screaming, keeps struggling against the tarp, his eyes now unnaturally wide as he continues moving.

“Roger!”

Ronny’s arms leave my waist then cover mine right down to my hands where he grips tight. “Nova, baby, that’s enough. It’s time to let him rest.”

“No!” I squirm around and plant my palms against Roger’s neck. “No! It’s not time. He didn’t tell us anything. I need to know where my parents are! Roger!”

“Nova. Baby, that’s enough,” he whispers and pries my hands off the corpse that immediately stills over the loss. “That’s enough.”

My chest heaves, my hands ache.

Tears roll down my cheeks, my vision blurry but not so much I can’t see Roger return to a lifeless body once again.

Any longer and he would have been back completely, and I have no idea what would have happened if Ronny wouldn’t have stopped me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper through my tears. “I just—”

“You did great, baby.” My best friend wraps his arms around me, my hands still held by his. “You did so good, Nova. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“But I didn’t get anything useful.”

I feel him shake his head as he pulls me closer. “But you did. You found out where they’re going, confirmed the others are still safe and traveling with them, and it sounds like they

have a specific destination in mind. You did fucking fantastic, Nova.”

“But... but Mama and Daddy...”

“Shh.” Ronny presses a kiss to my temple, then another to the side of my neck. “They’re ok, Peach, and now we know where to look for them.” One more kiss to my neck. “Are you ok? You feel alright?”

I nod and lean back into his warmth. “I’m ok. A little tired and my hands hurt, but I’m ok.”

“Then let’s get you back.” In one quick move, Ronny scoops me up and gets to his feet, jumps from the bed of the truck and has me in the passenger seat before I can even blink. “I’ll get you settled at the room in that god awful flannel onesie, find your fuzziest socks and tuck you into bed with a piping hot cup of tea while I fill the others in on what happened. After that, I’ll pick up whatever food you want, order all the musicals on that dinky little TV then rub your hands until they don’t hurt anymore. How’s that sound?”

“Perfect.” I sigh because it does. This man knows me better than anyone else ever has and the fact that he’s not only accepted what I am but proud of it as well as willing to embrace the aftermath, gods I love him so damn much.

And that’s all I can think about when he shuts my door, while he tends to Roger then drives us back to the motel, my very cold hand wrapped in his much warmer one the entire ride.

It’s all I can think about when we get back to our room and Ronny does every single thing he said he would then tops it off by kicking my brothers out around midnight just so he can cuddle me into oblivion while he softly sings me to sleep.

Ronin Abraham Caldwell has officially sealed my fate, and I can’t find it in me to be worried about it anymore.

## CHAPTER 10

# WINGSPAN

## RONNY



“**O**h. Zan just sent me the link for the place he rented us.”

I glance in the rear view at Sig with a smirk. “GPS says we’re like, twenty minutes away. Wouldn’t it be easier to see it when we get there?”

He rolls his eyes then leans forward to hold his phone between me and Nova. “There’s an outdoor hot tub.”

“Oh, *fancy*.” She giggles, the sound making my chest all warm and fuzzy. “What else?”

Sig sticks his tongue out at me then eagerly scrolls through the link. “Outdoor hot tub and kitchen, huge wraparound deck. There’s a game room in the basement, which is completely finished by the way, an in-house gym, and oh my gods,” he shrieks. “There’s even an indoor pool!”

“This isn’t exactly a vacation,” I mumble while trying to navigate us through the never ending snow. “There’s a pretty serious reason we’ll be staying in Banff for gods knows how long.”

“I know,” Sig pouts. “Believe me, I *know*. Mama and Daddy are the priority for sure but Zan wanted us to be comfortable and have a little bit of fun since we’re gonna miss Christmas in Oregon.”

We are.

After Nova talked to Roger Burgess—something I will never not be amazed by, or proud as hell of—we modified our plan.

Zan and Frankie went back to Ashland while Colt, Vega, and I took a few days to see if we could pick up Kentworth's trail heading toward Alberta.

From what the puma shifter said, it sounded like there was some kind of secondary location he was trying to get to, so we laid some ground work and had Vok look deeper into the crazy doctor's connection to Canada.

Turns out, Kentworth has ties to Slave Lake, Alberta but his family hasn't been there in years despite the fact that there were several properties listed in their name.

Further research proved it was an ideal location for a second site: the population is less than ten thousand, it's secluded by mountains and trees, and it's right on a decent sized body of water in the middle of nowhere. So we figured that's where Kentworth is going.

Colt and Lark left a few days ago, took off toward home the same time we set out toward Banff, the resort town still seven hours from where we will most likely find the doctor but my uncle didn't want us close enough to get discovered.

Which is why he and Zan picked the place we'd be staying, the demon booking us a small house since we have no idea how long we'll be here, and apparently my lavish and loaded uncle went all out with the amenities.

"Let's see." Sig keeps scrolling, his green eyes glued to his phone. "Loaded basement and outdoor areas, fire pit in the backyard, privacy fence around the entire property. Large living room, family room, *oh* a library... three and a half baths, a chef's kitchen, three bedrooms, fireplaces galore, balcony upstairs. Whole home WiFi, flat screen TVs with premium channels, everything's furnished... shit, this is perfect!"

"Just don't get... wait, did you say *three* bedrooms?" I frown as my GPS tells me to turn left up ahead.

Sig nods, his eyes still on his screen. "Three bedrooms, each with an en-suite, fireplace, walk-in closet, fifty-six inch LED TVs, private outdoor space, king-sized bed." He pauses



for a minute. “Two bedrooms downstairs, the master upstairs. And wow, it has a jacuzzi tub big enough for four people, a rain shower for just as many, and another outdoor hot tub on the balcony.”

“Looks like you and Queen Nova get the master suite, Ron,” Vega grunts with a grin from behind me. “Should be a lot less cramped than that motel room.”

My eyes dart to his in the mirror. *Asshole.*

I don't know why everyone keeps sticking me with Nova, not that I mind all that much because she's my best friend, but I swear they're trying to drive me insane by doing it.

And knowing we'll be sharing a room with at least ten different places I would love nothing more than to fuck her in, this is going to be torture.

Seriously, the fantasies are already rolling through my head.

Rain shower up against the tile wall.

Hot tub with her straddling my lap, the fabric of her bikini pushed to the side while she rides me.

On the floor in front of the fireplace while I nail her from behind.

Laid out on the king-sized bed, her spun gold hair fanned around her while I eat her pussy like it's my last fucking meal.

The list goes on really, because it doesn't matter where or how, it just matters that it's Nova. *She's* the fantasy, so the setting is basically just background.

Which is exactly why we should not be sharing a room—again—but I'm not about to open my mouth and argue, not after what happened in Great Falls.

I do not want a repeat of that screwed up almost-fight we had, especially now that we're back to normal.

Better than normal, to be honest.

Maybe it's a bond formed in trauma or some shit, but ever since I took Nova to work her magic on the dearly departed,

things between us have been great, so good, damn near perfect, and if I was any other man I'd take the opportunity to make a move and deepen our relationship by taking things to the next level, but I can't.

Not when she means so much to me and the idea of ruining our friendship by trying to make it more when I know damn well we both have fated ones out there is too hard to even think about.

So sharing a room full of fantasy-inducing amenities is a bad idea.

I've already had one hell of a time keeping my hands to myself, trying to stay platonic while every inch of my body—along with my wolf—are basically screaming at me to make a move.

And the fact that Nova seems to be seeking comfort specifically from me, clinging to me anytime she gets upset or worried, well, yeah, that shit is making things so much worse.

Our hugs linger.

We hold hands almost constantly.

She insists on sitting right next to me whenever we're doing something, almost demands we sleep in the same bed, and makes sure we're touching in some way the entire time.

Nova has even taken a page from my book and started giving me small pecks to the cheek whenever we're close enough to do so.

I about died when she kissed my throat last night, the two of us curled up tight, her face buried in my neck while we drifted to sleep.

And I'm really not doing myself any favors by returning her sweet and innocent kisses with my own.

I've always been affectionate with everyone I care for, more so with my best friends, but the normally chaste lips to her hair or forehead have turned into slightly less chaste lips to her temple, forehead, and the side of her neck. And I'm obviously a glutton for punishment because I've also kissed

the goddamn delicious skin where her neck curves into her shoulder—the place where I’d mark her if she were mine.

If I don’t get myself under control there is no doubt in my mind I will act on every single one of those fantasies and more while we’re in Banff, most likely confess how fucking in love with her I am and suggest we be together until we can’t, and that would be a total disaster.

“So what’s the plan?” Veg interrupts my thoughts, thankfully. “Christmas is a few days away and Colt said to take it easy until then.”

I nod and turn onto a hidden driveway. “He suggested we set up a makeshift command center with all of our intel first, get the equipment Vok sent setup and running then have you three work on your skills before we try to enjoy Christmas Eve and Day.”

“Zan said the equipment should already be waiting,” Sig chirps from the back. Always with *Zan said*. They aren’t going to act on any of the crazy sexual shit they’ve half joked about, my uncle is happily mated and probably swinging with my other uncle, but they were fast friends and I feel like Sig has a serious idol worship thing going with him. Whatever, though, it’s fine, even if it’s kind of annoying. “They sent all of the intel and computers, basically everything we’d need to set up shop.”

“I’ll get that going once we’re settled.” I need to make sure I put as much space between Nova and I whenever I can. I don’t want to neglect her, not at all, and especially while she’s dealing with so much emotional shit, but I don’t trust myself to be alone with her anymore. “Colt said he had the owner stock the place with food so we shouldn’t need to leave for a while, probably not until after Christmas.”

Sig leans further between us, his green eyes dancing as we pull up to a gate that’s sky high and sitting a ways out from a decent size cottage. “Wow. This place is awesome.”

“And it’s decorated!” Nova claps and leans into the windshield while I punch in the code. “Look at how pretty it

is! Garland and lights, and that wreath—just wow.” Her eyes dart to mine. “You think there’s a tree inside?”

I can’t help but grin as the gate slides open. “If Zan had them decorate the outside then I have no doubt the inside will match.”

“He said there’ll be presents too.” Sig smirks. “If I’d have known I’d be getting my very own sugar daddy, I woulda told y’all I’m a banshee way sooner.”

I roll my eyes as Vega grunts. “Quit calling him that.”

“I will not. Zan is sexy as hell and generous to boot. If I don’t call him my sugar daddy then what else should I call him?”

“Zan,” Veg deadpans. “Just like the rest of us.”

Nova giggles and shakes her head. “Whatever he is, he really didn’t need to do all this for us. It’s too much.”

“Hardly.” I smile as I throw open my door. “To be honest, I’m sure Colt had to talk Zan out of booking us a mansion. Christmas may not be something he’s used to but I know Zan wishes we were there just like everyone else and this is his way of making up for it. Don’t be shocked if ninety percent of the gifts are sex toys.”

The twins chuckle but Nova blushes then chews her cheek to fight a smile.

And now I’m *hoping* my uncle sent a year’s worth of vibrators and dildos just so I can make her blush over and over again.

*I am seriously so fucked.*

We unload the back of my truck then make our way up the steps, each of us *ooing* and *ahhing* over the stone structure, the huge porch, the beauty of our temporary home.

The look on Nova’s face is priceless as she peeks in the windows, the most breathtaking smile plastered on her gorgeous face. Something that gives me all kinds of ideas about the work I’m doing on my cabin back home, ways to

build onto the one room house that would make her smile like that when she sees it.

My renovations are in the beginning stages since I've only now just saved up enough to start, but I began chalking out where I wanted to knock down walls, started pulling out the counters, and taking things apart. I can't do a whole lot with the weather we've been having but I have a plan, and the money I'll be able to keep saving until spring will definitely help solidify my blueprints and make shit happen as soon as the snow quits.

And this cottage is *definitely* giving me ideas.

I could easily do the addition in stone, keeping the logs where they are since the one multipurpose room is hopefully going to become the entrance into my house, then lay stone on either side and have it wind all the way around.

I want to add a second floor with at least two bedrooms, maybe three, turn the downstairs into a living room, kitchen, and hopefully a library that can double as my office. Nothing real fancy but a studio space won't cut it forever, especially if I do find my mate in the next few years because I don't plan on waiting until I'm in my late one hundreds to have pups. Then again, I keep hoping those pups will be part sorceress so who's to say I'll ever need the extra space since I'm hung up on a female I can never have.

"Oh my gods," Nova whispers as I lock the door behind us, the four of us taking in the high ceilings, big windows and enormous fireplace. "This is beautiful."

It really is.

I'll give him credit. Zan outdid himself with this rental, that's for sure.

The living room is to the right, library to the left, both open and airy while maintaining a very cozy rustic vibe. There's another door just past the library, most likely the den, and just beyond the staircase in front of us you can see the kitchen and dining room, both of which are open as well, and

there's a hallway to the left that must lead to the downstairs bedrooms and family room.

Everything is done in deep, rich earth tones, the furniture incredibly over-sized and plush, soft thick rugs scattered over the hardwood floors, and it is all decorated like the inside of a Christmas edition of some Better Homes magazine, complete with an eight-foot-tall live tree next to the fireplace.

Zan definitely went all out, but I can't even pretend to be mad at it, not when my girl looks like she just hit the lottery and won a lifetime supply of magnolia oil.

"We've never stayed anywhere like this before," she whispers as she walks around, touching the fancy ornaments on the tree as she looks toward the fireplace. "This is amazing, and look!" Nova squeals as she points to the mantle. "Stockings with our names on them!"

I chuckle and shake my head.

*Yeah, this girl is going to be the end of me.*

"You think Santa will bring us more ammo and tracking devices?" Sig grins as he runs his hand along the back of the couch. "I asked for assless chaps but I probably won't need them while we're here."

Veg rolls his eyes as he hangs up his and his brothers coats in the closet. "Santa has had you on the naughty list since you could talk, doubt he's bringing you shit."

"You think we can still get deliveries out here?" Nova looks at me then hands Vega her coat. "I mean, obviously Zan was able to send stuff but I want to order gifts for you guys, maybe try to celebrate a little while we have the chance, and the only way to do that is Amazon."

"I'll ask." Cause I have every intention of ordering stuff for my friends too. This Christmas needs to be special since it's most likely going to be one they spend without their parents. "I'm sure we can figure it out."

After exploring downstairs, Nova heads to the kitchen to find something for dinner while the twins unload their shit in their bedrooms, and I take our bags upstairs.

And thank fuck she didn't come with me because our room is very literally the physical manifestation of several years of wet dreams about my best friend come to life.

There's a four post California king against one wall, huge picture windows with an outstanding view of the mountains on either side of it.

Across from that is a huge stone fireplace with a cozy loveseat and faux bearskin rug laid out in front of it.

The bathroom is all black marble, a deep jacuzzi tub that can definitely seat four, double sinks with vanity space and mirror. The rain shower doesn't have a curtain or door, just a half tile wall that sort of keeps some privacy, and a fucking bench that's hidden and basically screams *I'm here for your girl to grab onto when you bend her over and take her from behind!*

And Jesus, when I check out the balcony, the small private hot tub with outdoor wet bar, the entire thing totally secluded and seemingly soundproof, I groan.

It's like the upstairs was designed to be a sex suite or some shit, and now I'll be sharing it with the woman I'm totally in love with and have fantasized about for years.

I may end up with the world's worst case of blue balls by the end of this mission, and that's only if my dick doesn't just explode right off my body first.

After a while, Nova calls us for dinner, my gut rumbling when she presents us with fried chicken, homemade mashed potatoes, Brussel sprouts with bacon, and her mom's recipe for peach cobbler.

If I wasn't already head over heels for this girl, her cooking would seal the deal. She's a southern belle with a heart of gold, the nerdiest hobbies, smart as a whip, sexy as sin, and she can cook like a fucking champ.

Nova is the whole package.

The whole package that will make another male happy as hell one day.

I just need to get over the fact that it won't be me.

Once the meal is devoured, Sig clears the table and cleans up while Vega and I move the twenty or so boxes of equipment into the den and while he starts opening them, I run back upstairs to grab my laptop since it'll be the key to linking everything together.

Something I regret immediately when I walk blind into our room to grab my backpack from next to the door.

Nova is standing at the foot of the bed, furiously digging through her duffel bag, grumbling to herself while little beads of water roll from her dripping wet hair down the delicate curve of her spine over the fleshy globes of her delicious peach shaped ass, more glittering droplets cascading over the most glorious side boob before they slip over her ribs then the curve of those thick thighs.

Nova is rummaging through her clothes because she's freshly showered, smelling like everything I've ever wanted, and she is totally, completely naked.

*Fuck. Me.*

My backpack drops from my hand with a thud as I stare like a total pervert, my eyes glued to her body, and when she jumps and turns, Nova's hands fly to cover her chest and her pussy, her thighs clenched tight while she screams and tries to hide everything I'm dying to see.

“Ronny!” she squeals. “Jesus! What are you doing?!”

My fingers flex at my sides, my cock hard as stone, my eyes lasered in on her hands as if I'll somehow be able to see what's behind them.

I know it makes me a creep, makes me the worst kind of friend but I can't pull my stare away from her, can't pry it off of the most beautiful girl I've ever seen while I see more of her than I ever have before.

And fuck if I can form words right now, not any that should be said anyway, especially when Nova wiggles around to keep herself covered and I notice the tattoo on her left hip I didn't know she had.



It's musical notes.

Notes that scroll over her hip toward her lower abdomen, notes that turn into a couple dandelions, the kind when they're white and puffy, some of the seeds fanned out like they're blowing in the wind toward her right hip.

It's sexy as fuck.

*She* is sexy as fuck and if I don't get out of here in the next two seconds I will do something I won't ever be able to take back.

"Ronny?"

I blink a few times, my eyes traveling from the tattoo up the soft flesh of her stomach, the swell of her breasts where she has them hidden under her arm, until I connect with those incredible eyes, the shadows swirling and moving to a rhythm only I can see.

The second Nova's lip starts to quiver though, that's when I realize I fucked up.

I stared too long, let my love for this woman, let the fiery lust consume me and now I've violated her, objectified her in the worst possible way while making a complete jackass out of myself in the process.

I drop my eyes as soon as a tear rolls down her cheek, clear my throat and start backing toward the door. "Sorry... I—sorry..."

"Ronny?" Nova snuffles as she takes a step toward me.

But I just shake my head before I basically run out the door, down the stairs, and blow passed the twins in the living room.

"Ron?" Vega takes a few steps but I'm still shaking my head. "What's—"

"Gotta go," I grunt as I pull off my hoodie, tossing that and my beanie on the floor. "I have to get out of here."

"What happened? What's going on?"

I throw open the front door and don't respond, just take off into the night like a bat out of hell, the worst kind of pain swirling in my chest the further I get from the cottage.

*I fucked up.*

I fucked up big, ruined everything because there is no doubt in my mind Nova saw how turned on I was, saw the way I wanted to bend her over the foot of the bed and claim her right fucking there.

She had to see the unbridled lust on my face, had to see the huge erection pushing against my jeans, and despite how good things have been between us, that was not ok since Nova clearly doesn't feel the same about me.

Then her words from Montana start playing through my head as I scale the fence and run into the woods.

*She must hate me.*

I just proved to her that I can't keep my dick in my pants, showed her I'm everything she thinks I am, some asshole player on constant pussy patrol because I couldn't stop staring at her.

That's how she'll view it, anyway, because Nova has no idea that she is the only woman I respond that way to, the only woman who makes me want forever, the only woman who has ever made me want to throw her down and claim her, mark her as mine for the rest of time.

All things I can never explain because not only does she think I'm a piece of shit for playing the field but now she'll hate me for ogling her to the point of almost coming in my pants because I couldn't stop staring at her.

I can't explain to Nova that she's everything I've ever wanted, the only woman I have ever truly loved because she wouldn't believe it, doesn't feel the same, and now I've most likely lost my best friend in the entire world because I'm a sick bastard.

I lost everything the second I stared too long, the second I couldn't even form words to explain or apologize the way she deserved, and I have no idea how to move on from that.

As soon as I feel like I'm far enough from any prying eyes, I strip off the rest of my clothes and shift faster than I ever have.

My wolf has been quiet this entire time, hasn't said one fucking thing to me and I know he's pissed because of how quickly he took over, because I can feel his desire to turn around and go back to the cottage.

He doesn't though, thank gods, and he just runs deeper into the woods until I have no idea where we are.

Hours and hours pass while my wolf runs us both to the point of exhaustion, the early morning sun starting to creep through the trees.

He slows to a trot, my wolf ready to shift back, to let me deal with the mess I've made on my own and just when he curls up under a pine tree to rest, we hear the crunching of snow under what are definitely military grade boots.

"Look what we have here." A thick German accent that belongs to a man snickers seconds before the barrel of a rifle is pointed in our face. "Seems as though we've found ourselves a wolf shifter."

Another voice answers, one with a Russian accent this time. "*Da*. A big fuck too. Johan will be pleased."

My wolf starts to growl, his hackles raised, and just when two big ass men come into view, a gun fires and something sharp nails us in the back.

And as our body goes limp, as the image of the men blurs, all I can think is I'm going to die without ever telling Nova how I really feel about her.

Something I'm determined to do if I make it out of this alive.

Despite the mess I've made, I'll be damned if I waste another minute without telling the woman I'm in love with that she is perfect, that she is everything I could ever want and never deserve. If The Maker gives me the chance, I'm going to make things right with Nova, and mate or not, I'm going to make her mine.

*Fingers crossed I don't die before that happens.*

## CHAPTER II

# CAMP TORTURE

## RONNY



“**R**ise and shine.” The German accent chuckles as a fist slams into my jaw, my teeth clanging together hard enough to rattle my brain.

My head lolls on my neck as blood fills my mouth, my entire body burning with the most excruciating pain I’ve ever experienced.

The hit to the face definitely woke me up, and now I can feel every other wound that’s been inflicted on me the last day and a half.

Both eyes are most likely black and blue, swollen and puffy for sure.

Nose broken at least twice, my jaw bruised and my lip’s split.

There are burns all over my neck and chest, down my busted ribs, more littered between several cuts along my thighs and shins.

My shoulders ache from the way my arms are wrenched back, my wrists bound so tight the skin is raw, and my left shoulder is most likely dislocated.

There are shackles around my ankles, heavy lead ones that bind me to the chair, scrapes on my calves from where they rub against the metal each time they suspend me in the air.

There isn’t one inch of my body left without pain but the worst of what I feel isn’t physical, no, it’s the throbbing in my

chest caused by worry and fear that these bastards found my friends. That they found my peach.

Fingers dig into my hair, jerk my head up, and force my eyes open as far as they'll go before they focus on the man in front of me. "Today is your lucky day, wolf."

Without even thinking, I spit a mouthful of blood in his face then smirk as he recoils. "Oh goody." My voice is hoarse, just as raw as my skin, and my throat is so dry it actually hurts to swallow.

"You disgusting canine!" he bellows before his fist lands on my nose. "Try to infect me with your diseased blood!"

I can't help but chuckle.

The German and the Russian, the only way I can identify them since we weren't formally introduced, have been keeping me in some sort of shack, by the looks of it, for what I think is the better part of two days.

I can't be totally sure but I've seen the sun rise and set twice through the cracks in the wall so my guess is as accurate as I can get without a damn clock.

They've been beating the ever loving shit out of me since I woke up chained to the chair, and fortunately for me, they like to talk so I've figured out why.

"The only... disease in this... room—" I spit another river of blood on the floor with a smirk. "Is you."

The German grips my hair by the roots and tugs my head back so far my neck cracks. "You are wrong, wolf. You are a disease, a plague upon the good people you infiltrate and hide amongst."

He brings the tip of a hunting knife to my throat, one coated in silver to slow my healing. He presses it to my skin, punctures it slightly and smiles down at me.

"It is a shame we have been instructed not to kill you." The German pushes the blade in a bit further. "I would have liked to see how far we could bend you before you break."



“Enough,” the Russian booms as the door opens and closes behind him. “You slit his throat, you answer to Johan.”

From what I gathered, these assholes work for a bigger asshole named Johan, and the three of them are a small branch of what we shifters lovingly refer to as Hunters.

Originally started as dragon hunters during medieval times, today’s Hunters have evolved into a group that has made it their mission in life to eliminate any kind of shifter they come across, and thankfully they’re too stupid to believe any other creatures of mysticism exist.

Much like Kentworth, Hunters believe our blood is diseased, that the ability to shift is a genetic abnormality, a birth defect caused by pure evil and because of that they’ve taken it upon themselves to rid the world of the plague we’re viewed as.

Now, Hunters have always been a mild threat but since they typically consist of meatheads with little to no brain between them, they haven’t done nearly as much damage as they could if they organized themselves better. Like, oh, I don’t know, Cyril of the Molnarva Clan, Nero the completely insane former vampire king, and Ishmael Kentworth who seems to be reigning supreme in wiping out our kind.

And that thought has run through my head more times than I can count since I’ve been here because I have a funny feeling these bitches are the ones the mad scientist is trying to locate.

Call it a long shot but I have a hunch that Kentworth knows there are Hunters this far north and since he has almost nothing left of his once expansive team, he’s looking for new recruits and a safe haven in order to rebuild.

Would I have come to that conclusion without being held captive by Hunters for almost two days? Not in a million years.

The last any of us knew, Hunters were disappearing just as quickly as shifters, the group mostly populating areas where dragons thrived and only coming to the states as recently as

the early 1900's because that's when they finally expanded into other species of shifter.

And since they were never very smart with how they did things and fight amongst themselves just as much as they fight us, they've been easier to fend off and break up than any other threat that's been posed to our kind.

So yeah, I'm pretty sure Kentworth is on his way to Slave Lake because there is a group of Hunters there and not necessarily because his family has properties in the small town.

Will it be beneficial? Absolutely.

If the doctor is as smart as we think he is—forty five years of genocide under the radar proves he has somewhat of a brain—then he will try to unify whatever Hunters he's aware of and entice them to come work for him.

With a crew like that, there's no telling what kind of damage Kentworth can do, and once he explains about other mystics, gives them proof in the form of my best friends' parents, then all bets are off and he'll have a fucking army just like the other psychos my family has exterminated.

“Johan needs the wolf gone immediately.” The Russian narrows his eyes on me. “He wants him to send message to his people, bearing witness that the Hunters will rise again.”

What an idiot.

They never rose in the first place.

In the grand scheme of ways our people have died, the Hunters barely even register.

Between Cyril and Ivan, Nero and Kentworth, as well as the few paranormal diseases, demons like Thologar and various civil wars between species, Hunters haven't even made a dent in our history.

A small blip on the radar.

A minuscule ripple in time.

Which is why I can't help but laugh.

“Dis is funny to you?” The Russian takes a step toward me. “You laugh in the face of your imminent death?”

I chuckle and nod, then cough a little too hard. “You just... said I’m not... going to be... killed...”

He scowls and fists my hair harder than the German did. “Perhaps I should appeal to Johan.” The Russian brings his face close to my smiling one. “Sway him to kill you and leave your body for the wild beasts.” He stares a little longer then lets go of my hair with a rip. “Fortunately for you, we need the room.”

I roll my neck and watch as he straightens up then goes back to the door and opens it. The Russian barks out a few commands in, well, Russian, then two more men come in carrying a distinctly female body with a burlap sack over her head.

My blood turns to ice in my veins as the body squirms, fighting the best she can despite the fact that her ankles and wrist are bound. Her voice is muffled which means she’s probably gagged under that sack but I can still hear the blue streak she’s cussing while she wiggles like crazy.

And when they throw her on the floor in front of me, her body going down with a thud, I catch the faintest hint of campfire and vanilla, something that makes my heart hurt and my stomach churn with fear.

*She smells like my peach.*

Broken nose or not, that scent is far too familiar for me to not recognize it.

I start to growl on instinct, jerking against my restraints in a sad attempt to get free.

The German and Russian both laugh, the German kicking the female while she struggles to her knees, the Russian walking around to grab another cigar to no doubt use on me.

“We thought our new arrival should see the way we treat our guests.” The German kicks her again, the female doubling over at the waist with a groan. “Make an example of you so maybe she will talk, tell us what we want to know.”

The Russian lights his cigar and takes a long drag before he crouches next to me, holds it over another burn that finally started to heal and when he gives the German a nod to remove the burlap sack from her head, everything stops completely.

*Bella?* I mouth the word because I can't believe who I'm staring at, but also because I don't want them to know her name.

Her eyes are wide and wild, fearful but angry as hell and when they finally land on me, she blinks about forty times as I mouth her name again.

She frowns, looks totally confused, but gives me a subtle nod and even if I hadn't seen her picture I'd know without a doubt that this was Bella Baker because she is the slightly older spitting image of the woman I'm completely in love with.

*Gods, they could be fucking sisters.*

Bella tilts her head a little, narrows those cobalt blue eyes and searches my face.

She's trying to figure out how I know her and while I understand that, there are more pressing things we need to take care of right now.

*Like how I'm going to get both of us the fuck out of here.*

"Dis will be much more enjoyable with audience." The Russian grins as he presses the hot of his cigar to my ribs.

My entire body tenses, goes rigid with pain but I don't speak, don't cry out, don't change the expression on my face because I will not give them that.

I'm a goddamn Paddock, a wolf with Alpha and Luna in my blood, a Beta stronger than any before and I will not give these bastards the satisfaction of seeing my pain.

I will endure whatever they throw my way and I'll do it with a fucking smile on my face because I am Ronin Abraham Caldwell, a warrior like my grandfather and my uncle, a fucking badass Beta like Ronald Isaac Caldwell. I am a member of the Dragovihk Clan, taught and raised by dragons

and demon, fae and vampire, shifters of all shapes and sizes, and no human asswipes are going to get to me no matter how hard they try.

I am a fucking wolf, sworn to protect those I love and I will protect them until my dying breath, and there is no fucking way I will not walk out of this shack with Bella Baker in tow before I bring her back to my best fucking friends, back to the woman I'm going to claim one way or another when this is all said and done.

Which is why when the Russian becomes frustrated at my lack of reaction and presses his cigar against my broken skin until it's nothing but a stump, I grin through the pain and keep my eyes locked on Bella.

"You have balls," the Russian grunts as he gets to his feet and grabs the hunting knife from his belt. "I will give you that, wolf."

"You should... should know..." My grin widens like I'm channeling Zan all the way from Oregon. "You've been eye level... with them most of the time..."

Bella's eyes go wide as she stares, then she winces as Russian backhands me across the face, something that makes me chuckle, the rumble starting low before it turns into a full blown laugh.

"Shall I cut them off then?" The Russian points his knife at my junk, the only part of my body they've left unharmed, that and my nipple rings oddly enough. "Send you back out into the world unable to spread your defective seed to others? That will be a message worth sending, *da?*"

I only laugh harder, which makes me think maybe I finally cracked, but when the German comes over to join his friend, I realize this is the perfect distraction.

Bella is completely unattended now and since I can see her ankles, I'm guessing her wrists are bound with rope as well. Something that with the right amount of movement she should be able to get free from.

So I continue egging the Hunters on, keep talking shit and endure the now doubled torture, the two of them taking turns beating me with their fists or whatever weapon they decide to use.

But after almost two days of their questioning, of their torture in order to get information out of me, this is a cakewalk.

“Keep it coming.” I smile. “That all you got?”

They’re both standing in front of me but I can see Bella through the space between them and I know exactly where my peach got her smarts from.

Her mom already has her wrists free, the gag out of her mouth and she’s furiously working on the rope around her ankles.

It would be easier if she didn’t have those gloves on, the ones she’s probably worn since Kentworth took her in February, but she’s making progress and that’s why I keep these two bastards focused on me.

“Pussies,” I spit as German shoves a paring knife into my side, the blade burning white hot with silver as it slices down my skin. “Fucking pussies.”

The Russian growls and pulls his gun from his belt, cracks me in the side of the skull before he points it between my eyes. “Johan will have to forgive me. I am done with dis bastard wolf and his—”

The gun fires and my eyes slam shut, part of me almost positive I’m about to meet The Maker Herself but when I hear the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the floor, I open slowly and see the Russian laid out, a stool broken on the ground next to his head.

The German spins and looks down at his friend, anger spreading through his entire body before he begins to advance on Bella, the woman’s chest pumping erratically, her eyes wider than before.

She surprised herself by knocking the Russian out, and if it wasn’t wildly inappropriate I’d laugh at how much she looks

like Nova right now.

“Bitch!” the German spits as he continues toward her. “You will pay for that!”

Not on my watch.

Using what little strength I have left, I grip the back of my chair, pull as hard as I can and bend the fucking metal so I can get upright.

German turns toward me with a look of a shock, his mouth opening and closing like a goddamn fish, and just when he makes up his mind to act, I pull even harder, my shoulders screaming and calves burning as the metal scrapes up the back of my legs and free from the shackles.

He draws his gun but it’s too late now, I’m already mobile and these fuckers are going to pay.

I lunge forward and tackle him before he fires a round, drop him on his back and knock the air from his lungs.

Quickly, because there’s no time to waste, I do a few moves worthy of a gymnast and get my arms in front of me, then proceed to sit on this asshole’s chest and beat him with my shackled wrists until he’s a lifeless, bloody mess.

I roll off of him, my chest heaving, my body on fire.

I can’t catch my breath, can barely even move but it doesn’t stop me from hearing the Russian moan in pain, shift around a bit seconds before another gunshot rings out through the shack, then everything goes silent.

My eyes close briefly while I try to regulate my heart rate, my entire life flashing before my eyes even though I’m not dying.

And the one constant I see, the one face that stands out among the rest is Nova’s, her gorgeous smile, her stunning eyes. I see my peach and that is enough to have me attempting to sit up and get the fuck out of here.

“Slow down, big guy.” A hand lands on my shoulder, the definitely dislocated one, and I cringe. “Sorry. Didn’t want you trying to get up just yet, you’re kind of a mess.”

I nod with a sigh and meet her dark as hell eyes. “Are you ok?” Then I roll my eyes because that was probably the stupidest question I’ve ever asked anyone.

But Bella nods. “I’m fine, honey, just a little banged up. How long have they had you here?” She moves to the German and starts going through his pockets.

“Not sure.” I swallow hard, sit up, and scoot against the wall. “No more than two days.”

“Shit,” she says as she moves to the Russian. “They did all of that in two days?” Bella shakes her head. “That’s screwed up.”

I nod, lift my hands to my face and feel around the mass of swollen skin. “They didn’t waste any time, that’s for sure.”

“Ah ha!” Bella crawls back toward me with a smile and a big ring of keys in her hand. “Well, they aren’t going to be a problem anymore, that’s for damn sure. That one looks like he went face first into a meat grinder, and the other has a nice new hole in his head that proves there wasn’t nothing else in it.”

“You sure you’re alright?” I watch Bella undo my shackles, popping them from my ankles and wrists. “They didn’t hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing I can’t handle. I’ve been through worse.”

“I know.” I sigh as I rub my wrists.

“You know?” Bella starts undressing the guards and grabbing weapons, more keys. “What’s that mean?”

“It means I know who you are and I know where you’ve been.” She tosses a pair of pants at me, then a shirt before staring holes in my head. “I’ve been looking for you, my family and I.”

“What... what are you talking about?”

*Man, I’m too sore to even try to put these clothes on, not to mention they aren’t going to fit.* “We’ve been looking for you since October. Lark is my aunt.”



Her lip quivers and her eyes instantly well with tears. “Lark Rivers?”

“She’s a Paddock now, but yeah. When she escaped I just happened to find her close to the Idaho border and we’ve been searching for you and Wes ever since. We were the ones—”

“Who blew up the lab?”

I nod. “Tried to get everyone out.” Then I chuckle without an ounce of humor. “Didn’t really work.”

“Where is Lark now? Chumani and Hotah? Did they...”

I shake my head and say nothing.

“Oh gods.” Bella clutches her stomach and drops to her ass. “Their baby. Chumani was with child, they took her away to the hospital just before the explosion! Oh gods...” She starts crying and that’s enough to get me to move.

I scoot around some more, wrap an arm around her shoulders and try to console her. “Their baby survived. Hotah tried to protect Chumani and Akacheta but... Chet survived. He’s back on my family’s land and he’s doing great. My aunt Frankie and uncle Zan adopted him and he’s getting the best of everything.”

She nods and leans into me as if we’ve known each other for years. “So is that where Lark is?”

“Right now, yeah. She and Colt, my uncle and her mate, were with us in Montana tracking you guys. We found Roger and Natalie, and they decided to go back, to make sure they were looked after appropriately.” Don’t need to tell her that they left because we hadn’t found anything but bodies, that they didn’t want to go but had to for family. That seems like salt on the wound. “We were able to do that for everyone at the lab.”

Bella snuffles and cries quietly. “And you stayed behind to keep looking?”

“Yeah we did. Tracked as far as we could then used our resources to figure out where Kentworth might be heading.”

“Slave Lake,” she confirms. “He has a house there, a big house where he wants to start another lab.”

“Figured as much. I’m guessing he knows about the Hunters too?”

“Yeah. Wants to get them to work for him, thinks it’ll be just like before.”

I continue rubbing her arm despite the way it hurts do so. “Like before?”

Bella nods. “The trackers Kentworth used at the lab were Hunters. He didn’t tell anyone, but we overheard some conversations between him and the guards he brought with us. He got them from some guy, someone he knew from years ago.”

Makes total sense.

Kentworth knew about Hunters because he had them working for him already.

Which is how he knew there was a group up this way.

“Is he already in Slave Lake?”

She shakes her head. “We stopped about two hours south because the nurse started bleeding again. Her ear was—”

“Torn off by Roger. Yeah, we found that too.” *Goddamn, I really need to shift, I won’t be able to heal properly if I don’t.* “How did you get away?”

“Wes...” Bella chokes down a sob. “Wes caused a distraction. He forced Kentworth to pull over and when he did, I ran. Wes was supposed to come with me.” She loses her shit at this and starts crying so fucking hard. “He was... he was supposed to come with me... we were supposed to run... run together and get away but... but he didn’t and I don’t know...”

“Did you feel the break?” I may not be mated but I know a little about it and I can say for sure that when one dies the other feels it. “Feel the break in your bond?”

She shakes her head again. “No. Westley is still alive, I know that for a fact but... but he was supposed to come with

me. We were supposed to get out and get back to our kids together.”

“About that...” *Oops, almost forgot to tell her everything.*

Bella sits up, wipes under her eyes and waits.

“So... I’m not the only one here looking for you.”

She frowns, and gods, it looks just like Nova’s.

“I’m not sure if they’ve ever talked about me but...” I take a deep breath cause I have no idea how the fuck to do this. “I’m Ronny Caldwell and—”

I don’t even get to finish.

Bella throws her arms around my neck so fast and so hard we almost fall over, every inch of me screaming in pain while she does.

“Ronny! Oh my gods, Ronin Abraham Caldwell. I cannot believe I’m hugging you right now.”

Bella isn’t just hugging me, she is literally choking the life out of me, crushing my broken bones, and obliterating my bruises.

*She’s going to kill me.*

“Oh honey, let me look at you!” Something she’s already been doing but whatever. As long as she lets go of me I don’t care what she does. Bella takes my face in her hands—gently, thank gods—scans it, and squints. “Even while looking like shit you are the most handsome young man I have ever seen. Nova was right, whoo lord have mercy, you are easy on the eyes.”

“Nova said that?” Cause yeah, I want to know if my best friend and girl of my dreams said that.

Bella nods, grabs the shirt I’m supposed to wear, rips it into strips and starts patching me up. “Well, no. She actually said, and I quote, ‘*Ronny is so super hot, Mama, just wait til you meet him. I know Daddy is the best looking man you know but Ronny, just wow. He is so hot.*’”

If my face wasn’t covered in blood, I’d be blushing.

Not that thinking I'm good looking means Nova has feelings for me, no more than friendship, but it's nice to know she thinks I'm not too bad.

For an asshole player on pussy patrol.

*Ugh.*

"Nova talks about you all the time, actually."

I wince as she ties the cloth around the wound in my side. "You don't need to fix me up. Once I shift I'll be able to heal a lot quicker."

"She never did mention you're a shifter though. Wolf, right?"

"Yeah. Nova and the twins didn't know until recently. I actually had no idea you were their parents. They stayed pretty quiet about the whole thing until an incident forced our hand."

Bella arches a brow. "You mean to tell me you've been best friends with my babies for almost eight years and never once told each other your biggest secrets?"

I shake my head.

Technically, being a wolf was one of three big secrets I was keeping from my friends, the other two they still don't know.

And yes, being madly in love with Nova is one of them but the other, I might just take that one to the grave.

"So how did this all come about then? Assuming you know what my babies are since you obviously know what Wes and I are."

"How about we figure out how to get back to your babies and I'll tell you on the way?"

With more difficulty than I'd like to admit, I get to my feet and turn, attempt to put on the pants I'm supposed to wear out of here, and the only reason I am able to get my junk stuffed inside is cause the Russian had a beer gut.

"My babies... they're here?"

I grab the guns, check both clips then hand one to Bella as I turn. “They’re in Banff. They came with us to Montana and when we didn’t find more than a trail of blood, your kids and I decided to stay and keep searching while my family went home to regroup. They’ll be back after the holiday.”

“All three of my babies... Vega, Sigma, and Nova are all in Banff? They’re that close?” Her eyes well with tears and fuck it kills me.

“They are. My uncle Zan rented us a place far enough from Slave Lake to hopefully fly under the radar but close enough to follow leads. We just got there when I was snatched by tweedle dee and tweedle dumbass over there.” Grabbing the other shirt, I pull it on with serious issues then decide I need to reset my shoulder. “You know how many other guys are outside?”

“Just the two that brought me in.” Bella watches me closely as I walk toward their weapons locker, do a quick three count and slam my shoulder against it until it pops back into place. With a wince, she frowns. “You want me to drive us out of here?”

I shake my head. “I’ll get us back, just need to get past the others and we’ll be set.”

After checking to make sure there are car keys on the ring Bella snagged, I push the door open a crack, check our surroundings and see the two other Russians smoking next to a big ass Range Rover with tinted windows.

“You cover me from behind.”

She pulls on one of the coats, readies her gun, and nods. “We gonna kill them?”

“Most likely. They aren’t going to take too kindly to us trying to leave, and they really won’t be happy when they see what happened to their friends.”

Unfortunately, bloodshed has become a very normal part of this entire thing, trying to stop madmen and save our people, and if I had a minute to process everything correctly

I'd probably be concerned with the way I'm so nonchalant about it.

It's all part of the game though, and feeling anything other than rage for the bastards that keep hurting people I care about would be more concerning.

Which is why Bella and I move quickly and quietly as a unit, take out the two guards before they even know what hit them then hop into the vehicle and start it up.

It's got a full tank, which is great since we have no money, and the idiots sprung for a loaded model which means we're sitting pretty with heated seats and a navigation system that gives mine a run for its money.

The four and half hour drive is brutal, not because of my company, no Bella is great and keeps conversation light, telling me stories about my friends when they were little to help take the focus off the immense pain I'm feeling. It's brutal because of that pain, because there's too much silver in my system and even if I wasn't driving so I could shift and heal, I can't.

My wounds won't allow it and have basically knocked my wolf out.

By the time I see the gate to our cottage, I'm almost delirious, the exhaustion, the lack of food, the stinging and throbbing over every inch of muscle and skin making me incoherent at best.

I'm pretty sure I'm going to pass the fuck out as soon as I'm inside and considering the Baker siblings are about to see their mom for the first time in months, I should have plenty of time to pass out, wake up, and try to get myself cleaned up enough to get my wolf back with the living before anyone even notices I'm here.

The second we roll to a stop behind my truck, the front door opens and the twins walk out first, both of them carrying military rifles, their faces stoic but etched in worry.

Obviously, they went into lockdown and I am so fucking relieved over that I could almost cry.

They were safe, they weren't found, and they're ready to kick some ass to keep it that way.

"Wait a second," I say to Bella, the woman already crying as she looks out the tinted glass at her sons. "They are going to be shocked to see you so just let me try to... I don't know but just wait a second."

She nods emphatically and wipes her eyes. "I know, I'll wait for you to let me out. I just can't believe we're here, that my babies are right there..."

With a grunt, I throw open my door, my body screaming with each movement, acting like an old man over the way it aches but I quickly move in front of the Range Rover, holding up my hands in some sort of sign of peace.

Which is stupid because judging by the way they go from worried to relieved then seriously concerned, my friends didn't need shit from me.

"Ronny?" Sig says as he takes a few steps toward the stairs. "Jesus, Ronny!"

They start toward us but don't get far because once my hand is gripping the handle of Bella's door, Nova comes racing out of the house toward me, looking like the most beautiful thing I've ever seen because she is, tears streaming down her cheeks while she eats up the space between the porch and car.

And when I pull the door open, she stops dead in her tracks as her mom gets out, sobbing and smiling just like my peach.

"Mama?" Nova gasps. "Oh my gods! Mama!"

All three of my friends rush Bella, slamming into her, holding her so goddamn hard while they cry, the rifles abandoned, any caution or worry gone.

I watch for a minute as Bella tries to hug all three of them at the same time, hugging them tightly, kissing their faces, and it warms my frozen bones to see such love and joy come from the group, but I don't speak.

Instead, I let them have their reunion, lock up the stolen vehicle and decide I need to get a hold of Colt and let him know what's going on, have him and Vok figure out putting the Rover in my name, send out a new plate so there's not any issue with the vehicle. That's something I can do, something I have to do now before I do actually pass the fuck out, and then I'll try to tend to my shit.

Taking off on my best friends wasn't exactly right and it sure as fuck lead to a couple of hellacious days for me but the fact that it also brought Bella home to her babies makes every second of it worth it.

And once I'm back to one hundred percent, we'll find their dad and the others too.

Mark my fucking words, it is going to happen.



## CHAPTER 12

# MY WHITE KNIGHT

## NOVA



I can't stop smiling.

Or laughing.

Or crying.

My face is puffy and my cheeks hurt, but my heart is so damn happy I can't even put it into words.

The last two days have been hell, the worst kind of worry I've ever experienced with a pain in my chest that knew no bounds.

The ache caused by my parents disappearance has become a normal part of my daily life these last eight months, no less suffocating though, just normal; and when Ronny left, stormed out of our room and apparently, ran into the night after seeing me naked, I was crushed.

I didn't know what to make of it but I knew it hurt, and when it got later and later without any sign of him, that hurt blossomed into fear.

Then one night turned into two and by the time Vega was ready to call Colt and get as many of his uncles out here to help look for him as he could, I was a real mess.

It didn't matter that the sight of my fat ass naked caused him to run, all that mattered was the fact that my best friend was missing, and everything else was pushed aside.

Vega found Ronny's clothes, found his phone somewhere about a half hour from the cottage and since it's colder than a witches tit, that was the first red flag something was wrong.

I know shifters run warmer than most but there's no way Ronny would survive the frigid temps and snow completely naked for as long as he was gone, not without hypothermia setting in or something like that.

And the fact that Ronny probably just went to let his wolf run but didn't come back for hours that first night is why Vega went looking in the first place.

My brother didn't come back until almost four in the morning and when he did, my heart sank.

Vega was alone and said he found evidence of some kind of scuffle about three hours away but without any kind of equipment or a way to pick up his scent, we had no way of knowing where Ronny was.

I spent the entire time a crying, nervous wreck but I was convinced Ronny would come home and didn't want to drag anyone else into things until we knew for sure he was in danger.

The twins didn't like that, not at all but they understood it.

Ronny explained to us why his family went home, how he insisted they go home and spend time together, how all the new babies and holiday meant they shouldn't be in danger right now.

It was sweet that he sent them away for that, even more so that he stayed with us to help look for our parents, and it's why I didn't want my brothers to call Colt or Zan or anyone else until we had more information about what happened to our best friend.

Ronny would have been upset if we did, if we called and his family came running to his rescue—which they absolutely would—and maybe it was wrong, but I tried to think like my sexy best friend in our most recent crisis and managed to hold off on the search party for the time being.

And I am so glad I did.

Well, mostly glad anyway.

Glad because when Ronny pulled up in that car and let my mama out of the passenger seat, all I could do was fall apart.

I was so relieved to see him, so damn relieved, and my heart broke into a million tiny pieces at how beat to hell he looked, but when Mama stepped out, gods, I hate to admit it but I nearly forgot all about his injuries because he brought my mama home.

My love for him grew so big I can barely contain it, but the second my mama was hugging me for the first time in months, damn if I didn't feel like a little girl again.

And it's why I'm sitting here now at the island in the kitchen of the cottage hugging her still while my mind is torn between never letting my mother go and running up the stairs to tend to my best friend, make sure he's ok, then kissing his face off before yelling at him for disappearing on me.

I feel like a piece of crap to be honest, ignoring my seriously injured wolf in favor of holding my mama, my heart full of so many things, things I know aren't just my feelings but Ronny's too, but he went inside and left us in the driveway, stalked off to our bedroom without so much as a word, and that's the only reason I haven't gone up after him.

That and I want answers to about forty billion questions I have for Bella Baker.

Once we brought her inside, Vega turned on the alarm system he installed while Ronny was gone, secured the entire property then took charge of the situation like he's been doing since Mama and Daddy were taken.

I helped her shower, gave her some of Siggy's clothes—mine don't fit her quite right because we Baker women are thick and mama's thigh give mine a run for their money even after all the weight she lost while she was gone—and took stock of her injuries to make sure she was ok.

Sig started on dinner, my brother is quite the wiz in the kitchen, and by the time we joined them, he had a pork roast with all the fixings ready to plate and be devoured.

I almost brought some to Ronny but the twins said he hasn't come down yet and when Sig went to check on him, he heard him on the phone, most likely with Colt by the sounds of the conversation.

Instead, the four of us sat at the island and ate—well, Mama ate—two plates and half a third—while the three of us just stared at her with those questions running through our heads.

And now that she's clean and full, warm and cared for, Sig and I are hugging our mama again while Veg tries to get those stupid gloves off her hands.

"These are on pretty good," he grunts as he wiggles his tools around in the lock. "Too bad I'm better."

The cuff on her right hand pops open and the second it does, my mama yanks it off and tosses it across the room. "I don't care how cold it is, I will never ever wear another pair of gloves for the rest of my life."

"Thank gods they make mittens." Sig smiles as he rests his head on her shoulder.

Mama giggles and flexes her fingers. "Thank gods for that."

The air grows heavy again, silence surrounding the four of us as Vega works on freeing her other hand, and I'm about to explode from the pressure of the most important question I haven't asked.

Which is why I do.

"Mama?" I squeeze her tighter and press my face to her shoulder. "Where's... is daddy... is he..."

She kisses my head and rests her cheek there. "Daddy is ok. He's still with that bastard of a doctor but he's ok. I can feel him still."

I blow out the breath I was holding on a ragged sigh. "Why didn't he come with you?"

"And how did you even get away?" Sig adds.

“Your father caused a distraction, forced them to pull over on the way to Slave Lake. He was supposed to come with me but we got separated and he just told me to run.” Mama sniffles a little. “Daddy was so brave, so strong for me, and for you. He’ll be safe but if he didn’t do what he did I would never have gotten away and that means we have to fight like hell to find him.”

“How’d you find Ronny?” Vega grunts again as the other glove comes off. “He’s been gone for two days, almost three, and we couldn’t find him anywhere.”

Mama sighs, rubs her super dry hands and rolls her wrists. “Divine intervention. I was running through the woods trying to find a house, a road, anything when these two Russian assholes found me. They knocked me out, hogtied me, and took me to a little shack in the middle of nowhere.”

“Who were they?” I sit up and reach for the lotion I brought out with us, Sig and I each taking one of her hands to massage it in. “They weren’t part of Kentworth’s group if they took you there.”

“Hunters.” She sighs. “They were Hunters and thought my gloves meant I was some kind of shifter so they took me in order to get information from me.”

Veg frowns. “But they already had Ron?”

Mama nods. “They were torturing him, had him bound to a chair, that sweet boy covered in bruises and blood, so many wounds it’s a miracle he survived it.”

My heart squeezes so hard I gasp.

*I really need to go take care of him.*

So what if he was disgusted by my naked body?

It’s not like I really thought his extra affection meant Ronny had feelings for me or anything, and despite the crushing weight of his rejection, he is still my best friend in the whole world.

He shouldn’t be alone right now, and he definitely needs someone to take care of him.

I just don't think it's right to leave my mama yet.

“So how'd you two get out?” Sig asks as he rubs more lotion into her poor hand.

Mama smiles a little. “He's a good man, that Ronin Caldwell. He kept the Hunters focused on him so I could get out of the ropes, antagonized them until both of those peckerheads were facing him, and once I was free, I clocked one with a stool. From there, your best friend took charge, tackled the other one and beat him to a pulp all while he was handcuffed to a damn chair.”

My eyes go wide, my fingers stilled against her skin. “Ronny did that?”

She nods. “He did, and then he took out the other two Hunters and drove us all the way back here. He's pretty amazing.”

The way she says that has me blushing for some reason.

*Ronny is amazing.*

He's perfect and sweet, the best kind of man, and he's obviously even more of a badass than I thought if he saved himself and my mama like that.

And for some reason, the way she's looking at me right now leads me to believe my mother knows exactly how I feel about him and why.

“He's in pretty rough shape, your friend. A lot of the weapons they used on him had silver on them so he won't be able to shift for quite a while. I doubt Ronny's had anything to eat in a few days either, and I'm sure he's completely exhausted after everything he's been through.” Mama grins at me for a beat then turns to Sig. “I'm pretty whooped too, honestly, and since I'm guessing y'all are gonna be bunking with me for the foreseeable future, maybe we should make sure your pigsty of a bedroom is ready.”

Siggy hops up from the counter and smiles. “I'll go change the sheets. Can't have my mama sleeping on dirty boy sheets after she's been sleeping gods knows where for months.” Then he takes off down the hall, no doubt to clean his disaster of a



room and make sure there's nothing but the best for our mother. He'll probably even spray the lavender mist all over and add the electric blanket, fluff all the pillows and get a fire going just for her.

"I'm gonna check the cameras again, make sure the alarms are all set." Vega smirks before kissing Mama on the temple. Obviously she's trying to talk to me alone and while Sig probably knows that, Veg definitely does. "Shouldn't take too long."

Mama cups his cheek, smiles the way she always does at any of us then leans up and kisses his forehead. "My strong boy," she whispers against his messy hair. "You did so good, Vega Hail. I am so proud of you."

His lip quivers but my big brother doesn't speak, just kisses Mama's head again then walks off to do what he said he was gonna.

"He took good care of you and your brother." She smiles as she turns to wrap me in a hug. "You three took good care of each other."

I hug her as hard as I can and breathe in my mother's scent. "Vega deserves all the credit. He kept us fed and safe, happy as we could be while he tried to find you. He even moved us to Ashland to be close to VivaDee and Ainsley while we searched."

"Good." Mama rests her cheek on my head. "Daddy will be glad to know that his sister was helping look after you while y'all looked after her too."

"You want some hot chocolate?" I ask after a few beats. Since she hasn't gotten to the point of getting me alone, I might as well do something for her after everything she's been through.

Mama nods against me before I get up, then sits quietly while I start rummaging through the cupboards for the high-end hot cocoa Zan had sent to us the other day. He even sent marshmallows and buttermilk to make them with.

“So Ronny...” I can hear the smile in her voice even though my back is to her. “He is an impressive young man.”

My face is on fire but I just nod, grab two mugs and avoid eye contact. “He’s great.”

“Your high school sweetheart was great, Nova Rain, Ronny is exceptional. He’s special, and you know it.”

I do, but I don’t say it.

I’ll cry again if I get into all the ways Ronin Abraham Caldwell is better than any man I’ve ever met, and I don’t want to do that anymore tonight.

“Nova.” I wince at the slightly stern tone then turn slowly to meet my mama’s dark eyes cause she isn’t messing around. “What’s going on with you and that boy you shoulda started seeing the second you met?”

“Mama...” My lip quivers and my eyes well with tears. “It isn’t like that with me... with me and Ronny.”

Her eyes soften as a smile forms on her pretty face. “Don’t lie to me, sweetheart. All it took was a few hours and I can tell that boy is head over heels for you.”

“It’s not...” I shake my head as the tears roll down my cheeks. “He isn’t... we aren’t...”

She pats the stool next to her. “Tell me everything while our cocoa heats. Then maybe you can get upstairs and take care of him the way he needs right now.”

So I do.

I spill my guts to my mama about how I am so in love with Ronny that I can’t even think straight, tell her all about him and what makes him special and amazing. Then I tell her about how weird things have been between us, how mean I’ve been to him since before my birthday, all the stupid things I’ve said that made everything worse.

I tell her how it was getting better and I thought maybe he had feelings for me, how maybe we’re an exception to the fated mate rules but I end up crying even harder and have to stop and mix our drinks to catch my breath.

“You ever think maybe that boy is your divined, Nova?”

*Gods, yes.*

Not seriously because it's never been more than one sided but I've hoped upon hope he could be the one, I just know better than that.

“I've touched him plenty though.” I sigh through my tears. “It makes every part of me light up like fireworks over the Mississippi but it's never confirmed anything except how much I love him, and he's never hinted to feeling it himself.”

“Of course not. You've never kissed and you know damn well that may be the only way you would know anything at all.”

I nod and wipe my eyes. “But he's a wolf, Mama. If I was his mate he'd know that. Love is instant for them, and if Ronny was in love with me then he'd know I was his mate, right?”

She smiles softly. “Not necessarily. Things like this, different kinds being fated to each other, can be complicated. When you have more than one way of knowing someone is your forever things don't come so easily.”

“They did for you and Daddy.”

“Only on my end.” Mama giggles. “Your daddy just thought he had the hots for me because of my big booty and sense of humor. I knew he was my divined, but he had to figure it out for himself that I was his mate. And since he was a proper southern boy, that idiot didn't kiss me until we'd been on five dates. I thought I was gonna tear my hair out before he finally did it.”

I giggle too because I love their love story. “But you didn't know Daddy was a banshee until after he kissed you.”

“No, I didn't, but I knew he was special, and when he finally grew a pair and kissed me and that bolt of lightning went off between us, well, yeah, he basically shouted he was a banshee and I was his mate for everyone in the great state of Mississippi to hear.”

“Which is when you told him you were a sorceress and he was an idiot for waiting so damn long cause you already knew you were gonna be together forever.”

She sighs dreamily and nods. “Yep. But for him it all started with an intense attraction, a deep love that he felt right away, and didn’t know how to handle because he knew he had a mate out there waiting for him.” Then my mama smirks at me. “Just like you and Ronny. You both know you have a fated one out there and despite feeling so strongly for each other, neither one of you are gonna grow a pair because if you’re wrong, if your love isn’t forever, then you risk hurting each other when that forever comes along.”

“I might have agreed with you a few days ago.” *Damnit, I’m gonna cry again.* “Thought Ronny felt something more for me than friendship and was just too scared to act on it, ‘specially now knowing he’s a wolf but...”

“But what, sweetheart?”

*Gods, this is embarrassing.*

She already knows pretty much everything so I’m gonna tell her what happened, but it doesn’t mean it’s easy to tell my mama the man I love ran for hills when he saw me in the buff.

“Well...” I chew my cheek and avoid looking her in the eye. “Ronny left... when Ronny left it was because...” *Gods, this sucks.* “He saw me naked.”

Mama frowns. “What?”

“I had just gotten out of the shower and forgot to grab my clothes. We’d been driving so long and I was tired, had a full belly and I left everything on the bed. So I went back to grab it and while I was going through my bag, Ronny came in, saw me naked and just stared at me for a few minutes before he took off out of the room. Out of the whole damn house, I guess, and, well, you know what happened next.”

“And you think that means Ronny isn’t your divined? Doesn’t have any feelings for you at all?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not like I think he should have mauled me or something but he looked angry, definitely didn’t look

like he liked what he saw and..." I just shrug. This is uncomfortable at best, heartbreaking and awkward at worst.

"Nova, honey, I mean this in the best way possible but you are acting like an idiot."

My eyes snap to my mother's as I scowl. "Why?"

She laughs and starts rubbing my back. "Sweetheart, you said yourself you basically called him a cheap floozy and made him out to be a player that objectifies women. You think maybe he took off because he really liked what he saw but didn't want to treat you the way you think he treats everyone else?"

No.

Not even close.

It makes sense, though, and it does make me an idiot.

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing. On our drive here, Ronny would not shut up about you. He told me how much he cares about you, how thrilled he was when you moved to Ashland, how much you mean to him. And he practically oozed with pride when he told me what you did for poor Roger. That boy has it bad for you and I would put money on him trying to act like a gentleman when he walked in on you, nothing more than that."

"Still though... even if Ronny is attracted to me it doesn't mean he has feelings for me, doesn't mean we're each other's forever."

Mama rolls her eyes, and gets up to pour our hot chocolate into the mugs. "Have I taught you nothing? You know as well as I do that people like us can only really love our fated ones, and with the way you talk about Ronny, the way you've talked about him for years, it's obvious you're so in love with him that it will be forever."

"But he doesn't—"

"Just because he hasn't made a move or said the words does not mean Ronny isn't in love with you too. You have years of friendship that is incredibly important to both of you,

you've never given him reason to act on his feelings, and you throw in the way wolves do things then yeah, he probably has no idea how to handle his feelings." Mama sets down a delicious cup of chocolaty goodness and starts loading it with marshmallows. "Not to mention, he's also best friends with your brothers, and since he reads more romance novels than you or I do, he is probably worried about screwing up his relationships with them too."

"Veg and Siggy know how I feel about him."

She nods. "I figured since they each have their own room, and you and Ronny were meant to share."

I snort. "They've been doing that since we were in Montana. And Ronny's Uncle Zan was helping."

Mama lifts a blonde brow and waits for that to sink in and when it does, oh boy.

"I doubt it's cause Ronny loves me." *Right?* Zan just has a bit of a mischievous side, a huge one actually, and he was probably just trying to stir the pot. Yeah, Zan kept putting us together because of that and not because his family knows Ronny loves me. "Zan just likes to start shit."

"And what kind of shit would he be starting exactly by putting you and Ronny together?"

Another shrug. "Probably just trying to piss off the twins."

She frowns like that's the stupidest thing she's ever heard. "But you just said they were doing the same thing."

"They were but..." But I have no argument. It's still crazy though. "They knew how I felt before we went to Montana so maybe they were just trying to get a rise out of me."

Mama shakes her head. "Your brothers wouldn't do that. They'd sooner freeze your underwear or switch out your magnolia oil with deer piss to get a rise out of you than force you to share space with the man you're in love with."

*She's right.*

My brothers have never done anything but little pranks to give me hell because they have been my biggest fans since the

day I first opened my eyes to this world.

Sure we've fought and picked on each other but it's never been mean spirited, and they definitely wouldn't do something like that unless there was a good reason for it.

"I don't know..." Because now I'm all sorts of confused. I really don't know what to make of this new information.

"Well, regardless of anything, Ronny is your best friend and he is hurting right now, honey. Why don't you fix him a plate and take it upstairs, see if he needs any help with his injuries and get him settled in for the night. He could use a friend right now."

*Right again.*

We were so caught up in Mama that none of us have even checked on Ronny since Sig heard him on the phone, and that's not right.

"You'll be ok for a while?" I ask just as Vega comes back into the room.

"I'll be fine. I'm gonna crawl into bed, try to navigate sleeping between your brothers at this size since the last time I did it they were little, and drift off to dreamland with minimal worry for the first time in months. I will see you in the morning." Mama stands and stretches but I'm shaking my head.

"I'll be down in a while. I'll just make sure Ronny is ok, that he eats and—"

She wraps me in a hug and whispers in my ear. "You come back down before tomorrow and I'll kick your ass. Ronny needs you, sweetheart, and I expect you to stay with him until that changes."

"But—"

"No buts." My mama let's go and looks me in the eye. "Friend or more, he needs you and he should not be alone tonight."

"Ok," I whisper and drop my eyes. "But if you need me..."

“I’ll be fine. Your brothers will look after me and I’m just gonna sleep for forty years anyway. You’ve already done so much for me, Nova. Go do for your man.”

And with that, I do.

I make a Ronny-sized plate, wrap it in tinfoil, then walk up the stairs slowly with that and several bottles of water.

My heart is pounding out of my chest, my face burning, hands sweating.

Mama is right though.

After what Ronny went through he needs to be taken care of, needs someone who loves him and right now, that’s me.

It’s always me, but you get the point.

I take a deep breath before I walk into our room, one that gets stuck in my throat when I finally do.

There are bloody towels everywhere and the shirt Ronny was wearing is basically torn to shreds on the floor. His duffel is hanging off the bed, clothes spilling out of it, his laptop open next to his phone on one of the tables and as my eyes bounce around the room, they well with tears when I look to the bathroom door.

It’s open, the light is on, and Ronny is standing in front of the mirror squeezing a nasty looking cut in his side with black tinted blood oozing out slowly.

“Oh, Ronny,” I breathe as I rush to the bathroom, those Caribbean blues tired and sad as they connect with mine.

“Hey, Peach.”

I set down his plate and immediately move to his side. “What on earth are you doing?”

He’s cringing, his jaw clenched in pain. “Trying to get the silver out.”

“Honey, no.” I swat his hands away. “You can’t do it like this, it’ll take forever.”



“If I don’t get the silver out then I won’t be able to shift and heal.” He sounds so tired, so bone deep exhausted. “There’s too much in my blood.”

More tears swim in my vision as I look over the many bruises, the dozens of cuts, the endless burns. And his poor face, his so handsome face is still bloody, the swelling minimal but still bad. I’ve never seen anything like this and the fact that it was done to Ronny, *my Ronin*, breaks my heart. Especially knowing he still fought like hell to get himself and my mama out of that horrible place. He saved her and protected her while he was like this, and that makes him more of a hero than I ever thought before.

And let me tell you, Ronny was already my hero so this pretty much makes him a saint.

“Stop fiddling with this and let me take care of it.”

Ronny frowns, sort of, at me in the mirror. “You don’t have to, Nova, go spend time with your mom. I’ll be ok.”

I roll my leaky eyes. “You are not ok. You’re a bloody mess, and for someone who can fight off Hunters while chained to a chair, you can’t properly handle wounds for shit.”

He cracks a smile and gah, so handsome. “No, but I’ll be fine. Henrich usually does this part and he explained how to patch myself up if ever needed. I can manage.”

“Not happening, Ronin. Hands on the counter and don’t you dare lift them until I get back.” I wait for him to do as I say, something he does with a smirk, then march out to the closet where I set my stuff up on the vanity.

I love my magnolia oil but it’s not the only one I’m familiar with. Mama raised me right, and with extensive knowledge of holistic and supernatural remedies.

Which is why I grab peppermint oil, chamomile, lemon, eucalyptus, tea tree, pine, and cinnamon from the table, stop at the linen closet and grab several washcloths and the last two towels, then march right back into that bathroom where Ronny is still waiting.

I say nothing as he watches me, his gaze burning in the most delicious way against my skin but I can't have thoughts like that right now, especially with what I'm about to do.

Trying very hard, I put up a wall, just enough to do this without allowing my mind to wander, then walk to the jacuzzi and turn it on. I check the temp and make sure it's hot enough to produce a thick steam, to warm my tinted purple friend without burning him, and when it's about half way full I start adding the oils.

“You gonna cook me, Peach?”

I roll my eyes and try not to smile. *This is serious business.* “No. I'd like to throttle you for disappearing on us but I can't do that until you're better, and I might not do it anyway since you brought back my mama.” This makes me smile as I turn. “Thank you, Ronny.”

He clears his throat, drops his eyes and nods. “Don't need to thank me. It was an act of The Maker, I'm sure. Right place, right time, just like Lark.” Ronny lifts his head a little. “About taking off...”

I shake my head once, not at all wanting to get into that shit right now. “You focus on getting better. Everything else can wait.”

“Peach...”

“I mean it. Now strip.” His eyes go as wide as they can through the swelling, his mouth opens just a bit and I can't help but giggle. “You are a bloody, filthy mess. Which is why you're going to get rid of those pants that are probably cutting off most of the circulation in your lower half, you're gonna get in that tub”—I point like he has no idea where it is—“and let me use my oils to not only help you feel better but extract the silver from your body so you can shift if you need to. And while you soak I'm gonna clean you up and feed you before I put you to bed.”

Ronny blinks a few times then blows out a breath. “Ok, Peach.”

“Ok?”

He nods. “That all sounds too good to pass up, honestly.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. “Good, cause you, Ronin, do not have a choice.”

I cut the water and turn the jets on low and help Ronny the best I can toward the tub. I hand him a towel and he wraps it around his waist and while he braces himself against the wall, I attempt to wrestle his pants off without putting my face in his crotch.

“How... how the hell...” I grunt as I pop a seam. “How did you even get these on?”

He chuckles a bit. “About like you’re taking them off. Didn’t have much to choose from, and I didn’t need to ride with your mom naked.”

That should not make my pussy clench for lots of reasons but the idea of Ronny naked is going to cause that to happen no matter what kind of situation we’re in. He’s super hot and I am so in love with him. Can’t help it, won’t change it.

A few more tugs has the nasty cargo pants on the floor and when I get to my feet, I grab the top of the towel, unwrap it and hold it so it’s blocking his junk. “Get in.”

*Gah.*

*This is not working.*

*I am not strong.*

Ronny’s super sexy bubble butt is facing me, and when he has one foot in the tub he has to let go of the wall to use both hands to cover his junk before lowering himself into the hot water.

It would be wrong to strip down to nothing and get in with him, right? Not appropriate to try to mount him like a wild animal while he’s bleeding and in excruciating pain?

Yeah, didn’t think so.

*Not to mention he’d probably hate that.*

“Now what?” He sighs, his eyes fluttering closed as he rests his head back against the cushion—yes, there are actual

cushions, little pillows, on the headrests.

“Sit tight for a minute, I’m going to change.” The tub is too big for me to sit next to it and take care of him, so I’m gonna have to do something else that makes me a lost cause.

I run to the closet again, grab a pair of sleep shorts and tank top, throw them on and hurry back. Making sure his plate and the oils are within reach, I walk to where he’s resting his head, his eyes hooded but with sheer tiredness and nothing more.

“Sit up for a minute.”

A dark blonde brow lifts but he does as I ask and as soon as there’s room, I step into the tub and situate myself behind him on the edge, a knee on either side of Ronny’s shoulders.

“You still comfortable?” I ask before I grab the fancy gold cup that is probably decorative but will now be used to dump water on his head.

“Mmhmm.” Ronny sighs, his hands coming up to rest on my calves. “Very.”

*Oh lord, I’m in trouble.*

Big, Ronny-sized trouble.

Especially when he scoots around a bit so he can rest his head against the inside of my thigh.

“What’s in here?” he thankfully asks, distracting me from how easy it would be for him to eat me out like this.

Yes, I’m *that* asshole now. The one fantasizing about my injured best friend while I’m trying to take care of him.

I clear my throat and start pouring water gently over his hair. “Different essential oils. Lemon, pine, peppermint. All kinds of stuff that have anti-inflammatory properties, antibacterial, antiviral, soothing stuff to loosen your muscles and make you relax.” Grabbing my shampoo, I squeeze some into my hand then add a few drops of the oils there too. “Stuff that will pull toxins from your body and help purify it.”

“Mmm,” Ronny basically moans as I start massaging his scalp. “Not cooking me.”

“No.” My giggle sounds a little hysterical but I’m doing my best to keep it together. “Just doing what you were trying to do but better.”

He chuckles, the rumble vibrating against my legs. “What would I do without you, Peach?”

“For starters, you’d probably have your guts all over the bathroom floor since you were poking around the holes in your body.” Another rumble from this man has me smiling so big. “And you’d end up with no clean towels since you used every single one and probably woulda just thrown them out instead of washing them.”

“You know me so well.” His fingers start to slide up and down my calves, his touch setting every inch of me on fire. “That the silver?”

*What?*

Oh right.

He’s talking about the swirling circles that are floating away from his super naked and sexy body.

“Yeah. Regular oil won’t pull it out that way but mine has a little extra kick.”

Ronny nods against my leg then sighs deep. “A little sorcery?”

“Of course. I don’t just play with shadows and talk to the dead, you know. A little bit of my power can do some good.”

“It’s doing great. This is the best I’ve felt in a long time.”

*Me too*, I think, but I don’t say that. “With all the steam, you’ll breathe it in and it’ll help internally too. It won’t get rid of the pain but it’ll help soothe it some, help relax you and pull out most of the silver.” I finish lathering his hair with a small sigh. “Close your eyes, I need to rinse this out.”

One quick nod and I rinse as gently as I can, the water tinged with the silver rings, blood and dirt.

After a quick conditioning treatment, I explain how he can't wash his body with soap, how he needs to let the oil sink into his skin, sit on the surface of it for a few hours, but because of the purifying qualities it'll get rid of the dirt and grime, clean him off in a different kind of way.

I also tell him he'll be oily for a few days but that'll just help everything work better and by the time he's so relaxed I'm worried he'll fall asleep, I start feeding Ronny the food I brought up.

"It's not that warm anymore." I frown as I lean down and pop a cooked carrot into his mouth. "I can run back down—"

His hands tighten on my calves, sliding up to my knees as Ronny chews slowly and opens his eyes even slower. "It's fine. I don't need it hot. Anything's better than nothing anyway."

"Are you sure you don't want me to run down and zap it real quick?"

Ronny shakes his head and takes another bite I'm offering. "I don't want you to go. Just stay with me, Peach."

I swallow the enormous lump in my throat and nod, staring into those tired crystal blue eyes.

He has to know how that speaks to my heart, doesn't he?

Can't he see it on my face? Read it in my eyes that there isn't anywhere else I'd rather be and the fact that Ronny wants me here with him has my heart soaring?

Everything else aside, those simple words from my best friend, from the man of my dreams, has me falling in love with him deeper than before—which was earth's core kind of deep already—and I have to do something about it.

I can't go on this way for much longer so it's about damn time I show Ronny just exactly what he means to me.

Just need to wait for him to heal up real nice first, then I'll kiss his gorgeous mouth so hard it'll bruise all over again.

## CHAPTER 13

# RECON



## RONNY



“The bodies are still here,” I grunt to Colt via AirPods. “Doesn’t look like anyone has been back since Bella and I left.”

“Good,” he grunts back because that’s what we do. “Take pictures, make sure to get their faces, but don’t touch anything. Leave it all the way it is and check back in a few days. If they’re gone we’ll know Johan took care of his mess.”

I roll my eyes because *duh*, but I don’t say that. “It wouldn’t shock me if they aren’t found for a while. Didn’t strike me that these guys were watched very closely and mostly had remote communication.”

“Probably, but we need to be sure. If they were a part of a bigger team I’d like to figure out how big and if they have the skills to dispose of evidence, cover their tracks, that kind of shit.”

Another eye roll. “They’re obviously part of a bigger team. Bella confirmed Kentworth is trying to find Hunters to use as his muscle, that he was using them before to track people like us. There has to be some sort of organization here in order for him to head this way without worrying about his dwindling group.”

“I still can’t fucking believe you found her.”

“Me either, but I didn’t really find her. She just fell into my lap the same way Lark did.”

“Cause you’re blessed, Ronny!” my aunt yells in the background. “Blessed by the gods and the universe itself! You

have their favor and that's why they keep smiling down on you!"

"Something like that," I mumble because if I hadn't acted like an asshole then gotten myself captured and tortured I never woulda been there when those Hunters found Bella. Just like if I hadn't been so pissed at my mom for blaming Colt for every bad thing to ever happen in their life when she was really the one to blame, I never woulda been in Paradise to find Lark. It's more like dumb luck caused by shitty circumstances if you ask me. "I can get faces on the three Russians but the German isn't really recognizable."

Colt chuckles, a little pride in his tone. "Got him that good, huh, Ronin?"

"He deserved it. Fucker kept using kitchen knives on me."

A beat of silence passes as I carefully walk around the bodies, trying to step in footprints already made, stopping periodically to take pictures so I can send them to my uncle.

Bella and I really went out with a bang, man.

I didn't realize how much damage we did until now but the four bodies, broken furniture, and totally wrecked shack say it was a lot.

"You doing ok?"

I frown at the concern in Colt's voice. "I'm fine. Why?"

Another chuckle. "Cause you were held prisoner and tortured for two days. Not many would be fine after that."

"Well, I am. Still a little stiff, little sore, but fine otherwise." Mainly because I had a blonde bombshell taking care of me with her special oils and phenomenal cuddles. Not that my uncle needs to know that, but Nova is the only reason I'm feeling remotely close to normal.

After that first night, when Nova made me bathe in a concoction that smelled kinda like my mom's chicken noodle soup, I felt decent enough to attempt to shift, thankfully our room at the cottage is big enough for me to do it and my wolf

immediately curled up in front of the fire she started in the huge stone fireplace.

We were both exhausted and my wolf was definitely still feeling the effects of all the silver, but it didn't stop him from herding my peach toward the bed to get blankets and pillows after she showered, then basically demanded she sleep next to us on that fake bear skin rug.

Of course Nova agreed, she was practically giddy over the idea of sleeping snuggled up next to my wolf, and once we were both satisfied with the way she padded the floor, he damn near laid on top of her in order to make sure she was warm enough on hardwood.

And when she cuddled up so close, close enough that her face was pretty much buried in his fur, my wolf sighed in total contentment while repeating *mine* or *my mate* until he drifted to sleep.

It didn't take too long for me to follow him but I couldn't help but try to analyze his words before I succumbed to my exhaustion too.

My wolf, *Abe*, has loved Nova since the first time I saw her after answering the call, but it wasn't until recently that he started claiming her, and started to really get possessive over my best friend.

I don't get it, to be honest, because despite the way Abe has been referring to her, I feel like he would have known sooner if Nova was actually our mate.

I mean, that's the way it goes right?

Wolves know immediately, know without question, who their mate is.

And if she is mine, then why is he only *now* saying something?

Of course, that was enough for me to disregard his comments, justify them away like I have been this entire time, but it's left me wondering.

Especially since day two of being back at the cottage was very similar to day one.

We woke up around seven and Abe licked Nova's face, the big perv, until she was a giggling mess before he got her up and in bed.

I shifted back after she was asleep, checked over my progress in the bathroom—which wasn't as much as I'd like, by the way—then decided I was still too tired to do anything but throw on a pair of sweats and climb into bed myself.

Ten hours later, I woke up to another chicken soup bath being drawn and demands from my peach to get in the tub while she fed me.

After I soaked for gods knows how long, Nova had me lay out on the bed in nothing but a pair of boxer-briefs—borrowed from Sig because I don't own underwear—while she massaged almost every inch of my body with more oils, and if I wasn't still in so much pain, I would have had the biggest boner of my life the entire time her hands were on me.

Fortunately for me, silver and torture curb one's libido enough that I didn't make everything super weird for either of us.

Nova then hand fed me dinner in bed, put on Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, and ran her fingers through my hair until I passed out, which was barely after the opening credits of the movie.

I woke up around one in the morning alone and I was still tired as fuck so I didn't have it in me to go find my best friend, but when I woke up at three, Nova was plastered to me, damn near every inch of her body wrapped around mine and I didn't wake up again until almost nine this morning.

She was still holding me when I got up but my peach was sleeping so soundly I didn't have the heart to wake her, so I slipped out of bed, washed my face, brushed my teeth and changed before taking the Range Rover to go back to that shack.

I wasn't lying when I said I'm still sore, but I needed to get back out here to look for useful info, to check on the bodies

and the way we left things so I could report back to Colt.

I made contact with him as soon as I was back at the cottage but it was only to give him the rundown on what happened, to tell him about the Hunters, Bella, and nothing more because I was too miserable for anything else.

He understood, still does, but he wanted me to get back out here as soon as I was able just as bad as I wanted to, so here I am, stomping around in the fucking blizzard that started twenty minutes ago, photographing the scene and sending Colt relevant shit.

My body isn't a huge fan of this, though, judging by the way I'm getting cold faster than I should, how I'm slowing down and having a little more difficulty focusing. All signs I need to wrap this up and get back, get some food in my gut, and sleep until tomorrow morning.

But that's not likely since it's Christmas Eve and apparently the Baker's have a tradition where they eat a big ass meal—I'm ok with that part—exchange one gift early, then play board games until all hours before they finally go to bed. Then they wake up at the ass crack of dawn for a complete southern style Christmas breakfast that Bella makes before more presents and singing and all kinds of shit. Shit I would love to participate in a lot more if I wasn't recovering from being tortured. And because Nova told me all about it with the purest joy I've ever heard in anyone's voice while she bathed me yesterday, I will be there for every second of it because it obviously means a lot to her, especially since their dad isn't here.

“You sure you're good, Ronin?” Colt butts into my internal debacle. “Don't need us to send Henrich or anyone to look you over?”

I shake my head, which is stupid because he can't see me and the movement fucking hurts. “I'm fine, honest. Fucking tired but mostly back to normal. Helps having a couple of sorceresses around.”

“Yeah but you know Henrich would be there in a heartbeat if you need him. He's got all kinds of shit that could help you

heal even quicker.”

“I know, but I’m good. Besides, it’s snowing buckets and I don’t want anyone flying in this garbage. It’s gonna probably take me double the time to drive back to the cottage. Plus, it’s Vivian’s first Christmas. I don’t want anyone missing such an important holiday for so many of you.”

“Ronny…”

I smirk. “I swear to gods, I’m fine. If I need you, I’ll call, ok?”

“Fine,” Colt grunts. “You get your mother’s package?”

“I did.”

“Haven’t opened it yet, right?”

I snort. “Of course not. I don’t have a death wish and that damn box had *Do Not Open Until Christmas* written in giant red letters so many times I wondered if it was actually a bomb.”

My uncle laughs cause he knows you don’t fuck with Mary Caldwell. “You get everything else, too?”

“Yes.” I sigh and finish up inside the shack before heading out to the Rover. “Packages from every single one of you broody assholes put together by your mates with gifts for all five of us, about seven thousand packages from Zan alone, most likely filled with butt plugs and cock rings.”

“You get your shit from Amazon?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that by the way.” Since I disappeared for a couple days, I missed my window to order gifts for my friends but I was able to have Colt and Vok use their hacking skills to order my stuff then back date it which meant Amazon put a rush priority on it so that it got out here before Christmas. Everything arrived last night and it wouldn’t have happened without their help.

“No problem.” He pauses for a sec, his emotions floating through the Bluetooth before his voice does. “Wish you were here, Pup.”

I can't help but grin at the term of endearment, something he's called me since I was *actually* a pup. "Me too."

"Fucking proud of you, though."

"Me too!" Lark yells. "We are so goddamn proud of you, Ronin!"

"Thanks." I chuckle, wishing I was with my whole family more than I was a few minutes ago. "You guys are gonna FaceTime me tomorrow, right? Make sure I can see everybody and watch the kids open presents?"

"Your mother would skin me alive if I didn't." Colt chuckles. "We'll be there first so we can watch the pups open what Santa brought, then we'll be at the main house and make sure to call again. Everyone misses you, pup, they wouldn't be ok if we didn't have you there somehow."

"And Frankie wants you to see Chet!" Lark bellows. "He's gotten so big since you last saw him, and since you're his godfather, you have to see him in that onesie you bought!"

My smile is huge as I slide into the driver seat of my stolen ride.

It was kinda weird that Frankie and Zan chose me to be Chet's godfather, not for any reason other than Colt is his best friend and Lark knew Akacheta's biological parents, but since I was the one that got Frankie out after she ran into that burning hospital room, they thought it was appropriate.

And I won't argue cause I fucking love my family, their kids, I love babies and everything that comes with them, and despite the fact that none of us are gonna die and don't really need godparents for any of the little ones, it still meant a lot to get the title.

All of the godparent talk is more for show than anything else since in a clan we're all raising everybody together, especially a clan like ours where everyone is family by bonds formed as well as blood shared and shed, but again, it means a lot even if it's just a word.

"I want to see him too. I'm glad he gets to finally go home." Wish I could be there for it but honestly, there's a

blonde I want to be here with just as much. “I’m getting ready to head back to the cottage. I sent all the pictures to your secure email, backed them up in the cloud too. I’ll come back out here with Vega in a few days, make sure to check on things before the New Year.”

“Sounds good. Get some rest, make sure to take care of yourself, and actually take at least the rest of today and tomorrow off. You deserve it, pup.”

“Yeah, yeah. I just want to eat and sleep so I’m well enough to find the others and kick Kentworth’s ass.”

Colt laughs. “I hear that, but really, take a few days to decompress, unplug. You’ve been on this shit for months without a break and having your ass kicked was probably a sign to slow down.”

I grunt in response.

My uncle laughs.

I can hear Lark smack him.

*Man, I miss them.*

“We’ll talk to you tomorrow, Ronin.”

“Sounds good.”

“Make sure you call your mother, she’s wiggling over your injuries.”

I roll my eyes and start backing out over my tracks from before. “Oh I know. Non-stop texts since you told her what happened. We’re gonna talk tonight so don’t worry.”

“Good,” he grunts. “Love you, pup.”

“Love you, too.”

“I love you, too!” Lark basically screams. “Eat, sleep, rest, and you call us if you need us! Love you, Ronny!”

I chuckle. “Love you, too. I’ll talk to you guys later.”

I won’t admit it to my uncle, to anyone in my family really, but I am so fucking ready to unplug the next few days it’s not even funny.



Colt wasn't lying when he said I've been on this without a break for months, not since I brought Lark to the compound and found out where she came from.

If it wasn't hours of research into everything she told us, it was long weekends of driving and casing locations, intel and stake outs in order to get facts straight. Then there was the hours and hours of planning, the strategy meetings and phone conferences with Kai and the others once Frankie went undercover. And that... man, that was terrifying. It was the key to getting in though, the most vital piece to the fucked up puzzle and from there it was total chaos from infiltration to explosion. Cleanup and recon was no joke, recovery a bitch, and you throw in the fact that I was still going to school and working through most of it? Yeah, I'm ready for a goddamn break.

But again, I'll never admit that to my family but not because I have something to prove. Nope, I did all of that, am still doing all of that, because it's just what you do for family, and since ours has had more than our share of crazy wars and homicidal psychos, I won't ever complain.

We're a clan, it's just what we do.

Which reminds me...

I check my phone and realize my signal has dropped, then toss it on the passenger's seat with an irritated huff.

Colt wanted me to have Vega call VivaDee to have her and Ainsley move onto our property.

She won't want to, I know that crazy banshee well enough to know that, but she'll understand where my family is coming from and eventually agree.

It might take promising to move her turn of the century mansion to Dragovihk land to get her to do it, but VivaDee will, and my uncles will figure out how to move her house if they have to.

They actually want Bella and Wes—once we rescue him—their kids, and anyone else we rescue to move onto our property too, and I'm also supposed to talk to them about that.

I doubt they'll care and I'm definitely glad Kai and his brothers basically bought a whole city worth of land, but it also means building more houses or moving one big ass one in order to accommodate our new members. Probably both.

And that's all dependent on whether or not I remember to have those conversations when I get back to the cottage since I'm too goddamn tired to even think straight.

*Ugh.*

## CHAPTER 14

# SOULMATES?

## RONNY



Five hours later, because it wasn't *actually* terrible driving through a blizzard, I roll up to our rental more tired than I think I've ever been.

Thanks to my new friends, ibuprofen and Tylenol, I'm just a little achy, but my exhaustion is no joke and it definitely overpowers the hollow feeling in my gut that says I haven't eaten yet today. But food is just gonna have to wait until I take a nap.

With a huge sigh, I push open the driver door, basically melt out of the Range Rover, and the second I round the front of the vehicle, my sluggish mood is replaced by tension tight enough to pop.

"Ronin Abraham Caldwell, you son of a bitch, how dare you!"

My shoulders touch my ears as I cringe, then slowly lift my eyes to the front door, my gaze clashing with the most fiery stare down I've ever been subjected to.

Nova is standing on the porch, her hands balled into fists and shoved on those curvy hips, her foot tapping out a pissed off rhythm, her eyes wild and downright angry while they throw daggers at me. Nova's pouty lips are pursed into the scowl to end all scowls and if she's not careful, her light blonde brows are gonna slide right off her face from how furrowed they are.

But my gods, I've never seen anything more beautiful.

Spun gold waves thrown into a careless and messy topknot, Nova's cheeks flushed, her breasts rising and falling against the oversized sweater that's slipping off her left shoulder, the fabric pumping just as hard as her chest, and fuck, those goddamn yoga pants are going to be the death of me. Nova is hands down the sexiest thing I have ever seen and her irresistible look is topped off by the fuzziest pair of socks ever made.

*Gods, I love her so fucking much.*

Even when she's trying to kill me with her eyeballs like she is right now.

"Where the fuck have you been?" she screeches.

Another cringe over her use of the F word has me totally motionless, and when I frown because I don't understand why she's so mad, Nova gets even madder.

"Don't you give me that look!"

My frown deepens. "What look?" *I know the look.*

"That!" Nova points in the general direction of my face. "That infuriatingly sexy confused frown. You don't get to use that on me right now, bucko!"

*Ok, maybe I didn't know the look.*

Confused? Yeah.

Frowning? Totally.

Sexy, though? That's news to me. Nova has never ever used that word to describe me in any way. And I think I like it.

"Sexy?" I lift one brow, still frowning in order to hide my smirk. Something I almost fail at when my peach turns the deepest shade of red I've ever seen her sport. It doesn't slow her down though.

"Where the hell have you been?!"

"I went to check on things."

*Gods, she's pretty when she's flustered and angrier than a bull.*

“Things?” Nova huffs, her foot still tapping away. “You went to check on *things*?”

I nod.

*Why the hell is she so mad?*

“And you didn’t think you should wake me up? Tell me you were going to *leave for hours*? Couldn’t even write a fucking note?”

I blink once, then twice at her use of that word again but also because the thought never crossed my mind. I mean, she was sleeping hard when I got up so I didn’t want to wake her, and I just figured this wasn’t really something she needed to know. Not that I was going to keep it from her, not at all, but it didn’t really occur to me to leave a note for her or anyone else.

“Ugh!” Nova throws her hands up, the look on her face a combination of pure frustration, exacerbation and... worry? “I can’t believe you don’t see the problem here!”

I lean my hip against the grill of the Range Rover and cross my arms against my chest. “Enlighten me, then.”

“I shouldn’t have to,” she snaps.

We stare at each other for a few beats, our eyes locked, the silence stretching between us. Gods, she really is pissed at me and I’m a big enough idiot to be totally in the dark over why.

I was just following up on some stuff, trying to scope out where I was held for a couple days while the sun was out, while I wasn’t fighting for my life. I had to do it, needed to get info back to Colt and the others but I didn’t think anyone would have a problem with that, and definitely didn’t think Nova would be ready to tear me a new asshole over it.

Nova groans, her eyes to the sky while she sends up a mumbled prayer for strength before she continues staring and growls, “You were *gone*, Ronny! No one knew where you were, we couldn’t get a hold of you. You disappeared and...” Her eyes flick to the woods beyond the fence and I swear I see them glimmer with tears. “You were gone.”

“I came back. Wasn’t gone that long. It’s not a big deal.”

Anger flashes across her face as her head swivels in my direction. “Not a big deal, huh?”

I shrug.

*Females are fucking confusing.*

“Not a big deal?!” Nova starts marching down the steps, her socked feet stomping through the snow, and that’s when I finally do something other than stare at her.

Before she even hits the walkway, I’m in front of her, my hands on the back of those thick thighs while I hoist her in the air and get her feet out of the snow.

Nova gasps, her hands grabbing at my shoulders to find purchase, her legs locking around my waist so she doesn’t fall. And fuck me, if this doesn’t feel like the most natural, the most right and perfect thing to ever happen I don’t know what would.

With wide, shadowy eyes, Nova stares at my face, her breathing quick, the pulse in her throat fluttering against her creamy skin. “This... this was a big deal, Ronny.”

Supporting her with one arm, I hold her closer and bring my hand up to push a few loose waves out of her eyes. “Why, Peach?”

“Because...” Her gaze bounces between my light blues and my lips. “Because I... I almost lost you once. I...”

“You what?”

“I... I can’t go through losing you again.”

My goddamn heart is pounding, pounding so hard I’m sure she can feel it against her own chest but just when I’m about to speak, about to say anything I can muster in response that isn’t confessing my undying love for her, Nova beats me to the punch.

“Fuck it,” she whispers a nanosecond before her hands cup my cheeks and her lips are on mine.

*Holy fucking shit.*



The explosion of sparks behind my still open eyes has the world tilting on its axis, the dark as night bolts of lightning cracking between our lips then scattering over every inch of my skin. My entire body sings with the intensity of it, the way I feel how soft and supple her lips are, the sweet taste of them flooding my senses through the crackling heat and the extreme cold that simultaneously blanket me head to toe. It's the same kind of feeling I get from the simplest touch, the most minimal contact with her, but right now it's amplified by about a billion and I don't ever want it to stop. And while Nova owns my mouth, her fingers digging into the scruff on my cheeks, one word screams in my head with the most unshakable confirmation, a certainty that I couldn't deny even if I wanted to.

*Mine.*

The word pounds in my skull, thrums through every ounce of my blood, burns through my veins and scorches every inch of my body and blazes through my muscles right down to my very bones.

Nova is *mine*.

My peach, my best friend, and *my fucking mate*.

My hand on her thigh slips higher to her ass, squeezing it hard while the other slides along her jaw until my fingers are tangled in her hair then cradle the back of her head so I can tilt it, slanting my mouth over hers to deepen the kiss.

Nova whimpers as I tease her lower lip with my tongue, licking along the seam of that pouty mouth and when she opens for me, her fingers dive into my hair under my beanie and tug at the roots.

Our tongues touch, tentatively at first but that's soon replaced by an urgent need, a violent hunger that I've never felt before, one that makes my wolf howl in possession so loud I'd be shocked if I was the only one who heard it.

And when Nova abruptly breaks our kiss and looks at me with wide eyes, I'd put money on her actually hearing my wolf's very final claim on her, too.

“Jesus...” she breathes as she searches my face, her chest pumping with everything but anger. “You’re... I heard... I’m...”

I grin like a motherfucker. “You’re *mine*.”

Those galaxy eyes, those bottomless orbs of shadow and magic somehow widen but Nova nods and drops her forehead to mine. “You’re... you’re my divined.”

*Damn straight I am.*

Not that I could believe it before, could accept the signs that pointed toward this being true all along, but the facts are right in front of me now, stone cold and irrefutable.

I’ve been in love with this woman since we were kids because we are each other’s fated ones, and now that it’s all out there, I can practically see our bond vibrating in the air around us.

Nova stares at me a little longer, her hands on my face, forehead still pressed against mine. Those eyes are swimming with unshed tears but I know without a doubt they’re happy ones, especially when this girl destroys me with her next words. “I’ve been in love with you since the day we met.”

“Yeah?” I must be smiling like a lunatic. “That long, Peach?”

She nods against me, a lone tear rolling down her cheek. “Longer probably. I feel like I’ve loved you my entire life.”

Instead of using words, I growl, fucking growl my satisfaction at that, but when I inch forward to press my lips to hers again, Nova starts to cry and pulls back slightly.

“Nova?” She hasn’t pulled back completely, she’s still holding my face, still a few inches from me but gods, just that simple act has me feeling rejection to the max. “Peach? What is it?”

Nova snuffles. “You’ve been right in front of me this whole time...” More tears slip down her flushed cheeks. “I just don’t understand how...”

*Oh my gods, she’s going to reject me.*

Nova is going to reject me with some long-winded speech—that's just how she does everything—about how I've been in front of her this whole time, the two of us fated to be together but instead we became friends with too much to lose so we can't mate, can't pursue our bond because of that. It might not really make sense but I'm sure Nova will use our friendship as a reason why this can't work out and she'll reject me and I won't ever be the same again, I'll just be an empty miserable shell of myself without her, way worse than before because now I know Nova is mine and—

“We could have been doing this for almost eight years, could have been together that whole time if I'd have known. We missed out on so much.”

The breath I was holding whooshes out of me and blows right into her beautiful face. “That's why you're crying? Because we could have been kissing for years?”

Nova chews her cheek and nods, her fingers stroking the messy curls around the nape of my neck. “Why did you think I was crying?”

“Fuck, Nova.” I take a shaky breath and give her a relieved smile. “I thought you were going to reject me.”

Her head jerks back like I just slapped her. “Are you nuts? I just said I've been in love with you our entire friendship, and though I may not be a 4.0 GPA student, I am not that stupid, Ronin. You're everything I've ever wanted and now I know you're mine.”

“Gods, I love you.” I sigh as I wrap both arms around her tight.

“You... you do?”

“More than anything,” I growl, nip at her lips, and grin as she giggles. “The second I heard you sweet talking a baby cow, that's when you owned my heart, and I have loved you every second of every day since then.”

Nova smiles, the one that makes my insides melt and my dick twitch. “We're a real couple of idiots.”

I chuckle and nod. “We were young, still are. Neither of us knew what to do with those kinds of feelings and with our upbringings all we had to go on was what we were taught. There’s no handbook on how fated mates between wolves and sorceresses work.”

“We should write one.” Nova giggles harder. “Make it easier for our kids when the time comes.”

I arch a brow and smirk as Nova clamps her mouth shut, her eyes all but popping out of her head and she goes a shade so red it’s almost purple.

“Sorry.” She laughs nervously. “I didn’t really mean to say that. I just, well, I mean, just cause you’re my divined doesn’t mean we’re gonna start pumping out babies or something. I just meant there should be some sort of guide for people like us, ones that don’t have the advantage of a cut and dry mate bond or whatever. We don’t even have to have kids if you don’t want them. I just, I mean, I—”

“Nova.” More growling because I need to be inside this woman right fucking now but she blinks at me and my gaze softens. “We are going to have as many pups as you want.” I kiss her chin. “I want a whole house full, dozens of tiny little peaches running around.” A kiss to her nose. “You are the only woman I have ever wanted babies with, mate or not, and as soon as you give me the green light, I will knock you up so goddamn fast it’ll make your head spin.”

I kiss her lips, softly, sweetly, and when Nova melts into it, kisses me back with so much love I can feel it stretch from her heart to mine, all bets are off.

Nova is my fucking mate and I am going to claim her, *mark* her right fucking now.

“Where is your family?” My fingers flex against her ass, one of my most favorite parts of the goddess in my arms. “They in their rooms?”

She shakes her head and wraps her arms around my neck. “The twins took Mama into town to get her clothes and some other things she might need. Veg texted just before you got

home saying they were gonna try to wait out the storm at a restaurant.”

Her words cause several things to register at once.

One, my truck is gone. How I didn't realize that when I pulled up, I'm not sure, but it is so at least they'll be safe on the roads.

Two, the blizzard I drove back in has in fact become quite the storm and both of us are covered in snow, my peach wearing not nearly enough clothes for this garbage falling from the sky.

Three, we are totally and completely alone at a cottage with about fifty million fantasy inducing amenities and as I start walking us toward the front door, I know for a fact I'm going to get started on that list as soon as we're inside.

Given Nova is down for mating right this second and spending the rest of our night sweaty and naked.

Funny how all it took was confirming my best friend is my mate for that pain and exhaustion to fly right out the window.

“So what you're telling me is...” I walk up the steps and stomp my boots on the mat. “Not only did I become the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet because my best friend and girl of my dreams is my fated mate but...” Nova smiles so big and tightens her hold on me. “We're completely alone in a cottage that has at least a million different places I've dreamt of fucking you in, notable mentions being the shower, hot tub, in front of a roaring fire, and a huge California king?”

Nova sucks in a sharp breath as I kick the door closed and toe off my boots. “Ronny...”

I grin then squeeze her ass again because I *can*. “I have been madly in love with you for years, Nova Rain Baker, so in love with you that I haven't been able to even think of a life that didn't end up with you as mine, and no matter how long I've loved you or how badly I want you naked underneath me, I won't claim you until you're ready.” Without letting her go, I manage to shuck my coat, leave it in a heap on the floor and

start toward the stairs. “Even if that means my balls are bluer than my eyes when we rescue your dad.”

“Ronny.” She giggles. “I had no idea you were the kind of boy who talked dirty.”

“You make me fucking crazy, Nova.” Stepping into our room, I slowly set her feet on the floor. “Only you bring out the animal in me, and honestly, Peach, that was nothing compared to what my mouth is truly capable of when it comes to you because I promise, after that taste, I know my mouth can do *so much more*.”

Nova stares at me as I toss my beanie on the table, pulling my sweatshirt off before I toss that too. I meant what I said. I’m not going to mate her until she’s ready, but my gods, it is going to kill me to wait. I won’t tell her that though, won’t tell her I’ve dreamt of fucking her, making love to her for years, and want nothing more than to do that right now and in a way I’ve never been with anyone else, a way I’ve never wanted to be with anyone else. And yeah, I want this woman raw, need her that way, have to have my scent inside her, filling her to the brim while I mark that sweet flesh on her shoulder so every motherfucker from here to eternity knows this woman, knows Nova, is mine. It very literally might kill me, but I’ve waited eight years to kiss her, and she was the one to make the first move so a few days, weeks, whatever shouldn’t be that hard. Not to mention I can still do other things in the meantime and let me tell you, after tasting her lips I want to taste all of her to find out if every inch of her is just as sweet.

Even if Nova isn’t ready to mate I can probably convince her to let me eat her pussy, right?

My t-shirt comes off next and I swear to gods it’s because I’m soaked to the bone, my clothes wet from the snow and Nova’s are worse. As much as I want her to follow my lead and start stripping out of the fabric that is clinging to every one of her curves, again I won’t push. But I do like the way she’s looking at me.

I yank my belt free, pull off my socks then stop, wait for her to do or say anything, but when she does, fuck I wasn’t

ready for that.

“Why did you run when you saw me naked?” She’s not looking me in the eye, Nova’s technically asking my chest that ridiculous question, but I get it. I just wish I didn’t feel like such an ass because obviously now it makes her question everything I’ve said so far.

With a grunt, I shove my hand back through my hair. “Nova...”

She shakes her head, and wraps her arms around her waist, a protective gesture but she’s also shivering. “I know I’m not built like other girls, I know that. Too much junk in my trunk, no thigh gap and gods knows my boobs are almost a C-cup on a good day but...” Nova chews her cheek as her eyes dart toward the bathroom. “I just, well, I know I’m not anyone’s fantasy and since you ran—”

“*Stop.*” I really shouldn’t have growled that but I’ll be damned if I stand here and listen to her berate herself because I’m an asshole. “Nova, look at me.”

Slowly, and with more hesitance than I’d like, her eyes finally connect with mine but she doesn’t speak.

“You are hands down the most beautiful female I have ever met. I thought that the very first time I saw you and I’ve thought that every time I’ve seen you since. Your *trunk* is perfection, absolute perfection, and it’s something my eyes are super familiar with because every chance I got, they memorized each curve and dip, the way it moves when you walk, which drives me wild, just like your thighs.” I take a step toward her, not too close but enough to make sure she keeps looking at me. “Your thighs that are strong as fuck because I know you do yoga and take care of your body, but if anything you did changed one thing about your body even in the slightest way I’d have to demand you stop immediately. Changing your body would also change the image I’ve had of your sexy as fuck thighs wrapped around my waist or my head.” Nova is blushing so hard right now but she’s fighting a smile, I can see it. “And as for your tits? Jesus, how can you not see that they were made to fit perfectly in the palms of my

hands? You are beautiful, Nova, gorgeous, sexy as fuck, and I don't give a good goddamn if you're anyone else's fantasy because you are mine. *My* fantasy, *my* every wet dream, and you are the most perfect woman in every fucking way. You're *my mate*, my entire world, and if you ever speak another negative word, have another negative thought about your unmatched beauty and goddess-like body, I may just have to punish you for it."

Nova sucks in a sharp breath as I take another step toward her, her smile still hiding behind the way her cheek is between her molars and despite everything I just said, I can still see the question in her eyes.

*Why?* Why did I run when I walked in on her?

So I tell her. "When I walked in on you, when I saw more of you than I've ever seen before, my fucking brain short circuited. I've wanted to see you naked for-fucking-ever and my dick went rock hard so fast I was lightheaded, but—"

Nova nods. "I called you a player who goes on pussy patrol."

I chuckle then take another step forward. "I didn't want you to think I was objectifying you, that you were just another girl for me to prey on. At the time, I thought it was pretty clear what you thought of me and I didn't want to add to that by gawking at you with the hard-on to end all hard-ons."

"I didn't mean what I said," she whispers. "I was... I was jealous, so super jealous especially after I thought you were bringing a date to my party. I know you're not like that, Ronny. I mean, I'm not naive, I know you date or whatever but... I don't know, I'm just not as experienced in some areas and you throw in the fact that I was jealous and trying to convince myself we'd never be together, I just... I spoke out of turn and said things I didn't mean."

Ignoring the need to delve into all the ways she may be inexperienced, I step close enough that our toes are almost touching. "None of it matters now, Peach. The only thing that matters is you knowing that when I saw you naked I was seconds away from bending you over the foot of our bed and



taking you right then and there. You are all I've ever wanted, I love you more than anything in the world, and if you'll have me, I'm yours forever."

When Nova smiles, it's like a punch right to the heart. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to hear those words."

"Pretty sure I do, actually." I arch a brow as she giggles. "Wolves get that insta-love, baby. You were mine the day we met, whether I knew it or not, and I haven't had possession of my heart in just as long."

"So..." Nova chews her cheek. "So you forgive me for basically calling you Sigma?"

I bark out a laugh. "As long as you forgive me for running from your naked beauty instead of enjoying it the way I wanted to."

Nova nods. "Despite the way it made us act like idiots, I'm glad our friendship was so important to both of us. Just wish I woulda kissed you that first summer like I wanted to, coulda saved us a lot of trouble."

"You wanted to kiss me when I was an awkward, gangly, pimple-faced ranch hand?" I grin and let my fingers ghost along the drenched fabric of her sleeves.

"Especially then." Nova smirks. "You weren't as full of yourself yet."

Another laugh. "Right, cause my ego is so out of control now." I hit the bottom of her sweater, curl my fingers under it, and search for permission in her eyes, and when Nova only lifts her arms in response, lets me peel that cold, wet, knitted disaster off of her, I groan. "Fuck, Nova."

She pulls her eyes from mine to glance down at the bright pink lace covering the most glorious tits in the history of tits, then looks back up at me with a wicked gleam I've never seen before. "There isn't much you don't know about me, Ronny, but I know for a fact you didn't know that I'm a sucker for lingerie. Specifically matching sets."

And now my dick is punching the fly of my jeans so hard he might actually break through.

If we don't mate tonight, fine, but that means I'll be spending most of it in the bathroom taking care of what will no doubt be a permanent and painful boner.

"I fucking love pink," I growl then trace the strap over her shoulder to where the lace sits perfectly over the swell of her breast. "Fucking love it more on you."

"I know." Without warning, Nova lifts her hands to my chest, lightly brushes my chest hair with her palms before she fucking flicks my nipple rings then gives them a little tug. "It's always been your favorite."

My teeth are clenched so goddamn hard I might need to see a dentist, and my fists are rolled tight enough to draw blood in my palms, but that simple touch has me seconds away from mounting her and so help me, if she does it again, Nova won't know what hit her.

Something she clearly understands because the little tease barely touches them as she pulls away, takes a step back and hooks her thumbs in the top of her yoga pants. "Wanna see the rest?"

I nod because I can't talk, and fuck yes.

I want to see the matching thong, I want to see that entire tattoo, I want to see her pussy and how wet it is for me because I can sure as fuck smell it. And I absolutely want to see my girl standing in front of me owning her beautiful body and smiling the way she is as Nova's eyes travel from my chest to the front of my jeans.

"Jesus..." Her pants drop to her ankles and she steps out of them and her socks while her stare zeros in on my cock. "Oh boy."

I'd chuckle right now if I could, but I can't.

Nope, I can't even form a coherent sentence or thought because yep, totally a thong and fuck me, Nova is *dripping*.

I will wait to mate if I have to but goddamn, her pussy smells incredible and the fact that I can see her arousal through that lace has me so close to busting in my pants I can't take it.

Which is why I palm my dick through the denim and give it a hard rub.

“Ronny...” Nova watches as I do it again. “I... whoo lord, Ronny, I have to tell you something.”

I don't stop but nod. “Tell me, Peach.”

“Well...” She swallows hard, those gorgeous eyes watching my hand and the shadows swirling in them almost appear to reach out of the center and touch the white. “I... I maybe sorta saw something I shouldn't have.”

“Like what?” Talking is fucking hard right now but my cock is harder and he needs some kind of relief so I have to keep doing this. Definitely helps that she seems to like it.

“When we were in Montana...” Apparently, Nova wants to kill me because her delicate hands reach out as she speaks, her fingers grabbing at either side of the button on my fly. “I heard you in the bathroom and I thought you were hurt, so I peeked inside.” She pops the button, forces my hand away and slowly unzips. “But you weren't.”

My heart is going to pound out of my chest, maybe just explode all over the place.

Especially when Nova glances up at my face, licks her fucking lips then starts to push my jeans down over my hips.

“You weren't hurt, Ronny, and that should have been enough for me to leave but I didn't. Instead, I stayed and watched.”

I groan as my pants hit the floor, my cock jutting proudly from my body and pointing toward the ceiling. “You watched me...”

Nova nods then takes a step back so she can see all of me.

“You watched me get off in the shower?” My hand is around my dick, squeezing my knot as I give it a good hard stroke. “Watched me come to the thought of you?”

She nods again, watching me now with wide eyes, her arousal so obvious and potent I can practically taste it in the

air. And fuck if I don't almost lose my shit when Nova reaches behind her, unhooks her bra and lets it fall to the floor.

“God damn...” I growl and pump my cock, my fist tightening each time I get to my knot at the base. “You are fucking gorgeous.”

Nova blushes. “You are gorgeous, Ronin. I've never seen anyone as beautiful as you.”

*Ok, so that definitely is a big ass boost to my ego.*

“I have something else to tell you,” she almost pants and hooks her thumbs in the top of her thong, but I have to stop her.

“Nova...” I grunt through my teeth. “Baby, finish your sentence first because the second you lose that sexy scrap of fabric I can't promise I'll be able to do anything but mate you let alone continue a conversation.”

She drops them anyway.

Little minx is gonna pay for that.

Unfortunately, it's her next words that have me closing the gap between us quicker than I ever have before.

“After I watched you in the shower, I got into bed and touched myself to thoughts of you jerking off and moaning my name.”

And I'm on her.

I fucking pounce, cradle her face in my hands and slam my mouth on hers.

It's a mess of lips and teeth and tongue, starving, fevered kisses that will definitely leave us both bruised and puffy later.

Ask me if I care, though.

I don't.

I want every single part of this female blossoming with my mark, reminders of who she belongs to, who she will be with, the only male she'll have for the rest of her life etched across her beautiful skin.

I back her toward the bed, a brazen move since she hasn't said the words I need to hear but Nova doesn't seem to mind. She keeps kissing me, owning me while she lets me move her to exactly where I want her.

Nova moans into my mouth as I fiddle with the tie in her hair, freeing the damp waves of gold and letting them fall to her back.

Her hands grab at my hips when the back of her legs hit the end of the bed and that alone has them jerking forward, has my cock pressed to the soft skin of her belly and fuck, what she does next has me unraveling fast.

Nova slides one hand over my hip, pushes it along my abs and up between my pecks, her fingers curling in my chest hair before they move to tug my nipple ring. But that's not all, oh hell no, her other hand traces the groove in my other hip, follows that V toward my happy trail until she's palming my cock, Nova's delicate hand stroking me so slow I see fucking stars.

"Baby..." I grunt and roll my hips against her. "Nova, baby if you keep doing that I'm going to come all over your stomach."

She smiles against my lips then sucks on the lower one. "Then you better get inside me, Ronin, I don't want you coming anywhere but there."

*Fuck. Me.*

And she said *I* have a filthy mouth.

"You sure?" My hands slide down her throat, brushing against the curve of her breasts and further until I'm cupping that beautiful ass. "You know what it means if I do that."

Nova nods and gives me the most stunning smile. "I do. I know what it means and I want nothing more than for you to claim me as your mate, Ronny. I love you and I've been dreaming of this day for over seven years. I don't want to wait anymore."

With a growl straight from my wolf, I lift her against me, my dick now pressed between my stomach and her dripping

wet pussy, then climb onto the bed.

“I promise, next time I will worship your body the way it deserves but if I don’t bury myself inside your sweet little pussy right now I very literally might die.”

Nova giggles as I lay her out and make sure her head is on the pillows. “And what a shame that would be.”

“Gods, you’re beautiful.” My eyes drink her in, her stunning face with the shadows swirling in her eyes, the flush to her cheeks, the way her lips are already swollen from my kisses. And her body, Jesus, it is fantastic. From her perky tits with soft pink nipples to the soft flat plane of her stomach, the wide curve of her hips with that sexy as fuck tattoo and holy shit, her delicious pussy with the tight triangle of light blonde hair. I didn’t notice that before, not that I got a good look, but Nova is all natural and I fucking love that. My mate is a fucking goddess, the sexiest combination of sweet and innocent with fire and heat, the whole goddamn package and she is all fucking mine.

“Ronny?”

My gaze flicks to hers, the vulnerability, the happiness, the purest love I’ve ever seen staring back at me. “Yeah, baby?”

Nova clears her throat but her smile is breathtaking. “Is it... is it going to hurt?”

I flatten my body on top of hers and cage her head between my forearms. I know she means when I bite her because you can bet your ass I’m going to, but I try to ease her nerves a bit. “Probably a little at first. My knot might be a little uncomfortable, and my dick is pretty huge so...”

She swats my shoulder and giggles while she blushes. “I know that. I wasn’t kidding when I said my experience isn’t much, and I’ve definitely never had experience with anything like what you’re packing but I meant—”

“When I mark you.” Satisfaction rumbles deep within me knowing my peach is going to give me as many firsts as she can. I know she’s dated and I know she’s not a virgin but I also know how important intimacy is to her so I have a feeling

there are things she hasn't had the joy of doing, and I am going to make sure she does every one and then some.

First up on that list? Making sure she comes so hard while we make love for the first time I erase every guy she's been with before from her mind. But first I need to make sure she knows exactly what's going to happen when I do that. "It may sting at first, might pinch when I bite you here." I dip my head and lick the decadent flesh where her shoulder curves into her throat. "But the pain won't last."

"It won't?" Nova shudders as I lick her again.

I shake my head then meet her eyes. "The pain will quickly be replaced by a pleasure so great you won't even know it hurt in the first place. Chances are pretty high that it'll actually make you orgasm again."

Gods, she's adorable, that blush and all. "*Again?*"

"Oh yeah. You think I'm not gonna make sure you come at least once before I fill you with my scent, my seed, and mark you while I do it?"

Instead of words, Nova responds by tugging my face down to hers and kissing the breath right out of my lungs.

We kiss for what feels like forever, our lips sliding against each other's in the most passion I've ever felt, our tongues tangling in a dance I swear only we know.

Gods, I could kiss her forever and never get enough, never have my fill of this female, and my love for her just grows between one kiss and the next.

"Ronny..." Nova moans, her hips lifting and rolling against mine. "Please, Ronin. I need you."

Using my knees, I push open her thighs, push them wide and settle my cock at her entrance, the extreme heat of her core beckoning me like the warmth of a roaring fire in the middle of a cold winter storm. The head of my cock presses against her, proving without a doubt this is probably going to sting a little too because I can already tell it's going to be a tight fit, and I am fucking thrilled about that.

“You’re sure?” I ask against her lips, my eyes locked on hers. “You’re ready for this and what it means?”

Nova nods, her hands leaving my face to land hard on my ass where she squeezes. “I’m sure, and I’m ready. I love you, Ronin, and I want you to make me yours right now.”

I groan and kiss her because I have to. “You tell me if you need to stop, ok?”

She shakes her head, lifts her hips and wraps her legs around my waist. “No stopping. Do it.”

And I do.

Her words spur me on and before I can put too much thought into it, my hips snap forward and my cock sinks inside her to the knot in one quick thrust.

And my gods, my vision goes white, but Nova sucks in a shaky breath that leaves me completely still.

“You ok, baby?”

I blink down at her and relax when she smiles. “Perfect.” Then Nova locks her ankles across my lower back, flexes her fingers against my butt cheeks and smiles wider. “Now move, Ronin, I want to feel you.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I slowly withdraw until only the tip is inside her, then push back in almost all the way, spots dancing across my eyes, white hot pleasure tightening in my balls.

*Jesus, I’m gonna blow my load so fast it’ll be embarrassing.*

I have to get her to come quickly or else I’ll end up showing my mate I’m some two pump chump.

*Can’t let that happen.*

So I take a deep breath and repeat the action again and again, focusing on her face and the way Nova is staring up at me.



“I love you, Peach.” I brush my lips against hers, my rhythm steady, even, almost languid. “Love you so goddamn much.”

“I love you, too, Ronny.” My pace is thrown by her words, by her smile, and I slam into her harder than I planned to. “Oh gods, yes. I love you.”

*Hmm. Does my girl like it a little rough? Does Nova like to be fucked hard and fast?*

Jealousy tries to take root but I quickly push it aside, the idea of anyone fucking her hard and fast causing me to do exactly that.

My speed picks up, my thrusts become brutal and when I feel the first flutter of her walls around me, I swear I go blind for a second.

“Ronny.” Nova pants as I go harder, deeper. “Yes. Gods, yes! Ronny!”

I grunt into my next kiss then grab her thigh, pull it up higher to angle her hips and when my knot slips past her entrance so I bottom out, Nova’s nails dig into my ass so hard I’m sure she’s drawing blood.

“Nova...” I slam into her again and again, jerkier each time because the base of my cock has started to swell. “Fuck, Nova, baby, you feel so damn good.”

“Yes,” she hisses, her pussy clamping down on my cock like a vice. “So good, Ronin. So, so good.”

My hand slides between us, my thumb finding her clit and all it takes is one gentle swipe over that bundle of nerves, and my peach is screaming my name and coming so fucking hard all over my dick her entire body goes rigid with pleasure.

Which is when I feel my fangs extend, feel them grow along the top and bottom rows of my teeth, the need to mark her, the need to come, all of it so intense I’m not sure how much longer this is going to last.

“Peach...” I groan while her pussy contracts. “Nova, I—”

“Do it, Ronny,” she moans as she tilts her head to the side. “Do it now, please. I want you to mark me, make me yours, please.”

*Fuck. Me.*

Those words, the words I’ve dreamt of hearing come from Nova, words I wanted her to say and mean more than I’ve ever wanted anything has my head rearing back and a primal howl ripping out of my throat.

And goddamn, that makes Nova’s pussy start to flutter all over again.

“I love you, Nova,” I growl right before my teeth sink into her sweet skin, my jaw locked on the hollow of her shoulder so tight.

“Oh!” She cries out, her hands flying to my shoulders, her cunt milking me with every broken thrust. “Oh my gods. Ronny. Ronny, I’m coming again!”

*Hell yes she is.*

I can feel her orgasm race through her, feel her pussy strangle my cock and when my hips pump into hers even harder than before, my balls draw up tight, my knot swells, and I slam home one final time as it binds us together, my cock firing the first rope of my release deep inside her.

And that’s when I feel it.

My jaws locked on her shoulder, our simultaneous orgasms tearing through us both like lightning striking over and over again. That’s when I feel our bond weave our hearts and souls together with threads made of steel, unbreakable and stronger, more solid than anything to come before or after.

Nova is moaning my name like a prayer, chanting it in my ear while she holds me tight, both of us riding out the waves of our pleasure until they crash against the shore and reach a new height.

Just when I think my orgasm has slowed, the last few drops of my release finally wrung from my body, the place on

my shoulder where Nova is holding me, right at the top of my markings, grows hot and cold at the same time.

The skin pebbles with goosebumps; chills then heats, chills then heats, the sensation climbing up my neck and stopping just behind my ear.

My jaw tightens and right as my balls draw up yet again, Nova screams my name at the top of her lungs as a third orgasm races through her body straight into mine.

“Ronny!” she cries, her body writhing, her pussy gushing around my knot as my hips jerk forward. “Oh my gods, yes. Ronin!”

I release her on a growl then slam my mouth over hers, kissing her hard and deep while my hips twitch erratically, pumping a new and intensely satisfying orgasm into my mate, our bond glowing like black as night electricity in my mind’s eye.

One final thrust has me roaring, has me howling like the fucking animal I am before I almost immediately collapse on top of Nova.

She’s breathing hard, covered in sweat, and giggling a little as I bury my face in her neck. “So that’s what it’s like when a wolf mates a sorceress.”

I snort into her skin, can’t help but lick her mark which makes her pussy spasm around my cock. “Guess so.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, baby.” I kiss my mark and attempt to roll off of her so I don’t crush her. “So much more than I can say in words, Nova.”

She wraps her arms around me and keeps me on top of her, *inside* her. “Well you’re very expressive in other ways. I have a pretty good idea what those words can’t say.”

Exhaustion, heavy and deep, sets in as I nuzzle her throat. “Can we take a nap before I ravage you again?”

“Absolutely.” Nova giggles. “As long as you don’t move from where you’re at, we can nap as long as you want.”

“Gods, I love you.” Smiling like an idiot, I let my eyes drift closed. “You very literally are the perfect woman.”

And that is the gods’ honest truth.

## CHAPTER 15

**CONFIRMED**

## NOVA



I pry one eye open as Justin Timberlake starts singing somewhere in the distance, my half awake mind envisioning him dancing with giant croissants while he paints them with blackberry jam.

*Sexy Back*, that's the song I'm hearing, the one the croissants and JT are grooving to in case you were wondering, and it's Siggy's self appointed ringtone.

My eye closes again but I know I need to answer my phone, need to make sure the twins and Mama are ok. They've been gone since this morning and with the way the weather took a turn there's a good possibility they're having some issues getting back to the cottage.

With a sigh, I attempt to roll toward the nightstand but I can't.

I can't move at all.

Nope, I can't do anything except turn my head and watch my phone light up and vibrate across the wooden table because the majority of my body is currently pinned to the bed by a much larger, very naked one.

*Ronin.*

My cheeks heat when I realize my best friend in the whole world has every inch of his very hard, totally bare body wrapped around my also totally bare body, Ronny's arms and legs pinning me underneath him like he's holding his favorite stuffed animal while he sleeps.

I smile, turn my head the other way and come face to face with a mop of honey blonde curls, the spirals that aren't matted to his face tickling my skin, the rest stuck to his dewy forehead and cheeks, the leftover sweat from... *oh wow*.

My entire face burns when I recall *why* we're still sweaty, why we're both naked as the day we were born and tangled in bed together.

My best friend, the man of my dreams is my divined and we just...

I start giggling uncontrollably as Ronny burrows into my neck, his nose grazing the spot just below my ear. His scruff is rubbing all along my throat and my collarbone, his warm breath just as ticklish against my skin.

My giggling turns into full blown laughter, the kind I let loose minutes before I pee my pants, complete with shortness of breath and snorts that rival any hog on Caldwell Farms and somehow none of this wakes up the sleeping giant plastered to me.

"Ronny," I gasp, snort, and almost fart. *Gods, mated or not I refuse to fart in front of him still.* "Ronny!"

He grunts in response, nuzzles his way into my hair and help me, I'm gonna pee the bed *and* fart.

Then I'll be absolutely mortified and have to figure out a way to divorce my divined because I'll never be able to look him in the eye again.

"Ronny!"

He grumbles some incoherent bullshit and just when I'm convinced this is going to become a level five disaster of the worst kind, the sexy bastard's tongue snakes out and licks the mark he made on my flesh a little while ago.

All laughter stops, every inch of me quits moving completely—unless of course you count the violent clench of my pussy and involuntary moan that rolls out of my mouth.

"Hi, Peach." Gods, his voice is so rough and super hot when he's sleepy.



But I can't let that distract me.

Nope, I have to resist his charm and overall sexiness so I can get him off of me, run to the bathroom and call my brother back to make sure they aren't in trouble.

All of which would be way easier if Ronny wasn't now kissing that mark and shifting his big body around so his gigantic wolf dick is dangerously close to exactly where I want it.

Oh my lord, the man is hung like a horse and he is harder than stone right now.

"Why are you awake?" he asks in a tone that screams trouble while he nips my earlobe. "I don't think we slept long enough."

I mumble some gibberish as my eyes flutter closed, Ronny's hips rolling just a little against my already soaked lady bits.

Then his question registers and I free my hands enough to still his movements.

"Siggy called." He lifts his head and meets my eyes. "I need to call him back."

Ronny sighs but nods. "Yeah, you should. Could be important."

"Yeah." I smile, lean up and kiss him because I don't ever want to not kiss him again. "It'll be quick, promise."

He rolls off of me with a few grunts, which is when I realize we just had the most incredible sex of my life while Ronny was still recovering from horrible wounds and borderline hypothermia. I can't bring myself to feel bad about the sex part but he has to be in pain, so my divined will definitely be taking another herbal bath tonight.

I might even join him.

Gods, *my divined*.

Ronin Abraham Caldwell is my divined, my fated one and that makes me the happiest, luckiest girl in the world.

Especially when I glance at him from underneath my lashes and giggle at what I see.

Ronny is sprawled on his back, one arm propped behind his head, a hand resting over his heart, not one stitch of fabric covering any part of him. The man is not even a little self-conscious about how his huge and fully erect cock is practically waving at me. His eyes aren't even open and it's obvious he could care less about his current position.

I wish I had just a tiny bit of his confidence.

And boy oh boy, I definitely ain't mad at it.

I could look at naked Ronin all day long.

“Enjoying the view?”

I drag my eyes from his dick to look at his smirking face, those Caribbean blues hooded and dancing with amusement. “It's not bad.” I shrug for effect but I can't hide my smile. Or the way I'm blushing something fierce.

Ronny laughs, the rumble making my belly flip. “Not bad, huh?” The hand on his chest slides down his seriously defined abs, the dusting of dark blonde hair that leads to his dick before he skims his fingers over his erection and cups his balls. “Should probably work on that if your view is only *not bad*.”

I roll my eyes and giggle because this new level of closeness, this intimacy we now share makes me giddy as hell. “You do that.”

Ronny watches me while I scoot toward the edge of the bed, his stare burning against my back as I stand and wrap the sheet around me before I grab my phone from the nightstand.

He's still staring while I unlock my phone, relieved to see only the one missed call from Sig and no 911 style texts. They must have just been checking in or something. If it was an emergency, Sig would have blown me up or started rapid fire texting until I answered.

“Nova?”

“Hmm?” I hit Siggy’s missed call and bring the phone up to my ear, then turn to look at my beautiful divined.

Ronny nods toward me. “What’s that all about?”

“I don’t know yet, he still hasn’t answered.”

“Not that.” He smirks. “What’s with the sheet?”

I glance down at my impromptu toga then frown. “What about it?”

“Why are you wearing it?”

“Oh.” I look down again, shrug, and bite my lip. “Habit, I guess?”

“One I definitely have to break you of.” Ronny sits up a little then grins like he’s up to no good. “Don’t want you hiding from me, Peach. I want to see all of you, remember?”

“I just... I mean, I get that but—”

“Don’t even say it. Your thoughts are loud enough and I swear if you say the words out loud I will turn you over my knee and tan your sweet ass with my bare hand.” Ronny smiles, smiles so gorgeous it makes my eyes water. “Besides, I was balls deep inside of you not that long ago, I think it’s safe to say we’re past any need for modesty.”

“Ronny!” I gasp just as Siggy barks, “Who was balls deep where now?” in my ear.

I grab a pillow and throw it at Ronny as he laughs like a jerk, a gorgeous and super sweet jerk but he’s still a jerk for that, then scurry toward the bathroom.

Just before I disappear inside, I wait for Ronny to look at me then drop the sheet, shake my naked ass and giggle like crazy as he groans and cups his junk again.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sig chuckles down the line. “You sound way happier than the last time I talked to you.”

Shrugging even though he can’t see, I check out my reflection in the mirror and realize he’s right.

Sure, the last time I talked to either of my brothers I was a frantic mess over where the hell Ronny was but even still, this right now is the happiest I've been in a long while.

“Ronny’s back.” I grin, my eyes tracing his mark on my shoulder in the glass. “Got back a little while ago now but he’s ok and we were just—”

“Screwing like rabbits?”

“Siggy!” If I wasn’t giggling like an idiot my scolding would work way better. “He just did something funny, that’s all.”

“Right...”

“Honest.” Sort of. I mean, watching him groan and grab his dick was funny but I doubt my brother would see the humor in it, especially out of context. Then again, this is Sig I’m talking about, for all I know he’d laugh right along with me. “So what’s up? Everything ok?”

“You sound different.”

I blink at myself. “I sound different? Sound different how?”

Sig clicks his tongue. “You’re hiding something, baby sis. I can hear it in your voice. You’re super happy, giddy even, but there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I’m not hiding anything...” My eyes land on Ronny’s mark again, the skin a little pink where his teeth sank in but it’s already healing and becoming a beautiful design.

It actually looks a little bit like the tattoos on his right arm, the sharp edges and swirling patterns that reach from finger tips to shoulder, only mine is much smaller and a more feminine version. I should ask him about that. Maybe those aren’t even tattoos. Maybe they’re something wolf related and now I’ll have something wolf related too because I’m his mate and he claimed me exactly like he was always meant to.

I thought females usually mark their mates too though? I don’t know a whole lot about shifters, just what VivaDee told us and she said something about bites and marks exchanged as

a sign of their bond, said some shifters can only see their marks while others can see everyone's.

*Was I supposed to mark Ronny?*

Oh gods, what if I was supposed to mark him too but I missed the chance because I never grew fangs or whatever? What if I just fucked up our whole mating because I didn't know what to do and now it's not real or something? Oh gods, I feel sick. I need to ask Ronin. Yeah, I won't panic yet, I'll just ask Ronny and if he doesn't know we can ask Colt or my mama or someone. Everything is fine, we are mated, he is my divined, I'm sure I'm just overreacting. Yeah, that's all—

“Hello!” Siggy yells in my ear. “Earth to Nova!”

I pull my eyes away from the mirror and take a deep breath. “Sorry, sorry. What were you saying?”

He chuckles and I can picture him shaking his head. “Damn girl, I was talking for like ten minutes and you didn't hear a word, did you? What has you so distracted?”

“Nothing.” I sigh as I reach out and trace the pattern in the marble countertop. “I have to pee so tell me what you were saying so I can get to it.”

“Just go while we're on the phone. I have too many questions for you now that I know you're spacing out on me.”

Another sigh. “I don't want to pee while we're on the phone. I just want to talk about why you called, then I'll pee in private.”

Now Sig sighs. “Fine, but as soon as we're home I want the details, baby sis. Something is definitely up with you and now Vega is staring at me like he's gonna crawl through this damn iPhone and tickle the info out of you.”

“Sure.” Cause I can't really hide what happened while they were gone anyway. Not that I want to. No, I want to shout it from the rooftops that the man I've been in love with for years is all mine, but even if I didn't want to do that, my family would know.

First of all, Ronny's mark is in a place that is definitely noticeable, and secondly, I can smell him on me. In me? Whoa, that thought alone has my whole body blushing, but if I can smell Ronny's scent mixed in with mine then there is no doubt the twins will smell it. Mama too probably, and that alone tells them something big happened.

"Gods!" Siggy grunts. "You are impossible to deal with right now. You missed all of that again, didn't you?"

I chew my cheek and grin. "Sorry. I'm focused now, I swear."

"Right." He gives me an audible eye roll. "I was just saying we'll be back in about two hours. The snow let up some and the restaurant we've been holed up in is closing so we're gonna head home. Have you two eaten? Mama still wants to make the traditional Christmas Eve dinner."

My stomach growls in response. "We haven't. I don't even know what time it is."

"Almost nine. It'll be a late feast but we have to do it, or so Bella Baker says."

"Is there anything she wants me to get started? I can prep so it won't take as long." Then I frown. "Wait, if you've been at a restaurant..."

Siggy giggles, which makes me giggle. "Just appetizers and drinks." Then he drops his voice to a whisper. "Mama is a little tipsy so be ready for all the unfiltered nonsense you can handle."

"Oh boy. I bet she's more than tipsy. Months without a drop of alcohol? I'm sure Mama is feeling all kinds of loose."

"You know it." Sig chuckles but I hear the touch of sadness. This'll be our first Christmas ever without Daddy and that really sucks. "I'll text you the list of what Mama wants done before we get there. It's not much because she's insistent on doing this herself but she's gonna need the help."

I smile and nod. "Ok. Be safe. Tell Mama and Veg I love them, and I love you too."

“We all love you, baby sis. See you soon.”

“See you.”

I hang up the phone and set it on the counter, sigh, and finally pee after what feels like forever.

This Christmas is definitely going to be bittersweet. Daddy isn't here because he's still with that crazy doctor and on the run, so that makes it beyond bitter really, but this is also our first Christmas with Ronny, mine and his first special occasion as fated ones. *That* is super sweet.

“Everything ok?”

I jump as I finish washing my hands, my eyes darting to the mirror and whoo boy, what I see makes me feel all the things.

Ronny is leaning in the doorway, still naked as a jaybird and I cannot get over how the sorta shy, sweet boy I met years ago is so comfortable wearing nothing at all.

*Must be a shifter thing.*

Or it's because Ronny is built like a linebacker who had a love child with a Greek god and his dick is nothing to be ashamed of either.

He sends me a smile that would melt my panties if I were wearing any. “Linebacker and a Greek god, huh? Guess the view isn't as bad as you thought.”

I blush like crazy, drop my eyes from his and fight the urge to cover myself. “Can you hear all my thoughts now?”

“Only when I focus on them. Or if you were to send them to me. We'll be able to communicate telepathically through our bond any time we want, and you'll still be able to do it when I shift.”

“Will I be able to talk to Abe too?”

Ronny shrugs, comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, and rests his chin on the top of my head. “Probably. You heard him call out to you after you kissed me, I doubt that'll change now that we've officially mated.”

I lean back into him with a sigh, just reveling in how it feels to be surrounded by this man. “What else do I need to know about being your mate? I’m sure there’s all kinds of stuff that’s different from sorceresses and banshees.”

“Not really sure, Peach. There isn’t a mind link between your mom and dad?”

“It’s a little different for them. They don’t talk to each other in their heads but they are so in tune with each other that it’s kinda like that. It’s all feelings based for them.”

“Huh.”

“What?” I tilt my head back and look up at him. “Why the huh?”

Ronny frowns just a touch. “Just interesting. Vok and Cora don’t really have a mind link, more like intuition like your parents, but they can sort of have conversations. That’s probably because fae are almost telepathic and read people’s essence, though. Frankie and Zan kind of do too, not all the time or as fine tuned as a shifters, but I’m sure that’s because he’s an old as fuck demon with abilities he probably doesn’t even understand. Not to mention there is zero information documented anywhere on the demon mate bond.”

“So it’s rare for them to find their mate?”

“It’s basically unheard of. Demons aren’t supposed to be capable of love or forming bonds but Zan did, so he’s probably even more of a unique case than most.”

“Mama and Daddy have mate marks though.” I kiss his chin and turn back to our reflection. “Matching star shapes that resemble the North Star on the back of their necks. It’s why we all have astrological names.”

“I always wondered how they picked your names.”

I nod. “Yep. They’ve even got a few more picked out for when...” My words trail off as my heart squeezes in my chest.

“They’ll have more babies, Peach.” Ronny kisses the crown of my head then buries his nose there. “We will find your dad, bring him home, and you will no doubt end up with



a half dozen baby brothers and sisters as soon as they're settled... Shit."

He tenses for a second and I turn around to face him. "Shit what, Ronin?"

"I forgot to call Vega." He pushes a hand back through his hair on a sigh. "Colt, well Kai actually, wants VivaDee and Ainsley to move onto our property. I was supposed to have Vega call them and get that going now, and I was supposed to talk to him about you five moving to Dragovihk land too."

"Hold on." I frown as I lean back against the counter. "Back up. Who's Kai?"

"Our king, Andrej's younger brother, my uncle mated to my aunt Posey. He's the one who unified the shifters in Ashland and has been sort of ruling over our clan since we fought off Cyril and Ivan."

"Who the hell are Cyril and Ivan?"

Ronny chuckles. "There is a lot I need to tell you."

"Obviously." I smirk up at him. "And you can do that as soon as my brothers are home cause they're going to want to hear it too. In the meantime, tell me more about how you and your family plan to talk VivaDee Baker into leaving that big ass house to move into a commune of sorts."

"Yeah, I have no idea. I honestly figured the only way she'd do it would be if we actually moved that house onto our property, which actually makes a lot of sense because until your brothers and your parents can build their own places they'll need somewhere to stay that's close."

"And I won't?" I arch a brow.

"Nope." Ronny eliminates the space between us and slides his hands over my hips to my ass. "You already have a place. My place. You are my mate and there is no way in hell you're staying anywhere but with me."

The independent woman in me wants to argue, stand up and shout I don't need a man to take care of me, that I won't let a man tell me what to do. But the very newly mated woman

who is totally in love with her divined is swooning her ass off and punching the independent woman in the boobs.

“It isn’t much right now.” Ronny leans down and presses a sinfully sweet kiss to my lips. “But I’ve got plans for our cabin, blueprints and shit. I already started working on some of it but I can’t do a lot until the weather breaks, and by the time it does I’ll have enough saved to really get the expansion underway.”

I must look like a crazy person, my smile so wide it makes my cheeks hurt. “I liked what I saw of your cabin though. It was cozy.”

Ronny kisses me again and that’s when I feel his cock harden against my stomach. “*Our* place, and yeah, it’s cozy enough for the two of us right now but we’ll need the room when we start having pups. I’m probably going to have to change the plans some to accommodate the dozens of babies I’m gonna put in your belly.”

*Should that turn me on as much as it does?*

Probably not, I doubt most women go from zero to sixty at the mention of their man knocking them up with dozens of babies, but I sure did and now all I can think about is Ronny putting one in my belly right this second.

“Gods, it is sexy as fuck that you want to have my pups,” Ronny growls against my lips before he owns them. “So fucking sexy that the idea of it turns you on.”

“Mmhmm,” is all I can muster as he lifts me onto the counter and pushes my thighs open to make room for his hips. Is it always going to be like this? An urgent and unbridled desire burning between us? The intense and extreme need to be together in every way all the time?

“Yes,” he grunts, the head of his cock nudging my pussy. “Yes, it is.”

“Ok, mister mind reader,” I basically moan as Ronny rolls his hips and slides his shaft along my folds. “What am I thinking right now?”

He lifts his eyes to mine, kisses me nice and slow while he stares and I swear to gods I can feel his dick get harder. “You are full of surprises, Nova.”

I jut my chin out, demand another kiss, and wait.

“You really want to suck my cock?”

*Oh boy.*

Just hearing those words come out of his beautiful mouth has my pussy dripping down my thighs.

I’d be embarrassed if he wasn’t one hundred percent right.

So I nod. “I do.”

Ronny growls and kisses the breath right out of me but doesn’t stop rocking his hips. “Later. I need to be inside you again right fucking now.”

And as much as I want that, the independent woman raises her head in defiance again.

I pull away from his next kiss, grin in his face, and use Ronny’s confusion to push him back a little before I quickly hop off the counter and sink to my knees in front of him.

“Peach...”

I look up at him and smile, feeling powerful as hell over the way his chest rises and falls, the lust and the love in his hooded gaze, the way his cock twitches as I kiss his abs.

“Nova,” Ronny groans as I lick his happy trail then press open mouthed kisses to both hips.

“You want me to stop?” My hands slide up his trunk-like thighs, the muscles hard and tense under my touch. “Don’t want my mouth on you?”

He shakes his head. “Oh I do, I just—” his words turn into a hiss as I kiss the tip of his dick.

He’s big, so big, Ronny’s cock perfectly proportionate to his size; probably a solid eight or nine inches long, thick and girthy with veins that run base to head, and his knot is something else entirely. I know wolves have them, know a few

types of shifters do, same as I knew there are a few species with other extras in that department thanks to how open my Mama is, but seeing it in the flesh, feeling Ronny's knot and the way it swelled to lock us together when we made love, that's something else entirely.

It's amazing really, especially looking at the entire thing this close and realizing that huge piece of masculine beauty was inside me not too long ago. It's shocking that it fit to be perfectly honest but it did, and gods in The After, it was an incredible fit.

I make eye contact as I kiss the head again, moving my hands to his hips to lightly trace the V. "I've never done this before so you'll have to tell me if I do something wrong. I want to make you feel good, honey, and I want to taste you while I do it."

Ronny's eyes flare as he growls, those Caribbean blues going a shade darker. "You've never done this before?"

"Nope." I grab his shaft in my right hand, pumping it real slow and grin when a bead of precum forms at the tip. "Never wanted to before now."

"*Fuck...*" he moans as I lick the head of his cock, swirling my tongue around it the way I've seen in porn. Just because I'm inexperienced doesn't mean I haven't enjoyed my fair share of pornos. I have needs too, you know.

My pace is steady as I pump his cock, the soft velvet over hard steel hot in my hand. My hands that are always ice cold and I wonder for a second how that feels to him.

"Amazing," Ronny croaks out. "Your hand feels amazing."

I smile in satisfaction and sit a little taller because that makes me proud. "I'm glad you approve."

My left hand joins the party and goes right to his balls, cupping them, tugging the way Ronny did to himself, and when every muscle in his body goes tight right down to his fabulous bubble butt, pride swells in my chest because I'm doing that to him.

*Me.*

Nova Baker is turning her divined on just by simply touching him and that level of control has me squirming a little, has my pussy aching with need and dying for some friction.

Which is why I give Ronny's balls one more tug and squeeze as my lips close over the head of his cock before my left hand travels down his thigh then right between my legs while I start sucking him like Ronny is my favorite treat.

He is, in case you were wondering.

"Jesus Christ," Ronny moans as I take as much of him in my mouth as I can, hollowing my cheeks and using my tongue as I lift my hand to stroke the part that won't fit right down to his knot. "Fuck. Nova, baby are you..." He hisses as the tip of his dick hits the back of my throat. "Baby, are you touching yourself?"

I look up and smile around his shaft, don't stop sucking but widen my legs so Ronny can see, and when he does, I feel so incredibly beautiful from the look he gives me I could come on the spot.

"Goddamn, you are fucking perfect." He takes my hair in his hands, lifting it out of my face as he tilts his head just a bit so he can watch everything I'm doing. Ronny's eyes bounce between mine while I suck his dick faster, squeezing tighter with my hand before they drop to where my fingers are rubbing my clit, stroking my pussy to match the rhythm of my mouth.

I am very literally seconds away from a mind blowing orgasm but I don't want to come until he does.

And gods, I want him to come so bad.

Not just because I'm ready to explode but because I want to see what I do to him, see the effect I have on Ronny and taste him when he climaxes while I bask in the little bit of control I have over him.

I want to watch my divined unravel and drink him down when he does.

*“I fucking love hearing you talk dirty.”* Ronny’s voice in my head is just as sexy as it is any other time, especially when I watch him grit his teeth and drop his head back to the wall with a thud without breaking eye contact. *“You like sucking my cock, Peach?”*

My fingers move a little faster over my clit and I suck him a little harder as I whimper and send back, *“I do. I can’t get enough of the way you taste, Ronny.”*

“Fuck,” he grunts out loud, his fingers tightening in my hair. “I’m fucking close, baby.”

“I know.” I grin and release him with a pop, Ronny’s eyes snapping to mine as he growls before quickly reigning it in.

He watches with rapt attention, watches me as I get all kinds of brave and dip my finger deep into my pussy, coat them in my arousal and switch hands so I can use my wetness to work his magnificent cock.

Ronny groans as I do, his hips thrusting into my hand, into my mouth as I wrap my lips around him again and the second I start touching myself his dick hardens and thickens, his knot swelling before my eyes as his balls going so tight I know this is it.

“Nova...” Ronny pants. “Baby... I can’t... I’m gonna...”

He tries to pull out—such a gentleman—but can’t because I let go with my hand and just use my mouth, massaging his balls as I quicken my pace, sucking him faster, harder, more determined than ever to have Ronny come in my mouth.

And when he does, holy moly, that first taste sends me right over the edge with him, my own climax slamming into me so hard I have to remember not to bite down. A foreign and delicious heat races down my spine and explodes in my pussy, my screams muffled by Ronny’s cock and his own roar while he fires rope after rope of cum down my throat, all of which I swallow eagerly while waves of bliss wrack my entire body.

“Gods, Nova.” Ronny chuckles between shaky breaths. “That... that was fucking phenomenal.”

I smile up at him once his dick is no longer in my mouth, lick my lips and that's when the insecurities immediately start to creep in. "I did ok?"

He frowns down at me, watching me tuck my legs underneath my big butt and shrink into myself some. "Phenomenal is better than ok, Nova. That was so much better than ok."

"Yeah?" I blush and try to maintain eye contact. "I just... I've never done that before so I don't really know and I know you're too nice to tell me otherwise but I want you to be honest with me about it. If there are things I did wrong, things you would rather I do next time, I mean, you have to teach me or else I... just be honest and I'll do better next time."

I'm off the floor and back on the counter before I even realize Ronny moved. I blink at the serious and stern look on his face, chewing my cheek while I search his eyes. "I just want to make you happy," I whisper.

He sighs but cups my cheeks and smiles softly. "Nova, you have done nothing but make me happy for almost eight years. You are very literally the best thing to ever happen to me and that was true even before I knew you were my mate." Ronny smooths his thumbs under my now leaking eyes. "Just knowing you, experiencing everything that makes you who you are is the greatest joy I've ever felt. Your love for romance novels and musicals, your obsession with adult footie pajamas, the way you insist on watching horror movies with me even though you hide behind my hands the entire time." He smirks as I snort through my tears. "Every single thing about you makes me happy, from the way you chew your cheek when you're nervous to the way you snort like a pig when you belly laugh. I love the way you sing off-key and don't give a rat's ass while you do it, the way you clap over damn near everything, how you dance to the music in your head at all times. I even love how stinky your feet are after you wear your Chucks without socks for hours on end."

I swat his chest and gasp in mock appall. "My feet do not stink."

He grins and nods. “They really do, Peach, but it doesn’t matter. I love that about you, love everything about you because you make me the happiest I’ve ever been just by being *you*.” Ronny’s grin turns a little devilish. “And let’s not forget your face is fucking gorgeous, your body is to die for, and you suck cock like a goddamn champ.”

I giggle like an idiot then sigh. “I just... Ronny, I love you so much and have loved you so long that I don’t want to mess this up. I want to make you as happy as you make me, and I know I’m a little naive when it comes to certain things so I just, I just want you to be honest with me about it no matter what it is.”

“Are you my mate?” He asks with a serious tone.

I nod slowly. “Yes...”

“Do you love me?”

“More than anything...”

“Do I love you?”

I frown. “Yes, but—”

“Did I just come in your mouth in a never ending load of jizz?”

I scrunch my nose cause that was a little gross. “Yes, but —”

“Is my dick hard again just by being in your presence?”

My eyes widen as I look down between us. “Wow. It is...”

Ronny smiles when I meet his eyes again. “Are you gonna let me marry you, legally, after we find your dad and go home to our cabin together?”

My heart stutters, my belly flips, but I nod because I can’t speak. I’m crying instead.

“And are we gonna have millions of pups when you’re ready? A whole pack of pups and peaches running around driving us crazy?”

Another nod, and a lot more tears.



“Are you gonna let me love you for the rest of our lives, for the rest of eternity, because that’s the only thing that even comes close to describing how long I plan to do that?”

“Yes...” I practically sob.

“Then you, Nova Rain Baker, have already made me the happiest I could ever be. There is nothing you could do better or different because you are perfect, you are mine, and you make me happy just the way you are.” Ronny leans in and kisses me so sweet I cry harder. “You couldn’t fuck this up if you tried, baby. You’re perfect, stinky feet and all.” Another devastatingly beautiful kiss. “Now open your sexy thighs and let me fuck you on this counter so we can shower and get downstairs before your family gets back.” Ronny grins as I do what he asks. “If we hurry I can knock out my shower sex fantasy, too.”

I laugh as I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as we kiss, as he sinks into me on a groan.

We could have been doing this for years, sure, but that time doesn’t really seem wasted at all because it laid a foundation for our bond that made it unbreakable before it was set in stone.

Ronin Abraham Caldwell makes me happy just by being who he is, and I am so thankful he’s my forever, that he’s mine for all time.

## CHAPTER 16

# STORYTELLER

## NOVA



“I have another question for you, Peach.” Ronny grins as he pops a carrot into his mouth. “It’s a good one.”

I roll my eyes and continue cutting the carrots he’s stealing, the ones my mama wants to glaze and bake with the rest of the ridiculous amount of food she’s going to cook. “I bet.”

We’ve been playing this silly game of twenty questions since we got out of the shower, post *shower fantasy fun* as my best friend called it.

Despite how stiff his body still is, Ronny insisted on drying me off and dressing me, and while he did he asked about my tattoo.

I got it the Christmas we turned eighteen, a gift from Sig and Vega, and I honestly don’t know why I never told Ronny about it, it just never came up.

That didn’t suffice him though and since he knows me better than I know myself and called me on my bullshit excuse, I eventually told him it was insecurity based and that was enough for him to scold me then drop it. Ronny doesn’t like the way I sometimes talk about my body, and I don’t always care for how big my butt and thighs are or how not toned and a little pudgy my belly is, so having a tattoo there wasn’t something we could talk about before. Or now really, since my divined is just going to scold me for what I have to say.

*Such an alpha-hole, my Ronin.*

After that I asked him about his tattoos, which are wolf related markings like I thought, and as Ronny explained the ones for his Cherokee heritage, both the Moon Goddess and High Plains packs that his parents are from, and his status as Beta, that's when I noticed the new one that sits at the hollow of his shoulder and crawls up the side of his neck.

*It's my mark.*

My mate mark on Ronny's skin, the one I was freaking out over not making. Apparently, I did and my divined even remembered when he felt it happen.

When he *made me come my brains out for the third* time because even the sweetest males are cocky little shits sometimes.

We compared our marks, mine almost a fist sized replica of Ronny's Beta marking with what appears to be a supernova—I know, totally predictable—pattern through the center, and the one I made on him is similar. It's a variation of the North Star marking my parents have with the supernova around and through it, more of the sharp lines and swirls weaving it into his Beta and the rest of his marks seamlessly.

Our mate marks are so pretty and I love them, I just wish I knew how the hell I marked Ronny without feeling it.

*Anyway...*

After all that, Ronny's next question was about how long I've shaved my lady bits into *sexy shapes* because yes, he's a perverted boy still, and I told him I've been waxing since there was ever a need to. I'm pretty low maintenance in the grand scheme of things, but I do like to pamper myself from time to time and keeping my bits in tip top shape, even just for me, is no exception.

My next question? Yeah, totally asked about the nipple rings and when his response started with *Zan*, I knew three things without him finishing the statement.

One, he's only had them for maybe two years since that's about the time Zan moved in.

Two, Ronny's uncle probably talked him into getting the piercings.

And three, I'm going to kiss that demon on the mouth next time I see him because Ronin's pink nipple rings are so fucking sexy I can't stand it.

We hit a bit of a wall after that though because newly mated or not, Ronny and I already know pretty much everything about each other, so coming up with new questions has been a little tricky.

Which is also why the one he's about to ask makes me a little nervous because my divined is smirking at me like he's definitely up to no good right now.

"Ok, shoot." Then I frown and quickly add, "Why do you call me Peach?"

"I thought it was my turn?" My divined grins. "I'll answer your question but you have to answer mine first."

I sigh with a smile as I finish up the carrots. "Fine, fine. Ask away, honey, just don't forget what I asked you."

Ronny nods and his grin grows to evil proportions. "We established that you've never given a blowjob before that epic one you just gave me..." My eyes all but bug out as I blush down to my toes. "So, I want to know, my most important question is, have you ever received oral before?"

"Ronin!" I scold and choke on nothing but air. "That is hardly proper dinner table conversation!"

He rolls his eyes with a laugh. "This isn't the dinner table, Peach. It's the island, and you're prepping. Just cause I'm snacking while we chat doesn't mean this conversation is inappropriate." Then Ronny smiles proudly. "Besides, I'm your divined, I need to know these things."

"Well, I don't!" I snap. "I didn't ask you how many floozies have given you blowjobs or how many you've slept with before me. I'm not stupid enough to think that was the first time your dick has been in someone's mouth but I don't want specifics. Gods, Ronny!"

“You are so fucking sexy when you’re jealous.”

I scowl and snatch the tray of carrots off the counter then slam it on the burners of the double stove where the glaze is boiling. “Am not!”

“Are too.”

I huff and give him my back.

Our game was silly but it was fun before now, and I’m so not playing if we’re going to talk about past sexual encounters.

*Not. Happening.*

“Eight,” Ronny grunts behind me, which makes me pause.

“Eight what?”

“I’ve only been with eight before you, Peach, and none of them have given me oral because, well, the knot makes it a little weird and I’ve always viewed it as something too intimate to share with just anyone. And to be totally honest, only five of them were what could be considered a little more serious because... you know...”

My shoulders sag as I smile to myself.

That’s still five more than me total, but for some reason knowing Ronny hasn’t been with as many women as I thought he had—a number that was well into double digits in my mind—makes me feel a little less stabby.

“Not quite the player status you envisioned, huh?”

I turn to face him and sigh. “I didn’t mean that, honey.”

Ronny gives me a warm smile. “I know, just saying. I didn’t lose my virginity until I was almost eighteen and I only dated when you were in a relationship. Between all the shit going on with my family, school, and work, the fact that I’ve been totally in love with you for years, playing the field didn’t really hold much value to me.”

I lean across the island and give him a kiss then giggle when he nips at my lips. “In the name of honesty, I’ve only ever been with three before you and no, none of them ever

gave me oral. They didn't seem to want to, and quite frankly, I didn't really want them to either."

"Good," Ronny grunts as he gives me another hard kiss before he frowns. "Only three?"

"I never slept with Ricky."

"Thank fuck." He sighs. "I mean, I don't care about that, not really, and I wouldn't have cared too much if you did, but I cannot express to you in words how glad I am that you did not have sex with that asshat."

"Same." I laugh as I start peeling potatoes. "I still went and got tested anyway, didn't want him giving me some human STD by way of his uncoordinated kisses." Ronny growls and I laugh harder. "Oh stop. Ricky Schmidt was a terrible kisser but I thought he liked me so I dealt with it. No one, and I mean no one, kissed me like you do, Ronin. Your kisses are the best."

"Damn straight." He leans across the counter and proves his point, grabbing my chin and kissing me so good my knees buckle. "So what was your question?"

Leaning on the counter for support, I blink away the fog Ronny's lips leave behind and nod. "Right. I wanted to know why you call me Peach. You've called me that our entire friendship and I've never asked you why."

With a grin that could disintegrate women's panties everywhere, Ronny leans back into the high back chair and links his hands behind his head. "Well, for one, you're sweet, probably the sweetest girl I've ever met."

I smile because that's kinda cute.

It's not the whole story though, I don't need a mind link to know that.

"You're soft. Your skin, your hair, every inch of you is like silk." His grin grows. "So fucking soft and sweet."

Ok, yeah.

Ronin has always said things kind of like that, always commented on how nice my hair is, asked about my lotions



and stuff.

Still not the whole reason though.

“And you, my fantastic mate, have the most perfect, the most glorious, the most biteable peach-shaped ass I have ever had the privilege of staring at.”

“Ronny!” My gasp dissolves into a fit of giggles. “You’ve called me Peach since we were thirteen going on fourteen! There is no way that’s why you’ve called me that for years.”

He nods his head, his wild curls bouncing all over as he lifts one hand in the air. “Swear to gods, Nova. Your ass was the second thing I noticed about you and even at thirteen I wanted to sink my teeth into more than I wanted my next stolen copy of the Victoria’s Secret catalog.”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

My cheeks flame as I laugh harder. “My gods, I thought it was some cute little nickname because I got blasted on Peach Schnapps the night before we went back to Mississippi that first summer. I didn’t realize it was because you were such a perv even back then too.”

Ronny shrugs. “What can I say? You’ve always had a great ass.” Then he smiles. “Your affinity for Peach Schnapps helped too though.”

I giggle just as headlights shine through the front windows. “Gods, you’re ridiculous.”

“Nah. Just a guy who knows what he wants.”

I round the island and make my way toward the front door. “Just took almost eight years to get it.” I kiss him as I walk by and right when I hear my brothers clomping up the front steps, Ronny calls my name.

“Nova?”

“Hmm?” Glancing back at him over my shoulder, I smile then almost die when he speaks his next words.

With a smile and devious gleam in his eye, my divined says, “For the record, I want to eat your pussy.” Ronny smiles harder as I trip over my feet and the doorknob turns. “I’ve wanted to for years and as soon as we’re alone, I’m gonna show you just how badly I want to eat that tight little cunt of yours. Bet it’s just as sweet as the rest of you, right, Peach?”

“What’s sweet?”

My head spins toward the door as my mama stumbles over the threshold, my body buzzing and heart pounding, every bit of me on fire from those simple few words my Ronin just spoke.

Jesus, I am so turned on I can’t even walk.

*I should slap him for that.*

Ronny laughs while I try to find my footing and scowl at him over my shoulder before rushing to help my mother. “Nothing, Mama. Ronny was just talking about the glaze for the carrots.”

“It’s so yummy, Ronny!” she shouts in my face with a silly smile. “Sweetest thing you’ve ever tasted!”

“I have no doubt, Mrs. Baker.” My divined is laughing so hard right now and damnit, I start laughing too.

“Bella!” Another shout in my face as I help her with her coat. “You call me Bella, sweetheart. Once you share a torture chamber with someone you’re on automatic first name basis.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “Mama.”

“What?” She shrugs. “It’s true. Plus Ronny is basically like a son to me, what with the way y’all have been so close for years. We may have just met, but that boy is family all the same.”

“You have no idea how right you are,” I mumble as Mama leans into me to wrestle her boots off. “So what did—”

“I knew it!” Siggy practically squeals as he and Vega walk in, arms loaded with bags. “I fucking knew it!”

*Uh oh.*

Guess the cat's out of the bag.

I didn't think it would take long for them to figure out what happened between Ronny and I but shoot, that was fast even for my brothers.

"Knew what?" Ronny smirks as he walks over slowly and starts taking bags from Sig.

My brother claps the second his hands are free then pokes my divined right in the neck over my mark. "You two mated!"

My cheeks are going to melt right off my face.

With the way my family is, Sig is going to ask what position we used to do the deed and how many times I got off while we did it. Vega isn't going to ask any questions at all, he'll just give me the *I told you so and I'm happy for you* smile like he is right now, and my mother, well, she's gonna make this even more awkward than Siggy no doubt will.

Which she proves when Mama looks between me and Ronny with wide eyes then practically rips the collar of my sweater to look at my shoulder. "My baby is a mated woman?!"

I nod slowly, glance at Ronny who's chuckling while he hugs my brothers, then feel my eyes water when I see that my mother is crying. "Mama..."

"I am so happy for you," she shrieks and wraps me in a bone-crushing hug. "Your mark is so pretty, sweetheart! Gods, I could just scream I'm so happy!" So she does and it makes me giggle. "You didn't use protection, right? Made sure there wasn't anything between you?" Then she leans in and smells me, taking a huge whiff of my scent. "Oh good, you didn't. That's important. You don't want to ever use any protection, 'specially with a wolf. He has to mark his territory every time you make love, it's very important, you don't want —""Mama!" *Gods, I'm so embarrassed.* Doesn't help that Ronny is laughing his ass off either. "I am not having this conversation!"

"Nova Rain, we are having this conversation." Mama ushers us all back into the kitchen and plants me at the island.

“Now, I know not using protection is kind of scary but you’re both smart so I’m sure you’re clean, but it definitely increases the possibility of you getting pregnant sooner than you planned. That’s why I went on the pill when I mated your daddy. Are you still on the pill, sweetie? No condoms or anything because of Ronny’s scent markers but if you aren’t ready to start having babies yet, pups I guess?” She looks at my divined as he slides onto the chair next to me. “That’s what you call your babies right? Pups?”

“Yeah.” He grins and throws an arm over my shoulders as I drop my head into my hands. “We call them pups but Nova and I might not have wolves. Could be sorcerers or even banshees with her genetics.”

“Right!” Mama squeals. “Oh gods, you two are going to make the most beautiful pups ever. Blonde hair, pretty eyes. I cannot wait to be a grandma!” She sighs as she jumps in and starts cutting up the potatoes I peeled. “But I will wait if you aren’t ready yet. Daddy and I waited too. It’s nice to enjoy your mate for a while before adding babies into the mix, which is why if you’re not on the pill you should really get back on it. Are you, sweetie?”

“I am,” I grumble and hide my face. I should have prepared Ronny better for this. One conversation about how open my parents are on the way to talk to a deceased shifter definitely doesn’t seem like enough right now.

“Oh good. Not that I’m against you getting pregnant right away, you know we’d support you no matter what, but I’d really like to see you finish school first, make sure the two of you find a nice home for your family.”

Ronny starts rubbing circles on my back and it helps so much. “I have a house in Ashland. Gonna start on the addition as soon as spring hits.”

Mama claps her hands and bounces on the balls of her feet the same way Siggy and I do. “Oh how wonderful! You definitely have a keeper here, Nova. Smart, good looking, strong and capable with a house and plans for your future. Ugh, Daddy is going to be thrilled.”

Silence falls as soon as the words are out of her mouth and my heart grows a little sad. Daddy will love Ronny, there's no doubt in my mind, but we have to find him first and it kinda hurts that he isn't here to celebrate mating my divined with us.

“So,” Siggy clears his throat and hops on the chair next to me. “You guys keep it traditional and mate good old fashioned missionary style, or you get freaky right out the gate?”

I roll my eyes and groan.

*Called that one.*

But since he knows my brother just as well as I do, Ronny simply chuckles and says, “Wolves don't kiss and tell, man, that shit is private.”

“Wolves are freaky though, right? Zan was telling me about how sexual shifters are, wolves specifically. He said that's why he's always with Colt and Lark. Said the two of them are into the same freaky shit he is, why the four of them are so *close*.”

“Who's Zan?” Mama asks. “And Frankie and Colt?” Then she stops for a second as I lift my head. “Oh right, your aunts and uncles.” She starts humming while she boils water for the potatoes. “Wolves are supposed to be rather sexual creatures, promiscuous even.” Then she scowls at my man and points the kitchen knife at him. “Are you promiscuous, Ronny?”

“No ma'am.” He laughs. “My mother raised me better than that.”

“Good. Not saying I don't want you two to have a healthy and passionate sex life, but I don't like the idea of my daughter engaging in any foursomes.”

“Mama!” *Please just make this stop.*

Ronny leans over and kisses my temple while he continues stroking my back. “You don't need to worry about Nova, Mrs. Baker. I've loved her ever since we met, she's the only girl for me, always has been, and I have no intentions of sharing her with anyone. Your daughter will be very well taken care of and satisfied.”

I elbow him in the ribs as my mama beams at my divined. “Wonderful!” Then she frowns. “Your uncles have foursomes? Isn’t that... *wrong*?”

“Colt is my only uncle by blood.” Ronny is handling all of this so well, my mama’s crazy over sharing and prying ways. Makes me love him even more. “Zan is a demon, Colt’s best friend. Our clan is pretty hodgepodge but we’re still family.”

“With lots of kink,” Sig chirps. “Mama, all of Ronny’s uncles are so sexy and his aunts, lord have mercy, they could turn a man straight if he was so inclined.”

Mama nods. “Lark is beautiful, I have no doubt the rest of his family is the same. How many uncles do you have, Ronny?”

“Eight. Five dragons, a vampire, a wolf, and a demon. Then there’s Hank, my aunt Posey’s dad who is also a dragon but he’s pretty much like a grandpa to me.”

“And they’re all mated?”

Ronny nods and starts in on all the information he has yet to share with most of us. “Starting from the top, there’s Andrej and Allie, he’s the oldest dragon and his mate is human. He helped us blow up the lab a few months ago and your kids met him just before we went to Montana. Then there’s Henrich and Grace, dragon and tiger. Kai and Posey, both dragons and he’s our king. Milos is the youngest of the four and his mate Casey is also human.” Mama sets a glass of water and some ibuprofen in front of Ronny because she’s the best, and he nods his thanks, takes the pills and continues. “Havok is a purebred vampire, older than the dragons but adopted into their family by their parents and he’s mated to Cora, the last remaining fae. Her adopted brother is Zan, the demon who is well over one thousand years old and Frankie is his human mate. They’re the ones adopting Chumani and Hotah’s pup, Akacheta.”

“Wow.” Mama blinks at him then frowns. “That was six.”

Ronny chuckles. “Well, you know Lark and she’s my Uncle Colt’s mate and Luna, then there’s Karel, the dragons’

uncle by blood but he lost his mate during a war that forced the Dragovihk's to come to the states."

I turn to him as things start to click. "Is that where Cyril and Ivan come in?"

"My mate is brilliant." Ronny smiles before he kisses my forehead. "Cyril of the Molnarva Clan started a civil war among dragons and eliminated most of their kind before he tried to do the same here in the U.S. His cousin and right hand, Ivan, was the bastard that killed my grandparents, Posey's mom, and Grace's parents. They had sick plans to rule supreme over shifters by wiping out anyone in positions of royalty."

From there, my beautiful divined shares about Nero, Havok's insane grandfather and vampire king, and the plans he had to eliminate shifters altogether. Thologar, Zan's whacko sire that controlled his soul and wanted the soul of one of Ronny's family members because he was super nuts.

It's kind of amazing, all the fighting and shit that's happened, all the terrible things that have taken place right under our noses. Well, VivaDee's nose since she lived there while it was all going on but still. And to think my divined, my beautiful Ronin, helped with some of that and has been working with his family on our most recent battle is kind of amazing. It's also kind of frustrating that he never shared it with us.

I get it, it's not like he knew we'd understand because we're mystics too, but Ronny has never even hinted at any family drama before and it hurts just a tiny bit since we're all so close.

Then again, we never told him about Mama and Daddy either so I guess we're even there, and thankfully we won't ever have any secrets after discovering we're all apart of the same world.

"So Kai, the king of all dragon shifters, is king of your clan in Ashland and he's trying to unify what's left of creatures of mysticism by centralizing them on your property..." Mama

nods slowly while she processes everything Ronny has been telling us. “That’s pretty ballsy.”

My eyes practically shoot out of my head because I can feel how proud my divined is of Kai, feel his loyalty and love for him, the respect and adoration over his king and his plan.

But Ronny just chuckles. “It is, sure. There are similarities between how each type of predatory shifter’s group works but there are also differences and it’s been a bit of a challenge to get everyone on the same page.”

“Throwing in fae and vampires and demons probably doesn’t help either,” Vega grunts as he sneaks a butter roll. “They don’t really follow a structural hierarchy.”

“Right.” Ronny nods. “But Vok lived with the dragons, Cora, too, to a degree. Zan’s a pain in the ass but he spent most of his life being told what to do by his sire and Ancients, and The Destroyer Himself. He challenges authority and stirs the pot but he’s also pretty damn loyal and a huge asset to have. Plus, he’s a great guy despite the way he tries to make everyone believe otherwise.”

“But there are more people, more shifters, mostly outside of the core group?” Veg asks.

Another nod from Ronin. “Ashland seems to be a sort of melting pot. People like us have gravitated to it for decades and at one point they had almost every kind of shifter living there in groups. Now it’s only apex predators and not many of those honestly, probably a total of fifty including us. That’s why Kai went overseas. He wanted to see what kind of damage Cyril caused, if there was anyone left they could bring back to Oregon.”

“Was there?”

Ronny shrugs. “Unsure. All this stuff with Kentworth has taken priority for most of us and the last time I talked to Kai he said they weren’t really finding anything but ghosts of the clans he once knew.”

“So what’s his next step?” It’s pretty strange how interested Vega is in all this but I’m not really surprised. After



all the research he's done, the way he's been leading our little family while we looked for Mama and Daddy, it makes sense that he'd be curious and even want to get involved in something like this. "Assuming Kai doesn't find anyone across the ocean, what's the plan after they're home?"

"They're already home." Ronny sighs, a little slice of sadness hitting me right in the chest. "He wants to do a more thorough search in the States, Canada, and Mexico, see if there are any shifters in hiding. He wants Vok to look for vampires, specifically his biological parents because—"

"The king is worried Vok's mom and dad might try to do what his granddad did?" Vega grunts.

"Yep. Sometimes crazy is hereditary."

"Well, we are pretty sure there aren't any other banshees in the States." I wiggle around on my stool and watch Mama happily prepare a big ass meal. "As far as we knew, Daddy and VivaDee's parents were the last ones to migrate in years, so if there's anyone they'll probably still be in their native lands, but it's unlikely." Ronny lifts a brow at me, all sexy and curious. *Gods, he's so hot.* "The riots in Ireland were a good excuse for them to go into hiding, and from what our grandparents said, they sort of died off in isolation."

"And they're..."

We all nod.

All four of our grandparents passed when we were kids. It's why VivaDee moved to Oregon, why we moved to Mississippi from Nevada. It may be incredibly rare for creatures of mysticism to die for any reason but they did and it was almost like they just kind of gave up, letting themselves go into The After because of the way the world was changing. Both of my parents and my aunt are a little bitter about it honestly, thought their moms and dads had more to live for since they had us but it wasn't enough, not when they were so used to the way things used to be.

It's sad but we've accepted it.

“Isn’t it dangerous to centralize everyone in the same place?” Mama asks out of nowhere, the biggest turkey I’ve ever seen in front of her while she stuffs all kinds of goodies in its ass. “I mean, isn’t that just a bigger target for assholes like Kentworth and the Hunters?”

Ronny pushes a hand back through his hair on a sigh. “Yes and no. The land is protected by all kinds of magic, littered with booby traps and alarms. All of the buildings have added security, we do regular patrols, and have a ton of badass warriors living on the property. I see what you’re saying, though, and while Kai has thought of that, he still feels it’s best to have everyone together. There’s so few of us left it seems to make the most sense.”

Mama nods and crams a few oranges into the turkey. “It does, I’d just hate to see your compound hit by someone who’d view it as a gold mine.”

“We’ve been through it before, learned from it and taken extensive measures to keep everyone safe. It’s a good plan but even so there are always risks.”

“Which is why you want all of us to move to Dragovihk land.” I can’t help but smile at my divined. “There might still be risks involved but they’re way less when everyone is together.”

Ronny kisses my temple with a smile. “So damn smart.” Then he turns to my mother. “When this is over, when we find Wes and the others and head back to Ashland, Kai wants the five of you, VivaDee and Ainsley as well as anyone else we have, to move onto our property. I know VivaDee isn’t gonna want to leave her house so I already said something to Colt and they’re looking into how to move that huge ass mansion into the Siskiyou forest. My uncles and the other clan members have built or added onto all the homes there and I know they’ll be happy to build homes for whoever wants them. It’ll take time but not as much as you’d think, old ass shifters and other mystics are pretty quick, and lots of life experience means they’ve acquired a lot of valuable skills.”

“Don’t have to convince me.” Siggy grins as he helps Mama get most of the food in the oven. “The idea of all those sexy men running around shirtless while they build houses is enough to get me packing my bags yesterday.”

Mama giggles. “While it may not be for the same reasons, you don’t have to convince me either. Seems like Kai knows what he’s doing, and since Nova will be there with you anyway, it makes sense for all of us to be together.”

Ronny looks to Vega and waits for his response, one that comes in the form of a firm nod, half smile and grunt.

“I’m in.” Then a flash of insecurity passes in his dark green eyes for a beat. “You think... you think maybe Kai would have some sort of work for me? Like, maybe a scout or something? I’ve learned a lot while I was looking for Mama and Daddy, developed some skills that might be beneficial. I’m no army general or tech whiz but—”

“Kai will definitely have work for you.” My divined smiles at my brother, their bond something that all of us can feel in this moment. “He’ll be thrilled that you want to help and want to share in the responsibility of running the clan. When we get back I’ll arrange a sit down where we can talk about what you’d be interested in doing, how we can put your skills to good use. You’ll fit right in with the rest of us. All of you will.” Then Ronny chuckles. “Henrich is gonna flip his shit though.”

Vega frowns and bites a hunk off his roll. “Why?”

“He’s our resident historian. Henrich has a mind for facts and science, is a super healer and a doctor, but his real passion is record keeping. He is going to pump all of you for information on banshees and sorcerers so he can update what little they know about them.”

Mama arches a brow. “No tests though, right?”

Ronny pales and quickly shakes his head. “No. Gods, sorry. I didn’t even think about that. I just meant he’s going to want to learn about you and your people, add to the Chronicles for future generations. Henrich is nothing like Kentworth. He’s

a good male, one of the best, and anything he asks is merely for documentation purposes, making sure no one is forgotten. He might even be able to help with things you don't know or understand. It's all from a place of respect, the quest for knowledge in a reverent and loving way." He clears his throat nervously. "I really am sorry, I didn't—"

My mother smiles warmly, reaches across the island and takes Ronny's hand. "It's ok, sweetheart. I'm a little defensive so ignore me. I know y'all are nothing like that asshole bastard that has my Westley. It's just been a long year and I'm so ready to get things back to somewhat normal."

He squeezes her hand. "We're gonna make that happen, Mrs. Baker. That's all any of us want after everything we've been through, and it's why we're still fighting so hard against those that want to make our lives hell."

"I can see that." Mama let's go of him and produces a bottle of wine from out of nowhere. "And if you don't start calling me Bella I'm gonna smack you." Ronny laughs and nods as she goes for glasses. "Hell, you can call me Mom for all I care. You've been best friends with my babies for years and now you're mated to my sweet little girl. We're family, and now we're gonna celebrate!"

And we do.

Mama toasts Ronny and me, toasts our new beginnings and says a very firm prayer for bringing our daddy home safe, thanks The Maker for so many people that care enough to bring us into their fold, people who won't rest until we're all together again.

We play cards while the food cooks, exchange one present each because apparently Mama also shopped for that while she was out and then we eat until we're all so full we can't move but manage to play more games long into the night, until dawn is so close we can see the first signs of morning on the horizon.

And when we finally go to bed and I climb into that California king with my divined, with my best friend and lover who makes love to me so slowly, so sweetly I end up crying

before falling asleep in his arms, I know in my heart that everything is going to be ok.

*Ronin makes me feel like everything is going to be ok.*

## CHAPTER 17

# **CALM BEFORE THE STORM**

## RONNY



**G**ods, *she is beautiful.*

I can't stop staring at her, my gorgeous mate. I can't stop drinking in the sight of Nova sleeping so peacefully next to me while knowing that she's *mine*.

I've always loved her, always been *in* love with her and that's something that's been established since what feels like the beginning of time, but knowing she's my mate, that we've mated and belong to each other because we were always meant to, that's something else entirely, and it's almost as if I'm looking at her through new eyes.

It's also why I'm staring at her like a total creep at five in the morning the day after Christmas while Nova attempts to recoup a little from the events of the last few days.

I've kept her pretty busy every time we're alone but it's not just our excessive love making that's worn her out.

She's still wrapping her head around everything, around the fact that her mom's here, the fact that we're mates, the fact that as soon as we find her dad we're all going back to Ashland together to live on Dragovihk land and settle into the clan as an even bigger family.

A family that already welcomed Nova, her mom, and her brothers so warmly I couldn't help but be thrilled.

We only slept maybe three or four hours before Sig came barreling into our room early as fuck yesterday, not giving one shit that Nova and I were naked and our room reeked of sex. Nope, he just threw open the door, ran at full speed and took a



nose dive right into bed between us while he shouted some shit about Santa and breakfast.

Twenty-one or not, Sigma is a giant man-baby at times and he doesn't give a shit about who it annoys.

After Nova kicked him out, we took a fast shower—complete with a quickie where my mate made good use of that tile bench—then went downstairs in our footie pajamas, yes *our* because apparently Bella buys all of them matching ones for Christmas Day every year and that was what she had us open on Christmas Eve to start the festivities.

Breakfast was incredible, the gifts were thoughtful as hell, but what really made my whole day was when we FaceTimed my family.

The look on my mom's face when she popped up on the screen of my laptop and got a load of my new mark, that shit was fucking priceless.

She cried, pretty much sobbed through her smiles but not without the big fat *I told you so* that she threw in about forty times.

Congratulations came next from my dad, Colt and Lark, introductions between Bella and my parents, a very high-pitched reunion between my aunt and mother-in-law, then the five of us crammed onto the couch so we could watch my brothers and sisters open their presents. I had stuff for my family sent to their house along with the shit I had sent here and we engaged the best we could from afar.

There was a short break between that and Christmas at the main house, long enough for a quick nap in front of the fire and when Colt called me back for that madness, I felt even more homesick than my mom made me.

Each of my uncles and their families took turns with Colt's laptop to meet Nova, Bella, and the twins, and when I saw Bozi and Vivian, Lily, Daisy, Opal, and Khaos and Dizzy—shit, I almost cried. Then I did cry when Zan and Frankie got on with Chet, that pup was all kinds of fat and happy, a head full of dark hair, and cheeks that rival the Stay Puffed

Marshmallow Man, I just couldn't believe it. He looked so small and fragile the last time I saw him and now Chet looks like a chunky little baby that wasn't months premature. Then they dropped the bomb that Frankie is pregnant—something they never thought would happen—and damn, if I didn't cry harder.

After a few minutes of blubbering like an idiot while Nova cried right along with me, holding me like a child because she felt my immense joy, I got my shit straight only to lose it all over again when Colt and Lark got us alone and shared they're pregnant too.

Definitely something in the water back home, no doubt about that, but they haven't told anyone else yet because Lark is nervous about her pregnancy.

After they didn't conceive when she went into heat, Lark got worried that all the testing Kentworth did affected her in that way, making it hard, if not impossible, for her to get pregnant or carry a pup at all. Colt believes it was just delayed because of the drugs that the bastard used on her, the shit to keep her from going into heat for forty five years, so it just took until everything was out of her system before they could get pregnant.

I agree wholeheartedly with that. Bella did too because my aunt wanted her to know, but Lark is still nervous about the possibility of losing the baby, especially this early on, but my uncle is confident their pup will be strong as fuck and everything is going to be fine.

They took us back to the group after that and we watched all the kids enjoy their new toys, watched my uncles and aunts razz each other while they celebrated the holiday. Then they surprised us with a quickly thrown together *Congratulations Newly-Mates* banner provided by Grace, and they popped champagne on their end while we had wine on ours.

It was incredibly thoughtful, and I know Nova was happier than ever over the way my family embraced all of them, but goddamn it made me miss my clan more than I've already been missing them. And it also made me more determined

than ever to find Wes and get him back to his family because if I miss mine the way I am after being gone for such a short period of time, I can't imagine how my mate and her family feel. And that made my exhaustion and left over pain that's still lingering return tenfold, something my peach picked up on immediately.

Nova got me upstairs as soon as we wrapped all the FaceTimes, and drew another herbal bath for me, insisting I need to keep those up until I'm back to normal and while I know she's probably right, I'd love to quit smelling like chicken soup as soon as possible.

It's tolerable, though, because the baths have made a huge difference, and I really like when Nova gets in with me, sits behind me in that big ass tub and rubs oils into my skin while we soak and talk. No *hanky panky* though—her words, not mine—and quite frankly, I didn't have the energy for it yesterday anyway.

I do now though.

I might have crashed last night after that bath for damn near twelve hours but I have all the energy in the world right this second and I am definitely going to show my mate how good I'm feeling by making her feel good too.

Nova stirs a little, burrowing into her pillow as she reaches for me because she's used to my big body stuck to her gorgeous one like glue when we're in bed. Her palm lands on my chest, my heart fluttering from her touch and the way she smiles in her sleep when she feels it.

I love this woman so fucking much and I still can't get over the fact that she's mine, but Nova *is* mine and I will make sure she knows that every day for the rest of our life.

“What time is it?” She sighs as she scoots closer.

I smile, reach out and push that spun gold from her eyes. “Just after five.”

“Why are you awake?” Nova's eyes pop open then blink a few times in concern. “Are you feeling ok?”

“I’m fine, Peach.” I lean down and press a kiss to her head. “You know I’m an early riser, especially when I’ve got stuff on my mind. This isn’t anything new.”

She nods and gives me a sleepy smile. “I know, honey. I just worry, ‘specially after yesterday. I thought you were on the mend and then...”

“Baby, I’m fine. Lots of activity, lots of emotions, and all of it after having my ass handed to me by a couple Hunters. That’s all.”

“Ok.” She yawns then giggles. “Such a fine ass too. Hate to have anything happen to it.”

I bark out a laugh because she never ceases to amaze me. Turns out my peach has a dirty mind and mouth to match.

“You think my ass is fine, huh? Appreciating all my hard work at the gym?”

Nova giggles and nods. “Not that you need it, but your work has paid off. That bubble butt is sexy as hell.”

“Bubble butt?” I feign offense. “I do not have a *bubble butt*.”

“You absolutely do. A bubble butt so firm it can hardly be considered a bubble, but your ass is perkier than mine.”

“How dare you.” I gasp. “I can’t believe you’d say such things about those delicious globes on your backside. Your ass is perfection, Peach.”

Nova swats my chest. “Oh stop. I can’t handle your brand of bullshit this early in the morning.”

“I’ll give you something to handle, *mate*.” Rolling on top of her so quickly she didn’t see it coming, I pin her arms above her head, settle my hips against hers and show Nova exactly what I mean. “You handle me just fine.”

“Mmhm.” She nods as I brush my lips along the column of her throat. “I’m the only one that can handle you.” Nova’s legs fall open to make room for me to settle deeper into her. “I love handling you.”

“Damn straight.” I nip at her pulse then lick my mark on her shoulder. She shudders, arches into me when I do it again, and when she lifts her hips, giving me an open invitation I’d be a fool to pass up, I grin. “Hey, Peach?”

“Mm yes, honey?”

*I love it when she calls me that.* Her southern drawl makes it sexy as fuck.

I wait for her to open her eyes, wait for Nova to look at me and when she does, I grin harder. “I’m gonna eat your pussy now.”

Those shadowy pools go saucer wide, her breath stutters a bit but she bites her lip. “You... you are?”

“Uh huh.” I nod and kiss her nice and slow. “Consider it a late Christmas present.” One more kiss to her lips before I start kissing my way down her body. “A late Christmas present *to me.*”

Nova giggles for a beat but it turns into a moan as I pull her peaked nipple into my mouth.

*Gods, she tastes good.*

So fucking good, every inch of her creamy skin more delicious than I could have imagined. And let me tell you, the taste of her skin has had me dying to get a taste of that tight little cunt of hers because I know it’ll be sweeter still.

But I take my time kissing her breasts, licking her nipples, pinching them and rolling them between my fingers.

And fuck, the way Nova responds to me, to my every touch, it’s like a fucking drug pumped right to my heart.

Well, my heart and my cock. He’s diamond hard and happy as hell too.

I drag my tongue between her breasts, taking the sheet with me before I circle her belly button then kiss it, something that makes my mate giggle adorably before she moans again, before her hips lift on instinct when I kiss them.

My eyes flick to her face, her fucking beautiful face just as I use my shoulders to push open her thighs, Nova's scent so fucking strong I can't help but breathe her in.

"Peach." Inhaling deep I wait for her to look down at me. "I want you to watch."

Her cheeks redden, her chest rises and falls rapidly but she nods and tries to give me a smile even though I know she's nervous. I can feel it, almost hear the questions she's trying to keep from me.

Nova has never had anyone go down on her before, never had anyone be face-to-face with her most sensitive flesh and that means she sure as fuck has no idea what to expect when I eat her pussy the way I'm going to.

Knowing her like I do, I'm sure her insecurities are running wild, sure she's nervous and worried about me more than her, and I have to give her credit cause she's blocking those thoughts from me like a champ but she can't hide her feelings, not anymore. Those are mine now too.

And I can feel that my mate is nervous, worried, a little anxious but I can still feel her love, her amazement over how badly I want to do this, and I can also feel the little jolts of excitement wracking her beautiful body. And those are what I'm going to focus on before I make sure everything melts away and the only thing that's left is that excitement.

"You gonna watch like a good little mate?" My lips brush the inside of her right thigh as I settle her legs over my shoulders. "Gonna watch me eat your pussy like it's my favorite fucking meal?"

Nova sucks in a sharp breath and nods.

"Good girl." My voice is rough, huskier than I've ever heard it and when I nuzzle my nose against her, the scent of her arousal so heavy it's intoxicating, I fucking growl like the wolf I am. "Goddamnit, Nova you smell divine."

Her thighs tighten just a bit, a quick flash of insecurity hitting me, but I don't let her overthink this, won't let her back out now. Nova knows all she has to do is tell me and I'll stop

but she hasn't said the words, so instead of letting her thoughts run, my hands slide up her thighs to her ass, tilt her hips, and I lick her pussy from bottom to top in a slow, hot drag.

Nova moans almost immediately, her muscles relaxing a bit and Jesus fuck, I could come from just one taste of her alone.

*So goddamn good.*

I flatten my tongue and do it again, licking her sweet slit from bottom to top, top to bottom and when my mate jerks against my mouth, my dick starts leaking precum all over my stomach.

“You watching, Peach?” Another growl as my eyes find hers.

Nova nods as she balls the sheet in her fists next to her hips, her breaths coming in ragged as her excitement grows. I maintain eye contact as I adjust my hands, moving them around some so I can part her folds with my thumbs, opening her up to me like the most beautiful flower blooming in spring.

Slowly, in order to savor my first real taste, my tongue drags up toward her clit and holy hell I think I see stars.

I've never tasted anything like Nova before, a delicious combination of the components of her scent coupled with that dewy tang of her arousal. Decadent is the word, the only one to describe how my mate's cunt tastes because it's a combination of that same sweet and innocent, that fire and heat, a forbidden fruit, a guilty pleasure and you bet your ass this woman is mine.

Another taste has her hips lifting, and when my tongue flicks her clit, they buck in my face.

*So responsive.*

*So beautiful.*

“I could eat your pussy all day, Nova,” I groan into her, flicking her clit a few more times before I flatten my tongue against it. “All fucking day.”

“Y-y-yeah?”

“Fuck yeah.” My eyes drift from her lust filled ones, taking in the prettiest shade of pink I’ve ever seen set against creamy fair skin between her legs. *Jesus, Nova’s pussy is just as pretty as the rest of her.* “Gods, and just look at this sweet little cunt. Pretty in pink and just dripping for me.”

“Ronny...” she moans, her back arching, her eyes fluttering closed as her head pushes into the pillows.

“Eyes on me, Peach.”

They snap to mine and what I see, holy shit what I see is amazing.

The shadows that swirl where her iris should be are dancing, darting out to touch the white, spiraling over it in stark contrast before they roll back in only to do it again.

*That’s fucking hot.*

So hot, I pull her clit between my lips and suck, licking away the slight sting before I fuck her pussy with my tongue as deep as I can.

Nova’s back flies off the mattress, her walls spasming, her eyes wild as one hand dives into my hair, the other behind her supporting her while her body begins to shake.

I grin then repeat. Suck on her clit, fuck her with my tongue and despite the way her entire body jerks forward, Nova maintains eye contact just like I said.

“Ronny...” She whimpers as her pussy starts to gush. “Ronin, *fuck.*”

Nova’s fingernails scratch against my scalp, her hips bucking against my face and when my teeth gently graze her clit before I lick it, flick it, suck it, and dive right back inside, my peach fucking explodes all over my tongue.

My name tears from her throat in a beautiful scream, her head thrown back while she takes control, while she keeps my mouth locked in place and rides my tongue, her hips rolling while she comes so fucking hard her whole body writhes in pleasure.

“Ronny. Oh my gods, Ronin, honey, yes. Yes!”



*I am about to blow my load all over the fucking mattress.*

Which is why, while she's still riding high on an orgasm that will make me strut my stuff like king shit for the rest of time, I grab her hips, disengage my mouth and lift her in the air before I roll to my back and bring Nova down on my cock so hard I temporarily lose consciousness.

“Oh,” she cries. “Oh gods!”

Like she was born to do it, Nova starts riding my cock, her pussy contracting hard with every slide up and down my length. She keeps rocking her hips, lifting until I'm almost all the way out, falling until my knot is pushing against her entrance.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck. Me.*

*This is incredible.*

Nothing has ever or will ever be as amazing as making love to my mate, the way our bodies join, the way lightning hums through my veins and ignites where skin meets skin.

This—*she* is the reason I was born, the reason I was put on this earth and I am so goddamn grateful for her I could cry.

“Oh gods...” Nova plants her hands on my pecs, her nails biting into my flesh. “Oh... oh honey, Ronin, I'm gonna come. Oh gods...” She leans down and kisses me hard, my tongue pushing into her mouth, my sexy as fuck mate sucking on it, licking the remnants of herself from every bit of me.

“Fuck,” I growl as she goes upright, her head thrown back again but that won't do. I'm less than a minute out from coming myself but I want her eyes on me when I do and before I send her over the edge with me, I want her looking at what we do together. “Nova,” I grunt. “Baby look.” Her gaze finds mine, those shadows swimming over the whites of her eyes and nearly dancing past those blonde lashes. “Watch. I want you watching my cock while you fuck me.”

Her walls squeeze at my words, squeeze my dick tight, but when her stare travels to where our bodies join, when Nova

looks at the way we fit so fucking perfectly, I take control back.

I grab her hips and thrust up into her deep, pushing my knot into her core so I bottom out on every pump, slamming our bodies together in a rhythm so primal it's animalistic, and that's when my mate unravels.

Nova starts coming again, her eyes never leaving the way my cock pounds into her but her pussy clamps down around me so hard I have no choice but to come with her.

My balls go so tight as an icy fire lick down my spine and then my cock swells, goes impossibly harder before my knot thickens and binds me to my mate, detonating an orgasm that sucks all the air from my lungs and makes my goddamn toes curl.

*So fucking good.*

Nova collapses on top of me, her body covered in sweat and twitching, her heart racing. She drags her hands up my chest until she's cupping my face and tilts it so I'm looking her in the eye.

"You, Ronin Abraham Caldwell"—she smiles up at me lazily—"are a damn sex god and I'm pretty sure you just broke my vagina."

I bark out a laugh and wrap her in a hug. "You want me to kiss it better?"

"Yes." Nova grins as her pussy flutters around me. "But you have to give me a little bit. I need to make sure I get the feeling back in my legs first."

"I can do that." I sigh and hold my mate tighter. "So what'd you think?" Not that I have to ask but I want to hear it all the same.

"Egomaniac," she quips. "Sex god wasn't good enough for you?"

"That can be taken multiple ways. Sex is pretty much just when I fuck your sweet pussy with my cock. Now if you'd

have said *oral* sex god, then I'd understand what exactly you were getting at."

Nova rolls her eyes. "I have nothing to compare it to but I'd imagine you're a sex god in all aspects of the term." She smirks and arches a barely-there brow. "Hence broken vagina."

"I guess that'll do. You're going to sit on my face later though. One time eating your pussy probably isn't enough for you to decide if you really like it."

Nova tenses a little but doesn't say anything. Not out loud anyway, but her thoughts are screaming.

And that shit won't do.

"Yes, I absolutely do mean that, baby. I want to lay on this bed and have you sit on my face while I devour your pussy. I want you riding my tongue, rolling your hips while those fucking gorgeous thighs clamp around my head. I want your fucking beautiful body on top of mine, your pussy fucking suffocating me while I make you come so many times that I'm the one that will explode into nothingness, thus dying a very very happy male."

"Ronny..." Nova whispers with a shiver. "You really... you want..."

"I do." I press another kiss to her hair. "Now that I know how you taste I want it coating my tongue every second of every day. And next time, you are going to sit on my face, hang onto that headboard and ride my mouth until neither of us have any breath left." Then I grin. "And after that, maybe we'll try anal so you can get a real feel for things. More research to back up your theory."

"You are a filthy, filthy wolf."

I chuckle. "That wasn't a no..."

"We'll talk about your obsession with my butt later. Nap now."

"Anal later."

"Ronny..." Nova scolds.

I smile into her hair. “You have to admit, you have a phenomenal ass, Peach. Almost as good as your pussy.”

“Ronny!”

“Ok, ok.” I chuckle then sigh. “Nap now.”

“Good.” She tips her head back to kiss me softly, licks my lips for good measure then rests her head on my chest and kisses right over my heart, the thing beating her name in a steady, happy rhythm.

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A few hours later, my eyes fight to open when I hear Nova’s voice, my mate apparently reading something out loud.

*“When I looked at her I knew, I just knew, right down to my bones that this was the woman I was going to marry. She is the embodiment of everything I’ve ever hoped for, the things I’ve never dared to dream. We might have only just met, are still all but strangers sharing seats on a train to chase down our own demons, but Lucy Jones of Greensboro, North Carolina is going to be my wife.”*

My eyes fly open as soon as Nova’s words finally register.

I lunge off the bed, stub my toe on the nightstand then get tangled in the sheet my mate must have covered me with and almost go ass over elbow trying to get to the desk.

It’s too late though, Nova’s already seen too much, and now I’m going to have to tell her the last secret hanging between us.

“What is this?” she asks from behind the desk, my laptop open in front of her, the glow of the screen lighting up her face in the low light of our room.

Attempting to round the desk, I jerk back, the sheet wrapped around my leg and somehow stuck on one of the four post of the bed frame. “Nothing.”

Nova frowns. “This is not nothing.” Then she kills me as she keeps reading. *“Lucy glances at me from the corner of her*

*eye, smiling a little when she sees the book in my hand, ‘You a big reader, slugger?’ I swallow hard and shift in my seat. There’s so much more to me than my baseball stats and just once I’d like to be seen as someone other than the championship winning—”*

“It’s nothing. Really, baby. Nothing at all!” That last bit was basically yelled in her face as the post gives way and sends me falling toward her. I don’t actually fall though, nope, I manage to catch myself on the desk only to send almost all of its contents scattering when the leg breaks under my weight.

“Jesus, Ronny!” Nova leaps up, saves my laptop and stares daggers at me. “What’s with you? What is this?”

She shakes said laptop and I sigh. “Nothing, baby, just forget about it.”

Nova narrows her eyes, sets my MacBook on the chair then plants her hands on her hips, my t-shirt she put on at some point riding up just enough to show me she’s not wearing panties. “Do not bullshit me, Ronin Abraham Caldwell. Even without our mind link and bond I can tell when you’re lying to me, always been able to, and right now you. Are. Lying.”

“I’m not lying, Nova. It’s nothing. Just something I’ve been fucking around with in my very limited free time.”

“I’ve had your dick in my mouth,” she whisper-shouts, completely offended by my *bullshit*. “You’ve had your mouth on my pussy.” My dick twitches at that but I remind him now is not the time to get excited no matter how sexy it is hearing Nova say those things while she’s scolding me. “I showed you how I can talk to the dead and you turned into a beautiful wolf in front of me! We’ve been through so much together, well before you were fucking me a million times a day, and to think you still have secrets makes me want to slap you with a branding iron!”

*Do not pop a boner.*

*Do not pop a boner.*

*Do not... shit.*

I totally popped a boner.

“Nova, I’m not—”

“No!” She holds up her hand and struggles to pull her eyes off my inappropriately, extremely hard dick. “No more words from you unless you’re using them to explain that.” She points to my laptop then marches past me toward the bathroom.

*Fuck.*

Now I’m turned on, all kinds of anxious, and feeling guilty as hell.

*How does this woman do this to me?*

“Because I’m your mate!” she shouts just before Nova slams the door and the lock clicks in place.

*Shit.*

Shit on a fucking shingle, man.

This is so not how I wanted to spend the rest of our day. Not that we were gonna be holed up in here much passed nine in the morning, not with her family downstairs cooking breakfast by the smell of it, but I definitely didn’t plan on Nova stumbling across my secret project before calling me on it then locking herself in the goddamn bathroom.

“Nova.” Crossing the room with the sheet still wrapped around my leg and a fucking limp thanks to the nightstand, I knock on the door, which is stupid because it’s just me and her. “Baby, please come out.”

“You gonna tell me about the words on your laptop?”

I sigh and drop my forehead to the wood with a thud. “It’s not that big of a deal. Just something I’m fucking around with. It’s stupid so just come out and talk to me.”

“No!” She snaps.

“Nova... baby, please.”

“You said it yourself, you wanted to see all of me and I want the same. You don’t want to tell me what those pretty words were about, fine, but then you can explain to my mama

why you're eating her homemade biscuits and chocolate gravy without me!"

*Fuck, that sounds good right now.*

"It is good! It's my grandmama's recipe and it's the best, but I won't get to enjoy it cause I'm not coming out until you tell me what you're still hiding."

"Nova..." Gods this is not that big of a deal yet somehow it feels huge. "Nova... baby..." I bang my forehead on the door, not hard but hopefully it'll knock some sense into me. "It's a book."

Nova steps closer to the bathroom door, I can see the shadow from her cute little feet and feel her presence closer through the wood. "A book?"

Sighing, I close my eyes. "A book. A novel I've been writing over the past year or so. It's stupid, definitely not a big deal but, well I got an idea and started fleshing it out and before I knew it I had several chapters written. It's just a draft but it's almost finished, still needs a lot of work but it's been a good way to shut my brain off in between all the other shit going on in my life. It's nothing, though, so just—"

The door opens and my peach looks up at me, her anger replaced by a soft smile with a touch of hurt. "Why didn't you tell me you were writing?"

"Because it's not important." Except it is. The more I wrote, the more words that just flowed out of me, the more I wanted to pursue it and maybe even try to publish. "It's just a hobby to pass the time."

Nova frowns. "But you want to publish it."

*Damn mind link.* "Which is silly." Not really but I don't want to get my hopes up over this. "It's not that good and like I said, it needs a lot of work that I don't have time to put in. Just an escape when I have a few minutes to sit down and write."

"It is good, Ronny. From the little bit I read I could tell it's good and it pulled me in." She reaches out and cups my cheek, making sure I'm looking her in the eye. "Does it have a title?"

I blow out a breath and nod. “Batting a Thousand. It’s a working title, more like a name to save it under but—”

“What’s the hero’s name?”

“Charlie Kingston.”

Nova smiles wide. “I like that. Lucy Jones and Charlie Kingston. So it’s a romance?”

I rub the back of my neck and tug at the curls around my ears. “Yeah. Sports romance with a little bit of comedy and suspense.”

“Sweet or steamy?”

*Gods, this girl.*

She’s a romance novel junkie just like me and I know if we get into detail about my manuscript all bets are off and Nova will pump me for information, probably even ask to read it. But I relent and accept my fate. “Steamy.”

“You using a pen name?”

“C. R. Abraham.”

“How many chapters?”

“Twenty-seven with a prologue and I’m working on the epilogue.”

“Can I read it?”

*Called it.* “I don’t know, Peach. It’s not all that great, just a pet project. I haven’t started edits yet since it’s not done and —”

“But you’ve done revisions?” Nova asks, that gorgeous smile beaming in my face. “Read through enough times to make it almost perfect?”

*She knows me too well.* “Yeah. Structurally it’s ok but like I said, I haven’t started edits and it definitely needs some work. I might not even finish it.”

“You will.” Nova grabs my hand and leads us back toward the desk. “You’ll finish because it’ll drive you nuts to leave it unfinished, and I can tell it’s more than just a hobby to you.”



She picks up my laptop, plants me in the chair, throws the sheet over my lap then sits on me. “You’re even using Scrivener. That’s not just something you buy for a hobby.”

I rest my chin on her shoulder and sigh, my eyes bouncing around the chapter I left open. “I’ve always wanted to be an author. Dad wanted me to take over the ranch but that was never my thing and when I finally explained that to him, he was a little bummed but understood. Especially when I told him I wanted to go to school and get a degree. That made him proud as hell but I wasn’t sure what to get my degree in—”

“Which is why you’re still undecided.” Nova kisses my temple. “And it’s why you’ve been taking business classes along with all the writing and literature courses. Kept the ranch in your back pocket while you tried to figure things out.”

My mate really is fucking brilliant.

“Yeah. Wanted something solid to fall back on if I couldn’t get my shit decided. It’s not really like I need to go to school or even work if I don’t want to.” *Oops, guess there’s another secret I forgot about.* “Colt has a trust fund for each of us pups, started them when we were born, and I’ve had the option to access it since I turned eighteen but I didn’t want to just live off of that.”

“Could you?” Nova turns to me, thankfully unfazed by that little nugget of info and more curious than anything. “Live off of what Colt has for you, I mean.”

I nod. “We could live very comfortably off my trust for at least two lifetimes, maybe more. All of my uncles are loaded and have no idea how to spend the money. My parents are really well off too and I know my mom has been adding to the trusts since she found out about them, and I’m pretty sure Kai has been dumping money into my account under the guise of *hazard pay* for all the work I do for the clan.”

She smiles again as she kisses my lips. “But you still haven’t touched it because you want to earn your money and make an honest living.”

“Right.” I kiss her again. “I appreciate what they’re doing for me, so fucking much, and it’s nice to know I have a safety net but it doesn’t feel quite right to use that money for anything other than an emergency or something.”

Nova grins. “You’re a little bit of an idiot, Ronny Caldwell.”

I frown and wait for an explanation because *what?*

“I am so proud of you for your work ethic, for how hard you work and how you want to earn your money for yourself, but your mom and uncles, they obviously love you and are trying to take care of you even though you’re a stubborn ox.” She pushes my hair out of my eyes and smiles so beautifully it’s almost hard to look at. “You have the craziest schedule I’ve ever heard of and I have no idea how you do it without passing out from exhaustion at every turn. It bothered me before because I worried about you, but now that we’ve mated you can bet your ass I expect you to give up at least one of your jobs, preferably both so you can do the things you were obviously born to do.”

“Which is what, exactly?” *Man she’s cute when she’s bossy.*

“Work with your uncles, for the clan. Write and publish all the romance novels.” Then she smirks. “Spend as much time with me as possible when you’re not going to class. And when we start having babies you better believe you’re gonna be home every chance you get to help me raise them. If they’re anything like you or my brothers we’re gonna need to have a live-in nanny to keep us both sane.”

I chuckle and wrap my arms around her nice and tight. “That’s what the clan is for. We raise everyone together so none of us lose our minds, and our pups won’t be any different.” I kiss her mark and grin when she lets out a dreamy sigh. “Sounds like you’ve got this all mapped out.”

Nova nods. “Yep, and here’s what’s gonna happen. When we get back to Ashland you’re going to give Kady and Bill your notice then work until they get someone to replace you. Then you’re going to decide on your major, something with

literature for sure with maybe a business minor because it will come in handy when you start publishing your books, but you're going to lighten your school load a little or at least adjust it so it's more condensed. You do that then you block out times to write, assuming you have more stories up in that sexy brain of yours, and I'll pick my classes so it matches in order to give you the maximum amount of writing days possible without interruption. And here's the best part." Nova wiggles around so she's facing me, something my dick really appreciates. "I'll finally pick my major too, something in literature as well, with a minor in some sort of business management service so I can be your editor and PA. You will be the ultra talented, super sexy romance author who is off the market, and I will be your partner in everything while running the bullshit no writer wants to deal with. We will be the perfect team, it'll allow us to work from home, and it gives enough flexibility to still be involved with the clan and have all the babies."

I blink at her as I poke her in the butt with my hard-on because this all sounds amazing. "And you just came up with that right now on the fly?"

Nova nods proudly. "Yep. And while we finish school and work on the house, we'll use our trust funds to get by until you're making millions writing beautiful love stories."

"*Our* trust funds?"

"Yes, *our* trust funds. Mama and Daddy are also incredibly financially sound and they have accounts for all three of us like the one Colt has for you. You think shifters are the only ones who plan for the future?"

I chuckle. "Guess not. I just didn't realize my mate was gonna be my sugar mama."

Nova giggles. "Shut up. It's not like that and you know it. We could be very comfortable with what I have in the bank, but between what we each have saved I doubt there's a real need for you to bust your ass the way you do, and I'd really like to put that money to good use in order to see you get published."

“If my stuff is any good.”

“It is, honey. That first chapter was fantastic and I know the rest is just as good, but if you’re worried about that, let me read it, maybe Vega and Siggy too. You know how much we love to read, romance specifically, and we know the genre just as well as you do. I’m your editor but they can be your alphas. You’ll get honest feedback from all of us, get a feel for whether or not your manuscript is marketable, and we can go from there. You’re basically amazing at everything you do, Ronny, and I’m sure writing is just another thing to add to that list.”

“I really fucking love you.” I sigh and kiss her because I have to. “But how about just you read it first? If you think it’s any good then I’ll consider letting your brothers read it but I’d rather not tell them until then.”

“Ok.” Another kiss from my mate. “What about everything else?”

“As soon as we’re back home I’ll talk to Kady and Bill, and you can help me pick my classes for next semester.”

Nova claps, almost drops my laptop and squeals in my face. “Honey, this is going to be amazing! Gods, I’m so excited! Can I start reading now? I know you said it isn’t finished but—”

We both stop and turn as my phone pings in rapid succession from across the room. Not the normal text alert or random notification, no it’s the fucking tracking app Colt installed that links to the software Vok is using to hack into the security systems on Kentworth’s family properties.

“I gotta get that.” Carefully I lift Nova off my lap then hustle toward my phone. Sure enough, Kentworth is at the big house he owns in Slave Lake and the dumbass turned on his alarm.

“Ronny?”

I glance up at her. “It’s Kentworth. We got a hit on him.” My eyes return to the screen while I tap out a few things and try to pull up the video feed but it’s all black. “Shit. I gotta—”

A FaceTime call from Colt starts ringing on my phone and laptop, so I quickly get back to the desk and answer. “Was just about to call you.”

“We’re rolling out,” Colt grunts as he pulls on a shirt. “Vok’s trying to fix the video feed now then he’s grabbing a go-bag to meet us in the yard.”

I frown and blink in confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about? Who’s rolling out?”

“Me, Vok, Zan, Drej, and Kai.” I cover Nova’s eyes as my uncle steps into a pair of jeans and flashes his junk at his computer, Zan behind him doing the same. Which confirms everything I’ve ever been suspicious about, especially when they both move just enough for me to catch sight of what I’m pretty sure is Frankie and Lark curled up together in Colt’s bed. “Henrich and Milos are gonna stay back with Hank and Karel, put the compound into lockdown while we’re gone just to be safe.”

Not at all rocked by the revelation I just saw with my own eyeballs—more relieved to be honest—I shake my head firmly. “No.” I lower my hand from Nova’s face and narrow my eyes on my uncle. “The twins and I can handle this. Sig will stay with Bella and Nova, Veg and I will head to Slave Lake and take care of Kentworth. There’s no reason for you to come all the way out here especially since the whether is shit.”

Colt glares at me. “I know you can handle this but you ain’t doing it alone, pup. Vok and Zan will stay at the house with Sig, Bella, and Nova while the rest of us head to Slave Lake—”

“Fuck you both very much,” Nova blurts. “I will not be staying back at the house while you overgrown Neanderthals march out to save my daddy.”

“Peach...” I’m already shaking my head. “It’s gonna be too dangerous. You don’t need—”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I do or don’t need right now, Ronin Abraham Caldwell,” she hisses. “I am coming with you whether you like it or not and that is final.” Then Nova stomps

over to the closet and pulls out a bunch of clothes before she stomps toward the bathroom.

*Shit.*

“You got your hands full with that one.” Colt chuckles.

And I roll my eyes with a nod. “She’s not gonna stay put.”

“So bring her with. You and Vega will be able to keep tabs on her since you have bonds with her. Maybe she’ll be an asset, her power could come in handy.”

“I’m not gonna bring her if it’s just us. I want Sig at the house cause he can keep Bella safe, can help run the command center while we go in but if it’s just me and Veg then—”

“It won’t be,” Colt growls like an ass.

And I growl right back. “It will. For fuck’s sake, you, Zan and Vok all have pregnant mates! Kai and Drej have babies at home! The five of you have way too much to lose if this shit goes south. There’s no reason to get involved.”

“Not happening, Beta. We’re rolling out in thirty. The girls are staying behind, they’ll be safe and protected. And Lark expects me to bring Kentworth’s head back in a bag to put at our family’s altar right next to Cyril, Ivan, Nero, Thologar, and that bastard guard Dick. It was the only way to keep her ass planted at home when that notification went off and I’ll be damned if I don’t fucking do it.”

“Fine. You come alone then. Or better yet, you stay and make sure Lark stays planted and send Karel instead. He’s always down for a battle with the potential to go out in a blaze of glory, and I’ll get Kentoworth’s head for my aunt. I’ll even fucking gift wrap it for her.”

“This isn’t open for discussion, *Beta*,” Colt growls again as he starts strapping all kinds of shit to himself. “By order of your Alpha *and* your King, the five of us are rolling out to meet you. Vok and Zan will stay back with Bella and Sig. You, your Delta, your mate, the dragons, and I will head out immediately until we’re close to where those Hunters had you, using the shack as a base. From there we go on foot to Slave Lake and take that bastard down.”

“By order of my Alpha and my King? Did you really just pull that shit with me?” I get to my feet, the sheet falling as I flash my uncle my no longer hard dick. *Tit for tat, asshole.* “And what do you mean my *Delta*?”

Colt rolls his eyes and pulls on his coat. “Vega, dumbass. It’s obvious he’s your right hand, and if I taught you anything at all about packs, it’s how they fucking work. Alpha has his Luna, equals in power. Alpha also has his Beta, his right hand and the closest one can get to the Alpha aside from the Luna. Then there’s the Delta—”

“The Beta’s right hand and second highest rank under Alpha. Yeah, yeah, I know but Veg isn’t a wolf.”

“He’s your best friend though.”

“Zan’s your best friend, not a wolf, and I’m your Beta not him.”

“Come on, pup. I love Zan and I know he’s got my back but you, *you’re* my Beta because you’ve been my best friend since you quit shitting your drawers, not to mention fate determined your place in my pack long before you were born.” He flashes me his patented smirk, those wolf eyes smiling as he does. “And just cause Vega isn’t a wolf doesn’t mean he can’t be your Delta. He has all the qualities of one and quite frankly, he’s already a stronger Delta than the one your grandpa had. I’d put money on your friends having a drop of wolf blood way back in their line somewhere. That boy is your Delta, banshee or not.”

Ok, maybe that’s true. All three of the Baker siblings are my best friends but Vega and I are just a bit closer than me and Sig, always have been cause we’re into so much of the same shit, but still. “How do you know, though? I mean, we’re tight like you and the rest of the males but that doesn’t really mean...” Shit, maybe it does.

“Look at our clan, Ronin. Kai is king but Andrej’s an alpha. Hell, every last one of my brothers are alphas and we somehow make that shit work still. Drej, Henrich, and Milos basically have the shared roll of Beta; Zan, Vok and I essentially his Delta’s, and you young bucks are on the way to

being Kai's next gen Delta's, all of us acting as Sentinels too. Anything's fucking possible at this point and we just gotta accept it, be thankful for it, and move forward with it." Colt throws a bag over his shoulder and glances around his cabin. "Vega is your Delta, plain and simple. Now get your junk out of the camera, go put on some goddamn pants, and get your Delta informed so you can be ready when we get there. We're flying so it shouldn't take too long."

The screen goes black and I sigh.

*Fucking shit man.*

Today has been full of surprises and somehow I don't see that changing one bit before it's through.

I just hope Sig doesn't fight me on coming with. Bella, too, for that matter. Having Nova with me is going to make me crazy enough, I don't need to worry about them on top of protecting my mate while we save her dad.

I'm just praying my uncles will want to leave tomorrow because between briefing everyone on Kentworth's whereabouts, making sure the cottage is secure and planning our attack, fuck me, I need one more night of blissful ignorance with my mate so I don't lose my shit completely.



## CHAPTER 18

**F5**

## NOVA



**H**oly moly, the testosterone levels in this house just shot through the roof and probably impregnated every female within a one-hundred-mile radius.

No wonder why all of Ronny's aunts are either very recently post-baby or currently carrying one.

It was potent enough when we all met at Vok and Cora's house back in Ashland, but you get all those males together and throw a bonafide king into the mix, lord have mercy, I can't imagine what it's like when they're all together at home.

And it's not just the fact that all these males are absolutely beautiful, not like my Ronin but each of them are sexy in their own right, but then you add in the power that rolls off of them in waves, the danger they all seem to ooze, the undeniable charm and charisma as well as their kindness and love? Talk about an alpha male overload.

The minute I walk into Kai's house for the first family function I get to attend, my head is probably going to explode.

Ronny snorts next to me and gives me the side eye. "You done ogling my uncles, or do you need a few minutes before we start the strategy meeting?"

"Shut up." I stick my tongue out and bump my shoulder into his bicep. "I wasn't ogling anyone but you. Just can't help that this much male makes a girl stop to appreciate it."

"Sure." My divined rolls his eyes. "You're just *appreciating* how those five create a brick wall of big ass muscle and basically perfect hair."

I arch a brow. “*Perfect hair?*” My giggle comes out a little too loud but oh well. “Do you have hair envy, honey?”

Ronny shrugs, smirks then shrugs again but he doesn’t respond.

I know his hair drives him nuts, but it’s one of my many favorite physical qualities my divined possesses. He may think his dark honey blonde curls are a mess but I know for a fact every girl that’s ever met him wishes they had thick beautiful spirals just like Ronny.

And yeah, his uncles’ hair is pretty great but again, they don’t even compare to my Ronin.

Another eye roll. “You’re ridiculous.”

“What?” I know what, but I’m gonna pretend like I don’t. It’s more fun that way.

“My hair does not beat theirs.” Ronny grins as he nods toward that wall he mentioned. “Except maybe Drej since his is buzzed off, but I promise, if he grew it out it’d be just like Kai’s—glossy and fine but thick and straight. Bastards all have super easy hair.”

“Oh stop. From what I’ve seen, all of you have hair that make women jealous. It’s just something in the male mystics’ DNA. You’re all prettier than most females, what with your perfect hair and long as hell eyelashes, great skin and chiseled good looks. The Maker definitely knew what She was doing when She put together the blueprints for an alpha and I for one, ain’t mad at it.”

Ronny chuckles and wraps an arm around my waist. “If they weren’t all happily mated I’d be worried about the competition.”

“Which makes *you* ridiculous. I love *you*, Ronin. You’re my divined, and no matter how pretty anyone else is, you are hands down the sexiest man I’ve ever met. No one else even stood a chance before we mated and now that we have, all others are simply not in the running.”

“I feel so much better now,” he deadpans. “Thank you for putting me at ease, Peach.”

Ignoring him because clearly my sweet wolf is still a little insecure, I change the topic. “So, why are Colt’s eyes still like his wolf?”

“Best anyone can come up with is because mating Lark helped keep his curse at bay. She can control the *other* when he shifts into it, and their bond has made it predictable, and helps fight the evil.”

“And Vok’s eyes?” Cause those pale, almost white blue irises have a ring of black around them I’ve wanted to ask about since we met.

“Long story, but the gist of it is the darkness inside that was transferred when he killed Nero will always be sitting just under the surface, always battling to consume his light.”

I nod. “Which comes from Cora. Another mate bond related thing.”

“Yeah.” Ronny smiles. “He’s got a wicked cool looking scar on his chest from when Cora blasted him with her light too. Matches hers.”

“Cora has another scar?” I’ve seen the ones on her throat and hand, the small one on her forehead but I didn’t realize there were more. “Where?”

“On her stomach from where Zan stabbed her.”

I frown and turn to my divined. “But I thought...”

“Another long story, Peach. He’s her brother and they love each other fiercely but there is way more to their story.”

“I guess so.” I turn back to the five men who are chatting amongst themselves while Mama finishes dinner. “And Zan looks the way he does because he’s a demon? Those are all traits of his kind?”

Another nod. “Purple eyes, white blonde hair. He has horns and fangs and shit but he won’t let them show until he’s more comfortable around all of you. Nothing personal, it’s just one of his quirks. And the markings all over him are the souls he took before he got his own.”

“Wow.” *That’s a lot of freaking souls.* “And—”

“Kai and Andrej’s eyes match the colors of their dragons, same with the streaks in the king’s hair.”

“So Kai’s is red and Andrej’s is black?”

“Yep. All four of their dragons are black with different color highlights but they all have gold as a shared family thing. You’ll see soon enough.”

My stomach flips at that.

Apparently after we drive to the shack Mama and Ronny were held in we’re going on foot. When I asked what that meant and how it was going to work in sub zero temps, he explained that he and Colt were going to shift in order to track better while they lead the way, and even though it’s risky, Kai and Andrej are going to shift too because it’ll be a better defense or something, but also because I’m going to be riding one of them since I’m just a puny little female who can’t walk that far. Plus the extreme heat the dragons give off will keep me warm. Vega will be riding the other, he’s not puny but it’ll be a long walk and he’ll need the warmth too.

*I get to ride a fucking dragon.*

I seriously cannot believe this is my life but it is, and even though I’m kind of nervous, I’m really super excited. Might even ask if we can fly.

“This was really unnecessary,” Kai says with a smile as Mama sets a plate of her amazing shrimp and grits in front of him. “We did not intend to inconvenience you.”

My mother waves a hand through the air dismissively. “Nonsense. This is nothing, the least I can do for you since y’all came out here right away to rescue my divined. You’ll need the fuel, and I’m happy to do it.”

Vok nods with a huge smile as she continues dishing out the meal. “I, for one, shall not complain. If you want to feed us, fantastic. It is greatly appreciated and looks incredible.”

“Hell yes it does,” Zan mumbles around a mouthful. “It is incredible. Perhaps you can teach our females how to make this *southern comfort food* when we return home.”

Andrej grunts his approval, something he does quite often, as Kai grins. “You can be the one to suggest the cooking lesson to the females then, demon. Every last one of them are hormonal dynamite, I’m sure they won’t even be a little offended by your idea.”

“Lark can’t cook for shit and she knows it.” Colt chuckles. “She’d love a cooking lesson but she’ll also be the first to admit there’s little chance she wouldn’t burn the house down in the process.”

Mama smiles. “She told us that. Said she could hunt with the best of them but that was about the extent of her culinary skills.”

Colt nods as he shovels more food into his mouth. “I cook for us when we don’t eat at the main house and my mate isn’t the least bit ashamed of it.”

“My Westley can burn water so I get it. We’re lucky he can brew coffee.”

“On that note...” Kai sets his already empty plate in the sink. “I believe we need to discuss bringing him home.”

I shift in my seat a little, more or less picking at my food. I’m anxious, very anxious over this whole thing and the nervous energy is making it hard to focus let alone eat.

This is a big deal and the fact that Kai insisted so many of them come out to help get Daddy back leads me to believe he expects this to be rather messy.

And as much as I want my daddy home, want our family whole and safe, I’m worried about Ronny and Vega, Colt, Kai, and Andrej. We may have just met but I already love Ronny’s family because I can feel his love for them, which also means I feel his concern, his fear over what can happen to them, and everything they have to lose.

The king doesn’t seem worried though, so I’m trying to rely on that to get me through this without falling apart.

“It seems Kentworth is staying at the biggest of his properties.” Kai looks to Vok as he unrolls a blueprint of what I’m assuming is the house. “There are several points of entry,

many windows and possible escape routes but this also creates multiple blind spots.” He starts marking them with a red sharpie, little X’s over everything he referenced. “His security system is state of the art but if we breach the house in the proper locations we should be able to avoid the cameras.”

“And if not,” Vok says as he adds his plate to the sink. “I’ll cut the feed from here but we want to avoid that.”

Vega nods. “You want eyes on from afar so you can see what’s coming.”

“Exactly.” Kai grins at my brother, something that makes pride swell inside me. I like the approval my mate’s king apparently has for Veg.

“It’ll also be a red flag to Kentworth if his system quits working,” Ronny grunts as he leans over the blueprint. “We get a number on his guards?”

“Growing,” Vok grumbles while he reaches down and grabs a backpack from the floor. He rummages through it for a few seconds before he produces several thick file folders. “As of our departure, Kentworth had collected about twenty Hunters—”

“Including this Johan,” Zan says with a nod. “I’m familiar with the name but nothing more.”

The vampire blinks at his brother-in-law before he shakes his head with an annoyed look. “As helpful as that wasn’t, *I* was able to find a little more information on Johan. He seems to be the one in charge of the active groups that reside in most of Canada and Newfoundland, and based on that, we should expect the mad doctor to have a relatively large army by the end of the week.”

“Which means we move out before then.” Vega leans awkwardly toward the files, my brother craning his neck to get a look inside but based on his vantage point, he can’t. Not until Kai steps to the side to make room for him, the dragon king watching Vega closely with a look of curiosity and pride.

“Aside from the obvious...” Kai arches a brow as my big brother starts flipping through intel. “Why would moving out



sooner rather than later be ideal?”

I start chewing my cheek as all the males turn to Vega, my nerves swirling in my tummy because this feels like a test. One I doubt he could fail even if he tried, that’s just not something he’s capable of in any capacity, but it’s still intimidating to have so many men who are clearly seasoned warriors waiting on a barely legal banshee to call the next shots.

Which is why I wait on bated breath for his response, my heart beating a little faster as I look at my mama and Siggy—both of whom are smiling like crazy—then my divined.

*“It’s not exactly a test, baby.”*

*“It sure feels like one.”*

Ronny smiles as he pulls me closer to his side. *“You think your brother is gonna fail? Think my uncles will give him shit if he does?”*

*“No...”* I shake my head because I don’t think that but I can’t help but be nervous. *“They’re just so much more experienced than Vega. These men have fought battles as recently as a few months ago, and the only war my brother has ever been a part of is who gets to use the bathroom before Siggy locks himself in there for hours before school.”*

*“I love you,”* Ronny says with a chuckle in my head. *“And I know you have faith in Veg, so let that take front row in your mind instead of the nerves. Your brother is about to wow this group of assholes, I can feel it.”*

And what do you know, my wonderful divined is right.

“Element of surprise,” Vega finally says after way too long. “Not just because they probably hope Mama and Ronny are dead after what happened in the shack, but because they wouldn’t expect them to have any kind of connection to the dragons they’re hunting.”

“Even after the lab?” Andrej grunts as he tilts his head to the side. “Dragons were clearly there.”

Vega nods slowly. “True, but it doesn’t mean these guys would connect Ronny to you. Just like they wouldn’t connect Mama. No one knows any of that except for Kentworth and I doubt he was ready to flap his gums about losing Lark after he was almost attacked by a gigantic rabid demon wolf.” His eyes lift to Colt briefly. “Sorry.”

The Alpha just shrugs. “Not wrong, son. Keep going.”

“And Kentworth probably still hasn’t spilled the beans about people like us, so the Hunters wouldn’t know about our mama’s connection to Lark, necessarily.” My brother goes back to looking through Vok’s files and I can’t help the way my nerves start to melt away, turning into a big ole puddle of pride like my divined said. “The doctor isn’t going to disclose what he views as failures to a group of meatheads he obviously only wants for muscle, and because they’re more about actions than words, he probably isn’t going to tell them about mystics other than shifters being involved in order to keep them from acting out of fear.”

“So, going in with not only dragons and a *gigantic rabid demon wolf*,” Kai says with a smirk. “But a young banshee and shadow sorceress would catch the *meatheads* off guard as well?”

Ronny tenses at my side and I wrap my arms around his waist to comfort him. “*Everything is going to be fine, honey. If things get bad and you want me to leave, I can shadow hop back here.*”

“*Do that,*” he grunts. “*Or better yet, stay here to begin with.*”

“*Ronin...*”

“*I know, I know. You’re capable of being there and want to help. And I couldn’t stop you even if I tried.*”

I smile a little as I look up at him. “*Damn straight, but worst case scenario, I have to leave and when I teleport via shadow I create a black hole that sucks that awful doctor and his men into it. Almost a win-win.*”

My divined smirks down at me as I bet my eyelashes. *“Such a little badass, my mate. But I have to ask, why almost a win-win?”*

With a shrug I give him my most innocent look. *“Because you’d be sucked into it too and after discovering how much I like oral, it’d be a real shame.”*

Ronny snorts in my face with a chuckle, dipping his head to kiss me just before we both tense when we hear, “You get all that, Beta?”

“No...” he says as we turn slowly to find all of the males staring at us with knowing grins. “But I’m sure you’ll fill me in on our less than leisurely run.”

Colt shakes his head with a smile as Zan’s expression turns devious. “Perhaps we should allow the newly mated to solidify their bond one more time before heading out. It seems as though the handful of times they have already isn’t quite cutting it.”

Ronny growls—a warning growl—at his uncle but it fades into laughter when I start to giggle like crazy. I’m blushing all the way down to my toes, and mortified isn’t really the word to describe how I feel knowing Zan can tell how many times Ronny and I have had sex in the last few days, but I won’t lie and say I don’t want the time offered.

I have faith in my divined, faith in my brother, and these males, but the possibility of losing Ronny so soon after he became my forever is very real. And it’s scarier than anything my untapped power is capable of.

## CHAPTER 19

# LOVE AND WAR

## NOVA



“**Y**ou’re sure you’re ready?”

I take a deep breath and nod before I look up into the face of my divined as he places his hands on my shoulders and starts rubbing my arms. “I’m ready. I can do this; I *want* to do this.”

“I can tell.” Ronny gives me a soft smile before he leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I can feel your determination, Peach, but I can also feel how anxious you are.”

“Nervous,” I say with a sigh. “I’m nervous but not enough to let it stop me. Nothing is gonna stop me until we bring Daddy home.”

My divined, the boy I’ve loved since long before I knew I’d get to keep him forever, slides his hands up to my neck, gently brushing his mark on my skin as he tilts my head to look into my eyes. “I know, baby. We’re going to do that, bring your dad and the others home, but I won’t risk you to do it. If you want to go home or even if you want to stay here...”

I shake my head firmly, squaring my shoulders before I look around the tiny shack again.

We got here a few hours ago, and I knew from looking at the bloodstains in the snow outside that the inside wasn’t going to be much better. Ronny and Vega came back out here before my divined’s uncles arrived, so we knew the bodies were gone but seeing what was left, the crimson snow and drag marks didn’t quite prepare me for actually walking in.

And when we did, only to find pieces of the one Hunter's skull and brain, the dried pools of blood from both of them, and the tools of my sweet Robin's torture all left in a hurry, well, I can honestly say nothing would have prepared me for that.

It was like all the air was knocked out of my lungs once the door opened and between smelling Ronny's blood—a skill I apparently gained from our mating—and knowing my mama was brought in here to endure the same brand of bullshit my divined did was a lot to take in. Almost too much, if I'm being truthful. My eyes welled up and my heart started racing, and all I could think about was what life had been like for my parents for nearly a year, what was waiting for us when we finally went after that crazy doctor who has my daddy, and what could happen when we did.

I burst into tears then.

Looking around this dinky shack, thinking about all of the horrible things that have and could happen to the people I love the most, it was almost too much to handle. I cried for a good fifteen minutes, clinging to my divined and wishing so hard that this wasn't what we were facing. And while I never in a million years would want my parents to go through the things they have, Ronny is my silver lining in all of it.

The only good thing to come from these horrible and tragic events was realizing he was my forever, and while it's scary as hell thinking forever could end tonight, it was also enough to have me steeling my spine.

I finished having my breakdown and went right into *full battle mode*, as Kai called it, pulling myself together and asking questions I was too afraid to ask before. And I even managed to be helpful when we were reviewing our plan.

Initially, we were going to just break in, running into that huge house guns blazing, so to speak, but as they talked around me I thought of something else.

Since my big brother is a banshee and far more in tune with his gifts than me or Siggy, I suggested Vega go all apparition-like and get in that way since he can actually walk through walls when he does it. It takes a lot of concentration to

do but Vega is a Baker and that means he's capable of using his bullheaded streak to focus on something to the point of manifesting it into existence for himself, which is why he all but perfected that part of his gifts. Vega Hail has pretty much perfected *all* of his gifts, but you'd never know it because he's modest and almost reluctant to talk about them let alone use them.

Not now, though.

Vega agreed emphatically when I brought it up, saying that if he went in that way, he'd be able to stay undetected and keep up the element of surprise we're desperately holding onto, and Vega said if he can keep it up long enough he might be able to do a little exploring before anyone else goes in. The dragon king wasn't a very big fan of that part, though.

Kai understood and appreciated what my brother was willing to do but he didn't want him in that big spooky house alone. Something I was relieved to hear because I didn't either, even if I have all the faith in the world when it comes to Vega.

Not having any kind of backup or way to communicate are scary thoughts, and even my puny little self couldn't go in with my big brother and try to provide some kind of help because I don't know where the shadows are to hop on one. And no, I doubt any of these males would want two incredibly inexperienced youngins going into a situation like that on their own, but if I was able to transport inside with Vega, I would because at least he wouldn't be alone.

So, my big brother is going to ghost himself inside, block out any cameras, then let the rest of us in so we can divide and conquer.

Kai and Vega will be looking for the Hunters and where they're staying in order to *get them while they sleep*, and Andrej is going solo to do a full perimeter sweep while he takes out anyone on watch and looks for my daddy and the others. And Colt, Ronny, and I are going after Kentworth himself.

I know my divined isn't a fan of bringing me with them, but there's no way in hell he wasn't going to have me within



arm's reach this entire time either and since he and his uncle both promised Lark the crazy doc's head, this was our only option. So, I'll be tagging along with my beautiful Beta and his Alpha, then probably sitting on my hand in the corner while they rip Kentworth to shreds.

*Yay.*

Not that I don't want that miserable, horrible, sorry excuse of a man to pay for everything he's done, and I think whatever justice Ronny and his family serve is well beyond deserved, I just don't know if I want to watch Abe and Colt's wolf—who I'll name at some point, I'm sure—tear a human being to pieces with my own two eyeballs.

“So go back to the cottage, Peach,” Ronny says with a frown as he caresses his thumbs along my jaw. “If this is too much, if all the violence and death that could happen is too hard for you to handle, just go back and wait with your mom and Sig.”

“I can't do that, honey.” I search his eyes, pleading with those Caribbean blues to see how badly I need to do this. Not just for my daddy but for Ronny, too. He isn't the only one sick over their fated one marching into battle and I know if I were back at the cottage with the rest of our family, I'd be an even bigger hot mess than I usually am. “I'm in this with you. Fully committed and ready to kick some butt.”

Ronny's frown deepens as his eyes bounce around my face but after a few seconds he huffs out a sigh before giving me a small smile. “There's nothing I can do to get you to change your mind?”

“Nope.”

“Not even if I promise to eat your pussy for hours after I get back?”

“*Ronin!* Hush your mouth.” I gasp before I start giggling and look around to make sure no one else heard that. “But no. Even the promise of you using that very talented mouth in one of my most favorite ways isn't enough to get me to tuck tail.”

My divined gives me a lopsided grin. “What if I sweeten the deal by including your ass? I will literally tongue fuck both until I can’t feel my face, then I’ll bury my cock inside your pussy while I finger your perfect peach.”

*My entire body is on fire.* I’m blushing so fiercely I might just burst into flames, but Ronny’s filthy mouth isn’t going to change my mind. Not right now, anyway. “All of that and so much more is already promised because of our bond, Ronin. We have forever to do everything and anything we want—in or out of the bedroom—but I want to make sure our entire family is together and whole for some of it.”

“Hopefully the stuff *outside* the bedroom.” Ronny’s nose scrunches before he arches a brow. “I love your family and mine, but that’s just weird.”

I swat at his chest and roll my eyes.

*My divined is ridiculous.*

“I won’t stop you from doing this if you’re hellbent on it.” Ronny’s expression changes completely as his concern creeps into his eyes, as his worry begins to vibrate through our bond. “I couldn’t if I tried, I can’t say no to you, but I need you to promise me something, Peach.”

“Anything,” I whisper quickly.

My divined stares at me a little longer, stares and searches my face as if he’s committing it to memory. “You promise me that if shit goes south, if something happens to me while we’re in there, you leave.” I open my mouth to argue, to reassure this beautiful male that nothing is going to happen to him or anyone else, but he shakes his head. “I’m confident in our combined abilities, cocky even over the fact that we’re going to go in there and put an end to all of this insanity, but I need this, Nova. I need you to tell me, to *promise me*, that if something happens to me, or if you are in a situation you can’t get out of, you shadow hop back to the cottage as fast as possible. Vok and Zan will take care of you and your family, they know what to do, but I need to know that you’re going to get back to them— “

“Because if you can’t protect me, you want to know someone else is.” My eyes well with tears all over again as I nod my head, press up on my toes, and wrap my arms around Ronny’s neck. “I promise, Ronin, but you promise me, right here and now, that I won’t have to do that.”

He meets me halfway as I move to kiss him, my divined smiling against my lips as he wraps his arms around my waist and holds me tight. “I will try like hell to make that happen, Peach.”

“That wasn’t a promise.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Ronny chuckles as I scowl. “I can’t promise something like that, but I swear to you that I will try my hardest to make sure I keep it anyway.”

“I guess that’ll do.”

“You *guess*?”

“Yeah,” I grumble as he kisses me again. “It’ll have to since I’d rather you tell it to me straight than sugarcoat things to placate me.”

My fated one laughs then plants a hard kiss on my mouth as he slaps me on the ass. “Good, cause I’m done keeping things from you. Scary or otherwise. Now let’s join the pow wow by the door so we can get this fucked up party started.”

“Everything good?” Colt asks as we walk over. “You’ll be warm enough on our way there, sweetheart?”

My blonde brows raise as I look from him to my divined, then to the two dragons standing next to my brother.

All four of the shifters are wearing nothing but black boxer-briefs—bare feet and all—and Colt is worried about *me* being warm enough. Which I appreciate because it’s colder than a witch’s tit outside, but I’m in thermal underwear, wool leggings, a fleece hoodie underneath—one of Ronny’s fleece hoodies—and I’m wearing leg warmers over military grade winter boots. Plus, I’ve got a knit cap and infinity scarf on. The only parts of me that are exposed are my hands and face, the former because they’re always cold and I’ll need them for some of my magic, the latter so I can see what the hell is going

on and yell at my divined if I need to. And while I'd much rather be dressed in all of this *and* a snowmobile suit and ski mask, I don't think my body temp is the one to worry about right now.

"I'm fine," I say with a shrug.

"You sure, Sissy?" Vega does a full body scan as he looks over my wardrobe. "Gonna be ok out there? It's not a short trip."

I nod and give my big brother a warm smile.

He's dressed similarly to the way I am save for a layer or two, but Vega is running on adrenaline right now so he could probably be standing here in his underwear like the rest of them without it fazing him.

*Males.*

"If the sorceress has her needs met for the time being..." Kai gives me a stunning smile and nod. "I'd like to review our plan of attack once we arrive at Kentworth's property one last time before we head out."

"We go in on the south side," Vega says as he lifts his eyes to the door, my brother clearly reviewing his mental checklist. "Used to be his parents' wing so it'll most likely stay vacant until he has too many people at the house. Parents' bedroom is the best access point; it's upstairs, the panel of windows with the giant balcony. I go in, get out into the hall and clear it, and head toward the private entrance where you'll be waiting."

"Good," Andrej grunts his approval. "Very good."

Vega's eyes shift toward him briefly and I don't think anyone else would notice, but I can see the way his pride swells a bit from the dragon's words. "Then, uh..." He clears his throat and goes back to reviewing the plan. "Then we check the entire wing before we split up and—"

Out of nowhere, my big brother lurches forward, bending at the waist while his body begins to shake. I rush to his side because *what the hell is happening* and as soon as my hand lands on his back, a freezing cold shot of energy surges through my palm and zips up my arm.

“Vega!” I yell just as his body jerks backward, his spine bowing as his hands roll into fists at his sides. And when I go to him again, this time with all the males trying to get close as well, Vega’s head tilts back on his neck, his eyes shining an eerie yellowish-green light, and a scream louder than any I’ve ever heard from him before tears from his throat.

*And somehow, I know, this is the omen of many, many deaths.*

## CHAPTER 20

**SLAYED**

## RONNY



I close my eyes, cover my ears and drop to the floor as Vega screams, my best friend's cry never-ending and loud enough to pierce my eardrums.

Not that I have a ton of life experience, but I have *never* heard anything like this in my entire life.

It's both guttural and high-pitched, two-toned almost, and the volume has to be enough to knock the shack down on its own. The sound is haunting and yet beautiful, a clear sign of death, and it has my mate mark from Nova radiating a cold so intense it's shooting down to my fingers.

With a wince, I plant my palms on the dirty floor and try to get to my feet, my friend and his safety a concern, the safety of my mate even more so.

Nova said she can hear her brothers, said she can hear her dad too, and if this is what it's like every time, my peach is even stronger than I realize.

But my gods, this is brutal.

“Nova!” I yell over Vega's screaming. “Nova, baby, what's \_\_\_”

“Daddy!”

The sobbed response is enough to force my eyes open and when they do, that's when I see I'm the only one on the ground, the only one reacting to anything other than Vega's contorted position.



My uncles are all surrounding him, trying to talk to him and they're so wrapped up in it, none of them noticed my reaction.

Or the fact that my mate just took off out the front door.

“Colt!” I cover my ears and make myself stand, using my mated male energy to get my body to move. “Drej! Come on, you assholes!”

Not bothering to make sure they follow, I stagger outside just as Vega's scream subsides, rounding the shack in the same direction of Nova's boot prints, and when I hit the clearing, my stomach drops to my fucking balls.

There's a man, a tall beefy man who looks like the embodiment of evil with his dark eyes and bushy mustache. There's something familiar about him, something that tugs at the back of my mind like I should know who he is, but I can't quite place it. I don't try too hard though, because this guy just made my shit list.

He's smoking a cigar and chuckling, fucking *laughing* as I slowly regain my balance, and held firmly to his body by her goddamn hair, is *my mate*.

*Oh, fuck this guy.*

My wolf growls, growls low and mean as I square my stance and prepare for a shift but when the asshole opens his mouth, I pause.

“Is this the one?” The man asks over his shoulder to none other than Ishmael Kentworth.

“No,” the crazy fuck says as he steps forward. “But I want him anyway.”

*What the hell does that mean?*

I know this sick bastard will literally take any creature of mysticism he can get, but what *one* is he looking for exactly? Because we brought quite the variety, and I can guarantee we will each leave an impression in the psycho.

I can hear Vega and my uncles making their way toward us slowly and that's when my training finally kicks in.

Prying my eyes off of my mate, I look over the fucker holding her, making note of his militant attire and weapons before checking the doctor. He's bundled up but unarmed, save for the three men flanking him who are dressed the same as the one with Nova.

*"Four armed and the doc,"* I send to Colt as I continue my quick analysis of our ambush. *"At least ten more in view behind them. Hunters. More in the trees, I can smell them more clearly now."*

The movement on the side of the shack stops as he responds. *"Nova?"*

*"They have her,"* I growl. *"Must be Johan."*

*"Probably. What else do you see, Beta?"*

*"Movement. More figures coming through the woods and —"* And oh my gods.

Three Hunters walk forward, what appear to be leashes in their hands, and the bloodied and nearly blue bodies they're dragging behind them, the living creatures with shackles around their wrists and burlap sacks over their heads have me seconds from going off script.

*Wes is one of those bodies.*

I can smell him, can scent the markers he shares with his kids, and while I'm glad he's still alive, several things click, the most obvious being they knew.

These assholes somehow *knew* for sure, without a doubt that I was part of the group that blew up the lab, and once Bella was brought to the shack, the connection was solidified after they didn't find our bodies.

*"Fuck,"* I grunt. *"They just brought Wes out. Wes, Cory, and hopefully Colleen."*

*"Good. That's good. What's going on with them? What kind of protection and restraints?"*

I watch through narrowed eyes as the Hunters forcefully shove all three to their knees, yanking the bags off their heads before promptly pointing a gun at them at point blank range.

Wes Baker blinks repeatedly, his sandy blonde hair disheveled and matted with blood. He looks around the clearing, scowling at the Hunters then giving me a puzzled look before he catches sight of my peach.

“Nova? Oh gods, Nova!” he yells as he struggles to get to his feet but the Hunter behind him pistol whips him before he can.

“Daddy!” My girl sobs before those shadowy eyes swing my way again. *“Ronny, honey, I’m sorry. I heard him scream. I knew my daddy was out here and I—”*

*“It’s ok, baby.”* I send all my love through our bond and try to comfort her the best I can. *“It’s ok. This isn’t going how we thought it would, but that’s ok. We’ve got this no matter what, ok? Just stay strong and hang tight.”*

*“I love you,”* she says as tears stream down her cheeks. *“I’m sorry, Ronny, and I love you.”*

*“I love you, Peach.”*

“You sure you want this one?” Johan—I’m guessing—asks again. “If he’s not who you’re looking for, why bother?”

“I’m rebuilding, my friend.” Kentworth steps closer to them, his eyes shrewd as they watch me. “I need all of the shifters I can get.” The bastard reaches out toward Nova, his glove-covered hand moving toward her face but the growl that rips out of me when he’s centimeters away makes him pause and give me a stomach churning smile. “We’ll take her too. I believe the human female might be this one’s mate.”

My wolf howls and starts to tear through my body, my bones ready to bend and break, but before it can happen, the doc stops it with one nod.

I barely feel the bullet when it hits my thigh, barely feel the pain or the burn of the poison as it enters my bloodstream. It doesn’t really register at all outside of seeing the Hunter next to Kentworth lower his smoking gun, and the scream of horror that comes from my mate.

“Ronny! No!”

I go down to one knee as my stare finds hers. *“I’m ok, baby.”*

*“No!”* She struggles against the fucker holding her only to cry out in pain as he tugs harder on her hair. *“No! Ronny, honey, this is all my fault. I’m so sorry.”*

*“It’s ok, Peach. They want me alive.”*

*“No...”* Gods, even her sobs in my head are heartbreaking. *“No, Ronny...”*

My legs give out as they start to go completely numb and I can’t help but chuckle.

*Fucking figures.*

Every step of the way, all I’ve wanted to do was help my family and step into the role of Beta. That’s been my entire purpose since I answered the call, and mating Nova only made that drive grow stronger. But here I am, sitting on my ass in the snow with a fucking poison bullet in my leg, facing off with a dozen Hunters and the crazy doctor who gives Frankenstein a run for his money.

*“I got you, Beta.”*

And *that* is all the warning I get before Colt’s wolf comes flying around the corner of the shack and goes right for the bastard who shot me.

“That one!” Kentworth yells as Johan pulls him out of the line of fire. “That’s the one I want! The dual wolf!” The Hunters around him raise their weapons, aiming for my uncle who is literally ripping apart a lifeless body, but the doctor stops them from doing anything. “Stop! They don’t work on him, and I want him clear-headed.”

Johan throws his cigar on the ground and pulls Nova closer as he palms the piece in his hip. “So how the hell do we get it to stop?”

“Them.” Kentworth nods toward Wes and the others. “We have leverage, my friend.”

As much as I don’t want to admit it, the asshole is right because the second those hammers click, Colt lifts his head

from the center of the torso he's destroying, and he starts to slowly move toward me.

"That's it," the doc says as he nods, smiling like the unhinged bastard he is. "That's right. You come with us willingly and we won't hurt them."

Colt growls as he puts his body between me and them, and I hear the faintest creaking of wood behind me. Trying not to draw attention to it, I turn slightly and can vaguely make out the outline of... holy shit, it's *Vega*.

My best friend went *all apparition like* and he's on the roof of the shack, and based on his movements, he's sending info back to Kai and Drej.

*Hell yes.*

*"Ronny."*

My head swings back toward my peach at the worried and almost pained sigh she sent. "*Nova, baby, what is it?*"

*"I don't... I'm not feeling very good."*

My heart rate speeds up at that, and I try like hell to get to my feet, peeking around my uncle who is still facing off with the doctor. Nova is sagging against Johan, her body seemingly drained, and what has me even more worried is the fact that I don't *feel it*. I don't feel anything that could be going on with her and that terrifies me.

*"It's ok, Peach. I'm going to get you out of here. Hang tight, baby, ok? Nova?"*

And now our link is quiet.

I don't know how I can tell, but things are starting to feel even more off.

And that shit means I have to get my ass in gear.

"Show me the other wolf," Kentworth says like a dumbass as I start figuring out how to get off the ground. "Show me the other wolf and I'll have my friends remove their weapons from the other specimens."

Colt growls and snaps his teeth as he starts to pace in front of me, Vega still moving around on the roof before I can hear him climb down.

The doctor smiles again, a little crazy and a lot scary. “No? Don’t want to share your hidden talent?” Kentworth lifts his hand in the air, signaling for the Hunters to ready their weapons again and just when I feel Vega’s hand on my shoulder, all hell breaks loose and I swear I have a goddamn stroke.

Nova, my sweet peach, my fated mate goes limp and nearly drops out of Johan’s arms before her entire beautiful body explodes into what can only be described as a mini black hole. All of the men around her start sliding in her direction, their weapons flying toward her like she’s a goddamn magnet, and when Johan yells, “Move in!” close to one hundred more men come running out of the trees.

Only to be shot back about thirty feet when my girl *explodes*.

Shadows shoot from her body, Nova starting to levitate as they lift her from the ground and hold her upright. Her eyes flip open and *fuck*, more shadows swirl and dark from the darkest depths and within seconds they start to take on the shape of... *something*.

*A beast.*

Jesus Christ, my mate conjured a fucking shadow beast whether she realized it or not, and the Hunters are flocking to her and it by the dozens.

“Colt!” I yell as my Alpha turns toward me. “Now. If you have any control over the *other*, *now* is the time to—”

*“Way ahead of you. Hold on to your butt, Beta.”*

Faster than I can track, Colt lets the *other* free and before that mangled, terrifying wolf takes off toward his playground, he looks at me, narrows his eyes and chuffs.

*And the fucking bullet in my leg pops out like a goddamn piece of toast.*

“Holy shit,” Vega whispers as he becomes more human. “Jesus, Ron, what the—”

“Vega, the *other*. The *other*, Vega.” I watch the hole in my leg close and grin when I can move my toes. “That’s all you get right now. Go get your dad and the others to safety, it’s about to get real messy out here.”

My friend scowls at me. “But I can help. Let me help.”

With a grunt, I get to my feet, my eyes trained on my mate—who is fully back with the program and apparently puppeteering the shadow beast—and shake my head. “You will be helping. Get them to safety, kill anyone who comes after you. Your dad can’t do shit while he’s cuffed and gagged, and they can’t shift like that. They need you, Veg.”

He searches my face for a beat before he nods. “Make sure my sister doesn’t get hurt.”

“Always.”

“And keep yourself alive too, Ron. I kinda liked the idea of having you as my brother.” Then my best friend disappears and takes off in an invisible outline toward his dad.

*Crazy shit.*

Shit I don’t have time to think about because Kentworth is yelling at Johan to get Nova, and I’m not about to let them touch another hair on my mate’s head.

My wolf howls as we shift, shifting fast and racing toward the clearing. Dozens and dozens of men come after us but my wolf snorts as we hear the unmistakable roar of our king’s dragon, his brother’s just as deep and loud right after it before red and black fire lights up the night sky.

We dart past the shadow beast, the creature like a giant reaching down and scooping up men before it throws them into the forest.

“*Our mate is amazing,*” my wolf says with obvious pride. “*A force to be reckoned with.*”

“*You got that right.*”

Weaving through the quickly collecting dead, we go straight for Johan to find him taking aim at Nova, his gun pointed at her head in a kill shot that he might actually be able to pull off.

*Not on my watch.*

*You do not fuck with my peach.*

*Nobody* fucks with my peach, which is why we push ourself harder, run faster, and once we're in range, we pounce.

The satisfying crunch of bone under our paws makes me smile and when my wolf flips the fucker over so we can look into his eyes as he dies, my stomach rolls.

*Jacob Schmidt.*

*Ricky Schmidt's father.*

My only fucking friend until Nova and the twins came along.

The bastard who dated my mate and humiliated her at a party in front of so many people.

That asshole's *dad* is staring back up at me because he's a fucking dragon hunter with control over an enormous group of men, and he just tried to kill my mate.

For a split second we hesitate.

Memories from my childhood, times spent with his family and mine, they all play through my head like a movie, and I question whether or not I should do this.

“Go on, *wolf*,” he spits, his words full of so much hate I can practically feel it. “Kill me because if you don't, I'm coming after your mate and your entire goddamn family the second I can. And, and I promise you, *Ronny Caldwell*, I'll make their deaths slow and painful, right down to your baby sister. I—”

My wolf lunges before he can finish, tearing out Jacob's throat and biting down so hard he almost takes the man's head off.



*“He threatened our mate,”* my wolf huffs. *“Threatened the pups and our family.”*

*“I know.”*

*“No one threatens those we love.”*

*“I know.”* I sigh, still too shocked to say much more, and that shock is exactly why I almost miss the sweetest voice with a southern drawl scream, “Abe! Ronny, watch out!”

Our head whips left as none other than *Ricky* comes charging toward us, tears of rage and grief streaming down his face as he runs full speed and lifts his rifle.

My complete shock is why we don't move, why my wolf and I just stare as my childhood friend takes aim and fires wildly, his bullets exploding on the ground around us in a flurry of little clouds of snow.

And just when I'm sure I'm about to meet The Maker—who has a really twisted sense of humor—*Ricky* suddenly lifts off the ground in a shadowy fist, his gun plucked from his hand and tossed aside seconds before an ear-piercing scream rings out and blood begins flowing from *Ricky's* ears, nose, eyes and mouth.

The shadow beast tilts its head in confusion as it looks at the lifeless body it's holding, its dark form swirling and stretching as its other hand lifts to almost poke *Ricky* in the face. The shadow beast is amazing but obviously *Nova* is its brain because it clearly has no understanding of what's going on. Not that I know exactly what happened, but I have a pretty good idea. And when my wolf pulls my attention away of the creature and his plaything with a huff of relief, I get my answer.

*Vega* takes shape a couple feet away, scowling up at *Ricky's* corpse. “Wanted to do that since he embarrassed Princess *Nova*. Coulda screamed that asshole into The End a long time ago and probably saved us a lotta trouble.”

*Holy shit.*

Holy shit, my mate's shadow thingy stopped my former friend from getting to me and her brother turned his brain into

a puddle with his voice because the asshat was trying to shoot me.

*There is not enough therapy in the world to help me process any of this shit.*

“Abe!” Nova all but yells as her shadows lower her to the ground, her beast lumbering off toward the woods with Ricky in hand. “Oh, Abe, are you ok?”

My peach drops to her knees next to us and starts aggressively rubbing our side and scruff, not giving one damn about the amount of blood covering our fur.

“You were wonderful.” She beams a smile at us before she giggles, my wolf flopping down belly up so she can scratch us there too. “Both of you. You were so wonderful and brave. And you saved me!”

*“Peach—Nova, are you ok?”*

“I’m fine, honey. Right as rain, even.”

If I could roll my eyes I’d be doing it because *Abe* has checked out and I’m stuck in his head. “*Baby, you can play with Abe later. We need to get out of here.*”

Nova waves me off just as my wolf’s bag leg starts to kick. *Damn puppy.* “They’re gone, Ronny.”

*“What?”*

“Yep,” she chirps. “Once the dragons started lighting people on fire and Colt’s demon wolf ate half of Kentworth, someone started hollering for retreat and those Hunters high-tailed it out of here.”

*“You’re serious? They’re gone?”*

Nova stops petting my fucking wolf and looks us in the eye. “Do you really think I’d be giving Abe all the lovings if people were still trying to kill us?”

*“Smart ass.”*

“Well, it’s true. I might not be some big bad predator, but I can tell when we won, Ronin. I’m not stupid.”

“No. No, Peach, you’re not.” Quicker than she can blink, I shift again, laying on my back to look up into the beautiful face of my mate. “You’re intelligent as fuck, sexy as hell, and you’re a fucking badass shadow sorceress who saved me from your ex.”

Nova giggles as she leans down to kiss me but stops abruptly. “You’re covered in blood.”

I glance down at my body with a sigh because I am, and I can’t kiss her like that.

“Then let’s go home, baby. I’m sure your dad is ready to get the hell out of here, and I want to shower all this off so I can do all those things I promised I would before we fucked shit up.”

“You have a one-track mind, Ronin Abraham Caldwell.”

“You love it.”

“I do.” She sighs. “And I love you, honey. So much.”

I reach up and push a strand of her blonde hair out of her eyes with a smile. “I love you, Nova Rain Baker, and I’m thankful as fuck that you’re my mate.”

My peach’s eyes go misty as she tugs down the sleeve of her hoodie and aggressively scrubs it over my mouth, then leans in and presses a small kiss to my lips.

“Thought the blood grossed you out.”

Nova shrugs. “I had to kiss you after all that.”

With a smirk, I glance around the clearing to do a quick headcount and sigh at what I see: our king and his brother taking inventory on the bodies, Vega’s back with his dad while they both try to comfort the others. My gaze moves over the carnage and blood, the smoldering earth and trees, and when I finally see Colt strolling up with Kentworth’s head gripped firmly in his hand, the doc’s spine dragging behind him, I can’t help but smile.

*We did it.*

“We did.” Nova sighs as she wipes my mouth with the other sleeve and kisses me again. “We’re awesome.”

“We are,” I chuckle. “And you’re going to ruin that sweatshirt.”

My mate shrugs again. “It’s yours, so, sorry not sorry.”

I bark out a laugh at that and pull my mate to me, holding Nova tight as she giggles against my chest, and nothing in the world has ever felt so good.

My family is safe.

Our clan won.

And my fated mate was by my side every step of the way.

*Nothing gets any better than that.*

# HIS CRUSADE PLAYLIST

## HIS CRUSADE

### [His Crusade on Spotify.](#)

- Too Young - Post Malone
- Lips Of An Angel - Hinder
- Stay - Rihanna, Mikky Ekko
- Alone (Out of My Head) - Thousand Below
- Spoil My Night (feat. Swae Lee) - Post Malone
- Sign of the Times - Harry Styles
- Leave - Post Malone
- Guts Over Fear - Eminem, Sia
- Forty Six & 2 - TOOL
- My Shadow - Keane
- Welcome to the Black Parade - My Chemical Romance
- My Hero - Foo Fighters
- Man on a Missions - Oh The Larceny
- I Need Your Love (feat. Ellie Goulding) - Calvin Harris
- Whatever It Takes - Anita Baker
- Peaches - The Presidents Of The United States Of America
- Calm Before The Storm - Whisky Myers
- Roman's Revenge - Nicki Minaj, Eminem
- Angel By The Wings - Sia
- My Shadow - Jay Reatard
- Photograph - Ed Sheeran
- All of the Stars - Ed Sheeran
- Riptide - Vance Joy

- Perfect - Ed Sheeran
- Purple Rain - Prince
- Shape of You - Ed Sheeran
- Thriller - Michael Jackson
- Cheap Thrills (feat. Sean Paul) - Sia
- SexyBack (feat. Timbaland) - Justin Timberlake
- Home/Dirty Paws - Gardiner Sisters
- Careless Whisper - Seether

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A. K. Graves is a thirty-something, happily married mother of three fabulous girls and hails from America's very own high five, a Michigander born and raised. A writer of both paranormal and contemporary romance, A. K. believes that everyone should have their own happily ever after. She also believes until everyone gets a HEA, they should be able to read about smoking hot dragons, vampires, rockstars and MC members who fight hard and love harder to prove true love never dies.

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