



SAVED
BY THE
LYCANTHROPE

FATED MATES OF THE RIFTWOLVES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHLOE PARKER

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Fated Mates of the Riftwolves](#)

[Triggers & Tropes](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Up Next](#)

[Sneak Peek](#)

[Chloe Parker: Otherworldly Romance](#)

Fated Mates of the Riftwolves
SAVED BY THE LYCANTHROPE



Chloe Parker

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

This work is intended for a mature audience.

Cover Design by Moor Books

Copyright © 2022 Chloe Parker

All rights reserved.

FATED MATES OF THE RIFTWOLVES

THE AUSTIN PACK'S stories can be read in any order, and each comes with an HEA, but are ideally read in this order.

SAVED BY THE LYCANTHROPE

TAKEN BY THE LYCANTHROPE

BURNED BY THE LYCANTHROPE

TRIGGERS & TROPES

CONTENT WARNINGS:

- This is an omegaverse series, which means you can expect all the good stuff: knotting, biting, heats, and pack dynamics.

Tropes:

- Roadtrip Romance
- Only One Bed
- Texas (it's a trope)

Trigger Warnings:

- Discussion of past violence (Ch 15)
- Family disputes (Ch 16)

My first priority is for you to be safe and comfortable as you're reading, so please feel free to skip the mentioned sections if necessary.

Thanks so much for reading, and enjoy your trip to the post-Convergence Texas!

PLAYLIST

MUSIC IS ESSENTIAL to any romance set in or around Austin, Texas—the live music capital of the world and my beloved hometown.

Therefore, this book comes with a mixtape. You can find a playlist of bluegrass and romantic two-steppin' tunes [HERE](#)—to make you feel like you're looking up at the big Texas sky.

Run Away With Me - San Fermin

Curs in the Weeds - Horse Feathers

Werewolves - The Damnwells

Speak - Nickel Creek

Fidelity - Regina Spektor

Texas - The Damnwells

Rain - Patty Griffin

Golden Days - The Damnwells

Hello My Old Heart - The Oh Hellos

Heart in a Cage - Chris Thile

Broadripple is Burning - Margot & the Nuclear So and Sos

The Pool - River Whyless

Jealous of the Moon - Nickel Creek

Lil Dead Eye-d - Richard Edwards

Lost - The Damnwells

Wedding Song - Anais Mitchell, Justin Vernon

House of Winston - Shakey Graves

Slow Joke Grin - Laura Gibson

Noble Heart - PHOX

In Control - Greensky Bluegrass

Come With Me Tonight - Bob Schneider

I Will Keep the Bad Things From You - The Damnwells

PROLOGUE

“SOME COWBOYS HAVE too much tumbleweed in their blood to settle down.”

— *Ken Alstad*

I stare at the grandfather clock and listen to the seconds tick by, and I am scared out of my mind.

Three days ago, Gran and Pa went for their usual monthly run into the city to get supplies. I stayed home, played the violin, and read old smut novels from the cardboard box in the basement. I hid when I heard spacecraft fly over, and then I did my chores as the sun sank behind the Dallas skyline.

I set the table like I normally would, and then I cooked dinner. *Maybe they got stopped at a checkpoint*, I thought to myself. Maybe there was traffic out of the city, or it was busier in the black market than usual.

I only started to worry when the clock chimed eight, and they *still* hadn't come home.

But I made dinner: veggies from the garden under grow lamps downstairs, cooked with rice and a single, precious chicken egg—the last of our stock from our last supply run. I made plates for the two of them, even though it was a waste of resources, and then I sat in my spot, Pa's seat to my right at the head of the table, and Gran's across from me.

The food got cold.

I started to cry.

At this point, my tears are all dried up, and my eyes are red as I stare and *stare* at the grandfather clock. At first, I watched it so closely because I was wondering where Gran and Pa had gone, and how late it would be reasonable to expect them to come home.

Now, I'm watching it because I'm trying to figure out how long they've been in captivity.

And how long they have left.

...and how long *I* have left before I run out of food or am ultimately discovered.

I've done all the waiting I can, and now it's time to go.

I stand on unsteady legs, humming to myself more out of an attempt to comfort myself than boredom. The tune is a jig that Gran likes—the Swallowtail, bouncing around on repeat in my head. My grandparents have been smart; they have a contingency plan for things like this.

That doesn't make it any less terrifying to carry out.

I stride toward the front door, clenching my fists so tight that my fingernails bite into my palms. I can remember Pa's instructions clearly, given how many times he's drilled them into my head. If they disappear, I should go to the black market and seek passage to Austin, where I can connect with Resistance forces. Escape for three people is hard, but for one it should be easy; or at least, that's what they've always *said*. And the Resistance will keep me safe from the Heavenly Host, while their forces stage a rescue.

I feel like I should save them myself, but I don't even know where to look.

So I have to go to Austin.

First, I pin up my wild honey waves, making sure they're secure against my head. My hair could be a weakness if someone tries to grab me—I know this from Gran telling me about the outside world.

Next, I throw on a white linen shirt over a black tank top, to keep pests off of my skin and to stay warm in the cool

winter nights. On my legs, I wear a pair of jeans and a solid set of hiking boots.

I don't look at my grandparents' things as I pack. It'll be no good to them if I mourn before they're even dead.

I leave the food on the table, though...because I can't bear to clear it away.

The last thing I grab is Gran's violin, my fingers playing across the lovely, taut strings as I prepare to place it carefully in its leather case. I pluck the strings and squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself not to cry. I *have* to do this for them—if at all possible, I have to make sure I survive and that they get free.

Once the violin is in its case, I hoist the pack over one shoulder and the fiddle over the other, staring at the door handle. The last rays of my third day alone in the house shine through the glass window, sparking on the shiny gold door handle. I reach for it tentatively, all that light staining my hand as well—and then I push the door open.

In all my twenty-three years, I've never been outside. Not since before I can remember, anyway—since my parents died and my grandparents took me in.

But I take that first step into the twilight...then another, and another. And then I'm walking away from the house and the life I've built there, and into the ruined suburbs of Garland, Texas.

South, to the city, where the Angels keep their base.

And beyond, to find the Resistance.

CHAPTER ONE

☾

ELIJAH

Today is my last day in Dallas, if all goes according to plan.

I've been planning my escape for weeks, confident that the rumors of a new round of Blessings are true. Folks have been whispering that, in the wake of New Austin's takeover by the rebels, Dallas will be ramping up Blessings as the Angels mobilize us for their celestial war. I don't have much of an opinion on whether this is actually the army of heaven or not. I only know one thing: I'm not going back under the knife, even if there's hell to pay.

I'd rather join the Infernal Legion than give up what little independence I have left.

And of course, I've already been Blessed, but I'm defective. I don't work well with a pack. I don't follow instructions. Sometimes, I turn on my own kind.

So it's time to get the hell out of my hometown, even if it kills me.

I wind my way through the shining skyscrapers full of Angels, then out into the edge of the city, where the Angels don't have quite as much influence. Humanity has built tunnels underneath the old streets, where we can escape when

we want to; the invaders don't like getting dirty, so they don't often come here. Still, it isn't exactly safe, as you never know when you might stumble on other humans who think their Blessings are a nice thing. The Angels don't have quite as many allies nowadays, but they still keep spies everywhere.

I reach my entrance point—an abandoned cafe across the street from the old farmer's market—and fiddle with the lock until it clicks open, a cloud of dust puffing into my face. I cough and brush my tousled blond hair back from my face, waving my hand to get the dust away before heading inside. I haven't been here for a while, but the last time I checked, there was a basement with a hole in the wall that will take me into the Resistance black market. I step inside the lobby and around the café tables, and I'm relieved to find that there are a set of footsteps in the dust leading around the back counter and down into the dark.

My eyes adjust to the light as I walk, glowing slightly from my Blessing. I'm considered a failure in terms of being an effective Lycanthrope—that is, I've never fully transformed, and I was impossible for a team leader to control—but the infusion of alien wolf DNA *has* left me with pretty good night vision.

I navigate around the toppled cardboard boxes, the smell of rancid coffee beans wafting up toward me. Of course, that's another plus: my sense of smell, which clues me into all kinds of shit going on around the city.

It's less helpful when the only thing to smell is old, rotten food.

That changes quick, though. I can smell tex-mex before I even step through the hole in the wall, the scent of Diego's food truck making my stomach rumble. I would know the smell of that chorizo anywhere; Diego's used to be my favorite spot to grab a bite, before the Angels cracked down on independent cooks. They wanted all food to come from them, all *good things* to be a product of their "kind natures." I guess he moved his operation down here, and he's probably still peddling homemade tamales. Mm...yeah, I can definitely

smell chorizo, complete with the perfect combo of cinnamon, garlic, and chili powder.

At least I know what I'm having for dinner on my last night in Dallas, even if I don't know how I'm going to get past the wall.

Light creeps in slowly, blocked by a red curtain draped over the exit. I reach for it, stepping through only to be met by an angry, heavily armed man.

"Hey," I say, raising my hands. "Sorry, just trying to grab a bite to eat."

It's a lie, but he doesn't need to know that.

"This is Resistance territory," the man grunts. "You Blessed?"

"Yeah," I say. "But I'm not with the Angels."

"So who are you with?"

"Myself," I say with a bland smile. "Now can I please pass?"

He glares at me, his forehead creasing as his eyes narrow, and I'm only saved by the person behind him, a big guy in a stained white apron coming to my rescue.

"Elijah, is that you?"

I grin, popping my head around the guard.

"Hey, Diego!" I say. "Long time." I look back at the guard. "See? I've got friends here."

"Fine," the guard says, stepping back. "You're free to go."

I tilt my head with a snarky smile before I brush past him, shoulder checking him just a tad.

The black market is in an old warehouse on the outskirts of the city, all the windows boarded up so no Angels can see inside. It's a risky operation, but one that's absolutely essential to maintaining our independence—and here in Texas, I can't imagine we'll ever really shake that off, even in the wake of an alien invasion. I chuckle when I catch sight of a familiar *Don't*

Tread on Me poster plastered to the wall, this time with a big red X over the silhouette of an angel. Below the emblem is the text “Keep Texas Alien-Free.”

Sure, they aren’t what I ever pictured aliens looking like... but I can’t picture them being from Heaven either.

I get the feeling real angels wouldn’t perform human experimentation.

Maybe.

Diego laughs as I get closer, the scent of delicious food wafting over me.

“Still getting into trouble, I see,” he says.

“Always will,” I say. “Been a bit, Diego. Didn’t know you relocated after the raid.”

“Couldn’t exactly let my business go under,” he says. “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ and all that.”

“Yeah, I think we both know that’s bullshit,” I laugh. “Our angelic overlords don’t need bootstraps; they can fly.”

“Alright, well in that case, I’m here because people need to eat,” he says. “And on that note—what can I get for you?”

My eyes settle on the display behind him, which is full of mouthwatering food. Tamales line the metal shelves, wrapped in golden corn husks. “Chorizo,” I say, looking from Diego to the food. “I could smell it from all the way back in the tunnel.”

“Comin’ right up,” Diego grins. “And let me get you a stuffed poblano too...”

He turns around and starts to work at his griddle, and I slump to a seat on the stool at the counter. I use my enhanced senses to take in the sounds and smells of the black market, closing my eyes and breathing it all in. People chatter happily, laugh, and cry, all surrounded by the scent of Diego’s delicious food.

And then I smell the strangest thing.

It’s like wildflowers on a spring morning, morning dew on a blade of grass. When the scent hits my tongue, it tastes like

bourbon, heady and intoxicating. My eyes snap open and I scan the crowd for the source of that delicious aroma, but it's gone before I can find it, lost in the sea of milling refugees.

Omega, my wolf growls.

I shake off the thought, blowing out a breath—but it lingers anyway. My wolf is normally so quiet that I have a hard time keeping him out when he starts talking nonsense.

Diego brings me back to my senses, shoving a tin tray of food to clatter on the counter beside my elbow. I jerk my head toward him so fast that he jumps, stumbling a little.

“Damn, dude,” he says. “It never stops creeping me out when you do that.”

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Wolf thing.”

“Yeah, I get it,” he says. He puts out his hand. “Five dollars.”

I frown. “What?” I say. “You know I don't have that kind of money.”

It's a lie; I'm flush right now, having sold everything I owned to save up for this trip. And Diego seems to know that, giving me a smug smile.

“Hey, I'm a capitalist,” he shrugs. “Now pay up.”

I glare at him as I slide my hand into my pocket to grab my wallet, then yank out five bucks to toss on the counter.

“And here I thought we were pals,” I mutter.

Diego snorts as he throws the cash in a lockbox connected to his cart, looking at me over his shoulder.

“So are you going to tell me what you *actually* want?” he says. “Because I haven't seen you in months, and I'm assuming you're not just here for the tamales.”

I smirk. “Maybe I'm here for the company,” I say.

“Out with it, Elijah,” he says. “Or eat your food and shut up.”

I sigh, then lean forward on my elbows, picking up the offered fork in my right hand. “Fine,” I say. “I’m looking for someone to take me out of the city.”

His bushy brows shoot up toward his hairline. “Huh,” he says. “So you’re finally leaving town. Is this because of the news about another round of Blessings?”

“What do you think?” I deadpan. “Yes, of course it is. Gotta get the hell out of here before they start looking to juice up people like me. You know they’ll do it whether I want it or not.”

“I get it, man,” Diego says. “There’s a reason I’m down here and not up there. But why don’t you just stick around in the black market, where it’s safe?”

“Because I can’t just live in a bunker for the rest of my life,” I say. I take a bite of the food, chewing on it thoughtfully. “I think I’m gonna head to Austin and join the Rebellion.”

“Never took you for a man with a death wish,” Diego says. “It’s only a matter of time before the Angels take out their encampment in the old Georgetown caverns. The Resistance has made themselves way too dangerous, and it’s not like any of us humans have the resources to take on the Angels long-term. Plus, I hear the ‘borgs out there have fractured with the wolves...it ain’t good, dude.”

“It’s not about any high-minded ideals,” I say. “I’m just... I’m itching to fight. And I’m bored here in Dallas. It’s like something’s calling my name.”

“You sound like an old-timey cowboy,” Diego snorts.

“You know what they say,” I grin. “Got too much tumbleweed in my blood to settle down.”

“In that case, I guess I can’t stop you,” Diego says. “Here—I’ve got a name for ya.”

He pulls a crumpled receipt from behind the bar and then flips it over to scribble out a name and booth number on the back. “Roy Houston can get you set up. He’s not a nice guy, but he’s the best damn coyote I know.”

“Roy Houston,” I repeat. “That a real name?”

“I wouldn’t recommend asking him,” Diego warns. “But you’d better get going. He’s leaving with another group tonight, and he charges a pretty high price.”

“I’ve been saving up the cash for it wherever I can,” I say. “As long as he doesn’t need just *five dollars more* than I can afford...”

“Hey, if you’re short by five bucks, come on back and you’ll get your meal for free,” Diego says. “Otherwise—well, I guess this is goodbye.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess it is.”

I stand up and we shake hands across the counter, Diego’s sweaty hand firm in mine. I feel just a bit of remorse as he says goodbye, especially when I realize this guy is the only friend I still have in Dallas.

But it only lasts a second—then I’m off to Roy Houston’s booth, ready to get the fuck out.

CHAPTER TWO

☾

CHARLOTTE

I haven't met a lot of people—in fact, I've only met two—but I'm already pretty certain that Roy Houston is *not* my kind of people.

We've been haggling over how much passage across the wall will cost, and just how much my violin is worth, for well over a half hour. I found my way here despite the challenges of being around other humans for the first time, and I didn't expect this to be the hardest part.

My grandparents have always been convinced that the violin was worth enough to earn me safe passage. Houston is very quickly showing me that isn't the case.

“So you want me to take you across the wall, endangering my life, all in exchange for a fiddle?” The coyote shakes his head, chuckling as he strokes his greying beard. He has the same kind of southern drawl as my Gran, and it makes my heart clench.

“I'm asking for your help, and offering this in exchange,” I say matter-of-factly. “I know it's dangerous, but your name was the one that my grandparents wrote down for me.”

“I don’t just work on references, darlin’,” he says. “And I don’t tend to accept barter. It’s either cash or...” His eyes drag down my body and I cross my arms over my stomach, his expression making me recoil. “...well, you know.”

I set my mouth in a grim line, hunching my shoulders and wishing I was wearing more clothes. I would need about *ten layers* to keep Roy Houston’s sliminess off me. Gran warned me about people like this, but I hoped I would have been able to fend them off a little longer.

“This violin is worth more than you could possibly get from me in cash,” I say. “If you just take it and sell it when you get back—”

“This isn’t a world where anyone gives a single shit about violins, darlin’,” he says. I wish he would stop calling me that. “We’ve all got a sad song to play, and we don’t need a fiddle to do it. Now why don’t you play yourself a pretty little tune and get out of my place of business?”

“I’ll pay her way.”

I look over my shoulder to find a man standing there, giving Houston a discerning glare. The newcomer wears a black leather jacket and torn up jeans, his blond hair brushed back from his forehead. He looks like exactly the kind of man my grandmother had always warned me about, complete with the silver bar pierced through the shell of his left ear. He flashes me a sharp-toothed smile that makes me equally uncomfortable, and I cringe away from both the men who seem far too interested in me.

“And who the hell are you?” Houston asks.

“Elijah Pike,” the new man says. “I got your name from Diego, over at the tamale cart around the corner.”

“And what did he tell you about me?” Houston says with a sneer.

“That you’re the best damn coyote in Dallas,” Elijah says. “So what d’you say? I’ve got the cash for us both.”

“Five hundred dollars?” Houston snorts. “I doubt it.”

Elijah pulls out his wallet and holds out the old, tattered money, jerking it away just as Houston reaches for it. I've never seen that amount up close; just the pennies Gran and Pa bring back from the factory, and that's almost nothing.

"So—have we got ourselves a deal?" he says.

Houston glares, then jerks his eyes over to me.

"Sure," he says. "But I'm taking the violin, too, for the trouble. You look like you can handle yourself, but she's so green she could endanger us all."

My eyes dart over to some of the other people waiting in Houston's booth. There's a mother and child here, too. Does he think I'm more green than the kid, or is he just planning on using them as bait?

I can't think about that.

Not right now.

"No fucking way," Elijah says. "If you want the money, you'll take us both, and the girl keeps her damn violin. And that's that."

He starts to put his wallet away, and I guess that's enough to crack Houston. "Fine," the older man grumbles. "But you'd both better be quiet on this trip."

I don't have any problem being quiet. In fact, I don't intend on saying a word to the man who just helped me.

I can do this on my own.

Houston turns on his heel and stalks away, leaving us to find seats in the lobby of his booth. I give Elijah an awkward look, swallowing hard.

"You didn't have to do that," I say. "I could have handled him myself."

"Looked like *he* was trying to handle *you*," Elijah says, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I don't like the way he stares at me—like a predator deciding how he's going to eat his prey. I feel exposed and scared, wishing that Gran was here to tell these creeps off.

But I am *not* a child. I need to get a hold of myself.

I turn and walk toward the waiting area, bending to put my backpack down with a thud and holding my violin case in my lap, my arms wrapped around it. Even though I stare daggers at him, Elijah follows, sliding into the seat beside me. Everything about him oozes confidence—like he’s comfortable anywhere and everywhere, certain that he belongs.

I don’t feel like there’s *anywhere* I belong and, deep down, I guess I might be a little envious.

“What’s your name?” he says.

“None of your business,” I say shortly.

“Okay, Sunshine,” he mutters.

I glare. “Don’t call me that.”

“Well, you didn’t give me your name, so...”

“Why did you help me?” I demand, cutting him off. The man raises an eyebrow like I’m being cute, and I bristle.

“Because I could afford it,” he says. “And now you owe me one.”

I don’t know what he thinks I’m going to be able to give him. I’m *certainly* not going to jump into bed with him or anything, and the only thing of value I have is this violin and a bunch of fruit and veggie preserves in my backpack...plus the romance novels I stowed away from my grandparents’ basement.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say.

“If you want to stay in the city limits, be my guest,” he says. “But a girl without a Blessing won’t last long in Dallas.”

I bite my lip, staring down at the ground. “How could you tell?” I ask quietly.

“Because I’ve got a Blessing that gave me keen senses,” he says, tapping on the side of his nose. “And *you* smell...well, you smell incredible. But not like a ‘borg, and...huh. Not like a wolf either. Just a girl who smells like wildflowers.”

His words make my skin crawl...but they make something else happen too, warmth tingling in the pit of my stomach, setting my flesh on fire. I summon up the courage to defy him, gripping my violin tightly.

“I told Houston no, and I’ll say it to you too. *That* is not on the table.”

“I wasn’t suggesting a table, but I don’t mind improvising when it comes to places and positions,” he says. His voice deepens as he speaks, and it sends a shiver down my spine. “And I don’t mind working for it either.”

I haven’t ever done anything like that with a man—never even *met* a man. There are only two people in my life, and they’re all I’ve ever had. My heart pounds in my chest, my body feeling all kinds of ways that I don’t fully understand. I resist the urge to blush, which might just encourage him, and I huddle against my violin case instead.

“Leave me alone,” I mutter.

Consciously, I know this guy is bad news. But some part of me says I can trust him. Maybe it’s just that he helped me, or maybe it’s that he’s cute—and he is cute, despite how much I want to deny it—but I feel safe.

And that’s dangerous. Gran always said I should never strangers.

Unfortunately, everyone is a stranger right now.

“Alright,” he shrugs. “No worries. We’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other...and I won’t touch you unless you ask, Sunshine.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, holding Gran’s violin like a lifeline.

That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.

That one day, I might ask.

CHAPTER THREE

☾

ELIJAH

As night falls, we assemble our things and line up at the back of the booth, where Houston has carved a hole in the wall. That hole leads to a tunnel which connects to the maze of old sewers, subway stations, and basements that ultimately move into the plains south of the city, where we'll travel with Houston until he sends us on our way.

Once we're in the woods, we're on our own.

And I could go straight to Austin, sure. I have keen enough senses that I'll figure out a path.

But I've decided at this point that I intend on sticking with wildflower girl.

I scoop up my light duffel and stroll toward the group, a motley crew of six escapees, plus Houston. From the look of it, most of us are Blessed—all except the girl I've been calling "Sunshine", along with the small child of a frightened woman with pale hair. I figure the woman must be trying to get her kid out of the city before the Angels scoop it up to tinker with—and I can recognize the woman as a 'borg from the lack of pigment in her hair.

But it's Sunshine I don't get. I've rarely met an adult who hasn't been under Angel experimentation, and beyond that, she doesn't seem much like a Dallas native. In fact, she's downright feral, like she's never really been around people at all.

And there's the issue of her scent.

I realized right away that she was the sweet smell I'd picked up while I was sitting at the tamale cart. Her scent grew stronger and stronger as I got close to Houston's booth, and I only offered to pay her way because she left me so intrigued. It wasn't cheap, either—in one fell swoop, I used up all the money I'd saved to get into Austin just in case anybody needed to be paid off.

And now it's looking like it might not even be worth it.

She won't let me anywhere near her, shooting me glares every time I try to approach, so I keep to the shadows behind her, inhaling that gorgeous scent. She's like honeysuckle and magnolias, and fresh blackberries off the vine. Every time her scent hits my tongue, it makes me see things: like the blush of a Texas sunset over a field of bluebonnets.

I can't help it; I need to be closer to her.

The others talk quietly a little ahead, Sunshine between me and the group. I jog forward in the dirt, having to duck my head for the crumbling rocks to accommodate my height, until I'm level with the strange woman. Her eyes swivel over to me for just a moment before she sighs deeply, her brown eyes rolling straight to the back of her head.

"You again," she mutters.

"Me again," I grin. "Now are you going to tell me your name? Since you owe me your life and all."

"I'm fine being called Sunshine," she says with a fake smile. "Now will you please leave me alone? Houston said we should be quiet."

We turn left into an old subway tunnel, water dripping into puddles on the broken tracks. I try to think about how to approach her when she clearly wants nothing to do with me.

My mama would have taught me better, I'm sure, but I never met her.

So my manners are lacking, to say the least. After all, I was raised by wolves.

"I'm sorry, I just...you interest me," I say.

"Yeah, my grandmother warned me about men who might be *interested* in me," Sunshine says. She blows a honey brown curl out of her face, huffing a little. "Why do you even want to know anything about me? After we get out of here, I'll never see you again."

"Hey, Austin's not *that* big," I shrug.

"I won't be staying in Austin."

"Then where are you going?" I ask.

"I'm just going there to get help for my family," she says. "I think they've been taken to the Angel facility south of Waco."

Interesting. "You know a lot more about Angel hideaways than I think most girls your age would," I say.

"Girls my age?" she snorts. "I bet you don't even know how old I am."

"Well, how could I when I don't even know your name?" I say, flashing her a charming smile. The look is normally pretty effective, and I can't say I'm surprised when she blushes a little. She doesn't try to hide it—not with how dark it is—but I see it anyway.

"I'm twenty-three," she says quietly.

"Ah," I say. "So should I call you that from now on?"

She smiles softly. "Sunshine still works."

It's the first smile I've gotten out of her, so whatever I'm doing, it's working. And I have to admit, it isn't that she's immature; I figured her for younger because most people are Blessed by the time they're eighteen, in some form. If they're not, it means they're favored in some way by the Angels, or

they don't live in a city...or they've been in hiding, hunkered down in some decrepit suburb.

I think it's gotta be the latter with her.

"You thought I was younger, huh?" she says.

"Well, yeah," I say. "Don't meet a lot of un-Blessed people over eighteen."

"I've had a sheltered life," she says.

Unsure what that means, I probe a little further. "And that has something to do with your family, I presume?"

She scowls at me, her mood changing on a dime. "You're being awfully nosy for someone that isn't ever going to see me again after the next two days," she says.

"I told you, I'm just trying to be friendly."

"Sounds like something a creep would say."

We stop short when we bump into the people in front of us, who start and glare at us with a hiss. I raise my hands and wince, then look up at the front of the group to see that Houston has turned around, his finger to his lips.

"We're just about to head out into the suburbs," he says. "Stay quiet and stick with a buddy. I don't want any of you getting lost in the woods."

I hear Sunshine take a shuddering breath, and glance over at her.

"Buddies?" I say.

She groans as if she can't imagine a *worse* choice.

"Buddies," she grumbles.

☾

The moon is out when we climb out of the tunnels, the silver orb tinted pink by the Angel's "celestial curtain." They say the curtain protects against the forces of evil, but I think we all

know better; if it was designed to do good, it wouldn't make the whole outside world look like hell. The reddish coloring of the Angels' atmospheric shield paints the crumbling suburbs in a disturbing shade of crimson, like the whole world is stained in blood.

Sunshine doesn't seem remotely upset with the weird coloring, yet another sign that there's something wrong with the girl. Anyone who's never been outside Dallas would be disturbed by all this, but she keeps her eyes straight ahead, using the light of the moon to find her way through the debris-strewn streets. We take the neighborhood at a solid clip, easing some of my tension over being here again.

I don't have good memories of places like this. The last time I was here was...well, it got bloody, to say the least. So I shove my hands in my pockets and keep walking, ignoring the boarded up windows and discarded children's toys in the front yards.

"You're from outside, aren't you?" I say, staying close to Sunshine. "What are you even doing here?"

"I told you, I'm trying to get help for my grandparents," she says, keeping her eyes on the road ahead. "When are you going to stop interrogating me?"

"I'm not—" I pause, shaking my head with a groan. Just about time to give up; no matter how good she smells, the headache isn't worth it. "Fine, I'll leave you alone."

A shush sounds from ahead of us, and I stop dead in my tracks when I catch sight of Houston whipping around, his finger to his lips.

Then I hear it.

Something bad.

I should have been paying more attention, but I didn't catch it while I was so distracted with Sunshine's scent. My fingers curl as I listen, tuning out the frightened breaths of the other people in our group, my heart rate slowing as I focus.

Claws on cement.

I open my eyes and snap my gaze to Sunshine.

“Come with me,” I say.

I grab her hand, but she jerks it away and stumbles backward like I’ve just shocked her.

“I’m not coming with you,” she starts, raising her voice a little.

And then all hell breaks loose.

Lycans leap out of the darkness, a whole pack of them descending on us to herd the group like sheep. The others scream and begin to huddle together, but I take Sunshine’s wrist and yank her toward an old back yard, our feet crunching on the dry lawn. To her credit, she keeps pace with me, but she doesn’t drop any of her belongings. I don’t know if the sense of urgency has hit her yet.

“You need to drop the violin,” I say. “We’ll never get away without it.”

“No way,” she hisses. “I might need this when I get to Austin.”

“Sunshine, it hasn’t been the live music capital of the world for a long, *long* time,” I snap. “I doubt you’re gonna need a fiddle.”

“I’m not stupid!” she says. “It’s for barter—”

My senses flare with warning, and I’m only just able to grab her and toss her out of the way, putting myself in the path of the large Lycan instead. I pull the knife from my belt and stab upwards as the beast leaps over us, rolling when it yelps and rounds on us, its teeth bared. I can see the human eyes in its sockets, and it startles me a little to see the clear sentience in a beast of fur, spines, and fangs, its fur glimmering with a strange, oily sheen.

This is the thing they tried to turn me into.

The thing I’ve never fully become.

I lower myself like an animal, unleashing a growl I’ve been keeping held in for a very long time. The wolf pads in a

circle around me, but I put myself between the creature and Sunshine, the girl breathing hard at my back. *Don't run*, I urge her, like I have some kind of psychic link to her.

Turns out she can't hear me.

She bolts, sprinting for the hole at the back of the fence. I race to stop the wolf from reaching her, and I hurl myself with inhuman speed at it, where we roll into a tussle. I slash my knife at the creature's throat, its claws shredding through my leather jacket and into my back.

"Agh!" I scream. The pain is excruciating, but it's just bad enough to send a shot of adrenaline through my veins. I jab, then, and feel viscous blood pour over my hand as I get to my feet, something strange prickling at the base of my skull.

It feels like a transformation.

But that can't be.

I scent Sunshine on the air, my gaze snapping to find her running as fast as she can across the field south of us. I bow my head and break into a run, my instinct to catch her stronger even than my desire to survive. Her hair has come undone, brushing in pretty, honey-colored curls against her shoulders her back, and I follow the glow of her golden-brown hair like a dog might chase a rabbit on a track.

I only see the shape of the other wolf just before it plows into her, sending her to the ground. I snarl, and that's when I'm certain my body is transforming, every limb feeling like it's breaking as it's molded into something new. I feel the spines split through my back and shoulder-blades, bony spikes that can shred or even kill. Talons break through my knuckles, and my teeth elongate until I'm certain I won't be able to speak.

I don't need to speak.

Not for what I'm about to do.

I hurtle into the wolf standing over Sunshine, the other Lycan letting out a yelp. It rounds on me fast, but I've already put myself between the enemy and my woman. I don't balk

when two other wolves come up to flank the first, knowing in my bones that I will defeat them if it means keeping her safe.

I growl a warning, letting them know they're about to die.

But they attack anyway.

We fall into a rolling, writhing mass of teeth and claws, the others coming at me one after the other. I grapple with each of them, my claws tearing through flesh left and right. I can feel myself bleeding from wounds all over my body, but I can't bother to care—all I know is that I have to protect this girl.

And then I'll catch her for myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

☾

CHARLOTTE

I can't stand here and watch this, but I don't feel like I have a choice. The last time I ran, it caught the wolves' attention, and it got us here as a result.

So I stay almost entirely still, backing slowly away as I watch the Lycans rip each other to shreds.

I've never seen one in real life—I've never seen much of anything, I suppose. Gran always told me to stay the hell away from creatures like this, telling me that they were more animal than person. I grew up on scary stories about lycanthropes, and when I was a kid, Gran liked to spook me with warnings about lycans taking little girls away.

But this is more brutal than anything I could have imagined. The thing I knew as Elijah has turned into something of silver fur and violent spines and moonlight eyes, and he rips the enemy Lycans to ribbons, piece by piece.

And then he turns on me.

"Run away, Sunshine," he growls, his words garbled by too-long teeth.

I don't wait to find out why he wants me to flee.

I grip my grandmother's violin case in my hand as I sprint toward the woods, my heart pounding so loud in my ears that I can't hear anything else. Red light filters through the trees overhead, illuminating the leaves on the forest floor in a sickening pink. I stumble a couple times, but I just keep going, even as my shoulders start to ache from the weight of my oversized backpack. I think I rolled my ankle at some point back in the suburbs, and it starts to sting, pangs of pain racing from my foot to my knee.

I run for what feels like well over an hour, though it might only be minutes. When I finally pause to breathe, it's completely quiet around me, save for the snap of a single twig to my left.

I whip my head toward the sound, quieting my panting until there's no sound at all. But I'm certain I heard something, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end as I stare into the deep darkness of the brush.

"Hi, Sunshine."

The voice is deep, growling, and animalistic, his tongue still grappling with the newly sharp teeth in his jaws. My blood goes cold and I gulp, my eyes wide.

"Elijah, is that you?" I whisper.

"Pretty girls shouldn't roam the woods at night," the voice growls, almost teasing. "Or something big and scary might *eat them.*"

A twig snaps to my right this time and I jerk my head toward it, breathing heavily now. I can't help myself; I'm terrified.

"Stop playing games with me, Elijah," I say, hoping his name will work like a magic charm. "I'm scared. I just want this to be over."

"But I've just started to play," the voice says. It's behind me now, and I turn in a panic, dropping the violin as I move.

It's when I reach to grab it that I see a pair of eyes in the darkness, and I stumble back to fall on my rear. I watch him with wide eyes, staring into those glimmering opal irises, like

Elijah's grey eyes but *wrong*. He stalks forward slowly, just a hulking, graceful shadow in the dark—with two glowing eyes that promise violence.

“Why do you smell so good, wildflower girl?” he rasps.

“I don't know,” I say. I watch as the eyes lower, and then get just a smidge closer. I take a sharp breath, cringing backward and preparing to get up and fucking bolt...but I know he'll just catch me.

So I wait.

I wait to die.

I *just* left home for the first time, and I'm already dead.

“I just want a taste,” he says.

He leaps forward, and I'm thrown to my back as he pins me to the forest floor, sharp talons on my wrists. He doesn't hurt me—I'm just startled, really, especially when I realize that he's bleeding heavily from ragged wounds all over his torso. The blood drips onto my shirt as I trash to escape, my legs kicking weakly underneath him.

“Let me go,” I demand. “I don't want anything to do with this!”

He ignores me, pressing his animal snout into my hair and huffing against the shell of my ear. The sensation feels strange, a buzz zipping down my neck and into my chest, and I writhe beneath him.

“You must feel it too, Sunshine,” he says. He breathes again into my hair, like he'll inhale me and swallow me whole without even chewing first. “Who the fuck are you?”

I fight him again, but he's too big and too strong for me to escape. So I give him the one thing he's wanted this whole time, hoping against hope that it will help him see me as human.

“I'm Charlotte,” I say, closing my eyes. “Just Charlotte.”

The wolf's eyes flicker to mine, and a new gush of blood pumps from a deep wound in his chest. I grimace at the

sensation, the heat of it pooling across my skin, soaking my shirt. I'll need that change of clothes in my bag faster than I thought, if I even survive this.

"Charlotte," he repeats, the name impossibly sensual on his alien lips. He sounds like Elijah again, the tone of his voice almost tender.

"Yes," I say, and I repeat my name like a prayer.
"Charlotte."

And then he does something strange. His body shivers, a full tremor that shakes him from shoulders to hind legs. He twists and contorts, and then his limbs begin to crack and pop, forming themselves into something that looks more like a human. His snout contracts into a handsome face, his grey eyes still glimmering like gemstones, but otherwise becoming something recognizable.

Oh—and he's completely naked.

He rolls away from me, his back against the forest floor as he passes out cold. It's only then that I notice the horrible wounds all over him; transforming doesn't seem to have done anything to help, instead making matters worse. The wounds are still bleeding.

I stand on unsteady legs, then shuffle over to my pack. I have everything here that I need if we're going to survive, and a full medical kit to save his life. He'll need stitches, but I've given myself stitches before, and I've patched up Gran and Pa a few times too. And we have antiseptic, enough that I wouldn't use nearly all of it on the way to Austin no matter what I do. I look at him, pointedly ignoring his groin and putting my hands on my hips.

There's no way I can leave him here.

So I guess it's time to make camp.

CHAPTER FIVE

☾

ELIJAH

I slip in and out of awareness as Sunshine—Charlotte—hauls me through the woods, my bare feet exposed to the elements. I'm too hurt and too much of a bastard to care much about decency, but I feel at least a flicker of shame that I'm butt naked in the middle of the forest with a girl who seems a little too innocent for my usual taste.

“Keep moving, Elijah,” the girl mutters when I stumble over a log. “If I'm reading Pa's map correctly, there's an outpost just up here where I can get you fixed up and we can go our separate ways.”

There's no fucking way I'm letting her go. Not when seeing her in danger triggered a full transformation for the first time ever, and not when she smells so good that it's the only thing keeping me going right now. But I don't mention that.

I don't want to scare her.

Even if it was a *little* fun.

☾

We're inside when I start to really get my bearings again, an oil lamp flickering in the corner. Charlotte has thrown a blanket over my waist, but sits beside me, so close that she can touch me. In fact...she *is* touching me, her hands on my abs. At first I think the gesture is intimate, but then I feel the pinprick of a needle piercing my skin and I wince.

Ah—she's giving me stitches.

I grimace and groan, my body tensing. Charlotte's eye's flick up to me, her lips set in a firm line.

"You're up," she says. "I was hoping you'd stay unconscious while I did this."

"Yeah...I heal fast," I say, shaking my head. "Chances are good I don't even need the stitches. You can stop now."

"Don't think so," she says. "We don't have time to sit around and wait for you to heal, especially if you're going to help me get to Austin."

I quirk my eyebrow, focusing on her sweet scent and not on the searing pain of the needle piercing through my skin, tugging the thread through. "So now I'm helping you get to Austin?" I ask. "What happened to 'I never want to see you again'?"

"You were useful back there," she shrugs. "And if you insist on staying with me, and we're going the same direction anyway, it doesn't make much sense for us to part ways."

The animal inside me likes that. I like the idea of protecting her, of warding off anyone who wants to hurt her. My wolf growls possessively, telling me that this girl belongs to me.

And now I know her name.

"Okay...Charlotte," I say with a grin.

"On that note," she says, glaring at me. "You *cannot* jump on me like that. I don't know what that was, but I won't let it happen again. I have a knife, and I will stab you."

Ah—so this is calculus. She knows I'll chase her no matter what, at this point, and she's using that against me, finding a

way to mitigate risk. I feel something foreign in my chest at that fact.

Guilt?

I don't want her to be afraid of me.

I want her to like me.

"I wasn't going to hurt you," I say.

She snorts. "You made that obvious. You mostly seemed interested in sniffing me."

"Well, I haven't made any secret of the fact that you smell goddamn delicious," I chuckle.

Her hands still on my stomach, her fingers just barely playing against the uninjured flesh. I hold my breath, watching her closely—but she pulls away. She moves over to a little bowl she's filled with water, then rinses her needle with a subtle splash.

"Did you know those monsters?" she asks, training her big brown eyes on me.

"We don't all know each other just because we're Blessed," I drawl.

She blushes, the rosy tint of her cheeks awfully pretty in the flickering light of the oil lamp.

"That's not what I meant," she says.

"I know," I snort. "No harm done, Sunshine."

"You can stop calling me that now," she says stiffly. "I told you my name."

"Maybe I like Sunshine."

She groans. "Fine."

Charlotte zips up the first aid kit and then gets to her feet, tucking it away in her massive backpack. She shuffles through it for a moment, her back to me, and I take the opportunity to get a better look at her. She's taken her hair down—or maybe it just fell out of its pins—and it curls beautifully around her shoulders, a dark, spun gold color that reminds me of honey.

She's changed into new clothes, but I can still scent the acrid tinge of my own blood on her.

"Thank you for saving my life," I say.

She doesn't reply.

"I know you could have left me there," I go on. "And I'm sorry I scared you. I shouldn't have done that. But I've never actually wolfed out like that before."

That catches her attention. She looks over her shoulder at me, her brow furrowing. "Really?"

"Nope." I shake my head, sighing deeply. I'm starting to get tired, sleep tugging at my already exhausted mind and body. "But I didn't want them to hurt you, so I guess I changed."

"Just like a man to get all crazy and blame the woman."

"You say that like you know a lot of men," I tease.

I *really* don't think she knows a lot of men, even if she's a little bit right.

Charlotte leans back against the table behind her, crossing her arms.

"Why are you so interested in me?" she asks. "I really... I'm not that interesting."

I give her a wicked smile, swiping my hand over my stubble as I think about what response will put her on edge.

"I don't know," I say. "I guess it's just that you don't meet a girl every day who smells *quite* as good as you do."

She brushes a strand of hair behind her ear and looks down at the floor, her cheeks bright red. I chuckle at her stunned silence, then lean back in the old wooden rocking chair she's placed me in, resting my head against the seat. "

Well, you should get some sleep," I say. "And hey, Sunshine? Thanks for stitching me up."

"You're welcome," she grumbles, chewing on her lip. "But hey—don't get hurt again, okay? I only have limited supplies,

and I don't really feel like hauling a naked man through the woods for a second time."

"Scout's honor," I say, putting my hand over my heart.

"I don't know what that means," she says shortly.

"Yeah, neither do I, just something my dad used to say," I shrug. "It just means I promise. I will not force you to drag me naked through the woods again. It wasn't my proudest moment anyway."

"Okay," she says. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

And then we both curl up in opposite corners, trying to get as much sleep as we can.

CHAPTER SIX

☾

CHARLOTTE

Elijah and I get up early the next morning to travel by foot through the woods and out onto the rolling plains. His wounds are healing up nicely, which I'm sure is partially a result of his Blessing. Gran and Pa aren't Blessed, but it's only because they were too old when the Angels started ramping up production—so Elijah is the first person I've ever met who's been tampered with.

And that? Well, I don't know how to feel about that.

The sun is dim outside the walls of the city, where the Celestial Curtain paints everything in pink and rose, the sky a dull shade of reddish grey. It gets more jarring as we break out of the edge of the woods and onto the fields of tall grasses, where people once kept farms and little towns dot the highway.

It's sad to see things like this. Not just because it reminds me of the rundown suburb where I grew up, but because it reminds me that people had lives here before the Angels came.

“So where'd you come from anyway, Sunshine?” Elijah asks.

The nickname makes my cheeks heat every time—there’s something about the way it rolls off his tongue that sends pleasure shooting deep into the pit of my stomach, like when I read romance novels.

“Dallas,” I say simply. “I came from Dallas. Thought you’d have figured that out by now.”

He chuckles. “And she’s *sassy*, too. Just assumed you were being shy and stubborn yesterday, but it seems kitty’s got claws.”

“And I’ll scratch your eyes out with them if you get too close,” I deadpan. It’s not a lie, either; I slept with a knife under my pillow last night. But he hasn’t shown any interest in hurting me, and for that, I’m grateful.

And...

...well, he’s interesting.

It isn’t all that bad having a traveling companion when you’ve never had the pleasure of a stranger’s company.

“Okay,” he says. “If you won’t tell me where you’re from, how about a little about yourself?” He gestures at Gran’s violin, which I still carry on my other shoulder. I haven’t dared to open up the case to see if the instrument is damaged—after our tussle yesterday, I’m certain something has gone wrong, even if it’s just a broken string. “For instance, do you know how to play that fiddle?”

“No, I’m just carrying it around for fun,” I say with a roll of my eyes.

He sighs and I smirk, glancing over at him.

“Yeah, I know how to play it. Not as well as my Gran, but well enough.”

“Sounds like you two are close.”

I nod. Even *talking* about her makes me miss her more, but I feel compelled to tell him about her—about both of them. Like talking about Gran and Pa will make them more real, more safe, to be surrounded with my good will.

“We are,” I say. “She’s a—well, she *was*—a concert violinist, before the Convergence. But she was raised on Texas fiddle.”

Elijah grins. “So she’s a real fun lady.”

“She really is,” I smile back.

“And your grandfather? What about him?”

“What do you mean?” I frown.

“Like—what did he do before the Convergence? I always love hearing stories from old veterans. Just...imagining what the world was like before all this.” He gestures up at the Celestial Curtain, flickering that unsettling shade of red.

“Oh,” I say. “Uh. Well, funny enough, he was a Professor of Divinity at UNT. So he was already kind of in the angel business by the time they came around.”

“And did he think they were real?”

I glance over at him. I’ve been told not to talk about these things, but now that I’ve let it slip that Pa studied Divinity, it feels like I’m already too far gone. And besides—what is Elijah going to do about it?

Turns out it feels *damn good* to be able to talk to someone who isn’t my grandparents.

“No,” I say decisively. “He thought they were imposters.”

“Do you still believe in God?”

I glare at him. “Invasive much?”

He raises his hands. “Hey—sorry,” he says. “You may have noticed I’m not much for politeness. Wasn’t raised that way.”

“How is it that *I’m* the more polite of the two of us?” I say. “I was raised by two people who never let me outside.”

“And I was raised by wolves,” Elijah pauses. “Wait—they never let you outside?”

I falter for a moment, unsure of how to respond when it sounds so cruel.

Instead, I just forge ahead, trying to avoid looking at him. “It was for my protection,” I say. “And my Gran and Pa...they were scared of what the Angels would do. They didn’t want me to be Blessed. My Pa always said that God would not directly intervene in our affairs. And he thought that the Blessings the False Angels gave were unholy. That it fiddled with God’s creation in a way that perverted how he made us in His image.”

The sound of birds singing somewhere in the brush, and the grass against my fingertips, sinks in. He isn’t speaking up again. I chance a look back at him and Elijah’s face has soured, his grey eyes flitting to mine. I jerk my face away, tilting my chin up in defiance.

He’s going to find *something* to argue with there.

“So you think I’m some kind of freak?” he says. “That I’m unholy?”

I can’t tell if he’s messing with me or if he’s actually angry. “No, of course not,” I say. “You didn’t choose what happened to you.”

“Would you hate me if I had?” he says. “Chosen it, I mean.”

I stop, looking over my shoulder. Elijah is standing there with his light satchel, looking as casual as ever, a light smirk on his lips.

“Well, did you?” I say. “Did you choose it?”

He snickers. “You’re not the only one who’s allowed to keep secrets, Sunshine.”

☾

The morning rolls on like that, ebbing into the afternoon. And the whole time, Elijah levels a barrage of questions at me, never stopping with the personal, prying exploration. At first, it makes me uncomfortable, but by the time we’re sitting down for the night, I’m changing my tune.

It's nice to be able to talk to someone new. To get to know someone whose life has been so different from my own.

And Elijah is...well, he's nice to look at, at least.

Cicadas sing all around us by the time we finally decide to make camp, ducking into a little cave off the road. We're crossing into the Texas hill country already, and a waterfall trickles over the entrance, soaking my hair when I try to duck in. Elijah laughs at me and I roll my eyes, the two of us setting to work pulling out our things.

"I'm guessing you don't have a sleeping bag in there," I say, flicking my eyes at his satchel.

He shrugs. "I'm used to sleeping rough. Used to...eh, never mind."

I narrow my eyes. "You're not hiding something, are you?" I ask.

"Like I said, we've all got secrets," he smirks.

"I should check your wounds," I say. "I've got some antibiotic ointment in my pack—"

"I'm good," he says. "You don't have to."

"I *insist*," I say. I turn to rifle through my well-organized pack, finding the ointment quickly. "Now take off your shirt."

He snorts and I glance over at him, annoyed, only to melt right away. Elijah has already pulled his shirt up over his head, and there's a cocky smile on his face when the white garment comes off, his blonde hair ruffled.

"That was quick," I squeak.

"Well...when a pretty girl asks like that, I'm powerless to resist," he says.

"I'm *not* pretty," I say.

"Whatever, Sunshine," he smirks. "So were you going to check me out or what?"

Too late. I think I'm already checking him out.

He lounges back against the cavern wall, his arm draped over a boulder to his right. The fire flickers between us, and I skirt carefully around it with my first aid kit clutched tightly in my hand. The light flashes in Elijah's strange eyes, and the look within them is so distracting that I barely even notice his wounds.

That's why I'm shocked when I glance down at his stomach to find the cuts mostly healed.

"You *do* heal fast," I mutter, a little gobsmacked. Still, I reach for the wounds to press gingerly on them, finding that the deep gashes have healed over, leaving shiny pink flesh where there was raw, bloody red.

"I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a liar," he says, his voice low and rough.

I graze my fingers across the taut, lean muscle, finding a glaze of sweat from the heat of the fire. The edges of the wound show pale and jagged on his tan skin, rising and falling with his breaths, which are growing more rapid by the second. I follow the new scar up to an old one which stretches all the way from his pec across his ribs and down to the waist of his jeans—

Only for Elijah's hand to shoot out and grab my wrist.

I gasp, jerking my eyes up to his. "Sorry—did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm ticklish," he says. "*Really* ticklish."

"Oh," I say, my voice breaking.

A devilish smile curves his lips, and his fingers graze my inner wrist, giving me a full-body shiver.

"But you can keep touching if you want."

I instantly jerk my hand away, glaring hard at him and getting up in a huff. He didn't have to make it weird—I just haven't seen a lot of *men*, or any really, outside of old books and magazines, and this is curiosity, it isn't anything nasty.

I rifle through my bag and turn around to chuck a can of beans at his face, but Elijah catches it easily, still looking at me with those impossibly silver eyes and a cocky grin. He

hasn't put his shirt back on either, which is...well, I have mixed feelings about that, to put it lightly. I gape at him when he points his finger and a claw pops out, which he uses to open the can.

"Cool trick, huh?" he says.

"It's a little creepy," I cringe.

"Guess it could be, if you don't spend a lot of time with people like me," he says with a shrug. Elijah gazes across the fire at me as I settle in myself, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He's shining with a thin sheen of sweat from the day's walk, gloriously gold and painted in metallic tones. I *can't* stop looking at those muscles no matter how hard I try, but I attribute my slack jaw and watering mouth to how hungry I am. We eat in silence for a few minutes, my eyes trained on the fire like it can burn all the weird thoughts and feelings out of me, until Elijah clears his throat.

"So you've never been outside until now," he says. "You love your grandparents. And you're not Blessed, but you have resources. You know things."

I eye him. "What are you trying to say?"

He cocks his head. "You're part of that cult, aren't you? The one that hates the Blessed?"

I frown. "The Resistance isn't a cult."

"That's not what I mean," he says. Elijah sighs, setting his half-eaten can down on the ground and raking his hand through his dirty hair. "You know that humans fought the Angels at first, right? Twenty years ago, right around the time you were born, I guess. Right *after* I was."

"You were born before the Convergence?" I ask.

"A couple years," he says. "I don't remember a world without Angels, if that's what you're asking. But that's not what I'm trying to tell you."

I'm genuinely intrigued; when two people provide all of your education, it's easy to lose sight of the real world. And

now, here's Elijah, telling me that what I know might be wrong, and I'm...

I'm not angry about it.

I just want to learn.

"Keep talking, then," I say. "I'm listening."

"Well," he says. "There were people who agreed to be Blessed, of course—like my family. I didn't get any say in it, but I got my Blessing real young. During the New Crusades, though, some people got especially angry at the Angels, and they didn't direct their anger at the imposters; they directed it at us. They thought that people like me were *wrong*. Unholy, dirty, inhuman. And they came to our dens and they killed us where we slept."

I stare at him for what feels like hours, and my stomach roils like I might be sick. I've heard my grandparents talk about the New Crusades before, sure, but it's always been so quiet, and I've always felt like we were on the right side.

And as he speaks, I remember my grandmother's stories about lycanthropes. How they're unholy, dirty, inhuman.

How they steal away little girls.

"My grandparents would *never* have done something like that," I say quietly. "They're good people."

"I don't doubt that, darlin'," he says. "But good people sometimes do bad things. I know that better than anyone."

I'm not sure what he expects me to say, and I stall completely, my thoughts grinding to a halt. I'm still thinking about what he's said when he gets up and tugs his shirt back over his head, taking a deep breath.

"I'll take first watch. You get some sleep." Then he grins. "Thanks again for saving my life, darlin'."

His footsteps crunch on the gravel and I watch his back disappear through the entrance, the shadows taking him into their embrace. It's only then that my exhaustion hits me. I've never walked this far, this long, without stopping.

And as I curl up in my sleeping bag, the fire flickering at my back, I can only think about one thing.

How, when Roy Houston called me “darlin, ” it made me feel gross.

But when Elijah does it?

It feels nice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

☾

ELIJAH

It's been six years since I was last in Waco, and I haven't been looking forward to coming back. We have to pass through the ruined city if we want to take the quickest route to Austin, the old, rusted out buildings of Waco's downtown already looming ahead of us. By the time the Angels attacked, Waco had turned into a thriving metropolis—but it was one of those that was abandoned after the initial volleys of the invasion.

Now, they just use it as a prison.

I keep my eyes on Charlotte as she strides ahead of me, that big backpack starting to drag on her pace. She doesn't bother looking back at me as we walk, and while I might normally assume that's a symptom of her growing distaste for me, I think it's the opposite.

It's because she's starting to *like* me.

No, she's not acting like it...but I can scent her. She was turned on last night, and it was all I could do to get the hell out of there. I didn't get a wink of sleep, but at least I didn't wolf out again.

That might end up being a problem.

Something to worry about *after* we're out of this city.

I jog to catch up to Charlotte, not having to put in much of an effort with that backpack weighing her down and the violin in her hand. She avoids my gaze, but I can see the way her fingers clench, her knuckles going white at my proximity. And even though there's a glare on her face, the scent of honeysuckle overwhelms me, and I lick my lips instinctively. Charlotte's eyes flick to my mouth, her cheeks flushing pink.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"We're going to have to cross the Twin Bridges to get through the city," I say. "Ever since the dam broke, it's the only way south."

"Okay," she says. "And...?"

"And we'll need to move fast if we want to avoid unwanted attention," I say. "It's a big, exposed stretch of road. We can try to keep alongside the broken down cars still on the bridge, but with that massive backback of yours..."

"I can carry it faster," she says. "I'm sorry, I'm just—I'm getting a little tired."

"I can take over, but it might be best to drop any dead weight," I tell her. "We'll be in Austin in two days. It's not a long trip—we can take whatever rations we need and—"

"That's not what this is about," she says. "My things are in there."

I frown. "Your things? Like what?"

"Like...my books, and some sheet music, and my Gran's favorite sweater," she says.

"You've got books in there?" I say. "It's gotta be heavy."

"They're paperbacks."

"*Still*," I say. "Hey—we should really pull over here and just take a look at what you might be able to offload. I don't want to get stuck in the city with a whole backpack full of stuff, and wouldn't you rather leave *some* of it behind than have to ditch it all?"

She bites her lip, the movement drawing my gaze.

“You keep *looking* at me like that,” she says quietly.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to eat me,” she scowls. “You people don’t do that, right?”

“Calm down, Little Red,” I tease. “Now let’s take a look at what you can get rid of.”

“Fine,” she says, then a smile flickers over her lips. “But what big *teeth* you have.”



It turns out the girl *loves* romance novels.

She’s got about a dozen of them, each with dog-eared pages and tattered covers. I chance a look at the pages that are flagged, and she bats it out of my hand before I can get a good glance.

Definitely sex scenes, if I had to guess.

I’m able to convince her to leave about half of them behind, but she tucks her favorites—mostly westerns—back into the bag with care. She keeps the sweater, too, but I at least get her to offload at least ten mason jars of preserved fruit and pickled okra. That *had* to have been most of the weight, and she ends up setting off with a bit more pep in her step.

And then we’re at the bridge.

The last time I was here, I was with the Dallas pack. We crossed the Twin Bridges in the dead of night, and we...

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” Charlotte asks, interrupting my memories.

“Hush,” I say. “We need to stay quiet; Angels could be anywhere, even if they’re less likely to show up during the day.”

“But their troops could be here,” she says.

“Right,” I nod. She’s talking about people like me—lycanthropes, and maybe even ‘borgs, though the latter are usually used for purposes other than security. “But to answer your question, I *have* been here before. A long time ago.”

“You don’t look that old,” Charlotte says.

I roll my eyes. “Well, thanks. I’m not. Just did a lot of traveling in my teens.”

We have to cross in daylight to avoid Angels, but I don’t like it. The Heavenly Host prefers darkness, meaning it’s safer to travel during the day if we don’t want to run into any flying, otherworldly beings. Still, we keep close to the cars broken down on the bridge, which have all rusted out at this point in the apocalypse.

“Where have you—” she starts, but I whip around, raising a finger to my lips.

Because I *hear* something.

It’s soft at first: the vaguest sound of people screaming. I jerk my head to the south, where a white monolith rises over the city, clearly Angelic in origin.

The prison.

There’s something going on at the prison.

“Is that what I think it is?” Charlotte says breathlessly.

“Yeah,” I say. “And before you ask, we can’t go. There’s nothing we can do for the people there.”

“But my grandparents—”

I put a finger to my lips once again. Because *fuck*, I get it. I get it more than she even understands. But security at that prison is too strong. We couldn’t even make a dent in the exterior, not with all the firepower in the world.

At least, that’s what I *thought*...until I see the building erupt in flame.

My eyes go wide as I watch a massive explosion engulf the prison, and then hear the blare of strange sirens wailing across the lake. The water is crystalline pink, tinted by the Celestial

Curtain, and shakes with the force of the explosions at the prison.

And then I hear them: howls, from a strange pack.

Lycanthropes.

“We need to run,” I tell her, and then grab Charlotte by the crook of her elbow to pull her along with me. We dodge around cars, Charlotte barely keeping up with me. The lake stretches on either side of us, and I realize with a glimmer of relief that the wolves are moving *away* from us.

Another blast shakes us and I stumble forward, losing my grip on Charlotte. My heart races because I can tell that something even *worse* is happening—the bridge is shaking, the cables ready to snap. There hasn’t been any maintenance on the bridge in ages; the Angels don’t need it, not when they have aircraft to get from place to place. And now, it’s bearing the brunt of all these cars, and the explosion seems to have finally done it in.

“Elijah!” Charlotte screams, her eyes going wide.

And the suspension bridge *snaps*.

The metal cables zing and whir as they fly backward, and Charlotte falls back on her ass, drawn down by the weight of her backpack. Then she’s sliding as the bridge collapses in a mess of cars and debris and concrete, and I’m watching as I *lose her*.

No.

I will not lose my mate.

The thought envelops me as I start to transform, my claws coming out and my knees bending and contorting. My teeth get longer, readying my body for battle, and for the second time in my entire life, I wolf out—just as Charlotte slips off of the bridge and into the muddy water beneath us.

I race on all fours toward the water and leap in, the debris rough against me but harmless against my tough hide. Charlotte is soft, though, and weighed down by that backpack, she’s sinking fast. I look around in the dirty, turbulent water

for her, desperately searching, hoping that she hasn't been killed on impact—

I don't know what I'll do, find her, find her!

Blood in the water. It sinks into my senses and I dive, straight toward the river's muddy bottom. I can't see for shit, the pink sun just barely streaming through the water's surface, most of it blocked by debris. But I can *smell* her, and I pursue that scent like a bloodhound, paddling until I realize I'm running out of air myself.

There!

I head straight toward her, finding her in a few seconds. Charlotte is floating beneath me, her head bleeding, her hair in a cloud of honey blonde around her. My heart thunders in my chest as I reach for her and grab her shirt in my teeth, yanking her upwards. The damn backpack is caught on something though, and I snarl as I duck beneath her to chew it off.

If I let her go now to take a breath, I'll lose her. We have to get out *now*.

The backpack sinks, leaving only the ruined fiddle case slung over Charlotte's shoulder. She's light enough that I can get us out, and I head for the light above, dodging the remaining debris. I can only hope that I can find east—that I won't put us on the opposite side of the river, closer to where we started than where we're going.

I heave a breath as I surface, dragging Charlotte along with me. But the beach is there, covered in muddy, wet sand and glistening with droplets of ruby red water. Charlotte's body is limp as I place her on the beach, and I crouch over her to examine her wound, smelling her, listening to her weak heartbeats. She isn't breathing, *and she's bleeding, holy fuck, what am I going to do...*

Instincts take over. My beastly nature instructs me to mark her, to have her mark me, telling me that we'll be stronger bonded and together. A weak voice whispers to me to stop, that she wouldn't forgive me for this, but I'm certain she'll die if I don't. And my wolf is screaming at me that the only thing

that can save her is the fusing of our two lifeforces, so she can borrow my strength and heal like I do.

Why try to stop the inevitable?

I brush my snout over her pulse, where it continues to beat weakly. She's fading fast. She doesn't even flinch as I bare my teeth, pressing my canines to the flesh on her shoulder...

She coughs and I rear back, watching as she cringes. I'm shifting before I realize it, kneeling over her and scooping my arm around her shoulders while she sits up and coughs a whole bunch of water onto the shore. Charlotte's head isn't bleeding as much anymore, but my heart is still thundering in my chest as I watch the blood trickle from her forehead.

"Elijah..." She frowns, her eyes bleary. "Why are you naked?"

If I were in my right mind, I might laugh—because she's right. My clothes are in tatters around me, and we've just lost all our supplies in the river, so I can't exactly change. But I'm *not* in my right mind, I'm still partially shifted, and I reach out and grasp her to my chest, standing and holding her tight in my arms.

"Elijah, what are you doing!" she shouts, beating her fist weakly against my bare chest. "You're...you're naked!"

I get my bearings as I stand, gazing around. Yes—we've made it to the other side of the river, and if I follow it south, there should be a safehouse just down the way. Charlotte starts pounding her hands against me, wriggling to get away, and I growl at her, my eyes wild.

She stares up at me, terrified.

I *hate* that.

But I can't let her get hurt like that again.

I keep walking, Charlotte still in my arms now, her body warming to mine as we make our way down the beach. I think she's going to quiet down, but her voice is a whisper when she speaks again.

"Elijah, *stop*."

I pause like I'm her obedient mutt.

"What?" I growl.

"My violin," she says. "Please. Please go back and get it."

I shut my eyes, exhaling with a grunt. "Fine."

I turn around and get her damn violin, but I won't let her go—I'm never letting her go again, as far as I'm concerned.

Not when I almost watched her die.

CHAPTER EIGHT

☾

CHARLOTTE

Elijah is really, *really* mad at me.

I'm not sure why, exactly. I don't feel like I did anything but almost die and, if anything, he should be grateful I'm alive. But he refuses to speak to me, and he won't put me down either as the daylight fades and we make our way down the river.

It's after dark when Elijah diverts from the riverbank and walks into the woods, still holding me close to his chest. I can feel the steady thrum of his heart against my shoulder, his breath stable even while he hikes up the hill.

"Where are we going?" I ask quietly.

"Safehouse," he grunts. His voice is strange—raspy and quiet, like his teeth are too sharp—and he's sounded that way since he pulled me out of the river.

"How do you know about it?"

"I was here a long time ago," he replies.

I look beyond us into the woods and an old house comes into view through the brush, two stories tall with a rusted out car in front. I squint at it, and at first I think Elijah is going to

put me down as we reach the front door, but instead he takes me in one arm and swings me around his front, requiring me to wrap my legs around his waist. Given that he's still just partially dressed, my cheeks flush at the contact—but he doesn't seem to notice, wrenching the door open and carrying me across the threshold.

“You can put me down now,” I mutter.

He growls low in his throat.

Okay...so I guess that's a no.

It's pitch black in the house, but Elijah seems to be able to see in the dark, carrying me through the empty house with confidence. His arms are tight around me, his breath puffing into my now-dry hair, and I'm grateful at least for his body heat as my wet clothes have started to give me a chill. I yelp when I think he's about to drop me, but instead I find myself being placed gently on a pile of pillows, groping around for more clues as to where I am.

Elijah's hand snaps out of the darkness and around my wrist, a growl in his throat.

“*Don't. Move,*” he snarls.

I can't see him, but I can feel the heat rolling off him, and I wonder what he looks like right now. I barely caught a glimpse of him, but I've spent the past few hours feeling those muscles, and my mind conjures up wicked images straight from my romance novels as I think about how he felt.

Then a match strikes, the flame making me blanch, and I shield my eyes before looking at him.

Elijah tosses the match into a fireplace, the flames flickering to life as he squats in front of it. His back is to me, his pants in tatters around his waist, and he looks like some kind of wild man with his blond hair in messy locks around his head.

“Elijah?” I whisper.

His shoulders heave, and he lets out a shaky breath that sounds more like a snarl.

But he doesn't respond.

"Are you okay?" I continue.

The fire crackles in the hearth, flame licking around old timber. It's warm, and I kneel behind Elijah as I reach for him, partially to get closer to the delicious heat.

He whips around and I fall backwards, my eyes wide. He's...changed. His eyes have the flashing, oil slick look of an animal, and his teeth are long like fangs. It's only then that I notice the violet spines on his shoulders, like he's half-shifted after all this time.

"What happened?" I breathe.

He lunges for me and I let out a scream, Elijah's hand quickly covering my mouth. But he doesn't hurt me; instead, he pulls me closer, then sets me down right beside the fire. I stare at him in confusion, wishing he would just talk to me when before it didn't seem like he knew how to shut up.

"Warm yourself," he orders, striding away from the fire. He's started to disappear into the shadows when he pauses, looking over his shoulder. "I'll be back soon."

I watch him vanish in the darkness, and then hear the faint sounds of footsteps on a staircase. The fire crackles in the hearth, and I turn toward it to hold my hands out, already feeling the chill now that Elijah has put me down.

My violin is beside me, and I drag it toward me to check out the damage. I hold my breath as I unlatch the metal clasps at the side, anticipating what I'm sure is going to be a lot of water damage. And what I find is...well, it's not good. The wood is warped and soggy, and I suck in a gasp as I run my fingers over the clammy surface. I can even see where the glue is coming undone, and I hold back tears at the sight.

This instrument is fifty years old. My grandmother played it with the Dallas Symphony before the invasion.

It's been in my care for a measly three days and now it's *ruined*.

I leave the case open and put it beside the fire in the hope that it will dry out, but then the tears come—thinking about all the times I’ve listened to Gran play this instrument, both classical music and Texas fiddle. I think about the care she’s taken in replacing the strings, in adjusting the bridge, in somehow finding new bows in old music stores across the ruins of Dallas. They don’t make violins anymore.

It’s irreplaceable.

Footsteps sound on the stairs and my eyes dart up to find Elijah emerging from the shadows once again, dressed now in a white t-shirt and jeans. His hair is still a mess, but he seems to have reverted fully to his human form, and he scrapes his hand through his tousled locks as he watches me from just beyond the firelight.

“What’s the damage?” he croaks.

I sniffle, swiping at my eyes. “Pretty bad.”

“I should never have taken you across that bridge,” he says. “We could have found a different way.”

“Don’t think you could have predicted whatever happened at the prison,” I say. “I don’t blame you, Elijah. You…actually, you saved my life. And I’m grateful.”

Elijah takes a hesitant step forward, and our eyes meet. Then he’s rushing toward me, gathering me in his arms, breathing me in. I let out a shuddering sob and melt into his heat, knowing I’m just getting his clothes wet again and not really caring.

Because it’s hitting me now how close I came to death.

And that all the things I took with me from my old life are gone.

Elijah kneels in front of me, then pulls me into his lap, his breaths hot against my cheek. And I can’t stem the tears, fisting my fingers in his new shirt and weeping into the crook of his neck, letting him hold me even though I know I shouldn’t; that this is dangerous territory, that his hands feel too good in the small of my back, his nails biting sharp through my wet clothes…

My knees rest on either side of his hips, and I hold him in a full-body embrace. It's the closest I've been to another person since I was a child, since Gran carried me around on her hip. And I didn't realize it, but I've missed human contact—even if Elijah isn't quite human. To his credit, he doesn't so much as touch me inappropriately, just letting me cry as his fingers skate up and down my spine.

"I thought I lost you," he whispers into my hair, his voice hoarse.

I don't know how to respond.

Because I think I've been lost ever since I left home three days ago.

So I nestle my face into Elijah's neck, inhaling the scent of old, dusty clothes and pine, and some other, earthier smell that makes my flesh blaze hotter than the crackling fire beside us.

"Why do you care so much?" I whisper, my heart in my throat.

Elijah's right hand finds my chin and tilts my face up to his, and I stare into those crystalline blue eyes that are so human and so *feral*.

"Isn't it obvious?" he says.

The kiss is inevitable.

I've never done this before, so I don't know exactly what it's going to feel like. What I don't expect is how sweet he'll be—how withholding, when all I want to do is fall into him and forget I ever had another life. I curl my fingers desperately into the white cotton of his t-shirt as he threads his hands in my hair and presses soft lips to mine, the stubble on his chin and jaw scraping against my skin.

I open to him, desperate for more, knowing at least what the steps are *supposed* to be from the romance novels I've devoured over the years. But Elijah pulls my head back gently, his grip commanding on my scalp.

"You're gonna kill me, Sunshine," he says through gritted teeth.

I flatten my hands against his chest, sliding them over his shoulders, feeling the muscles I was barely able to look at without blushing just one night prior. “What do you mean?”

He hisses out a breath when I roll my hips and *feel* him there, pressing between my legs, deliciously hot and thick even through his jeans. “If the whiplash wasn’t enough, you know I can’t give you what you’re asking for...not tonight.”

“But you wanted this,” I protest. “I’m fine.”

“I still need to see to that head wound, darlin’,” he purrs, his accent a little stronger. His hands slide around the back of my head to hold me in place, and his eyes flit toward the wound. It still hurts, but not too much—not enough to change my mind. “And I’m not sure that you understand what you’re asking for.”

“I’ve read the books,” I cut in.

“But the men in those books aren’t like me,” he says, a growl of dark promise in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

He catches my wrist in one hand and pulls it down his torso, letting me feel the broad plains of his chest, his stomach, lower...

“You can touch if you want,” he says with a wicked smile.

The *audacity* of this man.

Of course, he’s not wrong.

“No strings attached?” I ask, more breathless than I wish I was, less self-assured.

“No strings,” he drawls.

I bite my lip as I pull myself out of his lap, kneeling across from him. He’s hard as a rock, his...

“I’ve never...” I start, not even knowing how to think about what I’m seeing.

“I won’t rush you,” he whispers.

“Really?” I snort. “Because it feels like we’re sprinting.”

He chuckles. “Like I said...no rush.”

He starts to get to his feet, but I pull him back down by the shoulder, yanking him to his knees.

“That doesn’t mean I won’t take you up on the offer,” I breathe. “Just—I’m nervous, okay? Don’t move.”

“I’ll do my damndest not to,” he says with a lazy smile.

“And I’m not making any promises,” I say. “But I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I want to see. Just...look. Not touch.” I pause when he cocks his head at me. “*Maybe* touch.”

He raises his hands. “Understood. I’m yours to do what you want with.”

Elijah keeps his hands up when I reach tentatively for his waistband, unbuttoning his jeans and then sliding the zipper down. He inhales sharply when my knuckles brush something hard, but he doesn’t so much as twitch, maintaining careful control. That he wolfed out when I fell off the bridge must have meant something—because I rarely see him lose his composure, except when I’m in danger. My eyes flit up to his to see that he’s watching me intently, my hands at the border of his t-shirt and his jeans.

“I’m not gonna stop you,” he rasps.

I lick my lips, watching as his eyes follow the quick path of my tongue. “Good.”

My thumbs hook in his pants and then I’m pulling them down his thighs, catching sight of a thatch of blond hair that trails from his belly button and then lower, lower... A mixture of curiosity and something new fills my chest, my stomach, spreading down to coil between my thighs. I’m unbearably hot by the fire, but the heat seems to come from within me, filling me up with molten desire.

“Don’t scream and run away,” he mutters. “I don’t know if my ego would ever recover.”

“It might not be the *worst* thing to take your ego down a notch,” I tease. The words sound hollow in my throat; I don’t

feel like teasing at all. In fact, I'm petrified.

But I continue that inexorable path down until he springs free, a little gasp puffing past my parted lips as my eyes widen.

Yeah, he's different alright.

The only time I've ever seen one of these is in an old biology textbook, and Elijah doesn't look much like that at all. First off, his dick is *huge*—bigger than the ones in my book, and more like the ones described in my favorite novels. He's shaped wrong too, with a bulbous bit at the base of his shaft, and what almost looks like a sheath around the tip, flushed and already beaded with silvery fluid. I have the strangest impulse to lean forward and taste it, and I bite my lip.

"I'm trying not to move, but you're making it awful hard," he growls, and I glance up at him as my core clenches.

His voice is as good as a caress.

"I can tell," I say. "I'm...I want to touch it."

"It's me, and you already have permission," he says. "You always have. You always will."

I don't have the fortitude to think about how strange those words are. Instead, I have to collect all my will as I reach a shaking hand forward, and I wrap my fingers around him.

Elijah grunts low in his throat, but he doesn't jerk his hips like I half expect. He keeps his hands up, even, his fingers just barely curling and twitching, his grey eyes fluttering closed. And I realize that he's *vulnerable* right now, the big bad wolf like putty in my hands.

"Fuck, Sunshine..." he groans. "This little experiment is gonna be the death of me."

"Hey, you volunteered," I say.

"And I'm smart enough to regret my choices," he says. "You..."

He trails off and I look up at him, my hand still on him.

"I what?"

His fingers curl, and when his eyes open again, they've taken on that strange, otherworldly gleam. "You have no idea how badly I want to push you against the floor and fuck you until you see stars."

I exhale sharply, heat pooling in my stomach, a near-unbearable ache in my clenching core. "But you said we couldn't tonight," I whisper, stroking him.

Elijah moans, rolling his neck, his breath labored. "And we won't," he said. "But once you're cleaned up? Once you've rested? Fuck, I am going to do *bad* things with you."

I stroke him again and I watch his jaw tense, a muscle twitching in his neck. "And what if I keep touching you?" I ask, knowing I'm coaxing him, knowing that I'm going to *win* this if I just keep—

His hands suddenly snap forward and grab my wrists, and I gasp.

"I think it's time we got you cleaned up," he growls. And he's on the verge of monstrosity again, his eyes blazing, his claws almost biting into my wrists.

"Okay," I breathe.

Then he's yanking up his pants and pulling me into his arms, and we're climbing the stairs to the second floor.

CHAPTER NINE

☾

CHARLOTTE

Elijah doesn't let me argue when he sets me down on a bed and sets a new fire upstairs, this time in what looks like a spacious bedroom. There's a fireplace here, too, and a massive old clawfoot tub on the other side of a partition. He starts getting water boiling right away, though I have no idea where he got it, given that I don't think there's any running water here.

"There's a well outside," he offers as I watch him work, disappearing every so often behind the curtain. The only light comes from the fire, and from the red-tinged moonlight outside.

"How did you know about it?" I ask.

He takes a breath, leaning over the tub, shrouded in steam. I don't think he necessarily wants to respond—but he does. "We used to use this place as a shelter when we would come through years ago."

I frown. "Who's 'we'? And just how long ago was this? You can't be that old, right?"

"Nah," he smiles. "I'm twenty-seven, but I've seen a lot. In my teens, I—promise me you won't get mad."

I raise my brows. “I already think you’re sketchy,” I say. “Not much can change that.”

He barks out a bitter laugh, shaking his head and leaning back against the tub. “You’re not gonna like this, though.”

I shrug. “Try me.”

“Well,” he starts. “I was thirteen when I got my Blessing. And my whole family thought the Angels were real—that they were sent by God, and that we had to take our Blessings and do what the Heavenly Host told us.”

“Okay,” I say, unease building in my chest. “And then what?”

He bites his lip with a sharp canine, then raises his eyes to mine. “How about I finish telling you while you get cleaned up?”

I make to slip off of the bed, but he’s crossing the room in a few quick strides and picking me up in his arms once again, curling me to his warm chest.

“You know, I’m perfectly capable of walking,” I say.

“Maybe I just like carrying you,” he drawls.

I allow it, not fighting him and instead cuddling against his broad shoulders. My clothes aren’t wet after warming myself by the fire, but I find that I’m still filthy from the river, and I’m ready to clean up. Elijah, however, doesn’t seem to care; he buries his face in my hair and inhales like he’s never smelled anything quite so delicious.

“Are you at least going to let me undress myself?” I tease as he puts me down on the floor, my feet finding the cool, worn wood underneath.

His eyes spark with desire.

“Don’t tempt me to do otherwise,” he murmurs.

He smirks and steps backward, closing the curtain behind him. I can still see his silhouette in the flickering firelight, his shadow moving around the room before taking a seat on the

sofa in front of the hearth as I start to unbutton my stiff, grimy shirt.

“You were saying?” I ask.

Elijah is quiet for a moment, and I watch his shadow lean toward the flames.

“Get in the bath before it gets cold,” he calls.

I growl a little to myself and he laughs from beyond the curtain; but I do as I’m told, shimmying out of my jeans and finally stepping into the steaming water.

It’s so hot that it tingles on my feet, and I hiss out a breath loud enough for Elijah to hear.

“How is it?” he says.

“It’s perfect,” I say. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says.

I know I should get my hair washed as quickly as possible, already seeing the water cloud up with the silt stuck to my skin, but the warmth feels so good that I have to take just a moment.

“Tell me a story,” I say. “I’m sure you remember, but my books are at the bottom of a river.”

“Don’t remind me,” he sighs. “Alright. Buckle up, Sunshine...”

He pauses.

“Do you know what happens when you’re Blessed?”

I chew on my lip, leaning against the edge of the tub and inhaling a mouthful of steam. “I’ve only heard stories,” I say.

“It’s not...pleasant,” he says. “They use chemicals and weird devices to—I don’t know, to change you? It’s so crazy and so far beyond human understanding that it seems like magic...and maybe it is, I guess. The Angels are a weird bunch; the people who call them aliens might be onto something, but their science can seem like magic. And when it’s over, you’re linked to your pack, physically and mentally.

You can feel their pain, and their sadness, and their...zeal, if they're devout."

"And you felt that way?" I ask.

"For a time, I did," he says. "And from fifteen to eighteen, I spent years running with a pack across Texas."

He pauses.

"We did terrible things, Charlotte."

Charlotte. He so rarely uses my actual name that I can tell he's being earnest, his words tentative and nothing at all like the cocky man I've come to know over the past few days.

"Do you want to tell me?" I ask.

"Not particularly."

I twirl my fingers in the water, glancing over the edge of the tub to find his silhouette frozen in place. "Okay. You don't have to."

"But I should," he says. "You don't know the kind of man I am."

"The kind that saves my life?" I reply.

"That was...selfish," he says.

"How?"

Elijah goes quiet again, and I realize I've chewed on my lip until it's almost bleeding. So I don't wait for him to respond; I dip my head under the water and rinse out my dirty hair, using the old bar of soap at the edge of the tub to at least try to wash the river silt away. The water stings on my wound, but it seems to have scabbed over, and it doesn't bleed anymore when I reach up to check the small lump.

"What happened to them?" I ask as I pass the bar of soap over my chest, my shoulders, my pits.

"To who?"

"Your pack," I say. "You said you were with them for a while."

"They died," he says shortly.

“Angels?”

“Hm...” he pauses. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Mine too,” I say quietly. “Not my pack—my parents. They died in the New Crusades when I was just a little girl. They didn’t want the Angels to take me, so they hid me away with my grandparents, and they lost their lives for it.”

Elijah sighs deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” I whisper.

I sit there for a few minutes, just appreciating the hot water while the fire crackles in the hearth. Elijah doesn’t say a word, and I finally force myself to stand up, water dripping off me.

“There’s a towel and a change of clothes on the chair by the curtain,” Elijah says—assuming, I suppose, that I must be getting out.

I reach for the towel, finding it fluffier than I expected, if a little musty. These aren’t ancient supplies—not as old as the house, anyway. After drying off, the clothes I find underneath are simple, and clearly designed more for sleep than travel: a pair of men’s boxers and an oversized t-shirt.

“These haven’t been worn, have they?” I ask.

“Everything’s been worn these days,” Elijah replies with a chuckle. “But don’t worry—they’ve been washed.”

I open the curtain to find him sitting on the weathered couch, his knees on his elbows as he stares into the fire. My eyes adjusted to the darkness while I was behind the curtain, and I can see the room a little better now. A boarded up window lets in cracks of rose-tinted moonlight that spill over the floor, while a four-post bed occupies the corner. Piles of clothes lie along the walls in a few places, along with a stack of books and magazines.

I move to investigate, but then a pair of arms wraps around my waist, lifting me up once again until I’m in Elijah’s embrace. He breathes into my hair as he sets me down on the bed, laying me back and leaning over me. I think he’s going to

kiss me—but instead, he inhales deeply near my wound, trailing his fingers over it.

I don't know what he's doing, and it's a little weird. Scenting me, I guess? Isn't that something a werewolf would do?

"I'm glad you're not dead, Sunshine," he murmurs, meeting my eyes.

"And I'm glad you're glad," I say. "But you can't just keep tossing me around like a ragdoll."

He snickers. "I think there are *a lot* of things you would let me do that you never even dreamed of."

"I think you're underestimating the things I dream about."

His fingers curl in the comforter under my head—I think he might kiss me, or touch me, and my whole body feels like it's going to burst into flame at the thought of it—but he pushes himself away from me and crosses his arms.

"Speaking of dreams, you should get some rest," he says.

I frown. "I thought you weren't supposed to sleep with a concussion."

"Common misconception," he says. "And you're healing up fast; don't think you're concussed. Aren't you tired?"

I guess I am. But...

"Is it wrong that I think this might all just be the head wound and that I'll forget this every happened tomorrow? Or maybe that it's all been a hallucination?"

"Are you saying you've fantasized about me so much that you would hallucinate fondling me?"

"Stop," I blush. "I just—Elijah?"

He raises his brows.

"Will you sleep in the bed with me?" I ask quietly.

He curves his lips in a half-smile. "I've still gotta get cleaned up, Sunshine, but after...yeah, I'll cuddle up with you. Now get some rest, okay?"

“Right,” I say. “Okay.”

He turns around and heads toward the curtain himself, starting the process of warming up more water. And I can see that he is, in fact, dirty, silt sparkling on his skin in the firelight.

I don't think I really care.

Because all I want to do is get him naked again.

And I can't understand how I went from hating this man to wanting him so fiercely.

CHAPTER TEN

☾

ELIJAH

It's becoming very clear that Charlotte smells so damn good because she's my mate.

Before this weekend, I didn't believe they were real. Mates were as fantastical as unicorns, or werewolves...but I *am* a werewolf, in a sense, so I guess I should have known life was going to turn out stranger than fiction. What shocks me even more is that she isn't Lycan; she *shouldn't*, in theory, be the partner I'm destined for.

But she is.

It's clear as fucking day.

When we run in packs with Angelic commanders, we don't operate the way a lycanthrope might in the wild. But I've heard that the free packs, like the one in Austin, have started doing things differently. They have designations supposedly 'fated to be', with some as alphas, some as betas, and some as omegas. I don't know where they *got* this info, but a few wolves in my last unit said we came from ancient lycanthropes far across the stars.

It's a lot easier for me to just roll with the punches than to think too hard about the fact that it's very likely I'm an alien

werewolf. The Angels have always told us they protect us from our coarse natures, which is great and all, and for a long time, I liked having a pack—even if I couldn't transform.

But now we're unleashed.

And Charlotte has made my instincts even more powerful, finally allowing me to take my true form.

I don't even want to bathe when her scent is all over me. I just want to bask in that glow, to curl up in bed with her and stay here for days while I fuck her silly. And in the state she's in tonight, she might just enjoy it, and not insist on getting back on the road. She seems just as horny as I am, even without the power of impulse behind her desire.

I'm doomed. Because how the hell can I tell her that she's my *mate* when she's been raised her whole life to hate the Blessed?

How can I tell her I almost bit her?

How can I tell her that even if she's starting to like me, I'm still a monster?

I towel off my hair as I walk toward the bed, the fire burning down to embers. I have no way of knowing what time it is, but I'll want to snuff that out before daybreak; once the sun rises, the smoke will be a sure signal of our presence. So I throw a bucket of water on the coals, plunging the room into darkness outside of the moonlight peeking through the boarded up window.

Last time I was here, I was with my pack. I was just a kid, and it feels like a lifetime away—but the memories are keen and sharp, surrounded by the debris we left behind. Somewhere in this house is a pile of blood-soaked rags I used to try and staunch my brother's wound, and his body is buried outside.

Charlotte doesn't need to know that.

The loss of a pack isn't something someone just recovers from.

I'm keeping so many secrets.

I selfishly let her touch me without telling her who I really am: a man who's been running away from my fate for a long, long time. I've done horrible things—worse than she could dream of.

But I can't stay away from her.

I pull on a new set of clothes before I crawl into bed with Charlotte, letting myself curl an arm around her ribs and nestle her close to my chest. Her stomach is soft under my fingers, her round ass against my hips. I'm weak and can't resist, so I bury my face in her honeyed curls and inhale her, drenching myself in the scent of my mate as a surge of possessiveness rips through me.

The part of me that's just a man knows I can't keep her with me if she doesn't want to stay, but there's another part—a beastly part—that wants to keep her locked in this old bed and breakfast and fuck her every night, impulse raging through me.

Even now, I resist the desperate need to mate her, to bury my knot in her cunt and lose myself in the sheer bliss of that bond. To bite her, to have her bite me, to dive into that well of pleasure...

I tamp down my feelings, my fingers curling against her sternum as she cuddles into me with a tired sigh. I need to let her sleep; I told her that we wouldn't do this tonight, and we won't, not when she needs a clear head to think it through. I'm a selfish, bad man, but I only fuck women who ask me to.

And they *always* ask.



I drift off in Charlotte's scent at some point in the night, and I don't wake again until sunlight is peeking through the slats on the window, a beam shining right into my eye. I bury my face in the pillow and hold Charlotte tighter, and she sighs as she stirs, nestling closer to my chest, her back still to me. We must have stayed like this all night.

“Good morning,” she says, her voice thick with sleep. Her hand finds my hip and drags up along my ribs—a bold move for someone who just last night told me she’d never done this before.

My body jerks of its own accord—because, as I’ve told her, I’m ticklish—and I chuckle into the crook of her neck, holding her tight as she stretches against me.

“I’m assuming this means you haven’t changed your mind,” I murmur, my lips against her ear.

“Either that, or I haven’t quite gotten over my concussion,” she says. “I’m just... I don’t know.”

I kiss her neck and she shudders, her fingers curling against my skin. “Talk to me, Sunshine,” I rasp.

“I feel...impossibly hot,” she says. “And not because it’s too warm. Because...” She takes the hand I’ve wrapped around her middle and splays it low on her belly, her hips rolling back against me. “It’s like the heat comes from right here, and it’s been winding tighter and tighter ever since last night.”

Fuck, I know exactly how that feels. And if this were any other girl, and any other morning, I might just suggest we bang it out right now and enjoy the afterglow for the rest of the day.

But Charlotte isn’t just any girl. She’s my mate, and she deserves to be treated like a goddamn princess.

And that’s *exactly* what I’m going to do.

“Do you want me to help?” I ask.

“I know how to do it myself,” she snipes, but her cheeks flush bright red. “I mean—”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” I say. “That means you can tell me how you like it. If you want me to...”

I let my hands brush the waist of her shorts and she lets out a harsh breath, her fingers gripping mine. At first, I think she’s going to say no, and I’m prepared to back off right now and go jerk off somewhere in private. But then she takes my hand and

pulls it just beyond the waist of her shorts, over a patch of soft, curly hair.

“No, I want you to,” she says, not looking at me.

“I think that’s a yes, but I want you to understand I’ll never touch you if you say no.”

“It’s a yes,” she says. “Please, just...get me some relief. I feel like I’m burning alive.”

Fuck, if that isn’t a sign that she’s my mate, I don’t know what the hell is.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was in heat.

My fingers crawl lower, down toward the lips of her pussy, where she’s already wet and warm. I don’t touch her there yet, though; I place my hand gently on her inner thigh, my movements constrained by the elastic waist of the shorts.

“I want you to tell me how to make you come, darlin’,” I growl. “But first, let’s take these off...”

Charlotte stills, and she looks at me for the first time all morning, her eyes wide. “I don’t think I’m ready for *that*.”

She thinks I’m going to fuck her—I need to make it clear that I respect her limits, that I won’t do anything she isn’t prepared for. She has no reason to trust me. I keep telling her how bad of a man I am, and fuck, I *have* been a *very* bad guy. But this...

“I won’t fuck you unless you want me to,” I say. “I swear this is just about you, but it’ll be easier if I undress you. Say no anytime.”

I can only hope she knows I mean it. I won’t do anything she doesn’t want.

By biological necessity, I’m a slave to her desires.

She nods, and then her eyes flutter shut as she presses her lips to mine, her hand coming around to tangle in my hair. And she *is* warm, her skin blazing hot, her kisses needy and insistent. I indulge her by pressing my tongue into her mouth, and she sucks at it with a moan as I drag her shorts over her

round thighs, letting her kick them off at the foot of the bed with the blankets, leaving her bare to the cool air.

It's the first time I've seen her naked—or at least, partially. And I can't get enough of the swell of her pale hip, her long legs, her soft stomach. She's short, and curvier than I thought with the practical clothes she's worn since we met, with an especially generous ass. But now I can see the gentle angles of her body in stunning detail, my eyes keen even in the dim early morning light.

“Guide me, Sunshine,” I say against her lips. “Set the pace.”

She might be innocent, but she knows what she likes—and she shows me, taking my hand and bringing it right to her core. I curve a finger against her clit and she cries out, the bundle of nerves already overly sensitive.

“Oh my God!” she groans, her whole body shaking. “Not—not that rough.”

I've only given her the barest touch, but I don't dare tell her that. Because that will lead to a lot more questions: questions that might include biting and knots and mates and why the fuck she's so goddamn horny all of a sudden...

And maybe she's not. Maybe I'm misreading this whole situation.

But my wolf is confident that she's begging to be bred.

“Understood,” I say, my fingers whispering against her clit, and then lower to her entrance. “So...softer. Like that?”

“Yes,” she whines. “Oh God, *yes*.”

I set a steady pace, moving my knuckles just *slightly*, drawing the most gorgeous sounds out of her throat. My cock wakes up with me, though, pressing insistently between her thighs, only the barrier of my sweats between us. But she trusts me not to use it, continuing to roll her hips back against me, writhing in the blankets. And maybe it's trust, or maybe it's frenzied passion, but the fact that she knows I won't hurt her is enough to make her even more irresistible.

I want to tell her everything, to stay here in this bed and fuck and fuck and *fuck*...

“Your fingers,” she breathes against my lips. “Put them in...put them inside me?”

Her voice alone could make me come, if she gave me the command.

“What about my tongue?” I ask with a crooked smile.

Her eyes widen, but she’s nodding before I think she’s really had time to process what I just asked, pausing in my strokes against her clit to make sure she thinks it through.

“Please?” she says.

“When you ask like that, how can I say no?” I say. “Get on your back.”

I pull away from her as she settles herself into the spacious bed, where I cover her body with mine. She arches her back when I settle myself between her legs, my clothes still between us but her whole body pulling me in.

“Not yet,” I say, sliding my hands under her shirt, letting it roll higher up her body. Charlotte writhes beneath me, letting out another cry when I twirl my fingers around her nipples. The shirt still covers her breasts, and I can’t wait to get a look. “Gorgeous fucking girl, you are...fuck, I can’t get enough of you.”

“I thought you said something about your tongue?” she mumbles, her words barely coherent.

“Bossy,” I chuckle. “Maybe I want to take my time.”

“I feel like I’m dying when you’re not touching me,” she groans.

Alright. Big change since two days ago, and I know the full moon is just around the corner. Too much coincidence for me to settle with.

“Me too,” I mutter.

I grasp her hips in my hands and lower my face to her inner thigh, dragging my stubbled cheek over the sensitive

flesh, scenting soap and arousal and honey. Charlotte bucks as she whines, practically begging me to lick her pussy.

I couldn't resist her if I tried.

My tongue flicks out against her clit, her flavor like nothing I've ever tasted before. And she's fucking delicious, sweet and tart and musky like roses. She writhes, my fingers biting into her hips as I hold her still, giving her one long lap from her entrance to her clit.

"Elijah!" she gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair, and I listen to her body and her voice and her moans, plunging my tongue inside her, lifting her to my mouth and devouring her.

She tastes like heaven and hell and everything in between. And I'm in limbo, thrusting my hips helplessly against the bed as she rides my lips and tongue into oblivion, my cock already so sensitive that I know I'll come from grinding myself against the sheets alone. Charlotte yanks hard on my hair, and then she's screaming into the ceiling, and I'm...

It's been years, but I come in my fucking boxers, Charlotte on my lips, invading my senses, her hips held tight in my claws.

I draw back from her as she melts into the mattress, her breath coming in short gasps. I crawl over her, gazing into her brown eyes as I lean on my arms, and I think I see a glimpse of something feral.

"Holy hell, Sunshine," I say. "You're gonna make me believe in God again."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

☾

CHARLOTTE

The world is fresh and new and alive as we set out from the old house outside Waco, leaving the city behind as we pass out of the grey plains of north Texas and into the rolling green landscape of the hill country. I've seen pictures of this place, but never actually been here: images of my mother sitting in a field of bluebonnets, my father behind the camera.

Before they were trapped in Dallas.

Before me.

And I guess it must be that same season, because the hills are painted with wildflowers: spears of bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush, black-eyed susan. It shocks me that flowers even grow here since the Angels razed this beautiful country years ago during the Convergence and the New Crusades, the terrain itself a casualty of cosmic warfare.

Amazing how flowers now bloom where heaven and hell once went to war.

We've each grabbed a new bag of supplies from Elijah's old outpost and we walk across the hills and valleys together, ridges of limestone sometimes rising up on either side of us.

Creeks and waterfalls wind through this part of the state, live oaks spiraling over us after remaining undisturbed for decades.

Elijah's fingers twine with mine, and we walk that way for hours, linked together. He helps me up steep paths and over forest channels; and when he catches me, I feel that heat building and building in the pit of my stomach, sensation crackling across my skin like hot coals. I don't know if something is wrong with me or if this is just what desire feels like.

The only thing I'm sure of is that I'm intent on giving into it.

"Have you been to Austin before?" I ask.

"Never made it this far south," he says. "After we left Waco ten years ago, we veered west to El Paso. There was resistance on the border, and we..."

He pauses.

"Do you want to hear this?"

I inhale deeply, biting my lip. "Do you want to tell me?"

He squeezes my hand. "Maybe one day."

Maybe one day. It's future talk—the third time he's done it today, making me feel a strange sense of apprehension and exhilaration and a million things in between.

"I'm guessing *you've* never been," he says, his eyes flicking to mine.

"No," I say. "But my family used to live here before the Infernal Legion leveled the city and the Heavenly Host built a weapons facility on top of it."

"I thought your grandparents were Dallas natives."

"They are, but my folks lived in Austin, and San Antonio for a time," I tell him. "I don't really know much about what they did, but we have lots of photos of the old city in our house."

He gives me a strange look, his head cocking to the side and his eyes narrowing.

“What?” I ask, a little annoyed.

“Nothing,” he says with a shake of his head. “I guess I’m just wondering if you plan on going back there. To Dallas, I mean.”

I think about it for a moment, never letting go of Elijah. I’m wearing a new set of clothes that don’t fit me, carrying a backpack full of strangers’ belongings, and a violin that’s damaged beyond repair.

And this morning, Elijah kissed me where I’ve barely even touched myself, and I liked it.

And I’ll ask him to do it again.

And *again*.

I’m not the girl I was when I left that house four days ago.

“No,” I say. “I don’t think I will.”

☾

The day drags on as the sun meanders its way across the red sky.

Cicadas begin their evening song, a lullaby for the Texas hills. Elijah holds me closer as the light fades, and when he curls an arm around my shoulders, I feel the heat build in the pit of my stomach, spreading to my extremities. It’s almost like I’m sick, feverish with need, wanting desperately to run my hands over his smooth, muscled body, to feel the weight of him in my palm.

He ducks his head to mine, pressing a kiss to my temple. “We’ll make camp soon,” he says.

“It’s okay,” I shake my head. “I’m not that tired.”

“It’s not your exhaustion I’m worried about.” He lowers his voice to a raspy growl, the sound resonating from where my shoulder makes contact with his chest. “It’s your scent, darlin’.”

“Do I smell bad?” I ask, mortified.

“No, you smell fucking delicious,” he chuckles.

His throaty voice buries itself in my chest, making my heart pound and my thighs chafe at my core.

“What do I smell like?” I ask quietly.

“Like...hm.” He pauses, licking his lips, and even the sight of that tongue is enough to make me quake. “Like honey and oranges. And heat and desire and high expectations. And like...like Charlotte.” He raises his eyebrows. “I don’t know how else to explain it but to say you smell like you, and it’s the prettiest damn thing to ever fill my lungs.”

“I have high expectations?” I ask, blushing. It’s getting dark enough that he wouldn’t be able to see me if he was fully human, but I know better than to think he doesn’t catch a glimpse. His eyesight is better than that.

“Sure do,” he says. “It’s gotta be all those romance novels you’ve read.”

“They gave me a lot of ideas, too,” I say.

“Oh, did they?”

He laughs, and I let out a yelp of surprise when he scoops me into his arms, slinging me around until my legs are wrapped around his hips. The clasp of his jeans instantly presses against my aching core, and I inhale a sharp breath, biting my lip.

“Tell me about them,” he says in my ear as he keeps walking, the unbearable heat of him everywhere. “I’m starting a list.”

“Of what?” I whisper.

“A list of all the things I’m gonna do to you, if you ask me to,” he says. “And hey—even if you don’t, I can keep it as a souvenir from our little roadtrip.”

“You’re writing these down?” I ask, mortified.

“Don’t have anything to write with,” he says. “But it’s not like I could ever forget.”

He doesn't put me down as we pass into a clearing, and I arch against him to feel him closer, my eyes finding the stars. They glitter white on dark blue in the skies overhead, those big, expansive skies that I've never really seen beyond the city, skies that stretch on and on...

And the *moon*.

A silver disc in the sky, diamond bright and glorious. I feel my heart pick up a beat at the sight of it, and my legs tighten around Elijah, evoking a growl. His stride slows as he lowers his lips to my throat, and I let him kiss me and kiss me, my arms locked at his neck.

Wait.

Silver and blue?

"Elijah," I croak. "The moon...the sky."

"They're pretty, I know," he says. "But not *nearly* as pretty as you, Sunshine."

"That's not" —I gasp as he grazes his teeth over my pulse, my hips thrusting toward him instinctively— "what I mean. Look up!"

He finally does as I ask, tilting his head back to gaze toward the heavens. His eyes widen when he sees what I see, the stars reflecting in those strangely luminescent eyes.

"It's clear," he whispers. "There's a hole in the Celestial Curtain."

CHAPTER TWELVE



CHARLOTTE

We stare up at the moon together, my legs wrapped around Elijah's waist, my whole body throbbing with desire. I am *fully alive* in a way I've never been before, my nails skating across the back of his neck.

And something is happening inside me.

My senses sharpen, the sound of a distant waterfall rushing around me. I hear something moving in the brush—something tiny with fluttering wings. I smell the earth, and the air, and water, and the smoky hint of an old fire.

I smell *Elijah*.

I didn't know what he meant when he said I just smelled like me, but I get it now. There's something essential and primordial in the scent of him, the taste of him, the way his arms curl around me and hold me close to his chest. It's in all of my senses, filling me up, and I'm overflowing with my need for him in this clear blue moonlight, draped in a dusting of stars.

It's like I've never been awake before tonight.

But I'm awake now, and I'm ready to live.

“Elijah,” I rasp, capturing his attention as he continues to hold me, his face still tilted upwards. He lowers his gaze like his name is an incantation, his pupils dilated, and my eyesight is even better here in this clearing, in the full moonlight.

“I need you,” I say.

I roll my hips against him, holding myself to his body, and Elijah groans as he bites his lip, avoiding my kiss. “There are...” —he pauses— “things I need to tell you. And we’re in the middle of nowhere, we haven’t even found shelter yet.”

“I don’t care,” I say. “Remember that night in the woods? The first night I met you?”

His brow furrows, his breath ragged. “Of course I do.”

“What did you want to do to me that night?” I challenge.

My underwear are already damp, my body on fire. I grind my hips against Elijah again in a silent reminder of where we are, how I feel, what I want—and then his jaw drops, his fingers curling against my spine, digging into my flesh.

“I wanted to fuck you until you couldn’t see straight,” he says. “In the grass, under the moonlight. I wanted to take you and *make sure* that everyone knew you were made for me.”

“So *do it*,” I breathe. “I think I’ll explode if you don’t.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life,” I say.

And I mean that.

In a startlingly fast movement, Elijah bends and practically tosses me to the ground, yanking his shirt off in one fluid motion. I sit up, scrambling for his pants, my fingers sure and certain even in the chaos of undressing him. I yank his jeans down like what lies beneath belongs to me, and Elijah groans as he steps toward me, his erection jutting out.

He said last night was off limits, but tonight...

Tonight, I’m starving for him.

I don't hesitate as I wrap my lips around the head of his member, swirling my tongue where a bead of white already beads at the tip. Elijah bucks into my mouth, and the most incredible growling sound erupts from his throat, inhuman and enticing, and speaking to me on a level that my brain can't process but that my body reads clearly as *mine*. And it makes me suck him further, feeling the strangeness of him, wanting to drink him up. And he tastes like earth, and spices, and plain bars of soap, and *Elijah*, and I need more, more...

I choke when he hits the back of my throat, but I don't stop. I swallow everything he has to offer, my lips curling around the swelling at the base of his hardness, my hands groping for him as he throws his head back in the moonlight. I touch and feel and taste everything I can, emboldened by the desire coursing through me, the heat between my thighs so intense that I rub them together to try and ease my need.

"Sunshine, I'm gonna..." He trails off, his fingers tangling in my hair, his hips thrusting toward my face. "Charlotte!"

He has to *pull me off him* before I'll relent, holding my head in his hands as he kneels to kiss me, and I feel the press of sharp canines between our lips—though I can't tell if they're his or *mine*. His tongue invades my mouth and I open to him as he lowers me to the grass in the clearing, wildflowers painted in moonlight all around us. I unleash a ragged breath as his fingers slide down the front of my shirt, buttons snapping off and leaving me exposed, his claws out purely for the purpose of undressing me. And then his tongue is lapping at my throat, my chest, my nipples, and I'm tossing my head back and howling at the moon.

His arms wrap around my waist to pull me against him as I grapple for the button of my new jeans, sliding them off my hips, practically tearing myself free. Elijah's claws press into my ribs, his eyes flashing as he glances up at me, sucking so hard on my nipples that it stings.

He kisses his way down my ribs, over my belly, dragging my jeans off and tossing them to the side. Then his mouth is there again, his tongue on my clit, teasing and sampling when

I want him to swallow me whole. “Fuck, you taste good,” he groans. “You taste so fucking good...”

His tongue plunges inside me again, my walls clenching around him, and I start to unravel. Then I’m spinning, spinning, my voice echoing around the clearing as he thrusts inside me with that long tongue, his thumb and his lips working against my clit.

I bite my lip so hard that it draws blood, the tangy flavor of copper filling my mouth as I beg him, “Please, *please*, I can’t stand it anymore!” And if this is what sex always feels like, I don’t know if I can ever stop, if I’ll never, *ever* be able to do anything but hold him close and take his cock over and over.

Elijah crawls over me, and I feel him for the first time *there*, the tip of him protruding from its sheath, dragging up my folds. Every touch is like an electric shock, and my inner walls flutter like they can drink him in of their own volition. I see the tight control in the way he stares down at me, the muscle in his jaw twitching as he closes and opens his eyes.

He’s *beautiful* in the moonlight, like God first etched him in silver and made him a man. His hair is nearly white outside of the Celestial Curtain, and his eyes gleam like oil sheen, his teeth sharp.

And he *sees* something in me, his eyes going wide. I want to ask him what it is, why he looks so startled, but all I can do is rub myself against him in desperation, feeling for all the world like I’ll die if he isn’t inside me. So it isn’t ‘why’, or ‘what’s going on’ that slips past my lips as I stare up at him.

“*Please*,” I whisper.

“Are you sure?” he asks, staying completely still while I writhe beneath him. “It might...it might hurt, at least at first.”

“I know,” I laugh. “I’ve read the books.”

And then he’s kissing me, harder, deeper, his hand on my breast. A distraction, I think, though I couldn’t possibly be distracted from the head of his cock slipping inside my clenching muscles, my legs splaying open in the grass as I tense around him. I try to pull him in faster, but then his bare

teeth are at my neck, grazing over my skin like he'll bite to subdue me if he has to.

"Take it slow, gorgeous," he growls. "Give it time."

I drag my nose up over his pulse and he shudders, slipping just that much farther. I adjust to him more quickly than I anticipated, melting into his embrace, letting him lead the way. Elijah breathes hard in my ear as he gently rolls his hips, taking an agonizingly steady path inside when all I want him to do is make love to me until the ache fades away and all I feel is pleasure.

I feel that swollen bit at the base of him against me now, thicker than the rest, and I don't know how I'm taking him, but I *am*. There's just a flash of pain, quick and biting, and I gasp. Elijah's teeth graze my pulse again, but I don't flinch; I tilt my head to bare my neck to him, my fingernails digging into the flesh over his spine.

He rolls his hips, and he's *there*, so close, that fist-sized swelling pulsing and nestling like it belongs there, his balls hanging heavy against me as he buries himself to the hilt.

I breathe in, out, in again, and appreciate the sensation of joining. Of how close he is, our limbs tangled together and his teeth still on my neck. I know that this is the brink of something, that I'm teetering on the edge, and that my mind is going to shatter as soon as he moves.

And he does.

And I'm *gone*.

He starts to move, our bodies curling together, my legs wrapping around his waist as he moves inside me. Elijah swivels his hips, the pressure building, growing. And that swollen bit keeps him lodged so deep, so *close*, knotting us together like we were made for this exact fit, clicking together as pieces of a puzzle. His hips begin to piston closer and farther, and he's hitting the exact right spot inside, where I've been burning up for the past two days, where I've been yearning and wanting and *needing*—

I scream into the open air, Elijah's mouth covering mine, inhaling my breaths and absorbing the shock of sound. His tongue slides over the raw spot where I bit my own lip, and he groans at the flavor of my blood. I don't know what it means, but I don't care, somehow still needing him closer and faster and harder and deeper and...

I splay my hands across his chest and he pulls away with a concerned look, his eyes widening as he opens his mouth to speak. Before he can, though, I shove him to the side, flipping him onto his back and rolling to keep him lodged within me, letting my legs relax as I ease him deeper. Elijah's hands fly to my hips, his eyes fluttering shut as his lips part.

"Holy hell," he gasps. "You're fucking beautiful."

I start to move, his hips thrusting up to meet me, his moans matching mine as we quicken our volume and tempo. We're a song, a rhythm forming in my head, and the full moon above is our audience as its light kisses my shoulders. Elijah holds me tight, his claws biting into my hips until they draw blood, and it *stings*.

I want to bite him.

And here in this moment, I'm a creature of impulse.

I lean toward him, baring my canines, but he seems to anticipate my movement and puts his hand over his neck, where I want to sink my teeth. Instead, I clamp down on the edge of his hand, Elijah groaning as I climax and pulse and flutter around him. He holds me tight, shuddering as he slams up into me, finally hitting where I want, deep, deep within, and I'm...

Finally sated.

After *days* of feverish desire.

I collapse on his chest, my hair spiraling out of its pins and curling in damp strands over his shoulders. Elijah stays locked inside me, and it's almost as if that's where he belongs, his fingers skating up and down my spine as his arousal ebbs away and he softens.

I don't protest when he moves, or when he scoops me into his arms. The sound of a waterfall envelops me, cool air wafting over my skin, and that's the only sound I make out as I nestle into his chest.

By the time I wake, I'm splayed out on a blanket, Elijah behind me with his arms wrapped around my middle. And as his breath brushes warm against my neck, I catch sight of the raw wound on the side of his hand, and the clear sign of *bite marks*.

What have I done?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



ELIJAH

Charlotte is part Lycan.

I've suspected for a couple days now—she healed way faster from that head wound than should have been humanly possible—but the way her eyes shone in the moonlight confirms it. As we lie in the early morning sun filtering through the glittering sheen of a waterfall, her naked form stretched out beside me, I'm convinced.

I can smell it on her, feel it in the way her body melds to mine.

But most of all, I saw it in her eyes, flashing silver in the moonlight.

And in her bite.

She tried to mark me.

When a lycan bites another near one of the arteries, it does something to lock us together—like the chemical equivalent of a knot. I didn't let her at the time because I understood she wasn't aware of what she was doing. But now, a deep sense of shame settles over me, my heart in my throat as I wait to wake her up. I almost let her mark me, binding us together for good.

I have to tell her.

Even if she hates me for it. Even if she thinks none of this is real.

At this point, I'm not even sure if what happened last night was because she actually wanted me or because of her instincts, and that doesn't sit right with me in the slightest. But in the light of the unfiltered moon, I don't think either of us could've stopped ourselves.

And I hope to whatever god there is that she wanted last night as much as I did.

She stirs, her brow creasing and a groan slipping over her lips. I watch as she yawns, stretching her arms up over her head, her ass arching back toward me. I exercise as much control as possible, taking care not to move in case she's disgusted by me.

But she rolls over and smiles, and it's like she's cracked my chest open and ripped my heart out still beating.

"Morning, Sunshine," I say, my voice husky from sleep.

"Hi," she whispers. Her smile is brilliant, her hand coming up to cup my cheek. I commit this moment to memory, afraid of all the things I'm not telling her, knowing I'll need these flashbacks if I want to survive when she's gone.

"What's on your mind?" she asks.

I smooth her hair back with my bitten hand, wanting nothing more than to fuck her again. But her heat is in full swing now, and I don't want to risk getting her pregnant. If she wasn't Lycan, it wouldn't be possible without the bite, but she's definitely a wolf.

"Oh no," she says, grasping my hand. "I...I don't know what I was thinking last night. I *hurt* you."

I shake my head, hovering over her, the blanket soft underneath us. "It'll heal," I say. "But Charlotte—I have to tell you something."

She frowns. "Is this the part where you break up with me? Because I should tell you, I'm not just going to let that slide."

I snort despite the growing dread in the pit of my stomach, leaning my forehead against hers. I can feel her soft body curling up toward me, ready for round two. And she smells *fucking delicious*, which means I probably *shouldn't* fuck her.

“No,” I say. “It’s just that—”

I stop short.

Because there’s a familiar scent in the air: the same one that I smelled in Waco, right before the bridge collapsed.

“Do you smell that?” she whispers, fear in her big brown eyes.

“Lycanthropes,” I say. “We need to go.”

I push myself to my feet, scrambling for my jeans and yanking them on. I don’t have time to throw on anything else—and if I have to shift, I want to be ready. Instead, I sling my pack over my shoulders as Charlotte gets dressed in a hurry, wincing a little as she pulls her jeans up. I rush to her and take her by the shoulders, getting in close and resting my head against hers. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says, nodding. “Just... a little sore.”

“If things were different, I would spend the whole day feeding you and coddling you and kissing it better,” I say, and she smiles sadly. “But right now, we have to run.”

“I’m ready,” she says.

I know she is.

She’s stronger than she realizes.

And I’m already starting to shift, my muscles straining and stretching and changing. I wish I had more control—if I did, she could get on my back and we would be faster. But as it is, I’m still barely learning this skill, and we’ll have to go on foot.

I hope we can outrun them.

I take Charlotte’s hand and we leave the cave, climbing up the rockface to higher ground, away from the approaching scent. We’re going the opposite direction from where we’re headed, Austin getting farther and farther away, but I don’t

much care as long as we escape. They're gaining on us, though, and a jolt of pain tears through me as I start to change in full.

This is going to be a fight.

I double over, my claws and teeth getting sharp, spines erupting from my shoulders.

"Elijah!" Charlotte cries, turning around, looking strange and feral and beautiful in the clear daylight under this hole in the Celestial Curtain. She rushes to kneel in front of me, taking my face in her hands, and I focus on telling her what she needs to know.

"Charlotte, I have to tell you," I start. "I'm...if they catch us, *you aren't safe.*"

My teeth grow so long I can barely speak around them, and I have to focus as the wolves' scent gets closer.

"What do you mean?" she says. "You fought off the ones before."

"You're in heat, Charlotte," I bite out. "Any alpha in that pack will kill to have you."

"What?"

She frowns, and then it all starts to click into place. She stands, staggering backward.

"*In heat?*"

"I'm sorry," I say. "I wish I could explain."

But there's no time. A howl pierces the early morning, and I turn to face our pursuers. "Run, Charlotte," I growl, my claws stirring up the earth beneath me, watching the edge of the cliff and the creek running over it.

"No way in *hell* am I just leaving," she says, and it's the first time I've ever heard her curse. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

"And I won't be able to do it if we're both dead!"

She doesn't get another word in; a grey Lycan crests the hill, its eyes glimmering, its savage teeth bared, a ridge of silver spines along its back. I recognize it as another alpha right away, and the violet ridge on my own back rises in response.

He's going to take her.

He springs at me, going right for the throat, and I move to meet him as Charlotte screams. She isn't backing down either; she races toward us, and I have to put myself in between her and the stranger.

As I maneuver between them, he manages to toss me to the side, though I roll right back to my feet. My front paw is a little sore from where she bit me, but it only makes me bolder, running back toward him. Just as I'm about to reach him, though, something massive barrels into me from the side: another wolf, this one with golden fur and silver spines, with eyes that glimmer like diamonds.

And then there's another, and another, circling around me with a growl, going in for the kill.

They fall on me like I'm fresh meat—and I may as well be, with the number moving against me. I try to fight them, thinking about how I *have* to protect Charlotte, how if they get their hands on her they might do unspeakable things. But the world is blood and horrible pain, and black spots swim across my vision as they tear at me with tooth and claw.

“Stop!”

They pause, and then a human form suddenly flings itself on top of me, hands gripping my white fur. I recognize her scent right away, inhaling her and trying to calm my unsteady, desperate breathing.

Charlotte.

“I'll go with you if you just leave him alone,” she says, her voice strikingly calm. There's a hint of threat to it as well, and I can feel the barest touch of her claws on my skin. She's *changing* as we speak, though I don't know if she can fully shift. Even if she does, her scent is different than mine and the

other wolves—only certain types go into heat, and they're smaller, faster, quieter.

She's an omega.

Of course she is.

“Charlotte, don't!” I try to say, but I can't speak around my sharp teeth, unable to shift back until the threat is gone. I manage to drag my eyes up to look at the new wolves, each with drastically different coats and spines. They're first generation—like me—not natural born like Charlotte. I can see it in the way they move together as a pack, and the slightly more alien features on their bodies.

And then one steps forward, and I watch him shift back into the form of a human—latino, I think, with salt and pepper hair and a thick beard, a tattoo spiraling around his forearm. The guy is huge, obviously the leader of their pack, as the others all defer to him even when he's in this form, staying in a circle around us. He tries to cover his nudity, looking almost embarrassed.

Not typical alpha behavior when they're around someone like Charlotte.

“Oh my God,” he says. “It's you.”

Charlotte's eyes go wide and she looks from me to the newcomer.

“How do you know her?” I ask, summoning the will to step in front of her. The others snarl at me, but I don't back down. Still, another wolf shifts—this one into a rangy female with silver-blonde, short hair.

“Get the fuck away from her,” she says. “We don't know you, and this omega is one of ours.”

“I don't belong to you,” Charlotte hisses, baring her teeth. They're sharp now, gleaming in the light.

“Easy, both of you,” the first man says. He looks to the blonde woman, who doesn't seem nearly as shy about her nudity—or as nice. “Arden, he's protecting her. We can work this out.”

“But Reyes—”

“I said *stop*,” the first guy—Reyes, I guess—says.

Arden immediately backs down, proving his power as their leader.

We stay locked at an impasse for a moment, the other two wolves remaining in their lycan forms—one so dark as to be almost blue-black, and the other with a thick red mane. Both male, I think. And Reyes isn’t acting like he’s a threat, but I don’t trust that when they were intent on killing me to get to Charlotte.

I shift as I grow weaker, my wounds making me see spots. Charlotte grasps my shoulder, her eyes filling with tears. “Elijah!”

“If you let us pick him up, we can get him down the hill and to our truck,” Reyes says. “Our medic is down there with supplies.”

“You expect me to trust you when you were the one who did this to him?” Charlotte demands. “I still don’t even know how you know me!”

“You can trust me,” Reyes says.

“Why?”

“Because your grandparents are waiting at our den,” he says. “And because...well, because you’re my brother’s kid.”

Charlotte blinks in confusion, but for me, the pieces are already starting to click together. I can scent the familial connection now, and it’s obvious why they were after her, why they knew her—and of course, why he’s so embarrassed.

“I’m...what?” she says. “How does...”

She trails off, but then she squeezes my shoulder tightly.

“Get him help, and then we can talk,” she says.

Reyes nods.

“Of course,” he says. “Let’s go; I think it’s high time for a family reunion.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

☾

CHARLOTTE

The pack takes us back to their den—which it turns out isn't a den at all, and is in fact a system of caves around a natural spring outside the old, ruined city of Austin. We drive—in a real, rumbling *car*—across the hill country and further south, until we see the peaks of old skyscrapers crumbling to the earth.

Before we reach the city, we veer right, the car taking us down an old asphalt road and past a fence, then past a broken down sign reading “Inner Space Caverns.” The surrounding area waves with tall grasses, but at its center is the entrance to the cave, along with what looks like it could be an old, one story farmhouse. People mill around the building, some coming out to peer at us in curiosity. I catch different scents through the open car window, quickly realizing something strange.

These people are all lycan.

And I'm one of them.

Elijah lies with his head in my lap, taking shallow breaths. I run my fingers through his hair to ease his pain. There are only two other people in the car with us: Reyes driving, and a

woman named Suyin, who works as the pack's medic. The other three wolves sit in the bed of the crew-cab truck: the female, Arden, a redhead named Grant, and a black man named Will. Everyone is dressed now, thank God, though I guess I should just get used to people being naked if they're always turning into wolves.

This isn't how I saw my life going when I left Dallas.

And I have about a million questions as I struggle to adjust.

"So you said you have my grandparents?" I ask.

Reyes glances in the rearview, keeping his hands on the steering wheel.

"We just carried out a raid on the Heavenly Host prison in Waco, along with help from some 'borgs in the city encampment," he says. "They were in the prison—unharméd, thank God. Told us you would come find us, or that you might land in the city. We've been scouring the area between here and Dallas ever since, lookin' for you."

"And they're...they're safe?" I ask.

"Safe and sound," he says. "I don't think they'll stay at the den once they've got you, but you're welcome to stick around."

His voice is tight, his shoulders tense. I'm sure there's something more going on here, but I don't even know where to start.

"Why didn't they ever tell me about you?" I ask quietly. "About...about myself?"

I thought Elijah was asleep, but his hand reaches up to squeeze the arm I have lying across his chest. His eyes flutter open, and I stare into them as an anchor.

I feel so lost.

"It might be best if we discuss this when I'm not driving," Reyes murmurs.

"But I need to know."

He exchanges a look with the medic, Suyin. She turns to look over the back of her seat, from me to Elijah. Elijah winces when her eyes settle on his ankle—on a tattoo I didn't notice before.

“It's going to be a lot,” she says, her tone clinical. “But I want you to be prepared for the fact that the two of you are going to be separated when we get to the den. You're already cleared, but your friend here will need to be contained.”

I frown, a rush of possessive rage coursing through me. “Why?”

“It's okay, Charlotte,” Elijah says weakly.

“He can't even do anything,” I say. “He's hurt.”

“Which is why we're going to take him to the clinic,” Suyin says. Her eyes go to his ankle again, to the tattoo. It's in the shape of a medieval-looking cross—nothing too unusual, but I'm surprised I didn't notice it before. Until now, he was wearing jeans and boots most of the time, I guess. And Suyin clearly gets more out of it than I do. “It'll be okay. But you need to meet with your family.”

My eyes go back to Reyes', who's staring at me in the rearview. “Is it not just you and my grandparents?” I ask, my eyes wide.

“Also my little brother,” Reyes says. “Your uncle Mateo.”

I chew on my lip, frowning.

“Okay,” I say. I look down at Elijah. “But you're not allowed to go anywhere without me, alright?”

He smiles weakly. “Understood,” he says. “And same goes for you, Sunshine.”

The truck slows down, and as it grinds to a halt, the three wolves in the back hop out. They make their way around the back doors, the female lycan getting to Elijah's side first. She swings the door open and I grasp at him protectively, her glare hard.

“Give me the Crusader,” she says harshly, her eyes narrow.

I shake my head. “What? Don’t touch him.”

The redhead—Grant—grips her by the shoulder and she spins toward him with a growl, then stalks away. Grant gives me an apologetic smile. “We’re just gonna take him to the clinic,” he says. “No worries.”

“I’ll be fine,” Elijah says to me. “Go meet with your family.”

I squeeze his hand, and lean forward to press a kiss to his lips. I have this horrible feeling that there’s more going on here than I realize—in fact, I’m sure of it—but there’s nothing I can do as Grant takes him by one arm, Will by the other. Elijah doesn’t make any attempt to get away, the plain sweats Reyes gave him falling over the tattoo once again.

I open my door to find Reyes just outside, talking to a man who looks almost just like him—but more slender, a little tanner, and with none of the grey in his hair. He turns toward me, and his eyes go wide. He takes a halting step forward.

Something in me crumbles.

I feel like I’m going to cry.

Because I can sense that this is my family, people that I never even knew existed. Mateo takes another steps toward me, then we’re walking toward each other, and he gives me a hug. I’ve never hugged anyone other than Gran, Pa, and now Elijah...but it feels like I’ve met this person before.

“It’s been so long,” he says as he pulls away, grasping me by the shoulders. “You look just like your mom.”

Gran has said that too. My eyes fill with tears, and I don’t try to stop them.

“We’ve met before?” I say.

He laughs through the tears, swiping at his eyes. “Yeah,” he says. “I held you when you were a baby, before they...well, we should talk.”

“I agree,” I say. “And my Gran and Pa?”

Reyes smiles gently. “They’re right inside,” he says. “Now let’s get you inside—you must be hungry.”

“What about Elijah?” I ask.

“We’ll take care of him,” he says. “Don’t you worry.”

And for some reason, I trust him.

So I walk through the crowd of curious lycans, and into the den.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

☾

ELIJAH

I say goodbye to Charlotte, knowing I might not ever see her again.

Because she's about to find out exactly what a horrible person I am.

The Austin wolves' friendliness shifts as soon as Charlotte is taken away, and I'm hauled into the den. I catch sight of a few nervous people who practically run away from me when they see me; I guess word travels fast.

They know what I am, and I scare the hell out of them.

The blonde lady is the worst of them all, glaring at me the whole time as she stalks down the stone corridors of the den. She flings a door open and the men on either side of me toss me inside. I scramble onto the cot on the opposite wall, keeping my eyes trained on the three of them.

Reyes was the one with the level head, and he's nowhere in sight.

This isn't good.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Crusader?” the blonde demands, pointing on accusatory finger at me. I realize for the

first time that she has a British accent; odd, given that there hasn't been much international travel over the past twenty years.

She takes a step closer like she's ready to tear me to pieces, but the black guy puts a hand on her shoulder, giving her a warning glance. He's been quiet this whole time, but I get the feeling he's the one in charge after Reyes.

"Arden, Reyes doesn't want him hurt," he warns. "And that's not us anyway."

"Awfully presumptuous of you to say that," she growls.

"We should hear him out," the man says. He runs a hand over his short, coiled hair, then crosses his arms and looks down on me. "What's your name, stranger?"

I swallow hard. "Elijah Pike. I'm not what you think I am."

The leader exchanges a glance with the blonde lady, but they both shake their head.

"Never heard of any Pikes," she says.

"Me either," he says. "In that case...I'm Will Watson. This is Arden Kovalenko, and our friend here is Grant Turner. We want to ask you some questions."

Grant—the ginger—stays posted up by the door, while Arden paces back and forth like a caged animal. Will stays still and steady, a monolith in the middle of the room.

"Ask away," I say. "I don't have anything to hide."

Not from them, anyway. From Charlotte though...

"You wouldn't have come this direction alone if you didn't have a death wish, right?" Will asks.

"I wasn't alone," I say. "I was bringing Charlotte here, then I planned to go to the city."

"To do what?" Will says.

"Join the Resistance," I say. "I used to be with the Heavenly Host, but obviously that's no longer the case. I'm

just looking for somewhere to live after dipping out of Dallas.”

“So you really were just going to bring Reyes’ niece to the den, then go on your merry way?” Grant asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “You got a problem with that?”

“Uh, yeah,” he says. “She’s your mate. Kind of a dickhead thing to do to just bail on her.”

I roll my eyes. “I think we all know that stuff is just superstition.”

“Nope,” Grant says. “It’s real. And it would be pretty fucked up.”

“How do you know?”

“We’re asking the questions,” Will cuts in. “Grant—do you want to go see if Reyes needs anything? I think Arden and I have got this.”

Grant huffs out a breath, but he turns to leave us behind, frowning back at the two of them. At least he doesn’t seem pissed at me.

He’s right, though.

I don’t think I can leave her.

“How did you get out of the Heavenly Host?” Arden says suddenly, scowling at me. “You don’t just leave. And you were a special breed of wolf, weren’t you?”

“It was a long time ago,” I say. “I ran with the Dallas pack during the New Crusades, but I was a kid.”

“Bullshit,” Arden snaps.

“I was Blessed when I was thirteen,” I say. “My family were zealots. I didn’t have any choice but to comply, and even then I was never able to shift.”

“But you can now?” Will says.

“Yeah,” I reply. “Because of Charlotte. I guess it just brought out a protective side of me.”

“And you’ve been without a pack since the war?” Will asks.

“Mostly been picking up odd jobs and flying under the radar in Dallas,” I say. “Which was fine until I heard they were picking up the Blessed for further enhancements. Then I had to dip.”

“How did you get out of your pack?” Arden asks. “Not normal for a wolf to go solo.”

“I killed them,” I say.

Okay. Maybe not the best way to introduce myself to a new group of wolves. But Arden seems to really hate Crusaders, so maybe it’s an attempt to get on her good side.

It doesn’t seem to work.

Will’s brown eyes widen, and he blinks slowly. “You... killed them?”

“We’d just killed a group of fighters in Waco,” I say. “They had kids with them. I wasn’t in on the op because I couldn’t fully transform, so I was providing support, and that night when they were sleeping...”

It wasn’t my proudest moment.

And I was a kid.

I was a fucking kid, but I couldn’t let them keep doing that.

“My big brother Zeke was in on it with me,” I say. “But he died, too.”

“Jesus,” Will breathes, shaking his head.

At least Arden seems a little more satisfied.

“So you understand that hasn’t been my life for a long time,” I say. “I was brought back to Dallas, and the Angels discarded me because they didn’t know what I did. They let me go...and I’ve been there ever since.”

“But you went on missions with the Heavenly Host during the war,” Arden says. “You killed, too. You can’t expect us to believe you didn’t.”

“Of course not,” I say. “But I can do good for the Resistance. And I care about Charlotte.”

They exchange a look, something unspoken going between them. Arden flings her hand up in the air and shakes her head, rolling her eyes.

“Do what you want with him,” she mutters. “I’m going to talk to Reyes.”

Then she leaves, slamming the door shut behind her.

I shift on the cot, making the cuts on my arm sear. I’m still bleeding a little; these guys really fucked me up. Will glances at them with a frown.

“Do you need those checked out?”

“I’ll heal,” I grunt.

“Sure you will,” he says, “but do you *want* them checked out?”

“Nah,” I say. “I just want to see Charlotte. To at least...to at least tell her goodbye, if you’re going to kill me or send me out alone.”

I sound fucking pitiful. Will obviously hears it, and he shakes his head. “I’ll talk to Reyes and pass on what you’ve said,” he says. “But I can’t make any promises.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“And Elijah? Just don’t go anywhere,” he mutters. “Arden will kill you if she catches you wandering the halls, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s just waiting for her chance.”

“Understood,” I say.

He turns to go, and then I’m alone.

And I feel like such an idiot.

I really thought I was going to roll into Resistance territory with a Crusader tattoo: the Templar cross. In the past, I guess I’ve always been able to hide it...but exposed as I was after my transformation, there was no use in even trying

So I sit with my bad choices, and I think about my good ones, and I hope I'll get to see Charlotte again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



CHARLOTTE

The den isn't what I expected.

I guess from the word 'den,' I thought I was headed into the lair of a bunch of animals, but this is far from it. We don't even go inside the caverns, Reyes and Mateo taking me into the farmhouse instead.

It's actually pretty home-y inside, with picnic tables laid out in what looks like a common area, a kitchen off to the right. There's no one here besides the three of us, and a girl with curly red hair busy cooking in the kitchen. I can smell onions, and hear sizzling from the griddle.

"Hey, Peaches!" Mateo calls as we walk in.

She starts, her shoulders bouncing, her eyes wide when she turns around. "Oh—hey Mateo! Was just getting some final preparations for tonight's full moon...and I see we have a guest!"

She puts down the spatula in her hand and waves. "Hi guest!"

I raise my hand, a little weirded out, but at least more comfortable seeing another woman here—a woman who *isn't*

Arden. My grandparents are nowhere in sight as Reyes pulls out a chair for me, Mateo taking the seat next to me.

“They should be here any minute,” Reyes says. “I think Suyin went to get them...”

A moment later, a door on the other side of the building opens.

And there they are.

Gran and Pa.

The people I’ve been looking for this whole time.

I can’t help myself; I get up and race toward them, flinging myself into Gran’s arms when she holds them wide. Pa joins in on the group hug, and I feel Gran’s shoulders shake as we embrace.

Then Reyes gets closer...and I feel them both tense.

There is something going on here, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Hannah,” Reyes says with a polite nod. “Abraham. If you’d like to take a seat, I think we have some things to discuss.”

My grandparents freeze, Gran’s eyes wide.

“Actually, I think we’ll be going now that we have Charlotte,” she says. “She’s why we’re still here and not in the city.”

Reyes’ lips thin into a grimace, and he glances at me. “It’s up to you, of course,” he says. “But Charlotte—would you like to ask us any questions first? I bet you have a lot of them.”

I look from Reyes to Gran, but I nod despite her look of fear. “Yeah...I think I do.”

“Let’s have a seat, then,” Reyes says. “And I’ll answer anything I can.”

I return to the table, but Gran won’t let go of my arm as we walk. Her grip is almost too tight, starting to ache by the time I sit down next to Mateo once again. I pat her hand, trying to set

her at ease, but she doesn't budge. Pa sits on her other side, his jaw tight.

I'm surprised when Reyes sits down opposite the four of us, his hands clasped in front of him...and doesn't say anything. For some reason, I thought he would be the one leading this conversation, but now I realize that all these people are here for me.

And there's too much to ask...and a lot of hurt that I didn't recognize right away.

"Um," I mutter. "I guess I want to start with asking why you lied to me?"

I look at Gran as I say it, and her eyes close as she bites her lip. She's still got tears in her eyes from our reunion, and they get worse when she looks over at Pa.

"Sweet pea, we were always just trying to protect you," she says.

"I get that," I say. "I really do. I've learned in the past few days that the world is a real dangerous place, and it was absolutely safer in our house, but...why lie to me about who I was? Are lycanthropes really so bad?"

"Only if you think body modification is bad," Pa cuts in. "Or if you think—"

"Abe, stop," Gran chastises him. "That's not going to do any good."

The damage has already been done, though. Sure, Pa has always been opinionated, but this one hurts. It feels personal.

Because I'm one of these creatures.

And either my mother or my father had to be one, too.

"So was it my mom or dad that you thought was an abomination?" I ask.

The words come out harsher than I expected. Gran visibly blanches, and Pa's eyes go hard and distant.

"Your mother was my perfect angel," Gran says. "And your father was..."

“Well, he was one of them, of course,” Pa says.

One of them?

“But I’m one of them, too,” I murmur.

Gran puts her hands on my face. “No, sweet pea. You’re a good girl.”

I jerk away from her.

“My status as a lycan doesn’t determine my goodness,” I bite out. “And my *father* was good. He was not ‘one of them,’ whatever the fuck that means.”

I’ve never cursed in front of my grandparents. They both gape at me, Gran’s chin trembling.

This is going real badly.

I just want Elijah.

“Reyes,” I say, looking over at the calm pack leader—my uncle. “Will you tell me about my dad? Apparently he was an abomination.”

Reyes frowns, a deep furrow forming in his brow. He opens his mouth to start talking, but it’s Mateo who speaks instead.

He’s been so quiet I almost forgot he was there.

“I was really close with your dad,” Mateo says.

I look over at him to find that his eyes are watering, his jaw tight. He’s about to cry—and I get why, given the way my grandparents are talking about my father.

I hate this.

I wish things were different.

“Manny was the middle child,” Mateo continues. “He was two years older than me, eight years younger than Reyes. And the thing I remember most about him is that he *really* loved your mom.”

A knot forms in my throat, and I try my best to swallow it down even as my eyes start getting cloudy as well. Mateo

takes my hand and squeezes it, his gentleness in stark contrast with Pa's iron glare.

"They were high school sweethearts before the Convergence," Mateo says. "And when the Angels showed up, the two of them got hitched...and Hannah and Abe here really didn't like that."

"It wasn't safe," Gran cuts in.

But I almost can't hear her, because she's a stranger to me all of a sudden. This isn't Gran, who played the violin for me through my childhood, who told me spooky stories at night about the big bad wolf.

This is Hannah: the woman who kept me locked in a lonely house, and warned me away from people *just like me*.

"And my father was Blessed?" I ask, ignoring Gran.

Reyes nods, looking pained. "It was my fault, actually," he says. "I was leading protests in San Antonio, and they took all three of us. Your mom got away."

"She came straight to us," Pa says. "And we tried to keep her safe, but she went right back to him when he got out, changed into a monster!"

"Abe, *stop!*" Gran says.

Silence falls over the five of us, and I swallow hard to keep myself from crying. There are already tears streaming down my face; I don't know why I'm trying.

"And then they had me," I conclude.

"They did," Reyes says. "And you were with us for two years."

I remember the bluebonnet photos. They must have been taken between here and San Antonio. And my grandparents...

"You kept my locked away to keep me away from *them*," I say, looking at Gran with wide eyes.

"They killed our little girl," Gran says.

“No,” I say. “The Heavenly Host killed my mom—and you blamed the wrong people.”

I can’t even stand to look at Pa right now; as far as I’m concerned, he’s become the devil himself, the barrier to the rest of my family. I don’t know when I’ll be able to talk to him again, but there’s one thing for sure: I’m not going back to Dallas with them.

In fact, I don’t think I’m going anywhere at all.

I look at Reyes, fully convinced in the blink of an eye. “I want ot stay,” I say.

“No!” Gran says.

Reyes takes a measured look at Gran, then at Pa. It’s almost like he’s warning them to let me choose—and I appreciate that, after all this time, I’m being trusted with my own destiny. Finally, he settles back on me, as Mateo squeezes my shoulder.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” he says. “Even to make a home here if you’d like.”

I feel my chin tremble, and I swipe at a tear that bursts down my cheek. “And Elijah?” I say.

“On that, the pack has to decide,” Reyes says. “But Peaches can take you to see him.

He gestures as he says that, and I realize the sunny redhead is still standing in the kitchen, pretending not to listen to us. She waves awkwardly, then gets back to whatever it is she was doing.

“I want to see him,” I say.

I stand up abruptly, avoiding Gran’s horrified stare. I can see the look in her eyes: the look of a woman who’s seeing the worst moment in her life all over again, losing someone she loves.

And I can’t bring myself to have any sympathy for her.

I wonder if my mom felt the same way.

“Please, Charlotte,” she says. “Come with us. These people aren’t—”

“They’re my family,” I say, “and I deserve to get to know them.” Then I look over at Peaches, who’s taking hesitant steps out of the kitchen. “Can you take me to Elijah?”

“Yeah,” she says quietly. “I’ll take you to your mate.”

And the two of us leave together, with Gran and Pa far behind.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

☾

ELIJAH

I sit in that room for what feels like ages.

There's no clock inside, nothing but the cot and a plain blanket. I might be able to leave, but I can sense other wolves outside—and they're all tough, big, probably alphas if they use that designation. I get restless and pace around for a little, but I get tired quickly; I'm still pretty badly hurt.

So then I just...sit there.

And I sit.

And sit.

I sense Charlotte before I see her, coming down the corridor with another lycan close to her heat. I guess there's more than one omega here—which means they probably have a big pack. I didn't even think these creatures were real, and now I've met two...

...but this other girl doesn't smell nearly as good as Charlotte.

My mate.

I sit on the cot and wait for them as the door clicks, then opens. Charlotte doesn't hesitate; she's running across the

space and flinging herself into my arms before I can even say hello, and I feel tears on my shoulder. I rub her back, looking helplessly at the person with her: a curvy redhead with wild curls.

“I’ll leave you alone,” she says with a smile.

And the door shuts behind her.

I breathe her in, trying to resist her pull as I hold her. With her heat in full swing—and with the evening on its way—I’m already having a hard time staying away from her. She doesn’t seem to realize that right now, though, crying against my chest.

I let her; because it’s my job, because I will always be here to love and protect her, if she’ll have me...and if the pack allows it.

She stops eventually, her breaths steadying and her shoulders shaking less and less. I keep rubbing circles on her back, holding her close, until her lips find my neck.

And she starts kissing me.

I crane my neck to give her better access, my cock jumping to attention. We shouldn’t be doing this here, I know—but she’s in heat, and I can barely resist her. I try to shake myself out of the fog of lust, remembering why this is wrong.

One reason stands out most of all: because now that I know we’re both lycan, I could get her pregnant.

I won’t do that without her wanting it.

“Charlotte,” I croak out, gripping her by the shoulders and dragging her away. “We can’t.”

“Why?” she asks. Fuck, she’s so flushed, her lush mouth bright red, one sharp tooth catching on her lip. “I thought you wanted...”

“You know now, don’t you?” I ask. “You’re lycan.”

Her eyelashes flutter, and I can see her shake herself out of her own haze. Finally, she looks me in the eye, her gaze discerning.

“How long have you known?” she asks.

“I suspected,” I say, “but I wasn’t sure until this morning. And then...well, after we woke up, the pack showed up and I couldn’t tell you...”

“That’s okay,” she says. “You’re actually one of the people who has lied to me the *least* this week.”

I groan, frowning. “That’s...not exactly true.”

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“Remember when I mentioned that I used to run with a pack?” I ask.

She nods.

“Well,” I say, “there are some things you should know.”

☾

After that, I tell her everything.

I tell her about my old pack, my family, my brother. I tell her about how I’ve been a coward, hiding in Dallas away from both the Resistance and the Heavenly Host. I tell her all the bad things I’ve done, and she listens.

And when I’m done, she holds me in the tightest embrace I’ve ever felt...

...and I melt.

Then she tells me about her grandparents—about how they kept her mother away from her father, and how when both her parents died, her grandfolks decided to keep it a secret. Now, it’s my turn to listen, and I commiserate with her and tell her it wasn’t fair.

Because it wasn’t.

And I’m going to treat her *so* much better.

“You’re not a bad person,” she whispers in my ear.

“Don’t say that,” I mutter.

“No—I’m not just saying it,” she says. She pulls back from me, tears in her eyes. “You were just trying to live, and your family forced you into a life you didn’t want. Trust me; I get it.”

I laugh and tangle my fingers in her hair, resting my forehead against hers. “We make quite the pair, don’t we?”

“We really do,” she says. “I asked Reyes to let you free; we’ll have to see what he says.”

“What do you *think* he’ll say?” I ask.

“He seems like a good man,” she says. “And I’m family, so...maybe that makes me some kind of werewolf princess.”

As if on cue, we both hear footsteps in the corridor, and Charlotte’s head snaps the door from where she sits straddling my lap. She gets off of me quickly, and I clasp my hands over my erection to try to hide it.

I don’t feel like this is a good look if I want Charlotte’s uncle to let me stay here with this pack.

Her comes in a second later, the two of us sitting beside each other. Charlotte looks her arm through my elbow, and we both look up at Reyes as we wait for his verdict. Will comes in behind him, and I catch sight of Arden before they shut her out in the corridor.

“So,” he says, “the pack decided what we’re going to do with you.”

I take a deep breath.

“Lay it on me, sir,” I say.

He laughs quietly. “Not sir,” he says. “*Father*, actually—I’m a priest.”

I snort. “A priest in the apocalypse, huh?”

“I don’t miss the irony,” he says. “But that’s not what I’m here for.”

He crosses his arms, then glances over at Will, who gives me what I *hope* is an encouraging look. “Will here said that you really care about Charlotte, and Grant was insistent, too.”

“I do,” I say.

“And you’ve been free of the Heavenly Host for almost a decade?”

“Damn near to it,” I say. “Uh...sorry. I know I shouldn’t swear.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he chuckles. “Well, then...here’s what we’ve decided.”

I hold my breath, and Charlotte does, too.

“There’s an old cabin where we sometimes stay during hunts, out toward Austin,” he says. “The pack isn’t ready to let you stay here, but they’re willing to give you supplies to spruce the place up—the two of you. And you’re invited to our den meals as well, provided that you’re on your best behavior.”

“I get to stay, then?” I say.

“In a way, yeah,” Reyes says.

Then he gives me a good-natured smile.

“In fact, me and Charlotte’s other uncle will help you clean up the cottage ourselves.”

I look over at Charlotte, my heart on pause as I ask the question.

“So,” I say. “Will you move in with me?”

She nods, and a grin breaks over her face.

“I would love to.”

EPILOGUE



CHARLOTTE

Three Months Later

Since I came to live with the Austin pack, I've learned a lot of things.

The first is that we're all still learning the rules. The pack is figuring out what it means to live together—and the chemical hierarchy that Lycans once lived under. Now that they're under Reyes' leadership and not controlled by the Angels, things are a little strange around here...but we make it work.

The second thing I learn is that the world can be a beautiful place, despite my first experiences of it. In the months that follow, I learn how to be a part of the pack. I get to know my new talents, which thrive under the light of the unfiltered moon, and I realize that I can heal and hunt and run with the rest of them. And it's glorious to be something strange and different and wild and, most important of all, *free*. It's something that I never had in Dallas, with my grandparents—who I'll still speak to every so often, but I'm not ready to forgive.

And I'm learning to love Elijah.

It's in the thing I noticed in our first days together: sly smiles and surprising sweetness, the little ways that he always stays honest with me and keeps me from slipping into the dark. And I know that Elijah doesn't believe in God, but I start to wonder if there's something to this whole thing with fate.

Because we really are good for each other.

The third thing I learn is a little more personal: going through your heat is a heck of a lot easier when you're on contraceptives.

I feel the familiar shift crawl over my skin one warm summer morning, my flesh burning deliciously where I'm sprawled across the sheets. Birds sing outside, and I take a moment to savor how nice it is to wake up somewhere free—our own cabin near the den, where the fresh air blows through the windows. They didn't want us staying out here alone, when we could always come under attack, but Elijah and I know how to keep ourselves safe.

Safe and warm and in love in our little nest.

My fingers curl against something warm and solid, and I smile against his skin as a sensation of deep desire overwhelms me. Two strong arms tighten around me, drawing me into a firm chest, and I sigh in contentment.

“Mornin’, Sunshine.”

I let my eyes flutter open and prop my chin on Elijah's chest, looking into his blue eyes. With my knee draped between his legs, I can feel that he's already turned on; he probably has been for hours, sensing the beginning of my heat before I was even awake. But he never wakes me up to have sex, even when I'm sure it starts to get uncomfortable.

It's one of the many things I've come to appreciate about him since we got out of a situation where we were constantly fearing for our lives.

“Morning,” I reply, trailing my right hand up to tangle in his hair. He keeps it short usually, but right now it's long—and I like treating it like a handle in certain situations.

Situations like the one we're in right now.

"How can I help?" he asks, knowing what I need before I even ask.

My pulse throbs as I look at him, and I realize that there's a very specific way he can help me out.

"Bite me," I whisper.

His eyes widen, but he hides his surprise under a mask of humor, a smile quirking at the corner of his lips. "There was a time that could be taken as an insult," he teases.

"Don't make fun of me," I drawl, dragging my hand over his pec. He exhales a sharp puff of breath at the sensation; I know he's turned on by my scent, his knot already swelling at the base of his hard cock.

"I mean it," I say.

I move to straddle him, and Elijah's lips part when I settle myself over him. My hair is down and lies in dark honey curls around my shoulders and down my back, and he raises his hand to toy with the strands. I take that hand though—the hand I bit months ago, which still has a little scar at the edge—and I run my lips over it.

"I think back then, part of me knew," I whisper, "even if I still didn't understand what was really happening."

"And now?" he says.

My heart hammers in my chest as I think about what I'm going to say next. "Well," I say. "The first time, it was because I wanted you. But now, I think I actually *love* you."

"You make it sound so awful," he jokes, a single canine biting into his lip. It's already hard enough to keep my composure, but when he looks like that...

I roll my eyes.

"Keep messing with me and we'll see if I want to do anything about *this*," I purr, rubbing myself against him.

Elijah groans, then in one fluid motion he's flipped me over to pin me against the bed, his arms on either side of me

and his cock pressing at my entrance. I can't help the whine of need that slips past my lips, the chemical, instinctive drive to mate him overwhelming all else. But he holds back, and sobers as he keeps me still.

"I've always loved you, Sunshine," he says, then drops his voice. "*Charlotte.*"

He kisses me, still settled over me, his hips in the cradle of my thighs, and I grind against him. In these first days of heat, it's like my body is desperate to feel him inside, and I hook my leg desperately around his waist to yank him closer.

And I know I want *only him*—that this bite will allow me to feel him like a second soul living in my mind and body, that it will claim me as his and him as mine, and that we won't have to worry about anyone else trying to come between us...

Not that anyone could.

"*Bite me,*" I ask again, my voice high and breathy and begging.

Elijah pulls back, leaning over me once again, brushing his fingers over my pulse. And then I'm wondering if *I'm* the one who should be asking *him*, and I open my mouth to say something but he puts a finger to my lips before gesturing at his own neck.

"Right here," he murmurs. "But not too deep."

I bite my lip, feeling him swell against me. I nod.

"Yes," I breathe.

His fingers move from his neck to my face, trailing down my cheek and over my lips.

"I hope you realize that, after we do this, we're not getting out of this bed until your heat is over," he growls. There's a hint of hunger there, of savage promise. And I nod again, licking my lips.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I say.

Elijah ducks his head against my neck, the tip of his nose meandering along my sensitive skin. His cock is still pushing

against me, his hips rolling like he can't quite get them under control, and then I feel his sharp, wolverine teeth in that place just over my pulse, where it's like all the love I have for him has concentrated in a tense bundle of nerves. And I do the same, lapping at him with my tongue and making him groan.

I wanted to do this *so badly* the first time we made love in the moonlight. Even when I didn't know who I was—or who he was at all—I *wanted* this. I breathe him in, spicy and delicious and *male*, and then I can't resist.

I need to mark him.

I'm gentle with the bite, and Elijah's chest heaves as he moans against me. The head of his cock slides just an inch inside, and I don't know what he's waiting for, I have to have him *now*—

He thrusts all the way in, his knot sliding past my entrance and filling me completely. I barely have time to scream in pleasure before he *bites* at the same time. And the pain sears and takes me apart, and I feel my mind flying out of my body to see us splayed there across the blankets, interlocked and entwined, my nails digging into Elijah's taut, muscular back. And we're not just in a little house on a lonely planet; we're everything, and the future is spiraling out and out and out...

His growl brings me back into this intimate space between us, our hearts thundering in time with each other. I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him deeper, arching my back as he unclamps his jaws to lick at the wound, a softer growl rumbling in his chest.

And I should do the same, I know; so I release him and taste the coppery flavor of blood on my tongue as I tend to the bite mark. This is something that everyone will be able to see—the proof that he's *mine*, even better than the gold ring hanging on a chain around my neck.

Sparks fly where he touches the mark, like it has a life of its own. And as his tongue continues to swipe over my neck, he starts to move, his hips rolling against me, his knot keeping him lodged inside. I have to be fucked to feel better, to ease

this fever raging across my skin, so I moan for him and hold him close, and we both chase our ends.

It comes quickly with the euphoria and adrenaline from the bite, and Elijah holds me close. He's still locked inside, though—and sometimes, when I'm in heat, he's just as stuck as I am. We could be here for hours, so I roll my neck and feel the strange new wound marking my skin as I stare at the raw bite mark on Elijah's neck.

He lifts himself up on his arms, driving deeper inside me, and I whimper.

Not done.

I let my limbs fall open to him, putting myself on display. Holding himself up on one rosy, muscular arm, he drags his other hand down the middle of my body, between my breasts and over my stomach, his fingers finding my clit.

“Gorgeous fucking girl,” he bites out, a strand of white blonde hair falling across his forehead. “You’re *mine*.”

“Yes,” I groan. “*Yes*.”

And he’s mine, too.

And I’m so damn grateful for the twists of fate that brought us together.

UP NEXT

TAKEN BY THE LYCANTHROPE



Reyes & Tilda's Story

Pack alphas are bad enough. It's just my luck I've fallen in with the worst of them all.

My life in post-Convergence Texas was always one of freedom— riding the plains and farming the land. But when my family clashes with the local shifter pack, our feud threatens to doom us all.

Because the most dangerous alpha of them all decides to claim me as his omega.

Ex-priest and Alpha Prime Reyes has demons of his own. He says my family is on the wrong side of the war, but he'll do anything to get me in his bed— and on his side. He demands my confession, but I won't let him break me, even if he's the hottest alpha this side of the Rio Grande.

He thinks I'll find salvation on my knees, but I'm a warrior. And I'll fight him tooth and claw until only one of us is left standing.

☾

"I can't stay away from you," he says. "And 'what God has put together, let no man put asunder.'"

"Matthew again," I laugh, then open my eyes to stare into his. "Gotta admit...what I want to do with you doesn't feel holy."

"How could this be anything but holy?" He presses a kiss to my neck, and I let out sigh. "This thing between us..." Another kiss, lower down, brushing my clavicle. "The twists of fate that brought us together..."

His fingers slide under the strap of my dress until it's hanging off my shoulder, his tongue on my breast. I'm dangerously close to getting naked in a church—and while I've done a lot of bad things, this isn't on the list. "Should we do this here?"

"I think we're already doing it," he says. "And I don't think I'm going to be able to make it back to my room."

Reyes' lips close around my nipple as the dress falls away, and I arch against him. He's right, of course. I'm not going to make it back to his room, either, with how wet I am. I don't even know if I can walk. My legs feel like jelly, desperate to spread for him. The bite pulses, desperate to be licked and cared for. I don't make any move to stop him as he reaches for the other strap of my dress to drag it down my arm, pulling me toward him with a primal growl.

"You taste just like you smell," he murmurs against my breasts. "*Mi mora.*"

I file the word away to ask about later, but right now I'm not capable of forming words. I boldly reach toward his waist,

and he groans against my breasts when I palm him through his jeans. “Oh God,” I breathe.

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” he teases.

I can’t be bothered to laugh. “You’re...you’re huge.”

“It’s the knot,” he rumbles. He nips at my breasts one more time before pulling away to cover my hand with his, guiding me to touch farther up the shaft. “What I warned you about—where I’m not like human men.”

I can’t help the shiver of anticipation that runs through me. He ducks his head to my neck at the subtle movement, the tip of his nose running over my pulse like he can scent my excitement. “You like how it feels,” he growls.

“I’m...curious,” I whisper.

His left hand slides around the small of my back, pulling me in until the apex of my thighs rubs against the bulge in his jeans. “I can scent how wet you are, Tilda,” he says. “You don’t have to hide it.”

“What is it?” I ask.

He pulls away, and for the first time since we started kissing, I see a flash of lucidity—and of insecurity. “Touch it,” he says. “It’s all yours.”

☾

Read Reyes & Tilda’s Story in:

[TAKEN BY THE LYCANTHROPE](#)

Fated Mates of the Riftwolves Book 1

SNEAK PEEK

☾

“As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

– *Genesis 8:22*

When Heaven and Hell went to war, we were what remained.

The farmers and the fishermen. People who lived on the land and tilled the soil and made things grow. We fed the masses who joined the celestial armies, and because we were useful, we were left alone.

They said we were already Blessed, because God loves the salt of the Earth, and we believed them.

And more important than all that—than my service to the heavenly cause, or my loyalty to the Heavenly Host—was the fact that I got to stay free.

I’m not the kind of girl who could ever *not* be free.

The wind whistles in my ears as my mare, Annie, gallops across the Texas prairies, aiming straight for the break in the celestial curtain. The sun is just about to set, catching the wildflower fields on fire with crimson light, and we race toward that sunset like the forces of hell are nipping at our heels. My thighs ache from the long ride today, out toward

Austin, where I can see the blue sky for the first time in damn near two decades.

So I ride, and I listen to Annie's breathing, and my heart pounds in my chest. My rifle is slung over my back, a touch of safety in this wild world of beasts and devils. If anything messes with me, I know how to use it. My daddy taught me well.

Patience and a steady hand, Tilda.

He would be angry I came out here, if he was still around.

But I'm almost there, where the moon peeks over the horizon, hanging low in an empty lavender sky. There's something about the Texas sky that always makes me feel freer—that reminds me I'm just a tiny speck of dust in a big old galaxy, spinning in circles on my itty bitty planet. And I haven't seen it like this since I was a kid—since before the shimmering red shield tinted the fields rose gold.

“Easy,” I coo to my horse, sitting up straighter as we slow down. She comes to a trot, then a walk, then stands perfectly still in the tall grass. I dismount and take Annie by the reins, stepping forward as I see the change from pink to big, beautiful blue.

The stars are twinkling in the dusk: signs of life in what sometimes feels like an empty world. The rebels say our Angels are aliens.

Sometimes, I think they might be right, no matter how absurd it sounds.

“If there's anyone out there, send me a sign,” I whisper. “It gets awfully lonely out here on the prairie.”

No one replies.

I'm alone after all.

So why does it feel like there's someone here? Someone with their arms around me, calling my name on a summer breeze...

If I close my eyes, I can almost feel the scrape of five o'clock shadow on my jaw, breath on the shell of my ear.

The full moon brings out something strange in me.

But it's got to be a fantasy, or maybe a memory. Memories of a girl who was fourteen when the Angels came, riding her horse on a night just like this one as scores of glowing beings descended from the heavens.

It sends a shiver down my spine.

But I don't have the time to dwell on it, as I wait for my four compatriots to join me. Because it's time to rally the troops.

We have a wolf den to raid.



Read Reyes & Tilda's Story in:

[TAKEN BY THE LYCANTHROPE](#)

Fated Mates of the Riftwolves Book 1

CHLOE PARKER: OTHERWORLDLY ROMANCE

**THINGS CAN GET a little chaotic in the multiverse.
Here's a guide on how to explore my backlist!**

For shifter omegaverse in Texas, you want:

Fated Mates of the Riftwolves

Start with [TAKEN BY THE LYCANTHROPE](#)

For very alien alien romance, you want:

Voyager

Start with [ALIEN TONGUES](#)

or [ALIEN ROGUE](#)

For alien mafia reverse harem, you want:

Alien Mafia Brides

Start with [VEILED IN SHADOW](#)

For steamy sci-fi fairy tales, you want:

Alpha Worlds

Start with [WARLORD AND THE WAIF](#)

For epic, spicy reverse harem space opera, you want:

Falling Star

Start with [CELESTIAL SINS](#)

For spooky 1920s paranormal, you want:

Friends of the Chalice

Start with [IN HER THRALL](#)

For cyberpunk mafia romance, you want:

Vaughn Syndicate

Start with [QUEEN OF CALLISTO](#)

Want more detail?

Visit my website at www.chloeparkerromance.com