



THE
Shadow Falls
PACK

the complete series

ERIN HAVOC

THE SHADOW FALLS
PACK
DUOLOGY

ERIN HAVOC

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HER SHERIFF MATE

BLURB



Life as she knew it is over.
The full moon brings real trouble.
A human looking for her brother.
A sheriff who must keep the
secret of his city safe.
And someone is on the prowl...

CHAPTER ONE

DANIELA



Where are you? Please, answer me.

Even though I stare at my phone for five solid minutes, no answer comes. This shouldn't surprise me. My brother has been MIA for two weeks and I have no idea where to start looking for him. He's always been like this. Never needed anyone and never thought twice before leaving for some solo travel. The local police department is tired of me telling them my brother hasn't shown up in several days. They know that's just like him.

But now it's different. Diego has been missing for two full weeks. A sister has no option but to be worried about it. It's worse because I have no one else to vent to about it. Mom and Dad have been gone for many years now. And Eddie, that jerk, breaks up with me in the middle of it all, just like my last boyfriend. With working two jobs, I have no time for friends.

I'm truly alone.

Tears brim on my lower lashes and I blink them away. It's night-time. The darkness makes me feel lonely. Or maybe it's just the fact that I am alone.

I can't believe Eddie broke up with me after everything I've done for him. I thought we were happy. I did everything I could for him. Everything he asked of me. Why didn't he love me then?

Releasing a deep sigh, my gaze rises from where I sit on the couch and fastens on the door to Diego's room. He's always been very particular about me not messing with his things. But he's never been missing for this long. And now that I lost even Eddie, Diego might be the last person who cares about me in life.

Sorry, brother. I'll have to break my promise.

Shooting to my feet, I stride the two steps that distance me from his room and open the door. At least he didn't lock it. He used to when we were kids. He never liked me in his room, unless it was for me to clean it, and only in his presence. Boys. I can only imagine what kind of dirty magazines he hid in there.

But life has changed, and Diego and I changed. Puberty brought strange new things to our bodies, and not only the hairs on my legs he liked to pull. And these fresh additions weren't for the better. Mom and Dad worried so much about us. Being adopted, they weren't sure about our genetic problems. And they nailed two kids with a disease so bothersome they spent a good share of their money in medicine.

Dad always told me to care for my brother. Out of the two of us, Diego seemed to have it worse. His head worked more against him than mine. And in keeping my word to Dad, I will break it to my brother.

His room is dark, and I have to flip the switch on to see anything. My nose curls the second I'm able to see. The duvet is upturned, dirty clothes scattered around the carpet, and there are books everywhere. And not tidy books, in shelves with pretty bookmarks. They lay open, pages up or page down. Some have fallen out of the bed or the study desk. One was thrown to the wall and now lies forgotten, half-crumpled there.

What was happening to my brother? How couldn't I see it?

I trudge into the room, careful not to step on anything. The sight makes me gasp in surprise. I didn't know he was this bad when he left, packing a suitcase up and telling me he needed

some days off. The days stretched into weeks, and now he's stopped replying. Something is going on.

I stop at the study desk. A black leather journal is half-hidden by a pile of books and newspapers. It draws my attention to the one thing that's not bound. I have to pull it from the bottom of the pile before I open it. My brother's writing takes the pages and I close it a second later.

This is betrayal. I shouldn't read it. Maybe it's a sort of diary. He never told me he kept one, but I don't need to invade his privacy this bad. Maybe I can find clues somewhere else. On a ticket or the books.

"Where are you, Diego?" I mutter as I go through the spines of what feels like a hundred books.

But the books give me no clue. They're about mental illnesses galore, and mysticism and spiritism. It's gotten worse. I can tell his disease got much worse, and he didn't tell me. Was he even seeing his therapist? I'll call her tomorrow, first thing in the morning.

The night grows old as I go through his dresser. No dirty magazines. But on his desk, I find the empty bottles of his med. He's been rising the potency in the last year. This sucks. My poor brother is only twenty-two, and he already has this much to deal with.

I put the empty bottles back. If Diego comes back today and finds out I threw his things away without asking, he'll be pissed. And I don't need him pissed at me when I'm shaking with worry.

The moon is high up when I give up. There's no nook or cranny in his room I haven't investigated. No tickets, no notes, or pamphlets like in the movies. The only thing I haven't read yet is his journal.

I slide another glance at it. This is an emergency, after all. I just hope he doesn't come home right now and catches me red-handed.

The journal falls open on the desk, and I narrow my eyes to make sense of the scribbles. But the moment I do, I regret it.

They're about the voice in his head and the things it says. He forced the pen to the point some pages ripped. My brother's scared. He's frightened of whatever is happening to him, and he didn't feel I was trustworthy enough to share this.

My stomach hurts. Bile climbs my throat and I wipe a hand on my cheek. Once more, I thought I was doing everything I could to help someone, but it wasn't enough. He never told me it was getting worse. Why didn't he talk to me? We could have gone through this together.

A hole pierces through me where my heart is. No parents, no boyfriend, no brother. All I wanted was to be loved, and it's the one thing I can't reach. I flip through the pages, faster and faster until I reach the last ones he has written on. The scribbles become harder and harder to read. But the last page has the one thing I need.

A map.

It's well done, and notes take half of its lines. There's a road, and my brother has written which one just below. A hastened note reads "follow it to the turn" with an arrow pointed at a turn of the road. Up that entrance, he has drawn a house and a tree.

Shadow Falls crowns the drawing in bold letters.

Shadow Falls? Where is this?

Google gives me nothing when I type it. I frown so hard my brain hurts. The one way to reach this place would be to take this road and follow its entirety until I reach a turn. His drawing is clamped with tiny trees, and that's the one clue I have of his surroundings.

Did Diego go to Shadow Falls? Why? What is in this place that could have helped him?

I glance at the previous pages again. Maybe the answer is here, but I've had enough of breaking my brother's trust just to find out how useless I am to him. My heart already aches too much.

When I look out the living room window, the moon glimmers back at me. Something in my chest stirs every time I

look at her. A powerful thing, as if words I can't pronounce try to climb my throat. I swallow them back down, ignoring my pain, and racing into my room. Clothes for a week and my meds go into a suitcase. Tomorrow morning, I'll be off.

Wherever my brother is, I'll follow. And whatever he needs, I'll give it to him. He won't go down this dark path alone.

CHAPTER TWO

ZEV



This is the fifth time. This month. I do my best to keep a tired sigh behind my teeth when I reach out for a pen. Sometimes I hate how goody-two-shoes I am. Who cares about this bureaucracy? We're a tiny town in the middle of the woods in Montana. No one will care if I don't file this one case. No one will miss it.

"So, when was the last time you saw him?" I ask in the best professional voice I have.

"Around seven this morning," Mrs. Dell weeps her eyes out, mascara staining her cheeks. I hand her a box of tissues that I feel she's the only one who uses and wait patiently for her to go on. Mrs. Dell blows her nose and clears her throat. "I let him out for his early morning routine. You know, he has to go as soon as he wakes up. The doctor said it's healthier not to hold it in..."

"Yes, I understand. But I thought we discussed this before..." I trail out, scribbling down the details I know by heart on the file sheet.

"Oh, Zev," she complains, the tears stopping. "The backyard is not big enough for Pugu. He needs nature. He needs to be set free!"

"He's a Shih Tzu, Mrs. Dell." I can't hold it behind my teeth. The dog is twenty inches tall, tops, and gives me more trouble than all the rest of the shifters in this place. And Ezra loves to pick some fights. "He's a lap dog. Lapdogs are

supposed to stay inside. It's dangerous for him to enter the woods."

She curls her nose. "Shadow Falls is a haven, Zev. You think one of the shifters would hurt him?"

"It's a wild forest, Mrs. Dell. Animals may slip into the borders." I write the last notes before looking up at her. Shouldn't have told her about the possibility of animals in the borders. Her eyes well with tears again and she bursts into sobs. Well, I'm the sheriff. Being tactful was never in the job's description. "Now, now, I promise I'll look for him."

"He might have been eaten already!" She cries out and Pietro puts his head into my office. I lock eyes with him and signal him away.

"I'm sure he wasn't, Mrs. Dell. Don't worry too much." I get to my feet. "Keep an eye out on your front door. He might come back home like the other time. Otherwise, I'll find him." Or someone else will and will call me. This dog is literally the only one the owner lets out so close to the woods.

"Are you going to look for him right now?" she pleads, standing up.

"I will. He'll soon be home." Like every other time.

I guide her out and Pietro makes his way to me, a cup of coffee in hand. He hands me another, the steaming cup making me relax. Sometimes the fox shifter seems to read my mind.

"Thanks." I raise it to him in cheer and sip the liquid happiness.

"He ran off again?"

"Of course."

"At least gives us some distraction." He looks out with veiled eyes, leaning against the door frame.

I chuckle. "Well, I'd rather have none of it."

"Yeah. It's such a bother to go into the woods just to look for some lost fleabag."

I shoot him a look and elbow him. “What I meant was I’d rather not have anything happening. My point in becoming the sheriff is to keep the town running perfectly smooth. Any minor bump is still a bump.”

“You worry too much. Shadow Falls is safe. Nothing ever happens here.”

My brows rise high. “You kidding, right? We’ve had hunters and a bear clan’s invasion, and then a wolf pack. How is that classified as ‘nothing’?”

Pietro chuckles, but I know what he means. Shadow Falls is blessed. Because of its secret location plus the wards Sabrina’s family has kept up for years, we’re tucked away from prying eyes. No human ever makes it inside. The supernatural secret is under the covers, and everyone is comfortable in being themselves.

It never ceases to amaze me when I leave the station for a night’s shut-eye and see the dragons up against the stars. Even a legendary creature like them can do whatever they wish. Can spread their wings, literally, and seek happiness. We have our problems here and there, but it always ends well. We always find a way.

Shifters are survivors, after all.

Pietro dries his cup and licks his teeth. “Well, we better look for the fleabag. Before some big, bad wolf decides to have him for lunch.” He whirls around to take the cup to the kitchenette we have in the back. It’s nothing fancy, just what we need to spend our days here. Which is basically a coffee maker.

“Yeah.” I follow him inside, sipping the dark liquid. “As if any wolf would have that. It’s just fur. No meat.”

Pietro arches an eyebrow as he washes his cup. “Am I getting this right, boss? Have you thought about it?”

I roll my eyes. “Just because I’m a wolf doesn’t mean I’d eat anything that crosses my path. I’m just making an objective analysis.”

“Sure.” He stretches the word, laughter playing on his lips. I fake punch his shoulder because I’d put him down if I did it for real. Shifters are big, but I’m way bigger than Pietro. Wolf genes. “Let’s just hope the dog didn’t sneak into your pack lands.”

I can’t help curling my nose. “They’re not my pack. Not really.”

Pietro smirks. “Poor sigma sheriff. Has to be counted with the others, but prefers to stay alone.” He snickers.

I punch him more for real this time, making him stumble back. It doesn’t wash the smile off his lips. “You think yourself so funny,” I tease.

“I actually do.” Pietro dries his hands on his pants and ambles back to the main room. “I’ll drive around town looking for him. Which will take me ten minutes, tops.”

“Sure you don’t want to stay? I can do that.”

He shrugs, picking up the keys for the car. “You did it the last, I don’t know, a hundred times. Let me do the honors.”

I watch him amble to the door, squinting at his back. “You’re going to Mama Lia’s, aren’t you?”

He winces and shoots me a glance over his shoulder. “Not gonna lie to you, boss. I definitely am.” He chuckles and leaves. I hear the car engine purring a moment later, and he drives off.

I make my way to the front door and prop a shoulder to the frame. The town is already bustling, or as bustling as a town this size can get. The station is just at the entrance, but I can see the entire main avenue from here, and people come and go, living their lives. Everyone’s part of a group or family or clan. Everyone has someone to go back home to. Everyone but me.

I shake the thought away. That never mattered to me. I’ve always known I’d be a sigma. Could feel it deep in my bones, in the way my wolf behaved. He never liked sizeable groups, too. Never enjoyed being ordered around by some alpha who thought he was the best wolf in the world.

And the one pack in Shadow Falls proves me right. Ezra counts me as part of his pack, but just because I'm also a wolf and live in Shadow Falls. That's where our dealings end. I don't visit his land and I don't take his orders, and he knows that.

I was born a lone wolf. That's how it works. I can't bring myself to trust people enough to join a group. Don't want to deal with the pain of being stabbed in the back, so it's for the best if I remain alone.

Lone wolves have no family. No packs. And no mates. But I'm fine with that. As long as I keep the town safe, I miss nothing.

Draining my cup, I tilt my head and watch the entrance of town. A car comes in from the road, driving slowly. It stops by the oak, next to the sign with the town's name. The moment the person is sure they're in the right place, they sink their foot into the gas, and the car jerks faster in my direction. I arch an eyebrow. A tourist? Maybe someone with family in town?

The car screeches to a halt right in front of me, bumping the curb. A smile plays on my lips, but it melts to nothing when the most beautiful woman I've ever seen steps out of the old auto. She studies me for a moment, her eyes landing on the plaque at my chest which says I'm the sheriff, and her empty face transforms.

She glowers at me with so much fire I'm surprised I don't burst into flames. But I'm damned if my cock doesn't twitch in her presence.

Whoever she is, she just caught my eye. It doesn't even matter if she smells human, and looks like she has a personal problem with me.

CHAPTER THREE

DANIELA



Finally, *finally* I'm in Shadow Falls. This is the small town crowning all small towns. Google doesn't even know about it. People I asked around have no idea. I blindly searched for it using the nonsensical scribbles my brother left, gathering tips from everything I could get my hands on.

My eyes almost drop off my face when I read the sign next to an immense tree. The oak has to be ancient to be this big, but the sign seems older still. It's like they don't want to be found.

The car jerks to a start as I rush into town, afraid it might disappear out of thin air. This is the place. The one place that might show me the way to find my brother. He might be here, staying at an inn or something. An enormous mountain looms at the edge of town, creating cropped-out darkness against the sky. Google calls it Black Mountain, and it's the one thing with a name on the map.

I squint, leaning forward against the wheel. The mountain is heavily forested. Bet my brother wanted to hike it. He loves doing this. Loves to take some time to join with nature and all that jazz. He says it recharges him, and I'm sure he needed some recharging.

A police station rises right to my left and I turn the wheel almost too late to approach it. The tire bumps the curb and I wince at it. Chill out, Dani. You don't need to show people you're worried sick about Diego.

A man stands outside the station and I jump out of the car to meet him. Must be an officer. He might help me with it. He might know where to find my brother. Once I rein control in, I let my eyes study the man. Need to be sure he's an officer, not some random pedestrian about to hear me rant. The moment I meet his eyes, my stomach somersaults.

Wow, that's a fine specimen of a man. The finest, if I may add. Tall, so very tall. I have to crane my neck back to meet his eyes and I'm not even close. Dark hair falls down his shoulders in a messed look that must have taken him half an hour to achieve. He's got broad shoulders, but everything else is slim. A strong chest tapers down into fine hips, but the biceps pushing against his shirt sleeve leaves no doubt about how defined he is.

I swallow. Fuck, I'm drooling. This is the definition of creepy. Who the hell drools from seeing some hot man? It's not like I've never seen one. Well, yes, never one like this, but chill, girl. Just because you've never gotten any doesn't mean you should climb the first guy you see.

My gaze studies his sharp jaw and the stubble on his chin, and the more I look at him, the less my brain works. When I meet his golden eyes, I remember what am I here for. It's about my brother. My missing brother.

I blink twice, then find a sign pinned to his chest. It reads simply Sheriff.

The sheriff. My stomach bottoms out, hesitation washing away. He's the one person who should know the whereabouts of my brother. The one person who should have already started looking for him. In a town this small, he mustn't have loads of things to worry about.

My brows sink over my nose and I can't help the glare I shoot his way. He arches an eyebrow at me and I step forward, tilting my chin up, ready for a fight. I can only hope he doesn't say he hasn't missed my brother because he's an outsider. We've always been outsiders. Wherever we went, people never cared much for us because we weren't like them. Because we were different. Strange.

It's not like it's our fault for having these problems. Not Diego's fault he got so much worse.

"You must be the sheriff," I start, taking shallow breaths. This man looks like he smells divine, and I won't be able to speak if I'm drooling all over his pecs.

He shifts in place, then nods. "Call me Zev. Is there something you need, miss?"

"My name is Daniela Guadalupe. I'm looking for my brother, Diego. He hasn't contacted me for days."

I watch him narrow his eyes, studying my face. Recognition is absent on his face. An expression I've seen one too many times. He doesn't know who my brother is. They never do. We're never important. We always look too much alike.

"Diego?" he repeats, and fire climbs my throat.

"Yes," I hiss back. "Diego. In his journal, I found a map of this place. It has to be the last town he was in."

Zev works his jaw, looking away in obvious embarrassment. At least he's not defending himself, blaming us. "Diego..." he murmurs to himself, staring at the pavement. I can almost see the cogs turning in his brain. After a moment, his brows rise. "Yes. I remember him. You don't look much alike." His eyes take another tour of my body and, I'm not gonna lie. I enjoy the way they light up in satisfaction.

But this is not the moment for flirting. I shake my head. "We are siblings anyway. Not all siblings have to be identical." We do look little like each other. Though both our hairs are dark as coal, Diego's is coarse while mine is smooth and wavy. Both our eyes are dark chocolate, but Diego's skin is pale as early snow, while mine has a dark olive shade.

"Of course. I apologize," the sheriff says, straightening his posture. He enters a professional stance as he motions me inside the station. "Follow me. Let's open a file."

I release a breath. At least he's taking me seriously. At least he's worried about doing something. I've heard so many times Diego would eventually show up and all I had to do was

wait. Sometimes it worked, even if I had to suffer through the worry by myself. Sometimes it didn't, and I had to go out of my way to do the cops' job and look for my brother.

The place is empty and small. A couple of desks, a closed-door that must be a bathroom, a kitchenette in the back. Tiny city, tiny police station. I'm impressed they even have one. Zev takes me to one desk half-covered in piles of paper, then points at the chair across from the one he sits on.

"Have a seat, miss Guadalupe." The chair creaks under his weight. I'm surprised he fits between its arms. The man is big.

"Just Daniela is all right," I breathe out, plopping onto the seat and resting my arms over his desk. He shoots me a glance I can't understand, then looks back down at an empty paper sheet, picking up a pen. "Do you remember the last time you saw my brother?"

He hums, scribbling on the sheet. "Two weeks ago, when he arrived. We don't have many visitors, so he stood out. He was by himself and said he didn't know anyone in town. He said a friend told him to come here, and I pointed him at the inn. That's all." He shrugs. "But I don't leave the station often. I'll have to ask around."

Good. At least he knows who my brother is. "Of course. I'll help."

A crease appears between his brows, but he doesn't raise his gaze. "That's not necessary, miss Guadalupe."

"Daniela." Why are his eyes golden, anyway? I don't think I've ever seen eyes like these. Lenses, perhaps? But he doesn't look like the kind of man who wears lenses. "And I think you may need manpower. You're by yourself. Even if the town is small, there are the woods. And I know my brother. I can recognize him."

He cocks his head, golden gaze pinning me in place. "Miss Guadalupe, please. I'm by myself now. My partner has left in search of a missing dog, but I'll call him back. A missing person is more urgent." He crosses his arms over his chest,

making his biceps bulge. I shouldn't be noticing this. Crap. "Besides, if you can give us a picture, it'll make things easier."

I shake my head. "Why stop the search for the dog if I can help you?"

"Because you're not trained, miss. It might get dangerous. You don't know the place. I suggest you get a room at the inn and take some days off. Or leave your phone number and go home. I'll keep you posted, and I promise we'll find your brother."

This I've heard hundreds of times. But when they tell me this, they never go through with their promise. They just want the annoying Latino girl to be on her way. She's too dumb to help. Too useless to do anything other than clean houses and twerk.

"Well, you can't stop me from looking for him, can you?" I shoot to my feet. "I'll leave my number, but don't expect me to sit at home waiting for a call. My brother has been missing for weeks. I won't stop until I find him."

He stands up too, towering over me. Only the desk separates us and, even so, heat comes off his body, intense eyes on my face. "Miss Guadalupe, it's dangerous. If you enter the woods by yourself, you might get lost or hurt."

"Daniela," I hiss. "For the last time, it's Daniela. And how am I supposed to trust you after you haven't even noticed his absence?"

He frowns, leaning forward. "Usually, the family misses the person and lets the cops know. I can't keep tabs on every single one of our citizens."

"But you remember when he arrived," I shoot back, leaning forward too. "You remember because he's an outsider. How didn't you notice him coming and going? You noticed when he arrived, but you never found it strange he didn't leave?"

We stand there at this stand-off, glaring at one another, his golden eyes burning into my face. His breath fans across my lips and I notice we're too close. When did we get this close? I

swallow around the knot in my throat and breathe in. It's a mistake. He smells like the woods after a rain shower, or like hot chocolate in front of a fireplace. He's refreshing and also comfortable, and I catch myself leaning in. His eyes hood, and I hear the tiniest of rumbles in the back of his throat.

A throat clears. I jerk away, cheeks warming. Too close. I was too close. When I snap my head to the side, it's to find another man in uniform standing by the main door, an amused smile on his face.

"Boss?" He has laughter in his voice, and it makes my cheeks warm twice harder. I step away from the desk, digging into my pockets for my phone.

"This is Miss Daniela Guadalupe," Zev says, voice steady as if nothing happened. Maybe because for him it didn't. Why would he care anyway? "She's looking for her brother, Diego."

The new guy blinks several times, squinting. "Diego. Don't recall him."

At least the sheriff did. I turn back to him. "Let me give you my number so you can call me when you have news." My voice trembles with heat, and I can't hide how much this encounter affected me. "Could you give me the inn's address, please?"

Zev nods and writes down my number, then gives me directions for the inn. Guess in a town this small you don't need GPS. When we're done, I nod to the new guy before leaving, racing to my car and driving away as my heart thunders in my chest.

Whatever that was, it can't happen again. My priority here is to find my brother, not to flirt with some hot sheriff. I must put my head back in the game. No hot man will distract me.

CHAPTER FOUR

ZEV



Though my wolf sleeps soundly inside me, I can't stop thinking about Daniela. He didn't react to her, which means she's not my mate. She doesn't even smell like a shifter. Then why can't I stop thinking about her sweet body, and the way she tilts her chin up, showing the fierceness of her spirit?

She has to be here for a reason. We've been told humans can only cross the wards if they have an apparent motive to enter, usually finding their mates. So there are two options. One, she is here because she's going to find her mate, and that's not me. I hate this possibility.

Two, she's here because she must find her brother, which means he is lost and possibly in danger.

Diego. I remember little of him. Gave him directions when he arrived. He didn't look healthy, with emaciated skin and deep bags under his eyes, but he didn't smell like a shifter either. I thought he might have been a sorcerer or something, but now that his sister is here, I wonder what's the reason behind all this. And what does it mean to Shadow Falls?

Yesterday's afternoon was a flurry of phone calls. I let the small towns around know of a missing person. So, in case Diego has traveled somewhere else without my knowledge, they'll find him and let me know. I called Ezra and Wyatt and Julian, letting the three alphas know about it so they add the search to their border control. If Diego entered one of their territories, they'll tell me.

Even when I'm a lone wolf and take no orders from Ezra, I have to admit it's good to have him around. He respects the things I say for the sake of the town, and he always helps me out when it's something like this. Of course, he does it because he considers me part of his pack. Though that's not the truth, I don't need to remind him of this today.

With the case filed, I went home and let my wolf free. Maybe because I hardly ever see other wolves, but mine is more demanding about the time he spends in the wilds. He needs out every single day, at least once. And I can't fool him with a five-minute walk. Oh, no.

I've never met other sigmas, so I don't know how their wolves act. But mine is the one who controls our relationship. He allows me to work just because he'd rather sleep during the mornings. If he thinks our time in the woods has been too short, he won't let me change back. Whenever I'm confronted by some alpha who thinks they rule the fucking world, it's a freaking task to keep my wolf inside me. Pretty sure he'd rip throats out if he came out.

And it's not because I've been taught like this. Not because I knew nothing else. It's just the way he is. Genetics, I guess? Not sure.

I wake up with the rising of the sun. My wolf snores inside me, content with last night's long run across the woods. We met no one since we keep out of any clan or pack territory. But I also caught no whiff of human. No sign of the recent passage of Diego.

So, he hasn't been in this side of the woods recently. But we had rain three days ago, so even if he did walk around before that, I wouldn't know. The water washed it away.

Today, I'll have to do the dirty work of asking around. Knocking on doors and asking if anyone's seen the new human. A picture would be good, but not essential. It's not like there are loads of unknown humans walking around. I sit behind the wheel and drive to the police station. The town's small enough I could walk there, but I enjoy taking the car to

circle the streets before starting my day. Just to be sure everything's all right.

And just as I pass Mama Lia's, the bakery owned by a bear and a witch, I see her. Daniela's dark hair sways behind her back as she saunters down the sidewalk. This woman could stop the traffic. Men would kill for that ass. I slow down, swallowing the saliva accumulating in my mouth just from seeing her.

I have never had this sort of reaction to a woman. Always focused on the job, on keeping this city safe, I've never paid much attention to the fairer sex. But it's impossible not to feel the tightness in my pants when I see Daniela's fantastic body. My heart squeezed every single time she shot me a defying glance. Both as sigma and as the sheriff, I'm not used to being challenged. But Daniela's fierce. She didn't even look away when she criticized me for not missing her brother.

And she's right, of course. I despise the idea of something happening in my town without my knowledge. Of one of its citizens being in danger, or hurt, when I haven't missed their presence. Shame festers in my stomach, and I hope Diego has gone off to somewhere else, hitchhiking or something. I hope he's fine.

Daniela stops by a street lamp and brings a sheet of paper up. I slow down further, squinting to see what she's doing. She juggles with more stuff in her arms before she pulls up a small, brown circle and sticks the paper to the pole. She readies to move on.

A frown creases my forehead and I stop the car by the curb. There's a picture on the piece of paper, and I take a second to recognize what it is. A missing person's poster. Crap. She shouldn't have to do this. I'm the one who should be responsible for this.

I turn the engine off and exit the car, leaving the key inside. When I slam the door, Daniela whirls around, her eyes meeting mine. My heart should not be leaping at the way she looks at me, but it does. The fucker.

“Morning,” she greets, but there’s some sourness in her voice. She sneaks a glance at the poster next to her. “Any news?”

I circle the car to stand in front of her. Damn it, how can she smell this good so early in the morning? “I spoke to several leaders around town and they’ll keep an eye around their lands. Also communicated other stations so they’re aware in case he passed their way.”

She nods then stops when I add nothing else. “That’s it?”

I arch an eyebrow. “We have several grounds covered now. Today I’ll ask around town in case anyone has seen him.”

“But you have no pictures. How are they going to know who’s missing if they can’t see his face?”

“We have very few tourists. Everyone knows when someone is not from town. Besides...” I turn and rip the poster she just glued to the pole. “Here’s a picture.”

In this picture, Diego looks healthier. Younger too. He smiles at the camera, dark hair brushed back, eyes glinting. The picture tells of better days, that’s for sure. Whatever was the reason he came to Shadow Falls, he wasn’t doing well. He needed some sort of help.

Which reminds me I should go on and start asking around. The first one on my list is Sabrina. Her coven is meeting, so I don’t expect her to have loads of time in her hands, but she might give me a direction. See something I don’t.

Daniela curls her nose. Perhaps because she’s so much shorter than me, but it’s so cute to see her getting mad at something I’ve done. “You could’ve asked instead of ripping it from the pole.” She turns to glue another to the same spot.

She looks so good when she’s mad it makes me want to tease her more often. Though that’s not a professional stance at all. “Listen. You can leave it to us. As I told you yesterday, it’s not safe for you to get involved.”

Daniela whirls around, her dark hair slapping my arm. “As if. You didn’t even miss him. And he’s been gone for days!”

I shake my head, stepping closer so she has to look up to meet my eyes. “Just because he hasn’t talked to you in days doesn’t mean he’s been missing in days. Maybe his phone signal is poor here. It wouldn’t be uncommon.”

“He told me he was in a peaceful town, recharging. That’s all he told me. I’m understanding he meant this place.”

“Well, then maybe he forgot to talk to you.”

Daniela’s olive skin turns one shade paler. I hit a chord, that’s obvious. Diego might have done this before. And he might have forgotten to talk to her before. The way her eyes turn melancholic is enough to tell.

“He’s safe, Daniela,” I murmur, close to her. Her gaze snaps up to mine when I say her name. Brilliant eyes watch me, unmoving. Study me, see through me to my soul. “We’ll find him.”

She releases a ragged breath, then steps back. My attraction to her is undeniable. But I can’t stop wondering if she isn’t here to find her true mate. Someone who is not me.

“Okay,” she murmurs back.

“Okay. I’m glad you trust me to find him.”

Fire lights up her irises once more. “I only trust you’ll find him because I’ll tag along.”

“What?” Her words muddle in and I almost can’t see sense in them.

“I will. You don’t know my brother. And you can’t stop me.”

My brows shoot up. “I’m the sheriff. Of course I can.”

She glares at me and images of her in handcuffs on my bed take the frontal lobe of my brain. I imagine her spread on my mattress, her cunt dripping for me, the taste of her on my tongue. I imagine my fingers in her hair, her hands tied to the headboard, and her ass up while I fuck her from behind.

My cock goes to an all-time high of hardness. I choke with indescribable desire, the warmth of her making my fingers

curl, itching to touch her. I stare at her so hard I'm sure she's reading my mind because her cheeks turn pink, and her breaths come out uneven. I watch her pupils dilate and she leans an inch closer.

I can't do this. Can't get distracted. Can't mate a human. There are so many things wrong with this attraction. But I know if I catch a whiff of her arousal, I'll be fucking lost...

A silhouette stops next to us and I'm forced to look away from her eyes. Abe lets the door to Mama Lia's close behind him, a brown paper bag in his hand. He lives here downtown and I see him often in the diner. The man eyes us, then the poster, his brows raking up his forehead.

"Is Diego missing? Crap."

CHAPTER FIVE

DANIELA



The stranger's words catch me so off-guard I take forever to understand their meaning.

This person knows my brother. He saw the picture and recognized him. My heartbeat picks up and, for a moment, I lose the ability to speak. So many questions race in my brain, but I can't utter any of them. He is the first person who acts like he knows my brother.

Sheriff Zev acts before I do. He shifts his stance so he's facing the man, his arm brushing mine. "Do you know him, Abe?"

"Yeah." Abe slides a glance in my direction, studying my face with some hesitation. "Are you Diego's friend?"

"I'm his sister."

Abe's shoulders relax, and I didn't even notice they were tense. "Oh, you must be Dani. Right?"

"Yes, that's me." My voice comes out pathetic. Breathless, hopeful. Not only he met my brother, but my brother spoke about me. That, above all else, makes my heart content. So often I thought he didn't care about me. So often I thought I had to work harder for his love.

"When was the last time you saw him?" Zev asks, breaking through my musings.

Abe cups his chin. "Now that you mention... It has been a while. We even thought he had left. It has to be almost a week now."

A week. I shoot Zev a glare. A week my brother's been missing and no one thought of looking for him. There's no way around it. I'll have to take this into my own hands. "Do you know anyone else who might have seen him?"

Abe shrugs. "He was often around the woods. I saw him in several places. The bar, the grocery store, the drugstore..."

Loads of places to ask about him. As expected, Zev can't do this alone. "Thank you, Abe." I nod once. "Do you mind if I come back some other time and ask some other questions?"

Zev shifts next to me and crosses his arms. "That's not your job, Daniela. Remember that."

Zev and I glare at one another for a moment before Abe laughs. "Zev knows where to find me. You two can show up any time." And he sets off, leaving the two of us at a stand-off.

The sheriff turns to me once more, pulling his shoulders back and going all manly. As if that would put me off. He can go as manly as he wants. All it does is make him hotter.

"Daniela..." He sighs, pinching a spot between his brows.

I bristle, the tone of his voice making me feel like a misbehaving child. "Well, Mr. Sheriff, I am going to help. You wanting it or not. As you just saw," I motion to the poster next to me, "my action, not yours, just got us some results. My brother spent his time close to the woods. We know where to start looking."

He releases a breath between his teeth, looking into the distance. "I already told you. Looking into the woods is in the plan. I let the others know and they'll check their territories."

"Are these others cops?"

"No..." He arches an eyebrow in doubt.

"Then why can they help and I can't?" A smile tugs at my lips. Now I know I got him. He can't refuse my participation if there are other civilians involved.

Zev's entire face tightens when he notices I put him against a wall. Figuratively, of course. Though I wouldn't mind doing that in a literal way. The crease between his brows

deepens and I wonder if whatever time we'll spend together will create new wrinkles on his perfect face.

“The others aren't cops, but they know the city and they've been involved in prior investigations and problem solving...”

“But if they aren't cops, then they're civilians. No training. No way of defending themselves, right?”

Zev opens his mouth then closes it again. He seems to fight against telling me something. No matter. I don't care why he thinks these people are more capable of searching for my brother than I am.

“Is there a reason you think they're better than me?” I say with a dare, lifting my chin and staring straight into his golden eyes. There's a challenge in my tone. I dare him to say it's because I'm a girl.

Zev swallows and looks away. And I know I win. “Honestly, Daniela.” Fuck, the way he says my name shouldn't be allowed. I have to hold myself from shivering in contentment. “I worry.” His voice lowers to a murmur, the intensity of his gaze making me melt on the spot. “I don't want you getting hurt. And we don't know what happened. If we have to enter the woods... There are animals and few paths. You could get hurt, and I don't want that.”

His eyes are honest, raw, and bright. I don't doubt a word that leaves his lips. Zev wants to keep me safe, and he trusts these others because they've been through this before. And I see where he's coming from. These people have lived here for a long time. Small towns are like this. Your grandparents are born in them, then your parents and then you. And you just stay. Whoever he called for help are people who know these grounds, while I don't. I'm just a newcomer.

But I'm a newcomer with high stakes. My brother is missing. The only person I have in life. And if I fail him, I fail myself.

“I get it,” I tell Zev. Our bodies hover an inch apart, and I tilt my head up, breathing him in. His scent of home and fire makes my flesh prickle with goosebumps. I chew on my lower

lip for a moment, soaking in his presence, and Zev's eyelids lower. His gaze fastens on my mouth, and I can swear I hear a low growl deep in his throat. But it must be my imagination. "You want to keep me safe, and I thank you for that. But I can't sit at home while you look for him. Diego is the only family I have."

Zev watches me, unmoving, his eyes pinning me in place. Then he nods. "Very well. I can't forbid you, and if you stay close, I can keep you safe."

My stomach trains somersaults. No one ever said that to me. No one ever wanted to keep me safe. And I know it's only because he's the sheriff and keeping everyone safe is his job, but tell that to my heart, beating double-time.

I force the thought of his lips on me away, and his hands digging around my hips, making me feel anything but the worry that always eats at my chest. I try to ignore the ache inside me, the need for someone to want me. For someone to take care of me for a change.

Clearing my throat, I step away. I create some distance so my brain can work properly. "Great." I release a breath, centering myself before staring at him again. "Where do we start?"

CHAPTER SIX

ZEV



Still can't believe Daniela convinced me of bringing her along. It's dangerous. Daniela is human, and I don't want her to be exposed to anything supernatural. What would happen if she saw one of us change? Would she freak out?

From what I've seen of how fierce she is, I bet she'd try to punch a huge bear to save her pretty ass.

We walk together to the station and I leave her posters in my partner's care. He's going to put them up as soon as possible. The two of us have different jobs to do.

"So what's the plan?" she asks when we step out of the station. The morning sun bathes her golden skin, and I get lost in her eyes for a second. "Sheriff?"

I blink twice. Focus, man. Whatever this attraction is, it can't get in the way of an investigation. "We have three major areas out of town. Let's drive there so we can ask about him. Do you have more pictures of Diego?"

Daniela nods and pulls her phone up to select a good one. She shows me one of the two of them, smiling at the camera. Diego seemed in better days. He wasn't as thin as I remember seeing him. Daniela looks as yummy as in the flesh, all curves and sparkling eyes.

She loves her brother, that's obvious. People with a small group of relatives tend to over-worry about them.

I open the passenger door of the car for her, and she shoots me a grateful look before sliding in. Daniela buckles herself in as I take my place behind the wheel and start the engine.

“So where is the first place?” she asks, studying the city out of her window.

“Some guys have a ranch. Let’s drop there first.” And as she distracts herself by taking pictures of the tree-rich streets, I type a quick message to Ezra.

Driving a human up there to ask about her missing brother.

We had humans here before. Doesn’t mean we should relax. Daniela can’t learn about the truth of supernaturals. About our existence. Though I think she wouldn’t do it, we can’t risk her revealing us to the world.

I take the beaten path that soon forks into three, driving into the left one. Daniela looks over her shoulder at the road as we drive away.

“What’s in the other two paths?” she asks, glittering brown eyes colored in curiosity. I wonder how she is when she’s not worried about her brother. How lively of a person she can be. Curious about life.

“We’ll take the right one later. Some guys live up the mountain. The middle one leads to the waterfall.”

She almost jumps out of her skin. “A waterfall?” she squeals, leaning close.

I chuckle. “Yeah. Interested?”

“Definitely.”

“I can take you there.”

“I’d love to.” She smiles at me, rising tension coating us as her presence takes all my attention. But then she drifts away, sitting back and looking down, the smile on her face melting away. “Once we find my brother, of course.”

I nod. “You seem to care a lot about him.”

“I do. He’s the only family I have.”

“Are you close then?”

Daniela fidgets for a moment. “I wish we were closer. Of course I love him. But...”

Before she can finish, we burst through the trees into the wide expanse of grass that is Ezra’s ranch. This part of town is made of plains, which makes it perfect to settle a ranch. Ezra looks more like the lost member of a bike gang, but he loves his horses. Some of them graze close to the gate when I park.

Daniela opens the door before I reach her, sliding out of the car with wide eyes. “Wow,” she breathes out, gaze roaming over the place.

“Let me guess,” I tease. “You two live in a big city.”

She chuckles. “That obvious, right? I hardly see nature like this.”

“Then you’ll have a good time in Shadow Falls.” I take the lead and open the gate, motioning her in. And I use the moment she passes me to glimpse at her fantastic ass. Fuck, how can someone be this hot? It shouldn’t be legal.

I wish it wasn’t legal. Then I could arrest her. Tie her up to my bed, do whatever I want to this sweet body of hers...

I clear my throat. Hard. Daniela shoots me a doubtful glance before we start side by side to the one house in view. Thank the Goddess I’m in jeans.

Ezra exits the house just as we climb the porch. He nods in my direction, then turns to Daniela. The alpha takes a long look at Daniela, preening himself and running a hand through his dark hair. I can’t blame him — she is gorgeous. But I also can’t deny the jealousy and possessiveness racing through me.

There’s nothing I can do to stop him from leering at her. I hate it with every cell of my being, but she’s not mine. We have nothing with each other, and it would only make me look crazy to claim her like this.

I clear my throat, trying to take his attention from her. “Ezra.”

“Why, hello.” Ezra ignores me and greets her with a voice so thick it makes me want to punch him. I know his voice

doesn't sound like this. What the fuck is he doing?

"Hello," Daniela replies with a dry word. A smile creeps onto my face. "My name is Daniela Guadalupe. I'm looking for my brother, Diego." She pulls up her phone, their picture ready on the screen. "He's been missing for some days. Have you seen him?"

Her speech was ready on the tip of her tongue. I'm impressed. She wasted no time and, even better, she didn't fall for Ezra's cheap seduction. I shoot him a smirk.

Ezra shifts his weight between his feet, disappointment obvious on his face. "Yeah, Zev told us to monitor our borders. I've seen Diego a couple of times, but always in town. Never up here."

Daniela and I exchange a glance. I move closer to Ezra, catching his attention. "What can you tell us about him?"

Ezra shrugs. "Not much. Seemed like a weird guy to me. The one time I tried to introduce myself, you know, learn who the hell he was, the guy wasn't very nice about it." Ezra crosses his arms over his chest, leaning against the door frame. "He'd overreact every time he saw me. Get edgy. If you ask me, I think he was running from someone who looked like me." Another shrug. "I don't know. He was weird."

Daniela bristles next to me, but says nothing, peering down at her feet.

"Where did you see him last?" I ask, trying to read Ezra. But the alpha is honest. Often too honest.

"At the Hexed. Both times."

I nod, looking at Daniela. She doesn't seem interested in asking anything else. Her demeanor changed so fast. I wonder how badly did Ezra offended her.

"What about the others? Did they see him?"

Ezra shakes his head. "Not more than I did. But they were with me when we went to the Hexed. You can ask them. They'll tell you the same."

“So you have no idea if he came into the woods or your borders?”

Ezra pushes himself off the frame, squaring his shoulders. “Not into my borders, hell no. I would’ve known.”

With a hand on Daniela’s back, I nod my thanks to Ezra and guide her out. She’s still immersed in thoughts when we enter the car and I drive back the way we came. Still in silence when we arrive at the fork once more and I take the road to the right.

“You all right?” I murmur, hoping I won’t bother her.

She shoots me a quiet smile. “Yeah. Thanks. Just worried.”

I twist my lips. “Ezra’s just like this, Daniela. Don’t take what he says at face value.”

Daniela presses her forehead to the glass next to her. “No, I think he’s saying the truth. My brother... He wasn’t in his best days when he left home. When he left home *this time*.”

I cock my head. “Was it usual? He used to leave?”

She nods. “We have a... Mental disorder. Genetics, you know?” She still doesn’t look at me. “But we’re medicated. Sometimes we have to adjust the meds because the disorder comes back. And my brother, he’s been having it hard lately. For the past months, no matter how much he takes or how strong the meds are, the disorder just wins him over. I think that’s what Ezra was talking about.”

I study Daniela for a moment. The darkness in her gaze has a reason then. She feels guilty. Guilty for not taking care of her brother. That’s why she’s taking this so seriously. When a person constantly disappears, we take it easy. The person might want some space, need some quiet. Here, Daniela seems to feel Diego needs help.

I reach out and take her hand in mine. She curls her fingers around my own, not prying her gaze from the window. “We’ll find him,” I promise her. I promise myself. This hurt she’s feeling, this ache in her heart. I don’t want her to feel sadness ever again.

Daniela nods, gripping my fingers. And then we arrive at the clearing where the bears live.

It's a large space bordered by tall trees. The house is lumber-made, two-stories, but wide. Wyatt's clan has lived here for generations, but there's been an addition. His mate, Mackenzie, brought her clan along, but they didn't unite. Two clans share the same space. Two alphas share responsibilities. It's impressive they don't kill one another.

The engine quiets and we leave the car to the thrilling sound of nature all around us. Birds sing different songs, and the breeze ruffles thousands of leaves. The blue sky overhead reflects the brightness of the sun as Daniela whirls around, taking everything in. Her shoulders visibly relax when she takes a deep breath.

"Shadow Falls does wonders to people," I tell her in a low voice not to break the spell.

She turns to me, dark hair falling down a shoulder. "It does. The perfect spot for a vacation."

The door to the house opens and both Wyatt and Mackenzie leave the house. Wyatt throws his arms up in his usual welcoming manner. Bears.

"Zev! Long time, no see!"

His mate shakes her head, rolling her eyes, but there's laughter on her lips. I touch Daniela's lower back, guiding her to the house. And then I remember I didn't send Wyatt a message letting him know of Daniela's ignorant-to-the-supernatural's status.

"Hello, stranger," he greets Daniela with a smile, and I can only pray he won't say too much.

Daniela can't learn what we are. She can't discover she's standing in the middle of people who can turn into animals at will. That would be the last drop to her, and I don't want her to leave.

Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DANIELA



Every new corner of Shadow Falls I see is prettier than the previous. I can't fathom how a place can be this amazing. And why haven't I ever heard of it?

Diego and I moved a couple of times throughout our lives. Always to big cities, places where our parents could have better opportunities, places where we could find better jobs. But Shadow Falls? It's unlike anything I've ever seen. And it beckons to me.

I don't think I've ever felt such a calling from anywhere else.

Zev and I walk closer to a house made of lumber. It's the typical mountain house, but bigger. A couple walks out the door, both with big smiles on their faces. Unlike Ezra, they look like welcoming people. I almost want to hug them.

"Hello, stranger," the man greets me after greeting Zev. He's good-looking, with dark blond hair curling around his ears, but so is his partner. The woman next to him has gorgeous dark skin, her curly hair in a bun on the top of her head. She also smiles, and I can't help smiling back.

"Hello." I offer a hand to her first. She takes it, grinning. "I'm Daniela."

"Mackenzie. This is my mate, Wyatt."

Mate. I arch an eyebrow. "Mate as in friend, or as in romantic partner?"

It's a funny sight. Both smiles freeze on their faces, and they sneak a glance at Zev. I look at him, and he has this weird expression on his face. Wide eyes, risen brows. It's as if he wants to tell them something, but it's something I can't hear.

That's... Uncomfortable. To say the least.

"As in romantic partner," Mackenzie adds, and it's like we haven't stood for half a minute in tense silence. "So, are you visiting?"

"In fact," Zev cuts in, towering next to me, "We're looking for her brother. He's been missing for some days."

The smiles disappear off their faces. Mackenzie's eyes go intense. "I'm so sorry, Daniela. Let us know however we can help."

Her offer warms my heart. She doesn't even know me. She doesn't need to go out of her way to aid a stranger. "Thank you." I pull my phone out and show them Diego's picture. "That's him. Diego. Any information will help."

The two study the picture for a moment. Wyatt's brows rake up his forehead. "Oh, Diego. Yeah, I've seen him around. Said he needed some time off to clear his head, and a friend suggested Shadow Falls." He chuckles. "Never thought Shadow Falls would become touristic."

"He said that?" My heartbeat picks up, and I put my phone away. "Where did you see him?"

Wyatt cups his chin. "At the grocery store twice. At the Hexed too. You remember him, love?" He turns to Mackenzie, touching her face. The way he does it makes my heart hurt with longing. It's so careful. I've never been cared for like this.

Mackenzie nods, staring at me. "Yeah. With a blond girl. What was her name?"

"Started with a B," says Wyatt, nodding with certainty. "She never spends long in town."

"Andressa." Mackenzie snaps her fingers in finality, then shoots Wyatt a glance. "Andressa doesn't start with a B."

He shrugs, then grins, turning to us. “Yeah, he was hanging out with this girl. Andressa.”

“And by hanging out,” Mackenzie curls her nose in humor, “he means they were sucking each other’s faces.”

My stomach bottoms out. Diego was seeing someone? He didn’t say a thing. Disappointment eats at me, making my hands cold. What else didn’t he say? What else didn’t I know about my brother? I must be a terrible sister. He left without telling me where to, and it wasn’t the first time. He didn’t tell me about this girl. Whatever Diego was going through, he didn’t think it was necessary to share with me. I must be awful.

Tears sting my eyes and I glare at my feet, blinking the wetness away and forcing my voice as steady as possible. “Any other places he could be at?”

Wyatt hums in deep thought for a moment. “Oh.” He points at Zev, standing next to me like a guardian. “Have you tried the cabin? I think Theo told him in the bar he could take some time off there.”

A cabin? “Where is it?”

“I know where,” Zev cuts Wyatt in, staring at the man. “Theo said that?”

“Yeah, you know how he took his mate there and...” Wyatt stops, stares at Zev for a moment, then his spine pillars. He tilts his chin up, and I wonder what made him change so suddenly. “Theo just suggested the place, Zev. He only leaves the house to do the borders, and always with his mate. He’s never alone.”

Weird way to defend someone. “Why can’t he be alone?” I ask, studying Wyatt’s reaction, but his face goes impassive as if he’s done this defense before.

“Theo can be kind of aggressive when someone breaks in,” Zev offers.

“Well, but my brother didn’t break into anywhere.” Diego’s many things, but not a thief.

Zev doesn't seem convinced, his forehead creased as he and Wyatt have a silent stand-off. "Very well," the sheriff finally utters under his breath and looks at me. "Let's check the cabin. It's further up in the mountain, but we'll have to leave the city and take a different path. Are you up to it?"

I take a deep breath. "Of course." This is the best clue we've had about my brother's whereabouts. And I'm glad Zev's going along with it, not doubting and not sending me away. "Maybe he's there. Enjoying some quietude and without a cell signal."

Zev nods. "That would explain why he didn't contact you."

I nod too, but I have little hope. Whatever happened to my brother this time, he didn't think I could help. He never even asked. Maybe all this time I've been trying to help him, he just saw me as overbearing. This is all I can think about as Zev bids his goodbyes and guides me back to his car. He opens the door for me and, after I sit, he buckles me up. It's nice for someone to take care of me for a change. He takes his place behind the wheel and starts the engine. We drive in silence for a while, my heart hammering in my chest.

What will I say to Diego once we meet him? Worse, what will he tell me? I can imagine him rolling his eyes and saying I worry too much. Saying ever since our parents died, I've tried to take their place when I didn't have to. Diego's older than me, after all.

Zev's warm fingers curl around mine. His kindness keeps me grounded. "Are you all right?" He asks, voice soft in contrast to his big frame.

I stare at him for a moment. Zev's handsome face makes me wish I was here for tourism, not looking for my missing brother. In a different situation, we could meet and go out for dinner. He could show me the waterfall and we'd kiss under the water, my fingers raking through his dark hair.

My mind conjures images of things I know I'll never have. My entire life has been about being responsible for my family. I started working early on when my brother couldn't, when my

parents were overwhelmed with our med expenses. Diego had everything to be the star of the family. He was handsome, smart, good with sports. He had a bright future. But when the disorder hit, things got bad real fast.

Even with the meds, I have started to feel the churning of it inside my soul again. Something that's not entirely me. The meds have to be constantly adjusted. I took care of myself and my parents and Diego, and now I don't know what to do.

Zev grips my fingers tighter. I notice I haven't replied. His expectant eyes study my face with care. Such a big, muscular man and he has a heart of gold that worries about a stranger who just arrived.

"I'm all right, thanks," I reply, pulling my fingers back. Though his warmth and care are welcome, they make my heart do things I don't like. Feel things I never felt.

"You sure?" he prompts, his eyes fastened on me. "You can talk, Daniela. I'll hear you out. Whatever weighs on your heart, I'll hear you out."

His words are almost too much. No one ever offered to listen to me. No one ever saw my suffering right through my mask. How does he do this? It's not like a sheriff is a specialist on human behavior or anything.

And I wish I could lean into him. Tell him the things inside my chest, the fear, the hesitation. I wish I could pour out my worries over my brother and my behavior with him. Am I overbearing? Am I too much? Does Diego hate me for trying to take care of him when he's an adult man?

But Zev has nothing to do with this, and I'm not staying. Diego will be at this cabin, and he'll tell me he's all right. Just taking some time off. I'll drive back home with shame eating at me, and I'll never see Shadow Falls again. There's no point in hoping for something I can't have.

No point in wanting more with Zev when I'm not staying here.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ZEV



The drive to the cabin is quiet. Daniela closes in on herself, and it makes me ever so curious about her relationship with Diego. What's in her head? She doesn't say a thing as I drive out of town and into the road, then up the back path to another part of the mountain.

I roll the windows down and allow the soft breeze of the woods and the smell of pines to drift into the car. Sweet, brave Daniela relaxes against the leather seat, and I hear air escaping her. It's a good thing she's comfortable in the woods. Makes me wish she would stay.

A part of me insists other humans have stayed before. It's not impossible. She could fall in love with me, and I would tell her about us, and she would live with me here, happily ever after. But I'm not stupid. Daniela doesn't belong here. She has her house and her job and maybe even a boyfriend.

Two days and my heart already aches for her. I want to learn more about her. To hear her out, to soak in the way she sees the world. And fuck, I need my hands on her, and her curves against my body. My cock throbs every time I wonder about her pussy clenching around me.

It's an empty hope. The husk of a dream. I've never felt like this. The first woman I'm attracted to, and she's not staying. She ain't from town and she has no interest. Worse, Daniela's looking for her brother. A missing person in Shadow Falls, when it's my one job to keep everyone safe. My head should be one-hundred percent in the game, but my focus insists on wandering.

The lone cabin appears amid the trees. I park outside of the clearing, careful not to destroy any trail. The second I kill the engine, Daniela hops off the car and makes it to the house.

“Daniela,” I call out, and she freezes, shooting a glance over her shoulder at me. “Let me check for trails first.”

She waits and I make my way to the edge. Squinting, I study for any signs of steps or car tires. It would have been easier if I were in my wolf form, but I’ve run out of luck. Can’t shift with a human here and worse: the rain we had has cleaned any signs from the entrance. The dirt is perfectly empty.

“If your brother has been here, he either hasn’t left or has been gone for at least three days.” And I make my way into the cabin, the floorboards creaking beneath my weight.

“How do you know?” she murmurs, following me with quiet steps.

“It rained and there were no new steps outside.” I turn to the inside of the place. This cabin has always been used for shifters to take some time off. Connect with nature. Have privacy with their mates. It belongs to no one and to everyone at the same time. Big enough for a couple. There’s a bed to one side of the lone room, and a kitchenette to the other.

There’s no one inside. But the place is not empty.

Shirts litter the ground. A black suitcase lays open by the foot of the bed. One shoe is upside down under the dining table, the other over the bed. It’s quite the mess, not something I’m used to with my strict way of living.

“Is this your brother’s?” I ask Daniela, already knowing what the answer will be.

She bends and picks a shirt up, studying its front. Her pretty nose curls. “Yeah. He’s always been like this.” She lets the shirt drop, straightening her spine, her brows rising. “But you said no one’s been here the past three days. I don’t get it.”

I whirl around to face her. “Your brother has been here if these are his things. But he hasn’t come back for the past three days, or he would have left footsteps outside.”

Her mouth drops in an O-shape that should not send my brain into lustful haywire but does it anyway. My pants grow tight, and I turn my back to her so she won't notice. May the Goddess bless whoever invented jeans.

"So you think he left?" Daniela starts around the house, picking things up. It's clear she's the one who cared for her brother. The one responsible for keeping their place tidy.

"Definitely," I answer, watching her ass sway away. "Maybe staying over with Andressa."

She nods, stopping near the kitchen counter. She picks something up. A small white box. "And he hasn't been taking his meds." She lets it drop. "Explains many things."

Daniela walks to the window and looks out into the woods without another word. I watch her breathe, shoulders rising and falling as she stands there, silent and cold. Distant. She must be worried sick.

Hope flickers in my chest. Maybe if she had a boyfriend, he would have come along. I would have if she was mine. I would never leave her to face whatever this case brings her. And because I'm so attracted to her, my feet take me closer, until I can feel the warmth of her body lingering against my chest.

Daniela half-turns, looking up at me with her big, brown eyes. I read hesitation there. As if this entire thing brings her feelings she doesn't like. My hands come up on their own and I touch her smooth cheek. She lets me, and I watch her breath catching with my pounding heart.

"What's in your head?" I ask, drunk on her smell.

She licks her lips, a minor act that makes me go halfway to crazy. "Do you think my brother kept this entire thing from me because I'm overbearing?"

So that's what's worrying her. "No. Maybe he needed space. From everything and everyone. Even you. But that doesn't mean you did him wrong."

Daniela breathes out again, and her hand comes up to mine. The skin-to-skin is hot, flaring me to awareness. Her

sweet scent makes my mouth water. Fuck. When did this become so intense? When did I become so needy for her?

“Thank you, Zev.” The way my name sounds around her tongue is straightforward filthy. My cock throbs with need, and I have half a mind to take her right here, on the wooden floor. The pink on her cheeks makes me wish she was thinking the same.

But Daniela clears her throat and steps away. I adjust my hardness in my pants before I follow her. Goddess. I need to focus on this job, even if I can only think of her, and her body against mine. She’s temptation in the flesh, and I’m starved for a taste.

CHAPTER NINE

DANIELA



Where in the world is my brother? He's always liked to run and hide, but never like this. Never this long, and never leaving mysterious trails behind. Zev's words replay in the back of my head as we drive back town. My brother was in the house. His things were there. Everything but his phone. But the lack of footsteps showed he left days ago.

Why couldn't he just message me where he was? I would have understood it if he needed some time. I would. Wouldn't I? My entire life I worked hard for my family's happiness. I gave my all to see them smiling, no matter the price I had to pay. Why do I feel like that never mattered?

"We're going to find him."

Zev's voice drags me from the self-loathing hole I started to dig. I look at him. Truly look at him. The sharp angle of his jaw, how his bottom lip is slightly bigger than the upper one. I stare at how his dark hair drapes past his neck to his shoulders. And how his golden eyes study me like the most interesting person of all.

Why is it so comfortable to be under his stare? So easy? I feel safe, protected. But it has to be because he's the sheriff. Right?

"I know," I breathe out, forcing my attention back to the road.

"There must be a reason your brother hasn't told you where he was going to."

I nod, the weight of memories making my heart hurt. Should I tell him? Being honest to people about our disorder never helped. We'd always get either pitiful or distrustful looks. And I don't want Zev to change the way he treats me. I like it the way it is.

But Zev's the sheriff. He should learn everything he can to help us out. Things that sound normal to me may help him see something new.

We drive into town and, the moment I make my decision and part my lips to tell him about the disorder, Zev parks. Not in front of the station, not in front of the inn. I follow him out and my gaze lands on a diner. A cute little diner, straight from the fifties with its red benches and white tabletops, the checkered floor completing the look.

Zev doesn't lock the door as he makes his way to the entrance. I trail him, arching an eyebrow. Does he think we'll find a clue here? Maybe the girl my brother has been seeing works here or something. I pull my shoulders back and gape at the people behind the counter, looking for someone our age. Trying to guess whoever would be my brother's girl, but there's only a mid-aged couple there. The woman picks up a tray and walks from behind the counter with a huge smile on her face. "Zev! Who is this beauty next to you?" She shoots me a wink.

"Morning, Mrs. Murphy." He half-turns to smile at me. "This is Daniela Guadalupe. She's passing by. Looking for her brother."

Mrs. Murphy sways her hips to a table in the back of the diner, putting the tray down. "Then I'm getting a special ready for you, Daniela. A welcome gift." She ambles back, eyes glinting. "We never have visitors, it's good to..." The woman stops and stares at me for a moment, studying my face. It gets uncomfortable real fast, but just because I'm not used to staring. "Well! You look like someone I know. Robert! Robert, look here." She motions for the balding man behind the counter, a glass in hand. "Who does she look like?"

Robert cups his chin with a hand. Now three people are staring at me, and I just like Zev to do this. My cheeks warm and I look away, incapable of holding so many looks.

“Diego,” Robert says with finality, and I snap my gaze up at him. “She looks like that boy, Diego. Same eyes.”

I blink several times. “This is the first time I’ve heard it,” I mumble out. “No one ever says we look alike.”

Mrs. Murphy chuckles. “Just because your skin is darker than his doesn’t mean you don’t have other features in common.” She smiles, nodding victoriously. “Well, so did we get it right? Are you and Diego related?”

“Yes.” I nod once, a knot in my throat. “He’s my brother. I’m looking for him. He’s been missing for a week.”

Mrs. Murphy’s shoulders droop. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear. We missed him around. He came here a couple of times. Liked our barbecued ribs.”

I nod, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. “Yeah, he did... He does like those.” Why the hell did I use the past tense? Yes, he’s missing. But he’s just *somewhere else*. My brother does this. He disappears, then he comes back, feeling better. I’m the only one who worries about the entire thing.

“Yeah, we have word he’s been seeing someone,” Zev says, his presence a constant warmth to my side.

Mrs. Murphy taps her chin but shakes her head after a moment. “I haven’t seen him with anyone around, sorry.”

Zev waves her off. “I imagined as much.” His big hand comes to the small of my back. “We’re here for some other business.”

Mrs. Murphy chuckles. “Coming right up!”

I blink in confusion at him as he guides me to one of the booths. “What business?”

Zev makes me slide into the booth and sit down. He sits across from me, intertwining his fingers. “Lunch.”

My jaw drops in shock. “Lunch? My brother’s missing. You’re the one who said he hasn’t been home for days. And you want us to have lunch?”

Zev reaches out and takes my hand. His warmth settles me. It’s like I’ve been plugged into an outlet and he just pulled the cord. Even my heartbeat slows down. I let him soothe me, soaking in his presence. No one has ever been like this for me. A support.

“We know your brother has been seeing someone,” he says, his hand still in mine. “He might be there, with her. He might be somewhere else. We’ll find him. But we need the fuel, and I need to learn more about him. Need to ask you some things.”

I swallow hard. “Like what?”

“When I mentioned there might have been a reason for Diego not to tell you these things, you jerked away. You closed in on yourself.” His fingers tighten around mine. “Tell me why.”

This time, I resist. When we were in the car, just the two of us, I felt safer than in here. Where anyone can overhear me and judge me. My heartbeat escalates again, but Zev grips my fingers, his golden eyes beckoning to me.

Why in the world is he such a beckon? I don’t understand, but there’s a call from my body to this man. Like my core, my soul, begs for him. Something inside me wants to trust him. Wants his help. I part my lips. This time, nothing interrupts me.

“We were diagnosed with a mental disorder when we were teenagers. It’s always been harder on my brother than on me. But if we take our meds, we can live like nothing is happening.”

Zev nods. “Mental disorders are common, Daniela. You don’t need to be ashamed of yours.”

My body tenses. How did he know that’s what I feared? “I’m not,” I lie. His eyes are too intense and I can’t bear

staring at them, so I look away and watch Mrs. Murphy piling plates onto a tray. “It’s not like I have a choice.”

“Exactly.” He lets my hand go and I almost fumble for it. Almost being the keyword. “You’re strong, Daniela. This much is obvious.” He takes a beat and I keep staring at Mrs. Murphy for the life of me. Is it hot in here? So hot in here. “So. Which disorder is it, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I lick my lips and gape at Mrs. Murphy making her way to us. She puts the tray down and slides a steak in my direction. There are more plates around us, but my eyes are intent on the slab of meat, my mouth filling with water. Crap. I didn’t even notice how hungry I was.

Even before Mrs. Murphy has turned around, I dig in. The juices of the meat make me hum in delight, my eyes fluttering shut. “Holy shit,” I whisper.

Zev chuckles. “They’re good, right?”

I nod and, after half the steak is gone, I turn to the other plates. Zev and I have quite a feast, and in such a small diner. He serves me and keeps my glass full of water. Zev’s a gentleman through and through. But I won’t deny I love watching his biceps curling as he brings forkful after forkful of food to his mouth.

He doesn’t ask again. I notice this much. Zev doesn’t press me. But once the ravenous beast inside me is settled, I meet his eyes. “It’s a type of schizophrenia.” My voice lowers. “We hear a voice inside.”

Zev stares. It’s a different stare from the previous ones. I can’t tell what it means. “What does the voice say?”

That’s the kind of question my psychologist asks me, not people I barely know. I twist my lips and go back to my food. “Sometimes it wants freedom. It wants to go away, to run. My brother feels cloistered in the apartment. He’s left before. He seeks some place where the voice quiets down until the meds take over again.”

Zev still stares, motionless. He takes deep breaths, nostrils flared. After what feels like forever, he nods. “It makes sense

why he was in the cabin. No place quieter than that around.” He nods again. “We’ll find him.”

Mrs. Murphy makes her way to us and sits next to me. The rest of the lunch is filled with small talk as she asks me what I think of the town, and how is it like where I live. Zev and I exit the diner thirty minutes later, but he doesn’t take me to his car.

He juts his chin to his left. “There’s a place I want to visit. It’s walking distance from here.”

I nod and follow him up the pavement. “Do you think we can find this Andressa girl?”

“Let’s drop at the Hexed and ask about it. That’s where Wyatt saw her.”

It doesn’t take long to wonder what the Hexed is for the place to appear down the block. Definitely a bar. Black walls, a sign painted in neon green. A smile tilts my lips. It’s been a while I haven’t been to one of these. Psychiatric meds and alcohol don’t go along.

The bar is open, even if it’s just past noon. A group of women sits in a circle, small round tables next to them holding all sorts of drinks. Someone is drinking wine. Another tea. There’s soda and a beautiful orange and yellow cocktail. The moment we cross the threshold, several heads turn to us.

“Zev,” one of them says, and a silver-haired woman gets to her feet. “How can I help you?”

She walks out of the circle and closer to us. It’s the weirdest thing. She looks... Middle-aged, I guess? But then no. I study her violet eyes, wondering if it’s a thing for people here to have different colored eyes. She doesn’t look a day over thirty. But also fifty. I have no freaking idea.

“Sabrina.” Zev nods in greeting, then stops next to me. “This is Daniela Guadalupe. She’s looking for her brother, Diego.”

Sabrina shakes my hand with a soft smile on her face. She looks approachable. Friendly, like every other face in town. “A pleasure. I haven’t seen Diego around much. Thought he had

either left or taken up some days in the cabin up in the mountain.”

“His clothes are there,” I burst out, cutting Zev in. “But Zev said the rain from three days ago washed out any signs of him.”

Sabrina’s eyebrows climb her forehead. “That’s strange. Three days?”

“We’ve heard he’s been seen around an Andressa. Do you know her?” Zev asks.

Sabrina nods. “Yes. They came here together. But I haven’t seen her either. She doesn’t spend long in town. I think she only comes around every fifteen days or something.”

Another woman joins us, standing next to Sabrina. She looks younger, but then Sabrina doesn’t look old. The more I think of it, the more my brain hurts. Her blond hair drapes past her hips in a straight curtain, and her eyes are green. Almost too green.

“Is someone missing, Sabrina?”

“My brother,” I offer. “Diego Guadalupe.” I fumble with the phone and show her his picture.

A small gasp leaves her. “Oh, such a young man.” She meets my eyes, studying my face. “Your brother, you say? I’m sure he’ll show up, darling. My name is Delphine. Is there something I can do?”

I smile. “Thank you. We’re looking for a girl who might have been dating him.”

“Do you know her, Sabrina?” Delphine asks, turning to face the silver-haired woman. The smell of verbena wafts up to me. Her perfume smells great. In any other situation, I’d ask about it. “We could ask around about her.”

My heart grows inside my chest. It’s so good people here are worried. Back home, whenever Diego went missing, no one gave two shits about it. Not even the cops.

“She’s my next-door neighbor, though she’s not around often.” Sabrina picks up her phone. “I’ll send you the address,

Zev.”

Once more, hope flickers inside my chest. Diego will be with her, laying on her couch or something. I know it. Everything will be solved by the end of the day, and I’ll drive back home and this entire situation will be in the past.

Even if I’ll have to leave Zev behind. He’s the one good thing about this ordeal.

CHAPTER TEN

ZEV



The sun makes its way down from its apex, sinking into the west and turning the shadows into elongated dark paths. Daniela and I make our way to the next spot on foot, leaving my car behind.

“So, Shadow Falls is this kind of place, uh?” she asks, her voice soft as her gaze wanders. “You can go anywhere within walking distance. No need for a car.”

I lift a shoulder. “Perks of a small town. Bet you don’t have this back home.”

She chuckles, and damn it, I would do anything to hear more of her laughter. “Definitely not. It’s a long drive to work every day. Since we live in the suburbs.”

I nod, glancing at her and hoping she’ll give me more glimpses into her routine. “What do you do for a living?”

Her cheeks turn pink and, fuck, every time this happens my cock goes hard. There’s not enough strength in me to stop that. This woman is amazing. She smells fantastic, her body is a killer, and she’s brave and smart. I adore how protective of her brother she is. If only she was a shifter. If only she would stay.

Daniela looks away, and it’s only then I understand her pink cheeks mean she doesn’t enjoy the subject. I open my mouth to tell her she doesn’t need to talk about it, but she’s faster than me.

“I’m a receptionist. Taking a small vacation right now. That’s the reason I could come after Diego. They’re probably

going to fire me. My boss thinks I'm making excuses up to skip work when I tell him my brother isn't feeling well." She shrugs, and even though it's a dismissive action, I can read the pain on her face. "I don't care. It isn't a good job, anyway."

Even if she says this, it's obvious the entire story hurts her. Diego's actions make her life more difficult, but she would never complain because she cares for him. And though I admire her selflessness, there's something that worries me.

"Daniela..." I slow my steps down until I stop. She follows my lead, halting and turning to face me. Her beautiful eyes are wide and bright in the early afternoon light. The yellow light of the sun turns her dark hair almost amber. She's gorgeous. I can't stop staring at her. "Who cares for you?"

She winces as if I had hit her, but she doesn't look away. "I take care of myself." Her voice is weak, breakable. She doesn't quite believe her words. They're rehearsed. They're something she's told herself over and over, and yet they never rang true.

Closing the space between us, I raise a hand and brush my knuckles against her jaw. Daniela shivers, her eyelids fluttering closed. She feels it. This attraction between us, this weird call. She leans into my hand, melting against me. My tongue glues to the roof of my mouth, and I've never been this parched for someone's taste.

"Daniela," I whisper her name, and another shiver rocks her body.

"Dani." Our gazes lock, and hers burn with need. Need for connection, for human warmth. "Call me Dani."

I open my hand, cupping her cheek. We're so close. So close to having it all. I don't care she isn't my mate. Whatever this connection is, it's enough to make my heart beat double-time. Dani licks the corner of her lips, her eyes on me. I lean closer, just slightly, just to see if she would give in. Her eyes flutter closed once more, and my body buzzes with a new need for her.

A door unlocks behind me, but I ignore it. Steps clack on the pavement and still, I can only see Dani. It's the snarky chuckle that makes me stop.

"If it isn't the sheriff making out with some girl in the middle of the day. And here I thought I was the town rebel."

Dani's cheeks turn bright red, and my stomach roils with rage as I whirl around to whoever thought it would be funny to interrupt us. A blond girl stands next to me, a smirk on her face. Her short hair curls away from her cheeks, and she's in jeans and a tiny top. I'm still glaring at her when she shrugs.

"No need to arrest me. It was just a joke." She plays with her car keys around her forefinger. "But it's always like this. No one gets my jokes. Mom always said 'Andressa, you're gonna get yourself in some trouble because of—'"

"Wait." I stop her, raising a hand. "You're Andressa?" I look up at the house behind her, searching for the number. And it checks out.

She blinks, looking between me and Dani. "Yeah... Were you looking for me? I did nothing wrong."

"I'm looking for my brother." The speed at which Daniela does her thing is astonishing. It doesn't even look that we've been an inch from each other's mouths a second ago. She pulls her phone out. "This is Diego Guadalupe, he..."

"Oh, Diego." Andressa rolls her eyes, batting a hand in dismissal. "Yeah, I know him. Bet you came after me because that witch told you we were making out."

I shoot a glance at Daniela, but she doesn't seem to react at the mention of a witch. She might believe Andressa is just being rude. Which she is.

"Do you know of his whereabouts?" I ask, glaring at her. She doesn't smell like a shifter but she ain't no witch, or she would be at Sabrina's coven meeting. Whatever she is, she can't tell Daniela's a human, and I'm halfway to panicking that she'll say something she shouldn't. Or another thing she shouldn't.

Andressa looks away, bored. “I don’t know. Have you checked the cabin in the woods? He was staying there.”

“We did,” I go on. “His stuff is there, but he’s nowhere to be seen.”

Something flashes in her eyes, but she frowns. “Then there’s your answer. I don’t know. And I don’t care.”

Daniela swallows. “So he isn’t at your place? I hoped he would be.”

“Nope.”

I arch an eyebrow. She’s acting weird. “Would you mind if I looked around?”

Her eyes go as wide as saucepans. “Do you even have a search warrant?” I shake my head. “I guessed as much. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have more important things to do.”

She passes between us, shouldering me, and I exchange a look with Daniela. This girl sure is acting weird. I shoot a hand out and hold her around an elbow. “Andressa. We mean no trouble. We’re just looking for him. If you have anything you can share with us...”

She shakes my hand off. “I don’t give a shit about Diego. He might have left. He wouldn’t tell me anything.” She whirls around and glares at Daniela. “I didn’t even know he had a sister. He wasn’t right in the head.” This makes Daniela wince.

“Andressa,” I roar with a warning but she shrugs me off as she opens her car door.

“If you ask me, he needed to let his animal free more often. I bet he burst out of him. Diego must be halfway across the state by now.” She turns the engine on and drives off without a look back.

Her words leave me frozen to the spot. My jaw hangs. How the fuck dare she talk about shifting and his animal in front of a human? This woman has no sense in her head. I have half a mind of following her just to scream at her.

And then, there’s something else. I whirl around to Daniela.

Confusion is all over her face. “His animal? What the hell was she talking about?”

His animal, indeed. Diego’s a shifter. And his sister didn’t know.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZEV



My mind runs a mile a minute. This investigation has taken a weird turn, one no one saw coming. How am I going to use this piece of info when his sister doesn't know? When she hasn't ever heard about shifters? I'm walking on thin ice. So thin I hear it crack beneath my feet.

Daniela's not a fool. No, she's too smart to let anything slide. Her brows bunch over her nose and she squints as she watches Andressa disappear. And I'm one-hundred percent sure she won't let the subject go.

"Zev? What did she mean?"

"By what?" I try, one last time, to drop it. To pretend nothing happened. I can't believe Andressa spoke like that. Fuck.

"By 'let his animal out.' What animal?"

I clear my throat, racing through possible excuses. "Um. It might be slang. Yes, something of the sort." And I whirl around to make my way back to the car.

Her small fingers curl around my biceps and she grips it. I stop and face her again. Her nose curls as she blinks up at me, dark eyes studying my face. And damn it, we've known each other for two days and I know she can read me just fine. She knows I'm hiding something. She narrows her eyes, seeing right through me.

"Zev," she says, stepping closer, too close. Her intoxicating scent fills my lungs, and I can never have enough

of it. Her voice is a murmur, just for my ears. “Tell me what it means.”

“Dani...”

“I know you know it, Zev. And it’s no slang.” Her eyes are intense as they drill into me. Goddess, this woman. She’s fierce. And I can’t help this crazy connection, this call to get closer to her. How could I? She’s much more than I’ve ever hoped for in a partner. Her fingers tighten around my arm. “What are you keeping from me?”

And I may be wrong, but I swear I hear a tiny break of offense in her voice. As if she’s disappointed I’m lying to her, and she’s insulted not because of the lie, but because it’s me.

Goddess, I wish.

Taking her fingers in mine, I squeeze them. “I have a clue. But I can’t share it with you right now.” She opens her mouth, but I press a forefinger to her lips and she silences. “Please. I allowed you to tag along this far. Let me do my job now.”

Her eyes widen. “Are you kicking me to the curb?”

My wolf growls inside me. He doesn’t like it either. He wants her close, all the time. I’ve never seen him so interested in someone, not when it’s not our mate. And yet, Daniela isn’t. Why is he so into it suddenly?

“No, not like that. Just asking you to go back to the inn and wait for me there.”

“What are you going to do?” Her voice strangles as she shifts her weight between her feet. It’s clear she doesn’t enjoy being left behind, and I wouldn’t leave her if I had another choice.

“I’m going into the woods.”

“And why can’t I go with you?”

“Because it’s dangerous. And I don’t want you getting hurt.”

She curls her nose. “What does that have to do with the animal inside my brother or whatever it was?”

I release a breath through clenched teeth. She's headstrong, and I adore it. But couldn't she just accept and go back to the inn? Have a bath, read a book or something?

Well, if she was this easy to convince, she wouldn't be this amazing, would she?

I shoot an arm out and grasp her hand, bringing her close. Daniela stumbles forward, her fantastic tits slamming into my chest. I breathe her in, staring into her dark eyes.

"Trust me, Dani. Please."

She gapes back at me for a moment, then nods, stepping away. "Just because you sound so sure of yourself." A tiny smile plays on her lips.

Relaxing my shoulders, I tap the badge on my chest. "What do you take me for?"

Her eyes glaze over, looking somewhere over my shoulder. "A dog."

That catches me off guard. Wait. Wait, what? How the fuck does she know?

I whirl around to follow her line of sight and my heart slows down. Oh. She wasn't talking about me. It's Mrs. Dell's dog. Daniela starts toward it. The pup stands at the edge of the woods, behind Andressa's place, white fur filthy, tail wagging once his eyes connect with Daniela's.

"Oh. We were looking for this one," I tell her, following her trail to the woods. This will be a good excuse to go back to the station. I'll leave the dog with Pietro and change, go into the woods to look for Diego. Now that I know he must be a shifter, I have another scent to look for.

I slide a glance to Dani. If he's a shifter, then why isn't she? Aren't they blood brothers? Maybe she doesn't know one of them was adopted? But both Mrs. and Mr. Murphy recognized Diego once they saw her.

She kneels in front of the dog, burying her fingers into his dirty fur. "You need a bath, little friend," she teases.

I chuckle, kneeling next to them. “He does this every time. His owner lets him out, then he runs into the woods.”

Daniela shrugs. “Understandable. Why wouldn’t he want to go there once in a while?”

I nod, studying the animal, looking for signs of injury. He’s never hurt, but it’s a habit. My gaze lands on something dark red. His paws.

“Fuck,” I hiss, taking one of his legs and lifting it. The toes are smeared in dry blood. “Hurt yourself this time, eh?”

“Look,” Dani calls, pointing at its hind legs. “The back legs are like this too.” She takes a beat and snaps her gaze at me. “I don’t think it’s his.”

My heartbeat picks up again. She’s right. She’s fucking right. The dog stepped on blood. Lots of it, apparently. I shoot up to my feet.

“Dani. Can you take him back to the station?”

She picks the dog up, uncaring for how dirty her clothes will get. Daniela is surprisingly dismissive for a city girl. “Of course. Do you think it’s Diego? Do you think he got hurt?”

I grind my jaw. “Maybe. Maybe not. We have others living in the skirts of the city, remember? Maybe a wounded animal. But I have to check it out, anyway.” And, without another word, I leave her behind and stride into the trees. Once I’m deep enough, I strip and urge my wolf to take over. He hates coming out during the day, so I have to go through some bargaining.

When the change happens, it’s quick. He understands someone might be in danger. Once I’m on all fours, I prepare to run.

A scream shatters the quiet of the woods, piercing through me. It turns my blood to ice as I wince, then look over my shoulder.

Daniela’s eyes are the first thing I see. I would never get them wrong. Even if she’s several trees back, even if she’s half-hidden behind a thick trunk. I can still see her.

And she sees me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DANIELA



My eyes must be fooling me. There's no other likely explanation for the *thing* I just saw. Either my mind is broken after too many drugs and the grief of my parents' death and Diego's disappearances, or... No. It has to be it. There's no other possibility.

Because I could swear I just saw Zev turning into a wolf.

Like, a wolf. That animal with a snout and fangs and fur. Four legs. A tail. A fucking tail, hanging from its behind. And I would have believed it was some magic trick, but why would Zev, a serious person, the sheriff, practice magic tricks by himself, naked, in the woods?

Nothing makes sense. Not even one bit of it. And here I was, thinking it was too risqué of me to follow him. Worse still when I decided to stay when he started stripping. God, what's going on with me?

The wolf turns around and his eyes are as golden as Zev's. I'm halfway to a panic attack, breath shallow making my head grow fuzzy. My hands shake and I look around myself. At least I'm still in the woods. Is this the medication going wrong? There might have been some crazy side effects I had never had before. Hallucinations, for example. Yes, it had to be it.

I'm having hallucinations because of my meds. I should call my psychologist and adjust the entire thing. Good thing the meds I brought are about to end. I'll just buy a new one.

The wolf steps closer, but I swallow hard and force myself to stare at it. It's not real. It's just in my mind. My feet are pinned to the ground and I can't move, can't run even if I wanted to. And then, the unimaginable happens. The wolf doesn't pounce on me. It doesn't roar or makes to attack me. Oh, no.

In an awful symphony of breaking bones and stretching skin, the wolf turns back to Zev. His toned body is exposed, the dark hair I've been wanting to touch sliding down his shoulders. My gaze roams down his hard chest to an impressive set of eight-packs and his cock. Wow. Even flaccid, the thing is huge. I don't think I've ever seen one as big as this.

Is this part of the hallucination? My teeth clatter as I try to come up with words and fail. Am I so desperate for love and affection that I'm imagining naked Zev? Naked Zev with an enormous cock? My breath locks in my throat. I can't take it in. I'm losing my mind.

He takes a step closer, then another, raising his hands in a pacifying gesture. I try to gulp air in. Why the hell have my lungs stopped working? My fingers shake as I lift my hands and touch my neck, then claw at the skin. What the fuck. What the fucking fuck.

Zev reaches me in the space of a heartbeat, his hands closing around my shoulders, golden eyes drilling into mine. "It's okay, Daniela. You're safe. No one's going to hurt you." His eyes search my face and I part my lips. "Breathe." But I don't fucking know how. My entire body shakes and I don't fucking know how to breathe. "Here," he says, gripping my hand and spreading it over his chest. "Follow me." And he takes a deep breath.

I force my chest out, slamming my eyes closed, and air rushes in. God, it's good to breathe.

"Another one," his voice commands, and my body obeys him. I do it once more, oxygen flooding my veins, relief washing over me.

It takes me another moment, but I open my eyes, sucking air in as I stare and stare at Zev. “You were a wolf. And then you were not,” I stutter out, racing the memory through my mind over and over. “Am I hallucinating?” Another breath rushes past my lips. “Is this what it feels like to go crazy?”

Zev is shaking his head even before the words are past my lips. “No. No.” His hands come up and around my face, and his warmth sends another wave of relief across my chest. “You’re not crazy, Daniela. Never crazy.”

I grip his wrists, and the feel of us skin to skin grounds me. “But you were a wolf. People aren’t wolves.”

Zev comes closer, and a small part of my brain is still aware, even through the fog of panic, of his nakedness so close to me. “People in Shadow Falls are different.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “Have you seen movies with werewolves? That’s what happens to us.”

I shake my head. “But it isn’t night. And there’s no moon in the sky.”

“We don’t need that. And it’s not passed in a bite. It’s genetic.”

I keep shaking my head until he tightens his hold around it, making me stop. “But Zev, you were a wolf.”

Zev twists his lips and his thumbs brush my cheeks. “I can change into a wolf at will, Daniela. That’s who I am. You are not imagining it, and you are not hallucinating. What you saw is real.”

I should run the other way. Either Zev is as crazy as me, or he’s pulling a prank. But the way he says it, with his eyes looking so deeply into mine... I can’t reject the truth on his face.

“A werewolf,” I breathe out, my body slowly ceasing to shake.

He lets me go but doesn’t step away. “Yes. But it’s not the only animal.”

I snap my gaze up to his. “Like werebears.”

He smiles and nods. “And werecats and werebirds. All sorts.”

Maybe it’s because I’ve lived so long with differences that I learned to be tolerant, but I accept it way easier than I expected. Zev is also a wolf. He can change at will. The legends are true, and not so much at the same time.

It also means something else. My gaze locks with his. “Is this what Andressa meant? By the animal inside my brother?”

Zev’s smile disappears. His face is somber when he nods. “I think so. But you don’t smell like shifter.”

My nose curls and I take a whiff of myself. “Smell like shifter?”

Zev cracks up. It’s so sudden, so natural and so unlike him, it takes me aback. But as I watch his eyes wrinkling on the sides and absorb the sound of his laughter, I accept I like it. I like it a lot.

“*Shifter* is how we call ourselves because we shift into animals,” he explains, and I nod him on. “Since I’m a wolf and have a better sense of smell, I can tell you smell only of human.”

“Oh.” I nod. “I see. But what if I’m human and my brother’s a shifter?”

Zev cocks his head. “It’s unlikely. Could happen, but unlikely.” Zev shoots a glance down at his amazing body, and I follow his lead, taking care to commit every inch of his deliciousness to mind. “Let me put some clothes on.”

I hold the ‘please, no’ behind my teeth, but it almost comes out. Crap. This is the me who hasn’t gotten laid as in ever speaking. Zev turns and walks to his clothes, picking his pants up. He doesn’t put the boxers or his shirt on and I have at least his chest to stare at.

“What about your parents?” he asks, and I have a hard time remembering what we were talking about. “Do you think they could be... different? Not completely human?”

That's a strange question, one I've never faced. Tapping my lower lip, I force my mind to remember any strange happenings back home, but I have not much clue what's a usual "shifter" behavior. Then it dawns on me.

I snap my fingers. "Wait. I don't think I've ever mentioned it. My parents adopted us."

Zev's brows rise. "Oh, that fits the puzzle nicely. So you and your brother aren't blood brothers. That explains why he is a shifter and you aren't."

"No, no," I cut him in. "Our parents adopted us, but Diego and I are biological siblings. Our parents died in a crash."

A crease deepens between Zev's brows. "Fuck. That sends all sense to shit again." He turns away, to the deeper part of the woods, then back at me. "Listen, Dani. The blood trail? I need to follow it, and it's much easier to do in my wolf form."

"Go ahead," I burst out, too eager to see him naked again. Whoever sees me like this wouldn't ever imagine I was halfway to a panic attack minutes ago. "I won't stop you from doing your job."

Zev nods, shifting his weight between his feet. "Go back to the inn. I'll meet you there later."

This time, all hesitation washes away from me. I square my shoulders and lift my chin. "No way. What if the blood belongs to my brother?"

"Then I'll take care of him and take him to the hospital."

I shake my head. "Not without me. I need to see my brother." I take a breath. "Diego isn't taking his meds. He's probably having problems dealing with the disorder. I can help."

Zev arches his eyebrow and takes a beat watching me. Finally, he releases a sigh and nods. "Very well. But stay behind me."

And he turns and strips off his pants once more. I lick my lips, watching the powerful muscles of his ass as he shifts into a wolf once more. Whatever lust has been coursing through

me disappears as his bones bend into awkward angles. Some pop. Fur sprouts from his skin at too fast a rate. I force myself to look away.

With a soft bark, he catches my attention and we start into the woods, Zev's wolf with his nose to the ground. We walk for long minutes, the sun sinking into the west and turning the woods golden and magical. I almost forget we're not trekking, but looking for someone who's been hurt.

Zev looks over his shoulder often. Making sure I'm okay, I think. It's endearing, and I become used to him in the wolf form fast. At least things can't get weirder, right?

Or so I think. Until we reach a clearing, stones making a circle at its edge. I'm about to raise my face to study the tall trees when my gaze lands on the person stretched at the center, over the grass.

It's my brother. Diego. A smile threatens to spill from my lips. But then I see it.

The deep gash in his exposed abdomen. The blood bathing his skin, sparkling under the last rays of the sun. There's so much blood. Too much blood.

As time slows down, I push past Zev to stumble into the clearing, and my hands are wet with my brother's blood, and his eyes are empty and glazed. My heart hammers and my breath fails as I call him. As I shake him awake. But Diego doesn't move. He doesn't move.

He doesn't breathe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DANIELA



The sun burns my eyes. Again. I have no idea how many times I watched the sun invading the window in my inn room. Time has lost its meaning. I don't know which weekday it is. Don't remember the last time I ate more than the fries the receptionist brings me. I don't have the stomach for the burger and milkshake. I don't have the stomach for anything.

My body aches. The heartache has spread, turning my limbs and my skin into something alien and burning, always burning. I don't know if it's because my meds ended, but my body doesn't feel my own. Even the voice in my head has returned. But it's easy to ignore it. Even the voice is in pain.

Why can't we be happy? Why can't Diego and I have a break just for a change?

Now he's dead. My brother is dead. I came to Shadow Falls looking for a clue about him, expecting him to be having another secret vacation. What I found was his body stretched in the woods, his guts spilling out of his abdomen. The image doesn't leave my mind. I only sleep if my body turns off, too exhausted to keep up. And I don't get up. I don't want to. As in ever.

The image of my gutted brother keeps flashing before my eyes. Even the voice in my head is shocked to the bone. When I close my eyes, I hope I won't wake up. But the sun keeps coming up. It keeps waking me up.

Someone knocks on the door. It must be the clerk. Should pay her. Or leave. Maybe I should live in the woods. No one's going to miss me, anyway. I have no family left. No one I can take care of. No one who would love me back.

The knock persists. I turn on my side and press a pillow to my head. Why won't they leave? I don't care about food.

"Daniela?"

Crap. This voice shoots straight to my core. It's Zev. What does he want here? To throw on my face I let my brother die?

"Dani. Open the door."

I hate it when he calls me Dani. It makes it sound like we're more than we are. More than we'll ever be. He won't want a girl with a voice inside her head, and who let her brother die, and who can't even get up to shower. He doesn't deserve someone like me.

Zev's good. He has a good heart. He did his best to find my brother, even when he wasn't aware of him being missing. But I get it. How could he know if no one told him, right? People around here go into the woods and spend time there. Nothing dangerous ever happens in towns this small.

It's my fault. If only I had come sooner.

"Dani," he calls again. Why won't he leave? "Let's talk. Please, open the door."

I don't reply. I don't want to talk. Don't want to see anyone.

But it's Zev, the voice inside me says. It's like my conscience, but not quite. It feels like someone else entirely.

I drop the pillow, frowning. The voice has a point. He's visited twice in this period ever since I locked myself inside, but I never let him in. He's respected me, leaving after a moment. But something tells me he won't give up this time. His voice is too firm, the tapping of his foot to the floor outside too persistent.

"Dani, I'm coming in," he says, and I sit up. What does it mean?

The room shakes and I jump up, bunching my shoulders in. My gaze snaps to the door. Is he trying to break the door down?

“Zev?” A voice outside cries. “What are you doing?” It’s the clerk.

“If she isn’t leaving, I’m breaking this down,” he says, so matter-of-factly it sounds obvious.

Oh, fuck. He is breaking the door down. And he’s so strong I’m surprised he didn’t manage it the first time. I jump for the door, gripping the doorknob with both hands and flinging the wood open. Zev’s eyes meet mine, wide, and he gives me a once over.

“What do you want?” I say, my voice cracking from disuse. He doesn’t need to tell me I stink, or that my hair is all ruffled and my clothes are days old.

Zev relaxes. The clerk behind him looks between us and leaves, her steps making the floorboards creek. I look away from Zev and step inside the room. He follows me in, the smell of spices colliding with the musty smell of the room.

“I needed to know if you were all right,” he says, his voice booming in the room’s silence.

“What do you think?” I whirl around, unable to hold the poison back. “I found my dead brother in the woods. Of course I’m not all right.”

He steps closer and both his hands come up to cradle my face. There’s so much gentleness in his touch, even when he’s this burly, huge man, it breaks my heart a little more. My eyes sting with tears and I slam them closed to keep myself from breaking down. Again.

“Dani.” The way he says my name is intimate. Quiet. It touches my heart, embraces me. It tells me he’ll be by my side, whatever happens. “You can’t let yourself sink into it. Your brother wouldn’t want that.”

I curl my nose and snap my eyes open to glare at him. “How could you know? You didn’t know him. And he’s not here to say what he thinks.”

“But he loved you. And he would want you to live.”

I look away, unable to stare into his deep eyes any longer. “Diego wouldn’t care. He’d be pissed. Pissed I didn’t care enough. Pissed I didn’t care sooner.”

Before I’m done, Zev’s already shaking his head. “He wouldn’t think that. He wouldn’t blame you for what happened.”

I roll my eyes. “If it isn’t my fault, then whose is it?”

Zev grips my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “It’s the murderer’s fault, Dani. We have to find whoever did this, and bring them to justice.”

I swallow hard. Something in Zev makes me want to move, to live, to do something. The warmth inside him calls for me. Beckons for me to act.

We have to avenge Diego, the voice in my head says. And she’s right. I don’t even mind I’m hearing her again. At least it’s company.

I clench my teeth together and nod. “All right. Where should we go first?” I clear my throat, trying to sound firmer than I feel. “Do you have any ideas?”

His hands stroke down my arms, his eyes glinting. “Yes. Let’s go after Andressa again. She didn’t seem on good terms with your brother.”

I remember Andressa and how she spoke of my brother. How she let it slip that he had an animal inside him. I’m still not sure about that. How come Diego’s always been a shifter, and I never knew? And he never knew?

Another nod. I step away and Zev takes a deep breath. His shoulders tighten. Fuck. I must be stinking like the sewer. “I’ll take a quick shower,” I tell him before rushing to the bathroom, cheeks burning in shame. He just stands there, no words. Moments later, I exit the bathroom and he still stands there, a frown on his face. “What’s wrong?”

He takes a beat and shakes his head. “Nothing. Let’s go.”

It doesn't look like nothing, but I don't ask. Zev leads me outside, and the sun burns into my eyes. I shield them from the light, and we walk ten minutes to the building we met Andressa the other day. No idea how long has it been. It feels like forever.

Zev doesn't force me and doesn't ask me anything. He knocks on her door, shooting me a glance, and we wait there, side by side. When the door opens, the sight before me makes a lump come up in my throat.

Andressa's eyes are swollen and red-rimmed. She looks between the two of us and huffs. "What do you want, Zev?"

Zev arches an eyebrow. "You all right, Andressa?"

"Of course not," she blurts out, staring at me. "Diego's dead. He's fucking dead." And she bursts into painful sobs. Every one of them is a knife to my chest, piercing and tugging and twisting. Tears rise to my eyes. "I should have been there. Should have been in the house with him. If I were, this wouldn't have happened." She shakes her head, pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes.

"I thought you two weren't on good terms," Zev goes on, his voice careful. I hug myself, shielding my heart from her pain.

Andressa scoffs. "I was in love with him, Zev. We had a fight. I left. And because I was so proud, the man I love is dead." She meets my eyes again. "He wasn't all right. The meds... He had stopped taking them because they weren't working. But I think he was only taking them because of his animal. It's what happens when you're raised away from a supernatural community. Diego didn't know what was happening, and he was afraid." Another heart-wrenching sob. "And I couldn't help him."

She flings her arms around my neck and wails. And I can't help the tears coming down my face. Her pain is my pain. Her guilt is my guilt. I cry with her for longer than I can follow, until my head hurts and my eyes are dry. And when I let her go, I let Zev hug me, kiss me on the head.

And I'm sure of it. It wasn't Andressa. Someone else killed my brother, and I'll find out who it was.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZEV



Daniela and I make our way back from Andressa's place. Daniela's tears quieted down, but her small body still trembles beneath my arm. I keep her close to my side, my nose to her head as I wait for her pain to subside.

Because I know it will never disappear. We can only deal with finding justice and hoping she heals. I can only hope I'll help her through it. Guilt swirls around in my stomach. It gets worse because Daniela doesn't blame me. But her brother has both disappeared and died on my watch. If she hadn't shown up poking around, I wonder how long would it take us to find his rotting body.

I should rip the badge from my chest and resign. What a piece of crap of a sheriff this town has. But I can't abandon the post now, not when it's most needed. I'll think of this later. The people are in an upheaval. Deaths do happen here, but seldom, and always because of some invasion or fight between clans.

A mysterious one like this? Never. And it makes my hackles rise to know we might have a killer among us. Someone the wards let in. Someone looking to kill again.

Daniela sniffs, racing a hand across her nose. "I need a drink," her broken voice says, and it rips my fucking heart.

I can't bear seeing her in pain. Whatever attraction grew between us, it's becoming something more. Even my wolf agrees. Her scent grows more and more intoxicating. I think

my wolf might want to mark her as our mate even when she's a human.

Or is she? The fact her brother was probably a shifter still bothers me. Shifter genes are always stronger than plain human ones. Unless there's some other magic crossing through one parent's veins, it's rare for one child to be just human.

"I can take you to the Hexed," I tell her, changing directions. Her brows bunch over her nose as she looks up at me in confusion. "The bar. Remember?"

"Oh." She nods. "Yes, please." She releases a pent-up sigh. "It's been so many years I haven't had alcohol. Because of the meds."

I shoot her a glance, studying her face. Her eyes are puffy from tears and I tug her even closer. I'm surprised she isn't complaining about how tight I hold her. "You stopped the meds?"

She shrugs and adds nothing. I could press her, tell her she shouldn't stop her meds without contacting a doctor and yadda yadda. But I have no rights. I let her brother die. I can't even ask if she's doing fine, because it's obvious she isn't. Daniela is taking all the blame on herself, and I don't know what to do. I have no idea of what to do, outside of catching the killer and giving her some sort of closing.

We walk together to the Hexed. Though it's almost noon, it's open. It always is. Sabrina sits with her coven in the back, just like the other day. The conversation today is not as lively, but all of them turn to gape at us.

Sabrina shoots to her feet. "Oh, dear," she mutters and strides to us, folding her arms around Daniela. And if I thought the girl had emptied herself of tears with Andressa, I was awfully wrong. She bursts at the seams once more, and Sabrina strokes her back, murmuring something that sounds like a lullaby under her breath.

It almost makes me feel like an intruder. But I can't move away from Daniela. Can't leave her.

The other witch who greeted us the other day, Delphine, ambles closer, her fingers intertwined, her lips twisted. “What a tragedy, isn’t it, sheriff?” She slides a glance to Daniela. “And we had just been organizing to go on a trek, looking for him.”

I nod at her. Her scent is not strange. Something flowery I’ve smelled before. Witches do love their flowers and herbs. “We expected to find him alive. All we can do now is find whoever did this and bring them to justice.”

The witch nods, side-glancing at Dani. “We could come up with... You know. Something to help.”

I wave a hand in dismissal. “Daniela knows. She saw me shifting.”

Sabrina scowls at me but doesn’t let Dani go. “That’s dangerous, Zev.”

“I know.” A shake of my head. “But there’s no point in hiding now. We have much more important things to worry about.”

Delphine looks between us for a moment before she nods. “Well. Then we could come up with a spell. With so many of us here, I bet it would be a powerful one.”

Sabrina looks up. “That’s a great idea, Delphine. A pointing spell. Something of the sort.”

Delphine acquiesces and turns around. “I’ll go get my grimoire. Pretty sure there’s something like that there.”

Daniela lets Sabrina go, brushing her cheeks free of tears. “A grimoire? What’s that?”

Sabrina hugs her sideways and guides us to the counter. “It’s a spellbook. Witches keep their best spells there.”

Dani combs the group. “You’re witches?”

The women nod. Sabrina chuckles. “Or do you think I keep my beauty naturally?”

That makes Dani chuckle too, even if it’s a tired, indistinct sound that grips at my chest. “You think you can find my

brother's killer like that? Why didn't you look for my brother then?"

Sabrina's lips tug in a scowl, and she makes Dani sit at one of the stools. "I'm so very sorry, Daniela. We were fools. Nothing of the sort ever happened in Shadow Falls. We thought he would be up in the cabin or something of the sort. Kills happen, but the culprits always come forward. It's to defend someone's mate or someone's territory. Never like this."

Daniela nods and Sabrina walks behind the counter. I take the stool next to the girl, our knees touching. She smiles up at me, or what might look like a smile in my hopeful mind. "Guess we only brought darkness with us, eh?" she says, and I shoot a hand out to grip her fingers.

"Of course not, Dani. Don't think like that. These things happen."

"But not around here."

I stare at her until she meets my eyes. "It's not your fault. We'll find whoever did this. And I'll make them pay."

Dani studies me for a moment, and the weight of my words brings some certainty to her. She breathes out, shoulders relaxing, and grips my fingers back. We sit in silence while Sabrina mixes a drink up. She slides it in Dani's direction and offers me half a pint of beer. I shouldn't drink while working, but half a pint will soon be digested. Both a blessing and a curse of wolf genes.

Delphine comes back with a thick, ancient book, and she sits with the others to discuss a spell. Dani's bright green drink disappears in minutes, and her pink cheeks make my cock harden, even if this is so not the right time.

My phone buzzes on the inside of my pocket. Crap, this will only make her look at my erection. I shoot to my feet and turn around before she can see the bulge. The name on my phone screen makes my heart beat double-time as I pick it up.

"Pietro?"

My partner clears his throat, and this is never good. “Zev. The result from the autopsy just came in.”

My heart sinks in my chest. Good. That’ll give us a head start. Diego was all cut up, and I’m sure the autopsy will tell me he died of blood loss. But I’ve been afraid to face what the marks on his chest meant, and anxious to learn what was he doing in the middle of the woods.

“Want me to read it?” Pietro offers, dragging me back from my musings.

“No. We’ll be there soon.” Daniela deserves to hear it too. It’s because of her insistence we found his body. If she didn’t show up, it might have taken weeks before someone found him. Diego was in a part of the woods that belongs to no one. No one runs there, no one does the borders anywhere close. It would have been a while before he was found and, by then, any clues would have disappeared.

“All right.” And Pietro cancels the call.

The moment I turn back to Dani, she’s already standing, her face two shades paler. “My brother’s autopsy.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“Your phone’s quite loud.” She darts a glance at the door. “Shall we?”

I study her for another moment. She looks cagey, shaky, but how couldn’t she? Dani came to Shadow Falls to look for her brother, and all she found was a corpse. Andressa is the only person connected to him, and she doesn’t feel like the guilty part. Then who did it? Is the town safe, after all? Or am I going to find more corpses by the end of the month?

“Let’s go,” I tell her with a nod, offering my hand. She takes it, intertwining our fingers, and we walk out of the Hexed to the station.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DANIELA



My hands shake when we cross the threshold into the police station. And to think this was the first place I saw in Shadow Falls. There was hope in my heart then. Hope to find my brother soon, so we could get back to our lives. Now, I walk into it knowing I'll never see Diego again.

My tongue grows thick in my mouth. There are no more tears to shed today, but guilt eats up everything inside me. I should have come after him earlier. Should have asked. Should have talked more... And now, it's all lost.

Zev touches the small of my back, and even through grief and guilt, the gentleness of his touch sends a wave of affection across my body. It almost soothes the ache inside me. Almost.

"This way," he says, pointing at a desk where another cop sits. The man gets to his feet and greets us, shadowed eyes when he sees me. He must read the guilt on my face. Must know I could have stopped this, but didn't.

"Boss," the man nods once to Zev. "I'll leave you to it." And he exits the station.

The voice inside me hums with sadness. Even she feels guilty. Even she wishes this was different, and she's just a voice inside my head. I care so little about what happens to me next I don't mind the lack of meds. Don't mind what their absence is doing to me.

Zev reaches the desk and picks up a folder. They cover the surface, sheets of paper and files, but he seems to know what

he's looking for. My head grows fuzzy, as if it's trying to slip away. To ignore what's about to happen.

The sheriff opens the folder and reads whatever is inside. I don't want to see it. Don't want the image of my brother's mangled body in front of me again. The only thing I smell is the tang of his blood, as if no matter how much I wash my hands, it won't ever go away.

Silence stretches, taut like a bowstring. My shoulders pull back, my spine stiff as if it's about to snap. A shiver of apprehension rolls through me, but I can't make up questions. Can't say anything.

Zev licks his lips. For a moment, I want his lips on me, and his arms around my body. Comfort. I want him to tell me it's not my fault, even when it clearly is. "Your brother had drugs on his system," he says, eyes searching for mine. "Not the drugs found in meds, but... Stronger things."

I blink, trying to dispel the fog in front of me. "Stronger things?"

He nods. "And Andressa was right. I asked the mortician to run his blood for shifter genes. He lives in town, both he and his wife are swans, so he knows about it." His throat bobs. "Your brother was a shifter, Dani. No mistake."

I cross my arms over my chest. "A shifter. Like you."

Zev nods. "Not necessarily a wolf. The tests can't tell you that. But he could change into something else, yes." His gaze lowers to the folder again. "You said your parents adopted you, so they didn't know you were shifters. Maybe..." A crease appears between his brows. "Maybe your parents treated Diego for a disorder because of the symptoms we get when our animals first show..." His eyes snap up to me and he stares.

I gape back at him, waiting for whatever he wants to say, but Zev's mouth moves without a sound before he gives up, looking back down at the folder with creased brows. Did I miss something?

No, I didn't get it either, says the voice inside my head.

Good. My mind is quite fuzzy. I want to leave. I miss my covers.

“Anything else?” I prompt him, aching to get out of this place. Anywhere. Anywhere but the station, where I have to face the reality of my failures and the loss of my brother’s life.

Zev nods slowly. “The marks on his chest. They fit wolf claws...” Zev frowns. “They were a bit deep for that, but the space between claws...”

A knot in my throat keeps me from swallowing. “A wolf killed my brother.”

“That’s a possibility. We also have to...”

That annoying one up at the ranch. What was his name?

“Ezra,” I reply to the voice, out loud. Zev meets my gaze. “That Ezra guy. He was a wolf, wasn’t he? And he looked like he hated my brother.”

Zev blinks. “Yeah, he’s a wolf, but...”

“It was him.” I change my weight between my feet, my heart thundering in my chest. “He killed my brother because he’s prejudiced. He seemed like a jerk. It had to be him.”

“We’re not sure, Dani,” Zev goes on, his voice steady. “But we have the time of death, so we can ask around, see whoever doesn’t have an alibi.”

“Yeah, because following the way of the law worked so well last time.”

The poison in my words makes Zev wince. I’m being a bitch, I know that. But I can’t help it. The pain inside me just flares out without letting me know first. I just want this over with.

Zev sees right through me. He lets the folder drop and grips my shoulders. I watch his chest rise and fall and follow his lead, taking deep breaths. He cups my jaw. “I’m so sorry, Dani. So sorry I didn’t find your brother in time. I know it’s my fault he’s dead. But I don’t want to arrest the first person out there and ruin someone’s life. Let’s do our best to make it right.”

I grind my jaw. “It’s not your fault.”

He shakes his head. “I’m the sheriff, so yeah, it is. Don’t carry the weight of things you are not to blame.” His sweet, sweet gaze rakes over my face for another moment before he pulls back. “Every wolf is now a potential culprit. Let’s talk with them and look for someone without an alibi. Sounds good?”

I step closer to him, seeking his warmth. “Yeah. Sounds good.” My voice comes out pathetic, breaking, but Zev only nods before he leads me out of the station. Finally.

All we have to do now is find some wolf who smells like a culprit. Someone who disliked my brother, or some animal who lost his control. I still know little about this shifter business. Maybe losing control is common. Maybe a famished wolf crossed with my brother in the woods and thought “why not?”

Whoever it was, I’m going to find them. And I’m going to avenge my brother.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZEV



Daniela isn't well. She's dealing with her brother's death the way many do — by taking the fault upon herself. But worse than it all is that I cracked half the case by myself, and I don't know how to share it with her.

Her brother is a shifter. But I'm pretty sure if we run Dani's blood through some tests, we'll find out she's one too. Not only her brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, she was as well. And I know it's because she must feel her animal inside her, and her parents didn't know how to explain it.

But she's going through so much. She found out about shifters on the same day she found her brother dead. I shouldn't have taken her into the woods. Now she has a picture seared into her brain she won't ever forget. And Daniela wasn't well before. Her self-esteem was low, with the disorder and taking care of her family. She's had no one to care of her. She's never felt loved for the sake of being loved, and I want to fix it. I want to help her find herself, and see herself the way I see her.

But there's something else too. The attraction, and the calling between us? Now it makes sense.

I can feel the animal inside her. It's drowsy and unsure, finding its footing, but I can feel it. And worse. It calls for me. My wolf calls for her.

Daniela's my mate. The realization hurts more than it should.

Finding my mate was supposed to be heavenly. The highest point of my life. But Dani is hurting. I can't give her this news right now. Not when she's dealing with so much. Not when it could send her running the other way. I have to take it easy. No matter how much my wolf is crying for her. No matter how much I need to feel her skin beneath my fingers. Her well-being is my priority. Finding whoever did this and help her through grief is the only thing I should think about.

Not about her curves beneath mine. Not about the taste of her. But it's getting harder and harder. The more her animal reacts to mine, the harder it gets.

"I can't believe we've been through them all," she says with a sigh as we drive back from the ranch. All the wolves in Shadow Falls live there. All but me, of course. We've spoken to them all, Ezra included, and everyone had solid alibis.

"Honestly, I'm relieved," I tell her. "I'd hate to know one of them killed your brother. Maybe it was some passing wolf. Someone we don't know."

Her fingers curl into fists on her lap. "Is that a possibility? Someone just comes and goes like that, and we'll never find them?"

I raise a hand and place it on the back of her neck. She relaxes. It might be because of the bond, but I've noticed she relaxes when we're touching. "The alphas will go through the borders again. They didn't catch the smell of wolf earlier, but they'll go through it once more. If it was a wanderer, they might catch his smell and follow it."

Daniela presses her lips into a thin line and looks away. I can feel her growing anxious, so I massage her scalp, bringing her back. It works, and her shoulders drop, a sigh escaping her lips. Her eyes flutter shut and I keep half my mind on the road, the other half on her.

Mate, my wolf whines. He wants her. He wants her so freaking bad it's the one thing he thinks of. I've lived free of his desires; he's always liked our lone life. But Daniela is different. I was attracted even before the bond showed up.

“I hate this,” she murmurs, her eyes still closed. “How lost we are.”

My thumb brushes her soft skin. “We’re not lost. Trails can be hard to find. But we’ll find it. We’ll solve this. No matter what.”

Her eyes open and she gazes at me. Daniela studies my face with such intensity it’s like she can read my thoughts, to the oldest memories in my head, to my filthiest desires. I hope she can’t see those. She wouldn’t like to know what I want to do to her pretty curves.

“Why are you so invested?” she asks, adjusting on the seat to face me.

I let my hand drop back to the wheel. “Why wouldn’t I be? I’m the sheriff.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, but... You’re *really* invested. I’ve never had anyone helping me like this the other times Diego went missing.”

I lick my teeth, staring ahead. “I hate the thought of something bad happening when I’m on duty. Shadow Falls is supposed to be a haven. A peaceful place where anyone can come seek refuge.” My lips twist. The thought of someone having been killed in these lands is atrocious. A true nightmare. It has the entire population going antsy. “Besides...” My voice dies down. I’m not sure how much I should tell her.

Dani cocks her head. She’s, of course, too persistent to let any subject drop. And I adore it. “Besides?”

I clear my throat. The woods clear out and I glimpse at the road that will take us back into town. We bump over the rocky path as I organize the words in my head. “You’re strong, Dani. I’ve never seen a stronger fighter.” I shoot her a glance, catching wide eyes, half-open mouth. “It breaks my heart how hard you’ve fought for your brother with no one helping you.”

She stares at me, her gaze boring into my skin. I keep my gaze ahead, knowing if I meet her eyes, I might give too much away. Besides the mating bond, there’s more. There’s this

attraction and the way my heart beats unevenly when I'm close to her. The way my skin aches to touch her, and how much I want to keep her safe and sound.

Dani shifts away and crosses her legs. We move out of the road and into town, passing houses as kids go back home from school and the sun slants toward the west. Dani follows a group of them with her eyes, then turns to me.

“What's next?”

I angle a smile toward her. “Afternoon tea? Early dinner? We can discuss the next steps.”

My motives are honest and pure. I have no urge of making a move right now when grief is so stark and she's so confused about her life. And I guess she sees through it because she nods.

“Sure.” She presses a hand to her stomach. “Don't remember the last time I ate.”

My lips twist. I should have insisted on seeing her earlier. She's spent a week on her own, and I gave her space when maybe she didn't need it. I'm still learning how she works and what she needs, but I want to make it the most important thing of my life.

I drive into my favorite restaurant in town and park. Dani follows me inside but lets me choose the meal. We wait ten minutes for it to be ready while I show her around the place, pointing at black and white pictures and telling their stories. Some are older than me, some from the founding of the city. Surprisingly, Dani pays attention to it all and asks questions, and we only notice the meal's ready when we're called. We pick the to-go containers up and leave.

Back into the car, it's a brief ride to my place. Dani doesn't want to go back to hers, and I don't ask why but I know she's uncomfortable with the way she left it. She's the kind of person who wants to be in control, and grief leaves us all over the place. I want to tell her it's all right, but she doesn't want to talk about it.

Dani should see a psychologist. We have only one in town, but he's good. He's worked with grief-ridden patients before, even shifters who lost their mates. But I'm not sure if the suggestion would offend Dani, not when she just quit her meds. She might think I'm calling her crazy. She might believe solving the case will settle her.

It's a convoluted thing. The case, my feelings, her not knowing she's a shifter. And I barely know where to begin with.

I don't live in pack lands, but a wolf is a wolf. The house my parents built is still here, though a bit neglected. The paint is peeling off in several places and there hasn't been a garden here since Mom passed away. The extra room is empty. I haven't got the time to develop hobbies, so I never messed with it. The house is the place I sleep in. The sheriff's job takes every drop of my focus.

Dani cocks her head, and she studies the frames hanging from the living room walls. They're still the ones my mom put up, with me as a kid and pictures of my parents' wedding. Dani looks over her shoulder, analyzing the timber TV stand and the dark couch.

"I guess your parents have passed away too." Not a question.

With a nod, I start down the hallway into the kitchen. Every shifter place has a wide kitchen, or so I've heard. The island in the middle is empty, but several empty mugs take the inside of the sink. I should stop and think about my caffeine addiction sometimes.

Dani's steps follow me. "No flowers, not even a vase. No decoration." A low, hollow chuckle escapes her lips. "Clearly a single man's place."

I chuckle with her, propping the food containers over the island. "What can I say? You're not wrong."

After I pick up some plates, she serves the food and we sit together on the island, knees touching. We're supposed to talk about the next steps on the investigation, but the subject is

sour and Dani moves her food around her plate too much for my taste. So I clear my throat and nudge her with my elbow.

“You’re acting so cool with all the supernatural discovery. Anything you want to ask?”

Her brows shoot up her forehead. “Oh, yeah. With my brother’s death, I totally forgot.” Her forehead pinches in concentration. “So, there are shifters and witches. What else?”

I tell her about vampires and all the sorts of nightwalkers that crawl about, not only Shadow Falls but other places. Other clan lands or pack lands, or havens like this one. Her eyes glitter with curiosity. I bet she’s seen little of the world, with caring for her family the way she does. And she’s young. Even before she’s seen the human world completely, she learns about an entirely new side of it.

She asks about the dragons, and I give my best to explain how they work. Not that I know much about it. I fill her in about the realities of vampires, and how they don’t sparkle but burn to ashes in the sun. She wants to know about what sorts of animals a shifter turns into, and she asks every question about it. When does it happen and how, if it hurts, if it can be controlled.

“Hurts a little, but you get used to it.” Our plates are empty, and I’m glad she’s eaten through the distraction. “Like period cramps, I would say. Not that I’ve ever had any.”

She chuckles, and this time it’s more honest. “Yeah, I know what you mean. Never stops hurting, but there’s no way around it, right?”

“Exactly.”

Her eyes go dazed, but there’s a curl to her lips. “Do you think my brother knew?”

I reach out for her hand. She grips my fingers back. “We can’t be sure of that. But I only hope I could have seen through his pain earlier. I would have been able to guide him through it. Help him through the first changes until he was used to it.”

She grips my fingers even tighter, her eyes turning misty. “Thank you, Zev. I know you would.” She takes a deep breath and releases it. Words tremble on the edge of her lips, but she doesn’t let them go. After a heartbeat, she slams her mouth shut and gives me a tight smile. “Let me do the dishes and you’ll brew us some coffee.”

The conversation goes on about shifter physiology. Are kids born in their animal shapes? No. When do they learn they’re animals? Around six they start feeling the tug, but the voice of their animal takes a while to develop. I’m careful around this subject, but her eyes go intense as she gazes at the plates.

“A voice,” she says as I hit the coffee maker on.

“Yeah. Like a voice inside your head. Someone else talking to you. The personalities are usually alike, so there isn’t a clash. But you have to be told you’re a shifter, I guess. I’ve never met a shifter who was raised away from shifter society.”

The water bubbles up and Dani turns the tap off. She faces me, her fingers dripping, dripping on the tiles. In her face, there’s confusion, there’s the possibility of something. She parts her lips. Another moment passes between us in silence. “Do you think...” She doesn’t end the sentence. She’s afraid to propose it.

I get her fear. It would change everything she’s ever known. But it would also make Shadow Falls a possible new home for her. Ambition makes my chest burn. I want her to stay. I want to be the one who leads her by the hand through this new existence. Goddess, to change next to her and run into the woods. To see the expression behind her eyes, the moment she first lets her animal take control. I want it all.

Turning to face her, I raise my hands to cup her cheeks. My thumb brushes her chin, her lower lip as I gaze into her eyes. As I urge her on, beg her to make the question.

Do it, Dani. Ask me if you’re a shifter too. I’ll be honest. I’ll tell you the truth, and I won’t ever let you live through your challenges by yourself. The promise is on the tip of my

tongue, ready to come out, when she props herself on her toes, her hands closing on my shirt, and her lips brush mine.

My mind blanks. I forget all else. My body heats and everything changes.

In the space of one heartbeat, I end the space between us, pressing my body to hers, roping my fingers through her hair. She gasps when I force my lips against hers, sealing the kiss, tasting her. Dani hugs me around the neck and molds her body to mine. We're one at that moment, her sweet, sweet taste exploding on my taste buds.

Fucking hell. The more I kiss her, the more I need her.

My hands curl around her hips, digging into soft flesh. She's so fucking curvy. My cock goes rock-hard as I inhale her in, every breath bringing more of the scent of her arousal. We pass straight from sweet to filthy, my tongue stroking hers, and Dani moans as she brushes her perfect tits against my chest.

I should tell her how I feel, and I should bring her flowers and take her to some fancy restaurant out of town. My body doesn't give a shit. My wolf howls inside me, urging me to bite her. Mark her, claim her. I roar into the kiss, rising my hands to her waist, gripping tight. She feels so good. So fucking good.

"Zev," she mewls against my lips, and it takes everything in me not to fuck her on the spot. But when I break the kiss to gaze into her eyes, I can only see the lust in hers. She licks her plump, swollen lips, and pulls me along as she backtracks to the island. "Kiss me harder."

Her wish is my command. My body works on its own and I put her up on the island. Legs flinging around me, Dani surrenders to the kiss, to the heat of our bodies crashing. It's the perfect height for her to grind against my hardness and that she does. She circles her hips and I explore her back beneath the shirt, and up her front, teasing her underboob. She murmurs in delight against my lips, but I don't take it that far. If I touch her breasts, I might not be able to pull back.

The animal lust inside me grows stronger. I feel her animal calling back and her nipples are so hard they could cut through our shirts. It's temptation in the flesh, sitting in front of me, grinding against my cock. Beckoning. Begging for my member inside her.

She must taste so sweet. My mouth waters at the prospect of licking her cunt as she rides my face into oblivion. Another roar climbs my throat. My cock pushes against the zipper of my pants. I bet it's about to burst clean through it. I grip her around the waist and devour her sounds, sucking on her lower lip until she moans my name.

"Zev!" she cries out, and it's not the kind of moan I was expecting.

Dani breaks the kiss, pushing me off. I let her, and a tang smell infiltrates my nostrils. I frown, looking around to find the source. Then I look at my fingers.

My claws have pushed through my nails. And they glimmer with red. It's not much, just tiny pearls of it. But it's blood, clearly blood.

Shock takes over first, but it gives space to regret. Bitter, bitter regret. "Fuck," I mouth, looking up at Dani. "I'm so sorry, Dani..."

The panic in her eyes is the last thing I ever wanted to see. It shuts me up so completely I can't do anything other than watch her backtrack, eyes wide, hands shaking.

"What the fuck," she stutters, face pale, hair mussed. "You hurt me!"

I open my mouth to apologize, to tell her my animal is a little out of control these days, walking next to her, holding back from touching her... But would that help? My mind whirls and I step closer just to watch her step away again.

"Don't come closer." She shakes her head. "You're a wolf. How the fuck did I forget that?"

I try to call her name but she keeps going, walking backward to the living room. My claws disappear into my

hands and I clean her blood into my pants. It doesn't seem to help with her panic, her fear. The fear I made her feel.

"Did you kill my brother, Zev?" she whispers, narrowing her eyes. And I know she's hesitant of learning if I did.

I can't lose her. Can't have her running off now. Not when we're so close.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "No, I would never do that. I'm sorry I hurt you, I'm just..."

"You're just what? Unable to control your animal?" She reaches the door but doesn't open it. "I trusted you."

The words pierce through me and I shiver with pain. "Please, Dani. Let me explain. I'm never like this. It's just that... You're my mate," I blurt out, "and my wolf has... He's been begging for you. I promise it won't ever happen again."

She curls her nose, hand on the doorknob. "I'm your what?"

"Mate. The perfect match. The one the Goddess has chosen for me." I reach for her, praying she'll relax under my touch, but she flinches so hard my heart breaks. "I'm so sorry."

She clucks her tongue, looking away. Her eyes glimmer. "I'm no one's perfect match. Is that another way to manipulate me into doing what you want?" A tear trembles on her outer lashes when she shoots me a glare. "Don't come after me, Zev. I'll find whoever killed my brother and bring them to justice. Even if the killer is you."

And then she leaves, and the air without her stinks like loneliness and mistakes. I stand there, staring at my hands, the ones who fucked me up. And I have no idea how I'll get her back. She's been through so much. I don't want to be another one to hurt her.

Hurting her is the last thing I want. And if I have to keep my distance to make that happen, then so be it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DANIELA



Maybe I should just go home. Diego's dead and nothing is going to change it. Yeah, I would love to find out who did it and why, to have some closure, to see justice being made. But no one knows anything, and whatever I do, it feels like every step forward takes me two steps back.

Days pass. I visit Ezra at his ranch, and Wyatt in his cabin in the woods, and both tell me the same — no invasions, at least none they could smell. They're as lost as I am.

I visit Sabrina at the Hexed too. Her coven — which is the word for a meeting of witches — has dispelled, leaving only a couple of them behind, still intent on finding whoever killed my brother. But every spell fails. Sabrina says they're either doing something wrong or the killer's behind powerful wards.

With my car keys in hand, I stare and wonder if I should go back. Leave this all behind. This crazy sort of adventure. Some people travel to places like this to find themselves and make new friends. Me? I just realized how much of a failure I've always been. My brother couldn't count on me. He was a shifter, and he probably didn't know. Everything is just so freaking wrong.

I stop playing with the keys, closing my fist around them. The possibility of being a shifter myself has crossed my mind several times. There *is* a voice inside my head. She urges me to take chances, to savor the woods, to go after Zev.

Shaking my head, I shove the thought away again. This can't be a shifter. Why would a shifter be calling for Zev? Yes,

he's hot and caring and protective, but what does that have to do with whatever animal would be inside me? Nothing. Wouldn't an animal be asking to hunt or pee or something? And the voice in my head hasn't done any of these things. All she cares about is Zev, Zev, Zev. The man who might have killed my brother.

He had me around his finger. With his sweetness and kindness, and the way he treated me as his priority. I would have believed it was honest. But if the other wolves have an alibi... He is a potential killer. He pricked me with his claws when we were kissing.

Was it hot? Hell yeah. Feeling him lose control like that gave me a thrill that was only overcome by the fear he was my brother's killer.

I drop on the bed, grunting. I don't know what to do. Should I go away? Should I stay and persist? I could hope Zev's going to find the murderer and let me know. But if he is the killer, he wouldn't take the investigations far. The moment I drove away, he'd drop them.

We need a walk, the voice inside my head suggests. And she's damn right. A walk could clear my thoughts. It's the strangest thing to agree with the "voice inside my head" and that maybe makes me crazier than usual, but she says wise things.

I get to my feet and look outside. Night has fallen, though I have no idea what time it is. Shrugging, I slide into my sneakers, leaving my phone over the nightstand as I walk to the door. The moment I reach the doorknob, someone knocks on the other side.

With an arched brow upon the coincidence, I open it. Delphine stands on the other side, a soft smile on her face. Unlike the other witches, she looks just young. Maybe she's new to this thing. Are witches immortal? Or just ancient? There are so many questions about witches Zev couldn't answer me.

"Hey there," she greets. She's also in leggings and sneakers, her hair pulled back in a ponytail as she crosses her

arms over her chest, a chuckle dropping from her lips. “I was just about to invite you to trek a bit into the woods, but I guess you were on your way out.”

Talk about coincidences. My brows shoot up. “I just thought of doing that.” I step out of the room and close the door behind me. “Any special reason?”

Delphine shakes her head as she motions me down the corridor. “No. But exercise often helps with heavy burdens. It airs the mind. It can help you see clearer.”

My heart melts. “Thanks, Delphine. A walk would do me good now.”

We descend into the main area of the inn, and the receptionist appears from one of the inner rooms. Her brows arch up. “Evening, Delphine. I thought you had already left.”

“Just leaving,” Delphine says with a wave over her shoulder. We amble out of the inn and down the street, and I let her lead us on. It’s not like I know any trekking trails around here. “Tell me about your life back home, Daniela. What do you do for a living?”

It’s painful at first, telling her how my boss fired me after I never showed back up, and how I have nothing to go back to. No parents, no brother, no other family. I used to have friends, but I had to work so much I lost contact with them.

We cross the threshold into the woods. Delphine pulls out a flashlight, illuminating the path even before I stumble onto anything. She’s thought of it all. I’ve never hiked the woods in the evening. Well, I’ve never hiked the woods, period. But the evening brings a special ambiance to it. I would expect silence, but the insects are having a party. Several songs and calls play around us. Delphine points out the name of the ones she recognizes.

“What about Zev?” she asks, looking over her shoulder at me. “You two seemed close.” She tilts a smile. “Really close, I’d say.”

I curl my nose and look away. The memory of Zev makes my cheeks burn. “I don’t know, Delphine. Don’t know who

am I supposed to trust.”

She slows down to run an arm across my shoulders. “Well, he *is* a wolf, after all. Shifters aren’t always to be trusted. Their control is very complicated. The magic that allows them to shift isn’t foolproof.” She clucks her tongue. “It’s because they’re not natural magic users. They never learned about it, never studied anything. They’re just controlled by it. And being controlled is a dangerous thing.”

I nod, gazing at her. “So it’s a thing? Shifters losing control?”

Was Zev lying all this time? But why? Why was he leading me on? And the story about being mates? Soul mates, meant to be. What the hell does he want with it? The more I think about the matter, the more confused I get. I can’t see through it.

Delphine nods, tightening the grip on my shoulder. “Yes. They’re not meant to have this magic that lives inside them, so it’s always fighting to be freed. It’s not exactly natural. And when something is forced, it never works out well.” She keeps going, and I have to keep up with her long strides as she maintains her hold around my shoulders. “The best thing would be to cut the evil from the root.”

I frown. Why is my heart beating so fast? Delphine is a friend. She’s trying to help, explaining to me how this world works. It makes sense. Zev couldn’t control his animal. Maybe he wasn’t able to control it when he attacked my brother. And my brother’s animal wasn’t under control too. That’s why he felt so bad. But the voice inside my head? She grows, gains heart, and she’s warning me against something. The sense of imminent danger creeps closer, and I look over my shoulder several times. Even if I can’t quite defend myself, Delphine would protect me. Wouldn’t she? She’s a witch, after all. She’s studied and learned magic, the way she thinks is right.

With looking over my shoulder, I stumble on something and look down. A rock. Who would put a rock here? But when I lift my eyes and follow Delphine’s light, I see several other polished rocks forming a circle. My stomach bottoms out. It’s

the place. The place my brother was killed. The place I found him.

Images of that day flash across my mind. Each one of them pierces my heart all over again and I wince, physically recoiling from it. My eyes search for Delphine, but she's let me go, walking to the center of the clearing. There, she stops and turns to face me. And her eyes have changed.

They glitter red like blood. Fear fills my veins. And the smile on her face is anything but inviting.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZEV



Hands on my head, I stare at the pictures of Diego's mangled body, scattered over my desk. It's past ten, and I should be home. Should be enjoying my rest, taking my wolf for a run. And he does need it. The bastard whines and whines for Daniela, never stopping. The one thing that will put him to rest, besides Daniela, is a run into the woods.

But I need to solve this. There's a piece of this puzzle missing. I know it. And while I don't solve whatever it is, the murderer is out there, capable of doing more shit.

My eyes follow the gashes across Diego's chest. I stare at my hand. The gashes are the precise distance for a wolf attack. But whenever I attack preys, I never use my paws. The paws are used to push the prey off, make them lose balance, stumble. My actual weapon is my teeth. They're the ones that do the real damage.

Why would a wolf kill someone like this?

I scowl. That's not the right question. I shouldn't ask why — but how. How could a wolf kill someone like this when our nails weren't even meant for it? Would I even be able to slash someone?

That's it. That's the missing piece.

I shoot to my feet, collecting all the pictures and shoving them inside the folder. Pietro calls for me as I stride out of the station, but I don't turn back. I need to follow this inspiration before it runs out. I take off in a jog, eating up the distance

between the station and my place. The keys jiggle in my hand and it takes me one smooth try to open the door. I slide inside and throw the folder onto my dining table. Two steps take me into the kitchen and the fridge.

To hell with it. I have to solve this case. Have to give Dani some closing. The mating bond calls between us, yes, but she's not ready for it. She has too much going on. And if this is the best I can do for her, then so be it.

I've got a slab of meat from a hunt two days ago inside the fridge. Didn't have the time to cut it up. I place it in a tray on the ground, in the middle of the kitchen, then step over it to walk into my bedroom. I strip and return to the living room to allow my wolf to take over. He comes quickly. Fur sprouting, legs bending and breaking. It doesn't even hurt anymore. I just need him out. Need him to collaborate with me.

Once I'm on all fours, he gives me back control. Usually, it's a steady fight between his instincts and my reason, and we're always struggling for balance. Tonight, he knows what we need. I walk into the kitchen, everything gray, colorless. The scent of raw meat wafts up to me and my stomach rumbles. But there's no time for that.

Tensing my hind legs, I attack. Not with my teeth, but with my paws. I slash and push and try and try, but as expected, it doesn't make as much damage as Diego's body displayed. Not even close. Once I'm satisfied, I pull back and my wolf peels away, leaving me naked on two feet, staring at the slab of meat and gaping at the realization.

It was a ruse. Everything is a ruse. The gushes are deep enough for a bear's claw, but then the distance between fingers doesn't make sense. That's because it's fake. Someone made them, with a knife or some sharp object. Someone tried to frame us wolves.

Rage coils inside me, but I push it to the back of my brain. There's no point in going wrath mode now. I need to solve this. Need to find whoever is trying to slink away without paying. I put my clothes back on and race out of my place. I have to figure this out before anyone else gets hurt.

Before she gets hurt.

Diego was a shifter, and unaware of that. Dani is a shifter, and she's also unaware. The fact they're brothers and have no one else in their lives helps. Murderers often look for people like this. For the ones who won't be missed. The joke's on them. I wouldn't ever let anything happen to Dani.

I make my way to the inn and burst into the hall, expecting to find it empty. But the receptionist is on this side of the counter, elbow over it, muttering something under her breath as she looks through a notebook. She raises her head when I walk in.

"Night, sheriff," she greets, but there's no smile on her face. A crease appears between her brows.

"Everything all right?" I ask, slowing down as I reach her.

She straightens her spine, crossing her arms and looking away. "Not sure. Just a feeling."

I shrug. "Shifter gut feelings should never be overlooked."

She nods, slowly, as if this has already crossed her mind. "It's Delphine. She checked out, got her stuff, and left. Then she came back and... I don't know. Maybe I'm being prejudiced against witches. But this murder put us all on edge."

"Of course." I frown, studying her face. "Why do you think it was odd that she came back? Maybe she forgot something?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing of the kind. I thought it was the case, but I think she didn't see me when she came in. She went straight to the rooms upstairs and came back down with Daniela. They went out for a walk, I think. But I don't like it. Why did she come back?" She shakes her head again. "And she seemed surprised when she saw me here. Like she didn't expect it. Yeah, I'm not often behind the desk at this hour but..." She shivers. "The way she looked at me gave me the creeps. It felt like a threat. And you know I'm an otter. Can't do much against a freaking witch..."

My brain has stopped processing her words. Everything slows down when she utters the name of Daniela. It pieces together. Exactly what I was thinking. And Delphine made it look like she was leaving so no one would think it was her.

A witch. It would make sense why Diego didn't react when she slashed him up. With drugs in his system, it would make it hard to escape a predator like a wolf. But a person? He would have fought back. Being a witch, Delphine could easily spell him up, keep him in place. I shake my head in disbelief.

He couldn't fight back, because he was spelled.

My blood turns to ice. Delphine is not only Diego's murderer. She's after Daniela too.

My mate might be moments from death.

Whirling around, my heart on my throat, I race out of the inn and into the woods. The second I'm past the trees, I strip off my pants and shirt, and my wolf bursts from me, in one explosion that makes my bones rattle. We land on four paws and he takes over. Looking up, we see no moon shining past the trees. Tonight is a new moon, the darkest night for a moment like this. My wolf throws our head back and howls. A warning. A call. He puts our nose to the ground to find Dani's scent, and our legs pump to reach her.

I need to reach her. Before it's too late.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DANIELA



My vision blurs with panic. I didn't even know it was a thing. I've been in tough spots several times in my life, but never something like this. Never dancing with death in the middle of the clearing my brother's body was found in.

Delphine grins as she steps into the clearing, putting her flashlight down. My heart beats double-time, but I can't take my eyes out of the way her eyes glow. It's magical, in a way that makes my stomach churn. Like blood, glinting as it swirls down the drain. A shiver races down my spine. I try to step away, but something holds me in place. My teeth clatter as I meet Delphine's eyes again, and she cackles.

"No escaping now, sweetheart." She lifts a finger and waves it around us. "Do you think I'm dumb? I've been here before. The wards are strong and inescapable." She raises her brows and indicates my feet. "Can't move, can you?" She winks.

I swallow hard. Confusion whirls around in my head. I have no idea what to do. I'm alone in the woods at night, with someone I thought I could trust, and no way of defending myself or calling for help. I'm a freaking weaponless, untrained woman who has to fight against a freaking witch.

And I thought Shadow Falls was a safe place. How could I have been so mistaken? My brother died. Of course there was someone evil lurking around.

“How could you?” I spit out, my entire body shaking even when I can’t move my feet. “Diego did nothing bad.”

She shrugs, looking around herself. “I needed a sacrifice.” She motions to her face. “Beauty and long life only come with a price. The other girls are more... Moral, I guess? They don’t like the original approach. The bloody one.” Another shrug, a soft smile on her face. It’s not like she’s talking about killing my brother. My mind goes fuzzy. Is this really happening? “Our ancestors did this. Not all of them, of course. But some. The smartest. What’s one lost pup, right?” Her smile turns hungry. “Or two. With the blood of you two, I get a hundred more years. A hundred years I can help other people.”

“Help other people?” I stutter out, my eyes stinging. “You’re about to kill me. You killed my brother.” My voice is unsure, weak. This has to be a nightmare. One that feels very real, but a nightmare.

I’m half expecting she’ll start laughing and other people will jump from the trees and reveal it’s a prank. How the hell did I end up in this?

“It’s an exchange, Daniela,” she goes on. Approaching slowly. My legs tense to pull back, but I’m still frozen to the spot. “Two lives, of unimportant individuals no one will miss, and I have a hundred years of healing people.” She shakes her head. “You wouldn’t refuse that, would you?”

I bare my teeth. “Like hell I’ll fall for that talk. You killed my brother.” My voice comes stronger, and now I shake with rage. Red stains my vision. “You killed my brother!”

She steps away, watching me. Her smile has disappeared, her face turning somber. “Very well. If you want to go down like that, then it’s your call. I was just trying to help. Sometimes, people accept their fates more willingly.”

She has the audacity to sigh as if I’m being difficult. Hampering her murder spree. Ha. As if.

Delphine turns her back to me because she knows I can’t run and can’t attack her. I glare at her, but she doesn’t spare me another moment of attention, bending on her waist and

adjusting rocks to precise spots before she picks up a purse from the back of a tree.

She's been planning this. I wonder for how long. For how long has she looked at me in the face and promised she'd help with my brother when all she thought about was killing me too. Was she laughing at me? Did she find it all funny?

From the bag, she brings out a posy of tiny flowers, pretty light pink and white. She undoes the tie holding it together and spreads the flowers throughout the circle, chanting under her breath. My heartbeat triples its speed as I catch the smell of verbena. I've smelled it before. Never connected it to anything.

The damn witch wants to kill me to keep her beauty. Talk about stereotypes.

While Delphine has her back to me, I struggle with the invisible ties keeping me in place. Certainly a spell. My body barely moves, and my legs are leaden, stuck to the ground of the woods. I think of Zev. God, how I wish he was here. It wasn't a wolf after all, and much less him. He wasn't lying. Delphine was.

The fact Zev wasn't lying about killing my brother makes me wonder about what other truths he told that I dismissed. Am I his mate? His truly, soul mate? The subject occupies my brain for the entirety of two seconds before Delphine whirls around to face me. The way she grins turns my stomach to water. I shake all over again.

"Almost there," she sing-songs before she walks back to her purse and searches through it. The flashlight glints against metal. Delphine pulls out a dagger, the edge so thin I could use it to pick at my nails.

I'm so fucked.

My heart climbs to my throat. I have to find a way out. Zev is not here, and he doesn't know where I am. No one can save me. I have to be the one to save myself. Somehow. Somehow I have to get rid of a spell when I just learned witches exist, and

I'll have to save my ass against a freak with a knife when I can't even move.

Either that or I'm dead.

Leave it to me.

I frown. The voice inside my head seems oddly clear today. What does she mean by "leave it to her"? What can she do in this case? Does she know something I don't?

Delphine pulls the dagger and gets to her feet. She raises her eyes to the sky, then closes them, and her lips move to a chant in a language I don't understand. She sways to its rhythm, and it swells to something hypnotic as she brings her hands up.

Time approaches. Hurry!

Hurry what? What am I supposed to do? And why am I arguing with the voice inside my head?

You know very well what we are. Zev was not wrong. He can feel it.

The words are a bucket of cold water at first. I refuse to think about it. Refuse to accept their reality. Memories swirl in my mind. If my brother is a shifter, why am I not one too? The voices in our heads. The animals inside us. How Zev looks at me.

His mate. I'm his mate. He smells the animal inside me.

I grind my jaw and my eyes widen as Delphine snaps her eyelids open and stares straight at me. There's something like madness in her pupils as she starts in my direction. Pressure grows in my chest until I can't breathe. I pant, and I struggle, but finally, I know there's no other way.

With a sigh, I leave it to the voice inside my head. Closing my eyes, I relax and give in to the pull. Give in to the urge inside me, an urge to do something, I don't know what.

The second I relax, pain flares all over my body.

I try to pull control back, but we're far gone now. My eyes open to see the night differently. A scream bursts through my

lips and I feel an unfathomable itch all over my skin, but I can't fucking tell what's happening. Pain crashes over me, twisting my spine, and I feel my legs bending in awkward angles but they can't be doing that, can they?

What the fuck is going on?

The voice escaping out of my throat turns hoarse, changing until all I hear is an ear-pitching howl. It eats up all other sounds, and when I come to myself, I recognize the howl comes from *me*. I open my eyes and the night is different. There's no more the shade of greens of the forest, but hundreds of grays, one brighter than the other. And everything is so freaking clear. Like I've been half-blind my entire life.

Delphine still stands before me, arms dropping to her sides, a huge smile on her face. "Yes. Fight as hard as you want. You can't outrun my spells, little wolf."

Little wolf? I look down at myself.

Fuck. I just changed into a wolf.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DANIELA



The confusion whirling inside my body almost drowns out the fear, but the witch glaring at me with red eyes doesn't let me put my guard down. She bares her teeth and lets out a squeal of rage that makes a shiver race down my body. I feel the fur on the back of my neck rising.

Crap, did I turn into a wolf? Or is this whole thing a complex hallucination from the lack of meds? I've had hallucinations when changing the potency, but tiny spiders walking in the walls and things of the sort. Never something so freaking big. I never turned into an animal, that's for sure.

Delphine shakes her head, her ponytail hitting her jaw. "So, you did come out to play," she says with a cackle. "Your brother wasn't brave enough to. His wolf kept begging him to let him free, but your brother was so sure he was just mad he never gave in to the urge to shift. A fool. But a fool who accepted his purpose."

She shoots me another one of those glances that say I'm the wrong one here for refusing to die. Delphine is out of her mind. There's no way anyone would accept to die this easily, and for something so futile. I want to tell her my brother would never do that. He would have fought, even if he thought he was mad, hearing a voice in his head. I knew he would have fought because that's who we are. We've always fought against the worst in the world, against whatever the world sent our way.

We never backed down, no matter what. Diego would never have given up.

All the words bubbling up inside me escape my lips as a roar. My upper lip pulls back and I let it growl up my throat, the sound powerful, grave, echoing up the tall woods around us. I feel pleasure when I do this, a warmth inside my chest. My wolf likes it. I know she does. This relationship is something I have yet to explore, to understand. But I am a shifter, and this wolf inside me is both part of my soul and someone else's.

I want to run. To escape until I find someone who can defend me. Maybe Zev. Now I see he spoke the truth. How he knew I was a shifter and was unsure of how to approach the subject. And the mate deal? It's in the back of my mind, but I haven't forgotten about it.

My wolf has other, more important plans at the moment. She wants blood.

There's only vengeance in the forefront of my brain. I picture my wolf's jaws closing around Delphine's neck, and the sound of it cracking and the warm liquid of her life seeping from her into my tongue. Lowering myself, I let my wolf take over. Let her fill my mind, her choices becoming my own.

Delphine's face changes. And it's good she sees it. How her spell does nothing to hold me back, and how my wolf doesn't give a shift about moral codes. Diego died in her hands. Sick, alone, suffering. And she not only doesn't regret it, but she wants to do it again. She stains his memory with jokes and irony as if my brother wasn't the strongest person I knew.

The frown deepens in my face and I take a step closer. Delphine raises her dagger and there's fury on her face, but I watch her step back and out of the center of the clearing. Not so brave now, is she?

"You think you can take me down, trash?" She laughs. "This is your first shift. You can't control your body properly." A shrug of her shoulder. "Doesn't matter. I'll carve you out like a pumpkin, and there's nothing you can do." Another laugh. "It would have been simple when it was just your brother. No one thought it was me. I carved him out to make it look like a wolf did it." She swirls her dagger in her hand.

“But then you showed up, and I couldn’t refuse it. Fight as much as you like. You’re going down, and I’m feeding on your life force for my youth and my beauty. Even if the sheriff or Sabrina sniffs me out, I’ll be long gone, and no one will catch me once I’m out of the wards.”

Another roar, deep in my chest, and my wolf lunges. She doesn’t give a shit about whatever Delphine’s babbling about. She doesn’t care about threats or consequences. The image of Diego’s smile and the fact I’ll never see it again flash in my mind with searing pain, and I let her take the lead. I let my wolf do whatever she wants, as long as the vengeance fills this gaping hole inside my chest.

With a yelp, Delphine jumps out of the way at the last minute. I tense my legs to stop my forward motion, but it isn’t easy controlling four legs at the same time. I skid and stumble before I turn around to face her again. The flashlight turns her hair silvery, almost beautiful if she wasn’t trying to kill me. Delphine raises her hand, dagger in her grip, teeth bared between a snarl and a smirk.

My wolf moves again. Delphine isn’t wrong when she said I’m not completely in control of my motions. But it’s not me doing the choice making. It’s my wolf, and though we’re not one-hundred percent synchronized, I’m pretty sure we can nail a vengeance today. We can stop it before she hurts anyone else. We can bring justice to Diego.

I want to kill her.

My wolf snaps at the air and Delphine backs off again. She moves the dagger around her, then lifts a hand. Light glitters from the ground, and I jump away as a circle appears in the underbrush. There are signs and runes drawn around it, but I waste no time studying them. I aim at her calves and pump my legs until I’m close enough to jump and bite her.

Her scream makes my heart beat with excitement. Adrenaline floods my veins as I tighten my hold, the tang of blood reaching my nose. I breathe it in and smile, though I’m not sure how it looks like on my wolfish face.

“Fucking trash!” She screams, squirming her legs out of my reach. I let it go, aiming at her other leg, my vision red. “Don’t dare to touch me!”

Pain flares in my right side and I yelp, abandoning the plan of biting her again in favor of rushing away. Did she stab me? It sure hurts as much. My stomach roils, but I can’t stop to think about this now. We have to finish this. I’ll limp back to town later if I have to.

Delphine raises her hand again and I prepare to jump out of the way. She moves her fingers and hisses something under her breath, slicing her hand down next. I jump to the side, but the wound on my right shoulder ignites in pain. A whine escapes me and I drop. It fucking feels like my blood is on fire.

She comes closer, limping but still grinning. I try to get to my feet, to naught. The pain racing through me is like lava, burning everything away. I slam my eyes shut and roar. Get up! Get the fucking up or she’ll kill us!

Delphine drops to her knees, a victorious smile on her face. I try to squirm away. She laughs, raising the dagger. I’m dead. Just like that, and no matter how much I fought. It was for naught.

Closing my eyes, I think of my brother. And of Zev. I think of all the things I never had. The warmth of love and family, a place where I belonged to. I wanted to stay in Shadow Falls, wanted to use it to heal my pain. But I won’t have time for any of it.

Death closes in. I open my eyes and stare at her, unwilling to let her think she broke my soul. Delphine stands in front of me, dagger risen and coming closer, then she’s not there. I blink several times, looking for her on the periphery. My heart skitters when I see the back of another wolf, dark as the night, hackles raised. And then there’s the sound of ripping, and the start of a scream becomes the gurgle of someone drowning.

The burning in my veins stops. I get to my feet and circle the wolf, adrenaline rushing through me as I study the black

fur and the ground until I find Delphine's black leggings, feet trembling until they stop. I halt, silence blaring in my ears.

Is she dead? Breathe, Daniela. Just breathe.

Before fear for this wolf takes over, I inhale his scent. And it's something like pine and spices, and I recognize it. Like I've always meant to smell it. It's Zev. Of course, it's Zev.

My body relaxes so hard I almost drop. He came after me. And Delphine's dead. Regret tastes bitter on my tongue, and I wish it was me who took her life. But instead of my heartbeat relaxing, it keeps on picking up. Adrenaline washes away, but something else coils inside me.

My wolf recognizes Zev's wolf. Not only recognizes, but she sees more than I've ever seen in him. My heart grows two sizes and being in his presence brings me so much joy I'm hyperventilating.

What is this? Yeah, I'm attracted to him, and I love being around him, and I feel safe and all but... This is different. This is more.

Zev turns to me, muzzle stained with blood. And I feel the tug between us. Stepping closer, I bump my forehead to his, soaking in his presence.

If that's what being mates mean, I'm into it. But we still have much to discuss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZEV



That almost got me. Knowing Daniela was out there with my one suspect drove me almost to madness. I shed my human form in favor of my wolf. Faster, stronger, he could find them easier. My heart was a powder keg, about to explode with fear for her.

What if Daniela got hurt? What if I was too late and Delphine killed her?

Fucking hell, a second murder when I'm the one with the duty of protecting these people, and it's my mate. I could never live with myself. Never bear another second of living with that knowledge.

I stare at her beautiful, cinnamon-colored wolf. The big, expressive eyes are the same. She stares at me for a moment, then steps closer, touching our foreheads together. Emotion knots in my throat. She feels it. She feels the connection between us, the thread of the mating bond between our hearts, tugging.

Before I can soak longer in her presence, I smell the tang of blood. And it's not the witch's. Stepping back, I race my gaze over Daniela's body, studying her fur, looking for the insulting source of the smell. And there it is. On her right shoulder, red stains the beauty of her coat, racing down her paw. New adrenaline shoots through me.

I whine, her pain hurting me. I can't believe I let her get hurt. Can't believe I allowed the woman of my life to almost get killed on my fucking watch. Daniela cocks her head,

gazing at me. I close my eyes and force my wolf away. He's not willing to leave, worried about her, but I need hands and thumbs to check on her wound. It's a struggle, but he gives into it. After a moment, I'm kneeling on my human form in front of my mate.

I reach out for her paw and she whines. My fingers race through her soft fur and I lean closer to her face. "It's all right, love. Let me see it."

Daniela gives me her leg, her eyes slamming closed. The slash wound is deep. She's going to need a couple of stitches to make sure her shifter healing leaves no scars. I poke at the edges of the cut. As deep as Diego's, I bet. A glance over my shoulder makes sure the weapon of the crime is nearby, next to Delphine's body and a purse.

My mate whines. I shoot my attention back to her, worry shooting up inside me. Her eyes are wide, ears twitching.

"What's wrong?" I prompt.

She shakes her head as if to dispel something. When our gazes lock, there's panic in her pupils. I reach both hands for her, cupping her head between my palms and bringing my forehead to hers.

I've been through this. She can't turn back. It was her first shift and she did it all without help. With no one walking her through it. When I first shifted, my parents were with me. They smoothed my fears away and guaranteed I would shift back, eventually. I would learn to separate the wolf and the man, and I had to learn to control the wolf, so the man had the upper hand.

Dani had nothing of that. Her parents didn't know, and they weren't to blame for that. I wonder how many other children are lost out there, without anyone to help them through the changing into shifter, or any other awakenings into other supernatural species.

"Breathe, love," I murmur, as softly as I can. Just for her ears. So she won't be scared, so she'll see this is part of the deal. "Close your eyes. Breathe."

She shoots me one last hesitant glance, and her eyelids flutter closed. Her breathing takes a while to settle, and I guide her through some breaths. The night slants away and there we stay, just the two of us, my hands around her head.

“It’s all right, love.” My voice is so low the insects around us trill again. They don’t mind us. We’re just two other beings in the forest, together under the light of the stars. “I’m with you. I’ll always be with you.”

Daniela shudders, and her wolf slowly peels away. When she opens her eyes again, there’s a brightness in them I have never seen. A smile crosses her face and she slings her arms around me. It’s impossible to hide my erection from her, not when the two of us are naked in the forest ground, but I do my best to keep it from brushing her stomach. Dani pulls back, a frown on her face.

“Ouch,” she says, looking at her shoulder. It bleeds still, and I cluck my tongue.

“Let’s get you back to town. You can heal by yourself now, but this one will definitely leave a scar. If you get a couple of stitches, it’ll be fine.”

She licks her lips and accepts my hand to get up. I avoid looking at her body so I won’t embarrass her, but my eyes insist on looking for her fine breasts beneath her hair and the full curves of her hips. I tug on her hand but she doesn’t move, and I search her face to find her gaze pinned to Delphine’s body behind us.

My grip on her hand tightens. “I wish it hadn’t been like this,” I tell her, catching her attention.

“Like what?”

I cup her cheeks, thumb brushing her smooth skin. “You came to Shadow Falls looking for your brother. I wish you could say you found him and yourself in the meantime, learning you’re a shifter. Instead, all I got you is the memory of two dead bodies. No one deserves to see this much death.”

Dani chews on her bottom lip, then closes the space between us. My cock presses to her lower stomach and lust

ignites my blood. I try to swallow it, but it's impossible when her soft body touches mine like this. When her eyes shine under the stars and her fingers race through my hair.

“Zev. You did your best. But some things aren't under our control, are they?” She sighs, shooting another glance at Delphine. “I do regret not being the one to kill her, though. But she used some kind of spell that kept me locked to the spot.”

My hands close into fists. “Dani. Don't say that.”

Her brows rise. “What?”

“That you wanted to kill her. I ran as fast as I could because I didn't want you getting hurt.” Our foreheads touch again. “And that includes your heart, love. I don't want to turn you into a killer if that can be helped. It's a weight you would never get rid of. Something you can never wash away.”

Her eyes turn somber. Her hands stroke down my arms and she intertwines our fingers. Finally, Dani nods. “You're right. My brother wouldn't have wanted me killing in vengeance. My parents wouldn't either. They taught me better than that, even when they had no idea we were shifters.”

Another nod. Dani tilts her chin up, eyes half-lidded as she studies my face. Without another word, I bend and touch her lips with mine.

This kiss is different. Under the stars, after everything that happened... It's a seal. A promise. We're in it for the long run, and I know she wants to stay. Dani parts her lips for me but, before I can touch my tongue to hers, she winces again.

“Crap,” I curse, pulling back. “We should get you checked out. Come on.” I tug on her hand, leading her out of the clearing and back the way I came. Luckily, I stripped before changing so I can put my pants back on and lend her my shirt. It'll be big enough to cover her entire body. More blood runs to my cock when I picture her in my clothes, but her perfect body overshadows the image, bared next to me.

Dani shoots a glance over her shoulder. “What about Delphine?”

I bring her hand up and kiss her knuckles. “She won’t go anywhere. I’ll send my men up here to collect the body and the weapon. We’ll have it all settled by tomorrow.”

Dani walks in silence for a while, but then her shoulders relax and a soft smile appears on her face. I don’t ask and I don’t break the quietude, but I know she’s calm for the first time in forever. And I’m glad I’ve been able to help her through some of it.

Coming next? Our new life together. No threats, no fears. Just love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DANIELA



My heart should be sad, but there's something calming about closure. I put my brother to rest, burning his body and spreading his ashes around a beautiful oak tree in the forest. It's the sort of place he would have loved, with the golden hues of the leaves and the sun glinting into the grass. Birds chirp all around, and I close my eyes and soak in the warmth of it all.

Andressa cries. I hold her around her shoulders and let her weep. Sometimes, I fear she misses my brother more than I do. But I know it's not the same. People just grieve differently, and I'm glad I found the culprit for Diego's murder. She will never hurt another soul.

Zev walks me back to the inn but I don't stay there long. After the cops hear me out and the dagger is crossed with Diego's wounds, Zev helps me pack up and I move into his place. We haven't even slept together and things might seem like they're moving too fast, but I don't care. I don't care what others think, and the way people see me anymore. I have no one left, and Shadow Falls is the one chance I have at a restart.

And I need a restart. Especially after Zev gifts me a phone they found inside Delphine's purse.

Diego's phone. Full of unsent messages to me. He really was out of phone signal, but he never blamed me. He worried about me, and he explained in messages how he had started to think the voice in his head meant more than a mental disorder. My brother was close to a breakthrough. He did take Andressa seriously when she told him about the animal inside him, and

he took his time walking in the woods, trying to find a connection to the animal.

I bet that's where Delphine found him. Curious, with his guard low, needing help. And though I still hope I came after him earlier, I know it's not my fault, and Diego never held a grudge against me. He loved me, as much as I love him.

Zev holds me through the tears as I read the messages, as I come to terms with the truth. And then I can move on. Towards a new life, with my mate.

Zev and I could share the bed, but he's keeping it PG-13 even when I don't want him to. For a week now, he wakes up early and makes us breakfast. He guides me through my shifts and we run together before he goes to work. I spend the day adjusting my finances and looking for remote jobs, and I read and I cook. Zev hugs me around the waist and kisses me on the top of my head every time, and I could get used to it.

I could say spending the days like this feels like therapy, but Zev convinced me to talk to the town's only psychologist, so that's that. Impressive how talking to someone who knows what's going on in your brain makes a difference. The doctor never judges me, watching me with an empty face through everything I have to say. I'm not the first to be raised like a human, and it's soothing to have someone to help me through the guilt and regrets.

The night breeze blows into the open window. I want to buy some curtains for this one. Zev has gone decoration-free for his entire life, it seems, but things are changing now. He gave me the white flag, and I can't wait to decorate a place I live in for the first time. When I lived with my parents, it wasn't up to me, and when Diego and I moved in together, we never had enough money for it.

I can't wait for the snippets of normal life I've never had. Decorating, cooking whatever I want, sharing a life without worries. And there's more. There's a new life ahead of me. A new world opens, a world made of supernatural creatures, and so much to learn about this new body.

The wolf inside me is a constant presence, and it's funny to remember how I thought I was crazy, and how I hated the voice in my head. Now, she's like a friend, sharing her points of view and keeping me company when Zev's working.

She moves inside my chest, tugging at me. I lift my head from the platter I've been decorating, placing basil leaves on the right spots. I've always liked to cook, but it's always been more practical than anything. Such a pity I never got to cook like this for my brother.

The smell of Zev's pine and spices wafts in from the open window. I hum, a smile splitting my lips. The fact he's approaching improves my day. Soft orange light spills from the window with the sunset, and my wolf whines with need. Zev came home for lunch earlier, but I haven't seen him in hours. Even that is too much.

We've grown so close these days I can't imagine my life without him. Without his careful and kind explanations, without the way he helps me through the shifts, and how he holds me and kisses me every time he walks in. He respects and loves me, and I can't wait for the days ahead of us.

The doorknob clicks and he walks in as my heartbeat sets off. I whirl around and leave the kitchen, my steps skipping as I find him already smiling at me. This man. He has my entire heart.

"Hey, love," he greets me, his hands finding my hips and bringing me close to his body. I press my body to him, my nose finding his neck as I sling my arms around his neck. Zev and I hug for a long moment, and I get lost in his heady scent. "I can't believe how much I missed you," he murmurs into my hair, and I melt.

"I missed you too," I tell him, nuzzling into his neck, breathing his scent in. Zev said this is a shifter thing, my wolf coming closer. Scents call to our animals, and I love how obsessed I've grown with him. My mouth even waters when I smell him after too many hours away.

Zev slowly lets me go, his hands barely touching my hips as he studies my face. "Tell me about your afternoon."

And I do. I do as I follow him into the bedroom and watch him slip his shoes off. He walks barefoot into the kitchen and admires my platter with wide, bright eyes. Pride swells inside my chest. I never had someone who admired the things I did like this, but Zev thinks everything I put my hands on is amazing. We have dinner as the night falls, and we sit on the couch and watch something I don't pay attention to. My gaze keeps searching for his. He's always looking at me, and a smile plays on his lips when our gazes lock. My cheeks warm every time. As if we haven't been doing this for a week.

There's something else on my mind, too. I can't stop thinking about it.

Zev raises the remote and turns the TV off. He half-turns on the couch, his body too big to fit. "Say it, love," he urges me, golden eyes on me.

I chew on my lower lip for a moment, looking away. "Just wondering about something."

His hand goes to my hair, and it grows harder to focus on the subject. "About what?"

I clear my throat, then look back at him. Golden eyes stare back, pinning me to the spot. Should I really say this? Maybe he's just taking his time. I don't want to force anything.

"Is something wrong with me?" The words come out of my mouth in a shy whisper. I can barely meet his eyes, my cheeks flaming.

"What do you mean?"

"After that first time... We haven't really... Made out or anything. So I was wondering..."

Zev is quiet for a moment, unmoving. Then it's like something snaps inside him. His hands are on my hips and he drags me to his lap, and his lips are on my jaw, his breath scattering over my lips. I gasp, and he devours the sound, fingers in my hair, chest heaving.

I'm confused, overwhelmed for a second. Then I surrender to his heat, to his warmth, to the possessive way his hands grip my hips.

“Zev,” I breathe out, and his mouth clashes with mine. His kisses sear into my flesh, and my mind goes fuzzy. Every swipe of his tongue over mine drives wetness between my legs and I try to press them together, but I’m straddling him and my thighs lock around his hips. Zev grunts against my mouth, hands sliding past my hips to my ass.

His fingers dig into the soft flesh of my behind, gripping with such bruising force I feel stupid. And here I thought he wasn’t making a move because he didn’t want me. Because he maybe changed his mind. Zev wants me. He wants me. The way he holds me against him is proof enough.

Another swipe of his tongue over mine, and I tremble with need. My pussy quivers, empty. Hell, I’ve never had someone kiss me like this. Like I’m the hottest woman alive. He sucks my lips between his, teeth raking, a deep grunt in his chest, and I know he wants me. I was a fool to believe the opposite. My hips circle his, the long erection of his desire clear against me.

“Zev,” I call again, my voice failing. My fingers rope through his black strands, and he breaks the kiss for a second, just an inch, his golden eyes dark with need. “Take me to bed already.”

The smile on his face is primal, animalistic. A roar rises, and he fits me against him and gets to his feet. Zev walks us to the bedroom, to the bed he insisted I used by myself. He doesn’t drop me down on the mattress. Instead, he slings my legs around his waist and lets me go to undo his jeans.

I chuckle. “You can put me down.”

He shakes his head, tongue exploring my mouth, the skin of my neck. “Fuck no. I’ll never let you go.”

My heart grows two sizes and I admire how he keeps me up as he shimmies his pants out of his hips. Zev climbs onto the bed with me, his body fitting between my legs. I lay down and watch him get rid of his shirt, perfect chest on show. My fingers race down his eight-pack, following the trail of his hairs. He’s still in his boxers, and I salivate when I follow the trail down where it disappears behind the fabric.

Wow, my mate is well-hung. The volume of his hard cock creates a tent in his boxers, the thickness of him making my pussy clamp around nothing. With everything going on in my life, I never was a sexual creature, or at least never had the time to be. I was always too tired, working too much to pay for the meds and the bills when my brother was having a hard time and couldn't work.

Now I know who I am, and the voice inside me wants Zev too.

His lips close around mine once more. Every kiss marks me to my very soul. I drink from him, our hands exploring each other, searching for more. Zev peels off my shirt and his eyes take me in, inch by inch. My breath catches in hesitation, but the lust glistening in his eyes makes me feel powerful. I arch my back off the bed and he unhooks my bra. The awe in his eyes makes me love him twice harder. His lips trail past my jaw, down my neck, where he inhales my scent. He nibbles down my collarbones to my breasts, hands holding them together, and his tongue explores every exposed inch of me.

Lips sucking on my nipples, Zev moves his hips against mine, creating the perfect friction. I moan to the way his hard cock strokes my pussy, blinding pleasure igniting in the back of my lids. Our bodies curl together, and his hands are possessive and rough when he rakes them down my curves. The curves I've been ashamed of, the curves my mate adores.

He wants me for who I am, and that's nothing closer to true love than this.

I part my knees for him and he kisses me between my breasts and down, over my stomach, and past my navel. My eyes follow him, his lips setting my skin on fire as he pulls my pants down, panties following along. The way his eyes shimmer to the sight of my pussy settles the deal. He's the one for me, there's no doubt.

Zev licks a stripe up between my pussy lips, making me jerk with pleasure when he reaches my clit. Lust coils inside me like a snake about to pounce. He doesn't stop. It's like every moan of mine fuels him on. When I try to close my legs,

he grips my thighs and parts them open again. Zev stares up at me, his pupils so large they make the gold of his eyes disappear.

I move, circling my hips as my breath hitches, soaking in the pleasure, adoring the way he makes me feel. The attention he pours on me is different from everything I've ever felt. Zev's hard body rubs against my soft curves, and we're both naked after a moment, his kisses driving me wild, every lick of his tongue bringing me closer to completion.

"Zev," I breathe out, my voice breaking as my fingers race through his hair. "I'm almost there."

And I half-expect him to pull back, get between my legs and fuck me. But he doesn't give up. He doesn't stop. Instead, he doubles his effort, every suck and every lick harder and fiercer than the previous. He wants me to break apart in his hands. He wants me entirely at his mercy.

Another lick and I come undone.

Zev's kisses climb back up my body as I come down from the high. His breath coats my lips as his body comes over mine. I move, trying to touch him, to feel him. I want to do more, want to be more active.

My mate presses a kiss to the corner of my lips. "Let me take care of you, mate," he whispers.

And it's so sweet I feel myself tearing up a bit. His arms curl around me, his body weight grounding me to the moment, the roughness of his palms so stark when contrasted with the soft kisses he scatters over my face. I want him to take care of me. For a change, I want someone else to take care of me, to make sure I'm fine, to keep me safe. And Zev's here for me. He'll always be here for me.

He kisses me again, and his thick cock parts my pussy lips. Slowly, he enters me. Inch by tight inch, he slides into my core. The completeness steals my breath away, my mouth dropping open.

And then we're one. His body and mine are one, and our souls are one.

Zev moves, breath catching. “You’re perfect,” he murmurs against my neck, his teeth raking my pulse. My wolf rises, closer to my skin. Her teeth press my gums, and I struggle to keep her back.

Mate mate mate, she chants inside my head.

“Mate,” I mimic her with a sigh.

Zev moves faster. His fingers rope through my hair and he adjusts his body. His teeth bared, his eyes lock with mine and he pounds into me. Pound after pound, he makes sure I’ll never want another man. He fills me, stretches me to the max, hands on my curves, fingers twisting my nipples. Moans spill from my lips, the way he makes love to me singeing into my skin, into my soul.

With a grunt, his body tenses. I hold myself closer to him, slinging my legs around his waist so I feel every drop of his seed into me. The warm thickness makes me shiver, but Zev doesn’t stop. He keeps fucking me into the mattress, and now his cock hits something inside me that just sets me off.

Not fireworks, but atomic bombs. I explode.

The scream that rips from me is awestruck and dazed. And Zev holds me against him as I come down once more. He gives me a couple of heartbeats to catch my breath, and then we start all over again.

I love him, and he makes love to me the entire night until the sun rises and slips into our bedroom. Until only the two of us matter. Nothing else, no one other.

EPILOGUE

ZEV



Six Months Later

Fingers steepled, I stare at the table set in front of me. Is this enough? Maybe too much? I have no fucking idea.

As a lone wolf, it was never my thing to do get-togethers, or celebrations, parties of any kind. But today Dani and I celebrate six months together. I can't let this day pass empty. Not when Dani told me she hardly ever had birthday parties after her parents passed away.

She's had a rough life and I want to spoil her rotten now we're together. Birthday parties and gifts on random days. Dinner out of town once a week. Runs into the woods at least thrice a week. I do my best to give her the best days, even if we're still not properly mated.

That first time I fucked her bareback, and it took every ounce of my strength, trained through years without an alpha, not to bite her. But it dawned on me at that moment that I didn't explain to her how things rolled when you're a shifter. And I don't want to mark her, bind her to me forever, without her being sure that's what she wants.

Even when sweet Dani promised me that's her desire, I still wanted to wait. Everything is new, the shifter life, the town, her brother's absence, our relationship. There's too much going on. So much for her to organize in her head.

But tonight? I feel tonight is right. We've been living together all this time. I've been making love to her, and she's been finding out more about herself. She found a remote job

she adores, and we travel around the state and she made friends.

We're happy. And there's only one thing missing from the list.

The front door clicks. I get to my feet, my heart already hammering in my chest. Chill out, man. You're the sheriff of this town. Already seen so much shit. There's no reason for you to be nervous now. I stride to the living room, hands in my pockets. Daniela waltzes in, humming under her breath. The moment she sees me, she smiles. My heart melts inside my chest.

"Hey, love," she greets, putting her purse down and approaching me. I hug her close, burying my face in her neck and breathing her in. She's been living here for six months and I'm glad her scent has stuck to, well, everywhere. But it's still so much better to smell it straight from the source.

I thread my fingers through her hair, feeling the silkiness of it for a moment before I cup a hand in the back of her neck. "Wanna have a bath before dinner?"

She smiles. "Sure. Just let me drink a glass of water. I'm parched."

Crap. She wasn't supposed to see the kitchen like this. It was meant to be a surprise.

"Why don't you go to the bathroom and I'll grab the water?" I shoot a hand out, grabbing her around the waist. She whirls around to face me, almost slamming into my chest.

"Thanks, love, but I can do that."

She tries to step back but I keep a hold of her. "You can, but you don't need to. Remember? I want to spoil you," I add with a smile, slipping my hands down her waist to her fine ass.

Dani smiles back, rubbing her perfect tits against my chest until my mind is foggy and my cock is too hard to allow me to focus on anything else. She closes the space between us, lips brushing against mine, her breath on my tongue. She knows she has me on my knees for her. My mouth waters for her taste. I dig my fingers into her ass, grinding our hips together.

She hums in delight for a moment, eyelids fluttering shut... Then she pulls back, so suddenly I don't have the time to hold her back. Dani grins knowingly as she steps away.

"You're hiding something," she points out, whirling around and swaying her hips away from me.

I gape at her back as she distances herself. "Mate! How dare you use me like this?"

She chuckles, then the sound of her laughter stops. I follow her into the kitchen, grunting in disappointment. Dani stands with her back to me, staring at the table laid in front of her. I did my best to have everything she likes — Angus steak and banoffee pie, that champagne with the French name I always forget. I got shrimp and swiss lemonade. It's a feast, and I also bought her red roses and a nice diamond ring to substitute the simple gold band she currently wears.

After an entire minute of silence, she gets me worried. I shift from foot to foot, staring at her back. "Love?" I test, reaching out to brush my knuckles on her hip. "You all right?"

She turns to face me, cheeks slightly pink, eyes veiled with unshed tears. The smile on her lips tells me everything. My mate ends the space between us, folding her arms around my shoulders. "I love it," she breathes out. "I love you."

I hold her close. "I love you too. Happy anniversary."

She grins. "Monthiversary. It's been six months since I moved in."

I nod, cupping her cheeks in my hands. "And I think we're ready." I don't finish the sentence, but her expression grows serious and I know she catches my meaning.

Dani licks her lips. "Really?" Her eyes glitter with expectation.

One nod and she stands on her tiptoes and seals our lips together. I think it's a peck for a moment, but then she curls herself around me, parting her lips, moving her body against mine. I feel the energy of her wolf closer, and mine rises in response. Our hearts pump in time, together, and Dani arches her back, her moans sounding like a plead.

Dinner is forgotten. With her body against mine, I think of nothing else.

I haul her legs up around my hips, but there's no time to take her to the bedroom. The kiss passes chaste in a second, growing heated, desperate. I suck on her lower lip. She swipes her tongue over mine, tugging on my hair. Her hips circle my erection, teasing, teasing me.

“Fuck, mate,” I roar against her mouth. “I'm two seconds away from making a hole in your pants and fucking you like this.”

She moans in response, pulling my lower lip out and letting it pop. There's no way she's going another second unmarked. I know the only reason she's gone this long unbothered by other shifters, even when she doesn't have the mating mark, is because I'm the sheriff and no one wants trouble with me.

Raking my teeth down her jaw, I tug on her cleavage until it rips, revealing a nice stretch of smooth skin. I suck on her pulse until all I hear are her mewls. Teasing her skin with my teeth, I let her get used to the idea. Instead of focusing on the moment, she keeps on teasing me, bucking against my cock.

And I deserve an award for not sticking my cock straight through her pants into her pretty cunt.

With a sharp release of breath, I let my wolf closer until my teeth grow into his fangs, and then I sink them into her skin. Her body tenses in my hold and she freezes. But just for a second. I'm still deep into her neck when she starts moving again. This time, it's not a tease. Her moans grow more desperate, achingly so. She strokes herself against my cock, and I grunt deep in my chest.

Fuck. She's going to make me come like this.

Dani keeps going, rubbing herself like a cat in heat. Her skin warms, and I bury my hands beneath her shirt, looking for her nipples. They're hard knots, ready to cut through her bra. I roar, my wolf so close, and I press her against the wall and pound against her like we could become one.

It doesn't take long at all. My balls squeeze and I come into my pants, her blood seeping into my mouth. Dani cries out, body tensing again, nails digging into my flesh, and she quivers hard, hips moving in time with her moans, sharp aftershocks rocking over her body.

We stand together like this, for a long moment, catching our breaths. The dinner gets cold. But when I pull back and meet her eyes, I know we're not stopping now.

Mate. She's my bound mate, and I won't ever tire of exploring her sweet body. I carry her to our bedroom, and there we forget the night and the celebration. She makes love to me, and I adore her body, swearing I'll never let her go.

She's mine. Now and forever.

EPILOGUE

DANIELA



Ten Years Later

Night falls, expelling the last rays of the sun from the purple sky. Some still cling to the top of trees, turning them orange, but stars prick the blue velvet above, announcing the rise of the moon. She's coming earlier tonight. I can already glimpse her, smiling on the horizon.

But if night falls, it means one thing.

Diego is late.

I tap my foot to the hardwood floor, trying to keep my mind out of it. But it's impossible, isn't it? So damn hard to forget the problems and the dangers, even when we live in such a peaceful place. But I can't lie to myself, and can't lie to him. Things happened in Shadow Falls once. Many years ago. And these things still haunt me when it's dark.

Zev's big hands curl around my shoulders, and his breath tickles my ear. "Love. Stop worrying yourself."

I flick my eyes over the book I'm holding. "Not worried. Why do you think I'm worried?"

He chuckles. Did I mention I love his chuckles? And I still remember when we met and how somber he used to be. "First, you're tapping your foot. Second, you keep looking at the window. Third, your heart is beating faster. Fourth, you've been staring at the same page for twenty minutes. Should I go on?"

I slam the book shut and shoot a glance at him. “No.” A sigh pushes past my lips. “Where is he?”

“Under Ezra’s protection.” My husband kneels in front of me, taking both my hands in his. “In pack lands, where dozens of others are monitoring him. With his friends.”

I chew on my lip. “They might be playing in the woods. What if he shifts without us? What if he gets hurt?”

Zev’s infinitely patient with me. We’ve been through this. Hundreds of times. But I can’t help but worry about our six-year-old. Zev kisses my knuckles. “He won’t shift. It’s too soon. Ezra promised the kids wouldn’t get out of his sight. And if he gets hurt, he’ll heal pretty fast, as every other time.”

Yes, he healed quickly the previous times, but just because they were shallow cuts and scrapes, not *real* wounds...

Zev cuts through my thoughts. “No one is going to hurt him, love.”

Another sigh rattles through me. Zev touches my hands to his chest and I follow his breathing pattern, in and out. My muscles relax. “I’m sorry. It’s been ten years and I’m still...”

Zev cranes his neck and stamps a kiss on my lips. “It’s been ten years, yes. But it was a nightmare, love. I understand you’re not completely over it. It takes time and work. And we’re working on it.” He curls his lips into a soft smile. One that tells me everything will be all right.

Sinking against the chair, I nod at him. Zev gives me surety. It’s incredible to have someone who understands and accepts me. He knows I’m still afraid sometimes. That I don’t enjoy the idea of letting Diego go play with his friends at the ranch. But I also know I can’t keep him in a cage, never allow him to leave. My son has the right to have some fun.

He has the chance for a happy childhood, unlike me. The chance for a family and a society who will accept him, instead of judging and humiliating him like someone beneath them. I found the place for me to be happy, and I won’t keep my son from enjoying everything about it. He deserves so much more than what I had.

Zev slips an arm underneath my knees and brings me up like I weigh nothing. This part of shifter life I got used to rather quickly. I adore it when he carries me around, and when he brings up all of our grocery shopping in one trip, flexing his delicious biceps. My husband is damn yummy, and I love being spoiled by him. He sits down on my chair and puts me on his lap, his arms folding around my hips, his lips brushing my jaw. Zev's all big and burly, but he's still careful with me after all these years. Like I'm breakable, even after we've done some pretty crazy stuff together.

"What's on your mind?" he murmurs against my ear, eliciting shivers down my skin.

I hum in appreciation to his warm breath, weaving my fingers into his dark, long hair. "Just thinking about everything we've been through. How I never had the time to enjoy myself, to go out with friends. Even when I had the time, no one wanted to hang out with the crazy kids."

"You were never crazy," he whispers against my neck, lips brushing my skin, setting it on fire.

"I know." A shrug lifts my shoulders. "But at the time, mental disorders were something bad, that stained you, that made you someone worse. Even if they're common. Even if you don't have a choice. We were the crazy kids. Period. Our parents did their best, but they had a tough time with us. They regretted taking us in when it got really bad and the meds got expensive." I curl myself closer on his lap, bringing my knees up. "My life wasn't happy. My parents passed away. Then Diego disappeared..."

Zev folds me closer, and I cradle against his warmth, soaking in it. "And Diego would have been happy you came after him," he says. "He would have been happy seeing his sister looking for him. Fighting so hard. Never standing down." He cranes his neck to look at me, his gaze still sending my heartbeat into a whirlwind. "I know he looks at you still, and he's glad you avenged his death and moved on with your life like so."

A smile stretches my lips. This man. This man has the entirety of my heart. Tears prickle at my eyes and I bat them away, burying my face into his neck. “You’re right. From so much pain, something beautiful bloomed. And it hurts that my brother isn’t here... But I’m happy I have you. I’m happy I have a chance at happiness, and you have the patience to deal with my problems...”

He kisses my hair, hugging me close. “They aren’t problems, love. And I don’t have to deal with anything. You’re amazing. You’re perfect, and not only because you’re my mate.” Zev pulls back to look into my eyes. “You’re brave, Dani. And you’re smart and you’re impossibly resilient. Even with so much pain, your heart is made of gold. You’re gentle, and you see the world so brightly.” He pecks my lips. “There’s no one like you out there, love. Good, bad. Everything that ever happened in your life is part of who you are. Don’t pressure yourself for these things. I love you. I love you completely.”

And this absolutely melts me.

A couple of tears slip down my cheeks, but Zev kisses them away, as he’s done hundreds of times. After a moment in his arms, the ring of the bell makes me jump to my feet.

“He’s here!” I cry out, wiping the tears away.

Zev laughs, a full belly laugh I would never expect from him when we first met. “I’ll pick him up.”

And I watch my husband, my mate, leaving the house, and follow the sound of his distancing steps. I watch from the window as he chats with Ezra, who waits by the causeway with his kid. Both wave at me before they leave.

And then Diego, my son, is back. In my arms, close to my heart, when I can keep him safe and love him. And he tells me about his day, and how much he’s anxious for the coming of his wolf, and all the fun he had.

My heart is full. And nothing could ever break this happiness I live in.

THE END

HER RANCHER MATE

BLURB



She is running away.
She just doesn't know from what.
A rancher rescues her when she
needs it the most.
Can they stay together when
the real threat arrives?

PROLOGUE

CLARA



Ten Years Ago

I grind my teeth together and glare at the annoying boy in front of me. Boy, yes, because even if Ezra is fifteen, he has the maturity of an eight-year-old brat. I can't believe the adults think he's next in line to be our alpha. He's so... so...

"You're so vexing, Ezra," says Liam from where he's sitting on the porch, next to me, knee brushing mine.

I turn and blink at him. "What did you call him?" I didn't catch it in time. New insult? Liam reads a lot, and he always comes up with the best insults.

"Vexing," Liam offers. "It means annoying, which means Ezra."

Ezra rolls his eyes so high we only see the white for a moment. "That word doesn't exist."

"Of course it does. I read it."

"Whatever." Ezra waves off, then places his hands on his hips. He's too thin to appear manly in that pose. "When I'm alpha of this clan, I'll forbid books. And you two will have to obey me." He opens a wide grin.

I shoot to my feet. "I would rather leave."

"You know you can't leave a pack of wolves," Ezra goes on even as I walk off, showing him my back. "I'd have to send my enforcers after you to bring you home!"

I ignore him and move around the house into the pastures. At least the horses aren't annoying. With Mom in town for work, and all the other adults too busy with their day-to-day lives, it's hard to ignore Ezra when we're out of school. There aren't many kids around he could annoy. I wish the bears up in the mountain would mingle more. Pretty sure they could beat Ezra up if he got too... What's the word Liam used? Vexing?

I make my way to one of the big trees at the edge of the pasture and climb it. With the power of my wolf inside me, it's easy. I sit down on one of the top branches amid the copse so Ezra won't spot me from a distance. Doesn't work every time: when he's bored, he'll hunt us down with his sense of smell.

The tree branches creak beneath me and I don't need to look down to know it's Liam. Even with our age difference, we've been best friends for years now. He always takes my side and always defends me from Ezra. Even when Mom doesn't have time, he'll sit next to me and hear me out. He reads for me when I'm too sleepy to keep my eyes open, and he carries me inside when we spend too long under the sky on moonlit nights.

Liam is the big brother I have never had. Dad passed away in a territory dispute so many years ago I can't remember him, and with Mom away all the time... I'm lucky I have him.

He plops down on the branch next to mine, shaking the entire tree with his weight. Liam's growing to be big, I'm sure of it. He's already twice Ezra's size even when he's a year younger.

Liam looks up at me and smiles. "You know what I'm going to say."

I mock annoyance, puffing at him. "That I shouldn't care about what Ezra says, yeah. It's hard when he keeps saying he's going to be the next alpha. Did you even hear what he said? He wants to ban books."

Liam chuckles under his breath. "He just says it to annoy us. No alpha would ban such things if they wanted to avoid a revolt."

“Ezra’s a jerk,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

He laughs. “That he is. But not always. With luck, he’ll become less of a jerk with time.”

I shoot him a sideways glance. “You’re so smart, Liam.” My shoulders droop. “Sometimes I don’t think you belong here.”

His brows shoot up, hiding behind the mop of dark blond hair on his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe you should leave. Go to college. See the world.”

“I’m fine where I am.” And his eyes turn intense, more than I’ve ever seen. “I don’t want to leave. This place is my home, and this pack is my family. I’d never leave.” He stays quiet for a moment, gaping at me. “Do you want to leave?”

I shake my head even before he’s done with his words. “No. No way. But, you know... Mom’s been leaving town so often. What if she wants to leave?”

We look into each other’s eyes for the longest time. Something stirs inside me, something I don’t understand. I want to stay with the pack. I want to stay with Liam. He’s the only person who ever made me feel like I’m worth it.

He shoots a hand out, pinky up. “Even if she leaves, I promise I’ll be here when you want to come back.”

My heart skips a beat. “Really?”

He nods in response. I hook my pinky finger with his. “Whenever you need a home,” he says, his voice lowering, his eyes sparkling, “I’ll be right here.”

CHAPTER ONE

CLARA



My heart thunders inside my chest, slamming against my ribcage so hard my entire skeleton trembles with every beat. Adrenaline courses through my veins, turning my vision sharper, but my mind grows foggy. Fear is the one thing I feel. It's the one thing taking my head, blinding me to all else.

Thank the Goddess for my lightning-speed instincts, my fast response. I dash between the trees, darting down the mountain, running hard. It doesn't matter I've been doing this for what feels like hours. I can't stop. Not before I catch the smell of an alpha, another territory protecting me.

Going back is the one chance I have. Entering another pack's lands will give me enough time to catch a breath. That is, before the pack finds me and either kills me for invading or shoves me back out.

Ezra wouldn't kill me. He might kick me out, though. Hopefully, he'll remember how much of a jerk he was when we were kids, feel bad about it, and give me a day or two to think of a plan. Of a way out.

All those years ago, I knew Mom was spending time away from home for a reason. Something inside me, maybe my wolf's instincts, told me she was seeing someone new. And I wasn't mad. She had the right to find someone after she lost my father. I disliked the idea of moving away from the Shadow Falls pack, but I had hopes for our future. A new father, a new, bigger pack. Friends. I had big dreams.

They were all futile. Empty. Not one thing I wanted came to be. Now, Mom's dead, and my alpha doesn't tolerate anyone who isn't somehow useful to the pack. And my one duty is the thing I abhor the most.

Goddess, please, don't let them catch me.

I keep running, my ears preened to the surrounding sounds. For a moment, I think it's fear talking, making me believe I hear things that are not there. But the cracking of branches increases, and then the sound I've been praying not to hear shakes me to my core. A cold, shrill howl reaches out into the morning. Another one replies from my left, a third from my right.

I'm being circled. They're not only coming after me, but they're circling me to stop me from running away. All because I refused. All because I want more in my life.

The alpha made it clear. If he caught me running, I'd beg him to kill me. After so many times I saw him dealing punishment, I wholeheartedly believe him. He's going to torture me until I beg for his forgiveness, and only then will he allow me to die.

I should never have left the Shadow Falls pack. Should have asked to stay, pleaded the former alpha when he was still alive. Now, I don't even know if Ezra will let me in. I don't know how he deals with my pack. I don't know if he's friends with my alpha or not.

Right now, my entire hope lies on Liam. Dear Liam, who defended me every single time, who kept me safe, who always had my back. If I can reach him, he might convince Ezra. He might help me find a way out of this mess.

Please, please, let Liam still be there.

The howls sound closer, making my stomach flip. Goosebumps race down my arms. I look over my shoulder and see the silhouette of a white wolf so close. So freaking close.

I might now make it. Reaching within me, I call for my wolf. I beg for her to come out, to help me out. If I shifted, her

speed might take me away faster. Her strength might defend us.

She won't come out. She whines inside me, head lowered in obedience. My alpha has her tight on his leash, his presence washing over me with authority. My knees tremble and my feet threaten to slip from under me, but I keep on running, defying everything.

I splash over water, but I don't stop. The river. The river right after the Shadow Fall pack's lands. I'm close. I'm almost there. A wolf darts next to me, the snapping of teeth catching me off guard, making me jump out of the way. My wet feet and the surprise join to take me in the wrong direction. I'm so confused by fear I forget one of the limits on the border of the lands.

A ravine. I dart straight over it, and my feet fail beneath me. With my breath catching in my throat, I fall. Locking my body close, I take the hits of several stones and branches, rolling over them and trying to get to my feet as fast as possible. As I open my eyes to figure out my surroundings, my head hits a huge rock. Pain flares in the front of my skull and I clench my teeth at it.

I know I should get to my feet, but my body grows heavy. Darkness embraces me without giving me any other choice.

CHAPTER TWO

LIAM



My feet take me across the living room of the ranch house, the space wide enough for me to take long strides, making the old floorboards creak. With every stride, I crack a knuckle of my hands. This is uncanny. Dread curls inside me, raising my wolf in alarm. I haven't felt like this in a long while, this sense of danger, the lurking of something dark.

“Goddess, if I hear another cracking of knuckles.”

I whirl around to find my alpha standing at the entrance. Ezra makes his way inside, uncaring about his lack of clothes. It's been a while since any female lived with us, not after his mother passed away. Even then, he didn't care much about putting clothes on after he shifted.

“Did you find something?” I ask, moving closer as he makes his way to the bedrooms. Ezra left with the rising of the sun to set the horses free and check on the borders of that region.

He arches an eyebrow at me, stopping and crossing his arms. “Besides horse shit?”

I grind my jaw and swallow the insult. Ezra's my alpha and though he was a shitty friend for years, he's grown into a responsible man. He doesn't deserve my flare of anger, especially since it's not his fault.

“Yes, besides horse shit.”

Ezra studies my face for a moment. “Everything's fine. You're the strange one. Why were you pacing around?”

I swallow. “Honestly, I don’t know. I just... feel weird. Like something bad is about to happen.”

Ezra squares his shoulders, staring straight at me. “You sure?” I nod in response. His brow furrows, and he closes his eyes, jaw working for a moment. When his eyes open, I see his wolf releasing his hold on him. “My wolf feels nothing. Everything normal for him.”

“This makes no sense. Why would I feel the incoming danger and you wouldn’t? You’re the alpha. The lands respond to you.”

“Maybe it’s not a danger to the lands.” Both his brows raise in comprehension. “Maybe it’s a danger related to you.”

I open my hands in confusion. How could it be? I’m in pack lands, protected, and even if something happened to me, I could defend myself. My wolf is strong, agile, and I’m not alone. Besides... “Wolves don’t see into the future. How could I feel something is going to happen to me?”

“No, you don’t get my meaning.” Ezra grips my left shoulder. “It’s not about the future. Something dangerous is happening right now, related to you.” I open my mouth to reply I’m not in danger, but Ezra shakes his head. “Your mate, man. It’s your mate. She’s in danger.”

My brows shoot up. Fuck. It makes sense now. It all makes awful sense. Our souls are connected, and ever since I reached maturity, I started feeling things I didn’t know the reason for. It’s because of her. Whoever she is, I feel the things she does, and she feels what I feel. The big feelings, the ones that spill out of our hearts. I had unexplained episodes of dread and sadness over the years, but that’s that.

Never this alarm. Never this foreboding.

“I’m going out,” I tell my alpha, showing him my back and moving to the door.

“Where?” Ezra asks. “You don’t know where she is.”

That’s true. I can’t go to her. I don’t know who she is or where she lives. Whatever is happening to her, I can’t stop it. I can’t make it go away. “Something tells me I should be at the

borders. Maybe she might be coming in my direction. Or someone who knows about her.”

Ezra cocks his head. “I don’t think that’s likely, but go on. With the witches looming about, it’s not bad to check if anyone invaded us.”

I nod in his direction and race out of the house. At the porch, I stop and strip, leaving my clothes folded over a chair. My heart beats faster and faster as I let my wolf out. Ribs break and adjust, my spine twisting into a strange position until it grows a tail. I soak in the pain for a moment, let it ground me, then I open my eyes to the gray shades my wolf sees the world.

I shoot into the forest, letting my legs pump as fast as they can. Feels like the closer I get to the borders, the faster my heart beats. My wolf trembles in expectation. He knows something big is coming, and he’s been waiting for it.

Our paws reach the river, splashing the water as I whirl around. This is the very limit of our lands. I turn around and press our nose to the ground, sniffing for any unfamiliar smells.

That’s when I catch it. A scent both familiar and new, and it feels my lungs and makes the hairs on the back of my neck raise. It’s her. Who? My mate, yes, but who? Why does her smell feel familiar? Have we met?

I follow the trail, sniffing around, keeping a fast pace. Down the ravine, around some roots. The metallic scent of old blood reaches me like a punch, and that makes me move faster. She’s hurt. She’s here, and she’s hurt.

The woman lying in the underbrush is unconscious, blood covering a side of her face, matting to the hair. She’s barefoot, her clothes shredded and dirty, and she’s absolutely beautiful. The sight of her is a punch to the gut, every sense in me screaming *mate*. And I know her. Goddess, I know her. I’ve known her for years before she left.

And she might be dead.

CHAPTER THREE

CLARA



Pain ripples across my skull, bringing me out of sweet darkness. I fight against it, try to go back to slumber, but something drags me out of it. The pain doesn't make it any easier to sleep again.

I bat my eyelids open and stare at the wood ceiling over my head. There's nothing in my mind for a while as I stare. The open windows let a breeze in, soft and fresh. As every other day, ever since I learned to distinguish my wolf from my soul, I reach out for her. She breathes deeply, asleep, tucked in. Quiet. Peaceful. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

"Are you awake?" The male, gritty voice calls from my left, a spot I can't see. He whispers as if he's afraid of something. Worried.

I turn my head to search for the source of the voice and what I see would swipe me off my feet if I wasn't already lying down. Dark blond hair falls past his shoulders in waves that look softer than velvet. An angled jaw and sharp cheekbones, big eyes staring at me. The man's big, broad shoulders and muscled biceps bulge as he shifts in the chair he's sitting. And he's so changed, so grown up and handsome, I almost don't recognize him. Almost.

The green eyes are what give him away.

"Liam?" I breathe out, awed at how much he's grown. It feels like we saw each other yesterday. "Wow, you look great."

His brows bunch together. "How are you feeling?"

Of course, always worried. I lift a hand to the point of pain in my forehead and find a bandage on my temple. “I feel... Wounded. My head is pounding.”

He nods slowly. “You lost a lot of blood.”

“I did? Why?”

“I hoped you could tell me.”

Well, this is weird. “I... don’t know.”

Liam cocks his head. “You don’t know what happened?”

I shake my head, but it hurts way more, so I stop. “Explain it to me like I was five.”

Liam’s features tighten in worry. “I went into the woods and found you near the border. Blacked out, covered in blood.” He looks over my face again. “What about your wolf? How is she?”

“Sleeping. Very, very quiet.” Quieter than ever. I’ve never felt her quieter than this, not when I’m awake. “Do you think she’s alright?”

“Maybe resting so you can heal.”

“I don’t get it. Why was I in the woods?” The more I try to remember what I was doing there, the harder my head hurts. I press my fingers to the bandage again. “I think the wound to my head is doing something. Honestly, I can’t remember what I was doing so far from the house. Was it my turn to do the borders or something?” There’s no other way to explain why I was so far off.

Liam gapes at me. “Why would you do the borders here?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Something is missing. Shit, it’s like I had to do something and it’s gone. Like when you’re trying to remember a word and it’s at the tip of your tongue. “Wait. Why shouldn’t I be doing the borders? Am I forbidden or something?”

Liam reaches out, taking my hand in his. For a moment, I’m all gushy, soaking in the warmth of his big hand around mine. But wait. He’s just my friend. My closest friend, but just

a friend. Or he used to be when we were kids and he wasn't this good-looking.

“You're not part of this pack anymore, Clara.”

The words are blocks of ice in my stomach. A shiver courses down my spine. It's a shock at first, and then it's not. My head pulses with pain and I slam my eyes shut. “Oh. Yeah. I remember that. I left the pack...” I open an eye, wincing as I look at him. “I can't remember why, though.”

Liam sits on the mattress next to me. His male, pine-heavy scent fills me, and my cheeks heat. I don't pull back as his hands cradle my face, his eyes narrowing as he looks at me. “Shit,” he whispers. “I think your head wound is way worse than I expected.”

“You think?” I reply, though I'm paying attention to how juicy his lips look. Get a grip, Clara. Since when are you this horny over a childhood friend? “I don't know. It's like there are important things I should know, but I can't remember them. I remember you and the pack, and Mom, but...” My heart grows heavy with the thought of Mom. There's something here. Something I don't remember, something important. “I don't remember.” My voice comes out frail, weak. My eyes sting with tears.

Liam grips the sheet covering me and shoves it off. I wince at the breeze on my legs, then look down at the weird clothes I'm wearing. It's like someone gave me an over-sized pillowcase, the white fabric reaching my knees. Liam ignores my shock at my clothes and folds an arm under my knees, the other around my waist. He hauls me up against his body in a smooth move.

I cling to his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to the hospital. You clearly have a case of amnesia because of the wound. I should have done this earlier.” He doesn't stop moving as he says all this, walking me out of the room and across the house. I don't have the time to glimpse at an unfamiliar portrait hanging over the couch or the bright yellow curtains. “I thought your shifter healing would trigger, but it's more than your wolf can take.”

I chew on my bottom lip, allowing him to take me to a car and sit me in the passenger seat. Curling my toes, I look up at him. “You think I could get a jacket? Maybe shoes? I have no idea why I’m dressed like a virgin sacrifice in a horror movie.”

He nods and goes back into the house. It takes him all but a second to run back, helping me into a leather jacket that smells like him, and boots much bigger than my feet. He buckles me in, then moves on to the driver’s seat.

“We’ll fix you up, I promise,” he says, driving out of the ranch of my childhood.

Where have I lived these past years? And why do I feel like I should be doing something important, something urgent? My stomach flips, but without memory of what’s going on and without my wolf... I don’t want to get away from Liam. He’s always been the one person who had my back.

He curls his fingers around mine as I fidget. His bright green eyes drill into mine. “Whatever it is,” he says with intensity, “I’ll keep you safe. No one will hurt you.”

And I don’t know why he says it, but it makes my eyes sting with unshed tears again. I look out the window and keep a hold of his hand. Something tells me I will need protection. Whatever or whoever is after me, it won’t stop because I can’t remember it. It won’t stop until it reaches me again.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIAM



Clara hops down the car, slamming the door shut behind her even before I reach the spot. She's looking much better than a couple of hours ago. The doctor changed her head wound and told us her healing has already done a good job on it. For some reason, it's taking longer than usual, but it's still happening.

Amnesia is expected when someone hits their head, the doctor said. It shall go away in a few days if she has proper rest. I take her to a clothing store so she can pick something other than the weird white dress she's wearing, and we make our way back to the ranch. Back home.

My wolf won't shut up about having found our mate, but I press my jaw shut and give her space. Clara doesn't need this right now. She doesn't need someone all over her. She needs a friend.

She smiles at me, propping her hands on her waist. "I can't even begin to describe how much better jeans and t-shirt feel."

I smile back, giving her a once-over. The black t-shirt sets off her pale skin, hugging the ample curve of her tits. Shit, Clara has grown into a gorgeous woman, curvy as sin. The jeans hug her flared hips, and Goddess, I have been avoiding looking at her ass because the sweatpants I'm in won't hide the hard-on that will come with it.

"The white dress was weird, I agree," I tell her, looking away and motioning for us to get into the house. She follows me, arm brushing mine. "You hungry?"

She grins as we climb the porch. “Always.”

I chuckle. Mom used to joke it’s well-known shifters eat more than humans, but we kids were ridiculous. We were always hungry, according to her. I leave the plastic bag full of Clara’s new clothes on the couch and we make our way into the kitchen.

“Bacon and eggs?” I offer, moving to the stove.

“Sure. Are you going to cook for me?”

Is she mocking me? I look over my shoulder at her. “Why? Is that a problem?”

The grin is still on her face. “You used to make toast-eggs, remember? They got so burned they were hard, like toasts.” She chuckles, her nose curling in this cute way. “Is that what we’re going to eat? Toast-eggs and toast-bacon?”

I chuckle with her. “No. That was years ago when I was a teenager who couldn’t cook. You’ll see. I’ll make you the best bacon and eggs in your life.”

She laughs again, throwing her head back in amusement and slapping the table. “Goddess, now I hope you burn them just to prove my point.”

“That’s evil!”

We chat, avoiding the subject of her having gone away years ago. She doesn’t remember why she left, and why she came back. She told the doctor there’s only fuzz and pain in her head when she tries to pin the reason. I don’t want her in pain, so we go on about the ranch, and new horses, and how Ezra turned out to be a good alpha.

“Who would have guessed?” she says once she cleans her plate. “He was such a jerk when we were kids.”

“Thank you.” Ezra’s voice calls from the living room.

Clara’s face turns a shade paler, then bursts with color. I laugh, unable to hold it back when panic crosses her features. “Were you spying on us, oh great alpha?” I tease him as he walks into the kitchen.

Ezra's in his dark pants and leather jacket, so it means he's driving to town. He crosses his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes at us. "I literally just entered the living room. Not my fault if you were talking shit about me at the same time."

Clara gets to her feet. "I'm so sorry, Ezra. I didn't..."

"No, you're right. I was a jerk when I was a kid." He approaches us. "Which is great for comparison now, because you can call me great alpha all you want." He finishes it with a smirk.

I stand up too and press my arm to Clara's. She presses back, her warmth grounding me. My wolf *purrs* from being next to her. "You remember Clara, oh, great alpha?"

"Of course I do," Ezra says, and shoots out a hand for her to shake.

Clara winces, pressing against me as if she wants to hide. As if she thought Ezra was going to hit her. The sight weighs on my stomach like lead. Shit. Why does she have this response? Ezra was a jerk, but he never hit her.

Ezra drops his hand. He looks up at me. "A minute, Liam?" And he walks out.

Clara's shoulders relax and she holds my wrist in a hand. "That was so embarrassing! I don't know why I did that."

I should hold back, but my arm moves on its own. When I notice, I'm cradling her face in my hands. "Don't worry about it. Ezra won't mind." I give her what I hope is a supporting smile and follow my alpha into the living room and out into the porch.

Ezra closes the door behind me and turns to the pasture. A couple of horses prance about, throwing their MANES and HISSING into the wind. Ezra crosses his arms again, eyes on the horses.

"So Clara's your mate?" he asks in a low voice, almost a murmur.

I swallow hard. "Yeah. Yeah, turns out she is." The bond only triggers after you're a mature wolf, so it explains why we

didn't know it when we were kids.

Ezra nods. "And you found her wounded, just inside our borders."

I do an about-face to look at him. "And I found signs of a chase just outside. I think her pack abused her. She was running away from them, and someone attacked her just before she crossed into our borders."

Ezra nods again, looking into the distance. "Did you see how she reacted to me? I think not only her pack abused her, but her alpha. You guys can say I was a jerk back then, but I never hit any of you. Not in human form anyway."

Wolves mock-fight all the time, so it only matters when you're in your human form. "I know. I think you're right."

Ezra stays in silence for another moment, then sighs, turning to face me. "She can stay to rest and heal, Liam. But you know how it works. Pack balance is important, and if they come after her, we have to give her back."

I pull my upper lip up. "They abused her, Ezra."

"We don't know for sure. We need her to regain her memories to tell us that, or identify your bond and mate with you." He lifts his shoulders in a shrug that's almost devoid of hope. "I would keep her without a thought. We were raised together. But she's part of another pack. A bigger pack. A pack that can, and will start a war with us if we don't send her back when they ask."

And I hate it. I fucking hate it with all my heart, but Ezra's right. Only one thing has higher priority than the pack rules, and that's the mating bond, but Clara said her wolf hasn't woken up yet. She might not even know we're mates.

If I want to keep her here, I might kill my entire pack. If I let her go, they might kill my mate. Shit. What are we going to do?

CHAPTER FIVE

CLARA



Closing my eyes, I reach out for my wolf. She's still asleep. I've never seen her sleeping so much. And that's so weird since the wound in my head has healed through the day. Now, there's only a pink mark on my temple, and I don't think I'll even have a scar.

I certainly don't need another one. Liam showed me the bathroom and a towel, and once I stripped I saw something I didn't expect. My back and my shoulders and my forearms. They're covered in scars. White scars, almost the color of my skin. What happened to me? For a shifter to have scars, a wound would have to be ridiculously deep, and maybe even worse. Maybe I would have to get hurt over and over at the same spot until not even shifter healing could deal with it.

Liam bought me a set of pajamas and a cute teddy, and I wear the latter when I lie down in the bed. There's no moon in the sky tonight, just stars and the other members of the pack have quietly greeted me before they retired for the evening. Everyone acts like I'm dangerous or sick. Everyone but Liam, and Ezra. I wonder if there's something I'm missing.

Scoff. Of course there's something I'm missing. Several years of my life. I touch my temple, but I can't quite remember what happened. I left the pack. But to where? Why? Why did I run back? I don't know where my mother is, and there are some ten years of my life missing. Not that I feel like I'm a kid again, quite the opposite. It's like opening the fridge door, and forgetting what you wanted there.

Liam enters the room, the floorboards creaking with every step of his. I press my lips together to avoid laughing. The house is old. The house was old when I was part of the pack. We used to say it would crumble with the first strong wind that blew in its direction.

“Still awake?” he asks, half-closing the door. I don’t feel threatened or afraid for being in a room with a man. Not when Liam’s the man.

I turn my head to look at him, opening a smile. “How old do you think I am? Only kids sleep early.”

He tilts a smile at me, coming closer until he sits down on the very edge of the mattress. “People who hit their head should sleep early too. Rest. Give a chance to heal their bodies.”

I show him the healed skin on my temple. “No need. I’m good as new.”

“Oh, yeah? Then why were you running the woods in a potato sack?”

I narrow my eyes at him, but catch the joke and shoot my tongue out. “The dress was ugly, but not a potato sack.”

“So no memories returned?”

My face grows somber. I look away from him, at the window to my right. At the night, and the stars and the moon. My wolf should beg me to leave, to run the woods and bathe in the moonlight. She always loved it, of that much I’m sure. Still, I can’t feel her. She’s still asleep. Mute.

“No,” I reply, my voice thin. “I mean, some things come naturally. I was thinking about my wolf, you know? And I just know she’d want to go for a run under the moon. I know it.”

“So something has returned.”

I shrug under the sheets. “Nothing that matters. Nothing that explains what I’m doing here, or why I ran.” Or why I have scars on my back. Who did them, and if they are the reason I’m running away.

Liam's fingers brush my cheek. I turn to look at him, and his gaze locks with mine. His eyes grow soft as we stare like he's seeing something I'm not. He touches my hair, brushing it off my face. I'm inebriated by the moment. His gaze and the gentle smile, the way he looks at me like I'm beautiful. His smell fills my lungs, making my skin crawl with sudden affection.

He jerks his hand back and shoots to his feet. "You should sleep," he spits, then flips the lights off. I'm still blinking into the darkness to adapt my eyes when I hear the floorboards creaking again. He doesn't lie next to me, but he doesn't exit the room.

I touch a hand to my chest. My heart stammers inside my ribcage, beating so fast my breath goes shallow. How weird. Is this because of the way Liam touched me? But he's just a friend. He's always been the best of friends, nothing beyond that.

At the same time, we're both adults now and it would be a filthy lie to say I'm not attracted to him. He's so handsome. He's put on muscle, grown taller, and his dark blond hair looks smooth and I bet it smells great. I swallow hard and slam my eyelids shut. This is not the time to develop a crush on the one person on my side. I don't know what's happening, I lost my memories, and someone's been hurting me.

Minutes pass and the floorboards creak. More minutes, and more creaks. Shit. I can't believe I didn't notice it earlier.

"Are you really trying to sleep on the floor?" I ask out loud, knowing Liam's still in the room. Even if his scent clings to the sheets, it's too strong for him to be absent.

"Yeah," he mutters back after a moment.

"I can't believe it."

"Why not? It's the sensible thing to do."

I sit up. "Are you kidding?"

The floorboards creak again. "No."

“Goddess bless, Liam. I get it, you’re a gentleman. Get up here.”

He scoffs, but there’s no humor in his voice. “I wasn’t being a gentleman.” Something in his voice makes me think there’s more to it, but he adds nothing.

“Then there’s no problem in us sharing the bed. Get up here.”

“No, Clara. You keep the bed.”

“Get up here or I’ll make you.”

This time, I can almost picture the smile on his face. We used to tackle each other when we were kids, but he’s too big for me to try now. My threat seems to work because the floorboards creak once more and his silhouette gets up from the ground. I scoot closer to the wall and he lies next to me, not bothering to lift the sheets.

I tug on them. “Get under the sheets, you savage.”

He laughs this time, obeying me. “I don’t remember you being this combative,” he tells me. “Oh, no, wait. I do remember.”

We laugh at each other and, before I know it, we’re knee-deep in memories from our shared childhood, making fun of Ezra until he knocks on the door and tells us to cut it out. We laugh under our breaths and Liam lets me lean into his shoulder as I doze off. Sleep finally claims me. And I’ve never felt this safer. Never felt like I belonged somewhere as much as I do now.

CHAPTER SIX

LIAM



The day rises with the sun burning off the dew from the grass blades. It's going to be a hot day, and every wolf loves to spend hot days in the river. Luckily, the river that borders our pack lands dips inside it right behind the ranch house. Our favorite spot to play as kids.

Clara felt something from her wolf yesterday. When she left us, she had no control over the animal, not yet being of age, so this is knowledge from her more recent life. The life I wasn't there to protect her from.

I can't help but feel something is off. She doesn't remember, but she was running from something. Someone. I don't know why, but if her pack was supportive, she wouldn't have to run back here. She wouldn't have to get so wounded her wolf has taken a vacation.

"What's the plan?" she asks after we're done with breakfast and I lead her to the back of the house. "You look like you have a plan."

I arch an eyebrow, tilting my chin up. "How do I look?"

She opens her mouth, but no sound comes. Her cheeks tint pink, and I furiously hope she says something dirty. She doesn't, rolling her eyes as she turns her gaze to the woods. "Are we going swimming or something?"

Disappointment passes in a moment. "Yeah. I thought we could go to the river, get our feet wet, see if your wolf wants to come out and play."

“That’s a good idea.” She keeps up with my pace, eyes focused ahead. “It’s so strange, the way she’s quiet inside me.” She slides a glance in my direction. “Sometimes I fear she won’t come back.”

“Of course she will.” I don’t think as I reach out and take her hand in mine. “Never heard of a shifter losing their animal. She’s just taking some time off to let you heal.”

“I’m healed,” she insists.

“Not completely. You don’t remember why you came here.”

She pouts and I can’t help but tickle her in the ribs. Maybe it’s because we reunited after so many years apart, but we act like children as we make our way to the river. I tickle her, she punches me in the arm then sets off ahead of me. I chase, and she giggles, weaving between tree trunks as she peeks over her shoulder at me. A wide grin takes my face and I can’t stop laughing. Her hair sways behind her, the sun punching through the copse of trees to face her, her glinting smile.

My heart pitter-patters, but I know it’s not from the exercise. The affection I’ve always felt for her deepens with every step we take together, and I can’t take my eyes off her. I want to keep her safe, and I want her to smile like this every day. I must protect her.

Her feet splash onto the river and she looks down, halting. “Shit.” She laughs, whirling around to gape at me. Clara props her hands to her hips, mocking nuisance on her face. “Look what you did to my shoes!”

“Yeah, but these boots are waterproof,” I tell her because I’m a rancher and there’s no chance I’d buy her something that wouldn’t be practical to use in a ranch.

She bends forward, staring at the boots. I can imagine her moving her toes inside the boots, testing for wetness. “You’re right.” She shoots me a smile. “Lucky you or I’d have to kick your ass like I did when we were kids.”

Another peal of laughter rings out of me. “I don’t remember that.” In fact, I do. She was sneaky back then and

used her smaller size to her advantage so she could get behind me and surprise me.

She kicks water in my direction, and the cold wetness covers my shins. “Liar!” And she darts into the water again.

“Take off your boots!” I yell behind her, and she stops mid-step to do as I say, shoving them back and out of the water. I want to tell her to take the rest off too, but that might come out as too forward. After kicking out my boots, I follow her in.

We enjoy the water on our knees and tease each other and chat for a good half-hour. She then stops, closing her eyes and tilting her head back. Her plump lips beg me to kiss her, but I hold back, even if my entire body trembles with the effort.

When Clara opens her eyes again, they’re deep pools of sadness. She looks at the water and releases a heart-breaking sigh.

“What’s wrong?” I ask in a whisper.

She shakes her head. “Can’t reach her. Can’t reach my wolf. She won’t even wake up to tell me to fuck off.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. I turn to face her, and she does the same with me. “I wish I could help. Honestly. I thought if we came here, she’d want to come out.”

“I know, and I think you’re right.” She sighs. “She usually would, but she’s not having good days.” Clara presses her hand to her temple. “This is the worst part, you know? Worse than amnesia. Worse than not knowing. I hate how I can’t reach her.”

Stepping closer, I fold my arms around her, bringing her to my chest in a tight hug. Clara gasps, muscles tightening for a moment, but she relaxes after a second and hugs me back. My mate buries her face into my chest, and her smell fills my lungs.

I try to ignore our hearts beating fast against one another, but I can’t help myself. Hope makes a knot grow in my throat. The affection I feel for her grows, swells, and I slam my eyes closed and press my nose to the top of her head.

Goddess, whatever comes our way, I promise I'll be by her side.

We make our way back to the house as the sun climbs the sky. Ezra greets us with a tilt of his chin.

"I'll take a shower," Clara says before entering the house, leaving me with all sorts of dirty thoughts.

Ezra walks me away, then stops in the middle of the field. "Just to let you know," he starts, sighing as he looks into the distance. "I did the border close to the river and a small group broke into our lands."

My stomach plummets. "Fuck."

"Yeah. They're looking for her." He takes a deep breath and releases it, turning to look at me. "You don't have much time, Liam." And he walks off, leaving me with this piece of news and dread filling my stomach.

With her pack this close, I need a plan. I need a plan to keep everyone safe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIAM



The sun has started its descent when I ask Clara if she wants to help with the horses. When we were kids, we were hardly ever allowed to since our parents thought we would annoy the animals and get kicked. It's more of a problem because of our inner wolves, and when we're kids and not in control of them, they might scare the horses.

Clara smiles when she accepts it, so I take it as a victory. We make our way across the field, and I point the horses out to her, introducing the new ones and reminding her of the ones who were here when we were young. They let her run her fingers through their manes, and we gather some of them to bring to the stable.

"How often do you have problems here?" she asks when we take to the shade. "I heard Ezra telling the others he went to check the borders. Does he do that out of habit, or is there a need?"

I look at her and think of telling her about her pack coming after her. She doesn't need to know this just yet, though. She needs to heal. "Well... We actually had a witch attack a couple of months ago."

Her brows shoot up. "Really? Is that new? I don't think I've ever heard about them messing around with wolves. What happened?"

"It was a rogue. She wanted to do some ritual or something and found a newcomer who didn't know he was a shifter."

She cocks her head. "Didn't know? How does that work?"

I shrug. That's a long story, and it might be easier to take her into town one of these days so she can meet the sheriff and his mate. They were more involved, and they can explain the details better than I can. "Not quite sure. The newcomer's sister showed up after he went missing. They found him dead in the woods. Thankfully, the witch was dealt with later on."

She helps me renew the horses' food in silence. Then she sighs. "This is so strange. I know witches don't like us, but they've never been this forward."

"Things change."

She looks up at me with something glinting in her eyes. "That they do." And her voice comes out of her lips scraping. There's no doubt. She's thinking the same I am.

I straighten my spine. Clara keeps her eyes on me, appreciation clear across her face as she gives me a slow once-over. My wolf's desire rumbles inside me. He tells me to take her already, to claim her. To make sure no one will ever touch her again.

I grind my jaw. I can't. Can't do this like this, can't move too fast. And still... My body burns for her. She sinks her teeth into her lower lip as she looks up at me, deep breaths making her chest rise and fall.

One step closer to her. She steps back, but she holds her chin high in challenge. Another step and Clara presses her back to the stall next to us. Her gravity pulls me in and I follow her, our gazes locked, our bodies responding to one another. I press a hand to the wood wall to the left of her head, then to the right, caging her in. She parts her lips, her breath growing shallow.

The sight of her intoxicates me. I can only gape at her big eyes, my fingers itching to tug at her hair as I devour her mouth. "What do you mean by that?" I ask.

She licks her lips. Slowly. "By what? By things changing?"

"Mm. That's what you said, yeah." I lower my face to brush my nose down her temple. She shivers against me, her

eyelids fluttering shut.

“You changed.”

“How?”

“You are... You know...” She turns her head, meeting my eyes, our lips so close to one another I can taste her breath. “You have...”

Shit. The way she stutters, and how her body warms up against me makes my cock go rock-hard. I close my hands in fists, shifting my body so I won't dig my hardness against her. “I have what?”

Clara's breath hits my face. “There's one thing that hasn't changed.” Her voice lowers. “You still have my back.”

The words shoot straight to my heart. “I always will.”

And her eyes are so bright, so intense on me, I know I'm a goner. I need to kiss her. Need to taste her, feel her body against mine. Clara parts her lips, her gaze fastened on my mouth, and I know she wants me too. She wants me, even when she doesn't feel the calling of the bond.

She's mine. She's *mine*.

“Liam!” Someone calls out from just outside the stall. “You there? Ezra needs you.”

I don't move, but Clara slips under my arm, creating distance between us just as I hear footsteps closing in. She giggles as she makes her way to the horses and starts braiding a mane before my hard-on has even gone down.

This woman. I have to have her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLARA



It's undeniable there's a world of things going on. My amnesia doesn't release its grip on my mind. My wolf isn't quite ready to come out. The pack tries to make me feel comfortable, but I can see an underlying tension between them as if something is about to go off.

There's so much I should be worrying about. And yet, I can only gape at Liam and hope he'll kiss me until I'm out of breath. My body grows warm when I get close to him, my skin prickling whenever our arms brush. It wasn't like this when we were kids. Liam was always my closest friend. He listened to me and cared about me, and kept me safe. But there wasn't a grain of romantic tension between us.

As I lie down to sleep, belly up, and he turns the lights off, the only thing I can think of is his hard body against mine, and wonder about his taste on my tongue. Nothing else comes to mind. Everything passes me like it's not important. Not as important as he is.

The mattress dips next to me. He finds his spot beneath the sheets, and even with a bed this small and a man this big, he manages not to touch me. A minute passes, then five. His scent fills my lungs to the brim, and I shudder to the absence of his warmth.

"You okay?" he mutters.

"A bit cold," I lie, because the other option is telling the truth, and it would be so pathetic to say I'm shivering because I miss his body heat.

He turns to me. “Really?” The disbelief in his voice is justified. Shifters run hot. No one feels cold. “I can grab more sheets.”

“No, I’ll live.”

I adjust myself under the sheets and my arm brushes his body. His warmth shoots through me like a current and I shiver again, my nipples tightening. My body goes taut, the smell of him, of his wolf, washing over me with need.

Liam moves again. Uncomfortable, unquiet, I’m not sure. After a pregnant moment, he reaches out a hand, barely touching my elbow. “Come here. I’ll warm you up.”

I let him move me, turning me to my side until my back presses to his hard chest. He slides an arm beneath my neck, his other hand resting on my hip. His warmth is everything I feel, and I clench my jaw shut so a sigh won’t escape me. I nuzzle into his arm, breathing his scent in, soaking in his presence.

Liam pulls me against him, and I’m so overwhelmed by his scent and his warmth, I almost miss the hardness twitching against my backside. Heat floods me, and a knot tightens in my throat.

“Better?” he murmurs, warm breath against my neck.

“So much better,” I whisper back, closing my hands in fists, pressing my thighs together so he won’t smell my arousal. So he won’t smell how much I need him right now.

His thumb circles a spot on my hips. I arch my spine so his hand will touch some skin, and once it does, warmth coils inside me. A simple gesture and it has me this needy. My panties grow slick, and I move my hip so his thumb will touch more of me.

Liam groans behind me, the sound reverberating through his chest to my back. “You already have me on the edge of madness, Clara,” he says, breath sliding down my neck.

I just murmur an “oh?” back, my eyelids fluttering closed as I press myself against him. His cock twitches again, and I

can't help but move against it. To grind up against its length, feel it against my ass. Wish it was inside me.

Liam tightens his hold on my hip. "Stop that."

Ha. As if I could. "Stop what?" My voice breaks, muffled with heat. I can't even hide how much I want him, how much my body burns with desire.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks, and his breath brushes my lips. I open my eyes to peer up at his face, gaping at me with doubt and heat, his eyes glinting in the darkness of a ranch night.

I choke on how intense his gaze is on me. Craning my neck so our lips brush together, I don't break eye contact. "Because I need you."

Liam *breaks*. He snarls and clashes his lips to mine with bruising strength, devouring my mouth as if he's been hungry for it for too long. I let him take me, parting my lips, losing my breath to his kiss. He marks me with his searing mouth, making me wish we were the only people in the world.

I arch my back off his chest, toward his hand. "Touch me," I breathe against him, begging for more.

He doesn't waste a second, hand sliding past the collar of my pajamas' shirt. The calloused palm of his scrapes down my neck and collarbones, over the slope of my breast until he grabs one mound. I arch off, my head falling back and breaking the kiss. A huge moan escapes me, and Liam groans back, moving against me so he can kiss me again.

Liam palms one breast, then the other. His rough fingertips brush against the hardened knots of my nipples, starting a deep ache inside me. My pussy clamps around nothing, and I need him so freaking bad.

"More," I moan against his lips, my mind half-gone, clouded with lust.

The hand on my hip strokes up to my stomach beneath the shirt. The roughness of his palm gives me shivers. He rubs circles around my navel, then down to the waistband of my pants. Liam's wolf snarls inside him, a wave of vibrations

racing through his chest to mine. I arch my spine yet again, pleading for more of his touch, for his hand to slide into the place I need it the most.

“Fuck,” he curses against my skin, lips touching my chin, my jaw. “You’re so... So...”

He doesn’t finish. I can’t wait for his words, for whatever he wants to tell me. I grip the hand teasing at the waistband of my pants and open my eyes to stare at him. “Touch me. *Please.*”

His pupils flare and he kisses me again. Every swipe of his tongue turns my panties slicker, and I’m almost crying with despair when Liam finally slips a hand into my pants and panties, fingertips exploring my mound. I heave against him, gripping his hips, pressing them against mine. I part my knees, needy, moving, but he explores my skin, inch by torturous inch, until I’m mewling.

Liam touches everywhere but where I need him most, teasing and brushing, and he moves in time with me to keep the torture for another long moment. I’m halfway to madness, grinding my ass against his hardness, soaking in the way he grunts against me when his teasing fingers part my lower lips and he goes straight to my core.

The hand on my breast tightens in reflex. He groans with satisfaction at the wetness he finds there. “Shit,” he roars against my lips. “Is this for me?”

I nod. “All for you.”

“Fuck.” And he dips one knuckle inside me, gently. I rock my hips back against him, but he pulls his hand away and finally, fucking *finally*, touches my clit. I groan, arching my spine so hard it’s about to break, and the circles he makes on my nub quickly bring me to the edge. “That’s it,” he murmurs, biting down on my earlobe. “That’s it.”

And I move, out of rhythm, seeking release. It takes no time at all. Liam rubs me so right it’s like we’ve done this before, and I’m almost there when he changes the angle of his hand, flicking me with his thumb as he inserts a finger in me.

I rock against him once, twice, then I explode. Pleasure reaches out to my limbs, to every cell in my body, and it takes over. I go dizzy, and maybe I scream because Liam presses his lips to mine. He moves against me, cock rubbing at my backside until his entire body locks, and he relaxes with a deep shudder. Aftershocks take my body, making me tremble as if I were about to freeze over. Liam twists a nipple of mine between his fingers, and another jolt quivers through me.

His chest heaves against me, and I float in pleasure as he pulls his hands off me and gets to his feet. I reach out and he takes my hand in his, kissing my knuckles.

“Sleep,” he murmurs before pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll be back in a moment. Just have to clean up.”

The thought of him coming on his pants because of me makes me hot all over again, but the pull of darkness is strong, and my body is all pliable and relaxed. I keep fighting against it, and I only fall asleep once Liam’s back, his arms locked around me, my face pressed to his chest. I fall asleep to the beating of his heart, his scent all around me.

And my heart has never been this content.

CHAPTER NINE

LIAM



The evening falls around me, crickets and birds training their symphony as I raise myself on a raised bar behind the house. The trees are alive, and the stars glint from up above as I bring myself up and down, feeling the muscles of my biceps burn with the exercise.

My wolf snarls inside me, unhappy with my decision. I've seen to the horses, and I checked the car and my bank account. Everything's ready if we have to run at a moment's notice. He hates I'd leave the pack behind, but he also knows I wouldn't let anyone hurt Clara. She's my priority, and if we have to leave to keep the pack safe, then so be it.

My wolf, as animals usually are, doesn't understand about sacrifices. He thinks we should stay and fight whoever comes our way. He thinks the pack would have our back. Keep our mate and our pack, and that's that.

He can't see the danger. How Clara's pack is coming after her, and how they would be a problem. They're bigger, and her alpha is meaner, a man for violence and punishment. I can't let them have her. I can't let them come here and kill my entire pack because of us either.

We have to leave. Ezra wouldn't be happy, but he doesn't have a better idea either.

Soft steps come from the back door, and her smell wafts up to me, sweet and powerful, clear among the others. I pull myself up one last time, a drop of sweat running down my back, then I stop, landing on the ground and turning to her.

The way her eyes glisten as she gives my naked torso a once-over makes my cock harden. Good thing I'm in jeans. Now I see why males tend to start wearing jeans after they meet their mates. It would be ridiculous to walk around with a tent because of her.

Beautiful Clara smiles at me, brushing her hands down her hips. "Dinner's ready."

I expect her to stop a foot from me, but she ends the space between us, slinging her arms around my waist. The skin-to-skin makes me groan, and my hands raise to her hair automatically.

"I'm sweaty," I tell her, hoping she'll step back before she notices my hard-on.

"I know." And the cat-like smile on her face tells me she has noticed it, and she doesn't mind. Shit, I'm head over heels for this woman. "I'll let you go if you kiss me."

I chuckle, but my entire body grows taut with her proximity. Burying my fingers in her hair, I tug her head back and feast on her plump lips, devouring the taste of meat and garlic and *her*. I lick at the corner of her mouth, groaning with hunger. For her.

Clara blinks and takes a step back, her cheeks that filthy color of pink. "There's something I noticed," she says, her voice muddled with lust.

It takes everything in me to turn away from her, pick up a towel and pretend I don't want to rip her clothes off and pound into her cunt until she screams my name. "What?"

"You know how I've been cooking?" she asks, and I nod once. "I remember recipes. I know how to do things. You know, how to cut and grate and cook. Isn't it interesting? How I don't remember a bunch of things, but I do remember others?"

"Muscle memory, perhaps?" I turn around, using the towel to wipe off the sweat on my brow. "These are things related not to emotion, but to practice."

She snaps her fingers. “True. I think you have a point.” Then her eyes turn wistful and she looks away, into the woods. “There’s something else I remembered as I was cooking. My mom.” She looks back at me, the corner of her lips tilting down. “She passed away.”

My brows shoot up. “I didn’t know that.” I throw the towel over a shoulder and reach out for her, cradling her face in my hands. “You alright?”

She nods, hands coming around my hips. “It feels like I’ve been through the grieving already. There’s, like, a sore spot in my heart. I don’t remember how it happened, but I know I’ve already been through the whole crying part of it.”

“I’m so sorry —,” and, Goddess, I almost call her mate. The word hangs off my tongue for a moment before I lean forward and kiss her forehead. Clara hugs me, face pressed to my chest even when I’m covered in sweat.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs against my skin. “I just wonder... Why didn’t I come back? If I was alone, I could have come back.”

“Some packs don’t like dissidents.”

She nods, stepping away. “Yeah. Guess that was the case.” And she reaches behind her. She doesn’t scratch it or anything just touches it. Strange. What does it mean? Her gaze shoots up to mine. “Enough of this talk.” She forces a smile onto her face. “Dinner’s ready.”

And I awe at my mate. My strong mate, who has so much going on, so many terrible memories invading her at every moment, and still she doesn’t give up. She doesn’t put her head down, she doesn’t let it take her over. I admire her for another full minute before she blushes and slaps my chest playfully, taking my hand in hers to drag me into the house.

I stop, pulling her back until her chest slams into mine. She peers up at me with a smile. I kiss her, sucking on her lips until she’s trembling with need against me until her eyes gloss over with need. I hold her against me, breathing in as I gape into her eyes.

“Whatever happens,” I murmur against her swollen lips,
“you have me. You’ll always have me.”

She smiles. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

CHAPTER TEN

CLARA



Liam spoils me. I didn't need another batch of clothes, but he went on and had me buy them either way. I look at myself in the mirror, admiring the black teddy, the color so striking against my pale skin it makes me look like a ghost.

After peeking outside the bathroom door to make sure everyone is in their rooms, I tiptoe to ours — Liam and mine —, and enter without a sound, closing the door behind me. When I turn around, he's on his feet, gaping at me as if he saw not a ghost, but something beautiful.

These soft eyes and the curl to his lip. They give me the certainty I'm not the only one falling in love here.

“So, what's the plan?” I ask, my cheeks growing warm and my gaze avoiding his. He gave me orgasms so good yesterday, but it was in the dark, and now the reality of intimacy makes my cheeks burn.

Liam shifts his weight between his feet. “I have a plan to bring your wolf out.”

This makes my attention snap back to him. “Let me hear it.” And my eyes take a long once-over of his muscled form. Shit, he's in gray sweatpants today, and the fabric delineates his hard cock. My mouth fills with saliva. I can't drag my gaze away.

He shifts his weight again, then digs his hands into his pockets. Is he uncomfortable? Maybe I should start ogling his cock. “When we were kids, our parents would say the wolves would only come out if we were relaxed. If we were one with

nature, willing to hear them out. Maybe if we go into the woods and do something to... relax you?"

Oh, shit, are we going to fuck? "Yeah. Sure." My entire face heats up, and I whirl around to the door. "Let's do it." And I leave through the door without waiting for his reply. I almost hop my way outside, ignoring the fact I'm barefoot as I make my way to the edge between the ranch and the woods.

Liam reaches out for me, warm fingers brushing my arm. "Don't you want — " He's a careful man, so I bet he's going to offer shoes, but I'm too hyped up now.

"No, I'm good." And I start into the trees, easily making my way through the path as I follow him inside.

Liam guides me into a clearing bathed by moonlight. I stop and gawk. I remember this place from my childhood. We used to come here to hide from Ezra. A haven, but it never lasted long. Ezra would eventually find us and force us to hang out with his annoying self.

I chuckle as I reach Liam's side. "Remember how often Ezra came after us here?"

Liam shrugs, a smile teasing the corners of his lips. "When I look back, I see how desperate for attention he was. Maybe he felt the pressure of being the next alpha. He just didn't know how to deal with it."

I point at him, propping a hand to my hip. "Doesn't excuse him of being an ass to us."

"No, it doesn't."

We laugh, and Liam takes my hand to guide me to the center of the clearing. We sit side by side on the soft underbrush, the wet leaves under me making me shiver. I shoot Liam a side-glance. So, that's it? We're going to fuck on the underbrush like animals? I mean, I don't really mind, I'm just surprised.

Liam takes my hand in his, then adjusts himself so he's facing me. I do the same until we're staring at each other. He grips my fingers, then brings them to his lips, kissing my

fingertips. Goosebumps pop on my arms. Liam's eyes drill into mine.

And nothing happens. He just stares at me, breathing, my fingers to his lips. My heartbeat slows down. "That's it?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

He blinks, caught by surprise. "Mm..."

So I'm the only one who thought we were coming here to fuck. I narrow my eyes at him. "By 'relaxing' you meant... Meditating?"

"Yeah. Try to reach for your wolf."

My wolf's still mute inside me, and now I want him. Madly. I clench my jaw for a moment, debating if I should take the initiative or not. To hell with it. I desperately need this man.

Dropping my hand from his, I bury my fingers in his long hair and press our lips together. Liam breathes out, but he grips me close and parts my lips with his. His tongue dips into my mouth and we tease each other, his hands coming down to my hips. Memories of yesterday flood my mind and I groan against him, wanting more of that.

Liam brings me to his lap, my legs straddling his hips. I sit on his hard cock, the flimsy fabric of the teddy meeting his sweatpants. Liam's warm hands explore my sides to my exposed thighs, and he slips his thumbs under the hem. I arch against him, circling my hips to his hardness, delighting in the pleasure that reaches deep inside me.

Lust coils low in my belly, and with every sharp motion of my hips, more wetness coats my panties. A rumble grows in Liam's chest, his fingers toying with my panties. I part my knees wider, moving against him, seeking release. His lips sear into mine, and I crane my neck to allow him to kiss down my throat. My moans fill the clearing, and I keep moving, a jolt of pleasure shooting straight to my clit.

Liam reaches inside my teddy, his thumb finding my clit and massaging it. My wetness makes the gliding easy even with the awkward stance. His teeth nibble on my pulse, down

to my collarbones, and I wonder if he would ever mark me. If he would choose me to be his, forever.

I keep grinding against him, never faltering as he flickers me, and with every breath, I get closer and closer. Something grows inside my chest as if my heart is swelling. I gasp, an orgasm threatening to overpower me. Liam's touch on me grows faster, maddening, and I'm about to blow.

The presence inside me grows until it's impossible to deny it. It clogs my throat, just as pleasure grows to its apex. My moans die out just as Liam presses his thumb to my clit, and I come undone. Sharp pleasure explodes in the back of my eyelids, making me cry out and move faster.

Mate.

What? What was that? My eyes shoot open. Liam's arm folds around my waist and he puts me down on the underbrush, his hard cock twitching against me. I arch my spine off the ground, increasing the pressure between us as he rubs himself on me.

Mate he's our mate he's always been our mate.

I choke again. This voice. This voice inside my head, this presence. It's her! It's my wolf!

"Oh, shit!" I cry out and push Liam away. He sits up, his pupils blown wide, his eyes full of lust as he moves his mouth to no sound. I turn around and let the urge take me.

And Goddess, the pain feels amazing.

Even as my bones break and mend, and as my fur scratches like hell coming out, I grin in happiness. I can still change into my wolf! She's still here, still alive inside me. I open my eyes to gape at the surrounding woods with a different vision, with my wolf's point of view.

Then her words fill my head again.

Mate mate he's our mate.

I whirl around to face Liam and narrow my eyes. Liam's our mate? Why the hell didn't he tell me this?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIAM



C lara gives me such a scare I don't move for several heartbeats, just watch her. Then I capture what's happening — her wolf woke up. It reached out for her. She's back.

I watch the white wolf in front of me, eyes narrowing for a moment. My wolf howls inside me and it takes everything in me not to copy him. Instead, I strip and let the urge of a shift take over, and in moments we're in our wolf forms, gaping at each other.

Approaching her, I bury my face in the fur on her neck, smelling her. The scent of her is still here, but more powerful, clearer because of my wolf senses. I soak in her scent, letting it fill my lungs, then turn to the woods, motioning with my head to her. Her wolf lingers for a second, then darts among the trees. I follow along.

We move in perfect rhythm, knowing where the other is going next. We run and run, ignoring the animals scurrying away from us, the ones escaping the predators racing in the woods at night. The two of us reach another clearing bathed by moonlight, and I throw my head back and howl in delight.

My mate. She's my mate, and we're in this together. Running until we can't take it anymore, becoming one with nature. The feeling is beautiful, overwhelming. I keep grinning and grinning as we race together into the trees, then around the border, and back into ranch lands.

Clara slows down when she reaches the clearing from where we started. She makes for the shreds of her teddy and keeps her back to me as she shifts. The moonlight washes pale scars down her skin, and I squint at them for a moment. Where did these come from? My heart still races in my chest, but I force my wolf to give me back control. Once I'm on my feet, I hasten to put my pants back on and offer her my shirt, doing my best to avoid looking at her naked curves.

She puts the shirt on, her full curves filling it out, the hem reaching her thighs. Her nipples are two hardened knots through the shirt, and my cock twitches, aching to bury itself inside her. Now she knows. Now that she knows maybe we could...

"You didn't tell me," she murmurs, and her voice is so broken and so vulnerable, everything else washes away.

"What?" I blink, confused for a moment.

"You didn't tell me we were mates." She narrows her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had too much going on, Clara. Too much with the amnesia, and running from your pack."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "So you let me be the fool? Did anyone else know?"

"Ezra did."

She chews on her bottom lip for a moment. "You lied to me."

"I didn't lie, I just chose to tell this once you were feeling better." I approach her, reaching my hands out to her elbows. "There are priorities, Clara. You know that. And how could you know I was telling the truth when you couldn't feel your wolf?"

She looks away, into the woods, and stays in silence for several aching heartbeats. Finally, she nods. "You're right. This is not the time for mating bonds."

That's not what I said. I cock my head to meet her eyes. "I understand you're upset. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you earlier,

but we're together now, and that's what matters."

Clara nods once. "Okay. Okay..." Her shoulders relax, and she releases a sigh. "So we have two good things, right? I can reach my wolf again, and we're mates."

I smile at her. "Yeah. And a mating bond overcomes the bond with an alpha, so you could be free of your pack."

She massages her chest with the heel of a hand. "My wolf is still connected to him. She's whining to go back. She doesn't understand why we ran." Clara shakes her head, and I reach up to comb her hair away from her face. "And I don't remember, too."

I press our foreheads together. "We'll find answers. Together." And I don't point the scars out at her, but I take that mental note. This alpha of hers did her wrong, and the mere hypothesis of him hurting her burns inside me. I have to keep her safe, but I won't let her alpha go without punishment.

I won't rest until he's dealt with.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLARA



Warm water cascades down my back, battering down on my skin. I soak in the last drops as I turn the shower off. After a day helping Liam around with the ranch's duties, my body pulses with that soft ache of exercise. It's not something I've grown used to after I moved away.

I reach out for my towel and wrap myself around it, the cotton scraping against my skin. After I'm dry, I turn my back to the mirror, peeking over my shoulder at the scars down my back. The exercise, and the shower, and the sight of them... They join in my head to bring out something I didn't notice was there.

Memories of pain. They rattle through me, shaking me to my core. I close my eyes, flashes of being put down, kicks to my stomach, lashes to my back. The tangy taste of blood covering my tongue, no one defending me. My arms raised over my head, my wolf whining. The pain of being betrayed, wounded, humiliated by my alpha. His eyes full of hatred on me, the disappointment filling my veins like poison.

It was him. My alpha did this to me. The memory blossoms as if it's always been here. I press a hand to my chest, gazing at my reflection. My wolf whines and whines, deep betrayal clashing with her need to go back to the pack. Even with the pain and the truth and how he treated us. The authority of an alpha is so strong, my wolf dislikes going back, but she still wants to. It's a pull deep in our souls, a tug that will never cease.

Wrapping the towel around myself, I tuck my clothes under an arm and shoot out of the bathroom. I reach our room and enter it, meeting Liam's eyes as I close the door behind me. His gaze drapes down my towel-clad body and his pupils blow wide, but I'm already talking.

"I remember it."

He doesn't even blink. "Remember?"

"How I got my scars." I drop the clothes and turn to him. "It was my alpha. Goddess, everything is so much clearer now. It just dawned on me. He loves his punishments." I gasp, massaging my chest. "Can you believe my wolf still wants to go back to him? I hate this alpha bond."

Liam blinks once, slowly. He unfolds his body, getting up and reaching out to cup my face. "Get dressed, will you?"

I cock my head. "Why?" I'm out of breath with the thrill of the discovery, and yet he's more worried about me putting my clothes on? Insult chokes me for a moment as I gape at him, not understanding his weird reaction.

Liam reaches for the door. "I'll wait outside."

I blink at the door closing behind him. With a sigh, I put my pajamas on. Crossing my arms over my chest, I wait for him to come back inside. Once he does, he doesn't look changed or anything. He sits on the edge of the mattress again.

"Go on. You remembered... Your alpha?"

Didn't he hear a word I said? "Yes! He's the one who gave me the scars I have on my back. I remember now, how he punished me. How violent he was with everyone who said no to him."

Liam reaches out, hands gripping mine. "I thought something like this must have happened." His eyes harden. "I promise you, Clara. He won't touch you ever again."

"But what about the others?"

Liam blinks. "The others?"

“The rest of the pack. If he was this violent with me, he must have been with others.”

Liam’s shoulders grow taut. “We can’t start a war, Clara. Our pack is too small.”

I look down, stomach roiling with frustration. “But what if...”

Liam pulls me closer, flush to his chest. His hands land on my hips, and my arms go around his neck like we’ve done this for years. His lips brush against my chin, my jaw until they touch my ear. “Don’t think about that. You’ll only hurt yourself. Let’s deal with what we can.”

He hugs me closer, but I can’t help but feel disappointed. My lips tilt down, and I let him pull me to bed. Liam tugs me closer and I lie on his chest, but I’m not happy. Dread makes it hard to sleep, even when I’m in my mate’s arms.

I wake up to a howl. A long one, slithering down my spine like an icy finger. I jerk awake and sit up, memories of my alpha and the pain he put me through washing over me. I remember it now. I remember everything.

Liam sits up too, hand on my back, stroking up and down. “It’s alright. That’s just Ezra.”

I shiver. “The alpha was going to sell me.” The words are a weak murmur, about to break when they leave my lips. Tears brim on my lashes and I blink to wipe them away. “That’s what he does to the females who don’t mate in the pack. He sells them to other packs to create alliances.”

Liam’s body tenses, but he says nothing. I reach out, gripping his knee in a hand. That’s why I ran. Because he was going to sell me. The weird white cloth I wore then was tradition. Every female about to be sold off wore one of those, so the potential buyer could study and smell the future breeder better.

A breeder. That’s what I was going to be. Not a bride, not a wife, not a mate. A breeder. The horror of it makes me shiver. Nausea grips at me. Goddess, and my wolf wants to go back to him. The bond between alpha and his wolves is so strong, my

animal won't think of running. Not if she's not mated. The mating bond comes first, but the alpha bond comes second. If Liam doesn't mate me, my alpha could show up at any time and order me back, and my wolf would fight me to obey.

How could an alpha do that to someone? To his pack? The people who swore to obey him, who bound their souls to his authority?

That's why she didn't let me change when I ran away. That's how much she respects his authority.

Liam pulls me against his chest, lying the both of us down. I shiver in his warm embrace, closing my eyes against the memories. He holds me tight, lips pressed to my temple.

"He won't hurt you. I won't let him." And in his words, there's the promise of protection, but it feels cold. Like there's more to this than he lets me know.

And I can't sleep. Liam soon take deep breaths, relaxed in his slumber. But I can't follow him into the darkness. I see the first rays of the sun turning the dark sky to lilac, and I get to my feet. Uneasiness seeps into me, and I don't know what to do. Even with my mate next to me, my next step is as mysterious as when I ran from my pack.

Fear is the one thing I feel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIAM



Ezra finds me sitting on the porch when he arrives from the border. He shoots me a glance and says nothing as he picks up his discarded clothes from the ground and puts them on. I wait, my heart thundering in my chest. My wolf knows something is wrong.

That howl that woke up Clara last night? Clara didn't recognize it because she hasn't lived enough with Ezra as an alpha. But I do. And I know it's the howl he uses to signal for a meeting place.

He met them yesterday. Clara's pack. And from what she told me, her alpha will want her back.

Ezra plops down next to me. Our knees touch, and he stares at the ranch, the first rays of the sun coloring the grass. The horses are already out, prancing about, ignorant of what's happening here. Ignorant of the danger.

"They want her back," Ezra finally says. His words sink like stones in my stomach. Nausea roils inside me.

We stay in silence for another moment. Unmoving. Ezra's grown to be an excellent reader of the situation. He knows I don't know what to say, and he doesn't insist. He just stays with me.

"She said," I start, looking down into my joined fingers and my white knuckles, "he wanted to sell her off. As a breeder."

Ezra's body tenses. I look sideways to find his jaw clenched hard. "That's a shitty part of being secret," he says.

“We don’t have a leader. Someone who would make rules and be sure all would obey. Every pack has their set of beliefs.”

I half-turn to face him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” and he raises his brows when he looks at me, “there’s nothing we can do, Liam. Do I think it’s primitive to exchange women for alliances? Yeah. It’s a fucking crime. But humans do that, too. And what do you want me to do? To call their cops? How are you going to explain to them that Clara would move back into the pack because her wolf told her so?” He shakes his head. “Shifters’ problems can only be solved by shifters, and our pack is not big enough to face theirs. He had, like, ten men with him yesterday. We’re strong, but we lack numbers.”

“So you want to give her back? Just like this?” I bare my teeth, shooting to my feet. “She grew up in this place, Ezra. How could you send her back like this?”

He hushes me as he stands up too. “Keep quiet. And I never said we were giving her back.” He changes the weight of his body between his feet, gazing into the woods. “I told them she was very wounded and I wouldn’t send her back like that. Told them she fell and hit a stone. So I asked for three days.”

I pull my shoulders back. “Three days?”

He nods. “Three days to give her back. You’ll have time, Liam. You two pack up and disappear.”

“That would make you a traitor, Ezra.” I shake my head. I could never do that. Leave, knowing they’ll be killed? That they’ll be slaughtered because of my mate and I? “They’ll come for vengeance.”

Ezra points a finger up as if he had been waiting for this. “But if they come to destroy the pack, we might get the others on our side. The bears. Maybe even the dragons. If they invade Shadow Falls, it’s everybody’s business.”

My brows shoot up. Does Ezra have a plan? That’s new. That’s... Impressive. Then I shake my head. “Even so. Even

with the bears and the dragons. They'll take time to get here. Some of you might die."

Ezra twists the corner of his mouth, propping his hands to his hips. "Well, do you have a better idea? Because I'm not letting them take Clara, and you won't either."

A hiss of impatience exits my lips. I pace up and down the porch, looking up to check on the horses here and there. Finally, I stop in front of my alpha. "If I mate her, they can't claim her." I snap my fingers, pointing at him. "That's it. The mating bond has priority. And we're mates, anyway. I'll mate her, and whoever was going to buy her won't want her because she's mated."

Ezra pulls his upper lip up. "You dumb? Of course they will. If they kill you." He shakes his head. "Yeah, the mating bond is stronger, but she's still tied to her alpha. I'm telling you, Liam. The only way out is for you two to run. We'll hold out, and the rest of the shifters in Shadow Falls will help us if we need."

"I can't let you take the brunt of this."

Ezra steps closer. "But I will because I am the alpha." He grins, gripping both my shoulders. "That's everything I've always wanted, Liam. I'll keep everyone safe."

And he walks off, leaving me slack-jawed staring at his back. Shit. Shit shit, what am I going to do? I can't abandon my pack, not when they might all die fighting my battles. I'm the one who should stay. My brows lower over my nose in determination.

The one who wants Clara back is her alpha. He's the one call the shots, he's the one who wants to sell her. He's the one who hurt her so much she's a shifter with scars.

Rage boils inside me. That's it. I have to solve this, and the one way to do so is fighting her alpha. I have to kill him, then hope to Goddess that his beta has more sense and won't come after us for vengeance.

Looking at the rising sun, I promise the Goddess. I'm not letting my pack get hurt because of this, and I'm not letting

anyone hurt my mate. Clara will be safe here, and Ezra will take care of her and let her stay if I kill her alpha.

That will end everything.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLARA



Maybe it's because we've known each other through childhood. Maybe it's because we're mates. I don't know the reason, but I can read Liam just fine. As I stand by the bedroom window, slightly cracked open, and let his exchange with Ezra come in with the breeze, I know what he plans to do.

He doesn't want me to get hurt. He doesn't want the pack getting hurt. So he'll try to solve this alone. I take a deep breath, grinding my teeth together as I hear Ezra's steps coming into the house. Liam will try to kill my alpha. That's the one way my mate could free me of his authority.

He won't make it. My alpha keeps his position because he's strong. Violent. He always attacks first.

And there's something I know Liam doesn't.

Ezra said he got three days to send me back. I know that's not true. My alpha may have told him he'd wait, but my alpha doesn't wait. He just said that so Ezra would put his guard down. So it would be easier to invade.

He's planning something. I know he is. He might want to break into the ranch when no one's expecting him so he can take me and get his revenge at the same time. Or maybe he'll just burn the ranch down. I've heard of him doing that.

I flutter my eyelids shut. Memories of pain are now supplanted by memories with Liam. Caring for the horses, lying in his arms. His warmth, the scent of him against me. The way he tasted on my tongue, how special he makes me

feel. These memories are going to push me through anything. They're going to be the one thing my alpha can't take from me.

I need to leave. That much I know. My wolf whines inside me, and I press a hand to my chest as if I could reach her. She doesn't want to leave our mate, and at the same time, she wants to go back to her pack.

I just want to keep my mate and his family safe. They treated me so well, even when they didn't have to. Even Ezra, who had always been a jerk to me, has grown to be kind of annoying, yes, but caring and responsible. A much better alpha than my own.

Shifters don't choose their alphas, though. This is not a democracy.

I push myself off the wall and lean closer to the window. Liam's striding to the horses in the field. Good. This gives me some time. I whirl away from the window and tiptoe to the door, peeking up and down the corridor to make sure no one's seeing me. Taking deep breaths, I pull my shoulders back and make it to the kitchen, pretending I'm only looking for some breakfast.

The place is empty. I release a sigh of relief, keeping my ears preened for any steps. Ezra goes to his room. The others are still sleeping. No one will see me. No one will stop me.

I reach the back door and exit, gazing into the woods. This is it. I could stay and fight my previous pack next to my mate. This would get us all killed. The sensible choice is, of course, to just leave. End all of this. Talk to my alpha, beg for forgiveness, accept every punishment he throws my way. Anything to keep Liam safe.

Maybe if I take the beating without complaining, the way my alpha likes it, maybe he will leave my mate in peace.

I race into the woods, legs pumping as I crash the undergrowth beneath my bare feet. My wolf rises closer to my skin, asking to shift, but my chest aches so hard I'm sure she

would release a howl if I let her out. The sound might tip Liam off to my position. I keep my pace, racing on my human legs.

Tears sting at my eyes, but I don't pause. I don't let myself suffer, not yet. Liam's heart will break, but we're not mated yet. It's not like he can't go on and find someone new. The thought burns through me, but I keep running, putting distance between me and the ranch.

Between me and the only place I've ever been happy.

I fly over roots and fallen branches, and circle the border to the very point I arrived last time. To the river and the ravine and the stone. I cross the border, the smell Ezra left in the woods disappearing. It takes no time for me to see them.

A group of wolves lies in a circle beneath a tree, relaxing in the shade. Some raise their heads when I creep closer, ears twitching. None roars to my presence. They know me.

The biggest wolf of the group rises, heavy steps bringing him closer. He lifts his head to sneer at me, a side of his lip curling up. My alpha. He knew I'd come. He knew all he had to do was wait.

I lower my stance and gape at the ground, showing him my neck. Submission is only the beginning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIAM



The horses are taken care of, and I take a long last look at the lands. Now, all I have to do is check on Clara, make sure she's fine and comfortable, give her one last kiss, and then I'll make my move.

The odds of me surviving this are slim, but I don't care about that. Clara's not mated yet. Her heart won't break so bad if I die, and I'll be giving her a chance at life. A chance to live free, away from her alpha's clutches. She'll be able to choose whoever she wants to marry, or not marry at all, and be happy however she desires.

That's the best I can do for her. I love her so much I'm ready to sacrifice everything to see her happy.

I climb the porch, the smell of steak wafting to me. She must be in the kitchen. I'll pull her aside and kiss her once more. Then I can leave. The floorboards creak under my weight, something they've always done, and I make my way to the kitchen.

Clara isn't in front of the stove. Ezra is.

I arch an eyebrow, stopping at the threshold. He lifts his head to me and arches an eyebrow back.

"What?" he shoots, flipping a steak on the frying pan. "It's not too early for meat. And don't tell me you don't feel like steak today. I damn feel like steak." He points at the fridge with the fork he's holding. "Grab yesterday's potato salad. It's almost done. I'm sure the others will come up with the smell."

I change my weight between my feet for a moment, cocking my head. “Where is she?”

He opens his mouth as if to ask ‘who’, but seems to think better of it. “Clara? I don’t know.”

“I thought she was the one cooking.”

“I wish,” he shoots back. “She’s much better at this than I am.” He leans away from the stove. “Breakfast is almost ready!” he calls out to whoever might listen.

I whirl around and go for the rooms. The others come out of their places, moving to the kitchen, but I ignore the greetings and questions and keep moving. My wolf grows unquiet. Something is up. Where is she?

I rap at the door with my knuckles. “Clara?” She doesn’t reply, and no sound comes from inside of the place. Maybe she’s sleeping. Maybe. I open the door and find the room empty. My stomach plummets.

Where is she?

Whirling around, I make my way to the living room, racing out of the house. I swipe my gaze over the field, but she’s nowhere to be seen.

The tree. She must be at the tree.

I jog that way, the enormous tree my focus. Yes, she has to be there. She used to climb it whenever she needed to think. Whenever she needed some peace. Of course she’s there. I didn’t have to worry.

Still, my heart thunders in my chest, and my wolf paces, expecting her to be here, for her to be fine.

“Clara?” I call when I reach the tree. She doesn’t reply, and I walk closer to the trunk and look up at its branches. She’s not here. She’s not here either.

Fuck. Where the hell is she?

I rush back to the house, and Ezra’s on the porch steps, his eyes serious as he gazes at me. “What happened?” he asks.

“I can’t find her.”

He nods once. “Did you go to the tree?”

“Yeah. She’s not there. Not in our room either.”

Ezra nods once and turns to the inside of the house. “Breakfast’s canceled, you pricks! Clara’s missing!” He turns back to me. “We’ll find her. Don’t worry.”

And as my pack leaves the house and asks questions and searches for the trail of her scent, it dawns on me. We’re mates. We were made for one another, and that means one thing — we think alike. It’s always been like this, we’ve always read each other’s minds, and we always knew what the other was up to.

She’s doing what I intended to do. She’s going after her alpha.

Fuck, she’s going to surrender to keep the pack alive.

Horror washes through me like cold water, a shiver racing down my spine, every hair on my body standing on end. She’s gone. She’s gone after him. Fear pools in my stomach, and I might be too late. I don’t know when she left. She might be back within her pack’s lands, being punished by her alpha right now.

I can’t let that happen.

Whirling away from my pack, I pump my legs into a run and call for my wolf. He comes out without questions, bursting free through my body mid-run, my paws hitting the grass, the wind racing past me.

I need to find her. I need to get to her before it’s too late.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CLARA



My head knocks to the side, pain flaring on my cheek. The sting tells me he cut me, but that's nothing compared to what he'll do to me. I slam my eyes shut to the pain, promising myself I won't let them see me cry. They won't have the satisfaction.

My alpha waits for me to look back up at him, just to slap me again. It's a slap so strong my head snaps to the side once more, and my mind swims. I grow dizzy, nauseous with my brain bouncing in my skull, but my shifter healing kicks in a moment later, and I'm back to myself.

Only for my alpha to reach out and grip my hair, tilting my head back. I wince, then cover up the reaction with a glower, glaring at him as best as I can. He shifted out of his wolf form so the beating would drag out longer. That's how much he enjoys the torture.

“So, you think you're so much better than my rule?” he spits, baring his teeth. My alpha bends on the waist, getting on my face, all the threats on him making my heart pulse. “Instead of doing your part for the good of the pack, you decide to run. Selfish bitch.” He shakes me. Hard. My brain bounces around again and I see stars. “Never complained about my protection. Then when I ask you to do something, you run away.”

I bare my teeth, trying to pull back from his hold. “Never complained? I tried to escape dozens of times. I asked to be freed so I could go home to the ranch, and what did you do? You tortured me. You hit me and whipped me until I couldn't

get to my feet, and you humiliated my wolf until she can't move away from you. I never wanted to stay, but I couldn't leave."

He throws me back, and I catch myself at the last moment before I hit the ground. My alpha pulls his shoulders back and roars. It's that kind of roar that should make me wince and grovel. That should make me beg for apologies. I tremble, closing my eyes, and my entire being wants to curl and cry.

But I don't bow. I don't know why, but I don't bow. I look up at him, my eyes widening, and the mere possibility of me challenging him makes him snap. He kicks out and hits the side of my shoulder. I drop back with a thud, my lungs expelling all air. My body makes to curl on itself just as he lands a kick to my stomach.

That's it. That's it, all over again. He's going to torture me, kick me over and over, smash my head to the ground, and watch me bleed until he gets bored. I can't believe it took me this long to run away. The first couple of years after Mom and I moved into the pack, I tried to convince myself things would get better. The alpha mistreated us because we were outsiders. But as I grew older, I noticed that's just how he is. He leads with violence and threats, and everyone is too afraid of him to make a move.

No one will help me, because no one ever did. Not when Mom died, and her new husband started beating me up. Not when he died too, and I was left as a loner, neglected part of the community. As I got closer to my adulthood age, I thought I could get a shot at running away. Only to find out my alpha had other plans.

"You're useless," he says amid the kicks. "The one thing you would be good at was becoming a breeder, and you can't do that. You can't even do that, the most basic of female duties."

I cringe. "You can't force me!" I shout out, and he stops kicking me for a moment. Gaping up at him, I catch his eyes flaring with rage. He'll kill me. I know it.

My alpha arches his back with anger, his eyes turning to gold as his animal comes closer. “I will. Oh, I fucking will. Because I fucking own you.”

“Maybe we should move this to pack lands, alpha?” the beta asks, not moving closer. His gaze darts from side to side in the woods. “We’re too close to — ”

“Let them come,” the alpha roars, reaching down and gripping me by my hair. “Let them all come. I’ll fucking kill Ezra for having kept her.”

“No!” I cry out, trying to free myself. “No, they have nothing to do with this!”

He opens a wicked smile. “They clearly do. And I will have my vengeance.”

And I tremble out of fear, but not for myself. I fear for Liam, Ezra, and all the others who treated me well and kept me safe. Goosebumps take my skin, and I wish I could change into my wolf and bite into my alpha’s neck until he bled, but I can’t do that. My wolf would never let me. No matter how hard I fight him, she still cowers inside me.

A howl breaks the night. It shudders the quiet, a shiver reaching down my spine. And this time, I smile.

It’s Liam. I feel it deep in my heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LIAM



My heart thunders in my chest, thrashing against my ribcage. Fear rushes through me like poison, burning my insides, making me nauseous with rage. How could I be so stupid? How didn't I notice it?

I was so lost in thoughts of keeping my mate safe, I didn't even notice when she left to sacrifice herself. For all I know, she might be already dead.

Goddess, please. I can't lose her. She can't die.

My paws fly over the underbrush as I follow the border line, marked by Ezra's scent. She has to be around here. I have to find her trail somewhere around here, then follow it out and to her pack lands. If I'm fast enough, lucky enough, I might find her safe and sound before she reaches it.

Steps crunch the dead leaves to my left. I shoot a look behind me, not losing speed, and find Ezra's wolf moving closer. And he's not alone. The rest of my pack moves with him, flanking his sides.

Ezra's wolf is lithe, faster than me, and he picks up his pace until our shoulders brush. His eyes meet mine. The connection between an alpha and his pack thrums between us, and I silently gape at him. I try to tell him they shouldn't have come. That coming means putting the entire pack in jeopardy.

Ezra rolls his eyes, then gapes back at me. I know what he means.

We stick together. No matter what.

With a grateful grunt, I keep running, nostrils flared to find my mate's trail. The sweetness of her wafts up to me, very subtle at first, and I slow my pace down to find it. Ezra and the others follow me sniffing the ground, but I'm the one who takes the lead to follow the trail.

My hackles rise. Her scent is not the only one in the wind. There's more. Many others.

We're still near the borders when the trees open up and I see them. Clara's pack. Several of them, some in their human forms, others in their wolves, standing in a circle around the alpha. Around the alpha and my mate.

He yanks her head back, gripping her hair. His eyes flare with rage, a crease between his brows, his teeth bared. Clara's on her knees, chin tilted up in challenge, but there's the smell of her blood, and my vision goes red. Her alpha raises a hand, closes it in a fist, aimed at her face, and she waits for punishment, not bowing to him.

Fucking hell, I'm going to kill him.

Madness takes over, blinding me, and I pump my legs harder, eyes fastened on his arm. His gaze snaps to mine and I roar just as I take the jump, my jaws closing around his wrist. The alpha cries out, letting go of Clara, and she throws herself out of the way just in time.

My teeth pierce his flesh, his blood washing over my tongue, but he's an alpha for a reason. He glares at me, then punches me on the nose. I tighten my hold, shaking my head to shred through his flesh. The wolves around him jump into action, pouncing at me, but my pack is right here.

Chaos ensues. Wolves fighting wolves, and humans changing to fight. Some of them stand in the back, for whatever reason, and our numbers aren't so different now. Hope rises in my chest.

The alpha changes into his wolf, a fast shift, and he escapes my hold as he lands on the ground. I look behind me at Clara, and she meets my eyes with wide ones. She slams her eyelids shut once more, concentration on her face, and I know

she's trying to change. But her wolf won't allow her, I know it. I know it, and it's alright. I'll keep her safe.

Moving so I'm in the way between her and her alpha, I get ready for another attack. The alpha's wolf is much bigger than I am, and I pull my upper lip up and roar. Ezra steps up next to me and joins my roars, and I know he has my back.

The two of us move on to the alpha, and he is much stronger than I am. Ezra is fast, dodging his attacks and landing some of his own, but my sides and my haunches cry out with pain at each of the alpha's bites. Rage keeps me moving, and I try to keep his attention on me as Ezra makes the biggest attacks.

Some wolves surrounding us fall. I don't know if anyone in my pack is wounded or not. Fuck, their alpha is huge. Whimpers of pain and the sound of bodies crashing to the ground and against tree trunks take the clearing.

The alpha slams his body against Ezra, and my alpha stumbles to the side, shaking his head to wipe off the fog of confusion. Then the alpha turns to me. He bares his teeth and pounces, and I know I won't be fast enough. The best I can do is stay between him and Clara, and avoid her getting hurt.

Another wolf jumps from behind the trees, slamming his body into the alpha. The two roll away, and the newcomer gets back to his feet, fast. Ezra and I take to his sides, and I sniff around to see if I recognize the newcomer. It's the sheriff. Surprise crosses me. He never comes to us. Ezra likes to consider him part of the pack, but he's more of a lone wolf.

Doesn't matter. Together, we attack the alpha. He's hard on the fall. Big, strong, fast. Only Ezra can keep up with him. And just as I think we might lose, more wolves join. Not ours.

His beta. His beta, and the others who had been standing by the sidelines. They join... Our side.

I gape as the alpha looks at his beta, betrayal on his face, and the others bite at his haunches, distracting him. The beta slams his body into the alpha's ribs, making him lose his balance for a moment. And it's enough for Ezra. My alpha

pounces and attacks, his teeth closing on the other's throat and ripping.

The sound of his whiny cries reverberates up the trees until he stops moving.

We stand there, hearts racing, for another moment. I move back to look for Clara — still sitting on the same spot, eyes wide. Some of her pack's wolves lay dead around her. My pack has come out not only alive but victorious.

I shift back, going for my mate. She slings her arms around me, shaking as she buries her face in my neck. I bring her up against my body and hold her, breathing her in. Goddess, I thought I had lost her. I was so afraid.

The others shift back too. Both packs. Feet shift on the undergrowth, the smell of several wolves coming up with the wind.

“That was... timely,” says Ezra. I look over my shoulder, and he's staring at the beta who betrayed his pack's alpha.

The man shakes his head, gazing at the body of his dead alpha. “His rule was... Not what any of us hoped for. But we've been stuck with it for so long we didn't know what to do. I guess... All we needed was to see someone defying him.” And he looks up at me. No, not at me. At Clara. She props her chin on my shoulder, meeting his eyes.

“So, you used our attack to take his spot,” says Ezra. “Smart. I hope you won't become a problem too.”

The former beta shakes his head. “No. No, we don't want that.” He raises his hands in a pacifying gesture. “We'll stay out of the way. You have my thanks for taking the initiative.” And he nods once to my mate before he turns around, shifts back into his wolf, and howls. The survivors of his pack follow him back to their wolf forms, and, as a group, they race into the trees.

“They could have helped with the bodies, at least,” Ezra says, and I watch him kick the former alpha's foot. “This fucker. He'll keep giving me problems even after death.”

Clara shivers in my arms. I need to get her out of here. This is enough.

The sheriff sighs, crossing his arms over his chest as he meets my eyes. “Get her back to the ranch, man. She doesn’t need to see this.” Then he stares at Ezra. “Tell me you don’t want to hide bodies with the sheriff next to you?”

Ezra just grins, and I take the moment to sneak out. With my mate in my arms, I trudge my way back to the ranch, my heart still thumping with nerves.

But she’s fine. She’s safe, and that’s all that matters.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CLARA



When I'm in Liam's arms, everything is alright. He carries me across the woods and out of them, then back into the ranch house. I keep my eyes shut, my nose pressed to his neck as I breathe his relaxing scent in, and his steps make every floorboard creak on our way to the bedroom.

He kicks the door closed and sits on the edge of the mattress, keeping me in his arms. I finally look up from the safe nook of his neck and meet his eyes. The affection on his pupils is only overshadowed by a glinting flame.

I bite my lower lip. "So, he's dead."

"He is."

The silence stretches for a moment. Liam studies my eyes but says nothing. I hold on to him even tighter. "What happens now?" I ask in a voice that almost disappears the moment it escapes my lips.

Liam looks at me for several beats of my anxious heart. Finally, he leans in and presses his lips to mine. The sweetness of his action washes over me, relaxing my shoulders, turning my entire body to mush. He holds me close when I sigh, and pecks me again and again.

He pulls back, pressing his forehead to mine. "Now you're mine. No one will ever hurt you again, and you can stay with our pack. We can stay together."

The words sink slowly. After so many years of pain and suffering, this sounds like a dream. I let myself believe. I let

myself hope for more, for years by his side, for happiness in this pack. My heart swells with what's coming, and my eyes sting with tears of bliss.

Liam kisses my lids, then my cheeks. "Don't cry, love."

"I'm happy. So happy." I lift my head to brush our lips together. "That nightmare is over."

"It is. And I'll keep you safe for the rest of our lives."

"You promise?"

He smiles. "I promise. I love you."

His words rattle me to my very core. "I love you too," I breathe back and smash our lips together.

Liam kisses me back, devouring my breaths as I press my body to his. His hands slide down to my waist, holding, gripping, then lower, to my hips. I sigh into his embrace, my body growing hot, and then I'm sick of being dressed, of keeping my distance, of *not* being marked.

I want to be his. Completely his.

Liam coaxes my mouth open and I let him in. Our tongues slide over one another in sensual strokes, and I try to suck his into my mouth as he rakes his teeth over my lower lip. It's messy and wet, and a knot coils between my thighs. His fingers inch down to my ass, and he pulls my body against his lap until I feel the hardness of his cock against my thigh.

My hands reach around his shoulders, down his back. The warmth of his skin seeps into me, and I fold myself closer to his chest. I want to feel him, *all of him*. Against me, pressed to me, his intoxicating scent clinging to every inch of my skin.

Liam's arms fold around me, his hold so tight I lose my breath against his kiss. He devours every moan of mine, his naked skin searing my fingertips. He buries his fingers into my hair, tugging my head back. It's an action so at odds with my alpha's that I gasp. My mate's lips brush my own and he stops, eyes bright as he stares at me.

"Fuck," he hisses, a growl starting deep in his chest. "You're so fucking beautiful." I open my mouth to tell him

he's so handsome it hurts, but the awe on his face mixes with something else. It melts away into hunger. "And you're mine."

The words shiver down my spine, and Liam slams his lips to mine. His kiss grows possessive as if he wants to learn and adore every nook and cranny of my mouth. I ignite, pushing him into the bed so I can straddle him.

If I'm his, then he's mine, and I'm aching for him *everywhere*. Liam plops down on the mattress, bringing me to his chest. He grabs handfuls of my ass, rubbing my core against his cock. Up and down, he's not gentle, but desperate. His harsh motions denounce relief. He's been holding back until now.

He won't hold back any longer.

I fist his hair, kissing him as hard as he kisses me. My hips circle his cock, the delicious friction making me grow slick with pleasure. Every move shoots a jolt of desire straight to my core, but he won't give me time to tease. Liam's not patient today.

He flips us easily. I bounce on the mattress once, air leaving my lungs, and then he's kissing me again. His lips sear down my jaw to my neck, tongue licking at my beating pulse and down to my collarbones. Big, rough hands caress my breasts, pressing them together, kneading at them.

Liam grunts in impatience, a delicious sound that almost makes me want to laugh, and he grips my shirt. I raise my arms, expecting him to pull it over my head, but he rips it clear down my midsection.

"Liam!" I gasp, my eyes wide as saucy as I gape at him. He merely grins back at me, then leans to my breasts, repeating the action with my pretty lace bra. "You were the one who paid for those, you know?"

He makes a deep sound that might be a laugh. "I know. And I want them off." His voice has never sounded this rough. Like he's intoxicated.

The second his thumbs reach for my nipples, I lose track of my thoughts. Torturous circles and his fingers join to pinch

and roll. I arch my back off the bed, my eyelids fluttering shut as he works me. His lips join a second later, sucking, licking, raking his teeth across my sensitive skin until I'm a mewling mess.

I don't know how long I can take of this. Of this beautiful, beautiful torture.

Flipping my hair off my neck, I cock my head to the side. "Liam."

The question on my lips goes unvoiced, but he understands the meaning. Liam stops for a moment, halting so perfectly it's as if time froze. He looks up at me, an eyebrow arched as he studies my face.

"You sure?"

I nod. "More than sure."

He lifts himself to brush our noses together. "We don't have to. Not right away."

His cock twitches against the inside of my thigh as he says this, and I almost laugh. As if I could go another second without being marked. As if I could take any more of this push and pull, and the doubts, and the fear.

"I love you." I swallow, watching his eyes go soft. "I love you, and I want to be with you. Let's stop wasting time."

His shoulders droop and a smile crosses his face. "I love you more." The smile grows into a smirk. "And I love you most, in case you were about to add."

I frown, but he kisses me again and there's no way I can stay mad at him. Liam kisses me hard, his cock brushing along the seam of my pants. He reaches past my stomach to fidget with the waistband. Slowly, his fingers dip into my panties. I part myself, trembling with expectation, but he keeps circling the skin of my mound without ever touching me where I need him the most.

"Oh, fuck, you're the worst," I breathe out, a mix of pleading and complaint.

He makes that rough sound that might be a chuckle again. His lips travel past my jaw to my neck, and he sucks on my pulse until I'm covered in goosebumps. A hand still playing with one of my nipples, his other parts my folds and dips into my wet center. I moan and arch into him, half-lost to the pleasure of his fingers on me, circling, rubbing, skating over my clit.

Liam's body arches and shudders, and I feel the press of his wolf's fangs to my skin. It takes a second to register, and then he sinks them into my flesh. Pain flares, and it's overshadowed by pleasure so fast I cry out.

"Fuck!" I shoot, his fingers working me so close to an orgasm I shiver. "Oh, shit!" And I come apart, trembling and gripping into his arm, bucking into his hand for the life of me.

Are his teeth still in my flesh? Am I bleeding? I have no fucking idea. My wolf's presence grows in my mind, the mating bond clicking in place. She celebrates, howling inside me, and I fight against howling with her. Instead, I moan so loud I'm sure people out of the ranch can hear me.

Shit, I hope Ezra's not around.

If I thought the bond would make this need easier, I was so wrong. It grows into something like desperation, starvation, everything molded into one. With a hand to his chest, I shove Liam off. His eyes glaze over, blood staining the corners of his lips, and then I kiss him. He kisses me back with as much hunger as I feel.

Reaching down, I try to slip off my pants, but my emotions are erratic as pleasure still shoots through my veins. Liam grips the waistband and rips it all off, shoving the shreds to the ground and parting my legs. This is the moment I should warn him of my virginity status, and he would take it easy and be romantic.

There's no time. We're clinging to each other, breathing through each other, and he angles his cock and thrusts in. I cry out, sharp pain ripping through me, choking me for all of a second. My improved healing takes over, and before I can fill

my lungs again, I'm moving. Pleasure makes me drop my head back and my hips pump against him in time.

We hold on to each other, hands on skin, mouths biting and caressing. Our scents mix, becoming one. His steady pounds into me throw me off the edge of another orgasm, and we're not done yet. I dig my heels into his muscled ass and ride him back.

"Fucking hell," he curses, out of breath, gripping my hips and bringing me up against him. He sits me on his lap, but I can't move. Liam bounces me on top of him, hitting this place inside me that reacts like an atomic bomb. I explode, bright lights popping in the back of my lids. Again. Again.

I scream. His lips eat up my sounds. I push him down and ride his cock, my eyes wide to catch the change of his expression until his eyes roll to the back of his head and he comes inside me. Huge, hot spurts of come hit me, and I feel everything. Every drop heightens my pleasure, and I drop off the edge once more, my inner walls clamping around him, begging for more.

We fight to catch our breaths. Our gazes meet. We smile.

"That was..." I start, but he rises off the bed and kisses me.

"Not over," he breathes out and flips me, laying me sideways and entering me from behind. I arch my back and shiver with delight. My mate's hand reaches around my hip to flick my clit.

"Oh." I smile, half-turning to look at him. "I like that."

"Good." He smiles back, his motions never faltering. "Because I'm far from done with you."

The promise makes me gush because Liam proved, over and over, that he always keeps his word.

EPILOGUE

LIAM



Ten Years Later

The oak tree rises in the far side of the ranch, its leaves swishing to the breeze. I approach, not worrying about sniffing the wind. There's no need to. I know I'm going to find her there.

Once I'm close enough, I peek up through the copse of the tree to find my mate sitting on one of the highest branches. Clara presses her back to the thick trunk, her eyes closed, an arm hooked around a branch to keep her in place. I smile. I can't help but smile at the sight of my mate hiding.

She opens her eyes and meets my gaze. The corner of her lip tilts in amusement. "Shit. You found me."

I chuckle and go for the trunk, gripping at the lowest branch to make my way to her side. "Of course I did. You should change your hiding spot if you didn't mean to be found."

Even with my fortieth birthday approaching, my shifter nature keeps my body strong, pliable. It's easy to reach her, and I sit at the branch right next to her. I intertwine our fingers together, and we stand in silence. Clara leans into my shoulder, closing her eyes again. The rustle of the leaves is the one thing we hear.

"What are you hiding from?" I murmur, not wanting to ruin her moment.

She releases a sigh, snuggling even closer. "You'll think I'm an awful mate if I tell you."

An incredulous laugh leaves my lips. “That’s literally impossible.”

She pulls back, straightening her spine and looking down. “You will.”

I study her face, her tired eyes, and reach around her with an arm, tugging her closer again. “Tell me. I promise I won’t judge you.”

She sighs. “Nobody told me being a mom was so tiring.”

I chuckle. “That’s what you’re worried about?” She nods. “Clara. Of course it’s tiring. We’re raising a child.”

“Some people make it sound easy.” Her shoulders droop. “My mom made it sound easy.”

“Because your mom was never around. With all due respect, she basically let you raise yourself. It’s easy if you’re not doing anything.”

Clara pouts. “I just needed a moment. Goddess, there are so many kids in the house!”

I laugh, nuzzling into her neck. “At least none of them is Ezra’s. Can you imagine? Another child Ezra bullying everyone around?”

This time, she opens a smile. Mission accomplished. My mate presses closer to me, closing her eyes again and breathing out. We have been parents for six years now, and it is very rewarding to watch your kid grow and learn new things. But, Goddess, it is hard. Half of the time, I’m winging it. I don’t know what to do, how to explain something in a way that’s palatable and comprehensive, and no one prepared me for freaking tantrums.

Oh, sure, the books told us to ignore, so the kid learns they can’t manipulate you. But try that when you’re in the middle of the town square, with everyone gawking at you and wondering if you’re an abusive father.

“You need some time off,” I tell her, stroking her hair. “You haven’t been sleeping well this week.”

“There are, like, twenty kids in the house,” she says with a defeated sigh.

“Hardly ten, but it feels that much.” The sheriff brought his kids around too, and they’re all in summer break. We only let them go to the river or near the horses with an adult, so, most of the time, they’re running up and down a small part of the field around the house.

“Feels like forever since we last fucked,” she says in a soft voice that almost feels disinterested. Then she reaches out and her hand lands on my thigh. “Do you remember it? How it feels to fuck?”

I laugh. “How could I ever forget?” And I nibble on her earlobe, tasting her skin, blowing into the wet spot to make her shiver. She does, body arching closer to me. Her hand tightens its hold, and she climbs her way to my crotch. My cock twitches, half-ready, hardening from the mere memory of her moaning against me.

She teases the bulge in my pants with the tips of her fingers, her lips parting as her breath leaves her in soft mewls. I reach up to cup a tit of hers, flicking my thumb over the hard knot of her nipple. She moans, turning her head to kiss me hard. Her tongue teases mine, and I press against her, devouring her lips. Sucking her lower between my teeth, I bite her mouth until she grips my cock.

“There’s something I need to say,” she breathes, both her hands fighting with the button of my jeans. “I hate your pants. You should wear something easier to take off.”

I groan against her, feasting on her plump lips. “If I wear sweatpants, I’ll walk around with a tent the entire day.”

“Oh?” She bats her lashes, opening my zipper. “And why would that happen?”

I kiss her furiously, gripping the branch on her other side to keep us in place. “Because you’re so fucking hot, mate.”

She hums in appreciation, fishing my cock out of my pants. Clara curls her fingers around my member, using the pre-come to coat the length as she pumps it. I grunt with

blinding pleasure, goosebumps raising down my arms. With my other hand, I reach between her legs, knowing it'll be impossible to reach inside her pants in this position.

Even through her pants, I feel her warm core, beckoning for me. I rub a finger up and down the HEM, knowing exactly where she needs my attention. She moans against me, burying her face in my neck and biting down on my pulse as she pumps my cock. Fuck, I need to take her. I need to claim her again, to bury myself inside her, to come all over her fine ass. Images of her spread on my bed, moaning for me, take my mind. Memories of fucking her on all fours in the woods, or while she straddles me in the river. Licking her cunt with her legs open in the clearing.

She picks up her pace, licking my ear. "I love you so much I'm wondering how to fuck up here."

I chuckle, focusing on my rhythm so I won't falter, even as I approach an orgasm. "Shit, I love you too. I love you so much."

And she kisses me back, just as I reach my peak, her hand working me up and down, pleasure barreling down my spine. I burst into her hand, covering her pale skin with my load. She slows down her pump, gaping at me with lust in her pupils as I come down, shivering with the last of my throes.

Steps make the grass move and we freeze. We gawk at each other for a moment, then she hastens to put my cock back in my pants. Clara cleans her hand in the branch just as Ezra comes into view.

He narrows his eyes. "You look the opposite of innocent."

I try to come up with an excuse, but Clara opens a grin. "We're innocent, alpha. Nothing to see here."

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Just a heads-up. Your kid said he's running away because I'm an authoritarian dictator. I don't know where he learned that."

Shit. Clara shoots me a glance. I know where that comes from. I was trying to explain how Ezra was the alpha, and how

the alpha takes all the decisions. I may have used a dictatorship as an example.

“He’s taking a ham sandwich and two graphic novels,” he goes on, then turns his back to us. “If you’re too busy, I can tail him.”

“No, we’ll do that. Thanks,” I answer quickly, and Ezra disappears. I turn to gape at Clara, who starts to laugh. “Well, that explanation didn’t work out as I expected.”

“No, it didn’t.” She keeps laughing until her eyes tear up. “Come on. Let’s find him.”

We descend the tree, then turn into our wolves. In this form, we can tag along without our kid noticing, just to let him come to terms and go back home by himself. We’ll be keeping an eye on him so he won’t be in danger. I read that idea in a book.

One thing books never warned me about was how intense this feeling would be. This love for my mate, for my family. The ache to always be near them. The immense appreciation I feel for this incredible, strong woman.

And she’s mine. Mine to love, mine to cherish. Mine to protect.

THE END

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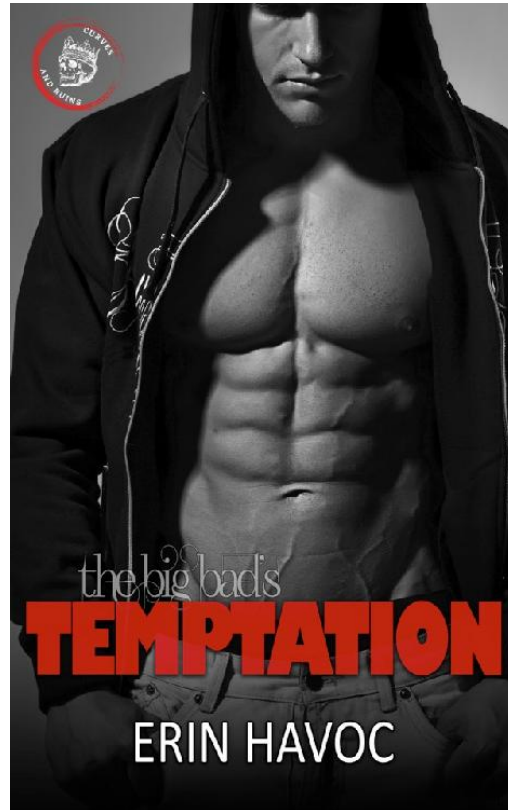
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Havoc writes steamy romance with curvy heroines. Her heroes might look tough, but they have a soft spot for their girls. No matter if they are mountain men, CEOs, or wolf shifters, there's always a happy ending. Check out her Amazon page for more books, and a link to a free story.

