



# WOLF TARGETED

REJECTED BY FATE  BOOK FOUR

EMBER-RAINE WINTERS

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REJECTED BY FATE

BOOK IV

# EMBER-RAINE WINTERS

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J ara

I wave at my fellow pack members as I tighten my wool coat around me on my morning walk. The weather has gotten colder, and there's a light dusting of snow on the ground.

"Hello, McKenna," I say warmly as the woman rushes toward me.

"Hello, Al... I mean Jara." McKenna ducks her head.

"How are you fairing? I know it's been months with so few deliveries from the city. Is your family doing okay?"

A month after Grayson imprisoned me, Archer lifted the total ban on deliveries, but he decreased their frequency.

Jack and Malcom's packs have been routing some supplies through their packs, but the situation still isn't like anything the pack was used to before.

McKenna shakes her head. "We are doing all right. It is quite the adjustment, and the boys are having trouble with their electronics being monitored."

"Hopefully it won't be for much longer. Archer has been working diligently to get this investigation under control." I

smile.

Almost too diligently.

I do my best to keep my depressing thoughts to myself as I walk alongside McKenna. Archer has been even more distant lately.

I'd thought everything would be better after the incident with Grayson.

I was wrong.

"Jara? Are you okay?" McKenna asks, bringing me out of my head.

"Yeah, sorry, I zoned out for a minute. What is it that you need?"

"I was saying that some of the other pack members aren't fairing as well. They would never say it to you or the alpha but..."

"Who?" I ask, but I think I already know the answer. There are only a few pack members who would suffer in silence for the good of the pack.

"Patrick." She sighs. "He will kill me for saying something, but he's one of the best of us."

"That stubborn man," I growl and march back to the pack house. "What are they in need of?"

McKenna rushes to keep pace with me. "When he's not patrolling, he's hunting. He hasn't come to the storeroom for supplies in weeks."

I gasp. "He and his family are surviving off whatever he catches in the frozen wilderness?"

McKenna and her organization skills impressed me so much when this whole mess with the humans started that I asked Archer to have her run the storeroom for us. She is extremely fair and honest about rationing supplies.

I open the door to the storeroom and flick the switch to turn on the light. The shelves aren't as full as they could be, but we are due another delivery in the coming days.

“Does Libby have a coat?” I ask.

I picked one out especially for her when doing some shopping a few weeks ago. If Patrick didn't take it, I'll strangle him.

“I told him the package had Libby's name on it, but he insisted that her coat from last year still fits her fine.” McKenna shrugs and pulls out the package with Libby's coat tucked inside.

“That girl has grown at least two inches since I joined this pack.” I take the coat from her and grab a large wicker basket.

Moving to the shelves, I add some fresh produce and canned goods. “What about Patrick and Mary? What do their coats look like?”

McKenna is already at the store of jackets and picking out two.

With the basket full, I leave the storeroom and storm to Patrick's cabin. My jaw is locked tight and I grind my teeth together as I narrow my eyes at all the wolves walking around the square and they give me a wide berth while whispering to each other.

I reach the cabin and adjust my grip on the huge basket. “McKenna, can you knock for me please?”



McKenna knocks loudly, and a minute later, Patrick opens it.

He scowls at McKenna before his eyes narrow on me. “Alpha, what are you doing?”

“What you are doing is noble, Patrick, but it isn’t necessary.” I thrust the basket into his hands.

“No, we are fine with what we have.” Patrick tries to pass the basket back.

“I got that coat specifically for Libby.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“We are fine with what we have. Let the pack members who are most vulnerable have it.”

I poke my finger into the hole in the shoulder of his jacket. “This doesn’t look fine, Patrick.”

He glances down at my finger and grimaces. “But, we are fine.”

“Patrick, don’t make me get Archer. He will tell you the same as me. Take the food and the jackets.” I glare at him.

“Fine,” he huffs. “Thank you, alpha.”

I grin. “You’re welcome. Have a great day.”

I turn back to McKenna who has a small smile on her face. “You are very demanding when you want to be.”

“I won’t have my people starving or freezing out of some misplaced notion of being noble. I know we have more vulnerable pack mates, but everyone gets what they need as long as we have the resources.”

I will not budge on that. I want to be a good alpha female to my pack and to my mate.

Too bad my mate wants nothing to do with me.

“You are a much better alpha female than anyone gave you credit for.” McKenna pats my shoulder.

“Do we have any other stubborn pack members that are refusing food or necessities?” I ask.

McKenna chews her lip, and I groan.

“Alex?” I ask.

McKenna nods.

“I’m going to string these stupid men up by their damn toes.”

Stupid, stupid men. Why are they acting like this? A growl of frustration bubbles up inside of me, but I temper it.

Alex strolls toward me with a grin. “Who are we stringing up, cousin?”

“You.” I glare at him. “And maybe Patrick if he keeps his shit up.”

“Whoa, what did I do?” Alex raises his hands in surrender.

“When is the last time you went and got supplies?”

He crosses his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes on me. “Don’t, Jara. There are others who need it more.”

“I get that, but we have enough to go around until the next delivery. You are an enforcer. You need to be strong and not a hardheaded idiot.” I plant my hands on my hips.

How many others are doing the same? This is ridiculous.

“I can hunt and don’t need much else,” Alex argues.

“It’s getting colder, Alex. Most of the prey animals are going into hibernation. What are you going to do then, huh?” I

poke him in the chest.

Alex swats my hand away, and several gasps ring out in the square.

They all know that we're cousins, but—family or not—he shouldn't be swatting me away like that, especially in front of the pack.

“Shit, sorry.” Alex tilts his head in submission.

“All is forgiven, if you go and get supplies. If I see you in that ratty old jacket again, I'm taking my claws to it.” I spin on my heel and stomp away.

Why do the men in this pack test me so much? Starving or freezing to death isn't noble when there are resources available.

I turn to the small crowd of shifters that has formed in the square and stare each of them down until they look away in submission.

“If I hear of anyone not taking supplies that they need again, I'm going to...” I try to come up with a suitable threat but come up empty. “I'm going to be very angry.”

I lock eyes with several of the enforcers before spinning on my heel and walking away. Stupid prideful shifters.

Several of the enforcers rush away, and I grin. I guess the threat of my anger is enough to get them moving. Though, my cousin hasn't moved to follow them.

We have come a long way since Grayson caged and tortured me in his territory. I hadn't even realized the man was my cousin until the summit that stopped us all from going to war.

A shrill voice calls my name, and I turn to scan the crowd, but I don't see who it is. I take a step forward, and a loud creak fills the air above me.

Small snowflakes dust my hair from above, and I dust my hair off.

"Jara, watch out!" Alex shoves me a split second before a roof tile smashes on the ground where I was just standing.

Pain ricochets through my ass and up my spine as I hit the icy ground, hard. Freezing water seeps into my pants, and I shiver.

"Oh my gods," I whisper.

"That nearly took you out." Alex scans the square.

What is he looking for? It was just a shingle from the roof that slipped off. No need to scan the pack for a suspect.

He reaches down a hand, and I take it gratefully, dusting all the snow off my pants and jacket.

"That was seriously weird." I shake my head, twist to see whose cabin I'm standing in front of, and make a mental note to have someone look at the roof.

Loose roof tiles are not a good thing to have in the freezing snow. I don't want their roof leaking.

"We need to call the alpha," Alex says.

"The alpha is busy." I shrug. "Besides, it was just a freak accident."

Alex frowns. Doesn't he think it was an accident? It was just a loose tile. What more could it be?

"I'm not so sure, Jara," Alex whispers. "It's no secret that some of the females here don't like you."

What do the females in the pack have to do with anything? He's just being paranoid.

"That's ridiculous, Alex. They may not like me, but do you really think they would go out of their way to hurt me? That solves nothing."

Angela jogs up and eyes the tile warily. "What happened?"

"A loose tile. We are going to need someone to look at the roof and make sure there are no problems with it," I say.

"I'm not so sure about that." Alex crosses his arms.

"You're paranoid." I wave him off.

"Are you sure, Jara? Alex usually has pretty good instincts," Angela says, staring down at the shattered tile.

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." I shrug off their concern. "You know I'm clumsy, Angela."

"This is more than simply clumsy, Jara." Angela plants her feet and scowls at the tile.

"She's bad luck," someone shouts, and my shoulders stiffen.

Rochelle stands with several of the female pack members that didn't leave the pack in exchange for my family.

I obviously couldn't be lucky enough that the bitch would leave.

If she doesn't quit her snide comments, we are going to end up in a challenge, and I have no problem tearing her apart the way I did Crystal.

The women giggle together, and I growl.

Why didn't Rochelle volunteer to leave? All the single pack members that had eyes on Archer volunteered. They left

and went to Grayson's pack.

All except Rochelle. Just my shitty luck.

"Rochelle, shut your dumbass mouth," Alex yells back.

She scowls at him but thankfully turns away.

I thought she was done with that bullshit. She hasn't said anything about me being bad luck in months.

Could she have done something to the tile?

I tilt my head to the side and stare up at the roof. Rochelle is a lot of things, but I don't think she could pull off something like this.

"She's an idiot," Angela huffs.

"Yeah, I'm done with my walk for the day." I stroll back to the pack house.

When we get inside, I take off my boots and wool coat. The fire roaring in the fireplace warms me instantly.

"I have to go to a meeting with the enforcers," Angela says. "Are you okay for a bit?"

I sigh. She keeps too close of an eye on me these days. It's almost as if Archer has asked her to so he doesn't have to deal with me.

I wouldn't put it past him to do something like that behind my back, but I don't think that's what this is about.

She still feels guilty that Grayson and his pack beat me and locked me in a cell. But it's not her fault that I lied and snuck away from the pack. If Archer had simply tried to get Grayson to let me visit my family, I wouldn't have taken matters into my own hands.

It's not her fault, but Angela blames herself, and Archer blames her too.

"You don't have to babysit me, Angela. I'm fine." I trudge into the kitchen.

Should I make Archer his favorite cake? Maybe that will warm him up to me again.

I blush. I made cupcakes not long after I came to the pack, but every time I make a cake, it turns into a huge mess.

Maybe a cake will be more trouble than it's worth.

What can I do to bridge some of this distance between us, though? My heart aches every time I think about him.

I don't understand what's been wrong with him lately. He never talks to me, and we haven't mated in months. He's so hot and cold all the time.

I wish there was something I could do to fix us.

The door to Archer's office slams, and I peek my head into the hall.

"Have you eaten?" I ask. "I can make us some breakfast."

Archer grunts before he shuts the front door behind him.

He can't even answer a simple question. My heart sinks to my toes. He refused to even look at me before he left.

I wish I knew what I did to deserve this treatment from him. We were good. We'd laid out all our pain and come back from it, or at least I thought we had.

I slump in the doorway. How will we ever get to a good place in our relationship?

Is a loveless mating to an alpha who can barely stand to be in the same room with me all there is for me?

Why did he fight so hard for me if he was just going to turn away?

It all seems so hopeless.



**A**rcher

My heart hammers as I slam the front door to the pack house. There has to be another way to go about this. There has to be some way to find a balance between us.

Why can't I just have my mate and my pack and be happy? My father's voice rings through my mind.

*Alphas don't have emotions. We have brute force and a pack to protect. Emotions are a weakness. Are you weak?*

Any time I showed a hint of emotion in front of him, he beat them out of me.

I hate that the second I even consider storming back into that house, kissing my mate, and apologizing for what an ass I've been, my father's voice screams at me in my head.

He's not wrong, though. I can't give in. There's too much at stake.

I scan the square. Pack members move around the space freely. They are what I need to remember. I can't let Jara cloud my judgment and threaten my pack.

I turn back and walk into the house. Jara isn't in the kitchen now. Thank the gods for small mercies. I can get to the

conference room without piling the guilt even higher inside me.

She asked me a simple question; she wanted to feed me, and I ignored her. My wolf growls. He likes it when his mate takes care of his needs.

We have been at odds more and more lately because the wolf doesn't understand the responsibilities of man.

I march to the conference room and sit at the table. The map is still spread in the middle, and there are more black markers on it than ever before.

Humans have no sense. They trespass all over my territory without care for the signs that are clearly posted.

I clench my fist on the table. Rage pulses through me, and it's finally something me and my wolf agree on. He doesn't like people trespassing in our lands either.

Alex walks into the conference room snarling at Patrick. "She realizes we are doing this to help, right?"

Patrick shakes his head. "Your alpha female gave you an order, I suggest you follow it."

Jara is giving orders to my enforcers? What the fuck? She's overstepping her role as alpha female issuing demands to them. She knows better than to try to rule my pack. I'm the alpha.

I narrow my eyes at the two men and sit forward in my chair. "What did my mate do, Alex?"

"She found out that I haven't been taking any supplies for myself and threatened to claw my jacket if I don't." Alex shakes his head with a groan.

“Wait, you haven’t been taking supplies? Why?” I cross my arms over my chest.

What would make him think that’s okay? It’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. They are my enforcers, and they need to be strong.

“There are others who need the food more. People who can’t hunt like we can,” Patrick says.

“You too, Patrick? What the fuck?” I run a hand down my face. “What about Libby?”

Poor Libby. No wonder Jara went off on them about this. Kids can’t grow the way they need to with only the animals in the forest, and Libby is one of her favorite people in the world. Did Patrick even give her the jacket Jara picked out specially for the girl?

What were these idiots thinking?

Protect the pack at all costs. I sigh internally—I am partially to blame for this behavior.

They should know better, though. It’s the alpha’s job to protect the pack. I get where they are coming from, but this is not the way to go about it.

Patrolling the territory is the best way for them to protect the pack. And they can’t patrol if they’re starving.

The fact that my enforcers care as much about my pack as I do warms my heart, but we aren’t starving by any means.

“Jara already put me in my place, Alpha.” Patrick drops into his chair. “She brought a huge basket over this morning and forced me to take it.”

A small grin spreads. That sounds exactly like my mate. However, I drop the smile in an instant. I can’t smile about the

things she does when she's simply doing her job as alpha female and taking care of the pack.

I nearly let her destroy everything when she was captured in enemy territory, and the pack has to come first, always.

I shake my head to clear it and stare at the men across from me. "You need to take rations. If the others see you taking only the bare minimum, it could cause fear and then they may do the same to help the rest of the pack. Do you see the problem?"

"They may panic and think we are running out of supplies," Alex says, his expression grim.

I have to hand it to my mate, she had the right idea to demand the enforcers take what they need. Maybe I'm being too hard on her. She obviously cares deeply about our pack.

No. I can't think like that. What if another scenario comes up where I have to choose her safety or the safety of the entire pack? I can't be weak and let the pack know I care so much.

Even if it crushes me to be distant with her.

"Where are the rest of the enforcers?" I ask.

"They are probably in the storeroom. Jara made it abundantly clear that she would be angry if the enforcers did not start taking what they need." Alex shrugs.

"They knew we were having this meeting, couldn't it have waited?" I slam my fist on the table.

I don't have time to wait on my men. We have important things to discuss.

Patrick scoffs. "The alpha female was very specific. She poked at the hole in my jacket."

“There’s no hole in your jacket,” I say.

“I know, because I wore the one she forced me to take. I didn’t want to anger her more than she already was.” Patrick throws up his hands.

I chuckle at Patrick’s frustration. “She’s making sure the pack’s needs are met. That is the job of the alpha female.”

“I can take care of my family’s needs.” Patrick slams a fist on the conference table.

“Tell me, Patrick, what did Libby’s jacket look like on her? She’s grown since last winter.” I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him.

“It was a little small, but it’s still wearable. No holes or anything.”

“Then donate it back to the storeroom. We aren’t wasteful. My mate picked that coat out for her specifically.”

“Yes, alpha.” Patrick bows his head.

The door opens and Angela struts in with a grin, the rest of the enforcers following behind her.

“So glad you could all make it,” I deadpan.

Angela chuckles. “The alpha female is scary.”

“I’ll tell you all what I told these two. Everyone take rations. Jara was right. We need you strong, and McKenna is running the stores. She is good about distributing just enough based on family size. Now, sit your asses down.”

Everyone sits in their assigned seats, and Angela pulls out her chair next to mine.

She opens a folder and squints down at a picture, then glances around the room. “It’s not anything concrete, but does

anyone have new evidence that the humans are watching us?”

John sits forward. “I’ve smelled humans out by the border on several occasions.”

“Where?” I point to the map.

They all know they are supposed to be placing sightings on the map. Any little nuance can be helpful.

John stands and grabs a couple markers from the box before staring down at the map. He puts in two pins on Grayson’s border about five hundred yards apart.

Is Grayson in on this? Does he know that humans are stalking between our territories? Why would he risk us all like that?

Patrick leans forward. “The humans are getting bold traveling between territories.”

Alex shakes his head. “Are they getting bold, or did Grayson sell us out?”

Alex has never had a great relationship with Alpha Grayson, especially since the alpha’s parents made Alex leave his pack to save their son from a challenge.

What else did Grayson’s parents do to protect their only son? Because I’m still not convinced that Jara was ever his fated mate. He wouldn’t have been able to reject her. There is no way he could hate her this much if she was meant to be his.

I run a hand down my face. “We need to double patrols but be wary. Something is definitely going on with the humans, and I don’t like it.”

My phone buzzes on the table, and I glance at it, cursing under my breath.

“It’s Bill. I need to take this,” I say and stand to head for the door. “Hello?”

“Archer, we have a problem,” Bill says into the phone, his tone wary.

“What is it?” I pace the hall outside the conference room.

“You have been subpoenaed to testify in this case the human government have against you. They are fishing pretty hard on this.”

“It’s been months, Bill. They have been talking to my employees, and they haven’t found anything. Why hasn’t this gone away yet?” I lean back against the wall, tilting my head back.

“I don’t know. They are relentless—almost as if they know something but are trying to get you to slip up.” Bill sighs.

“They know about shifters? How? That shouldn’t be possible.” I slam my fist back into the wall at my side.

How did the humans find out about us? Was it one of the packs in the east that let it slip?

“I don’t know,” Bill grumbles. “Maybe a pack in another region had issues and got on their radar, but I don’t speak to many alphas, just you.”

“You said they want to interview me for their case?” I groan. “It’s not exactly the best time. We have humans in our woods doing gods know what.”

“Humans have been watching you? If you can get me proof that they are watching you maybe I can get the rest of this to go away. They can’t surveil you without a warrant.”

I shake my head. “They’re the human government. They can do whatever they want, Bill. Not having a warrant isn’t

going to stop them from trespassing on private property.”

Having to attend some stupid meeting so they can try to accuse me of things I have never done is bullshit.

“Fine, tell me when, and I’ll be there,” I say. “I want this over with once and for all.”

I promised Alpha Callahan that I would help buy up the land around the other packs to help them stay safe from the humans, but I can’t do that while under investigation.

“This afternoon in my office,” Bill says. “Can you be here by three?”

I glance at my phone. It’s already noon. If I’m going to go, I need to leave within the hour.

“Might be cutting it close, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I hang up the phone and storm back into the conference room.

All eyes turn to me, and the rancid scent of fear fills the air.

I take my seat with a grunt. “I need to head into the city. The government agency investigating our business wants to have a chat.”

Angela sighs. “I just got a text from our delivery driver. They are stuck at the bottom of the mountain due to poor weather conditions. We need to send a pickup truck down to get the supplies.”

“All right, you all get a list of supplies together and send it over to Jordan for next weeks delivery. I have to go.” I stand. “And don’t forget to keep an eye out for the humans.”

“We won’t, alpha.” Angela grins and claps me on the shoulder. “Just get to your meeting and hopefully get the



assholes off our backs.”

“Watch my mate too. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone.” I turn and head up the stairs to change into something more suitable for a meeting with lawyers.

I fucking hate lawyers.

“Alpha,” Patrick calls out when I’m halfway up the stairs.

“Yes, Patrick?” I frown down at him.

“We’ll be okay, even if they don’t stop the investigation soon. It will all work out in the end.”

“I’m not so sure about that, Patrick. I have reason to believe they know about us. Why else would they be investigating us so hard?” I stomp up the rest of the stairs, not waiting for the man’s reaction.

How in the hell am I supposed to protect my pack this way? If the government knows about shifters and is targeting my pack, is anyone safe?

I don’t like anything about what is going on with this meeting. What if they try to arrest me on trumped-up charges? I haven’t done anything to warrant an investigation of this magnitude.

There is no other explanation than they are trying to prove that shifters are real and I am one of them. But how far will they go to get that information?

I storm into my room, and my mate’s scent hits me like a ton of bricks. She’s not here, but her scent coats every surface. I breathe deeply through my nose and sigh. I don’t want to care more about my mate than my pack.

I was ready to go to war for her—to risk the lives of my pack to get her back safe.

That is not what a strong alpha does.

I have to put the pack first no matter how much I want her. The pack is my responsibility, and I need to remember that they must always come first.

I rip a suit off a hanger, angry at myself more than anything. I'm sitting here wondering where my mate is and what she's doing instead of hurrying out to the meeting that will keep my pack safe.

I hope.

All I can do is hope that this meeting will finally get the government out of my business.

If it doesn't, then I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do.

**J**ara

I skulk down the stairs and into the crowded storage room. The enforcers are milling about with baskets in their hands, but someone is missing.

“Has Alex been down here yet?” I ask McKenna.

She shakes her head. “I think he and Patrick were organizing the cleanup for the roof tile and looking for someone to check the roof.”

“Alpha,” John calls from behind me.

I turn around, and the tall man looks absolutely lost. His eyes are wide as he scans the room.

“Do you need help, John?” I stroll up to him and hand him a basket.

“I... ummm... I don’t really know what to do with most of this stuff.” He rubs a hand over the back of his neck.

“That’s okay. What do you normally eat?” I wave for him to follow me to the back aisle where the canned and boxed foods are stored.

“Usually anything frozen or in a can so I can microwave it. I also hunt and eat that,” he whispers and glances around, as if

to make sure no one else is listening.

Is he embarrassed by his eating habits? That's kind of adorable.

Helping him might be just what I need to get over my close encounter with Archer. Keeping busy always helps with that.

I grab a few cans of ravioli off the shelf and stack them in his basket. "We have all kinds of canned foods, but are you sure you don't want to try something new? I can find some easy recipes for you to try out."

"Thank you, alpha, but I'm afraid I would burn water," he says with a sheepish grin.

"Okay, no problem. There are a couple of things in the freezers that are fit for the microwave. I'll make sure to add more items like that to the list for our next delivery as well."

Maybe a cooking class for the young wolves in the pack would be a good idea too. Especially the unmated males. I have a feeling they are all pretty hopeless when it comes to cooking.

Several of the others in the room follow us back to the freezer section, and I roll my eyes.

"How do you all survive on nothing but frozen foods and still have energy to patrol?" I ask.

"Cooking isn't something we were taught at a young age like the girls were." John shrugs.

"I guess we need to fix that then. You all live alone, and nothing about this diet is nutritious. We will start a cooking class soon, and I want all of you there." I glare at each of them.

“Yes, Alpha,” John says, and the others nod.

“Yo, idiots,” Angela calls from the top of the stairs. “You’re gonna be late to the meeting. Hurry the fuck up.”

I have never seen such huge men move so fast. They all scramble up the steps and out the door, then Angela grins and finger waves at me before following them out.

I scan the storeroom and pick up a few baskets as I try to clean up from the stampede.

I grin at the half-stocked shelves. “The enforcers cleaned us out.”

McKenna giggles. “You put the fear of the gods into them.”

“I just don’t understand what was going through their minds.”

“The unmated males I could understand, but Patrick? I didn’t like that for poor Libby at all.” McKenna huffs out a breath as she walks over to one of the produce shelves.

“I’m glad you told me what they’ve been doing. It’s not right. I don’t want the other pack members to be afraid to take what they need.” I grab a half-empty basket of fruit and bring it to the table in the middle.

We work side by side in silence for hours organizing the shelves as best we can.

“Jara?” Angela calls from the top of the stairs.

I don’t look up from my task. “I’m in the storeroom.”

“I found an idiot that still hasn’t listened to his cousin.” She marches down the stairs with Alex right behind her.

“We had an enforcer meeting that I didn’t want to be late for,” Alex argues.

“The others had no problem being late,” she shoots back over her shoulder.

“I’m not them. I know that the alpha likes punctuality.” Alex crosses his arms over his chest.

McKenna grins. “You two are adorable.”

I choke on a laugh as Angela turns her glare on McKenna.

“Adorable?” Angela growls, and her eyes glow with her wolf. “I know you didn’t just call the beta of this pack adorable.”

That really pissed her off.

Alex pats her shoulder. “She didn’t mean anything by it, Angela. Calm down.”

Angela is quick as she grips his wrist and spins around, pulling his hand behind his back and twisting.

“Shit, okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Alex shouts until she releases him.

I shake my head and move over to another shelf to grab some things for Alex. “Don’t you know it’s never a good idea to tell a woman to calm down when she’s angry?”

“I just don’t get why she was so angry about being called adorable.” Alex grins and sits up on the counter. “You are kind of adorable. In a stone-cold killer kind of way.”

Angela huffs out an angry breath and turns away, giving me her entire focus.

I guess I’m the only one not pissing her off currently, good to know.

“What’s up?” I raise my brow as I put a few of the staples in a basket for Alex. We always have ravioli and SpaghettiOs in the storeroom for the pups, but I secretly love them too.

“We need a list of supplies to send to Jordan, and we wanted to make sure that we had space. We have to go meet the driver at the bottom of the mountain to get our delivery,” Angela says.

“It’s going to be here today?” I glance at all the shelves.

I thought we had a week or two before the next delivery.

“Yes, they are stuck at the bottom of the mountain now. We need to get down there.” Angela peers inside a box on a shelf before walking down another isle.

“Okay, we can do this.” I heft the basket up on my hip, stroll over to Alex, and hold it out to him. “You take these, and we will get this place ready for the delivery.”

Alex huffs out a laugh. “Fine, Mom.”

“Don’t let your mom hear you calling me that.” I plant my hands on my hips. “She will smack you upside the head.”

Grayson sent over only Ellie and Callie—my cousins—and my aunt after we traded ten of our pack members. My parents have not been allowed to come yet.

Dread pools in my gut as I think about the situation. He’s holding people hostage and only trading those I’m not super close to. I hate it.

I love my aunt and cousins. Ellie has been thriving here in the Everette pack, but I want my parents out of Grayson’s pack.

I have no idea what’s happening with them or if they are even still alive.

Are they still in a cell? Did he let them out?

He takes the basket and sets it on the metal table he's leaning his hip against. He peers into the basket and his hands clench into fists.

Does he think I gave him too much? But he hasn't been taking anything. He needs it.

Alex grins and rolls his eyes. "Mom will probably do it anyway."

"She will do more than that if I tell her you have been stubborn about taking rations you need."

"Don't. I already got read the riot act by the alpha, don't tell her this. I'm taking the rations." Alex holds his hands up in surrender.

"As long as you keep taking the rations and stop being stubborn, there's no reason for me to tell her."

Angela shakes her head. "You are diabolical."

I shrug. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure the pack is happy."

"You're a good alpha female, even if you're a pain in the ass little cousin." Alex grins.

"Watch it." I glare at him. "I'm still your alpha female."

He throws his hands up in the air. "I am allowed to tease my little cousin."

"C'mon." Angela pushes him forward. "We need to get down the mountain."

"We will have everything ready before you get back, and we will get a list together for Jordan," I say with a smile.



McKenna glides over to one of the shelves to start making room for supplies as Angela and Alex storms up the steps.

I grab a basket of apples and bring them to a table. “Anything perishable needs to be removed from the baskets so we can put the new stuff beneath it.”

McKenna nods as she also brings fresh veggies to the table. She meticulously pulls carrots from the basket and sets them on the table in a neat row. She’s much more organized than I am.

“It was pretty weird to find out Alex was your cousin, huh?” she asks.

“I think the hardest part was that he knew and didn’t tell me. In fact, he was outwardly hostile toward me at first.”

That took some getting used to once the cat was let out of the bag. He’d been a dick about me coming to the pack, and I know why now, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

My first weeks in this pack were so lonely, and if I had known he was my family then, maybe I wouldn’t have felt so lost.

However, he thought I was encroaching on his territory, and I think some remaining loyalty to his former alpha kept him from telling anyone the real reason he left Grayson’s pack.

What else did Grayson’s parents do to protect Grayson’s reign over the pack? Could they have lied about us being fated mates? It is the only thing that makes sense, but why?

“How did you not realize it was him?” McKenna asks.

“He looked very different before he left for the Everette pack. They called him Runt because he was so small. This pack has been kind to him.”

We all thought he left the pack because Grayson and his inner circle bullied him. I had no idea he was stronger than Grayson.

Grayson's parents did both Grayson and Alex a disservice by sending him away. They did that whole pack wrong leaving them with Grayson as alpha.

I move back to the shelf and grab another basket. "Plus, I didn't pay him much attention. He was older than me and really quiet."

I lay more vegetables on the stainless steel table and stack the baskets before repeating the process.

Staying busy and being productive helps keep thoughts of all my problems with Archer away. I thought we were growing closer, but since that night all those months ago, he's barely looked at me.

Why does it seem like every time we take a step forward in our relationship, he takes two steps back?

"What's wrong, alpha?" McKenna asks.

I jump, having completely forgotten that I'm not alone. I place a hand on my chest to slow my thumping heart.

"You scared me," I say breathlessly.

"Sorry, you were frowning." McKenna points to my face.

"Oh, my mind wandered off a bit." I turn away from the woman.

I'm starting to think that all wolves see too much and that wolf intuition is a bitch of epic proportions.

She pats me on the shoulder before grabbing another basket. "I'm right here if you want to talk."

Maybe I should ask her opinion. She's a mated female, so she might have some insight into what I should do.

I chew my lip. The pack gossips like a bunch of old ladies, though, and if they think there is division among the alpha pair, there may be other issues.

The unmated females that still hold out hope that I will turn on Archer will think they have a shot with the alpha.

My wolf growls in the back of my mind at the thought of Rochelle and her bitchy friends.

No, I can't talk to anyone but Angela about what's going on with my mate. It will do more harm than good in the end.

"Thank you for the offer, but it's rather personal." I smile awkwardly, then head down the aisle to where the boxed food is kept to get away from McKenna's prying gaze.

I take a cleansing breath. I can't show weakness, just like Archer can't. If I do, I could be challenged. Not that any female in the pack could beat me in a challenge.

Would Archer even care if someone challenged me? I doubt it very much. I thought we turned a corner when he realized I'm not going anywhere, but something's changed.

Why is it so hard to get through to him? Why can't he just be my mate—the man who was so tender and almost loving after I explained myself. I know he has it in him.

"Jara?" McKenna calls.

I spin on my heel and tap the shelf with my elbow. "Ow, yeah?"

"Are you okay?" she asks as she rounds the corner.

"Yeah, I just smacked my elbow," I groan.

“Alpha, watch out,” McKenna screams and points at the shelf behind me.

An ominous creak fills the air, and I spin just as the shelf crashes into me.

The impact knocks me over. I cry out in agony as my head smacks the tile floor hard and the heavy metal shelf crushes my chest.

Boxes litter the floor, and McKenna races forward to help.

My vision blurs and the room spins. My oversensitive ears pick up faint dripping.

Am I bleeding? Is that blood dripping from the back of my head?

Reaching up, I shove the shelf off my body and roll away.

How did that happen?

I push to my hands and knees, my head still spinning, and stagger to my feet.

I stumble to the side holding my head, and McKenna wraps an arm around me to lead me to the front of the storage room.

She guides me to a chair and sits me down.

My eyes droop, and I blink away the sudden sleepiness.

“I’m okay, I think,” I say as my eyes roll back in my head and I slump into the chair.

**A**rcher

“Alpha, watch out,” McKenna screams.

A crash sounds in the storeroom.

What the hell is going on? I’m upstairs, but my oversensitive hearing picks up everything.

I need to leave for this meeting, but the panicked scream has all my senses on high alert.

Is something wrong with Jara? Why is McKenna screaming like that? What was that crash?

I race down the stairs to the main floor of the pack house, cross into the kitchen, and hurry down the steep steps into the storeroom.

McKenna stands over a slumped Jara, and the scent of my mate’s blood wafts in the air.

Her skin is pale, and blood drips down her neck in a steady stream. Is she dead? No. She can’t be dead. Who the fuck did this to her?

Do we have someone else out to kill my mate? My body count and list of enemies are longer than ever before.

“What happened?” I stomp over to her and slide McKenna out of the way with a growl.

“A shelf fell on her, then she hit her head on the ground.” McKenna steps back rubbing her arms.

“Jara.” I tap her shoulders gently.

My wolf snarls in my mind. He thrashes in my chest, ready to jump from my skin to defend my mate. My hands shake with his rage, but I keep him locked down.

“Archer,” Jara mumbles.

She holds a hand to her head as she sits up.

I lift her into my arms and climb up the stairs. I don’t have time for this. I can’t be late for my meeting with Bill.

She has a small head injury—nothing she won’t heal from—but still I open the front door.

Patrick stands on the other side, his hand poised to knock.

He gasps. “What happened?”

I brush past him, race through the center of town to the healer’s cabin, and bang on the door.

Mary opens the door with a scowl. “Do you have to scare the life out of me every time you knock on my door?”

“She has a head injury.” I glance pointedly at my mate, and the healer waves me inside the cozy cabin. Patrick follows closely behind.

“What happened?” Mary asks.

“A shelf in the storeroom fell on her and she hit her head on the ground.” I lay her on the table.

“Archer,” Jara mumbles.

My mask slips momentarily. I can't fucking do this.

I have to get out of this cabin before I do something stupid like stay with her and put the entire pack at risk.

Pain like claws tearing out my heart threatens to take me to my knees as my wolf whines in my head.

He doesn't like leaving her he bleeding and in pain, but if I don't go to this interview with Bill, I could lose everything and our pack could be exposed.

"Patrick, stay with her. I have an important meeting in the city." I turn to leave, but Jara grabs my hand.

My shoulders stiffen, and I glance back into her green eyes that plead with me to stay. But I can't.

I turn away before I break down and stay with her just so she won't look at me with those disappointed eyes.

"You're leaving?" Jara asks.

"I have a meeting with Bill. I'll be back later." I wrench my hand from hers and storm to the door.

Every step away from my mate is harder than the last. My feet are weighed down with lead, but I trudge on.

I can't let her get to me. No matter how much I want to turn back and stay with her—to tell her how sorry I am for being distant these last months—I can't.

She knew what was important to me when she mated me. Strength above all else. It's not my fault that she hoped for more between us.

That's a cop-out and I fucking know it, but sometimes it's easier to deal with the hurt in her eyes when I shift the blame off myself.

I'm a bastard and I have never pretended otherwise.

"Alpha." Patrick jogs over to me.

"I thought I told you to stay with Jara." I spin on the enforcer.

What the fuck is he doing disobeying a direct order? Has everyone in this pack gone insane?

"Are you sure you should leave? Can't you postpone?" Patrick crosses his arms over his chest.

He and many of the pack members care deeply for their alpha female, even to the point that they question me. It's fucking annoying. I can't sit in that room with her and hold her hand while telling her it's all going to be okay.

Not when being there could very well destroy everything we've built here.

No. I need go.

"The government is already on our case. I can't give them any more reasons to come after the pack." I race back to the pack house and over to my truck.

The pack has to come first. I didn't put them first when I threatened war with Grayson, and I didn't think about how many of my pack might die.

All that mattered was getting Jara back whether she wanted to come back or not. I can't show that kind of weakness again.

I slam the door to my truck and my wolf howls. He wants to go back to his mate, but we can't. I turn the key in the ignition and speed away.



He snarls at me and thrashes in my chest the farther we get from the healer's cabin.

*We have to go to the meeting with the government. You need to calm the fuck down. They can't know what we are.*

The damn wolf continues snarling in my head. I tighten my hold on the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

A peaceful drive to the city where I can clear my head before I'm interrogated is no longer possible with my wolf this angry at me.

My heart pangs with regret—I left her barely conscious in the healing cabin. While I do my best to quell the feeling, it festers in my chest.

But the pack has to come first. It's not just the pack that could be in danger if they shut down my businesses. There are tons of rogues living in my apartment building and working at my company that would be in danger.

All wolves and packs could be in danger if the government finds out about us. I have to be on time to this meeting. The fate of my entire species could depend on it.

I battle with myself the entire drive to the city. I shouldn't have left her there, but I had to.

When I pull into the parking lot of Bill's office, I take a cleansing breath and turn the engine off.

I just made it in time, but there is already a government issued black town car not far from where I'm parked.

They are already here. Good. Hopefully we can make this quick.

I step out of the car. My wolf has finally gone silent in my head, giving me the opportunity to clear my mind.

I pull open the door to the office, and a bell chimes loudly next to my ear. I wince. That fucking hurt.

I reach up a hand to my ear but lower it to scratch my neck at the last second. Humans wouldn't think that chime was too loud. It wouldn't make their ears ring.

*Don't show any signs of discomfort.*

Already there are eyes on me.

Two men in dark suits sit in the wood chairs in the waiting room. One man is a bit on the round side, and the one who sits there glaring at me has some seriously bushy eyebrows.

“Archer Everette?” the older woman behind the desk asks.

“Yes.” I step up to the desk.

Both men stand, hands on hips, and glare at me.

What the fuck is their problem? I thought people were innocent until proven guilty in this country, or does that only apply to humans?

“Bill will see you now, Mr. Everette.” The woman stands, comes around the desk, and waves for me to follow.

The men in suits take a step forward, but the woman glares at them. “He's not ready for you gentlemen yet.”

They stop and sit back down.

She is one stern older woman, and I can't help but like her even though she's only said a few words to me.

She opens the door and leads me into the office with cubicles dotting the space.

“How long have they been out there?” I ask.

“About thirty minutes, and Bill is just fine leaving them out there a while longer.” She turns to me with a grin.

“He is an asshole, but he’s my favorite kind of asshole,” I say.

She knocks on a door and we wait. The door opens, and Bill’s drooping eyes meet mine.

“Archer, come in.” He widens the door and waves me inside.

“Thanks, Bill,” I say and take a seat in front of the large oak desk.

“How long should I make them wait?” the receptionist asks.

“They can wait a few more minutes. This was a last-minute request, and I need to confer with my client first,” Bill says.

“Yes, sir.” She chuckles.

Bill closes the door and walks around the desk with a sigh. He rubs his eyes. “I’m sorry about this. I know you have other issues.”

“Yeah, Jara had a shelf fall on her today. She’s with the healer.”

Why did I tell him that? Am I still feeling guilty about leaving her half-conscious?

“And you came here to deal with this nonsense?” he asks.

“It’s important, Bill. She knows that.” I shift uncomfortably in my chair.

“You nearly went to war for her.” His gaze locks on me in disapproval.

He picks up a stack of folders and straightens them before setting them down in the exact same spot.

“I know. I nearly risked my pack for her, and I can’t do that again. I can’t show weakness. Can we just get this over with so I have some idea of what to expect?”

“Archer...”

“I don’t want to talk about this, Bill. Let’s talk about the damn investigation.” I glare and clench my fist around the arm of the chair. A faint creak meets my ears.

“Okay, they are going to ask you a series of questions. You don’t have to answer them all, but I will be in there to advise you on what you should or should not answer.”

“Why wouldn’t I answer all their questions?” I sit forward.

“They could try to twist your words.”

I nod as he stands and heads to the door.

“Where are you going?” I stand as well.

“We will talk with them in the conference room. I don’t want them snooping through my office.” Bill strolls out the door.

“Good point.”

Bill works as a lawyer for many rogue wolves, and he probably has details about them that the government can never know.

I follow him into the main office and around the room to another door. It’s glass, and the entire wall is basically a window.

“Is this room such a good idea?” I ask as we walk into the conference room.

I'm exposed to the entire office, and there are no actual walls in this place. How am I supposed to have a wall at my back without walls?

"I picked this conference room because it's glass. It will make those agents uncomfortable and let them know that they are in clear view of every one of my employees."

That makes sense. I just wish it didn't make me uncomfortable too. I nod, walk to the opposite end of the room, and sit at the end of the table with my back to the window.

Bill takes the seat next to me and pushes a button on the phone. "Bring them to the conference room."

"Yes, sir," the receptionist says and hangs up the phone.

Several sets of footsteps sound outside, and I straighten my spine, glancing over at Bill. The receptionist knocks on the door and Bill waves her in.

A small woman with a computer strolls in and sits on the other side of Bill. She must be the court reporter since I've never seen her before. The two government agents follow her.

"Gentlemen, please have a seat," Bill says. "My client requested we do this quickly as he needs to get home."

"And where exactly is home?" the bushy eyebrow agent asks, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"I live on my own property on the mountain." I rest my arms on the table casually.

"You don't live in the apartment building that you own?" the heavy one asks.

"No, that is employee housing, but you already knew that."

What is the point of this? Why are they so interested in housing? It doesn't make any sense.

The one with the glasses sits forward. "Employee housing? What are the conditions of these apartments?"

Bill cuts in, "You already know all about the conditions of the housing. You have had tours and have been harassing the residents."

"What? Why?" I snarl.

"We will be asking the questions here, Mr. Everette," the man with the glasses says.

"I care about my employees. They shouldn't be harassed in their homes." I cross my arms over my chest.

That is total bullshit that they think they can trespass on my property and bother the residents there.

The man with the glasses clenches a fist around the pen in his hand. "The reason it is being called into question is because of the price they are charged for rent. Other properties in the same area are charging double that."

"So? I am within my rights as the owner of the property to charge the rent I see fit." I stare him down, not giving an inch.

"Are you a slum lord, Mr. Everette?" He writes something down on the pad in front of him.

Bill scoffs. "You know he's not. You have seen the building. Are you simply here to waste our time?"

"Do you rent apartments to anyone outside of your employees?" Glasses asks.

"No, it's a perk of working for me and nothing else." I sit back in my chair.

“You realize that could be seen as housing discrimination, don’t you?”

“Only if I take applications to rent the place, and I do not.” I sit forward, resting my arms on the table, my fists clenched.

I glance at Bill with raised brows.

He clears his throat, stands, and strolls to the conference room doors. “If you have no questions based on your investigation, this meeting is over.”

The men glance between each other and move to leave.

“We’ll be in touch.” Glasses storms from the room with the heavy agent trailing behind him.

The court reporter scurries out of the conference room as well. I huff and scrub a hand over my face.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask.

“A waste of time and a fishing expedition.” Bill flops in his chair.

“What do we do now?” I tilt my head back.

“That wasn’t a normal line of questioning. You need to make sure the pack is extremely careful. They know something, and they are just trying to prove it.”

“I don’t know how we could be more careful, but you’re right. Our very way of life depends on them not proving their theories.”

How the hell can I keep my pack safe from the humans and make sure we don’t all starve to death?

**J**ara

I sit up on the table and bat Patrick's hands away. "I'm fine."

"You were just healed of a head injury," Patrick says.

"Yes, just healed. That means I'm okay, Patrick." I cross my arms over my chest.

Who's being a mother hen now?

"The alpha told me to stay with you. I don't think he would be happy if I let you wander off on your own."

"Of course he did. His normal babysitter had to go down the mountain," I grumble and hop off the table.

"That's not fair, alpha." Patrick frowns.

"Isn't it, though?"

"You had a shelf fall on you and knock you unconscious. There's a cause for concern here."

*Then why isn't he here?* I want to ask the question, but I don't. It's Archer, and he tells me all the time that the pack comes first.



The meeting with his attorney must have been important. Either that or I'm just not important to him. Probably the latter if I'm honest with myself.

"It's fine, Patrick, I'm fine. I'm just going for a walk to clear my mind." I storm past him.

"You have dried blood in your hair."

I reach for the back of my hair with a frown. Its crunchy and gross.

"Fine, I need to take a shower first."

The events before I was trapped beneath the shelf are fuzzy, but it had to be a freak accident, right?

I remember bumping my elbow, but was that enough to make the whole shelf topple over on me? It must have been enough. Weird clumsiness has been plaguing me lately. First the roof tile this morning, then the shelf.

What the hell is going on? Why does it seem like my home is trying to kill me?

I wander back to the pack house and race up the stairs to the bedroom. I breathe in the scent of my mate, and my heart pangs with loneliness.

No, we aren't doing that. There are plenty of shifters in the pack that I can talk to.

Too bad the only one I really want to talk to wants nothing to do with me.

I strip off my clothes in the en suite bathroom and climb in the shower. Red runs down the drain as I hold my head under the spray. I don't move until the water runs clear, then I go through the motions of washing, trying and failing to keep my mind off my mate.

What happened? Did I do something? He will barely look at me, let alone touch me.

This isn't how it's supposed to be for mates, especially not in the first year. It's not normal for mated couples to go so long without sex.

I step out of the shower, stare into the mirror, and sigh. Is he not attracted to me anymore? Was he really thinking about rejecting me? But why go on this long after the incident if he is planning to throw me away?

How can I get through to him when he's so closed off? Maybe everyone in Grayson's pack was right and he's nothing but a ruthless alpha without the ability to love.

But what about those precious moments that are so few and far between? Those moments when he actually shows me a tenderness that I don't always expect.

Am I missing something? Are we just going to have to spend more time together before he can be with me the way I need him to, or am I kidding myself?

I dress quickly in soft jeans and a sweater and head back downstairs to take in the fresh mountain air.

I stroll through the center of our little town, waving to the friendly pack members I see, when a little blonde tornado rushes into me and wraps her arms around my waist.

"Hi, Libby." I squat down to her level.

"Hi, Jara, will you play hide-and-seek with me, please?" Libby bounces up and down.

"Where are the other pups?" I scan the area.

"They don't want to play. They said it's a baby game." She sticks her tongue out in disgust.

I hold back my laughter, just barely. “Okay, then. Do you want to hide or seek?”

“I want to hide first.” She claps, then pulls me to the play area and stands me in front of a tree trunk.

“You count here, no peeking.” She wags her finger at me.

“I promise not to peek.” I nod and cover my eyes with my hands, facing the tree as I start counting.

Tiny feet shuffle away, and I chuckle under my breath.

She does realize that I can find her by scent, right? Silly pup.

“Twenty. Ready or not, here I come,” I shout.

I scan the play area and frown when I can’t find her. Maybe she’s better at this game than I thought.

I search under the slide and sniff at the air, but there’s no sign of her scent.

Where did she go?

I stroll around the town, searching behind trees and houses, under stairs, and anywhere I can think of before going back to the play area.

A breeze blows my damp hair in my face, and I pick up her scent.

No, she’s not supposed to go out there. I pick up my pace, following her scent to the forest beyond town.

Why would she hide in the forest when we are supposed to be staying within the town? Surely, she knows better.

“Libby,” I call into the quiet forest.

No birds chirp, and no animals rustle in the cold snow. They are all hibernating for the winter.

This isn't good at all. Maybe I should go back and get Patrick or someone to help me search. But what if something happens to her when I'm looking for him?

What if the humans see her first and snatch her up, or any of the other thousands of horrible things that could happen to her?

"Libby," I yell again, but there's still no answer.

The forest darkens as clouds float over the sun. Is it just my imagination, or is that a little ominous?

Did she go deeper into the forest? There's no way she hasn't been told to stay in the town. I'm almost positive that was a rule for her long before our current situation.

"Where is she?"

I rush deeper into the forest. A small ball of fur pounces on me, and I scream.

Even though I catch her easily, the force throws me back on my ass into the cold, wet snow.

Libby. Thank the gods she's okay, but I hope she knows how much trouble she's going to be in. She scared the life out of me going into the woods.

A warm wet tongue glides up my cheek, and I chuckle while ruffling her fur on her head. "You're not supposed to be out here, pup."

Libby whines and wiggles in my arms. I set her in the snow, and she races around me in a circle, nudging me with her nose.

“Libby, we need to go back now,” I say sternly, but she’s just too damn cute.

A throat clears, and I stare up at John. He’s glaring down at me with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Alpha, the woods are restricted. Pups aren’t supposed to be out here, especially not shifting.”

“I know. I was trying to get Libby back to town, but thank you, John.” I stand, dust myself off, and reach for the little brown ball of fur, but she dodges me like we are playing a game.

“Libby,” I say sternly.

She whines, stopping long enough for me to pick her up, then she barks and licks my face again. I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up.

No one in the pack can stay mad at this little girl.

John steps forward. “I’ll walk you back to the village.”

“That’s not necessary. Go back to your patrol.” I wave him off, but the stubborn shifter doesn’t listen.

“The alpha will skin me alive if something happens to either of you. What were you thinking coming out here in the danger we are in?”

“Excuse me?” I adjust Libby in my arms and raise my brows at the enforcer. He is not treating me like a child.

I tore Crystal apart with my bare hands and saved myself from Carter; I don’t need men thinking they have to protect me.

Archer is bad enough. Leaving people to watch over me like I can’t take care of myself is that man’s favorite pastime.

Just so he doesn't have to deal with me.

"There are humans in the woods, and we don't know what they are after. Coming out here was reckless, especially with a pup." John stomps ahead of me.

"I don't explain myself to you, enforcer," I growl.

Libby whimpers and rests her chin on my shoulder. I run my hand over the fur on her back soothingly as we step back into town.

"Go back to your post." I storm away from John.

The nerve of him scolding his alpha female like a child. Who does he think he is?

Is this payback for me telling them all they need to take rations this morning? Stubborn men.

I'm fuming by the time I get to Patrick's door. Libby barks and wiggles to get free, but I tighten my hold on her as I knock on the door.

"You're not getting out of this, Libby. The forest is dangerous right now."

Patrick answers, and his eyes widen when he sees his pup in my arms. "What happened?"

"We were playing hide-and-seek, and she decided to hide in the forest and shift." I sigh.

I hate getting her in trouble. It's not what friends do, but friends also don't let friends put themselves in danger.

"Libby, I have told you repeatedly not to go into the forest without an adult." Patrick frowns.

Libby's gaze snaps to mine. I shake my head.

"I wasn't with you in the forest until you pounced on me."

I hand over the fluff ball to her father, and her puppy dog eyes nearly kill me when she stares back. She's begging me to help her, but I can't. She knew better and tricked me.

She thought she could get away with being out there as long as I was with her. That wasn't really fair to me.

"I'm sorry, alpha, I hope she didn't cause too much trouble." Patrick glances at Libby with a scowl.

Shit. My little friend is about to be in some big trouble.

"Nothing I can't handle. John was a bit angry, and I will probably have to deal with Archer when he finds out, but other than that, we are all good." I shrug and turn to leave when someone calls my name.

I glance up just as Ellie races over to me from across the courtyard with a huge smile. "Hey, cousin."

"Hey, Ellie. How is the transition?" I loop my arm through hers.

She pushes her blonde hair behind her ear and ducks her head shyly. This isn't the same girl from the cell who threatened everyone around us.

Is it because she's happier here than she was at Grayson's pack? I hope so, or what did we trade people for in the first place?

"It's great. I have met lots of friendly people here." She blushes.

Why is she blushing?

"People or men, El?" I chuckle.

How many of the unmated males have been sniffing around my little cousin? I scan the town and narrow my eyes

at any of the shifters looking too closely at Ellie.

“Shhh, if Alex hears you saying things like that he will freak.” She slaps my shoulder.

I smirk. I was right; she has been making friends with the guys around here.

“Relax, Alex went down the mountain with Angela. They won’t be back for a bit.” I bump her with my shoulder.

That doesn’t mean I won’t warn the men off my cousin, though. At least warn them to be respectful or else I will tell Alex because Ellie would never forgive me otherwise.

“He spends an awful lot of time with the beta. Are they dating? Every time I ask him, he blows me off or gets super angry,” she says.

“No, and I probably wouldn’t ask him about it anymore.” I grimace.

It’s obvious that he wants her, but after her last relationship, I doubt she will be ready any time soon. I can see why his baby sister asking about it would probably piss him off.

“What? Why?”

“Just leave it, El. Promise me.” I pat her hand.

No one wants to hear Alex blow up at Ellie for sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong.

A truck comes tearing into the driveway of the pack house. Dust and gravel kick up into the sky.

Archer jumps from the vehicle and slams the door behind him.



Is he angry? Did his meeting go bad? What the hell happened? Is the pack in trouble?

My pulse thrums like a drumbeat in my ears, and my hands shake as I turn to Ellie. "I have to go."

I race to the house.

Archer walks into the house slamming the door behind him when I'm still at the end of the drive.

I scurry up the drive and into the house. Archer turns at the sound of the door. His eyes are hard, and the sour scent of anger fills the air as he turns away and stomps into his office.

Is he mad at me? What the hell did I do?

**A**rcher

“Hello?” I say into the truck’s Bluetooth.

“Alpha,” John says slowly into the phone.

“What is it?” I bark.

Whatever he has to tell me doesn’t sound good, and I clench my fists on the steering wheel.

I’m still half an hour from the pack. Dread sinks in my gut like a stone. There’s something he doesn’t want to tell me. Shit.

Is it Jara? Is she okay?

“I found Jara and Libby in the forest playing,” John says.

“She what?”

What the fuck was she thinking taking a pup into the forest to play? She knows the stakes., doesn’t she?

Did I forget to communicate the stakes again?

No. She was there when Patrick confirmed that the government car had been in our territory. She fucking knows better.

“Libby was shifted, alpha,” he says with a sigh.

“Motherfucker.” I growl.

Why the fuck would Libby shift in the forest? We are supposed to be careful. What is she thinking?

“Did Jara wander out there with a head injury?” I ask.

She was supposed to be getting that healed. What happened? Mary had her and was working on her when I left. Did she decline treatment and wander off?

It’s the only thing that makes sense, but where was Patrick then? He was supposed to stay with her.

“I didn’t see a head injury.”

“I need to call Patrick.” I stab at the screen for my Bluetooth to hang up and call Patrick.

“Alpha,” he says when he answers on the second ring. “Is everything okay?”

“What happened with Libby and Jara today?”

Patrick sighs. “Libby is in serious trouble for that stunt, but I can’t get her to shift back so I can scold her. Scolding her wolf is like kicking a puppy.”

“What were you told about the incident?” I punch the steering wheel.

This is fucking bullshit. Can my mate not stay out of trouble, ever? What the fuck was she thinking?

“They were playing hide-and-seek. Jara found her in the forest. I’m sorry, alpha. It wasn’t Jara’s fault.” Patrick is quick to say.

“She knows the stakes. She should have gotten her out of there the second she found her.”

A creak comes from the steering wheel, and I loosen my hold.

“I wouldn’t be too hard on her, alpha. It was a rambunctious nine-year-old’s fault, and as soon as I get her to shift, she’s going to hear about it.”

John said they were playing. Could he have mistaken Jara for playing with the pup when she was actually trying to wrangle her?

Libby can be a handful, and I know how much Jara cares for her, but she never should have gone into the forest knowing what she does about the humans.

“I’ll think about it, Patrick,” I say with a grunt.

“I’m grateful to her for finding Libby before someone else did, or gods forbid she was seen shifting by the humans,” Patrick whispers.

“Me too, but Jara should have found an enforcer to look for Libby if that’s what really happened.” I run a hand down my face.

The woman has no sense of self preservation. She can fight and she can win, but why does she have to make everything exceedingly difficult.

I stab at the phone screen to hang up.

The longer I drive, the angrier I get. She was reckless going into the forest by herself. She should have gotten Patrick to go look for his pup.

I pull into the drive too fast, but I don’t care. Rage tints my vision red. If Jara doesn’t want to protect herself and stop wandering off on her own, she’s going to have someone with her at all times.

The slam of the door cracks like a shot over the pack village, and I stomp to the door of the pack house. Quick footsteps follow behind me, but I don't turn. I already know who's there.

Her citrus and vanilla scent floats on the breeze. My spine stiffens as I slam the front door behind me and storm into my office.

I lean my forearms against the wall and squeeze my eyes shut. She'll be in here in a minute, and I need to calm as much as possible so this doesn't turn into yet another argument.

Thoughts of humans seeing her out in the forest and somehow hurting her play like a movie behind my eyes. I will not let that happen.

Even if she hates me for it, I will make sure she is protected.

The door clicks open, and quiet footsteps follow me into the room.

"How did your meeting go?" Jara asks.

I spin on her with a glare. "What were you thinking?"

"Me?"

"Why do you constantly defy me?" I stomp forward and wrap my hands around her arms.

Touching her is a bad idea, even when I'm angry. I want her so much. I can't though. I have to be strong, and this woman is my weakness. A weakness I can admit to myself but no one else.

Not even her. Especially not her.

“It wasn’t like that, Archer. I was playing with Libby, and she went into the forest.” Jara stares into my eyes.

“You never should have gone into the forest on your own. You know the risks.” I push her back into the door, crowding her.

“You wanted me to leave her in the forest and go find someone to go with me to get her out?” she asks, exasperated.

Would I have done the same thing in her position? Yes, but I’m the alpha. I’m supposed to risk myself for my pack. Not her. Never her.

She’s not allowed to risk herself. She’s meant to be protected at all costs. She’s going to hate me for it, but I would rather have her hate me than her not be here at all.

“Yes,” I snarl. “Anything could have happened. You know the risks with the humans.”

“Those same things could have happened to Libby. It was worth the risk.”

“No, it was not.” I drop her arms and take a step back.

“Yes, it was worth the risk. You aren’t the only one that can put the members of this pack first.” She plants her hands on her hips.

Fuck. She’s using my own words and actions against me.

“I am the only one who should put this pack before their own safety and wants, Jara.” I run a hand through my hair.

This woman frustrates me beyond belief. Can’t she see that everything I do is for the safety of the pack? That includes her. Always.

“What wants are those, Archer? Because it sounds like you have sacrificed not only your wants but mine as well.”

What is she talking about? I have gone out of my way to make sure she wants for nothing. I have provided for her in every way.

What wants does she think I've sacrificed? Are we even having the same argument anymore?

“I don't know what you're talking about.” I turn to the desk, and walk around to sit behind it.

“You don't?” She scoffs.

How did we get on this topic?

“I provide for all your wants. I have not sacrificed your wants for the needs of the pack,” I say slowly.

What possible wants can she be talking about? Half the time she acts like she hates me, so it can't be what I'm thinking, can it?

Is she angry because I won't mate with her or get close to her again? I can't. No good will come from that path.

“You're not dumb, Archer.” She shakes her head.

“Are you insulting me, mate?”

The word slips out without a thought, and I hold back a wince. She is my mate, but I haven't treated her as such in a long time.

“No, but sometimes I wonder if you know anything at all.” She sighs, flopping into the chair.

Her face crumples into a frown, her expression defeated.

I harden my resolve even as my mask begins to fall.

I can't let it fall. I have to be the strong one. If I give in to what I want, my actions could put the pack at risk because emotions unlike anything I know bubble up inside of me any time I let her get too close.

"We're getting off track here. You are not to leave the pack house without Angela. If you won't stop taking risks, I will take the decision out of your hands."

"What? No, Archer. I can take care of myself, and you fucking know it." She jumps from the chair.

"You will be kept safe, Jara."

I'll make sure she's kept safe, even from herself.

What does she not understand? I'm her mate, and I have failed to keep her safe twice now. I will not let that happen again.

She will be protected at all costs. If I lost her... the world would burn.

Fuck, see? This is why I can't let her close. I can't burn the world for her; I just have to get the idea through her stubborn skull that these risks she takes aren't worth her life or the pack.

"You're being an asshole, Archer. Angela is a woman, and I am just as strong as she is, if not stronger. Why have her as my protector when I can take care of myself?" She throws her hands up in frustration.

"Because Angela isn't reckless!"

Jara flinches at my words, but she nods solemnly and turns to leave.

"Okay, Alpha." She places her hand on the doorknob but hesitates before pulling it open.



She steps out of the office, letting the door click shut behind her, and I slump in my chair.

What the fuck have I done? All the fight seemed to deflate right out of her.

So many of her actions have been reckless, though. Not just going after Libby on her own today but when she snuck into Grayson's territory and when she promised Carter she would go with him to Alpha Kyle.

I can't trust her to take care of herself, so someone has to protect her for me. I have a pack to run, so I can't be constantly at her side.

My phone rings and I pick it up. Angela is on the other end.

"Are you back from picking up supplies?" I ask.

"Yes, we are headed to the storeroom now."

"I'll meet you down there," I grunt, hang up the phone, and stand.

Angela's going to yell at me and call me an idiot for this, but I don't care. She needs to keep an eye on my mate. The subject isn't up for discussion.

She will be fucking protected.

I stroll out of the office just as the front door opens. Angela and Alex walk in carrying a bunch of boxes.

I scrub a hand over my face. "It may not be completely ready for those. There was an accident."

"What accident?" Angela asks with wide eyes.

"A shelf fell on Jara."

Alex stumbles to a stop. “Are the pack lands trying to kill her today?”

“What do you mean?” I grab a box from Angela and march through the kitchen.

“A roof tile fell this morning and nearly took her out,” Alex says as they both follow me down the stairs.

“What?” I stop and Angela runs into my back.

What the fuck is going on? Freak accidents like this don’t happen here.

I drop the box on the metal table. Is Jara in more danger than any of us realized?

“How the fuck do things like this keep happening?” I storm around the storeroom to the back wall where the shelf fell and crouch on the ground.

“Do you see any signs of sabotage?” Angela asks.

“Not that I can tell, but it looks like McKenna cleaned up.” I lean over.

The shelves are supposed to be bolted down, so how did this one fall?

“Did they say how it happened? Who all was in here?” Angela shuffles her feet.

“It was just McKenna, and no, I was only concerned with getting her to the healer.” I shake the shelf but nothing happens.

It’s sturdy now. What could have caused it to fall in the first place?

Could someone in my own pack be trying to hurt her again? The only thing I know for certain is that if someone is

trying to kill her, then it's not on Kyle's orders.

I glance over my shoulder to Angela. "Until further notice, Jara doesn't go anywhere alone, got it?"

"You know how I feel about this heavy-handed bullshit," she grumbles.

"You really think these were accidents?" I stand and cross my arms over my chest.

She isn't serious, right? It's too much of a coincidence to be an accident, and I don't believe in coincidences.

"She's going to be pissed, but I get it. She's been through a lot since she got here." Angela tilts her head back.

"She already is pissed. I told her this after she followed Libby into the woods alone."

Alex runs a hand down his face. "Maybe someone should talk to McKenna and get briefed on what she saw when she cleaned this place up."

"I'll go," I say. "I need to know what's happening inside my pack. You two unload the truck."

I climb up the stairs and walk out the front door. I have no idea where Jara went, but I'm glad that I don't run into her again.

I'm barely down the steps when McKenna comes striding up the drive with a box in her hands. She glances at the truck and then over at me.

"Alpha," she says with a nod.

"McKenna, I need to know what you saw when you cleaned up after the shelf fell. Did anything look suspicious or off?" I fold my arms over my chest.

“What should I have been looking for? One of the bolts was broken in half, and I replaced it.” She shrugs and frowns, as if she’s trying to remember.

“A bolt was broken?”

Those bolts are supposed to be solid steel. How could a bolt have just broken out of nowhere?

“Yes, it was a bit strange since it wasn’t rusted or stripped or anything, but maybe it just wasn’t supposed to be strong enough to hold the shelf up on its own?” She adjusts the box in her hands.

“What do you mean on its own?” I ask, dread sinking in my gut.

“It was the only bolt I found alpha.”

What the fuck? There should have been more bolts holding that shelf down. Is someone in the pack trying to hurt my mate?

I don’t know what will happen to the pack if something were to happen to Jara, but it looks like someone is trying to steal her away from me. Again.

**J**ara

I blink my eyes open to the early morning sun shining through the window and reach next to me.

His side of the bed is empty and cold. Why did I think he would be there? It seems like he's never there anymore.

He slept somewhere else again last night—probably went back to the guest room like he used to. What the hell is going on with him?

My heart aches, but I refuse to let the tears fall.

“Argh!” I scream into the pillow and punch it repeatedly.

This is all so fucked up. Archer is being Archer again, and I can't fucking stand it. A knock at the door pulls me from my chosen form of stress relief, and I roll onto my back.

“Come in,” I call.

Angela peeks her head in, and I scowl.

“Hey, I'm not the one who ordered you not to leave the house.” She steps into the room, closing the door behind her.

“I know.” I sigh and put the pillow over my face to scream into it again.

It's not her fault that Archer is an asshole. She just takes orders from him.

The pillow gets ripped away from my face, and I glare at her.

"I can't scream into a pillow now?" I sit up on the bed.

"Force of habit." She throws the pillow, and it hits me in the face.

"What do you want? Are you here for my walk around the prison yard?" I ask. It feels like that, even if she says it's not. But honestly, I have been locked in this house more times than I can count.

"That's a bit dramatic, even for you, Jara. He didn't tell you not to leave the room, just not to leave the house."

She's right; it could be worse. I could be locked in the bedroom.

Archer wouldn't do that to me again, though. The last time he locked me away for an extended period of time, my wolf practically went feral.

"I don't care if I'm being dramatic. He watched me in action twice and saw that I can protect myself when I'm not tied up." I fall back into the pillows.

"The alpha female's roll isn't a protector, Jara, and you know that. The alpha is traditional in that thing alone. He protects the pack. His mate nurtures them." Angela sits on the edge of the bed.

Who's supposed to nurture me and care for me? Because surely my alpha can't.

"What's the point in looking for strength in a mate then?" I scrub a hand over my face.

I need another pillow to scream into, but Angela will probably just yank it away from me again.

“Who knows what goes through Archer’s fucked up mind?” Angela bounces lightly on the bed.

“You’re not wrong. I mean, all I did was go after Libby when she went into the forest alone.” I roll to the edge of the bed and stand up.

I need to get ready for my day of sitting around the house until Angela comes to release me from my cage.

“That’s not the only reason.” She grimaces.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I’m sure he’s just overreacting.” Angela stands and heads for the door.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

She raises a brow, but finally says, “Alpha isn’t sure the things that happened yesterday were accidents.”

“That’s ridiculous. They were accidents. You really think someone would come into my home and try to kill me? Why?” I ask, but it’s not entirely crazy.

“It’s happened before, Jara.” Angela reminds me.

The nightmares still haunt me like ghosts in the dark. Every time I close my eyes, I can see the dank, dirty cell, the clearing up the mountain, or Carter’s body torn to shreds after Archer killed him.

“I know that, but Kyle can’t hurt us anymore, and Carter is dead. There isn’t anyone else in this pack who would be stupid enough to try to kill me.”

Even as the words escape me, I wonder if they are true.

There is one person that would happily see me dead, but is she really the type to murder someone?

I've had my suspicions about Rochelle for a while, but there's no evidence to prove them. Could she have loosened that shingle on the roof?

Angela lifts a brow. She knows as well as I do that there are females in the pack who wouldn't skip a beat if something happened to me.

"Just maybe take it easy on him. He's under a ton of pressure." Angela opens the door.

"Right. I understand the pressure he's under, but he doesn't have to take all his frustrations out on me," I say.

Angela nods. "I'll be downstairs while you get dressed."

She leaves, closing the door behind her. I glance at the unmade bed and slump. Archer never came to bed last night, but that's not anything new. He's been sleeping in the spare room more often lately.

I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling momentarily before spinning on my heel and walking into the closet to get dressed for the day.

Angela is busy, so I don't expect to be allowed out of the house very often. The fact she's here and waiting for me now just proves that she's my friend.

She doesn't want me stuck in the house any more than I want to be.

I dress quickly and wander down to the kitchen. Angela is sitting on the granite counter, peering down at her phone.

"What are we doing?" I ask as I move to stand next to her.



“You want to take a walk or tackle the delivery from last night?” she asks.

“Shit, I forgot there was a delivery. The place is probably a disaster after the shelf fell.” I glance out the window, longing to go outside and see the members of the pack, but there is probably a ton of stuff to clean up in the storeroom.

I take a step toward the storeroom, and Angela grabs my arm.

“McKenna cleaned it up. The shelves and freezers just need to be stocked.” She hops off the counter and races down the stairs to the basement.

I follow behind her, taking them carefully so I don’t trip and break my neck or something equally humiliating.

Boxes litter the space, and I groan internally. They just dumped everything down here. The produce is still sitting on one of the tables, but I don’t even know which boxes contain the new produce for us to stock.

“That’s a lot of supplies,” Angela says.

“Yeah, and it doesn’t look like the guys had any rhyme or reason to where they set anything.” I sit cross-legged on the ground and open the nearest box.

Angela picks up a box and carries it closer to the canned food shelf. “Who puts this many cans in one box? It’s a good thing we have shifter strength.”

“Maybe we should make some of the enforcers come down here and help just for making this shit so difficult.” I drag another box in front of me.

It’s heavier than the last one. Who the fuck packed these things? I’m surprised that the bottoms didn’t fall out.

“I’m sure they would cry like babies but do it all the same.” Angela chuckles.

She has a can in each hand as she scans the shelf for the correct place to put them.

“They definitely would. Did you see how scared they were when I yelled at them yesterday?” I ask.

“Serves the idiots right.” She reaches up to one of the top shelves and is barely tall enough to put the can there.

I struggle with picking at the tape on the box with my fingernails; it’s been taped within an inch of its life.

Maybe that’s why the bottom of the box didn’t collapse. They used an entire roll of packing tape on it.

“Can you hand me the box cutter?” I ask, waving a hand over my head.

“No, I’m not handing you sharp objects right now.” Angela turns her glare on me.

“Fine.” I stand and head to the table, but Angela beats me to it and snatches the box cutter.

“No sharp objects.”

“I’m not a fucking toddler.” I stomp my foot and hold my hand out to her.

“You just stomped your foot like one.”

“Whatever. You and Archer are so convinced that those weren’t accidents yesterday, so I guess I’m not accident prone. Now, give me the box cutter.” I reach for the blade, but she puts it behind her back.

Are we seriously doing this right now? What the fuck? Archer won’t care if I cut open a few boxes. She is being

ridiculous.

I hold out my hand and wiggle my fingers. “I could just go up to the kitchen and grab a knife if you won’t let me have the cutter.”

“No.” A booming voice rings out from the stairs, and I turn to find Alex standing there with his arms folded over his chest.

“You’re not the boss of me.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Your mate will skin us alive if you hurt yourself.” He storms down the stairs.

What the fuck do they think I’m going to do with a box cutter? I know they are sensitive because of Eloise, but it’s not like I got myself in the situations yesterday all on my own.

They were fucking accidents. I’m not her, and I will kick, scream, and claw to keep what I have. Even if Archer never opens up to me, I will never take the route she did.

The fact they keep thinking this just pisses me off.

“Unless you’re here to help, you’re going the wrong way.” I turn back to Angela.

Why does Alex get a say in what I do? He was an asshole to me at first, and it wasn’t until I was locked up that he actually told anyone we are related.

Now he thinks he can be all protective, even when I get on his case about not taking what he needs.

“I need Angela,” Alex says. “It’s time for our patrol.”

“Good. Give me the box cutter, and I will finish up here.” I raise a brow, holding my hand open for the cutter.

“Fuck no.” Angela stomps to me and tries to nudge me up the stairs.

“I’m staying, Angela. I’m in the house, technically, so go.”  
I wave her off.

The place is a mess, and I don’t want to leave it like this. There’s so much work to do.

Alex catches me by surprise, and the next thing I know, I’m airborne. “You were fucking injured the last time you were in here, so stop being stubborn.”

“Alex, you better put me the fuck down or Archer really will skin you alive,” I yell.

He stomps up the stairs and out into the kitchen before setting me down on the counter.

“I’m probably the only male in this pack he won’t kill for that,” Alex says.

“If you really think that carrying me up the stairs like a caveman will keep me out of there, then you’re wrong.” I lean forward to crowd him and glare up at his stupid face.

“Jara.” Angela sighs.

They don’t understand the absolute crushing sadness that comes with your mate distancing himself from you out of some misplaced sense of duty.

Is that really it, though, or did I do something? I still don’t know why the change has happened. His attitude was a complete turnaround, and he won’t even tell me why.

“I need to keep my hands busy, Angela. I won’t use the fucking box cutter, and if you want to send an enforcer to help, I won’t complain.” I throw my hands up and stomp back to the stairs.

I’m fucking tired of this bullshit. When will our lives calm down so we can just be a pack and be together?

An arm bands around my waist. I scream as Alex hauls me back into the kitchen and sits me down on the counter. Again.

“I’m going to kick your ass, Alex,” I shout in his face.

“At least you will be alive to do it, alpha.” Alex crowds me and bumps his chest into mine.

I gasp. “What do you think is going to happen?”

“Anything can happen, and I prefer my alpha when he’s not burning the world down around us.”

Right. Like he would even care outside of some sense of duty to me as his mate.

He frowns at my scowl.

“You didn’t see the way he reacted to Grayson and his pack holding you. He was ready to burn the world down for you.” Alex shakes his head.

So, what has changed? Why was he ready to go to war for me one day and the next he can barely look at me?

“Seriously, Alex. I’m not going to hurt myself with the damn box cutter.”

Why are they being ridiculous?

Angela pats my shoulder. “Just do me a favor and stay away from the storeroom for a while.”

“Fine,” I say.

They aren’t wrong. I did have a shelf fall on me yesterday, and I don’t know if I would have been able to get up had McKenna not been there.

It would be dumb to hang out in there alone. I step around Alex, bumping him with my shoulder, and open the fridge to pull out a bottle of water.

Everything is a mess in the storeroom, and that fact has my hands twitching with the need to fix it, but I turn my back on the stairs leading to the basement and head back upstairs to my room.

May as well be locked in my room. I can't fucking go anywhere.

I stare at the unmade bed and groan. I should've made it before I left with Angela.

Angela peeks her head in as I smooth out the sheet.

I turn to her with a frown as I pick up a pillow and fluff it. "What's wrong? I thought you were going to patrol?"

"Just coming to tell you it may be a while before we can take that walk. Archer called a meeting with the enforcers."

"Why? Has something happened?"

"I don't know, but I wouldn't worry about it." She shuts the door behind her.

Please don't let anything else happen. The pack can't take much more disaster.

**A**rcher

“Alpha,” Patrick calls from across the town square.

“What is it, Patrick?” I turn and frown.

The man is breathing heavy, his pulse racing under his skin, and his eyes are wild with fear. The rancid stench of it fills the space between us.

“Alpha, I need a word in private,” he whispers.

I clap him on the shoulder and lead the way back to the pack house.

What could be bothering him so much that he can’t say it with the rest of the pack in hearing distance? No good can come from this.

The door to the house clicks shut behind us as we make our way through the quiet house.

Why is it so quiet? Where is my mate?

Is she upstairs cursing the day she met me because she can’t leave the house, or is something wrong?

I shake off the worry, lead Patrick into my office, and close the door behind us.

“Tim came to me with grim news.” Patrick flops down in the chair in front of my desk.

“What is it?” I ask.

“The roof tile...”

“Spit it out already.”

What happened with the roof tile? We don’t seriously have another pack member trying to kill Jara, right?

“There is evidence it may have been tampered with.” Patrick scrubs a hand over his face as his fear permeates the air.

“Someone is after my mate again?”

What the fuck? How did my pack become so disloyal? I mean, they aren’t all disloyal, but who the fuck is after my mate this time, and why?

I race over to the desk and pick up the landline. There’s one person I need to talk to before I lose my shit. He’s sworn a blood oath never to come after my mate.

The phone rings twice before a gruff voice answers. “Hello?”

“You better not be going back on your blood oath, Kyle,” I bark into the phone.

“Why would you think that?” Kyle asks.

There’s a tremor in his voice.

Good. He should be fucking scared.

“Did you blackmail another member of my pack?” I growl.

“No, I took a blood oath. I have no plans to break it. Ever.” His voice raises an octave.



“Fuck!” I bellow.

Who is after my mate this time? Why can't we catch a fucking break?

“I warned you the last time as best as I could without breaking the blood oath I took.”

“Grayson?” I ask, but Kyle keeps his mouth shut.

How is he doing this from his pack? Is there someone working for him, or is it a member of my own pack acting out on their own?

“Your mate isn't safe,” Kyle whispers, and the click on the phone is ominous as he hangs up.

I turn back to Patrick. He has a worried frown on his face.

“Did you hear all that?” I ask.

“Yes, he sounded terrified. I think he's telling the truth.” Patrick runs a hand down his face.

“What are we going to do? I can't have enforcers on her every minute of the day.” I collapse into my chair.

“The alpha female is strong. She can take care of herself, Alpha.” Patrick rests his elbows on his knees.

“I know that, but I am her mate, and it is my job to protect her.” I clench my fist, wanting desperately to punch something.

“Maybe just tell her to be vigilant.”

“No, I don't want her knowing about this.”

I don't want to scare her and have her afraid to move around the pack, looking over her shoulder wondering when someone might strike.

“Alpha, are you sure?” He tilts his head to the side.

“Yes, we need to keep this under wraps so we don’t tip off whoever is sabotaging her.”

Patrick nods. “So, what should we do, then? We have everyone on patrols.”

“Angela is already assigned to her when she leaves the house.”

“Should we let Angela and Alex in on this new information?” Patrick asks.

“Yeah, they need to know, and talk to Tim. He needs to keep his mouth shut about what he found.” I pull my cell out of my pocket and text Angela.

Kyle’s words continuously ring in my ears as we wait for Angela and Alex. *Your mate isn’t safe.*

Jara isn’t safe, but who do I have to kill to keep her safe? Hopelessness threatens to smother me. I’ve failed to keep her safe twice before. What if I fail again, but this time she’s beyond saving?

I can’t even think about that. I can’t. I clench my fist so hard my knuckles turn white. The need to destroy something is strong—I need to destroy whoever thinks to kill my mate. They need to pay in blood.

Minutes later, the door opens. Angela and Alex walk in with matching grim expressions.

“What is it?” Angela glances between me and Patrick.

“We need to be more vigilant than ever. I’m taking you off patrols.” I stand and stroll to the bar in the corner of my office to grab a much-needed drink.

“What’s going on?” She glances at Patrick, and he sighs.

“Tim found evidence that the roof tile was tampered with.” Patrick hangs his head.

“What? Someone is after her again?” Angela storms to the bar, yanks a bottle of whiskey from the shelf, and pours the amber liquid into a glass.

“We need to keep this quiet. We don’t want whoever is doing this to know.” I steal the bottle from her and put it back on the shelf.

Gripping my glass, I stalk back to my desk and sit in my chair. The glass clinks on the table as I set it down.

“You’re going to keep this from her, aren’t you?” Angela asks.

“She doesn’t need to be looking over her shoulder all the time. That’s why I’m taking you off patrol.”

I don’t want to take Jara’s freedom away from her again. She was locked in that cell in Grayson’s territory for a week, and I won’t do that to her again.

“So, I am her bodyguard all the time then?” Angela asks.

“It gives her more freedom and keeps her safe.” I pick up my glass and take a sip.

The liquor burns going down, but it’s just what I need. I tilt my head back and squeeze my eyes shut against the headache forming.

“Okay, I have no problem with that part, but not telling her is a mistake.”

“I’m ordering you to keep quiet.” I growl.

“How have your communication issues worked out for you in the past?” She plants a hand on her hip.

I flinch at the memories. It was my fault she snuck into Grayson’s territory to see her parents. If I had told her what Kyle implied, would she have been tortured the way she was? Would she have ever gone into Grayson’s territory?

“They have gone horribly.” I frown.

Is Angela right? Is this going to make things worse if I don’t tell Jara that someone is after her?

“Exactly. Are you ever going to learn to trust that your mate can handle the truth?” Angela throws her hands up in the air.

“Enough,” I bellow. “No one is to tell her this. It’s my choice what to divulge.”

“Fine,” Angela says with a glare.

She tips the rest of her drink back and slams the glass on the bar.

“Take it easy,” I bark.

If she breaks my damn glass, then we are going to have a problem.

Alex shuffles his feet. “I don’t think she’s wrong about this, but we are going to be spread thin with patrols.”

“It’s not ideal, but the alternative is unthinkable. Can any of you think of anyone who would want to hurt Jara?” I ask.

Angela winces.

“What is it?” I ask.

She can’t keep information from me. If we are going to keep Jara safe, then I need to know who could be a danger to

her.

“I’m not implicating anyone without proof, Archer.”  
Angela clenches her fists at her sides.

The sour scent of her anger permeates the air.

What is she so angry about? Who does she think did this?

Alex tilts his head to the side. “Someone called her name just before the tile fell.”

“What?” I ask, standing so fast that my chair nearly topples over behind me.

“That doesn’t mean anything, Alex.” Angela sighs.

“It’s suspicious that they called her name to get her to stop in that exact spot. She was tearing the enforcers a new asshole.” Alex leans back against the wall.

A grin tugs at the corners of my mouth, but I school my features quickly. I have no right to be proud of my mate for standing up to my enforcers.

Not with the way I have treated her lately. Maybe I should talk to her. I don’t want to be cold toward her.

But icy fear fills me any time I even consider letting her in closer. Will I lose my pack if I let her in? It’s a delicate balance, and I’m failing at being a mate and alpha miserably.

Angela and Alex bickering pulls me from my thoughts.

“It could be a coincidence. I refuse to accuse anyone without proof.” Angela steps into Alex’s space, glaring at him.

“I want my cousin safe, so the alpha has a right to know my suspicions.” Alex kicks off the wall, staring her down.

“Accusing people of things without proof isn’t how this pack works. We’re not like your old pack, Alex.”

“I know you did not just accuse me of being like that piece of shit alpha.” Alex squares his shoulders and doesn’t back down.

Patrick groans. “You two just need to fuck already.”

My head snaps to Patrick, and I raise my eyebrows in surprise. “What the hell, Patrick?”

Patrick has never spoken like that in front of me. It’s definitely out of character for the older enforcer.

He’s not wrong though. The tension between the two of them is suffocating. They really need to fight or fuck.

My guess is that fighting will lead to fucking and then all hell will break loose.

Angela scoffs and spins on Patrick. “Never going to happen.”

“Right,” Patrick says.

“Whatever, I’m going to go guard my friend.” She turns on her heel and stalks out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

The woman needs to watch herself with slamming shit in my home. Her attitude lately is worse than ever. Have I let her get away with too much?

I know she has been going through a lot after Jacob’s murder, but she needs to stop being angry at the world and do her job without complaint.

“Well, that was fun,” Alex grumbles.

“Let’s get back on track. I know it’s not a smoking gun, but who called Jara’s name to stop her before the tile fell?” I scrub a hand over my face.

“I don’t remember who it was exactly. The voice was female, though,” Alex says.

Female? One of the females in my pack is trying to kill her? Disgraceful. There is a challenge process for a reason.

Why would they resort to underhanded tactics instead of outright challenging her?

“That’s ridiculous. No female member of the pack would try to kill her.” I shake my head.

“Don’t be blind, alpha.” Alex’s shoulders slump.

Am I being blind? I don’t want to believe that the females in the pack are so petty and disgraceful. The few that were still holding out hope to get to me left and went to Grayson’s pack as a trade for Jara’s family.

I need to talk to Callahan and facilitate the transfer of Jara’s parents to my pack. We held up our end, but Grayson has not.

I should have known he wouldn’t, though. He sent Alex’s family as a show of good faith but not Jara’s parents. I need to fix that.

“I need to see my mate.” I grunt and head for the door.

Why didn’t Jara tell me about the tile in the first place? Had I even given her the chance?

I stomp up the stairs to the bedroom and open the door to find Angela lounging in a chair at the small table but no sign of Jara.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“Bathroom getting ready.” Angela shrugs.

She doesn't look up from the magazine she has fisted in her hands. Her rage is palpable.

"I need to speak with her." I arch a brow when Angela doesn't move.

She huffs out a breath and leaves the room without another comment.

"Jara," I call.

"What's going on?" she asks warily as she steps into the room.

She just got out of the shower. Water droplets trail down her neck, and she's naked except for a towel wrapped around her perfect tanned and toned body. Fuck, my mate is dangerous.

I can't focus on my anger when she stares up at me with those big green eyes. Shit. I glance away to calm myself.

Anger, I need to remember my anger. She didn't tell me about the danger she's in. That is unacceptable.

"Why didn't you tell me about the roof tile?" I ask.

"It was a freak accident, Archer, and it's not exactly like you have given me many opportunities to talk to you." She flips her long chestnut hair over her shoulder.

It's an exercise in control not to pull her to me and rip the towel off her.

*You can't get too close to her. She's too easy to love, even when she's angry.*

My feet move before I make the conscious decision, and a small smirk teases the corners of her lips.



I crowd her space, backing her against the wall. “You should have told me your life had been in danger twice yesterday.”

“When? When I was unconscious or after you fled the healer’s cabin?” She holds her head high as I glare down at her.

I slam my hands against the wall on either side of her head, caging her in. “You should have made me listen.”

“Why, Archer?” She sighs. “I don’t want to force you to spend time with me or listen to what I have to say. I want you to *want* to do those things.”

She runs her hand up my chest, and my spine tingles with the awareness that my mate is touching me.

Her hands slide around the back of my neck, and I let her pull me to her in a heated kiss.

I groan against her lips. I missed this over the last few months. I’ve missed being close to her. Fuck, this is a bad idea. I nip at her bottom lip and suck it into my mouth.

Jara gasps, and the sound goes right to my balls. Fuck, I want her. I want her more than anything in the world. I just need to give in to her.

Consequences be damned.

**J**ara

Surprise and longing flicker through me as his soft lips meet mine in a fierce kiss.

He crowds me, pressing his chest against mine as his hand caresses my jaw before moving down my body to grip my waist.

I missed this so much. I miss him and just being close like this.

Archer deepens the kiss, his tongue clashing with mine in a show of absolute dominance. A tiny moan escapes me as I thread my fingers through his hair.

He breaks the kiss and trails his lips over my throat to my mark. I shiver with pleasure and reach for the towel secured around me.

I need it off. I need it off now.

The towel drops to the floor, and I arch into his touch as his fingers trail from my throat to my breasts.

He sucks my nipple into his mouth hard. The brutality behind his movements is so much like Archer that I don't care that he's punishing me as long as he's touching me again.

I run my hands over his shoulders, digging my fingers into them until my fingernails cut small moons into his skin.

He pinches my other breast, and I tilt my head back, smacking my head into the door. I slide my leg up the back of his thigh to pull his body closer to me.

His hard cock brushes against my bare pussy through his jeans. I pull him even closer.

I trail my fingers down his chest to his pants to pop open the button on his jeans. I want them off.

Archer grabs my hands and pins them over my head against the cold wooden door, stopping me from getting where I want to be the most.

He grips both hands in one of his and pinches my nipple. Pain and pleasure spark through me.

“You don’t get to control this, mate,” Archer whispers.

His mouth descends on mine again, taking me in a demanding kiss. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, and I squirm.

It’s too much and not enough all at the same time. It’s been so long since he’s touched me like this, and the sensation of his hands on me have me climbing to the peak without him ever touching my pussy.

Fuck, he feels so good. I rub my body against his, needing the friction. I’m so close to falling over the edge, but he’s not letting me get closer. I whimper as he places his hand on my hip, holding it to the door.

“Archer, I need you.” I groan.

His body stiffens, and I regret my words instantly. He releases my hip and steps back abruptly. It’s like a bucket of

ice water shattering our moment.

His lips part from my skin as he stumbles back, leaving me cold and naked.

The mask he usually wears falls into place. There he is: the alpha—the brutal asshole who refuses to get close to anyone.

I wrap my arms around my middle and glance at my feet where the towel lies discarded on the floor.

“I am the alpha, you will do as I say,” he growls. “I don’t care if you think it’s an accident, you tell me right away.”

“Fuck you, Archer.” Tears burn the backs of my eyes.

I bend over, grab the towel from the floor, and wrap it back around my body.

“You tried that, mate, and I denied you. If I want to fuck you, I will initiate it.” He turns on his heels and strides to the door. “Cover yourself before I open this door.”

He just wants to use me. It doesn’t matter what I want. It never has. How can I be so stupid?

Searing agony tears through my chest. I gasp for breath as panic threatens to take me to my knees. My hands shake violently, but I refuse to let him see my tears. He doesn’t deserve to see that he’s finally broken me.

Is that what he wants? A broken doll up on a shelf he can take off and play with when it suits him?

I stomp into the bathroom and slam the door behind me, locking it for good measure. I don’t want fucking company right now.

The scent of my rage fills the room, but there’s something else there. Despair.

Leaning back against the door, I slide down to sit on my ass on the cool tile floor and curl my legs up to my body.

He really is just a heartless bastard, isn't he?

Maybe my mother and the rumors were right about him all along. A sob escapes, and I suck in a ragged breath.

How long can I deal with this? How many times does he have to push me away before I realize that this is all I get in my life?

I stare blankly at the wall. Rocking back and forth, the soft *thud, thud, thud* of my back hitting the door is rhythmic but not soothing.

Nothing can soothe me ever again. I have nothing left to give anyone. Hot tears burn paths down my cheeks.

How can he do this to me? Why is he like this? I still don't understand what I did.

Was I some horrible person in a past life and a life with a man that I could grow to love but will never love me is my punishment?

"Jara." Angela's soft voice is followed by a knock at the door.

No, I won't let anyone see me like this. Not even Angela who has seen me at my worst—well, at the time I thought it was my worst, but I've just hit rock bottom and I'm drowning.

"Go away." I sob even harder.

"You know I can't," she says sadly.

"Leave me alone!"

"The alpha left me to guard you." She knocks again.

“Don’t talk to me about the fucking alpha.” I swipe at my wet cheeks.

My wolf whines in my head at the rejection. My sobs become more ragged as any hope or possibility of a real future with Archer are torn from my chest.

He doesn’t want me. He said it plain as day in the cruelty of his words. He denied me when I tried.

What kind of life am I going to lead here? Is this any better than exile?

I’ve done my best be a good mate and alpha female to this pack despite Archer and his fucked up ways.

“Jara, open the door.” Angela tries again.

It’s disgusting, but I’m well past caring and lie down in front of the door with my eyes squeezed tight.

Tears tumble out and wet the ground by my head as I curl in the fetal position.

“I’m going to break the fucking door down,” Angela says.

Memories of Archer’s tenderness and caring attitude push to the forefront of my mind, and I cry harder.

Why is he like this? Who made him this way? Was it his father as Angela claims?

“Your tears are making my wolf go insane. Either open the door or I’m going to go wolf out on an alpha,” Angela whispers through the door.

Guilt eats at my chest, but I can’t get up. My body is numb. My limbs unresponsive.

“You won’t wolf out on Archer,” I croak.

My throat is shredded from the tears I've already cried and my screams of rage.

"You don't think so?" she asks.

"No."

There's shuffling on the other side of the door and the knob jiggles.

"Jara, get the fuck up," Alex barks from the other side of the door.

What the actual fuck is Alex doing in my bedroom? He doesn't have the right to be in here just because he's my cousin.

"Get out," I whisper.

He can hear me.

His shifter hearing will be tuned to my side of the door.

"I'm getting my mom and a lock pick kit," Alex says.

"No," I say.

I don't doubt he would get them both—damn the consequences—and when hopelessness isn't eating at me and making my limbs feel like lead I will tear him a new asshole.

"Then get up and get the fuck out of there. You're scaring the fuck out of us. I thought you were the alpha female." Alex pounds on the door.

I flinch at his accusing tone. Gods, why can't they leave me alone to wallow in peace? I'm allowed to break on occasion.

This is bullshit.

“Can you just leave me alone? I’m just fucking upset,” I cry.

“No,” Alex shouts. “If you aren’t out here in ten seconds, I’m going to get Mom.”

He’s serious. He will get his mom if I don’t get the fuck up, but I’m still wearing only a towel.

“I’m not dressed, Alex. If you want me to come out, you’re going to need to leave for a minute.”

My voice doesn’t even sound like my own. It’s soft but rasping.

“Fine.” Stomping steps lead away from the bathroom door, and the door to my room clicks shut softly.

“He’s gone,” Angela whispers.

My bones ache as I sit up. I haven’t been on the floor long, but it feels like I have been curled in a ball for hours.

Standing, I unlock the door and pull it open, not meeting Angela’s eyes as I hobble to the closet. I pull on leggings and an oversize sweater and crawl into my bed, where I curl into a ball again.

“What happened?” Angela asks sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Nothing,” I say. “I can’t talk about it right now.”

Alex pushes the door open, but I can’t even muster a glare for him. He’s the asshole who made me move, but I don’t even care.

Numbness tingles through me. “I just want to be alone.”

My voice is hollow. Will I ever be normal again, or will I just continue to hope and let Archer hurt me by being a cold



bastard?

Maybe my initial assessment of him was right. Maybe he will never love me the way I deserve.

“You need to stop, Jara. You are the alpha female. If anyone sees you like this, you could be challenged.” Alex crosses his arms.

A crazed laugh bubbles out of me. Let them try. I have nothing left to lose. They can’t fucking take me.

“Maybe I don’t care.”

What does it fucking matter anymore if I’m challenged? No matter how many times I prove myself, Archer doesn’t see it. He just pulls heavy-handed bullshit with the excuse he’s protecting me.

But why? Why protect me if he’s going to treat me like I don’t matter?

“You don’t care?” Alex scoffs.

“You watched me tear Crystal apart. Do you really think any female in this pack is stronger than me?”

I pull the blanket up to my chin, turning away from him as tears well in my eyes again. I don’t want to cry in front of anyone, but they won’t fucking leave.

“What is she doing?” Alex whispers in panic.

Angela huffs. “Get out. She’s upset.”

I can’t muster a laugh as I twist to find her shoving him out of the room.

“Fine, I’m leaving no need to be pushy,” he says as the door slams in his face.

Tears trace down my cheeks, wetting the pillow beneath me. I sniff as Angela sits on the bed again at my side.

“Archer’s an asshole. I should go punch him in his stupid face,” Angela says with a growl.

“It’s not worth it. I should have known better than to think he could be more than the ruthless alpha he’s rumored to be.”

“Don’t do that,” Angela says.

“Don’t do what? The truth has been staring me in the face all this time, and I ignored it. I stupidly thought he could at least come to care about me. I was fucking wrong.”

“Please don’t lose hope. Archer may surprise you.” Angela pats my leg as she stands to leave.

Thank fuck.

I just want her to leave me alone to wallow in peace.

The door clicks shut behind her, and I take a deep breath—the first deep breath I have been able to take since Archer stormed from the room.

A sob breaks free, and I curl in on myself.

The man is every inch the brutal alpha he is rumored to be. There is no changing that. How did I ever think I could get him to love me?

Have I just been fooling myself the last several months? Did I read too much into all those tender moments?

He said he cared about me. He nearly started a war to get me back and asked pack members to volunteer to leave the pack so my family could come here.

Was it all a lie?

It has to have been a lie because actions speak louder than words.

He will never love me. He will never care about me. I'm his possession, not his equal. Why did I ever think any differently?

I'm here for the soul purpose to make him look good.

My soft cries fill the room. Tears track down my cheeks. I want my mom here, but at the same time, I'm glad she's not.

She would freak the fuck out and lay into Archer.

It's kind of a blessing she's not here—I don't want her in even more danger—but wanting my mom when my heart is breaking is a natural reaction.

Aren't moms supposed to be there for their daughter's first heartbreak? Is that what this is?

I have been lying to myself all this time. It's not a possibility that I will fall in love with Archer because somewhere along the way I already did.

It's bad enough that I don't know where my mom is and if Grayson has her still locked in a cell. Months have passed, and Ellie can't even remember the last time she saw my parents.

Everything is going to complete hell now, but I have a feeling it's only just beginning.

**A**rcher

I run a hand through my hair as I pace my office. It was an exercise in restraint pulling away from my mate.

The way her face crumpled with pain at my cruelty will haunt me for the rest of my days.

I must stay strong, though.

I can't let her get under my skin more than I already have because every time we have sex, she pulls me in a little deeper.

She makes me want to give her everything. And that is fucking dangerous.

Someone pounds on the door so hard that it rattles and sets my teeth on edge. Whoever it is, it better be a fucking emergency as I am not in the mood for bullshit.

I stomp to the door and pull it open so hard, it hits the wall with a clang.

I glare at Alex. "What the fuck do you want?"

He's not fucking stupid. He shouldn't be banging my door off its hinges, and he fucking knows it.

"What did you do to my cousin?" Alex asks.

“What happens between me and my mate is none of your concern.”

“It is when she was curled in a ball and sobbing on the bathroom floor.” He crosses his arms over his chest.

I straighten to my full height and my lip curls in anger. Who the fuck does this wolf think he is?

“Are you challenging me?” I clench my fists.

“No, I’m not challenging you, alpha.” Alex bares his throat to me in submission. “I’m just worried about Jara. None of us want another Eloise situation.”

Is it getting that bad? It can’t be. My mate is stronger than that. She’s the perfect alpha female. That’s why I have to resist her.

“She’s not Eloise.” I have to believe it.

Jara isn’t allowed to leave me. I refuse to let her go. I’ll burn the world to the ground to keep her safe, even from herself.

Angela shoves past Alex, her expression angry. Her skin is turning an eggplant color that doesn’t suit her at all.

“Are you stupid or just a giant fucking asshole?” She clenches her fists.

Is she ready to punch me? She better fucking not.

“You already knew I was an asshole,” I growl, not appreciating my beta and enforcer challenging my actions.

It’s none of their business. Everything I do is to keep this pack safe.

“You’re doing a fan-fucking-tastic job of convincing her that you are the monster everyone perceives you to be,”

Angela yells.

“I am that fucking monster.” It’s best that Jara sees that now and stops hoping for a life I can’t give her.

“No. You’re not that monster. Your father fucked with your head to turn you into him. You pride yourself on your strength, but your father made you weak.”

“Watch it, Beta.”

What the fuck did she just say? She thinks I’m weak. Fuck that. I am the strongest alpha in the region. No one is stronger than me.

I storm over to the bar in the corner and grab a glass. I set it down so hard it clanks against the wood bar top.

I need a fucking drink, if I’m going to deal with the enraged enforcer and beta.

“I’m not going to watch it, *alpha*,” Angela sneers. “Do you have any idea how close I am to punching you right now?”

“You do and you will lose that fucking hand. Do not get in the middle of me and my mate,” I roar.

They are still glaring as I turn to grab the bottle from the shelf.

I don’t give a fuck what they think, though. They are members of my pack, and I give the orders around here.

I pour two fingers into the glass and take a sip. The alcohol burns a path down my throat, and my shoulders relax just a fraction.

Can I really be pissed that they are looking after my mate? She inspires loyalty wherever she goes.

They are doing something for her that I should be doing. Guilt claws at my chest, but I push it back down. No. I can't feel guilty for protecting my pack from what will happen if I get too close.

Another reason, I can't get too close. I almost let my loyalty to her destroy everything before. I can't get lost in her when Grayson is most likely still scheming and there are humans traipsing through my territory like they own the place.

I refuse to let her distract me from my goals. We need to keep the pack protected at all costs.

"You're supposed to be guarding her, Angela. Why did you leave your post?" I clink the ice in my glass as I take another sip.

"She's a mess, Archer. She doesn't want anyone seeing her like that." Angela shakes her head.

My shoulders slump, and the moment the cruel words spewed from my lips plays on repeat in my mind.

Why did I have to spit those words at her so venomously?

She absolutely did not deserve that. It's my own fucked up past that's making me shove her away with the ferocity of a fucking monster, but there's no going back on it now.

I almost destroyed everything once before by giving into the chaotic emotions my mate makes me feel. If I'm not careful, this could all end in fucking disaster.

Alex stomps to the bar and grips the wood as he leans over it.

"I know you would do anything for Jara—I saw the way you were when you saw the bruises on her skin. Why the fuck

are being an asshole to her?” Alex stares too long into my eyes.

I raise an eyebrow at the enforcer. He’s pushing his luck. My wolf growls in my mind, forcing his way to the surface at the clear challenge in Alex’s eyes.

“Alex.” Angela grabs him, pulling him back. “That isn’t a good idea.”

“I just want to know why my little cousin is miserable when he’s clearly in love with her,” Alex shouts, yanking his arm away from Angela.

*Love?* He has to be wrong about that. I care for her probably too much, but I don’t even really know what love is. I have never had a great example of it. Could Alex be right?

My wolf howls in my mind. He knows exactly how he feels. His animal instincts scream at him.

Pain sears through my chest as the images of her reaction to my words flash in my head again.

“Getting mauled by the alpha isn’t going to help matters,” Angela whispers.

Fuck, I have to go to her. I need to make it up to her, but how can I do that? How can I give her this piece of me and not be weak? Is that even possible?

I stride past Angela and Alex and out the door of my office. Trudging up the steps to the bedroom, my oversensitive ears pick up Jara’s sniffing and soft sobs.

What the hell have I done? Have I broken my mate? She’s not even mad at me, just crying.

What happened to the woman who challenges me at every turn? Has she given up on me?



Fuck.

I hesitate outside the door, leaning my head against the cool wood. Did I ruin the one good thing I have found in my life?

What if she refuses to speak to me again? What if this is the last straw for her and she leaves for real this time? Not that I could really blame her.

Why do I continuously let my ruthless father's teachings fuck with my life? He never showed kindness or love to anyone. Not to me or my mother, and not to the pack he ruled with an iron fist.

I always said I would run my pack differently, and for the most part, I have. So why can't I get his teachings out of my head when it comes to my mate?

*If you're not careful, this woman will ruin you. She will become the most important thing in the world to you.*

It's far too late for that, though. As I stand outside the door to my own bedroom, my heart shatters at her soft sobs. I very well could have destroyed any chance to make this right.

I grip the knob but hesitate to open the door. I should go and apologize—lay everything bare for her and hope that she doesn't laugh in my face.

But can I even be that honest with myself and her? What if she doesn't believe me? What if I have irreparably damaged my mate with my actions?

Her soft sobs gut me, and my wolf is clawing at my insides to get out and comfort his mate. His growls and whines in my head making me flinch as I tighten my hand on the knob.

I take a deep breath and square my shoulders, ready to walk into the room, but the front door opens and closes.

I hang my head as feet climb the stairs.

“Alpha?” The rancid scent of Patrick’s fear precedes him, and I spin to him.

“What is it?” I press my hand to the door, anger burning inside my chest at the interruption.

“We found something in the forest a little too close to the village for comfort.” He bares his throat in submission.

What the fuck is going on now? Fuck, Is everything going to keep falling apart around us?

I just want to see my mate. I need to see that she’s not broken. That I haven’t broken her the way I did Eloise.

Fuck. Can the world just stop shitting on us for five seconds so I can see that she’s okay?

“What did you find?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“A surveillance camera.” His heart beats wildly, almost drowns out his words.

“What?”

How the fuck did that even happen without our knowledge? We’ve had wolves patrolling for months.

“A human camera was found about a mile outside the village closest to Grayson’s territory line.” Patrick’s shoulders bunch around his ears, and fear still oozes off him in waves.

“Show me.” I take one last longing look at the bedroom door before following Patrick down the stairs and out the front door.

Jara will be okay. I have to see this new threat to my pack firsthand, and we're going to have to come up with a plan to stop the government from traipsing across our territory.

There are trespassing signs posted all through the forest. They have no right to step foot on our private property.

"The rest of the scouts have been notified?" I ask with a grunt.

"Not yet, alpha. John was on his way to tell them when I came to find you." Patrick races around the pack house to the dirt road that leads to the clearing.

"They are out by the clearing?" I ask in horror.

No, they can't be this close to the pack. This is a fucking disaster of epic proportions. What if they already got something on us?

"They are a little past the clearing, Archer," Patrick says using my name instead of title in case anyone is listening.

Good man. He knows how fucking dangerous this situation is for us.

"Has anyone been out here that isn't supposed to?" I ask. My eyes widen as I remember Jara and Libby were out in the woods playing yesterday.

"Only the enforcers are allowed out this way. Libby and Jara were just inside the forest on the other side of town," he says, answering the question I didn't ask.

My pack knows me too well. The incident with Jara and Libby is definitely on my mind now that we have proof that the government is trying to track us.

Rain pelts the ground and drips through the leaves of the tall pines as we move silently through the forest.

There is nothing left to say as I follow Patrick.

How the fuck are we going to handle the humans doing this?

Patrick stops abruptly, his eyes widening and his pulse thrumming in his throat with his anxiety.

“What is it?” I step next to him.

He points up at the tree in front of us with a trembling hand. “That’s not the same one we found. There is another one farther out.”

“We are only a half mile from the village. How the fuck are they getting so close?” I ask.

I clench my hand in a fist as I stare up at the tiny camera pointing down from the canopy of the trees.

I want to destroy it, but will that tip them off? How do we know there aren’t more planted in the trees all around the territory?

“I’m sorry, Archer. I didn’t see that one before.” Patrick hangs his head.

“We need to get the patrols all together for a meeting. I don’t want anyone else hearing about it for now.”

“Yes, Archer.” Patrick nods and turns to leave.

We need everyone in one place and on the same page. I want to know where every single piece of surveillance equipment is on my property before I show them my hand.

“No one is to shift, period. All it will take is for them to catch one person shifting and it’s all over for us,” I say.

I still don’t understand what they are trying to prove here. Is this about the investigation, or do they already know what

we are and need proof before they can attack us?

I need to call the other regional alphas and find out if they have any missing pack members or have noticed anything, but it's tough.

No one wants to be the one who outs our existence to the humans.

If I start asking questions and bringing up the possibility, it could be disaster for my pack.

“How do they know to look in our woods, and why would they think they would find anything on surveillance cameras?” I run my hand through my hair.

“I don't know, alpha.” Patrick shrugs. “Did someone else out us to the humans and tip them off? Are we just collateral damage and another group to test on?”

Do they think we will be easy prey? Are they ready to rain destruction on my people?

How will we fight against them when we aren't supposed to know they are there?

A weight sits on my chest. Can we fight against men with weapons we don't understand, or are we doomed to fail?

J ara

Tears blur my vision as I lie in the bed for I don't even know how long. Seconds turn to minutes that turn to hours, and all hope of a happy life dies a painful death in my soul.

My wolf howls mournfully, the sound in my head heartbreaking. The tears flow free as I curse every stupid decision I made to bring me to this moment.

Should I have turned Archer down from the beginning and gone rogue without question?

Would my life be better or just a different kind of brutal?

Archer employs rogues. Would I have been employed by him anyway? What would be different between us if I was a rogue and he an alpha?

Even if there was something between us then, we wouldn't have been mates. I wouldn't have been able to mate with him being exiled.

Could I live without him? Maybe if I never met him, I wouldn't be begging for whatever scraps of attention he might give me.

Maybe I could have even been happy.

The tears have long since dried hours later when Angela steps back into the room. I haven't moved from my spot curled up on the bed.

Numb, my mind races with all the arguments, all the times we blew up at each other, and all the times Archer showed me something more.

"There was a time I hoped that he could change and maybe grow to care about me, even in some small way," I croak.

I don't turn to the woman, but I know it's Angela—my oversensitive nose recognizes her scent.

"You can't lose hope, Jara," Angela whispers.

I roll over in the bed to face her. How can she say that? She's seen him these past months. He's been nothing but a coldhearted ass.

"I can't? Really?" I raise an eyebrow even though it pulls at my puffy eyes. "Pretty sure I was an idiot for ever having hope in the first place."

"He's under a lot of pressure from the pack and the investigation," Angela says.

"Don't. Just fucking don't make excuses for him," I whisper.

I can't take it if my best friend sides with him. She's not helping my mood at all. Why is she even here if she's just going to stick up for him?

"I just don't want you to lose hope, Jara. He'll come around when everything calms down."

I narrow my eyes. She can't be fucking serious.

“Things haven’t calmed down since I’ve been here.” I scoff. “Maybe Rochelle was right, and I am bad luck for the pack.”

“Quit it. Things will calm down soon and then everything will be okay.”

She’s so confident in that, but how can she be sure?

“Nothing is okay and probably never will be. I was a fool to think he could ever love me.”

This conversation is pointless. All it’s doing is sinking me deeper into despair. She’s so sure that he’s not the monster everyone thinks he is, but he’s proven it to me over and over.

“You’re not a fool. He’s just a stubborn ass.” Angela growls.

She’s giving me whiplash. One second she’s defending him, and now he’s an ass? I don’t get her sometimes.

I turn back to face her with a raised brow.

“Everything that happened yesterday is a freak accident. I don’t need protection from the pack, but he’s too hardheaded to listen to me,” I say.

“You want to go take out your frustrations on some cardboard boxes? I won’t even hide the box cutter this time.” Angela holds out a hand to help me up.

“There’s no one in the house, right?” I ask.

I can’t let anyone see me like this. Even just the puffiness around my eyes would be a dead giveaway.

“No, everyone is gone.” Angela wiggles her fingers, and I take her offered hand.



Keeping my hands busy and my mind off the disaster that is my life is exactly what I need right now.

We make our way into the storeroom, and everything is just as we left it a few hours ago. I sigh and pick up the box cutter before Angela can go back on her word not to hide it and get to work on the box.

Cans are stacked on top of cans. It's no wonder the thing was so heavy. I grab an armful of them and stroll back to the canned section. Something rolls beneath my foot and I stumble, dropping the cans with a crash.

"Jara," Angela shouts from the front and races to me.

"I'm okay. I just tripped over something." I crouch and reach for the offending object.

"What is that?" Angela asks, and I hand the bolt to her.

"What's it doing down here?" I ask.

"All the shelves are bolted to the ground. This one snapped." She holds the bolt up to the light.

"How did it snap?" I stare at the small bolt between Angela's fingers.

"I don't know." She drops the bolt into her pocket and crouches in front of the shelf.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure that nothing is about to topple on our heads," she mutters.

I stare at the shelf, and my stomach drops as dread fills me. How did that bolt just snap? Did someone really tamper with the shelf?

Archer may not be as paranoid as I thought. “Are the bolts there?”

“Yeah, I think McKenna fixed it when she cleaned up the mess. She just missed a bolt.” Angela stands, grabbing a few cans as she does.

“So, nothing’s going to fall on my head?” I laugh.

I have to laugh or I’m going to cry again.

“Not today.” Angela stacks the cans on the shelf and moves to grab more.

They’re all dented now. It’s going to be hell on my anxiety, but there’s nothing I can do about it now.

I stroll back to the front and grab more cans before trudging back to the shelf. The repetitive motions and keeping busy help to ease my mind.

When all the cans are stacked on the shelves, I grab the cutter and sit in front of another box to open that one and start unpacking.

A door upstairs slams, and I flinch. The woodsy scent of my mate hits my nose, but he doesn’t come down the stairs.

So much for getting my mind off Archer and the disaster that is my life. He’s never far from my mind.

Another door slams toward the back of the house. He must be in his office because I don’t think that even my wolf hearing could pick up the door to our bedroom slamming.

“Has anyone heard when Grayson’s going to release my parents?” I ask.

“No, he won’t tell us anything,” Angela says with a sigh.

“I just think this would all be a little more bearable if my parents were here.”

Would it, though? My mom has been very outspoken about not wanting me with the alpha. She would probably lash out at him any chance she got.

Could she be the reason they aren't here yet?

Angela pats my shoulder. “I don't know, Jara.”

“Yeah, that was wishful thinking. My mom probably would have gotten locked in a cell months ago for talking back to him.” I shrug, then stare at the top of the stairs, wishing for things that aren't possible.

Does Archer even care that he hurt me so bad with his cruel words?

Is he capable of caring about anyone at all?

“Hey, we are here to get your mind off the stubborn alpha,” Angela says, crossing her arms over her chest.

I turn to her and raise a brow. She does know me, right? Archer is always on my mind. Him and caring for the pack.

“Easier said than done.” I pull the box closer to me and open the lid.

Produce fills it to the top, and I heft the box to the steel table where the older stuff still sits.

Setting out all the baskets and separating the fruits and veggies takes all my focus, and I'm glad for it.

No errant thoughts of my parents or Archer run through my mind as I finish the entire box and move on to the next.

Angela's phone beeps, and she curses.

“What is it?” I ask.

“An emergency meeting of the enforcers. I have to go,” she says, chewing her lip as nervousness leaks out of her.

“I’m okay. Go. I’m just going to finish with the produce, and then I will leave.”

She fidgets and shuffles her feet indecision warring inside her. “Promise you won’t go near the shelves or do anything dangerous?”

“I don’t really want to be down here on my own, so no, I’m going to finish this and then lock up the storeroom.”

She blows out a relieved breath and nods before racing up the stairs and out the door.

As the front door slams and I’m left completely alone, a chill wracks my spine. I didn’t realize how creepy this place would feel when I’m alone in the house.

I hurry to finish the produce and take the stairs two at a time once I’m done. I do not want another shelf to fall on me. Has someone checked the bolts on the other shelves?

And why did Angela seem so nervous about me finding the broken bolt? Those shelves are heavy, especially when they are full. It could have just snapped under the pressure.

Anyone could have been standing there. It doesn’t mean someone is out to get me.

Grabbing my keys, I lock the door behind me and breathe a sigh of relief when I’m standing in my bright, cheery kitchen.

The afternoon sun peeks through the clouds, sending warm rays of light through the window over the sink.

My stomach growls loudly. I didn’t realize how hungry I am.

I open the fridge and grab the ingredients to make a ham sandwich. I don't think I can handle much more than that.

Anxiety and pain roil within me as my wolf whimpers in my mind. I do my best to block it all out as I reach for the bread and pull out four slices without a thought.

It doesn't even occur to me until I'm done that I've robotically made two sandwiches, and one of them is exactly the way Archer likes it.

"Fucking stupid mate bond," I growl, tempted to throw the sandwich in the trash, but I don't want to waste food when deliveries are so infrequent.

"He probably won't even eat it, thinking I poisoned it or something," I say as I open the cabinet and grab a plate.

I set the sandwich on the plate and stick it in the fridge for him to eat after his meeting.

Am I a fucking doormat? Am I letting him treat me like a possession rather than an actual person?

Not that I have much of a choice in the matter. I made this decision, and I have to live with it.

I've tried to be a good mate and a good alpha female, but nothing I do is ever enough. At what point will I be enough?

Is Angela right that he's just under a lot of pressure and will come around eventually? Will it be too late if he does?

He shattered my heart when the cruel words slipped from his full lips recently. I can only take so much.

I sit at the table with my sandwich and a pad of paper to jot down things we need for the pack. Angela will have to give Archer the list because I don't even want to look at him right now.

As I take a bite of my sandwich, I remember the conversation with John yesterday. He and several of the other enforcers need more microwaveable options until I can get them a cooking class.

Even with everything else going on, I want to make sure they are eating healthier. Frozen burritos and TV dinners are not the way to go.

I tap my pen on the table as I try to think of anything else we may need beyond the normal everyday supplies.

After I finish my food, I walk to the sink to rinse the plate. The front door opens, and Archer stops at the door to the kitchen. He stares at me wide-eyed before stepping in the kitchen and opening the fridge.

“What is this?” He turns with the plate in his hands.

“It’s a sandwich.” I shrug.

“I know, but why?” He frowns.

“I don’t know.” I stomp from the room without another word.

Why did I make him food? It just felt natural to take care of my mate, even after he treated me like I was nothing.

I’m halfway up the stairs when Archer calls, “Jara?”

“What?” I ask, stopping but not turning to face him.

I can’t look at him because if I hope again and he inevitably proves to be the bastard he’s shown he can be, his words will finally break me for good.

Archer hesitates before saying, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I rush up the stairs.

Tears threaten to fall as I close the bedroom door with a soft click and slide down the door to my butt.

Why can't he just stop? His tone was soft and regretful, so I'm glad I didn't turn around, even though he spoke to me without prompting and without yelling.

Why does he keep doing this to me?

I think that's the cruelest part of all—those small moments when he seems to care for me just to turn around and be the monster he always claims to be.

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. How long do I hold out hope for a better life?

Will he ever change? I sound like a broken record, even in my own head.

He's never going to love me. He is never going to want me as more than a possession.

The faster I figure that out, the better for me.

But no matter how much I say he never will, my fool heart just can't believe it.

**A**rcher

Staring at the steps where Jara just left, I forget about the plate in my hand. Why would she try to feed me after the way I treated her?

I shake my head and walk with leaden feet back into the kitchen. I need to return to the meeting, but confusion wars with sadness inside me.

I was a cruel bastard to her, and I didn't even apologize as I planned. The gesture confused me and left me slightly rattled.

The pad of paper on the table catches my attention, and I pick it up. She made a list of things we need to send for on the next delivery run.

She was just crying a few hours ago, and she's now making me food and making sure the pack has what they need. She's much stronger than I've ever given her credit for.

"Fuck," I say under my breath.

I put the plate back in the refrigerator for later and storm out of the room, but not before casting one last longing glance up the stairs to the bedroom my mate is in.



She wouldn't even look at me as I thanked her for the gesture. Shaking my head, I close the front door quietly behind me and walk around the side of the house to the conference rooms.

Angela is standing outside with her arms crossed over her chest. She hands me a broken bolt. "I found this in the storeroom."

It doesn't prove foul play or that someone is out to get her. The bolt could have snapped off at any time.

"McKenna said one of the bolts snapped in half, so this is probably a piece of that. We just need to stay vigilant," I say handing the bolt back.

I don't want to believe someone in my pack is doing this to her, but I can't ignore the evidence either.

I run a hand down my face. "We have bigger problems to deal with, c'mon."

I wave for her to follow me into the conference room, and I sit at the head of the table. Patrick pulls a pack of green markers like the black ones from the cabinet and sets them on the table.

"We need everyone to watch the forest," I say. "Two separate cameras were found way too close for comfort."

I nod to Patrick, and he grabs two markers from the box and sets them on the map where we found the cameras.

Alex blows out a breath. "They are filming our woods? For what purpose?"

"We don't know yet. We just found these two cameras hidden high in the trees today."

"This is bad, Alpha. What are we going to do?"

“That’s what we need to figure out. Are they looking for the possibility of shifters, or is this a part of the business investigation that the government is conducting?” I lean back in my seat.

“What if it’s all connected?” Patrick sits forward.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“We have discussed the possibility that the investigation into your business is really a fishing expedition for something else,” Patrick says. “What if the people setting the cameras are the same people investigating the businesses?”

Alex taps his fingers on the table and cocks his head to the side. “They did both start happening around the same time.”

“That we know of.” Patrick shakes his head. “They could have been out here before and seen something they shouldn’t have.”

My eyes widen as a memory assaults me. Three separate human scents in the forest when we were going for a pack run. Did they see us change?

Is that why the government came for us? They saw us shift and want to do experiments on us?

I fucking hope not.

“When Carter was terrorizing the pack...” I wince. “We smelled humans in the woods.”

“You’re thinking that it’s all connected?” Alex clenches his hand into a fist.

Angela nods. “That’s when all the trouble started.”

She glances at everyone in the room, but she won’t break in front of them. No matter how sad or uncomfortable this

topic is for her, she won't let anyone see her pain.

"It is entirely possible," I huff. "What do we do about it?"

"My first instinct is to destroy anything that puts the pack at risk," Alex says with a growl.

"But is that the right choice?" Patrick drums his fingers on the table. "If we tip them off that we know, are we setting ourselves up to be invaded?"

"We have to do something," Alex argues. "We can't just let them get away with surveilling us."

"We won't. We just need to be smart about it." Patrick pats Alex on the shoulder.

"We have two options, I think." I steeple my fingers in front of my chin with my elbows planted firmly on the table.

"What are you thinking?" Angela asks, her tone much stronger now that we aren't talking about Carter.

"We could do as Alex says—rip down every camera we find and tip our hand—or we can map out where every camera is hiding, then draw the human government out and ambush them," I say.

"What happens after that, though?" Angela asks.

"We go back to normal. Do you think the government would actually own up to sending agents in to spy on its citizens with no probable cause?"

"No." Alex shakes his head. "They also won't out supernaturals to the world. It would cause chaos."

"That's the fundamental reason we stay in the shadows," I agree.

“Humans are terrified of what they don’t understand,” Angela whispers. “Their government doesn’t want to cause mass panic.”

“They just want to experiment on us in secret,” Alex mutters.

“No one is getting experimented on, okay?” I slam my fist on the table so hard it rattles the glasses there. “We can and will stop them from taking over our pack.”

“I think we take the ambush route.” Patrick nods.

“Agreed.” Angela chews her lip. “But are we going to have to out ourselves to get them here?”

“It may be the only way to get them to attack us.” I scrub a hand down my face.

“That’s risky, alpha,” Patrick says.

“If we shift on camera, they will have that footage forever. The cameras are bound to be sending everything to some offsite server.”

I tilt my head back and squeeze my eyes closed tight.

“What do we do then?” Alex asks.

“I still think it’s worth the risk to get them off our backs.”

“Agreed,” Alex says.

John raises a hand, and I nod. He’s been a lot better as one of our scouts since he was locked in a cell.

“I agree,” he says, “But what are we doing in the meantime while the trap is being laid?”

“Every scout and enforcer will be on double patrols, and we need to map these cameras. I want to know where every

single last one of them is, so place a green marker on the map anytime you find them.”

“But don’t be obvious about looking for them,” Alex says.

“Good point, Alex. We don’t want them to get suspicious and attack until we are ready for them, so be as natural as possible. We have no idea how long they’ve been watching us. Don’t look directly in the trees or do anything out of character.”

Angela stares out the window. “It’s getting dark. I don’t think we will be able to find much tonight.”

“Right. We will still keep scouting, and if you see something, don’t engage. We will all go out in the morning and search for the cameras.” I stand.

I need to warn Jordan and Bill. This is an absolute disaster.

“What about Jara?” Angela asks.

“You are to stay with her at all times unless she’s in the house. That hasn’t changed.”

“I’m one of the best scouts we have,” Angela argues.

“You’re also the only one I trust to keep her safe outside of the house.”

“Rude,” Alex says. “I saved her from the roof tile.”

“Yes, by knocking her on her ass,” Angela says with a nod to me, accepting her role as protector.

I narrow my eyes on Alex, but I can’t be mad that he pushed her out of the way. It saved her from a head injury or possibly worse.

I clench my hands into fists at my sides, and it takes everything in me not to punch something or someone.

Probably Alex. I can't think about the worse possibility in that scenario.

"I need to make a couple calls." I grunt and walk out the door.

They all know their roles and what to do; I don't need to babysit them. I storm around the side of the pack house and to the front door. I open the door slowly and slip inside.

Bothering Jara when I have business to handle isn't something I am looking forward to doing right now.

I head into the kitchen and grab the sandwich she made for me. What had she meant when she said she didn't know why she did it? Was it instinctive?

My wolf is constantly beating at me to care for her the way she cares for everyone around here, except for herself.

That's one of the most infuriating things about my mate. She will go to war with me over the pack's wellbeing, but she throws herself headfirst into danger without a second thought.

How am I supposed to keep her safe if she does that? I shake my head and take the sandwich with me into my office.

I flop into my chair, pick up the sandwich, and take a big bite. Fuck, she made it exactly the way I like it.

Guilt gnaws at me as I chew slowly. It's just a fucking sandwich. Why does the gesture make me feel like the biggest asshole in the world?

I drop it back on the plate, pick up the secure landline, and dial Jordan first. He's a workaholic, so I know that even though it's close to the end of the day, he will be there.

"Hey, boss," he answers, breathless.

Did he run to the phone? The wolf is dedicated, I will give him that.

“Jordan, there have been some... developments here at home.”

“One second, boss.” He closes a door. “There are agents in the building.”

“Fuck, I thought we gave them everything they needed. Why are they there?” I scrub a hand down my face.

“They just showed up today with more warrants and started kicking people out of their desks to search their computers. I don’t know what’s happening.”

“Have you spoken to Bill?”

Dread sinks its icy claws in my chest. What could they possibly be looking for? Do they know that I only employ shifters? Are they about to start hunting down my employees?

“No, I was going to when you called. They just showed up.” His voice shakes with his fear.

“I’ll call him, but I need you to think very carefully for a minute.” I screw my eyes closed.

“What is it, boss?”

“Have any of our employees missed more work than normal?”

*Please don’t let anyone go missing.* If they already took some of the rogues, then why are they setting up cameras in my forest?

“There are a few that have not shown up to work in the last few days, why?”

“Motherfucker,” I shout.

They've been abducting my employees. They already know what we are and are coming for my pack.

"What's the matter, boss?" Jordan's voice trembles.

"I need you to have someone look up the missing people and make sure they aren't just sick. I think the government knows about us. They went after the loners first." I run a hand through my hair.

"They're missing?" Jordan gasps. "I thought they were just sick."

"I hope that's all that's happening here, but I need someone to check to make sure. No one should be alone," I say. "Call a company meeting and advise the employees of the threat and that they need to travel in groups."

"Yes, sir. I hope you're wrong about this."

"I have never wanted to be wrong about something more in my life than I do right now," I say and hang up the phone.

Fuck, are all the plans we just made to trap the government into attacking us in vain? Do they already know what we are because of the shifters they detained?

I pick the phone back up and dial Bill.

"Archer, I was just about to call you." Bill's tone is tired.

"What's happened on your end? I may not be able to handle one more thing tonight, Bill." I pick up the sandwich and take a bite.

"What else is going on, Archer? I was just going to say that the agents came back today asking more questions."

"Why won't they just give it a rest? I think I have missing employees, and I know I have cameras in my forest."



“They are trespassing on your land?” Bill asks.

“Yes, and I don’t even know how long they have had cameras up to spy on my people.” I tilt my head back.

“It must all be connected, Archer, but I don’t know what to do here. They are not working within the parameters of the law. This is dangerous territory,” Bill says on a sigh.

“I told Jordan to investigate the people that haven’t shown up to work and to make sure they are okay. He was concerned that the agents just showed up again with new warrants and started commandeering computers.”

“Fuck.”

Bill’s cursing shocks me. I have rarely heard the man curse, so hearing it now is unwelcome. Dread sinks in my stomach like lead.

“What the fuck do we do?” I ask quietly.

“I’m on my way to the office now to make sure that they are staying within the parameters of the warrants,” Bill says, and there’s a rustling on the other end of the phone.

“What about the people who are probably missing?” I ask. “They could have been abducted, but will it matter if the authorities are alerted?”

“It pains me to say this, Archer, but there’s nothing you can really do for them right now.” Bill sighs.

“I hate that I can’t do anything to help them—if there is actually anything wrong with them.”

“We will do everything in our power to get them back if that’s what happened,” Bill says. “I will hire private investigators if I have to. No one should be treated like a lab rat just because they are on their own.”

This whole situation is horrible, but I can't help thinking it's going to get worse before it gets better.

**J**ara

I spread the comforter out on the bed, fixing it into place. Archer slept elsewhere again, but I'm not even sure why that surprises me anymore.

No matter how much I tried not to, I had hoped that he would come sleep in the room. Of course, that hope was dashed like all the others.

My poor, stupid heart just can't see sense. It doesn't understand what my brain sees right in front of me.

There is nothing left to hope for.

I huff and stroll out of the room, heading down the stairs to the kitchen. My stomach rumbles, and I pull eggs and bacon from the fridge and grab a pan.

On autopilot, I once again make more food than I'm going to eat. I sigh. I just can't help myself when it comes to that man; I make him a plate and set it in the warmer.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm not even doing it consciously. I just keep making him food without even realizing it. And even after I've made my plate, there's still food left.

I trudge over to the table and flop in the chair. I pick up my fork and stab at my eggs, the dark cloud over me fully in place.

The front door opens, and I glance up at Angela who struts in with a grin.

“You mean I don’t have to drag you out of your room today? That’s progress,” Angela says.

“I made breakfast, and apparently, I’m incapable of making enough for just myself lately.” I point to the stove.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Can you just go tell Archer there’s a plate in the warmer for him? I don’t want to talk about it.” I turn back to my plate and shovel some eggs into my mouth.

It won’t stop her from asking questions, but it feels good to have some semblance of control.

“You made him food?” She opens the warmer like she doesn’t believe me.

“It keeps happening. I don’t even realize I’m doing it until it’s too late.” I shrug, hoping she will just let it go.

“You’re caring for your mate. Are you sure it’s not your wolf?” she asks as she grabs a plate from the cabinet and loads it up with what’s left over.

“I don’t know, okay? I just don’t fucking know.” I pick up a piece of bacon and bite into it, never turning to look at the disappointment I’m certain is shining in her eyes.

After what he said and the things he’s done, I shouldn’t be doing this, but I don’t even know it’s happening.

“Just take him the food, please? I think he’s in his office.”  
I wave a hand to get her to go.

She stomps from the room, and I sigh with relief. I’m over the interruption to my breakfast. I am over explaining things that I have no explanation for.

I’m just over... everything.

My stomach drops to my toes, and I push the eggs around on my plate. What is she telling him in there?

Why do I even care? I wish I could turn my feelings off as easily as he does. It would make my life much more bearable.

“Hey, lose your appetite?” Angela asks.

I jump in my seat and hold a hand to my chest. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Angela grabs her plate and sits at the table across from me with a grin. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not. Asshole.” I shake my head and take a bite of eggs.

It tastes like ash in my mouth, but I need the sustenance. I can’t let this get to the point where I’m not taking care of myself.

She grins and shovels eggs into her mouth. “No, you’re right. I’m not.”

I chuckle under my breath and go back to my food, feeling a little lighter now. I needed the brevity. The dark cloud is consistently hanging over my head.

“You want to go for a walk this morning? You look like you could use it.” Angela eyes me over her fork.

“That would be great.” I nod.

We finish our breakfast and rinse the plates in the sink before I rush up the stairs to grab my coat out of my closet.

I scan the room with a sigh. Archer's scent is fading since he never comes in here anymore. My heart cracks a little more.

Stupid heart.

I hurry from the room, steeling myself against the pain. I roll my shoulders back and hold my head high as I meet Angela at the front door.

"You ready?" she asks, opening the front door.

"Yup. Let's go." I lead the way out to the town square.

Pack members stroll around the space, watching the pups play or just chatting with each other. I wave at Arthur and make my way to him. He waves back at me.

"Alpha." He furrows his brows at Angela. "Beta."

"Hi, Arthur, how are you doing?" I ask.

"Absolutely fine," Arthur says, but there's something he's not telling me.

I can smell the lie.

"Are you sure, Arthur? Is there something you need in our next delivery? Or is something else wrong?"

Arthur shakes his head and shuffles his feet. He glances around, scanning the square, probably to find an escape.

Fuck. This is stupid.

We usually have such great conversations in the morning. He's never been scared to tell me what they need before.

Is it because of Angela? Fuck, I knew Archer's heavy-handed bullshit was going to cause me problems.

I huff out an angry breath as Arthur excuses himself and races away.

“This is bullshit,” I growl.

“It might just be Arthur. He would never want Archer to think he was complaining.” Angela pats my arm. “Let’s keep going.”

I wave at McKenna, and she rushes over. “Hello, Jara.”

“Hey, McKenna. How is everything going?” I ask.

She glances over my shoulder at Angela and grimaces.

“Not you too,” I grumble.

“Sorry, it’s a force of habit,” McKenna says. “I don’t think you’re going to get many people to open up to you with the beta here.”

“Argh,” I scream. “I told him this was fucking stupid. How the fuck am I supposed to find out what the pack needs if they won’t talk to me?”

“I can help if you want. Just until the alpha calms down,” McKenna offers.

I start to shake my head, clenching my fists at my sides and rolling my shoulders back. I’m about to burst into his office and let Archer have it, but deflate.

“Yeah, I can’t be hotheaded when it comes to the pack’s needs.

“That would be very helpful, McKenna,” I grumble.

I hate that I have to ask McKenna to do this because Archer’s being an ass.

“This won’t be forever, Jara,” Angela says.

“Won’t it? He said I don’t care about my own safety and if I won’t protect myself, he will protect me from myself.” I roll my eyes.

“It will get better as soon as the humans get out of our woods,” Angela whispers.

I nod, but I am not as convinced as she is about that. Optimism when it comes to Archer and his bullshit isn’t something I am allowing myself to have anymore.

“I’m going to walk around some more and see if I can get anyone to talk to me.” I smile at McKenna.

She nods, but her eyebrows are raised like she doesn’t believe it will help. Either way, I have to try. I refuse to give up on the pack’s needs.

There’s a tug on my sleeve, and I’m surprised and a little pissed to see that it’s Libby. What happened to the tiny blonde tornado that usually screams and hugs me with full force?

Even my tiny friend is acting weird with Angela here. Damn it!

“Hey, Libby, what’s up?” I ask.

Her lip wobbles and tears fill her eyes as I crouch in front of her.

“I’m sorry I got you into trouble,” she cries and throws her arms around my neck.

“Hey, don’t cry. It’s okay.” I rub soothing circles on her back.

I was protecting her, and whether Archer likes it or not, I would do the same thing all over again. She’s just a child.



“Daddy said he heard you crying,” she whispers close to my ear.

I widen my eyes at Angela. That isn't something anyone wants leaked to the pack.

“Shh, it's okay. I was sad for different reasons. It wasn't because I got in trouble.” I hold her at arm's length. “Let's not tell anyone else what your dad heard though, okay?”

She widens her eyes and nods quickly. She's way smarter than any nine-year-old I've met before.

“I promise,” she says.

“I need another promise. I need you to promise me that you won't shift again and go out in the woods. It's very dangerous.”

“I promise. Daddy said he would string me up if I do.” Libby crosses her arms.

I chuckle because that is definitely something Patrick would say just from sheer frustration alone.

“We are just scared for you. We don't want anything to happen to you.” I ruffle her hair.

Libby scowls and smooths her hair. “You messed up my hair.”

Angela chuckles. “I think after the stunt you pulled, squirt, you had that one coming.”

Libby turns narrowed eyes on Angela and sticks out her tongue.

“Hey now,” Patrick says as he jogs over. “You don't disrespect the beta like that, Libby.”

“Sorry, Beta,” Libby mumbles her apology.

“What did you call me?” Angela asks. “I thought we were on a first-name basis like you and Jara.”

Libby turns to Angela and then glances at her dad and back to Angela. “Sorry, Angela.”

“It’s okay, squirt.” Angela pats Libby’s shoulder.

Patrick grabs Libby’s hand. “C’mon, you’re still grounded. You did what you needed to. Now, back to the house.”

Libby’s shoulders slump and she hangs her head as they trudge to their cabin.

I stroll around, chatting with the other members of the pack, but it’s all the same. People are cagey and acting like everything is fine until I see Ellie and she rushes over to me.

“Hey, El.” I hug my younger cousin.

“Hey, have you heard anything about your parents? I feel so guilty Grayson let us out before them.” Ellie chews her lip.

“No, and I don’t think it’s a great idea to try to move them here right now with the current issues.”

I want them here more than almost anything, but with the humans in the forest and my relationship with Archer being so rocky, I don’t want my mom to say I told you so.

She’ll try to get me to leave him, and no matter how much of an ass he is, I can’t. My wolf whines in my head at even the thought of leaving this place and her mate.

“It’s probably for the best right now,” Angela says, pulling me from my thoughts.

“How are you guys doing?” I ask changing the subject. “Is there anything you guys need from the next delivery?”

“You know where we came from. Deliveries weren’t a thing.” Ellie laughs.

Grayson’s pack is stuck in the dark ages. Ellie and her mom probably don’t understand all the pack whining about monitoring their electronics and the need for deliveries.

“I know, but you’re here now, so if there’s anything you need, you let me know and I’ll get it for you.” I pat her shoulder.

“Sure thing. How are you holding up?” She eyes Angela.

“I’m doing my best.” I sigh.

“No, I meant how are you? From what I see around this place, you take care of everyone. Who takes care of you?” Ellie crosses her arms over her chest.

I flinch. She has no idea how on the nose she is about that, and that’s the heart of my problem. I take care of me, or at least, I try to.

“I do,” I say with a shrug.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I refuse to break.

“That’s not fair,” Ellie says.

Ellie is a year younger than me, but she should know better than anyone that life isn’t fair. It’s not fair that Grayson is holding my parents over my head, and it’s not fair that Archer treats me like property, but this is my life.

Eventually, I’m going to have to live with this. I’m going to have to become accustomed to giving all of myself to my mate and my pack and expecting nothing in return.

“It’s my life and life’s not fair. I have accepted it.” I lie.

Angela grumbles, “We’re trying to make sure you’re safe.”

“That’s not the same,” Ellie argues.

“It’s fine, El. We are all just doing the best we can in a difficult situation.” I try to diffuse the tension the best I can, but Ellie isn’t convinced.

The sour scent of her anger pours off her in waves.

She just needs to drop it. No good will come from this line of thinking. I have accepted this is my life now. I can’t dare to hope that Archer will change.

I’ve wasted enough tears on the crazy hope that something will be different.

I wave at another pack member that usually has time to talk. She waves back but rushes away eyeing Angela warily. I nearly throw my hands up in frustration. This is completely insane.

“I shouldn’t have to be guarded all the time,” I mumble.

“I’m telling you, it won’t last long,” Angela says. “He’ll get over all this soon enough, and you will be able to move around freely again.”

“I wish you would just stop, Angela. I can’t have hope. It will kill me when it’s dashed again.” I shake my head and turn away from both of them to head back to the house.

Maybe I can reason with Archer and get my freedom back. I stomp to the front door and throw it open. Anger and frustration war inside of me.

I can’t be the alpha they need if I can’t get them to open up to me. Archer will just have to see that I’m right.

But how can I convince him when he’s so set in his ways?

**A**rcher

I stab at the keyboard. Still pissed at the riot act that Angela read me when she brought in the breakfast Jara made.

Why does she keep doing that even though I've been a complete ass to her? Breakfast was good, but my beta yelling at me grated on my nerves.

The phone rings, and I grit my teeth at the interruption. "Hello?"

"Boss, I have some awful news," Jordan says quietly.

"What is it? Are you on a secure line?"

"Yes, of course. I'm using a burner."

"Good. What happened?" I sit straight, my shoulders tense, waiting for the ball to drop.

"Five employees are missing."

What the fuck? I jump to my feet and pace the room. They are trying to abduct my pack. They've already abducted some of the rogues.

"How did this happen?" I shout.

“I don’t know, Boss. It looks like they were particular on who they took,” Jordan grumbles.

“How do you mean? Do you know for sure that they were abducted?” I stop pacing.

My grip tightens on my phone almost to the point of cracking it. What the fuck does the government think they are doing?

“I can’t prove anything, and it’s not like it would make a difference if I could.”

“No, it won’t matter. I don’t want them reported missing. It won’t do any good and will just bring more attention to us.”

“Of course, Boss, but how do we stop it from happening to anyone else?” he asks.

“No one is to go anywhere alone. How were they targeted?” I run a hand through my hair.

“I have had everyone report to me whenever they got a visit from agents. Every time,” he says. “These five all lived alone.”

“What about family?” I ask, getting a clearer picture of what’s happening here.

“They had no family and were all visited in their apartments the day before they stopped showing up to work.”

“Fuck. They already knew what we were before the investigation.” I clench my fist. “They are rounding us up to do gods know what.”

*They are taking us for experiments*, I think, but Jordan is already scared enough, so I don’t repeat my thoughts.

His voice wobbles giving away his fear. “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to check on the apartments and see if there was anything left behind.”

This is so much worse than we originally thought. Why are they taking such a sudden interest in us? How did they find us in the first place?

“I have a couple of trusted HR managers asking around to see if anyone noticed anything suspicious, but so far, there’s nothing.” There’s a soft knock on his end of the phone.

“Are you alone, Jordan?” I ask slowly.

I warned him to be careful. What the fuck is he thinking?

“Yes,” he says.

“Do not answer the door. Keep very fucking quiet. We don’t know who’s there.” My shoulders tense, bunching around my ears.

The knock sounds again, a little louder this time. Is Jordan about to fucking disappear as well?

“When is the last time one of the agents came to visit your apartment, Jordan?” I whisper.

Do they have shifters with hearing like ours on their payroll? I don’t know, and I don’t want Jordan to find out either.

“Yesterday,” he mumbles so quietly I almost don’t hear him.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” I whisper because Jordan fits their MO.

He doesn't have any family that they know of, and he lives alone.

What are the odds that they would pick him up while he's on the phone with me? I don't believe in coincidence.

This is a clear message to me that they can take my people any time they want and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Find somewhere to hide, Jordan. I'm calling Bill. He'll be there as soon as I can get him there." I hang up the phone and call Bill immediately.

The phone rings three times, and I'm about to freak the hell out and hop in my truck when he finally answers.

"Archer? Is something wrong?" Bill asks over the line.

"Employees at the company have gone missing, and I was just discussing the situation with Jordan when there was a knock on his door," I say in a rush. "Can you run and check on him?"

"Slow down. Why do you think the government is at his door?" Keys jingle in the background.

Good, he's actually taking me seriously and getting to Jordan.

"The people that were taken live alone, have no family, and were visited within twenty-four hours of when they disappeared." I pace around the office. "Jordan fits all the criteria."

What the fuck am I going to tell his parents if he's abducted by humans? I am the reason he doesn't have the protection the pack does. It's my fault. Maybe if I hadn't let myself get lost in Jara for so long I could have seen this coming.



It makes my vow not to get close to her even more important than ever. She's a distraction that could get us all killed.

"I'm on my way to make sure all is well. I'm sure it's a coincidence. They have to know Jordan would be missed. He's the operations manager of the entire company." The click of a car door meets my sensitive ears.

"He's pack, Bill. He can't be taken like the others." I squeeze my eyes shut tight. "I will go after them all, but Jordan is only there because I asked him to be."

I can't believe I'm voicing such weakness, but I need Jordan to be okay.

"Look, call Jordan back and talk to him until I get there," Bill says. "I'm five minutes away."

I hang up the phone without another word and call Jordan back on the burner phone, but it rings out.

What the fuck is happening to him?

I call again and it rings until the robotic voicemail picks up. I hang up without leaving a message.

Should I text him? He may have turned his ringer off to keep silent and hidden.

I pull out my own burner phone from my pocket and clumsily text him. My hands shake so bad that I can barely type the letters.

They can't take Jordan. They can't have my pack.

Fuck can I even stop them, though? I'm all the way up in the mountains; I can never get to him in time.

The longer I wait for a response, the closer I am to saying fuck it and grabbing my keys.

I need a fucking drink. I storm to the bar in the corner and keep myself busy by grabbing a glass and filling it with ice. The silence is heavy and oppressive.

Has Bill made it there yet?

The bottle clinks against the glass, and I nearly spill whiskey on the bar top. I need to calm the fuck down.

Bill will get there faster than me. He will let me know what the hell is going on with Jordan.

Why the fuck didn't he heed my warning? Why is he alone? This is bullshit. I hate fucking waiting to find out what's happened.

I take a long sip of my drink and stare at the silent phone like it's offensive. Where the fuck is Bill? Did he catch the agents and they took him too?

If they take both Bill and Jordan, my business is totally fucked and my pack is even worse off.

The glass creaks as I slam it back down on the bar. I can't just stand around waiting for someone to tell me what's going on. What if they are both gone? I'll never know if I don't go out there.

Mind made up, I pick up my phone and rush to the door. There's nothing I will be able to do to stop them from being taken, but I can maybe track them by scent if I get close quickly.

My hand is on the doorknob when my phone starts ringing and Bill's name flashes on the screen.

I whoosh out a breath I didn't realize I was holding as I hurry to answer.

"I almost came all the way out there," I say.

"You might still have to, Archer," Bill says, his voice wobbly.

Fuck, what did he find? I'm almost too scared to ask, but I'm the alpha. I need the information.

"What happened?" I whisper.

"Jordan's apartment was broken into. The door is broken down, and I have searched everywhere for him."

"Fuck." I slam my fist into the wall.

There is no sting or bite of pain as I wrench it from the crumbling plaster. Blood drips from my knuckles, but I'm numb.

Everything is so hopeless. What the hell am I supposed to do? How do I tell his parents?

Shit.

"Are there any witnesses? Did anyone see anything?" I bark my questions at a rapid-fire pace.

"There are several apartments around his luxury apartment, but I haven't canvassed the area yet." Bill's tone is resigned, but I can't let this stand.

I have to do everything I can to find Jordan. Even if it's hours later and probably hopeless.

But the hopelessness in my chest claws at me along with guilt.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." I throw open the door to find a scowling Jara blocking my path with her hands on her

hips.

I hang up the phone and try to move around her, but she steps in my path.

“I don’t have time for this, Jara.”

“You never do, do you?” She throws her hands up.

“I’m not kidding, Jara. Move or I will move you.” I try and fail again to get around her.

“Everything is more important than me, Archer, I get it. But this isn’t about me, it’s about the pack. I can’t do my duty to them with a fucking babysitter.”

“She’s not a babysitter, she’s your protection,” I roar.

How can she not see or smell the simmering rage that pours off me? I need to get out of here before Jordan’s trail gets cold.

“I don’t need her protection,” she screams back at me.

“Yes, you do. I don’t care what you think you need, I will provide it for you as I see fit.” I grip her arms and forcefully move her to the side.

“You’re always saying pack needs come before me, so why don’t you care if they won’t tell me what they need with Angela around? They don’t want to complain because they know she’s loyal to you.”

“Jara, I’m not kidding. I don’t have time for your fucking tantrum.” I hold back a flinch as her eyes well with tears.

“Tantrum? Okay, Archer, just go wherever you go at night to stay away from me. I hope you’re getting your needs met there,” she says, and the accusation has guilt trying to claw me open.

She thinks I'm cheating on her? Never..

Shit. How could I make my mate think so terribly of me?

"I would never do what you're thinking. How dare you disrespect your alpha that way," I yell in her face and storm away.

I don't have time to waste. Even as guilt worms its way into my soul.

She's rightfully upset, and in any other situation, I might stay and argue, but there are lives at stake. No matter how hard it is to leave her when she thinks I'm cheating on her, the pack comes first, especially when it could mean the difference between life and death.

I grip the keys in my hand so hard that the bite of pain in my palm is like a balm to my soul. I will have to talk to my mate eventually, but right now, I have to get to the city for Jordan.

Jordan's life may hang in the balance if I can't find him.

Alex jogs up to me as I slam the truck door behind me.

"Where are you going?" Alex frowns.

"There's a problem in the city. It's as bad as we thought. Six of my employees are missing, including Jordan."

Before I even know what's happening, Alex rounds the truck and hops in the passenger seat.

"What are you doing?" I growl as he sits down and closes the door behind him.

"You're going to need my nose." He pulls the seatbelt around his waist.

"You need to stay and help protect the pack." I eye him.

He's stubborn and doesn't like to listen. It's just like talking to a wall.

Alex shrugs and pulls his phone from his pocket. "I came to get you so we could scout the forest, but I'll send a text and tell the enforcers the plans are postponed."

Fuck. I forgot about the surveillance. Are they going to warn the assholes in the city that we're on our way?

I punch the steering wheel, setting off the horn. "Can we just catch one motherfucking break?"

"We'll handle it, Alpha." Alex pats my arm, and I raise an eyebrow at him.

Did he think that through before touching me? I don't really think he did. He wouldn't have done it otherwise.

"Fine, I could use the help." I sigh and start the engine.

"What happened?" Alex asks.

"Jordan noticed that five of our employees have gone missing. All rogues with no family who live alone. Agents had been to their apartments the day before. When he was giving me the information there was a knock at his door. He's been abducted too."

"Fuck," Alex growls.

He slams his head back against the headrest. The enforcers are the only ones who know exactly how dire this whole situation is. I should have told Jara, but I was so panicked about being too late to think beyond leaving.

"Yup. Bill is there waiting on us. He is trying to get more information for me by the time we get there... hopefully."

“We’ll figure this all out, Alpha. We don’t have any other choice.” Alex leans forward, typing something out on his phone.

I can only hope that he’s right and that we will come out of this without too many scars. But right now, with everything imploding around me, optimism isn’t something I have in droves.

I need a fucking win in a sea of losses. This is so fucked.

**J**ara

Archer storms off without another word, and my shoulders slump in defeat. Of course, he doesn't have time for me.

That was a cheap shot I threw at him too. I know as well as anyone that he would never cheat on me. I was just so angry with him, I wanted to hurt him the way he hurt me.

It's petty and cruel, but that is the person I have become. It's the person I have to be to get through all of this.

I should have known that it wouldn't work, though. He refuses to talk to me. The only time he does is when he's screaming at me or being cruel.

If I keep letting him hurt me like this, will I become the monster he claims to be? Will I go out of my way to hurt others to make myself feel better for the pain I'm suffering daily?

I don't want to be that person. I want to be the light in the dark for this pack and for him. But how can I be that when all that surrounds me is darkness, and the person who is supposed to care about me is the one dimming that light more and more every day?



I trudge up the stairs to my room and slam the door behind me. One glance around the room and I break into sobs. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I flop back on the bed and cover my face with my hands as a scream of frustrated anger bubbles out of me. It's so stupid. The definition of insanity. Maybe I am insane for taking the deal.

A knock sounds on the door, and I turn to glance at it. Angela steps through, and I raise a brow at her.

“Why did you knock? You never knock.”

“Why are you up here all alone and wallowing?” Angela asks.

“Same shit, different day. Archer and I had a fight, and he stormed off.” I drop my hands to the bed and grip the comforter on either side of me in tight fists.

“He's under a ton of pressure, Jara, trust me. This will be fine.” She steps toward the bed.

“Seriously, Angela, I'm fine. I don't know why I even let it get to me anymore. It's insane.”

Stupid heart. Stupid hope. Stupid fucking alpha.

“There's more to all this than you're aware of, okay? Just be patient with him.” Angela pats my leg.

I jerk away from her, not wanting to be placated like a child.

“Why did you come up here?” I ask, deflecting her comment.

She raises an eyebrow knowingly but doesn't comment on the subject change.

“McKenna is in the storeroom with a list.” She grins.

“She actually got them to talk?” I lift my head from the bed.

Maybe we can work through this. If McKenna can pull the pack’s needs from them, I may be able to stand being guarded at all times.

Yeah, probably not.

“I’m more impressed that she got them to admit to needing anything,” Angela says.

“That’s for sure. Stubborn shifters.” I jump from the bed and head out the door behind Angela.

The house is silent as we rush down the stairs and into the storeroom where McKenna is waiting for us, list in hand.

“I can’t believe you got this already,” I say.

“It wasn’t easy.” She holds the sheet of paper out to me.

I scan the list. It’s all basics that we already have plenty of in here right now. They aren’t even trying.

“We have all of this.” I sigh and hand the list back.

I glance around the storeroom. Nothing except what me and Angela have done is put away, and I grimace.

“They are stating their needs, Jara. That’s all we asked of them.” Angela pats my shoulder.

It doesn’t make me feel any better. I may have been able to get more out of them if Archer wasn’t being a complete asshole.

A scream of frustration bubbles up my throat, and I slam my hand down on the metal table. It creaks ominously from the strength of the hit.

“I just wish that man would stop tying my hands like this.” I flop on the floor in front of one of the boxes and tear it open.

I don't even care what the box looks like when I'm done. Cans fall out and roll across the floor.

“Shit.” I lunge for one of the cans about to roll under the table.

The fucking thing gets away from me and smacks into the shelf on the other side of the table. The shelf rattles with the force of it but thankfully doesn't fall.

Angela rushes over and steadies the shelf, and I breathe out a sigh. I don't particularly want to get beat up by produce. I'm already pissed enough as it is.

“Gods, Jara. You have to be careful.” Angela holds a hand over her chest.

Her heart thumps loudly in the silent room as she stares at me with wide eyes.

“I'm frustrated, okay? It got away from me.” I throw my hands up in frustration.

It's all Archer's fault and the stubborn pack members who refuse to talk to me in front of Angela.

“Yes, I know, but let's not make that frustration deadly, okay?” she asks.

“Don't make fun of me,” I grumble.

“I'm not making fun of you.” Angela rears back like I've slapped her.

Standing up, I wander around the small area, gathering the rogue cans and stomping to the back where the correct shelf is located to stack them neatly upside down.

It's the only thing I would ever stack that way. It keeps dust off the top.

Angela frowns at me. I shrug and continue stacking them.

The repetition helps clear the dark cloud from over my head, and soon, I'm humming to myself as I work. My shoulders relax, and I move back to the box and grab the rest of the cans to do the same.

When that's done, I pull the box from the freezer section and organize all the meats and frozen foods. I chuckle to myself when I remember how embarrassed John had been when he admitted he couldn't cook.

"What do you think about a cooking class for the unmated wolves?" I ask Angela and McKenna.

"You want to teach a cooking class?" Angela raises a brow.

"Not me, but I think there should be something. I think embarrassment was more of the reason several enforcers didn't take rations."

McKenna hands me a package of chicken. "Who would teach it then?"

"My aunt is an amazing cook. She's still acclimating, but I think it would keep her mind off my mom still not being here." I place the chicken on the shelf.

"It could also help her get to know some of the pack members. She isn't like Ellie. She's been kind of skittish." Angela drops a banana on the top of the produce basket.

"That doesn't go there," I say as I grab the banana and shuffle the fruit around until the rest of the older produce is on top.

"What's the difference?" Angela asks.

“We put the brand new stuff at the bottom. That way, the older stuff gets eaten and doesn’t rot at the bottom of the basket.”

“What the fuck did we do before you got here?” Angela asks.

“Ate rotten fruit?” I ask, giggling.

She picks up another banana, motions as if she’s going to throw it, then shrugs before peeling it and taking a huge bite.

A few of them are turning a little brown.

“Let’s get some of this older fruit out to the pack members with pups before it goes to waste,” I call to McKenna.

“That’s a great idea. We’ll still have plenty left to go out in the next rations until we get the list together for Jordan,” McKenna says.

Angela flinches at the name. What the fuck is that about? I’m about to ask her when the door upstairs flies open.

Patrick rushes down the stairs, scanning the room with wild eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, taking a step toward him.

“I need the alpha,” he says.

Angela steps up next to me. There is definitely something going on that I don’t know about because Angela shakes her head almost imperceptibly.

“Didn’t you check your messages, Patrick? The alpha had to go into the city,” Angela says.

“Wait? What? He went into the city?” I ask.

Pain lances through my chest. Is he cheating on me? I thought he’d gone for a run or something. I never thought he

would leave the territory.

Why didn't he tell me he was leaving, where he was going, or give me a simple goodbye? Wasn't that what got us into the mess with Grayson in the first place?

"Jara, it's not like that." Angela squeezes my arm.

"Then what is it like?" I ask.

"I can't tell you that." She glances away.

The stench of her guilt fills the room. What the fuck is going on?

"You really expect me to believe it's not what I think without telling me anything?" I plant my hands on my hips.

Anger courses through me even as my heart breaks a little more. I didn't think it was possible for it to break again, but obviously there was still one tiny glimmer of hope that we could work things out.

False hope. That's all it was. And my heart hung on to it as long as it could.

"It's alpha's orders, Jara," Angela says with a sigh.

"I don't want to hear about the fucking alpha and his damn orders." I stomp past Patrick to the stairs. "Just leave me alone."

Patrick's whisper meets my ears as I stomp up the stairs. "I need you to come with me. There's been a... new development."

"Okay, let me talk to Jara first," Angela says.

"No. I'm fine. I need to be alone," I call over my shoulder as I storm through the kitchen and back up the stairs to my room. My prison.

What the hell is the point of all this? Did he meet someone in the city when he was trying to get me back from Grayson?

If that's the case, why didn't he just leave me to be tortured and executed? A manic laugh bubbles out of me as I slam my bedroom door.

Why does Archer do anything? To keep from appearing weak. He's so obsessed with strength and what others perceive him to be that it borders on insanity.

No, I'm the only insane one. I was insane for agreeing to the deal from the beginning, I was insane for not leaving and going rogue the first chance I got, and I'm still insane for ever hoping things can change.

The en suite is immaculate—just like I left it—and I turn on the water in the tub. I need a relaxing soak to get my stupid brain and heart to stop thinking about what Archer is doing in the city.

I pour in some citrus and vanilla bubbles as the steam from the water floats above the tub, then take off my clothes. I ease my tired body into the hot water and sigh as my muscles relax.

Closing my eyes, I try and fail to forget about everything, but different scenarios play behind my eyes on repeat.

Did he go to the city to see some rogue he met that works for him? Is he going to have an affair with some other shifter while he treats me like I don't exist?

I finish the bath quickly since it's impossible to relax. My own thoughts are my enemy. They hound me with every possibility. However, my wolf is oddly silent, and I can't help but wonder if she's finally given up on him too.

I really will be driven to insanity soon.

Stepping out of the huge tub, I grab a towel to dry off, then stroll to the closet.

I can't just sit here and wallow.

If he is cheating on me, what can I do? We don't divorce mates in packs. I could try to leave, but he will always find me.

After I'm dressed in an oversize cozy sweater and a pair of leggings, I sit on the bed and grab my e-reader. Maybe a book will get my mind off the asshole alpha.

After several minutes of trying to concentrate on the screen, I toss it on the bed and growl in frustration. This isn't working. Nothing works except for keeping my hands busy.

Covering my eyes with my arm, I flop on to the pillows.

*May as well do something productive and make something to eat.*

My stomach grumbles at the thought. Will I be able to do this without making something for Archer as well?

I don't even know when he'll be back, so why would my instinct be to feed him?

I huff. It doesn't matter if I do it or not; I need to eat something. Gripping the doorknob, I open the door and wander out into the hall. Horrible images still play in my brain as I stomp down the stairs.

A crack breaks the silence, and my stomach jumps into my throat. I fall into the hole in the stairs.

Pain tears through my gut as I scramble to stop my fall. Something sharp stabs me in the stomach, and wetness trickles down my abdomen.



Black spots dot my vision, and I shriek. How the fuck did I fall into the stairs?

“Help, help!” I scream, but the house is silent and cold.

There’s no one here to save me. I’m going to die.

**A**rcher

My knuckles are white as I grip the steering wheel. I race through the streets of the city much faster than is legal, but dread sits in my stomach like lead.

Jordan has to be okay. Bill has to be fine. I can't stand the thought of any more of my people going missing.

Alex grips the handle above his head. "Alpha, you should probably slow down a bit."

"We need to get there." I turn my steely gaze on him.

"We won't get there if we're pulled over by the human police, Alpha."

He's right, but I can't bring myself to leave my people in danger longer than necessary. It's already been a scary two-hour trip down the mountain covered in ice and snow.

"I just need to fucking get there, already," I growl.

"We will get there." He huffs. "If you don't kill us first."

"Very fucking funny."

We pull up to the apartment complex, and I kill the engine. The normally bustling complex is like a ghost town. There

isn't a soul in sight, but it's still early, so maybe the shifters are at work.

"Where is everyone?" Alex asks.

"At work, I hope." I unbuckle my seatbelt and push the door open.

Alex follows my lead, getting out of the truck and coming around to my side.

"It feels empty." He shivers.

"Stay alert. We don't know what the fuck happened here." I storm through the complex to Jordan's apartment.

"You don't think they took all of them, do you?" Alex whispers.

We scan the windows on each apartment we pass. Nothing looks out of place, but it's too quiet for my liking. Shouldn't there be pups at the very least?

"I will hunt the motherfuckers down if they did." I stomp ahead and turn the corner.

Jordan's door hangs half off its hinges in front of me. How the fuck did no one see this?

"What the fuck?" Alex barks, speaking my exact thoughts.

"We need to find Bill," I say, storming to the broken door.

"Wait, Archer. Are those claw marks on the outside of the door?" Alex leans closer.

I stop, glancing over to the door. Huge claw marks are gouged into the wood.

"Those aren't wolf claws," I whisper.

What the hell did this? Was it the government, or are there different types of shifters in the area that haven't announced themselves? This is wolf territory, and those look like bear claws.

"Are there bears here?" I ask, surveying the complex.

Is some huge fucking bear going to jump out and try to claw my eyes out or something? That would suck.

"Are they working for the government?" Alex whispers.

"I don't know, but we need to find Bill and get the fuck out of here." I turn to the entrance of the apartment.

Couch cushions are sliced open, and feathers litter the hardwood floor. Several tables are knocked on their sides.

Alex sniffs the air. "Do you smell that?"

A pungent odor of decay fills my nostrils. "What the hell is that?"

"I don't know, but it's definitely not human."

I step over some of the debris.

"Archer?" Bill calls from down the hall, stepping into view.

"Thank the gods you're okay," I say.

"They were already long gone before I got here. I don't know how they smashed this place up so quickly." Bill runs a hand over his balding head.

"There are several faint scents here." Alex sniffs again.

"Are any of them human?" I ask.

I wander past Bill and down the hall. Each room in the apartment is destroyed. They obviously wanted it to look like a

robbery, but the only thing that seems to be missing is Jordan.

“Yeah, there are two distinctly human scents mixed in with the rotting stench.”

I’m glad Alex came with me because, apparently, his nose is a lot better than mine. I can’t smell anything except for rot and death in this place.

Nope, not death. I refuse to believe that Jordan is dead. He can’t be fucking dead. What the hell will I tell his poor family?

Back in the bedroom, I breathe deeply through my nose and gag. There is a sterile metallic scent back here.

“Alex, come here,” I call down the hall.

Alex rushes to me and sniffs before sneezing. “It’s like human medicine. What is it? Did they drug him?”

“It kind of looks that way. It must have been the human government.” I scrub a hand down my face. “Who else would drug him and snatch him from his home?”

“I don’t know, but we have a serious problem if they are working with the bears.” Alex crosses his arms over his chest.

Bill pats my shoulder. “There’s not much you can do here. It won’t do any good to report him missing.”

“I know.” My shoulders slump. “Worst case scenario, it will tip them off that we know shit is going down.”

Defeat sinks my gut down to my toes. How the fuck are we supposed to stop them on our own in the forest if they can snatch people from an apartment in the city?

“Go home and protect your territory. I have an acquaintance who is a private investigator.” Bill takes a step back to let us through.

“A private investigator isn’t better than my nose,” Alex argues.

“This one is. He’s a rogue and can sniff out corruption better than anyone.” Bill grins. “We’ll find them.”

It goes against everything I believe in to leave and let someone else handle this, but Bill is right. We need to be careful and protect the pack.

“Fine, we need to find some things back home anyway.” I nod to Alex and rush from the apartment.

I’m purposely vague just in case there are any listening devices in the apartment. They obviously already know what we are, so the rest doesn’t matter, but I will not tip them off that we know about their devices.

The pack is in danger. More danger than we originally thought. We need to map out the surveillance and spring our trap.

I pull open the door to the car and make a mental note to send maintenance to fix Jordan’s door. He will be back, and I don’t want some squatter taking up residence in his luxury apartment until he does.

“We need to get someone out there to clean the apartment and I want to know where all my fucking employees are.” I slam the door behind me and start the engine.

“I’m calling the office right now. What should I tell them?” Alex asks, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“No one leaves without security. Matter of fact, just call security at the building and issue the order to them.”

“You got it, Alpha,” Alex says and holds his phone up to his ear.

I turn out of the parking lot and onto the road going slower this time, but the need to rush still has me fidgeting in my seat.

What if we get back to pack lands and the humans have already struck? What if they took my mate and I'm not there to protect her?

I press on the gas harder, and Alex glances over at me with a raised brow.

"I have a bad feeling about this," I grumble and turn my focus back to the road.

My wolf perks up and growls in my head. Alex speaks quietly into the phone, but I don't hear his words through the static and the growls in my mind.

My wolf doesn't like being so far away from our mate when danger is near.

They are pack just as much as our actual pack, though, and I can't let anything happen to the people under my protection.

I've already failed so many of them. I can't fail anymore shifters.

"Alpha?" Alex says, his tone sharp.

"What?" I ask.

"Patrick texted me. He said there is a problem that needs our attention as soon as we get back."

"Fuck. Make sure they are okay. I'm going as fast as I can."

What the fuck is going on in my territory? Patrick's voice fills the truck as Alex puts him on speakerphone.

"Archer, there are cameras all around the village. They have somehow gotten closer than they ever should have on all

sides.”

“What?” I roar. “How did they get close without anyone smelling them?”

Did Kyle do this? He’s the only one I know that has a scent masker.

“I don’t know, Archer. It doesn’t smell like humans but dirt and fresh moss. There is nothing. It’s almost like...”

“Like Carter,” I growl. “It may be worse than that, though.”

“What do you mean?” Patrick’s voice wobbles.

“I think I know how they know about us,” I say, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

“How?” Patrick’s breath hitches in his throat.

“They are working with bears.”

It’s the only explanation I can think of, but why would the bears work with the humans? They are solitary.

I’ve had no problems with the bears previously as they stay in their own territory to the north. But this could be an act of war between the two species.

“What do you mean? I haven’t smelled any bears,” Patrick says slowly.

He’s the oldest of all of us and probably remembers the time before the treaty when my father was alpha and our pack went to war with the Kodiaks.

Alex sits forward. “There were claw marks on Jordan’s door, and his apartment was trashed.”

“That information isn’t to be repeated,” I bark.



I glare at Alex out of the corner of my eye. We can't have that information getting back to Jordan's parents until we have an idea about where to find him.

Fuck. We have to find him.

"Absolutely, Archer," Patrick says.

"I need everyone on high alert. I'll be back in about thirty minutes to map out all the devices. Is there any evidence of microphones?" I chew my lip and my heart races a mile a minute.

I can only go so fast and my people—my family—are in danger.

I punch the steering wheel with an enraged roar. Alex shouts and jumps in his seat.

"Archer, it's okay, we aren't in immediate danger," Patrick says.

His tone is soft and meant to be soothing, but I don't listen to his words as I press the gas even harder. It's reckless, especially with the ice and snow going up the mountain, but Jara's eyes flash in my memory.

"Aren't you, though?" I ask. "I'm not there, and it's even worse than any of us expected."

"Slow down, alpha. We have this until you get back and we can put the plan into action."

Patrick is always the voice of reason, but I don't want to listen to reason.

"I need to get back to make sure the pack is safe."

And my mate. Not that she will want to talk to me. I leave the words unsaid, but Jara is never far from my thoughts.

Is she safe? Is Patrick absolutely sure that she is at the pack house and safe from the humans and their bear allies?

“We are all on alert. Just get back safely, alpha.” Patrick sighs.

Alex grips the phone. “We will be back as soon as we can.”

He hangs up without another word to Patrick.

“I’m sure she’s okay, Archer. She’s probably in the storeroom organizing or trying to start a cooking class for the enforcers,” Alex says with a chuckle.

I find it hard to believe that the Kodiaks would out shifters to the humans just to get back at the wolves.

They got their seclusion in the deal; they don’t work well in large groups so were given the territory up north to live in harmony away from us. Why would they give that up?

Did they even do it willingly, or were they abducted and experimented on? Is this what’s going to happen to my wolves? Are they going to be somehow brainwashed into helping the government eradicate the rest of us?

“I hope you’re right because I don’t understand why the bears would work with the humans.” I shift anxiously in my seat.

It’s completely crazy to even think about, but this entire scenario is insane, like humans. They fear what they don’t understand.

The idea of a person having an animal counterpart and shifting terrifies them to a point that they would do egregious things to them—things they won’t even do to the worst of humanity because we aren’t human.

We are the monsters that go bump in the night, and if they aren't careful, they will see just what kind of monster I can be.

Alex's words sink in, and I turn to him with a sharp stare. "Did you say she was planning a cooking class for the enforcers?"

"John and a few can't cook, so she's been talking about classes." Alex shifts in his seat.

I bark out a laugh. If he made that comment to get my mind off the general fuckery we are currently facing, it worked, even if it is only for a second.

"That sounds like my mate." I shake my head.

"She cares about the pack more than herself. She's the perfect alpha female," Alex says.

Leave it to Jara to try to make the enforcers eat better and be healthier. My gut sinks as I remember that she and my whole pack are in danger.

My shoulders tighten along with my chest. I didn't tell her goodbye again. The last words I said to her were angry and cruel.

"She is the perfect alpha female, and once all this bullshit is over, I'll tell her that."

What the fuck is wrong with me? I knew that if they could go after Jordan and the others in the city, they would come for us too.

"If you wait until then, you may never get the chance."

Fuck. He's right.

What if they get to her and I can't take back the terrible things I said? Why the fuck didn't I tell her what was

happening?

Angela would love this train of thought. She would love the guilt currently eating at me. Because that would mean she's been right all along.

"I know Jara's your cousin, but you're overstepping, enforcer."

"Does this situation we're in not prove that tomorrow isn't guaranteed? Anything can happen, alpha." He spits the word alpha at me as I turn into the drive of the pack house.

"I'm not talking about this with you anymore." I glare at him. "We will make a plan to eliminate the threat and then I will deal with my mate."

If she will even have me after the way I've treated her. If I were her, I would tell me to fuck off.

I don't blame her if she does. I am a bastard.

**J**ara

The pain in my stomach is blinding as I try and fail to grasp something that will give me the leverage to pull myself from the hole.

“Where the fuck is everyone?” I try to scream, but the pressure on my stomach doesn’t allow enough air to escape, so I barely croak.

I’m going to die. Blood runs down my stomach, wetting my sweater. My wolf howls in my head, trying to take over to save us, but that’s a terrible idea.

If I shift, my much smaller wolf will fall into the hole, and who knows what will happen.

The stairs creak, and I freeze. Are the stairs going to break more? Shit.

I dig my fingers into the scarred wood of the step until they turn white with my desperation not to fall.

Where did everyone go? Why can’t anyone hear me scream for help? We are shifters with superior hearing.

Someone should be able to hear my screams.

Why do I have to be so clumsy? My breaths rattle in my chest, and fear hot and fierce pours through me.

I'm going to die. Will Archer think I did this to escape him? Will he even care, or will he just bring in some rogue to take my place?

Gods, I need to stop hoping for my mate to save me. He doesn't care.

Another creak fills the air, and the piece of the stair piercing my stomach digs in even more. Did it stab an organ?

My wolf thrashes in my head and pushes at my shields to take over, but I force her back.

*No, we will fall—probably to our death,* I scold my wolf.

A mournful howl sounds in my mind. She doesn't agree with me. She wants to shift to protect. But it won't protect us.

The only way out of this is to go up, and if I shift, it's either going to dig this stair deeper into my gut or I will plummet I don't even know how far into this hole.

I have to pull myself up. I grip the lip of the step and struggle to heave myself up, but the effort digs the stair deeper into my stomach.

I cry out as more black dots my vision. How long can I hold onto this stair? Where is Angela? She's supposed to be with me.

Did she go somewhere with Patrick? Fuck.

McKenna's gone too. I scream in pain again as I slip, and the stair cuts into my chest. Is this really the way I'm going to die?

That's so disappointing.

I nearly chuckle at my own words, but I cough instead, and blood sprays from my lips. Fuck, I'm coughing up blood now?

I slip a little more, and the stair digs into my chest even harder. Tears stream from my eyes in rivers.

I always thought I would have a good life as an alpha female, but as my life flashes before my eyes, I realize it was all a lie. I fell hard for my mate, but he will never love me the way I deserve.

Maybe it's a mercy that my life might be ending because of a freak accident.

Living a lifetime with a man that will never value and love me is a worse torture than the wood sticking into my stomach.

My fingers slip, and I fall a little farther, ripping open the wound in my stomach even further. I blink my eyes repeatedly as the black spots continue to dot my vision. My breathing is labored, and my chest aches with every heaving gasp.

How long can I stay like this? Can I hold on until Archer or Angela comes back?

That could be hours, and my fingers are cramping with every second. I don't even know how long I can last.

My wolf howls and thrashes inside me until my hands shift into claws and dig into the aged wood. It's keeping me steady for now, but what happens when my weight becomes too much for the already fractured and broken wood?

"Fucking help," I whisper, even though I mean to scream it.

No one is coming. They might not even be in the village. Was there a problem with the humans in the forest? Another sighting? Is that why Patrick pulled Angela away?

Are they dealing with a greater danger and that's why no one is around? Are we under attack? Is the pack okay?

A crack fills the air, and I slip down even farther. The spike of wood presses into my sternum. My fingers slip on the ledge as sweat coats my skin. I wheeze out another, "help," but it's so low, I barely hear it.

My chest aches as I suck in a rasping breath through my nose. A piece of wood snaps from the stair and hits the floor below me with a thud. I slip again and the stair digs into my chest, so my already ragged breaths come out in short pants.

Dizziness from lack of air has my fingers slipping again, and I'm lodged all the way into stair.

My feet dangle, kicking on their own volition as I rasp for breath.

I'm going to die. The pain in my chest is excruciating to the point I want to pass out, but I can't do that.

My lids grow heavy, and I slump over the top of the stair. Why is no one coming to check on me?

I blink repeatedly to keep from falling asleep. Where is Archer? Is he out with some rogue not caring about what could be happening with the pack?

I wish I could see his reaction when he finds my body. A whispered laugh escapes me. Would he even care?

My fingers slowly go numb and slip from the stair. I'm done for. There's no way out of this unless a miracle happens.

Will someone find me? My lids grow heavier; they aren't going to last much longer.

A tear slides down my cheek for Archer, even though he will be fine. My only regret is that I never got to tell him how I



really feel about him.

I would never trade this life for anything else. Even after all he's put me through. I still love him, no matter what he's done. My stupid heart can't help it.

My eyes fall closed.

Archer's brown eyes furrow in concern behind them.

*Don't you fucking die on me, mate. You open those beautiful green eyes and fight.*

*I'm so tired, Archer. I can't breathe.* My eyes close tight. I can't keep them open.

The thumping of my heart slows to a slow thud and stutters. I don't have much time left.

I'm going to fucking die and I wonder if anyone will even mourn me? Will Archer mourn me, or will he fill my spot as his mate?

With one last wheezing breath, my eyes roll back and blackness engulfs me.

**A**rcher

The pack village is empty and devoid of sound. What happened here? Is the pack okay?

“Where is everyone?” I ask as I slam the door to the truck.

“Patrick and the others are out in the east forest. They are waiting for us.” Alex points to trees near where Jara and Libby were found in the forest only days ago.

“Did he ever say what he’s found that’s so concerning?” I take a step away from the house.

My wolf growls as an almost imperceptible whimper reaches my ears. I turn back to the house.

It’s been hours since our fight. She can’t still be upset about that, right?

My feet move to the house without my consent before Alex’s hand latches on to my arm. I spin on him with a glare.

“What is that smell?” He tilts his head to the side and sniffs.

“What?” I breathe deeply through my nose.

I freeze and my shoulders straighten. I would recognize that scent anywhere.

Where is she? I rush to the house and throw open the front door. I scent the air. Her blood fills the house, and I roar as I rush to the stairs where the scent is strongest.

I take them two at a time and bellow my rage as I find my mate stuck.

“Alex, fucking help me.”

“What’s wrong?” Alex races up behind me. “What the fuck happened?”

“The stair is broken, and it looks to be stabbing her in the chest, cutting off her airway.” My hands shake as panic threatens to take over.

*You have to be calm, Archer. She’s still breathing, even if it’s shallow. Passing out will not help your mate, your love.*

Love? What?

“Call the healer here, now, Alex,” I bark.

Alex moves to the stair above Jara and pulls out his phone.

“Ellie, you need to go to the healer now. Jara is severely injured,” Alex says into the phone.

She’s not my first choice, but all the enforcers are out in the forest so we don’t have many options.

Ellie’s high-pitched screech meets my ears, and I flinch. That girl can hit notes only a dog can hear. Pun not exactly intended.

“Ellie,” I roar. “Stop freaking out and help your cousin, now.”

The screeching through the phone stops, but I don't hear Ellie's whispered words before Alex hangs up and puts his phone away.

"What are we doing, alpha?" he asks, his tone shaky.

"You need to get a hold of yourself. Your alpha female's life depends on it." I trace a finger over Jara's fluttering pulse.

It's fucking weak. How long has she been like this, and why the fuck wasn't Angela with her? Is she the one trying to kill my mate?

She can't. She's my oldest friend and beta. She would never do this. But it doesn't mean she won't be severely punished for leaving her post. She's failed me in the most important task I have ever given her.

If Jara dies, Angela should run because I will destroy her along with the rest of the world. If I have to live in a world without Jara, all will suffer my wrath and pain.

"Alpha!" Alex yells.

I shake my head to clear it and stare at Alex. He has his arms hooked underneath Jara's, and I blanch at the damage.

Her cute oversize sweater is drenched in her blood, and a piece of the stair is sticking like a dagger in her sternum.

"How is she even breathing?" I whisper to myself.

Alex glares at me. "Fucking help her, Alpha."

"I'm not sure if we should remove the wood. It could do more damage." I clench and unclench my fists.

Helplessness sinks into my gut like a stone.

"I'm not a fucking healer," I bellow. "Where the fuck is the healer?"

Something hot burns the backs of my eyes, stunning me briefly. They might be tears. I can't let them fall, but the fact that I can feel enough sorrow for them to form is amazing and terrible all at once.

I really do love my mate. She has to be okay. Where the fuck is the healer?

"Calm down. Ellie is getting her. She will be here soon." Alex hefts Jara up a bit, and her breaths sound less labored.

"Don't move." I grip the wood from the stair and snap it off the base.

Jara's whimper of pain breaks my chest apart, and my pain is visceral as I help Alex pull her out of the hole.

I don't dare remove the wood from her still bleeding wound.

My wolf howls and snarls at me in my head as I take my mate and cradle her in my arms, then jump over the missing step.

I pull her to my chest carefully, so I don't shift the wood, but luckily her breathing has already evened out some.

"Go track down the fucking healer." I rage at Alex.

He holds his hands up in surrender as he backs away. "Yes, alpha. I'll get her. Jara is going to be okay."

"She better fucking be."

There is no longer a me without the woman in my arms. The pack could burn, and I wouldn't care as long as this precious woman was in my arms.

It scares the hell out of me, but I can't even fathom a life without her.

How did I ever think I could survive without her? I was so fucking stupid.

Jara whimpers as I lay her flat on the bed and curl myself around her. She will be okay; I'll make fucking sure of it.

The gods better help who crossed me because the world will be painted in their blood, and I will do it with a smile on my face and vengeance in my heart for my mate.

The little dark-haired Ellie bursts into the room with Mary hot on her heels.

“Jara,” Ellie whispers, placing a hand to her lips.

“Get out, Ellie,” I rumble. “Jara wouldn't want you to see her like this.”

“I saw her after that skank beat the hell out of her and they left her caked in blood for a week, alpha. That was worse.”

The fact that she's even able to argue with me is a testament to how strong she will be, but I'm not having it.

“Get out, Ellie!”

Jara gasps next to me and curls into my side. Fuck. I scared her. Even unconscious, I fucking scared her.

Alex appears in the doorway behind Ellie and nudges her out the door. “Out, Ellie. You can bug Jara once she's healed.”

Ellie sticks her tongue out at Alex but thankfully does what he says.

“I want you to check that step. Find out how the damn thing broke and impaled my mate.”

Mary steps forward. “I need you to move, alpha.”

“No,” I snarl.

“I can’t heal her with you like this.” Mary plants her hands on her hips.

The healer is right. I can’t stay here and expect Mary to be able to heal her. I lean over to kiss Jara on the forehead and send up a prayer to whatever gods are listening that my mate will be okay.

I draw back, but Jara’s hand snaps out and grips my arm. I peel her fingers off my arm and kiss her palm before moving from the bed.

Mary flies into action, kneeling on the bed and pressing her hands to Jara’s chest. Healing magic glows on Mary’s palms.

“I need you to pull the wood out of her,” Mary says.

“You want me to do that?” I back away, shaking my head, horrified that Mary would ask me to do that.

What if I hurt her?

“It’s not hitting anything vital, and she can’t heal until the wood is out, Alpha.”

Everything she’s saying is making sense, but the fog in my brain won’t allow me to comprehend the fact that she wants me to do it.

My chest aches just looking at the ugly piece of dark wood sticking out of my mate. I have to do this. She needs the wood out, and I can’t be weak.

I can’t let my feelings for her get in the way of saving her. I suck in a cleansing breath and move back to the bed.

Straddling her hips, I place one hand on her shoulder to keep her steady and grip the jagged piece of wood in the other.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper and yank the piece from her gut.

Jara screams and her back bows off the bed, but I hold her down by the shoulder.

Blood sprays, and Mary places her hands over the gushing wound. Healing magic washes over Jara in a green glow.

I need to get her clean. I’ll have to call Ellie in once the healer is done to strip down the bed and put new sheets on it. I’ll handle the removal of my mates clothes after everyone is gone.

Once the worst of the damage is healed, I flop on the bed on the other side of Jara and pull her into my arms.

Fuck, I missed this. I nuzzle her neck and breathe deeply. Her scent of citrus and vanilla surrounds me in a cocoon of everything that is my mate.

Mary backs away from the bed. “She should heal just fine on her own, Alpha.”

“Thank you,” I mumble.

She nods once and then leaves me alone with my mate. I don’t even care that we are both covered in blood.

There’s a soft knock on the door, and I turn to Alex.

“We have a huge problem, Alpha,” Alex says.

His eyes are hard, and his heart is thumping loud enough that I can hear it across the room.

“What is it?” I sit up in the bed.

Jara moans a little in her sleep and turns around, snuggling my side. Can’t I have just one minute of peace with my mate after she almost fucking died?

No. That’s not possible. There’s always something wrong.



“This definitely wasn’t an accident. Someone tried to kill her,” Alex says.

“How can you be sure?” I jump from the bed.

Jara whines and reaches for me, but I’m vibrating with rage. I’d already had an idea that someone tried to hurt her, but this is just confirmation.

“The stair was cut, Alpha. Someone used a blade to cut it enough so it would collapse under her weight.” Alex clenches a fist at his side.

“It was cut? Someone in the pack cut the stair in my home? Where the fuck is Angela?”

“I don’t know, alpha. They haven’t come back from the scouting mission.”

“They are probably waiting for us, but I’m not leaving my mate like this.” I sit back on the bed. “Find Angela and get her to the house. She should have been here.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Alex rushes from the room.

I pull Jara’s small body into mine, cradling her close. I almost fucking lost her, again. I failed my mate for a third time.

My wolf howls in my head. The mournful sound blasts through my soul, and guilt eats away at my chest.

My fault. This is all my fault.

If I had been here, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. How long was she holding on to life while trapped in the stairs?

Fuck. Who the fuck did this to my precious mate?

J ara

I blink my eyes open blearily. My chest aches, and it takes a moment to remember why. The stair.

My body is cocooned in warmth, and strong arms tighten around me. “Archer?”

“Fuck, Jara. You have no idea how good it is to hear that sleepy voice.” He buries his nose in my hair and inhales deeply.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. Nothing makes sense.

Am I dead? Am I dreaming while I’m still stuck in the stair? Archer is willingly touching me right now, and after so long, I can’t believe this is real.

“I found you...” He chokes on his words.

“You found me in the stair?” I run a hand over my stomach where the wood stabbed me, and there’s a small jagged scar.

“Alex and I found you and got you out,” he whispers, pulling me in closer.

I sigh as the heat of his skin envelopes me. I’ve waited so many months for him to be just like this. Why doesn’t it feel like it will last?

“I was so scared. No one could hear me. I didn’t know what to do.” I bury my face in his toned chest.

He slides the hair away from my face and tilts my chin up so I can look into his dark eyes. His lips brush mine in a featherlight kiss.

“I’m sorry, Jara. I need to learn to balance things better. I haven’t been fair to you. When you were stuck and barely breathing, I thought I’d lost you.” He presses his lips to my forehead, my cheek, and finally my nose.

“I’m right here, mate.” I kiss him hard.

Archer groans and deepens the kiss quickly, but he pulls back too soon.

“We have to stop. You were just injured. I don’t want to hurt you.” He lies back on the pillows but doesn’t let me go.

“What if I don’t want to stop?” I press my lips to his chest.

This is the kindest and gentlest he’s been with me in months; I can’t let that pass me by. I may not have this again.

He’ll invent some other reason to hold himself back from me, and we’ll go through the cycle all over again.

It’s sad, but it’s true.

“You almost died, Jara.” He chokes up a bit on his words.

I glance into his wet eyes. Is he crying? That’s impossible.

“I’m fine, Archer. You got to me in time.” I squeeze him close.

I run a hand up his chest to his neck and pull his head down to mine. He resists at first, but he soon crashes his lips to mine.

He pushes me on my back and groans into my mouth. His hand skims up my side and over my belly. His fingers brush the new scar there and he rears back.

His eyes widen, and he glares at the new mark. Insecurities arise inside me instantly. Is he going to reject me because of it?

My skin is flawed now. I wrap my arms around my middle and will the tears burning the backs of my eyes not to fall. I glance away from him so I don't have to see the disgust in his eyes.

His huge hands grip my arms and pull them over my head, pinning them to the bed.

“You misunderstood, mate. I'm not upset with you. I'm disgusted with myself.” He stares into my eyes. “I failed you again, and you almost died. That scar is a reminder of my failure.”

“No, it was just an accident, Archer. You didn't fail me.” I shake my head.

He has failed me in the past in so many ways, but not in this. He can't put the blame on himself for this.

Archer leans down and brushes his lips over mine before moving lower. “You may not see it that way, but I will spend the rest of my life making up for it, starting now.”

His lips travel down my throat and skim my mark. I shiver with pleasure at the light touch.

“Keep your arms up, mate. It's my time to worship you.” Archer kisses down to my breast, sucks it into his mouth, and gently nips my nipple with his teeth.

“Where did my clothes go?” I ask, just realizing that I’m naked in my mate’s arms.

“Gone,” he mumbles between kisses. “Told Ellie to burn them.”

He licks a path from one breast to the other, giving it the same treatment, and I wiggle my hips. I’m already close, and he’s barely touched me.

That’s what happens when your mate hasn’t touched you in months, even the slightest affection will make you crazy.

Archer slams his hand down on my hip and stills me. “You lie back and let me worship you, mate. You’re still weak no matter what your say.”

“I’m not weak,” I grumble.

“That’s not what I meant.” His tongue snakes out and traces the new scar on my stomach before traveling lower.

The hand on my hip slides to my thigh and pushes my leg wider. He trails his fingers over my pussy and down my slit, then pushes a finger inside me. My back arches.

“You like that, mate?” Archer chuckles against my skin.

The vibrations against my hip only serve to make me wilder. My hands fist the sheets above my head to keep from gripping his hair and shoving his face where I need him most.

“Archer,” I moan.

Archer nips my thigh and presses a thumb against my clit, rubbing circles slowly and methodically.

“Are you going to come for me, mate?” Archer growls.

“No,” I say, breathless.

“Why not?” He bites my thigh a little harder this time.

The pain mixed with pleasure only heightens my need to come.

“You haven’t given me permission.” I tilt my head back as my chest pushes up, and tingles race down my spine.

“Good girl,” he purrs.

He pushes a second finger inside and curls them to hit that spot that is meant to throw me over the edge. My body shakes violently with my need to come, but I hold back.

“Come for me, Jara,” he says and sucks my clit into his mouth.

My back arches as a scream tears from my lips, and my head thrashes back and forth. White-hot ecstasy explodes through my limbs, making them weak.

“That’s it, mate,” he says and laps at my juices to prolong the orgasm.

“Archer, please,” I beg.

I’m not even sure why I’m begging, or what I’m begging for. I just need... him.

“What is it, mate?” He grins up at me.

“I need you.”

“Not this time.” He sits up on his heels between my spread thighs. “I saw you flinch in pain. I won’t mate with you when you’re still weak and healing.”

“Archer, please. I’m okay, I promise.” I sit up on my elbows and stare him down.

As I sit back, a burning pain stabs at my stomach, and I flinch.

“Look, your hurting yourself right now.” He gently pushes me back on the bed.

“It was just a small pinch. I’m fine, Archer.” I grab his hand and pull him down with me.

Why is he acting like this? I could have sworn he wouldn’t care if I died. He acted like I wasn’t there—like I wasn’t his mate.

Did it take him finding me half dead to get his attention? I don’t know how to feel about that.

My stupid heart fills with hope that we can get through this and all those problems are behind us.

“It’s not fine. I don’t want to hurt you.” He crawls over me and lies next to me, pulling me into the warmth of his arms.

“There are more than physical ways to hurt someone, Archer,” I say but snuggle in closer.

“I know,” he mumbles into my hair. “I’m sorry. The humans are encroaching, and the investigation has me rattled. I thought the only way I could protect the pack was to push you away.”

My mate is an idiot.

“You weren’t cheating?” I ask softly. “When I found out you went to the city after our fight, I couldn’t get the possibility out of my head.”

Archer sits abruptly, resting his elbow on the bed, and stares down at me. “Are you kidding me, Jara? I could never even think about touching another woman.”

He cups my cheek, turning me to face him when I glance away. Shame fills me, and I huff out a breath.

“That’s not how it felt, Archer. It felt very much like you had found someone else and only put up with me because you had to.” I turn my gaze from him.

Tears burn behind my eyes, but I’ve cried too many times for him in the past. I don’t want to cry over him now as well.

His thumb brushes lightly over my cheekbone, and he kisses me softly. All his emotions pour out of him from his lips, and I squeeze my eyes tight, letting them wash over me as he deepens the kiss.

I run my hand through his hair and arch into him. I need his skin on mine. I need my mate inside me, making me remember exactly why we are so good together.

“Jara, stop,” he growls as I run my hand down his bare chest to his hips.

“I don’t want to.” I stick my bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout.

“Mate, you are going to make me embarrass myself. Do I need to pin you to the bed again?”

“Just mate with me and I’ll stop.” I say almost begging again.

I wrap my hand around his hard cock, and a rumble escapes him. Is that the wolf or the man? Does it matter?

I want them both.

I pump his cock and swirl my thumb over the head, spreading the precum across the tip.

“Jara,” his voice cracks.

Squeezing him a little tighter, I slide my hand up and down him again. He closes his eyes tight and grits his teeth.



“What, mate?” I ask to push him over the edge.

He moves faster than I can blink, shoving my hand off him and hiking my leg up over his hip. Calling him mate always does the trick.

He’s mine just as much as I’m his. My breathing is easier than it has been in months, and relief pours through me.

He’s mine. My mate. He hasn’t found someone else, and he isn’t cheating on me.

“Are you sure, Jara?” he asks as he lines himself up with my entrance.

“Fuck me, mate.” I grin up at him and tweak his nipple.

Archer slams inside me to the hilt, and my back arches as I grip the sheets on either side of me.

“Fuck, you feel so good. I missed you,” Archer says and pulls out slowly before slamming back inside hard and fast.

Exactly what I love from my mate.

“I missed you too,” I whisper, breathless.

Archer’s eyes glow with his wolf as he fucks me. “I don’t know how long I’ll last, mate. It’s been too long.”

“Fuck me and mate me, Archer. That’s all I want. I want my mate back,” I whisper.

Archer reaches between us and pinches my clit. “Now.”

He doesn’t need to tell me what he wants in that command. I combust into a big ball of white-hot euphoria and lead limbs before I pass out.

**A**rcher

Fuck, did I hurt her?

I collapse on the bed beside her and listen to the thumping of her heart, loud and steady. Reaching for her, I pull her body into my arms for just a second.

The sound of stomping feet meets my oversensitive ears, and I tilt my head to the side. Are they in the house?

Gently, I lay Jara back on the bed and scoot away so I can grab my sweats and meet the others downstairs.

I kiss her forehead and storm to the closet, angry that I have to leave Jara alone to deal with my beta.

How could Angela leave her like that? She was tasked with protecting my mate. She never should have been out in the woods when I was gone.

I stomp down the stairs and all sound stops. Everyone goes silent and stares up at me as I hop over the broken step.

“What the fuck happened?” I ask Patrick.

I don't acknowledge Angela; I can't. She failed us both. I nearly lost my mate because of her carelessness.

“We had a situation that I needed you for, but you were gone. As beta, Angela came out so I could show her what was going on,” Patrick says, his voice wobbly, and he glances at the floor in submission.

“Even after I specifically assigned her to protect my mate?” I ask with a snarl.

“It’s not his fault, Alpha.” Angela leans over in an attempt to catch my eye, but I dodge her.

I can’t look the beta in the eye when she’s failed egregiously.

“How long were you all in the woods?” I yell.

“A few hours tops, alpha.” Patrick crosses his arms over his chest.

“More than enough time for my mate to walk into a fucking trap in her own home.” I glare at Patrick.

Angela gasps and steps toward the stairs. I put an arm out, blocking her path. She doesn’t get to go see my mate when she directly disobeyed a direct order and my mate suffered for it.

“What happened to Jara?” Patrick asks.

His hands shake violently, and his pulse jumps in his throat.

Alex narrows his eyes at them and throws the piece of wood from the stair on the table in front of him.

“Is that blood?” Angela gasps.

“Yeah, that was sticking out of my cousin’s stomach when we found her falling through the stair.” Alex glares at the group. “No one could hear her scream.”

“What?” Angela shouts.

“Shhh, she’s fucking sleeping, and if you wake her, it’s going to be even worse for you.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Archer... you know I didn’t do this.” Angela steps in front of me, trying to catch my eye.

“Alex, take her to a holding cell until I can figure out what to do with her.”

“Alpha?” He eyes Angela.

It’s fucked up that I’m making him choose, but I need to know that he’s loyal to me. He needs to choose the pack over a woman he’s not even mated to. He needs to choose his cousin.

“Take her to the holding cells. We aren’t making a spectacle, yet.” I run a hand through my hair.

“Archer, you can’t be serious,” Angela says.

Tears pool in her eyes. I sigh and turn away from her as Alex grips her biceps and leads her from the room.

“Alpha,” Patrick says slowly.

“I know what you’re going to say, Patrick, and I don’t care. She should have been here. She failed her alphas.”

“It was just an accident, alpha. It could have happened at any time.” Patrick whispers.

I’m shaking my head before he even finishes his sentence.

“It’s not, though. The stairs were cut. The person responsible looked for a specific time when my mate was alone and came into our home to cut the fucking stairs.” I flop into a chair, tilt my head back, and squeeze my eyes shut.

“What?”

I shush him. “Jara’s sleeping.”

If anyone wakes my mate before she's ready, they will end up like Angela. Jara may be pretending to be fine, but she's not. She needs sleep to heal.

He lowers his voice. "Someone cut the stair so she would fall?"

"That's what it looks like, yes. And if Angela would have been where she was supposed to be, then Jara may not have suffered and nearly fucking died."

"Alpha, we found fucking animal traps and cages in the forest. That's why Angela was out there with me. We were figuring out how to keep the pack safe." Patrick crosses his arms over his chest.

He doesn't agree with me, but he will never outright disagree with me.

"Cages and animal traps?" I bellow before remembering I need to be quiet.

"Yes, and Angela and Alex are the only ones that would know what to do with you in the city, but Alex went with you."

Fuck, it really is my fault. If I hadn't taken Alex with me, Jara might have been fine. My stomach roils as guilt festers in me worse than ever before. Any small change in plans on my part could have altered whether she got stuck in the stair or not.

Patrick shakes his head and puts a hand on my shoulder. "No, Archer. You're not to blame for this. Whoever did this would have just waited for a different time if Angela had stayed. They were opportunistic and watching."

"Someone has been watching us. That means the other accidents were probably the same person, and they escalated

when she was saved from the others.” I cover my eyes with my hand. “But it doesn’t mean I can’t punish Angela, Patrick. She disobeyed an order and failed me and my mate.

“I know, alpha.” He sighs.

Alex storms back into the house with his arms crossed over his chest. “What now, alpha?”

“Now, you stay here and guard my mate until I see the fucking traps and cages.” I clap him on the shoulder as I follow Patrick out the door.

This could be a terrible idea, but I need to know what’s going on in my pack lands. Hopefully, my mate won’t wake up until I get back, but since when are my hopes answered?

“Where are we going?” I ask as I follow him to the path that leads to the clearing.

“The traps are closest to the first surveillance cameras we found.” Patrick waves at me over his shoulder.

I stomp behind him. Did they see us out there and decide that we were animals that would be easily trapped? Honestly, it’s pretty insulting.

“I’m gonna tear their traps apart in front of their damn cameras,” I growl.

“Is that a great idea, alpha?” Patrick asks. “I thought we didn’t want to tip them off.

“By now, they know that we have figured it out. They’ve abducted five rogues and Jordan.”

Patrick turns to me with wide eyes and stops in his tracks. “What?”

“It may actually be more. I’m not sure. The apartment complex was empty.” I step over a fallen log.

“They may have all just been at work?” he offers, but I’m not so sure.

There should have been mothers with pups there at the very least. I didn’t see any. It was completely desolate.

Did they have an entire team take out all our people? Were they deemed easily attainable and people that no one would miss?

“Bill is finding out everything he can, but if they can take an entire community in the city, what hope do we have of getting out of this?” I scrub a hand through my hair.

“We won’t let that happen to the pack, alpha.”

“Just like we didn’t let Jara get sabotaged and fall through a stair?” I ask with a growl.

No matter what anyone says, I will regret this incident for the rest of my life. Would she have been so depressed had I actually communicated with her? Probably not.

Would she have been paying attention to where she was walking and seen something out of place? Maybe, but maybe not.

Is Patrick right that only the person who cut the step is responsible for the incident? No. Angela should have been there. She could have helped Jara out of the stair at the very least, and at the most, it would have never happened in the first place.

Patrick holds a hand up for me to stop. He points straight ahead, and metal glints beneath the sun shining through the tree branches.

They aren't even really trying to hide the cages and traps.

"I don't smell any humans," I grumble.

"They are blocking their scent somehow, alpha." Patrick steps closer to the trap, but I stop him with a hand to his arm.

"Just because the cage isn't hidden, doesn't mean they don't have bear traps or something waiting to snare us."

Animal traps and cages are a big deal, but I'm increasingly irritated that they thought this was a situation that warranted disobeying my orders. No one but the enforcers go in the forest. It's not that big of a deal.

Jara's safety was a hundred times more important. Angela should have known that and gone right back to the house.

Although, could she have planned this? Is Angela the one that wants her dead?

"Why is this more important than guarding my mate, Patrick?" I clench my fists and my shoulders stiffen.

"There are traps and animal cages in the woods, alpha. It's a major problem."

"Why? No one is allowed in the forest. Or is Libby still being rebellious?"

That was a low blow. Patrick and his mate do their best, but Libby is going to be an alpha female one day and take the world by storm.

Our pack loves her and wants to protect that little girl and the rest of the pups no matter the cost, but she needs to learn boundaries. She hasn't yet, and it's a fucking problem.

"No, Alpha. She is on complete restriction. She doesn't leave the house without me or my mate," Patrick says as he



spins on me.

“That’s my point. I would hope two grown men would be able to handle a few traps and cages while on patrol.” I place my hands on my hips as I scan the small patch of forest.

My chest tightens in pain at the realization of what I’m going to have to do.

I have to banish my beta. It’s the only way to show I’m not weak. If I do anything else, I run the risk of losing my pack along with my mate. We will be too busy fighting amongst ourselves to see the threat for what it is.

Total annihilation.

Angela has to go. She’s not as loyal as I thought. I’ve known her my whole life and never thought I would have to do this.

“Get someone out here to map the traps and the cameras. Everyone else I want in the town square in an hour.” I turn and stomp back to the clearing.

This is going to piss a lot of people off, especially my mate. Am I willing to piss her off to keep her safe? Fucking absolutely.

Angela failed the alpha couple when she didn’t stay with my mate. She will pay for that disobedience. I just hope the pack will forgive me for what I do because all that matters is my mate, and she almost didn’t survive.

**J**ara

My stomach pulls as I stretch, and I flinch. It's still sore but not as bad now that I'm not stuck in the stairs.

I smile as I remember how tentative and loving Archer was before I fell back to sleep. Is that how we are going to be from now on?

Do I dare to hope that we will find some way to live together and trust each other? My heart says yes, but that bitch has betrayed me too many times already to trust it.

Tilting my head up, I stare at the ceiling and wonder where Archer went. His scent still surrounds me, and I hum happily as I bury my face in the pillows.

It's the first time in days that the room has smelled so strongly of him. His woody scent is one of my favorites, and my wolf practically purrs in my mind with contentment. She likes it when our mate isn't treating us like we don't matter.

I still don't trust him, though. All it takes is one thing, and he could flip right back to the cold, unfeeling bastard.

I hate it.

Yelling downstairs catches my attention, and I sit up abruptly. What the hell is going on?

I rush to the closet and dress as quickly as my still healing wound will allow.

“Angela, you failed her.” Archer’s voice booms through the house.

What? He’s blaming Angela for what happened? How could he blame her for a freak accident?

I grab socks from the drawer and stuff them on my feet with a pair of ankle boots, then grab my coat.

I have to stop whatever is happening outside. He can’t blame Angela for this. As I open the bedroom door, dread fills me. My heart practically beats out of my chest as I remember the accident in vivid detail.

A twinge of pain stabs me in the gut, and I rest my hand there. It’s okay. I can do this.

At the stairs to the main level, I grimace. Fuck. I’ve never been afraid of fucking stairs before, but I find myself testing each fucking step I take down them.

How the fuck did it break?

When I get to the hole in the stairs, I stare at the dark red stain on the wood. My blood.

The ground beneath the stairs is caked with more of my blood. It’s a miracle I survived losing that much.

Flashes of blood and death play out in my mind on repeat. Carter ripped to shreds in front of me. From the looks of the floor, I almost lost as much blood as he did when Archer killed him.

“You disgraced yourself and your alpha,” Archer bellows, bringing me out of my dark thoughts.

I step over the hole in the stairs and rush the rest of the way down. I throw open the front door, and the entire pack is standing in a circle outside in stunned silence.

“Archer,” I say. “What’s going on?”

Archer turns his glare on me. “Stay out of this, Jara.”

“What?” I plant my hands on my hips.

Are we back to this? He’s going to be an asshole again after everything he said to me after the accident.

“Go back inside, mate. You’re still healing.”

“No, what are you doing?” I step forward. “That’s Angela. She’s not at fault here.”

“Do not question me in front of my pack, Jara,” Archer says with a growl.

His pack? This fucking bastard. Rage pulses through me so hard my hands shake. Archer tilts his head as he glares back at me.

“Your pack? This is my pack too.” I throw my hands up in frustration. “Angela is my friend, and you’re out here humiliating her for something she had no control over.”

“She was supposed to be guarding you. That was her only order,” Archer shouts.

“I don’t need someone guarding me all the time.”

“Obviously you do. You fell through that fucking stair.” He grips my biceps. “If she had been where she was supposed to be, you may not have been as badly injured.”

“Archer, don’t do this, please?” I ask, angry tears filling my eyes.

He’s going to take my only friend from me. What the hell am I going to do without Angela around?

“I have to. She failed us both. She disgraced herself and her pack when she left you alone.” Archer squeezes my arms and then turns back to the crowd.

Angela glances at me. She’s visibly shaking, but she’s not backing away from him. She’s taking every bit of abuse.

She doesn’t fucking deserve it. Rage burns in my chest. It was just a fucking accident. He doesn’t need to punish anyone over a damn accident.

“This pack has become too lax in following orders. We don’t have the option to be lax anymore.” Archer crosses his arms over his chest.

I scan the crowd, but no one will look at me. Patrick is hanging his head in shame. Will Archer punish him too?

He just needed Angela’s help with something. I don’t understand why anyone needs to be punished or treated this badly in front of the entire pack.

“It was a fucking accident,” I whisper.

Angela’s gaze meets mine, and a tear leaks from her eye and trails down her cheek. No one would have ever guessed that Archer would treat her like this.

How can he be so cruel to someone he’s known his entire life?

She isn’t just his beta but his best friend. His misguided way of trying to protect me is tearing this pack apart.

“Alex will now be the new beta of the pack. Angela is stripped of her title and banished from this pack and any protection we provide.”

“No,” I gasp. “Archer don’t.”

I lunge forward, but Alex catches me around the waist, and I cry out. Pain at the rough touch stabs in my gut.

A low rumble fills the silence as Archer stares at the spot Alex is holding.

“Shit, sorry.” Alex drops his hands to his sides. “But you have to stay out of this.”

Does he really think I’m going to listen to him on this? No fucking way. Archer is wrong.

“Archer, you can’t banish her.”

“If she can prove her loyalty without question, I will think about letting her come back.” Archer’s tone is hard and unyielding.

“She did nothing wrong. She was protecting the pack,” I argue.

“Alex, take Angela to pack her things,” Archer says and grabs my arm.

He drags me around the side of the house and slams my back into the wall.

“What are you doing, Jara?” Archer crowds me. “You’re not to talk back to me in front of the pack.”

“You’re wrong here, Alpha. She only left to protect the pack.” I glare at him.

“Those weren’t her orders. She failed at the only order I gave her, and you nearly paid the price with your life.”

“It was a freak accident that could have happened when she was here.” I shove at his chest.

What is he not understanding about this?

“It wasn’t a fucking accident, Jara.” He runs a hand over his face.

“What?”

It wasn’t an accident? Someone did this intentionally. Why?

“It wasn’t an accident. Someone cut the stair. They wanted to hurt you.” He takes a step back.

“How did someone do this?” I ask.

“I’m guessing that they waited for you to be alone and cut it then. So Angela leaving you alone resulted in this person’s plan going into place.”

That’s how he’s justifying punishing her? She left with Patrick and someone came in. Ridiculous.

“I would have heard them, Archer.” I shake my head emphatically.

It’s not Angela’s fault.

“What did you do when you first went into the bedroom?” he asks.

“I took a bath to block out the world.” I slap a hand to my forehead. Fuck. None of my arguments are going to help my friend.

“Exactly, so drop it, Jara. I have to do this.”

I slump against the wall. I thought a pack member trying to kill me was behind us. Is he right in punishing Angela?

She wouldn't have done this, right? There's no way Angela is trying to kill me.

"Angela didn't do this." I straighten my spine to my full height, ready to square off with the alpha if needed.

She didn't do this. She couldn't have. She was with Patrick, wasn't she?

"No, she didn't, but she still failed her alpha and my mate. I have to make an example out of her while I try to find out who wants you dead."

"That's not fair, Archer. It's not her fault." I'm a damn broken record, but I need him to see reason here.

"What's not fair is that someone in my pack is trying to fucking murder you, Jara." He tilts his head back and squeezes his eyes shut.

Frustration and anger pour off him in waves. The scent of his frustration is a lot like the smell when you cut an onion and your eyes water.

"Then find out who did it, but don't banish her."

"I have to banish her. These wolves have started to think there are no consequences for their actions," Archer growls.

"So Angela is the cautionary tale to make them stay in line?" I ask.

"They ignore direct orders, and I have some fucking disloyal pack members who strip bolts and loosen roof tiles in an attempt to hurt you. They need to know that they will be punished."

"Wait, what?" I ask with wide eyes.



The other accidents weren't accidents either? Is he serious? How long has he known this?

"Someone has been trying to kill you and make it look like an accident for days." Archer clenches his fists at his sides.

"How long have you known this, Archer?" My body vibrates with a mix of fear and anger, and my heart thumps loud in my chest.

"I suspected from the beginning, but it was confirmed when Patrick came to me. Tim found evidence that the tile was tampered with."

"And the shelf?" I ask.

My voice is hollow. How could someone try to kill me again? Did Kyle go back on his blood oath? Did Grayson find someone in the pack to kill me?

He clearly wants me dead after his people imprisoned and tortured me. He was fucking gleeful for my execution.

Archer shrugs. "That was confirmed when you found the snapped bolt in the storeroom."

What the fuck?

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" I narrow my eyes on the alpha, but I already know the answer before he opens his mouth. Heavy-handed bullshit.

"I told them not to."

"Why?"

"Because I was handling it. You are mine. I protect you, and if I decide not to tell you something, then I don't. Neither does my pack."

“We really could have avoided all of this.” My laugh is hollow. “When I found out you were in the city doing gods know what, I told Angela I wanted to be alone. I thought you were cheating on me and wanted to be alone.”

Archer hangs his head for a second before he glares at me. “It doesn’t matter. You are not her alpha. You don’t command her.”

“I know I don’t command her. I asked for space, and as a friend, she gave me that space. Had I known what was actually going on around here, I would have made different choices.”

I turn to stomp away.

Archer grabs my arm and spins me back around to face him. “You are my mate, not the alpha here. You don’t get to tell her or anyone to disobey my orders. Do you understand?”

**A**rcher

I stare Jara down as I wait for her to tell me she fucking understands. Just because she's the alpha female, doesn't mean she can give orders or disobey me so publicly.

"Do. You. Understand?" I bite out.

Her green eyes flash, and the scent of her anger engulfs me. I'd rather her be angry than fucking dead.

"Yes, Alpha," she says through gritted teeth.

"You ever disrespect me in front of my pack like that again, there will be consequences."

"Like what, Archer? You going to be cold and cruel to me? Been there done that, and I'm pretty sure you're still doing it." Jara yells.

I slap my palm over her mouth to quiet her. She's really fucking pushing my temper here.

You would think after all this time she would understand. Everything I do is for my pack. Finding her like that nearly broke me.

I felt something I'm ashamed to even think—I was weak. I was weak because I couldn't protect her, again.

The fact that I even have to protect her from my own pack makes me a weak alpha.

I cannot be weak. Not for anyone. Especially not for her.

“It will be much worse than you’ve seen before, Jara. You are mine, and as such, you will fucking obey me without question.”

A caustic laugh bubbles from her lips. “I thought you were living in this century, Archer. Women actually have brains and can think for themselves.”

“I will have nothing but complete obedience from my pack. Especially my mate.” I ball my hand into a fist and punch the wall close to her head.

The plaster cracks but doesn’t break. Jara just stares me down, unflinching. She knows I would never hurt her physically. I just wish she would stop challenging me at every turn.

I crowd her space, but she remains standing in her silence as we stare at each other. Her eyes glow with her wolf, and she snarls.

“I may be your mate that you think you can just throw aside when you’re having a tantrum, but I have never thrown you away. I have always been right here for you. Don’t think I won’t call you out for being an asshole, though.”

It’s not the words I want to hear. It’s more of her opinionated bullshit.

“You refuse to obey me? That’s not what you do when I have you on the edge of an orgasm, is it, mate?”

Her breath catches, and she tries to hide how turned on this angry conversation is making her.

“No. You’re always the good girl who begs so prettily for me to let you come, right?” I whisper in her ear and nip the lobe.

“Fuck off, Archer.” She turns her head to me. “You’re fucking mine.”

Jara’s lips crash into mine in an angry kiss. She sucks my bottom lip into her mouth and bites it. The coppery taste of my blood fills my mouth and paints her lips in a savage smile.

She wants to be rough? I slam her back against the wall and grip her hip to keep her in place. Our tongues battle for dominance, even as she claws at my shirt and jeans.

We should probably stop, but I don’t even feel the biting cold against my skin when I’m this close to her.

She pops the button on my jeans and runs her hand up under my shirt and over my abs.

“What are you doing?” I break the kiss with a growl.

“I thought your mate was only here to obey and please you,” she says, a challenge in her eyes.

She reaches inside my pants and grips my cock. I’m already impossibly hard, and my cock twitches in her small hand as she strokes it.

Fuck. She’s fucking killing me.

“You want to be a brat? I’ll show you what happens to brats.” I yank her hand from my pants and spin her around.

I press her against the wall and kick her legs out wide.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to hold back your orgasm. Then when you come, I’m going to turn this pretty ass pink.”

I shove her pants down around her knees and step back. She's drenched. Her juices drip down her legs.

"Archer," she growls.

"What is it?" I run my fingers up her inner thigh to her pussy and pinch her clit, hard.

Jara squeaks out a protest but wiggles her hips. A dark chuckle escapes at how needy she is for me.

"You are mine," I whisper as I lean over, covering her back with my front.

Gripping my cock, I graze the tip up and down her slit before slamming home inside her. Jara cries out, her hands scrambling for purchase against the wall, but she has nothing to grip onto.

She claws at the plaster, and it crumbles beneath her shifter fingers.

We're going to destroy the house if we aren't careful.

With one hand on her hip, I slide the other into her long caramel hair and wrap it around my fist. Her chest smashes against the wall as I pound into her relentlessly.

She wanted rough. I'll give her fucking rough.

Her walls pulse around me, hugging my cock in a way that makes me want to explode, but I hold off.

I pull her head back by her hair and seal my mouth to hers in a biting kiss. I nip at her lips, and she cries out.

"Archer," she groans. "I need to come."

"Not yet."

I thrust in hard, hitting the spot inside her that makes her whole body shake. She tries to thrash her head, but my grip is

unyielding in her hair, and she shudders violently as she attempts to hold herself back. My spine tingles all the way to my balls, and I thrust inside her one final time.

My wolf pushes to the surface, and I bite down on the mark on her neck. Jara screams her release as I roar her name, pumping into her and collapsing over her back.

Fuck, she feels so good, but reality quickly sneaks back into my thoughts. Angela's punishment, the humans and the traps, the motherfucker trying to kill my mate—all war for dominance in my head.

I can't let Jara take up space in my brain. How was I so stupid that I didn't remember this before I lost all control? She's the worst kind of temptation and makes me the one thing I'm not.

Fucking weak.

I blink away the euphoria and right my clothes. Fuck, I need to stop getting fucking lost in my mate.

It's fucking freezing out here, and snowflakes are falling on the ground all around us. Anyone could have walked over and seen her like this.

Jara slumps against the wall, not even bothering to pull up her leggings as she pants.

“Fix your clothes, Jara,” I bark.

I'm angry, but mostly at myself for thinking with my dick instead of my brain. There's too much at stake.

She narrows her eyes at me and straightens her spine before bending and righting her clothes. Once she's decent, I turn and walk away.

“Archer?” she asks. “What the fuck?”

I ignore her question, too pissed at myself to even acknowledge her. There are things that I need to do, and I can't let her distract me again.

I have to stop doing this. My pack is under attack from the humans, and there's someone out to get my mate.

I can't afford to be distracted, and my mate is a huge distraction. Once this is all over and things have calmed down, maybe things can be different.

Jara storms past me as I round the corner to the front of the house. Alex is leading Angela back up from her cabin with her things.

I stop in my tracks at the sight of her tearful eyes.

Fuck, I hate having to banish her, but she fucking disobeyed orders. If I let her get away with it when it nearly cost my mate her life, then the pack will think they can disobey me.

The pack gathers back around the house to watch the show; they're probably wondering if I'm really going to do this.

It's something my father would have done. And while I've always prided myself on not being him, I have become more like him than I have ever wanted.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself before you're escorted from the pack lands?" I shout over the whispers of the crowd.

Jara turns angry, tear-filled eyes my way, and a pain stabs through my chest. I hate this so fucking much. I don't want to banish her. But I'll look weak if I don't.



“Alpha, I’m sorry I failed you. I will prove my loyalty...”  
Her voice cracks.

My wolf whimpers, not liking that this is happening. He doesn’t like that his friend is crying either.

“If you can prove your loyalty, I will consider reinstating you.” I cross my arms over my chest.

Angela nods once before turning to Jara.

Jara takes a step forward, but Patrick is next to her and stops her with a hand on her arm.

He shakes his head, and Jara sniffles but does as he says.

Jara wraps her arms around her middle and hangs her head. How did everything get so fucked up? Why can’t this mating go right for any amount of time?

Why does it have to be so fucking hard? The world is against us.

**J**ara

I meet Alex's gaze through the crowd. His mask is perfectly in place, but his eyes show his devastation.

I hate this—hate that Archer can just banish someone he's known his whole life.

Angela holds her head high, and her shoulders are stiff as she waits for the order from Archer.

I glance at my mate, but he's the cold and cruel bastard he always seems to be. There is no hope he'll change his mind. I cross my fingers for nothing.

"Jara," Angela whispers. "I'm sorry, he's right. I failed to follow his command, and you paid the price for it."

"It wasn't your fault," I say.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, but I can't let them fall. I can't show weakness in front of the pack.

Archer will lose his mind if anyone sees me as weak due to my own actions. Showing how emotional I am will be like a personal affront to him.

It would make everything worse.

My sad, stupid heart still hopes he will change his mind—that things don't have to be this way. There is no hope in my life, though.

Patrick squeezes my arm as I step forward again. There has to be something I can do. Some way to stop her from being banished.

I glance at Archer again, but his gaze is locked on Angela. His arms are crossed over his chest. He's every inch the unfeeling alpha.

“Archer, please,” I whisper.

He snaps his gaze to mine. He shakes his head and turns back to Alex.

“Escort her out of the pack lands.” Archer's voice is ice.

Alex's shoulders slump as tears run down Angela's cheeks. He nudges her toward the forest and all hope dies a slow death in my heart.

This isn't fucking right. She shouldn't be escorted off pack lands.

As the crowd thins and everyone shuffles away, I round on Archer. “I can't believe you actually did that.”

Can't I, though? It's exactly something Archer would do.

“Well, believe it, mate.” Archer turns away and storms off.

I jog behind him, not willing to let this go. He's not being reasonable at all. He's being an asshole.

“Archer,” I say to his back.

He spins on me and shoves me up against the wall. “You wanted to see the real me, mate. This is it. I'm the cold-hearted

monster that can banish my best friend at the drop of the hat. Test me again and you'll see that firsthand."

"I know this isn't really you." I shake my head.

He can pretend that this is who he is, but I have seen differently.

He's pushing me away again like he's a scared little boy who can't show his feelings, and the fact that he did is terrifying to him.

I glare into his dark eyes.

"You're still holding on to hope for some fairy-tale ending?" He barks a laugh. "I'm not the knight, Jara. I'm the fucking big bad wolf."

"Is this what you want? You want to push me away? Fine. You can lie to yourself all you want, but you can't lie to me."

"That's stupid. There's no reason to push you away. No matter what, you belong to me, so I can do as I please." He bends to glare back at me.

"Fuck you, Archer."

I shove him away from me and shift into my wolf before he can see the tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

He reaches for me mid-shift, but I dodge him easily. I just can't be around him right now.

My clothes shred as I bolt away from him and through the little town. Several shouts ring in my ears as I pass pack members, but I ignore them.

I ignore everything but the ache in my chest and the need to run.

My wolf howls, the sound haunting and heartbreaking. We really shouldn't be howling in case there are humans out here, but the bone-crushing ache in my chest demands it.

Several other howls answer mine in the distance, responding to their alpha female's distress.

I race into the woods through the packed snow and shiver. Even with fur, it's freezing out here.

Shit, this wasn't my best idea, was it? But I can't go back yet. I need to run. I need to get away from Archer for a while so I can breathe.

Where am I going to go, though? I can't leave pack lands; other packs surround us on both sides. And I will never cross territories like I did before. Ever. That was a huge mistake.

My wolf growls at the idea of leaving the pack. We aren't leaving, though, just getting space from Archer. He's even worse now than before I fell.

Maybe if I make him think that I'm leaving, his attitude will change.

I race through the forest with no direction. The scent of pine and freshly fallen snow are the only things that reach my nose.

It's peaceful out here, but as the sky darkens, I worry that I'll be stuck out in the cold. At the same time, I don't want to go back to the house yet and face Archer.

Snow drifts from the cloudy sky, and I shiver again. I need to find shelter. Maybe after a night in the forest, I'll be ready to go back and face my mate.

I sniff the air, but I still don't smell anything but the snow and trees. That could be a good thing or a bad thing. Is the

snow masking other scents?

Could there be others out in the forest, and I don't sense them?

A mountain looms ahead, and I cringe at how far I've traveled without even realizing it. Is Archer looking for me? It's been hours since I took off.

The climb up the mountain is easier than I expect. My wolf's dexterity and nimbleness make her a much better climber than me.

A howl in the distance has my wolf pricking her ears.

Is that Archer? Is he out looking for me? Why?

I'm not ready to see him yet. I nudge my wolf to keep going. She paws the ground, uncertain if she wants to go up the mountain or go after her mate.

*Not yet. I need more time.*

Finally, she trots up the mountain and away from Archer's howl. It's just too much.

I need space. That's it.

Halfway up, a small cave is cut into the mountain. Is this a bad idea? What if there's animals inside making it their home in the cold?

I sniff the entrance and wander around the nearby area, but again, I can't smell anything. An icy breeze blows over me, a chill tracks down my spine, and the fur on my back stands on end..

I tentatively trot inside the mouth of the cave, sniffing the air the whole time. My hackles stay raised until I investigate every dark corner of the space.

When I'm sure it's clear, I curl into a ball in the back of the cave so the howling wind won't blow through my fur.

I should have known better. I should have known that the sweet, tender Archer who almost told me how he felt about me after the accident would turn back to the cold, unfeeling alpha the second something went wrong or I didn't agree with him.

My wolf whines, upset that our mate hurt us like that. He confuses me all the time, and it's like walking on eggshells in my own home.

I never know when something might set him off.

Another urgent howl fills the air, but I ignore it. The pack link is static in my mind, and I block it out. I block him out.

I just need to clear my head and figure out where I belong in his life. If it's just to be his occasional punching bag, then maybe I need to reevaluate that.

I'm no one's punching bag, and if he doesn't start treating me as I deserve, maybe I just won't be around for him to hurt anymore.

My ears prick at the loud crack of a twig snapping outside. What the fuck is that?

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as I jump to my paws and crouch low.

Someone or something is outside the cave. Did the snow mask the scent of an animal, or is it someone else? Is it Archer or a human or another pack member?

Fuck, this was such a bad idea. Why the fuck didn't I go back? I sniff the air as my wolf snarls.

The wind shifts, and I smell it. The distinct smell of a human.

What the fuck are they doing in our woods? Could it just be a hiker? Or were the scouts right about the government trespassing on our land?

I creep to the mouth of the cave and peek out, but even with my enhanced vision, I can't see anyone.

Am I imagining things because I'm on edge? I really don't think so. There was a sound outside.

I step into the biting wind and snow. The snow has gotten worse since I went in the cave to warm up. The flurries are bigger.

Flakes stick to my fur as I slink around the small clearing next to the cave. Sniffing the air, the scents of humans become stronger. How many of them are there?

I'm not great at tracking so differentiating scents is more difficult. There could be more than one human or there could be only one. I don't have enough experience with humans to know for sure.

Either way, I want them out of my territory, and my wolf agrees.

My wolf trots down the side of the mountain in the direction of the scent. This is dangerous, and I should probably turn back, but my wolf doesn't listen to me.

She snarls at something up ahead. The scent of human is stronger the farther we get away from the cave. Shit. I really shouldn't be stalking a human. I shouldn't be shifted in the forest at all.

What was I thinking? I never should have come out here like this. But I wasn't thinking. I was tired—tired of Archer and his bullshit.



I creep forward, and another twig snaps as a man dressed in full tactical gear comes into view.

Peeling my lips back in a snarl, I growl and bare my teeth. What am I going to do?

I glance around the clearing and back away from the human man, but another man steps out from behind a tree. I peer over my shoulder, ready to run, but I'm surrounded.

What is going on here? What do they want from me?

"I know you can understand me," the man in front of me says.

I snarl at him and crouch low. I'm going to pounce—do whatever I can to get away from these men and find Archer.

Does he know the government is in our woods? Why didn't he tell me it was this bad? It's like they knew exactly where I was.

"Don't fight us, or it's just going to be worse for you." The man holds his hands up like he's not here to do horrible things to me.

It's the only thing that makes sense. They are in full gear and carrying weapons. They know they don't belong here and don't care.

I lunge for the man, and he dodges just in time. My paws hit the ground behind him, and I move as swiftly as I can. A shot rings in the air, and pain explodes in my flank.

They shot me? Another shot rings out, and I'm hit again. Stumbling, I glance at my flank. Two darts stick out of my fur.

My vision blurs, and I slump to the ground.

They shot me with tranquilizer darts.

Fuck.

They aren't here to kill me, so what do they want with me?

**A**rcher

I scrub a hand over my face. “Bill, I don’t know what to do. Are the employees taking this seriously?”

After the fight with Jara, she ran into the forest, and Bill called to give me an update.

“They are, and we have the whole building on lockdown. No one goes anywhere.” Bill sounds exhausted.

“What about the pups?” I ask.

They can’t just be abandoned wherever they were at the time.

“Security went to the schools and said there was an emergency. Everyone on our end is safe, Archer, what about your end?”

“We are all fine. There are problems in the woods, but everyone knows to stay out of them.”

Jara. She shifted and ran into the woods. Son of a bitch.

“Bill, I have to go.” I hang up the phone and race outside.

Alex jogs up, his brow pinched with concern.

“Where’s Jara?” he asks.

“We had a fight.” I run a hand through my hair and pace like a caged animal. “She went into the damn woods.”

“She what? You didn’t stop her?” Alex growls, balling his fist.

The putrid scent of his fear and rage hits me hard.

“Gather the enforcers. We need to find her. She shifted and fucking ran, but she doesn’t know how dangerous it is out there.” I whip my shirt over my head as I race into the woods.

“Because you wouldn’t let us tell her.” Alex glares at me but turns and stomps away.

This is my fucking fault; I am well aware of that fact. I don’t need my new beta reminding me of that.

I strip down and shift, hoping the pack link will help me find her and warn her of the danger. I sniff the air and bolt into the woods. My wolf is angry and snarling at me even as we run.

The cold wind bites through me, and white flakes fall on my nose and fur. The only scents I can find are the forest and the freshly fallen snow. It’s masking everything else.

Jara has been gone for hours, and her tracks are long since covered.

Fuck.

Where is she? Is she stuck in one of the traps? Have the government agents found her out here? What will they do if they find a lone wolf?

*Alpha? Alex speaks through the pack link. Any sign of her?*

*No, I can’t catch her scent through all the fucking snow.*

Fuck. This is all my fault. The traps were set to capture us, so what do they want with us?

*I can't either,* Alex snarls.

There has to be a way to get to her—to warn her of the danger she's in. I reach out to her through the mind link, but something's wrong. Is she blocking me, or did they already get to her?

*I can't get to her through the link either. Fuck.*

What if they have her and are long gone already? What if I never see my mate again because the government have taken her?

I was such a bastard to her, again. Why do I keep fucking ruining things with her?

*We'll find her, alpha, no matter what it takes,* Alex says.

*John and Patrick, circle the perimeter. I want everyone searching every single part of this forest until we find her. Alex, check the traps that we found and update me on what you find.*

I race through the woods with no actual direction. I spin in circles as the sky darkens and the temperature plummets.

What is she thinking being out here in the frozen forest at night all alone?

Has she made it back to the village, or is she holed up somewhere trying to stay warm? I hope she's back at home, but I'm not optimistic.

My luck lately hasn't been very good, and that would be too much to fucking hope for.

My wolf howls as we wander in circles, and I curse in my head.

If the humans are in the forest right now, they know damn well we have shifted wolves out here. I try to rein him in, but he wrestles control back.

He's angry at me for putting our mate in danger like this, and I can't fucking blame him because I'm angry at myself.

I race past several cameras, but I don't give a fuck. I'm not stupid enough to think they don't already know what we are. They have bears working with them.

They've been studying us for months. They know what we are and what we can do, but why abduct my people?

It doesn't matter why; I'm going to get them back as soon as I make sure my mate is safe.

*Jara, it's not safe.* I try the pack link again, but it's nothing but static on her end.

Gods, I hope she's just blocking me and it's not something worse.

Think, Archer, where would you go if you planned to spend the night in a frozen ass forest?

I rack my brain as I run through the woods on swift paws, and I sniff the air with every breath to see if I can pick up Jara's scent.

It's just snow and pine.

My wolf howls again into the night. The sound mournful and haunting.

Why won't she answer his call? Is she that upset about Angela, or was it the things I said to her in anger and fear?

I'm a terrible fucking mate. She was trying to stand up for her friend, and I lashed out at her, again.

She has to be okay. She better not be in the hands of the government pricks. I will burn the world and destroy any who try to fucking hurt her.

As I near the mountains at the edge of my territory and Kyle's, the wind shifts, and the faint scent of citrus and vanilla tickles my nose.

She's been here. At least close enough to scent her on the breeze. My wolf yips, but the relief is short lived when other scents mix with hers.

*Humans, I say through the pack link. They are by the mountains on the edge of the territory. Jara is close.*

Alex is the first to respond. *Shit. What are your orders, alpha?*

*Destroy the traps and anything else you can reach. I'm going to follow the scent.*

I'm trotting along and following the scent before I finish speaking through the link. I need to find her and get her out of there before the worst happens.

Panic fills me as the fur on my back stands on end. What if the worst has already happened? What if they have already gotten away with her? I can't fucking lose her.

Every horrible thing I've said and done to her blasts through my mind, and my wolf whimpers. I don't fucking deserve her.

She's perfect and strong, but that's the problem, right? She's too perfect for me not to fall for her, and if I'm being honest with myself, I already have.

I've fallen hard. Fuck. I've got to get her back. I need to know she's okay.

A shot cracks through the air like a bolt of lightning. It echoes through the forest so loud that I can't tell exactly where it came from.

*Alpha?* Alex says through the link.

*I'm fine. I think it was a gunshot, but it's too far away.*

Another shot and then a long mournful howl burst through my oversensitive ears. Jara.

*Is that Jara?* Alex's panicked voice screams through the link.

*Yes, they fucking got her. What the fuck?*

*What do we do, alpha?* Patrick asks calmly.

*You and John head to the border by the mountains. That's where their scents are strongest. Don't do anything, though. Just watch. We don't know what shape she might be in.*

The humans shot my mate. I bolt through the trees, desperate to get to the place where she's been shot. My paws fly over the snow and underbrush as I dart between the trees.

A metallic scent unlike anything I've smelled in my forest burns at my nose. It's unnatural and wrong.

What the fuck did they bring out here?

I follow the scent to where it's strongest, but the humans are already gone. Two small darts lie on the forest floor next to a depression in the snow that looks eerily like a wolf body.

I snarl as I follow the scent of the humans and my mate. How did they capture her? What was in those darts? Was it poison or something to make her easy to transport?



*The humans have her. They shot her with some kind of dart.*

*Fuck, Alex barks through the link.*

I race through the mountains and jump over fallen logs, never letting the scent get away from me, even though one swift breeze could blow it away and I may never find her.

At the base of the mountain on the territory line sits a truck. It's running with its lights shining bright in the freezing night.

I hold back a bark of outrage as two men carry Jara's unconscious wolf into a cage in the back of the truck.

Her russet fur is caked with snow, and her body is limp. Is she dead? Please don't let her be dead.

Why would they take her body with them if they killed her? A tiny bit of relief washes through me at that realization, and I crouch, ready to pounce and get my mate back.

Movement in the cab of the truck catches my attention. Going up against three men in full tactical gear doesn't give me great odds, but if I sneak up on them, I could take them out and get Jara back.

"Hurry up. There are more of them in the woods, probably looking for her," a man inside the truck yells.

I lunge forward, but Angela's wolf is suddenly there and blocking my path. Her lips are pulled back in a snarl as she shakes her wolfy head.

*Move, I have to get her back.*

*Are you dumb, Archer? They will shoot you with those darts too and take you with them.*

I snap at her, but she doesn't budge. She bares her teeth at me, ready to fight me to stop me from saving my fucking mate.

I lunge for her, tackling her to the ground, but she rolls out of my reach quickly and jumps back to her feet.

*I will kill you to get to her.*

*Then you're going to have to do that, alpha, because I refuse to let you go on a suicide mission.*

Angela circles me, snarling.

They're going to get away. Motherfucker.

She's being aggressive, but she's not outright attacking me. Fuck, she's distracting me. She wants them to get away?

I lunge for her a second time and roll with her so she's unable to get away from me. I pin her to the ground, my teeth buried in the scruff of her neck just enough so that she will submit.

Angela bares her throat in submission, but it's already done. The taillights of the truck can barely be seen in the distance.

Fuck. She succeeded in her mission to stop me from getting to Jara.

*What have you done?* I snarl through the link at her.

The others can hear it too, and I feel all their tension.

*I saved you so you can go after her another day, Archer.*

*I could have fucking saved her now, and you just took that possibility out of my hands.*

My wolf growls, and I take off down the dirt road after the truck. It's going too fast to follow it, but the scent my mate

leaves on the wind will help me follow the trail.

Angela calls out to me through the pack link as I race away, but I ignore her. The only thing that matters right now is my mate.

I will get her back or die fucking trying.

**A**rcher

What the fuck?

I slow as a gate comes into view just outside my territory line. The scent trail continues past the gate that's practically hidden by the foliage and vines that grow up the sides. How did they manage to obtain property so close to my pack?

Callahan's words all those months ago come back to me.

Humans have been buying up property too close to the packs for comfort, but I haven't been able to buy them with the government investigating me.

Fuck. They've been planning this so much longer than I thought.

My wolf whines and paws at the snow. He wants in there. He wants to save our mate.

Alex's voice blasts through the link. *What did you find, alpha?*

*Nothing fucking good.* I send a mental image of the black gate. There is a guard in a shack a few hundred yards away.

I slink back into the forest before he sees me and tries to grab me too.

This is so fucked. What the hell is this facility anyway? Are the rogues and Jordan here too? Can we save them all?

*That's really close to the pack. That's how they've been able to get in so silently.*

*Yeah, and close enough to the city that they can kidnap the rogues. I respond to Alex.*

I turn to the man in the guard shack, ready to take him out, but Angela appears next to me in wolf form again.

I snarl at her not happy to see her in the least.

*This place has guards everywhere. You should have let me take them out before they got her here. This is your fault, I say through the link.*

I lunge at her, but she doesn't move. She's not scared, even if she should be.

Determination shines in her eyes.

*This isn't the end of the world, alpha. I'll help you get her back along with all the others. At least now we know where they're being taken. I will help you get her back.*

*I don't need your help or your warnings. I'll get her back myself.*

I storm through the forest, sniffing and trying to find any break in the massive gate that may tell me something—anything—about the type of facility this might be.

Patrick and John round a corner ahead of me and shake their heads.

*Do you hear that humming sound, alpha?* Patrick asks through the link.

I prick my ears, listening, and curse in my mind.

*It's electrified. Shit.*

*There are also surveillance cameras everywhere. I'm surprised they haven't sent anyone out to try to capture us too.*

*That's an idea.* I cock my head to the side.

Can I get them to capture me without shooting me with a dart?

*No, alpha. Not a good idea.* Patrick shakes his head and paws the ground. *It's far better to get inside on our own terms.*

*They have my fucking mate. They're lucky I haven't stormed the fucking place already with my entire pack at my back.*

*It's always your call alpha, but I think we need more information first.* Patrick says through the link.

*I don't want information. I want my fucking mate back.*

I will burn the world to get to her. That facility will be rubble by the time I'm done with it. You don't mess with the Everette pack and live to talk about it.

The end... for now.



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