

The background of the cover features a romantic couple in a blue-toned setting. A woman with long, straight blonde hair is on the left, looking towards a man on the right. She has her hand near his face, and he has his hand on her shoulder. The scene is set against a backdrop of a forest at night, with a large, glowing full moon in the sky. In the foreground, a black silhouette of a wolf is shown howling, with its head tilted back. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and romantic, with a focus on the supernatural elements of the book.

THE
WHITE WOLF
PROPHECY,
BOOK ONE

Wolf Bound

KAYLEIGH KING

WOLF BOUND

THE WHITE WOLF PROPHECY, BOOK ONE

KAYLEIGH KING

Copyright © 2020 by Kayleigh King

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copy edit by Gina www.killingitwrite.com

Proofread by Michelle Morrow www.chellreads.com

Cover by Najla Qamber Designs www.najlaqamberdesigns.com

ISBN: 978-0-578-64201-7

For my Family

*Who told me to leave the driveway, but it's too peopley outside
and I'd much rather talk to the people living in my head.*

CONTENTS

1. Pruitt
2. Ryker
3. Pruitt
4. Ryker
5. Pruitt
6. Ryker
7. Pruitt
8. Ryker
9. Pruitt
10. Ryker
11. Pruitt
12. Pruitt
13. Pruitt
14. Pruitt
15. Ryker
16. Pruitt
17. Pruitt
18. Ryker
19. Pruitt
20. Ryker
21. Pruitt
22. Ryker
23. Pruitt
24. Pruitt
25. Ryker
26. Pruitt
27. Ryker
28. Pruitt
29. Ryker
30. Pruitt
31. Ryker
32. Pruitt
33. Ryker

34. [Pruitt](#)

35. [Ryker](#)

36. [Pruitt](#)

37. [Ryker](#)

38. [Pruitt](#)

39. [Ryker](#)

40. [Pruitt](#)

41. [Ryker](#)

42. [Pruitt](#)

43. [Ryker](#)

44. [Pruitt](#)

45. [Pruitt](#)

46. [Ryker](#)

47. [Pruitt](#)

[SOUL BOUND](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

PRUITT

“Good God, are you even helping?” I grunt as I hoist the heavy dresser up another stair step.

“Would you prefer to walk backwards up these stairs? You’re more than welcome to switch positions with me!” Aunt Addison hisses down at me. Her usually sweet voice is harsh and has a bite to it I’m not used to.

“I don’t think moving has been conducive to our relationship.” My arms burn as I struggle to keep my hold on the large piece of wood furniture. “You’ve been very testy, and you seem to be taking it out on me. But let me remind you, moving here was *your* idea, not mine. You were the one who said, and I quote, ‘*The fresh Montana air will do us some good,*’” I mimic in my best Addison voice going up an octave. “But you’ve been a brat the whole time, and you’re not lifting with your legs! *Heave woman!*”

“Pru, don’t make me laugh,” Addison says with a snicker. I can’t see her face from this angle, but I know she’s biting her lower lip and her brow is pulled together in frustration. “I’ve had an itch on my nose for the last three minutes, and if you don’t think I haven’t thought about letting this thing go and scratching it, you’re wrong. So don’t tempt me!”

With a final push, we’re able to get the dresser to the top landing. Once we have the dresser secure on flat ground, I step back and flop to the ground. “I can’t believe you told those mover guys we didn’t need help lugging the rest of this shit up

these stairs.” I push a lock of blonde hair off my sweaty forehead. “What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t want them to think we were weak girls who couldn’t move our own furniture.” Addie leans on the top of the dresser and rests her head on her arm.

It’s only ever been Addie and me. We’ve always been strong-headed and are always reluctant to ask for help, but in this case, we really do need it.

“Addie, we *are* weak girls who can’t move our own furniture,” I say straight-faced. “It took us a half-hour to get this beast up the steps, and that’s not even the largest piece of furniture we have to move!” Addison looks over the railing to the pile of boxes and belongings we have yet to haul up.

“Yeah, I know.” She groans as she stretches her back. “That’s why I called them an hour ago, and they’re coming back in the morning.”

“So what you’re saying is, I just risked my life moving this damn thing for no reason?” Addie’s lips thin in a stubborn scowl, and she offers no defense because she doesn’t have one. “Well, in that case, I’m going to bed.” I pull myself off the ground and head down the hall, kissing Addison’s cheek as I pass. Her hazel eyes look tired, and her light brown hair is falling from the French braid she had tied it into this morning. I hope she follows my lead and goes to bed.

“Don’t even think about coming and asking me to help you until there are double digits on the clock!” I warn her over my shoulder.

I should be missing San Francisco more than I am. For a place I’ve called home for fourteen years, I’m shocked at how easy it was for me to walk away from it all. I didn’t think twice about agreeing to move with Addison to Montana when she made the decision to leave. At the age of twenty, I had the option of staying in California by myself and continuing to go to the local college there. But Addison is the only family I have ever known, and the idea of being on my own did not sit well with me. So, I packed up my life with Addie a couple of days ago and made the drive to Montana with her.

Addison is originally from Montana, and though all her family is gone now, she felt the need to return to her roots and come home. She bought a farmhouse on a large piece of land and for the past six months, has had it renovated and readied for our arrival. It still has many of its original characteristics, like the exposed wood beams in the ceiling and heavy oak doors. Having lived in a modern condo for most of my life, the rustic feel of my new home is a welcomed change. I am, however, thankful she had every bathroom and the kitchen updated. The old fixtures were antiquated and damaged. And the original wallpaper in my bathroom with the colorful birds on it *had* to go.

I close the door to my new room and can't help but feel happy looking at the amazing little reading nook under my large window. I can already see myself spending hours painting or sketching there. Addison knew that as well, and that's why she allowed me to have this room. It's a bit larger than the one she chose for herself, but she said I would get more use out of this space, and I know she's right.

I pad across the dark hardwood floors to my bathroom and quickly brush my teeth and wash my face. As I braid my long pale-blonde hair, I study myself in the mirror. The same light green eyes stare back at me as always, but something in them has changed. A softness or calmness sits there now. The fast-paced life of living in a big city must have affected me more than I had realized.

I climb into my freshly made bed and snuggle under the white comforter, resigning myself to a rough night since I never sleep well in unfamiliar places. But to my surprise, I fall asleep the second my head hits the pillow.

IT'S RAINING.

No, correction, it's pouring.

But I don't feel it hit my skin or soak through my white sleep shirt. Nor do I feel how my hair now hangs around my face like a wet curtain. I don't shiver when the wind picks up or jump when the thunder cracks above my head so loud I

swear it rattles my bones. I should be scared and feeling seconds away from hyperthermia, but all I feel is an unexplainable warmth.

I find comfort in the woods surrounding me, they welcome me like an old friend. I've never been here before, but I know this path like the back of my hand.

I skillfully weave between brush, gracefully leaping over fallen trees and rocks as I go. I have a feeling in my gut, it tells me something is waiting for me. And at any second I will come face to face with the source of my calmness.

My heartbeat echoes in my ears as I step into the clearing. The full moon above is the only source of light, its beams creating shadows and dark shapes in the trees. I force my eyes to focus on what's in front of me, and I gasp when I finally see him.

A wolf.

He stands across the clearing from me, moving like a shadow in the dim light. His dark coat reflects the moonlight, and I can barely make out his silver undercoat.

Somehow, I know it's a male. I can feel it in my gut. Just like I know, he has golden eyes. I can't see them from this far away, but I know all the same, and I would bet my life I'm right.

I stare at the wild animal in front of me and notice a gold shimmer shines around his large frame. It's barely visible, but I can see the shimmering gold light glowing in the moonlight.

There is something familiar about that aura around him, like many of my memories, it's right under the surface, but I can't reach it. I know I've seen it before, but I can't place where.

We watch each other for what seems like hours, but I know it has only been mere moments. Neither of us moves, afraid if we do, it will be all over, and I'll never see him again.

Something in my soul cracks at the thought of never seeing him again. I feel connected to him in some strange way like we are a part of each other.

No longer able to help it, I take a deep breath and a step forward. My fingers itch to run through his thick fur and to see those golden eyes for myself. But the second my right foot lifts off the ground, the thick, inky darkness of the night starts to swirl around us. My vision begins to cut in and out, and I feel him slipping away from me.

No!

I BOLT UPRIGHT IN BED, ALMOST FLYING OFF THE SIDE AND onto the floor. It takes me a second to remember where I am and what just happened. Never in my life have I dreamt about a wolf. And if I really think about it, I hardly ever dream at all. Or if I do, I forget them the second I open my eyes in the morning.

But sitting here, trying to catch my breath, I can remember every moment of the dream. I remember the feeling of peace and the calmness I found by being in the woods. I remember the way the dirt felt under my bare feet and the sound of my blood rushing in my ears. But mostly, I remember *him*. I remember how beautiful he was and how his coat appeared pitch black except for the bits of white or silver peaking through on his chest. I remember how large he was compared to wolves I've seen at the zoo or on the discovery channel.

I remember everything about him and I don't think I'll ever forget.

To ensure I never will, I fling myself out of bed and begin to dig through the boxes on my floor. I sigh in relief when I finally open the box containing my sketchbook and pencils.

I practically float across the room to my window seat with images of the wolf swirling around in my head. I focus on the small details of his face as I start to sketch him. My hand moves without much effort, recreating the images in my head with skill and precision.

As I'm adding the finishing touches to his face, I hear it. A howl.

I sit motionless as I listen to the chorus of other wolves, adding their voice to the night sky. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard, and I pray I will hear it again.

I drift off as I stare out my window, willing the wolf to appear. Although deep in my soul, I know I will see the wolf again; he isn't just a figment of my wild imagination and subconscious; he will somehow soon stand across from me in the clearing.

And I can't wait.

RYKER

10 MONTHS LATER

“He’s heading south!” I hear Sawyer shout through the speaker on my phone, his deep voice breathless as he continues to track the rogue wolf. “You should be able to cut him off at the mountain pass!”

“Got it. Don’t let him out of your sight!” I growl as I quickly correct my direction, turning my truck around. The sound of my tires squealing and engine roaring fills my ears. “I’m tired of this fucker having the upper hand.”

Sawyer and I have been tracking this specific male for the past two weeks all through Alberta, Canada. Every time we come close to catching up with him, he somehow finds a way to evade us.

The thing about rogue males is they are so blinded by the bloodlust they don’t even bother to cover their tracks. But this male has been diligent about staying under the radar. He’s so far under the radar I’m starting to think he has some help.

“I’m heading east, I can help you trap him at the pass!” A female voice comes through the phone. Avery is the occasional third to our group. She was attacked and assaulted by a rogue last year. After Sawyer and I were able to subdue him, she was the one to rip out his throat. She has quickly become quite a fierce warrior.

“Sawyer, you need to shift! There’s no way you’ll be able to stay on his trail in human form!”

A thumping noise comes from the phone, and then it goes dead, meaning Sawyer took Avery’s advice and shifted into his

wolf form, dropping his phone somewhere in the Canadian woods.

I push my truck to its limit as it speeds through the back mountain roads. Usually, Sawyer is the one to drive while I track in wolf form. I'm faster and stronger in my wolf form than both Sawyer and Avery, but since he was closest when we caught the scent, he went ahead.

I try to keep my focus on the task at hand, I can't help but let my mind wander to *her*.

This week would have been her twenty-first birthday. We should be celebrating. I imagine we would have gone to the local bar and ordered her first legal drink, something fruity with an umbrella. It's the fourteenth birthday I have mourned her death instead of celebrating her life. And it's another reminder my mate is dead and I will never celebrate a birthday or holiday with her again.

Fourteen years ago, my mate was killed by a pack of rogue wolves. At the age of thirteen, I never truly comprehended the importance of having a mate or how lucky I was to have found mine so early. I was too young then to understand death. But now I surround myself with it daily. I spend my days hunting and killing rogues, so no one else ever has to know what it's like to lose their mate at the hands of a rogue wolf.

"Ryker, you still there?" Avery's soft voice interrupts my thoughts. "I know it's a rough week for you—"

Before she can finish her sentence, I cut her off with a growl more beast than human. "Stop talking, Avery," I warn her.

"I'm saying I'm here for you."

"I know, but I don't want to talk about it." She knows I don't like to drag up memories of Grey and talking about my feelings. What is there really to say? My mate is dead, and someday soon I will turn rogue myself. But until that day happens, I will hunt down every one of these evil bastards as I can. I have nothing to live for anymore, but at least I'm making a difference.

That's what I like to tell myself anyway.

Some would argue I still have my family and pack back in Montana. But it was never the same after Grey died. The place I called home all my life no longer felt like the loving, warm place that it was. It's more like a graveyard to me. It's the place where my mate died, taking our future with her.

“But—”

“Avery, I'm not having this conversation with you again,” I snap, trying desperately to end this uncomfortable topic.

Ever since we found Avery beaten and battered in that motel room last year, she has desperately tried to comfort me. At first, I thought she believed she owed me something for saving her life. But I quickly realized she was interested in being more than a shoulder to lean on. I'll admit, I may have taken her up on her offer once, but the guilt that overwhelmed me waking up in her bed was enough to make me vomit. I wasn't meant to be with anyone but my mate. And even if she is no longer here, it still feels like cheating. Since that night, months ago, I have tried to distance myself from Avery and set up more boundaries with her.

“*Sheesh*, no need to bite my head off.”

“I've warned you about this. I don't know why you continue to try to broach the subject,” I argue, but as I'm about to lay into her, Sawyer stumbles into the road, naked and bloodied and back in human form.

I slam on my breaks and barely swerve enough to avoid crushing my best friend. “Son of a bitch!”

Once safely on the side of the narrow road, I open my truck door and jump down onto the pavement. My heavy boots pound into the ground as I jog to where Sawyer is hunched over. I smell the blood, and the copper scent overwhelms my senses. “What the hell happened?”

“He got the jump on me. The redheaded fucker is on my last nerve,” Sawyer wheezes. His breath is short, and his face ashen. He is obviously in an immense amount of pain but trying to hide it.

“I’ll get the first aid kit,” I tell him as I help him hobble to the bed of the truck. I can see he has claw marks on his side and a pretty gnarly gash out of his thigh. “He got you good, huh?”

“He came out of nowhere,” Sawyer hisses as he adjusts himself, trying to find a comfortable position. “He was masking his scent somehow.”

As wolf shifters, we heal faster than humans. But it does not mean we are immune to pain or injury. Sawyer will be hurting for a couple of days, and there will be faint scars from the claw marks.

“I noticed that last week. I don’t know how he’s doing it.” The son of a bitch masking his scent is another reason I think this rogue is getting outside help. But that creates another question. Who would help a rogue wolf terrorize a female shifter?

It takes me forty-five minutes to get Sawyer stitched up. It wasn’t necessary, but it will help his wounds heal faster and smoother. This isn’t the first time we’ve had to do this. Each of us in the past five years has taken turns sewing and bandaging the other. We both have more scars than either of us can count. Luckily my dark tattoos do an excellent job of covering them. Sawyer, on the other hand, is pale and has no tattoos to cover the raised pink lines that mar his body.

Every time I do this, a pang of guilt fills my chest. He shouldn’t be doing this. He has no reason to do so, other than the fact he’s my friend. I’m the one who has a vendetta against rogue wolves, and I’m the one who drug him into this. He always wanted to go to the police academy, and I selfishly stole that from him. This is not how either of us saw our future.

“Sawyer—”

“Dude, don’t start.” He turns his head to look at me, and I can see the annoyance written on his face. “Every time I get hurt, we have this discussion, and frankly, I’m sick of. If I didn’t want to be doing what we’re doing, I wouldn’t be. It’s

as simple as that. So, shut your face and get me a beer from the cooler—I deserve it.”

“Yes, you do.” I clap him on his shoulder as I walk to the cab of the truck.

Sawyer has always been better than me, a better friend, a better son, and a better person all around. He would do anything for the people he cares about.

I would like to say the same for myself, but I haven’t seen my family in five years. I have no idea what they’re even up to these days. Remington, my younger sister, is going on twenty-one and should be in college if that’s the path she chose. My brothers, Ranger and Ransom, are twenty-four, and God knows what they’re doing with their lives. The last time I was with the twins, they were chasing tail and making complete assholes of themselves.

Sawyer makes an effort to call and check in with his mom once a week. Whereas I can’t be bothered to send more than a postcard home to let my family know I’m alive.

I return with his beer, Sawyer has put on a pair of basketball shorts, and a loose hoodie. Being shifters, we go through a mass amount of clothing because we hardly have the time to carefully remove and fold our clothes before shifting.

“Thank God,” I laugh. “I was getting sick of staring at your naked ass,” I joke as I hand him the chilled can.

“No one said you had to stare at it.” He shrugs and pops the tab, taking greedy gulps of the amber liquid. “*Ahh*, just what the doctor ordered.”

We sit on the open bed of the truck in comfortable silence. The mountain pass we are on is remote, not a single car has driven by. I try not to think about how, with us just sitting here the rogue is getting farther away. But I know he’ll turn up again sooner than later, and if we’re lucky, Avery was able to see where he was headed.

“Do you want to talk about what this week is?” Sawyer finally asks after a while, and I can tell how he runs a hand through his already tousled blond hair he’s nervous asking the

question. He knows from experience I don't react well to people asking me about Grey. But today, I find myself wanting to answer him.

"She would have been twenty-one this Saturday," I say after a long pause. "And just like every year when her birthday rolls around, or it's a holiday, my brain plays the *what-if* game. What if she was still alive? What if we had completed the mating ceremony? What if we were living in the house I would have built for her on the lake?"

"I can't imagine what you've gone through," he says. Like mine, his eyes still scan the surrounding area, in case we get lucky enough to have the rogue wolf come walking by. "To find your mate so young and then lose her so young is unimaginable. But you know Grey wouldn't have wanted you to suffer like you are. Get off the cross, dude, you have a whole life in front of you, and your head is stuck in the past."

He makes it seem simple, but Sawyer doesn't understand how not only am I in constant emotional pain, but so is my wolf. He misses and longs for his mate too. Male shifters crave the peace and calmness a female brings them. It centers them and makes them stronger. But to have barely known peace and have it ripped away like it was, I don't know if I will ever recover.

"It's not fair I get to keep on living after she died. I wish I had been with her the night they were attacked."

"I don't," Sawyer says, shaking his head. "If you had died in the attack with the Thornes, who would be here to help me prevent things like that from happening? Who would stop these sick fucks from destroying families, like they did Grey's?"

"And I still haven't found the wolves that killed Archer, Genevieve, and Grey." That's the whole point of this crusade, to find the wolves who ripped out the Thornes's throats and then set their car on fire, with their bodies still inside.

"No, but there's still time, and we will find them." Sawyer puts his arm around my shoulders. "And I promise you, Ryker, we will."

We sit in comfortable silence for a minute before we hear movement in the trees to our right. We both jump off our perch on the truck's bed. Sawyer moves a tad slower, but still ready to fight if the rogue decides to show his face. To our relief, it's Avery who steps out of the brush, picking leaves and pine needles out of her long dark locks.

Still naked from shifting, she saunters toward us, unfazed by her bare state. "That redhead is fast as hell," she grumbles as she passes both of us to find some clothing in the backseat. "I tracked him all the way to the border, but his scent disappeared like last week when we were in Calgary."

Last week, we had been outside of Calgary tracking the rogue after he attacked and assaulted a young unmated female. The sixth she-wolf he has left beaten and violated in his wake of destruction. He had originally started on the western side of Washington State and had made his way from there through Idaho and a piece of Montana before taking a quick turn north. We had been tracking him though Alberta ever since.

"We have to find him soon," I grumble. "He's growing more bloodthirsty, and his attacks are coming closer and closer together. His humanity is completely gone by now, and his wolf is working on pure instinct and need."

Rogue wolves don't choose to go rogue. Unfortunately, biology has not been kind to the male wolf shifters. Male wolves have biological timeclocks that dictate when they need to mate. The timeclock differs for all of us and whys and whens are unclear, but the wolf that lives inside the man craves the peace the connection with a female brings. And if they don't find them in time, they turn rogue. Meaning they look for peace in any female they can get their hands on. In some cases, the rogue male is so far gone it forces a mating bond on non-consenting females. In the wolf shifter community, this is considered a form of sexual assault and the worst thing that could happen to a female.

"His last victim is barely alive," Sawyer growls, surely remembering the bloody and gruesome sight we found the young female in. "But she fought like hell, and that's the only reason she's still breathing."

“It will take time, but she’ll be okay,” Avery assures us. Having survived a rogue attack, she knows how physically and mentally scarring it is for the females.

Turning to us with her hands on her hips, Avery adds, “He’s obviously headed into Montana, right? Where’s the closest pack to the border from here? He’s going to be looking for a new female, and with his escalation, it’s not going to be pretty if we don’t find him first.”

Both Sawyer and I stop and give each other a look. I know exactly what pack he’s making his way toward as we speak. Familiar faces flash in my mind as I think of the pack, and I feel bile rising in my throat at the thought of him going anywhere near them. *My Pack*. I don’t know if I should even consider them my pack anymore since I deserted them, but that’s my family, and I can’t let that wolf anywhere near them.

Kicking the rocks under my feet, I push my hands through my dark hair. “Shit!” I growl, a hint of my wolf coming through as I do. Avery jumps back, and Sawyer has turned pale.

“What did I miss?” Avery’s amber eyes narrow in question.

“He’s headed right toward our pack,” Sawyer explains as I pace in front of them. I contemplate my next move as they continue to talk in hushed voices. I should call my dad, the alpha of the pack, and warn him. But I know it will be better if I go and handle it in person.

“We have to go home.” I stop and look at both of them. “We kill him, and then we get the hell out of Dodge. Got it?”

The idea of going home makes my skin crawl, but it gives me extra motivation to get this wolf. The faster I find him, the faster I’m able to get out of Montana and away from the ghost of Grey Thorne haunts me there.

PRUITT

The bell above the door sounds as we enter the musty old basement-level shop. I know I shouldn't be surprised by the interior design, but I can't help but gasp and take a step back as I look around. The psychic shop is everything and more like they depict on television. Occult items cover every inch of the dark-red painted walls, and a variety of medallions and chimes hang from the ceiling. Bookshelves line the back wall and are full of books of varying genres and items. I'm surprised it's still standing. In the middle of the room is a round table with a purple tablecloth of sorts on it.

"What? No magic crystal ball?" I ask, snickering to my new best friend, Remington, as I continue to look around the small and overly crowded space. "I can't believe I let you drag me here. When you said you had something fun planned tonight, I thought it was going to be ice cream." I can't help but pout over the missing dessert.

"Esme is the real deal, Pru, just wait and see." Remington smiles at me from the other side of the room as she continues to stare at—*Holy shit. What is in that jar?*

No, wait! I've decided I don't want to know.

"Remi, I never would have guessed you believed in all this magic and paranormal craziness." I met Remi on my first day of classes at the local college, and we've been tight ever since. She had said the first day she felt like I was a friend she'd had forever. I couldn't have agreed more. I had lived in Montana for a week when we met and hadn't yet ventured out of the

farmhouse much. I mostly spent the week getting acclimated to my new home and obsessing over the wolf from my dream. Little did I know ten months ago I would continue to have the same dream almost every night and, it would only get worse.

I started sleepwalking not long after the first dream, and this morning, I woke up face down in the dirt in the woods behind my house. It wasn't my favorite way to wake up and I definitely would *not* recommend it.

“Well, my sweet friend, there are still many things you don't know about me.” Remi gives me a mischievous smile, her ocean-blue eyes sparking. “Last week, Esme told me to not worry or panic about my finals for the semester and guess who passed all her classes?” Remi motions to herself with a wave of her tanned hand. “That'd be me!”

“You needed a psychic to tell you that you'd pass your exams when you've been an A student your whole life?” I wrinkle my nose at her. “Seems like you wasted money to me.”

“I hear we have a skeptic in our midst,” a musical voice says from behind the curtain leading to what I would assume is another interior room. A middle-aged woman flips the curtain back and makes her grand entrance.

She is exactly what I expected when Remi told me we would be seeing a psychic tonight. She wears a long patterned skirt, and a loose blouse cinched with a thick belt at her middle.

The woman is beautiful in her own way. Her curly hair is dark with strands of silver starting to show from age, and I can see from across the room that she also has some feathers and other jewels woven into it. Her almond-shaped eyes are dark but reflect the small amount of light in a way I have never seen before. It's like making eye contact with a piece of obsidian. *Very Interesting*. Lastly, her tanned skin is flawless except for a small mole above the right side of her lips that are currently giving me a welcoming grin.

“No shame in being a skeptic, my dear, but I have no doubt we will be changing your mind soon.” The woman continues

to smile at me, but as she cocks her head to the side and exams me from her place across the room, I notice the slight widening of her eyes.

As quickly as the surprised look appears on her face, it vanishes. “Please, come sit, my girls, and we can get started. Remington, I am pleased to hear your exams went smoothly. And I’m enjoying your new haircut. It’s flattering on you.” She pats Remi’s hand as they sit down across from each other at the table.

Remington reaches up and touches the ends of her chocolate-brown hair. She had cut a couple inches off the other day, and it now rests at her shoulders. “Thank you again for getting me in last week, Esme. I really needed some reassurance it was *all* going to be okay.” Remi grins at the psychic, a look of trust and calmness on her face.

I suppose if Remi trusts this woman and is relaxed being here, I don’t see the harm in staying, I slowly take my seat next to Remi and across from Esme, who is now digging around in a cabinet behind her. “Are you going to read my palm or something?” I shakily laugh and wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans in case she says yes.

“No, my dear, that’s just a parlor trick people perform. We use real magic here,” Esme tells me as she places a deck of tarot cards in the middle of the table. I almost start laughing when I see the excited look on Remi’s face.

Good Lord girl.

“Let me get this straight. Palm reading is bull, but tarot cards are real magic?”

“Pruitt! Shut up and let the lady do her thing!” Remi reaches over and pinches the soft skin on the underside of my arm.

“Ouch!” I immediately rub the sore spot.

“Precisely,” Esme says with a slight laugh. I watch in fascination as she places the stack of cards in her hand and proceeds to knock and tap the top of the stack. She then places the cards on the table and shuffles them around on the purple

tablecloth. She whispers something as she does this, but I can't make out what she says. "Okay, let us begin."

Esme places the cards facedown on the table in a pattern that doesn't make any sense to me, but then again, none of this makes sense. I bite my lip and silently watch as she continues to chant and place the cards on the table.

It may be psychosomatic, but I suddenly feel a flash of cold air hit my back, and it causes chills to run down my spine. Esme picks up what looks to me like a totally random card and flips it over, revealing a picture of a man holding a lantern.

"The Hermit," Esme says.

"Ha! Even the cards know you need to leave the house more!" Remi giggles from her spot beside me.

"You have been lonely for many years... isolated," Esme explains as she traces the shape of the painted man on the card with a long finger.

I keep my face neutral, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing she's not far off. While I've always had Addison and I am forever grateful for her, I can't help but feel like I'm missing something big from my life. Lately, I've started to think I'm missing something more than just my dead parents.

Esme nods and lifts up another card. "The High Priestess." The card has a beautiful woman in a cloak on the front. "One of my favorites." I don't miss the knowing look Esme gives Remi, almost like they're exchanging an inside joke between the two of them.

"This card is telling you that you need to listen to your inner voice. You've been ignoring the truth your inner self knows. You need to listen to it. It's trying to tell you something. This may come over in the form of unexplained... *vibes*, if you will, or even dreams. Have you been dreaming lately, Pruitt?"

I'm perspiring now, and my heart is racing, but still, I keep it cool and shake my head. "No, I don't dream. Haven't since the accident."

Like before, Esme nods and moves on to the next card. I feel Remi give my hand a reassuring squeeze. Apparently, I'm not hiding how uncomfortable I am as well as I thought I was because when I look at Remi, she gives me a small smile.

The next card Esme flips over has a moon on it. On the left side of the card, a dog howls at the moon, and on the right, a wolf does the same. And this time, I can't help but let the shock appear on my face. I swear if she says something about a wolf, I'm going to freak the *fuck* out.

"The Moon card. The dog represents our civilized nature while the wolf represents our animalistic one. This hints you may be fighting two sides of yourself now, or sometime soon."

I exhale and relax. Had she said the wolf represents the wolf you've been dreaming of every night, I would have probably gotten up and left. But thankfully, I can't think of a single thing in my life that would reflect this card.

"Next, we have the Four of Wands," Esme describes, having moved on to the next card. Four wands are painted on a card with a bright yellow background. "You will learn soon, you have found your home—your *community*. That feeling of belonging you've been craving Pru is close. I promise."

I feel hot tears stream down my face. *Goddammit!* I hate crying, and the fact I'm doing it over some stupid parlor trick is ridiculous, but she's hitting way too close to home now. I've never belonged. I never fit in with any of the kids at school growing up. I've always felt unsettled and like I wasn't in the right spot. But this sense of belonging has slowly started to creep in ever since I first got to Montana and even more after I met Remington Weylyn and her family. They welcomed me with open arms, and I have never felt more content than I do when I spend my days at their large lake house. Remington's older twin brothers Ransom and Ranger have taken me under their wings like another sister, and it makes my heart swell. Not that I would ever admit that to them.

I quickly swipe the tears from my face and motion for Esme to keep going. The next card doesn't need explaining,

and I can't help but read the card's name aloud before Esme can. "The Lovers."

"Oooh! Pruitt, do you have a secret lover you haven't told me about?" Remi teases as she pulls the card closer to herself so she can see the artwork of Adam and Eve. "Are these all hand-painted? It looks like it. Hey, Pru, maybe that's something you can do, paint tarot cards, and sell them online. I bet some people would pay top dollar for that shit. What do you think, Esme?" Remi rambles on as she examines the card, even going so far as to scratch at the paint with her fingernail.

Esme doesn't answer. Remi and I both look across the table at the older woman who is staring straight at me. Her black eyes have glossed over, and I see they are darker and shinier than before.

"Holy shit. Is she okay?" I ask as I wave a hand in front of Esme's face, but there is no response from the psychic. "Esme?"

Remi tilts her head to the side and looks at the still woman. "She's fine. She's just having a vision." Remi shrugs like it's not a big deal, and what she said was completely normal.

"A vision? Like...a *vision*? Like she's seeing the future right now?"

"Yep!" Remi says, popping the *P* for emphasis. "Maybe it'll be about you! Wouldn't that be cool?"

"Umm, *no*." I have enough weirdness going on in my life right now, and the last thing I need to worry about is a vision of my future that may or may not happen. I haven't told Remi about my dreams or sleepwalking. I've only told Addison about the dreams, and even then, I left the sleepwalking out. Addison's had a lot going on lately, and I don't want to worry her.

All of a sudden, Esme exhales and shakes her head. Her eyes have cleared some, but her previous cheerful expression has been replaced by a look of sorrow. "Oh, child," she starts, "The lovers card is a little different for you."

Of course, it is.

“What? What is it?” I squeak, honestly terrified of her answer.

“He’s on his way, the one you’ve been looking for. As we speak, he is on his way to you. But another is coming, a darker soul. You must be careful of him, he brings destruction and trouble.” Esme reaches across the table and grabs my hand. Her own hands are ice cold to the touch. “I fear a painful decision is in your future, and it will be the hardest thing you will ever have to do. But you’ll know the right choice to make.”

The room is thick with tension, and I feel a slight electrical charge in the air. My mind races as I try to process what she has said. Part of me wants to heed her warning and believe she truly just had a vision of my future. But the rational part of me says this whole event is bullshit and to not put any weight into it.

We sit in silence as I contemplate the bomb the psychic has just delivered.

“Well, what the fuck does that mean?” Remi finally asks.

I’VE ALWAYS HATED MY BIRTHDAY.

Ever since I woke up in the hospital after the accident, I’ve never wanted to celebrate. Even though I don’t remember what my birthdays were like before that night, I knew deep down they would never be the same again. How could they? My parents weren’t there to celebrate, and I never had friends to invite to a party. By the time I was twelve, I had convinced Addison I didn’t want any parties or presents, and we agreed on a family dinner and a card, which was more than enough for me.

Remington doesn’t know my birthday is actually today, which is good because I know she would have wanted to throw a big party for me. Just like they are doing today for her father, Elias. His birthday was last week, but apparently, the

nice family dinner I had attended that night wasn't enough for the Weylyn family.

"I'm sorry I'm missing your birthday today, Pru," Aunt Addie tells me, her soft voice coming through the speaker in my Jeep. "But I'll be back at the end of the week, and we can have our dinner then."

Addison owns a chain of high-end clothing boutiques across the country, and she is required to travel often. She tries to spend an equal amount of time at each location, but it's been getting harder and harder for her to do since she's now up to seventeen storefronts. Addison's currently in New Orleans, working on opening the eighteenth location. Being the control freak she is, she insists she be the one to train the new staff and make sure everything runs smoothly. I don't know why she bothers to have an assistant when she won't let the poor girl take charge of anything.

"You know I hate my birthday, Addie," I say as I make the turn into the Weylyn's mile-long driveway. The gate usually requires a code is wide open, allowing the guests to drive in. The party for Elias technically started an hour ago, but I didn't worry about being on time as I figured I wouldn't be missed, seeing as, according to Ransom and Ranger, Margot, their mom, had basically invited the whole town.

"We can order pizza in or something when you get back." I reach up and remove my sunglasses from my face as the sun has set enough that it's no longer blinding me.

"I thought we would try the new steakhouse that opened in town," Aunt Addie replies. She sounds tired, and I can't help but think about how she's seemed worn-down and drained the last couple of months. Her usually upbeat self just hasn't been there. I've also noticed she is looking a little older than her actual age of forty-five. I had tried to talk to her about slowing down some and delegating, but she wouldn't have it. "We need to get you out of the house more, or you're going to be known as the Town Hermit," she adds with a laugh.

I gulp at the word *hermit*. I've been thinking nonstop about my appointment with Esme earlier this week. No matter how

hard I try to shake it off, her words and her *vision* have shaken me. The part about the lovers card had specifically gotten into my head.

“...The one you have been looking for...”

Of course, the first thing I think about when I recall Esme’s words is the wolf. Even after ten months of having the same dream, I haven’t given up hope he’s real and we are somehow connected. His golden eyes match the golden glow surrounding him, and every night I see those eyes staring back at me from across the dark clearing.

I remember I’m on the phone still and turn my attention away from my thoughts of the wolf and try to listen to what Addison is saying. “...and it was nice of the Weylyns to invite you to the party today. I wonder how many people they’ve invited. With the size of their house, they could host the whole town and half of the neighboring ones too.”

“The twins said there should be a hundred people here today.” The thought of so many people makes my skin crawl. I may be comfortable with the Weylyns, but being around that many strangers makes me nervous, and I pause a moment with the thought of texting Remi and telling her I can’t come after all. I could easily fake the flu... *“No, I’m sorry—cough—I woke up with this horrible head flu, and I’m afraid—cough—cough—I would get all those people sick—cough—and I don’t want to risk it. I’ll send Elias a muffin basket in my place—cough.”*

But as quickly as the idea comes into my head, I dismiss it. Knowing Remington, she would drive to my house and pull me out of bed and force me to come anyway. She doesn’t get told no often. I’ve learned to pick and choose my battles with her, and today, that’s a battle I would not have won.

“I don’t understand how they even know that many people,” I say to Addison. “Yes, I know we live in a smaller town, but still, I don’t get. Everywhere Remi and I go, people recognize her and stop to talk.” I cringe the second the words leave my mouth because I know how that sounded.

“Yikes. You might want to tuck that jealousy back in before you get to their house.”

I don't want to be jealous of Remington, but sometimes I wish I had the large happy family she has or I could make friends as easily as she can. Remi is the only friend I've ever felt close to. The small friendships I made while in San Francisco were surface level. Enough to sit in the campus café together, but never close enough to know or care to learn much about their families or private lives. Whereas Remi and I clicked the minute she sat next to me in our English Lit class.

“I know. I heard it too.” I bite my lip as I pull my Jeep into one of the only parking spaces available on their driveway. I barely fit my car behind a monstrosity of a black truck. I just know I would need a running start to even climb into that beast. “Okay I'm here, I'll call you when I leave. Love ya, Addie.”

Addison says her goodbyes, and I sit in my vehicle, staring at the large house in front of me. I don't understand how Margot has enough time in the week to keep it cleaned and organized, but every time I'm here, the Weylyn house is immaculate. I know in total, there are six Weylyn family members, but I'll never know why they need a house this big. One wing of the wood cabin-like mansion is a six-car garage. I've been in there a couple times and seen it's full of all kinds of toys. From jet skis to ATVs, Elias Weylyn has something for every outdoor activity. It makes sense, I suppose, since their home is directly on the lake and they spend the majority of their time outdoors.

I grab the gift basket I put together for Elias from the passenger seat and pull myself out, then take a deep breath before heading to the door.

I know knocking is pointless since I hear loud music and voices coming from the backyard, so I don't bother. No doubt, everyone is hanging out on the patio around the pool.

The house is eerily silent as I walk inside—not surprising since all the fun is out back—and my heeled booties click across the dark hardwood floor as I make my way into the

kitchen. After dropping my gift on the dining room table along with the rest, I move toward the backdoor. I'm halfway there when the hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I realize I'm not alone.

Whirling around, I find a tall, muscular man standing in the living room. Startled, I jump back and inadvertently let a small yelp escape.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," he apologizes. A crooked smirk grows on his classically handsome face. "I was just about to go raid Elias' kitchen to find the good booze. I know he has some around here. All they have down there is canned beer and white wine."

"Not a fan of wine?" I clear my throat and lower my hand from my chest, where it flew when his presence caught me by surprise.

"I'm more of a whiskey or bourbon guy," he explains as he walks past me. "What about you, what are you drinking?" He leans around the cabinet door he opened, his forest green eyes scanning me head to toe.

I'm suddenly glad I had put some effort into my appearance today, opting for distressed skinny jeans, bootie heels, and a black tight high-necked tank top. All pieces from my Aunt Addison's shop, of course. My long blonde hair is twisted into a chic side braid, and I left a couple pieces out to frame my face. I even went as far as to apply a pale pink lipstick.

Remi will be proud of me.

"I just got here, so nothing yet," I tell him, fearlessly meeting his gaze. He has the boy-next-door look, classically styled dirty-blond hair, and a clean-shaven face. Cute—just not my type.

"But you're looking in the wrong place," I inform him, smirking as he opens another door only to find more dishware. "Elias hid the good stuff a month ago because the twins kept drinking it all." I walk over to the kitchen cabinet that holds Margot's expensive china, and move a few pitchers and

stemware out of the way, revealing a stash of high-end liquor. I pull out a bottle of pricey whiskey and hand it to the blond-haired man. “Here you are, just make sure the twins don’t see you with it. Elias won’t appreciate it if he has to find a new hiding place.”

“I promise I can keep a secret.” He crosses his heart with his right hand in a dramatic fashion.

I nod in thanks as he takes a step toward the backdoor. “See you out there—*umm...*?” I realize I don’t know his name.

“Sawyer,” he tells me. “And you are?”

“Pruitt, or Pru. I’ll answer to both.”

Sawyer cocks his head, examining me again. His eyes narrow as they meet mine, and after a moment of staring, he shakes his head. “I swear you look familiar. Have we met before?”

“Doubt it.” I play with the ring that used to be my mom’s that sits on my right ring finger. “I’ve lived in San Francisco my whole life. I just moved here at the end of last summer.”

“Huh,” he mumbles. “Well, I’ll see you out there.”

I watch as Sawyer walks through the back door and down the steps leading to the stone patio, and see the multi-level surface is full of people of all ages. I never would have thought that kids would be attending a party for a fifty-year-old, but it looks like mostly families are here.

My gaze continues to follow Sawyer as he weaves through, and something in my gut tells me to pay attention, he’s going to lead me to something important.

My eyes never leave his white button-down clad back as he makes his way through the crowd. People smile and wave, obviously recognizing him. Which is odd, because of all the times I’ve been to the Weylyns’ home in the past ten months, I have never seen him around.

Sawyer stops in front of a pretty young woman with raven-colored hair and a tall tattooed man. Suddenly fascinated in the

latter, my gaze scans him, starting at his heavy boots and slowly making its way up his low-slung jeans.

He's wearing a tight black t-shirt that does a horrible job at hiding how muscular he is as his thick tattooed arms look like they barely make it through the sleeves. I follow the tattoos up to his neck, where I see them peeking through the collar of his shirt and swirling along his jugular. I don't know if I have ever found tattoos attractive on men before, but something calls to me. I want to trace every single one of them with my finger, and I wonder how much of his body they cover.

Finally, I manage to move on to his face. His serious gaze is scanning the yard as he listens to what Sawyer and the pretty girl are saying to him. He doesn't speak as far as I can tell but gives a curt nod here and there.

The more I look at his stern face, the more I realize I've seen it before. Hanging in pictures frames all over the Weylins' house.

Holy shit, that's Ryker Weylyn.

Ryker is the oldest Weylyn sibling, and I've yet to have the opportunity to meet him. According to Remi, he hasn't been home in over five years. I've never asked why since it's none of my business, but the small amount of information I've gathered makes me understand why he looks serious in all the photos and in person. Remi told me when Ryker was thirteen, he lost someone very important to him. And I'm certainly one who can understand how losing someone important to you can mess you up.

There's also no denying all of the Weylyn siblings are related. They all have the same dark-brown hair and bright-blue eyes. The twins, Ransom and Ranger, are a lot leaner than Ryker, I see now. He is bulkier and taller than them, not by much, though. Elias is tall himself, it makes sense his children would be too.

Having been lost in thought, I focus back on the tall, dark-haired man. Then, suddenly, still staring at his striking face, I realize something makes me wish the floor would swallow me whole.

Ryker is staring back at me. From my spot up in the kitchen window, I can tell his eyes are wide and his mouth is slightly gaping.

And at that moment, I see something else too. The same golden aura that surrounds the wolf in my dreams shines around Ryker, and the glittering golden air around him shimmers brightly in the sun.

I don't know I'm moving before I find myself ducking around the corner from the window, out of sight from everyone's view.

His view.

I place my face in my hands and take large, gulping breaths. I don't know why I'm hiding. *Well, maybe it's because I'm absolutely going crazy and seeing things!*

It's time I sign myself into a mental institution. Very vivid dreams and sleepwalking are one thing, but when the craziness starts to creep into my real life, that's when I need to get help.

Out of nowhere, my body feels like it's been electrocuted. The shooting and zapping pain starts at my scalp and shoots through my skin. Gasping, I throw my hand over my mouth as nausea wracks my body so hard I'm lurching forward, vomit close to making its unsightly escape. I quickly make a beeline for the closest bathroom as the last thing I want to do is lose my lunch all over Margot's pristine living room floor.

Just as I'm rushing past the front door, I hear a voice call to me. "Pru, you look like shit!" Remington hollers after me, her footsteps sounding as though they're right behind mine. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I barely make it to the toilet before I'm hurling my brains out.

RYKER

I forgot about my father's fiftieth birthday last week. Just add it to the list of reasons why I'm a horrible son.

Walking into my childhood home for the first time in five years is like stepping back in time. Very little had changed or moved. Mom had bought new sofas for the living room, and the chandelier in the entry is also different, but everything else looks the same.

While this place should feel like home and welcoming, for me, it feels like a graveyard. As if being back here wasn't bad enough, we had arrived in the middle of my father's birthday party, and from what I could tell, the whole pack is here.

Even though I've been gone for years, my inner wolf recognizes his pack members. While the human side of me has no issue being away from my family or pack mates, my wolf longs for the companionship. I know wolves are pack animals and forcing my wolf away from his community was unfair, but I simply couldn't be here any longer.

My mom and little sister had burst into tears the second I walked through the front door. Both of them barreled into me at full force and just about knocked me on my ass, and my ribs still hurt from their death-grip hugs. My brothers had both given me a stiff one-armed hug before punching me in the arm and chest. My father's reaction to my arrival was as expected. He gave me a curt nod and said it was good to see me. He, of course, didn't miss the opportunity to comment on the number

of tattoos that now cover my skin either. I have twice as many now as I did when I saw him last.

I guess a lot can happen in five years.

I haven't yet had the heart to tell them the reason I'm here is to inform them of the rogue that is more than likely in or around the pack's territory. I wish I were a good enough son to really be here to celebrate my father's birthday, but I'm not. I'm the son who walks away from his family with no intention of ever looking back. I'm the son who hunts and kills things on a daily basis. I'm the son that enjoys doing it.

"Your family is welcoming," Avery says from her spot to my left. We had all agreed to stay for my father's party as we practically walked in as it was starting. It was a good excuse for Sawyer to catch up with his parents and old school friends. Besides, I didn't have the heart to drag my father and his beta, Noah, away from the party to discuss rogue business. "And this house is amazing, and *oh my God*, look at the view. Why would you ever leave this place?" She gestures wildly with her hands at the property I grew up on. The large wood cabin-styled house sits on under four hundred acres of heavily wooded land and has the lake right in the backyard. It's beautiful, and still, I *hate* it.

"That pool is where Grey learned to swim and where we spent most of our last summer together." I point to the large rectangle pool; a couple of small children swimming and splashing each other, having fun. "That tire swing is where Grey and Remi would take turns for hours pushing each other back and forth. And the tree stump next to it is where I would sit and pout, annoyed she wasn't playing with me instead." I honestly can't believe the tire swing is still there. I would have thought my dad would have taken it down by now. "And the boat dock down there," I continue, "is where my dad told me Grey and her parents had been killed."

I watch as Avery looks down at the dock where several jet skis are tethered and then back at the pool where the screaming children play. "Looks a little different now, right?" I say sarcastically and hope Avery's starting to see why being

here is like being in a graveyard of what once were happy memories.

“Yes, it does. I’m sorry we had to come here. I can see how this would be tough for you,” she whispers after a small moment of silence. “Where the hell did Sawyer go?” she asks, effectively changing the tense topic of conversation. “Didn’t he say he would be right back with the good booze? Not that I’m complaining, but your parents’ alcohol selection out here is crap.”

“There are a bunch of families here.” Many of which had grown and aged in the past five years. I was a little surprised to see many of the people I went to high school with are now mated to each other and having children. There is only a small handful of kids here, but I know many of them belong to the people I grew up with. “My parents aren’t going to have the strong stuff out when it’s a family event.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Avery grumbles.

“You were raised in a barn, weren’t you?” It’s a standing joke between us that Avery was literally raised by wolves. Her upbringing was anything less than a normal civilized life. From what she’s told us, her pack gave into their animalist nature more than most wolf shifter packs. While most try to let the human side of them lead, Avery’s pack preferred to spend a majority of their time in wolf form.

“Wolf *den*, actually.” She smirks as Sawyer makes his reappearance, a bottle of good whiskey in his hand. “Dude, finally, what took you so long?”

“Your dad moved the stash again, and I couldn’t find it,” Sawyer explains to me as he starts pouring some of the amble liquid into our empty wine glasses. “This girl Pruitt had to show me where your dad keeps it now.”

“Pruitt?” I ask, not recognizing the name.

“She’s a new friend of Remi’s. As far as I can tell, she’s human.” He shrugs before taking a swig of his drink. “Super hot though and there was something about her so familiar, I just couldn’t place it.”

“Gross. Human,” Avery snarls with a scrunched look on her face.

Sawyer laughs at her and teases her for her hatred for humans. Again, Avery explains her reasoning for her dislike or distrust; something about how human child protective services tried to remove her from her parents’ care when she was young. Her elementary school had called the service when they got worried about Avery’s socialization skills. Not that I think it had gotten any better since then.

As I listen to them banter back in forth, a zapping sensation runs down my spine, and my wolf nudges me to look up at the kitchen bay window. I remove my stare from the partygoers and look up and back at the house.

At first, I think the vision I see is the ghost of my dead mate, but this apparition looks different than she has in the past. Whenever I had seen my dead mate over these past fourteen years since her death, she was always the same age as when she died, forever stuck in time as a seven-year-old. But now she’s standing there all grown up and... *breathing*.

She stands in the window with her arms folded in front of her chest and her plump bottom lip between her teeth. Her bright green gaze is staring directly into mine with a look of surprise taking shape on her face.

Her blonde hair is just as blonde as it was when we were kids. I used to tell my mom her hair was like an angel’s because of how pale the tresses were. High cheekbones have replaced the chubby cheeks that used to sit there, making her already pouty lips more prominent.

I wouldn’t need the golden mating aura that surrounds her to recognize Grey Thorne. My mate is standing in my childhood home, just yards away from me.

My heart rips out of my chest when she disappears around the corner and out of my view, and a loud animalist roar escapes my throat before I can stop it. My wolf cries and tears at my skin, desperate to go to his mate. But I can’t move, my legs crumple beneath me, and I sink to my knees on the stone patio.

Tears prick my eyes as I try to come to grips with the fact my mate has been alive for the past fourteen years, and I hadn't bothered looking for her. I believed what my father told me and took it as gospel.

I'm quickly back at my feet and barreling through the group of pack members now surrounding me. I ignore Sawyer's and Avery's calls, asking me what's going on as they follow closely, their voices full of confusion and worry.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm tackling my father, the alpha of our pack, to the ground. "How could you lie to me!" I roar, my animal side more in control than my human. "You told me she was dead, and I believed you!" I'm just about to bring my tattooed fist down to deliver a blow to his face when two males tackle me to the side and send me rolling into the grass.

Ransom and Ranger.

I'm in a defensive position in the blink of an eye, and I quickly whirl around to face my attackers. I know my eyes are now in wolf form and are glowing gold, and my canine teeth have elongated. My claws are out too, I feel them digging into my palms, and the warm sensation of blood dripping down my fingers follows.

"Ryker, what are you talking about!" Ranger demands as he starts to move to my left while Ransom moves to my right, planning an attack from both sides if it becomes necessary. I don't look directly at them; I keep my gaze on my father as he pulls himself off the ground, and calmly keeps his on me.

"Grey!" I growl in response. How could they not have told me she's been here the whole time?

"What about her, Son?" my father asks, taking a slow step toward me. "I know today is her birthday, I know that must be hard—"

"I'm not talking about her *fucking* birthday! I'm talking about how she was standing right there!" I point at the window above our heads that's, of course, now empty. I know she is still in the house, though. My wolf can sense her nearness.

“Ryker...” I hear my mother’s soft voice emerge from the group as she steps forward and heads in my direction. “Honey, Grey died. I don’t know what you saw, but sweetie...” She gives me a sad smile, and she calmly places her small hand over my forearm. “She isn’t here.”

“I just saw her in the window,” I whisper to my mom, who stares up at me with blue eyes that look much like my own. “Her hair was in a braid, just like how Genevieve used to do it for her.”

“Wait, a braid?” Sawyer asks, walking up to me. “That girl, Pruitt, the one I was talking about a minute ago was in the kitchen, and she had a braid. Maybe that’s who you saw, and she just looks like Grey.”

“No!” I growl, pushing my mom’s hand off me and quickly shoving my fingers through my hair. “It was her! She had the mating aura around her, I saw it!”

“Pru’s not Grey, man,” Ransom tells me as his own eyes shift back to their normal human blue instead of the glowing wolf silver. “She’s Remi’s friend. Her very *human* friend.”

“She moved here like ten months ago with her aunt,” Ranger adds in. “Cool chick, but definitely not Grey.”

“Come on.” My mother takes my hand and begins to pull me toward the house. “Can you keep yourself together long enough for me to introduce you to Pru? To get this crazy thought out of your head?”

“Mom, I swear I saw Grey. She’s grown up now, but it was her.” I walk beside my mother, and the large group of pack members politely steps out of the way to give us room to pass. Many of their eyes are wide with shock, but also I catch the scent of fear. *Great*, I haven’t seen these people in five years, and now they’re afraid of me.

My mom leads me into the kitchen, and I can’t help but stare at the spot where I saw her standing. I take a deep inhale and sort through the smells. The different scents of pack members and family members fill my nose, but underneath the familiar is one that is different than the rest. One vaguely

familiar, a scent of of sunshine and vanilla, and I can't help the small smile that appears on my face.

She was here. I know it. I follow the scent through the living room and down the hall, to the small guest bathroom. I discover the small room now empty, and my heart sinks.

“She was here!” I tell my mom, whose worried blue eyes watch me closely. Her lips are pulled down in a sad frown, and I know she thinks I'm losing my mind. There's a small chance I am, but I'm willing to take the risk.

Remington emerges from her bedroom a few doors down, holding a piece of dark clothing by her fingertips as far away from her as possible.

“Honey, did you get sick?” My mother rushes forward, obviously not missing the scent of vomit that accompanies my younger sister. My mom puts her hands on Remi's forehead, checking for fever or signs of illness.

Pushing mom's hands off of her, Remi explains, “What? No. This is Pru's. She totally tossed her cookies. She thinks she ate some bad Chinese food last night or something.” Remington shudders at the memory. “Being the amazing friend I am, I gave her one of Ransom's shirts to wear after she got some vomit on her tank top. So *gross*.” She holds up the tank top and cringes.

“Where is Pru now?” Mom asks her, her blue eyes darting back toward me.

“I sent Typhoid Mary home, so she didn't need to infect the rest of us with whatever is going on with her.” Tired of holding the soiled clothing, Remi shoves it at Mom, who, without hesitating, takes the shirt. *Such a mom thing to do*. “Why? She left a present for dad on the table if that's what you're looking for.”

Looking at me one last time, Mom sighs and locks eyes with Remi. “Ryker seems to think Pruitt is Grey Thorne...”

“*What?*” my sister barks, obviously confused. “Why would you think that?”

“My wolf recognized her,” I try to explain. I know it all sounds crazy, but I know whoever they think this Pru girl is; she’s my long lost mate, and I’m willing to sound crazy if it means there’s a chance I get my mate back. “She had the mating aura.”

“Well, that doesn’t make a lick of sense...” Remi starts, but I can see her brain trying to piece things together. “Grey was my best friend growing up. If it is her, I would know.”

“You guys were only seven years old when she died,” Mom says. “If it really is her, she wouldn’t look much like the little girl she was.” Turning to me, Mom asks, “Did Grey have any identifying characteristics you can remember?”

“A scar on her left palm,” I reply. She got too close to a young male pack member when he was learning to shift. His wolf was scared and lashed out at Grey. It was all an accident, but it left Grey with a jagged scar on her palm.

“Mom, you’re considering this insanity?” Remi doesn’t even try to hide how surprised she is by that.

“You haven’t met your mate yet, Remington. You don’t understand how intense the connection between mates is. And then there’s the fact Ryker saw the mating aura.”

“I’ve started sending our guests home, let’s take this discussion into my office,” my father’s deep voice echoes from down the hallway. “And Remington, please do something about that shirt. It reeks.”

“YOU SAW THE BODIES?” I ASK MY FATHER AS I PACE IN FRONT of his large oak desk. “And you read the police report?”

“I saw the bodies, they were burned beyond recognition, and their scents were impossible to detect due to the fire.” My father leans back in his chair and pushes his dark-framed glasses up his nose after they had slipped down some. “Of course, the human police reports were changed to not bring any attention to our community. Noah and I examined the

scene, two distinctive rogue wolf scents were all over the surrounding area. There was so much blood at the scene, both Archer and Gen's, there was no way they survived that kind of blood loss. Even with shifter healing, they would have died from their injuries."

"But what about Grey?" Ranger asks from his spot next to his twin and Sawyer.

"Noah saw her body." Elias looks down at his lap. "I didn't want that to be the way I remembered that little girl. I didn't need to see what those rogue wolves had done to her. But Noah said the coroner believed she died on impact. Her neck had been broken, and her body also badly burned."

"Sick fucks," Sawyer spits, shaking his head at the thought of how gruesome the scene must have been.

"How could Pru be Grey if there was a body?" Avery pipes up after a long stretch of silence.

"What if it wasn't her body?" Mom asks, looking around the room. "What if someone got her out of the car before it caught on fire?"

"Who would do something like that?" Remington questions, twirling her hair around her slender finger. "Who even wanted the Thornes dead in the first place?"

"We never could figure that one out." Dad sits straighter in his chair as he speaks. "I'd known Archer Thorne my entire life, and he never had any enemies. Genevieve, as far as I know, didn't either."

"What do you mean 'as far as you know?'" Mom questions her mate, a dark brow raised.

Clearing his throat, Dad explains. "We never actually knew much about where Gen came from. After a business trip, Archer came back with her in tow. He never said where they had met, or anything past the fact that they were mates and Gen would obviously be joining the pack as the alpha female."

"And that didn't seem sketchy to you?" Avery asks, confused as to why Elias wouldn't have pushed for more answers.

“He was my alpha, and I wasn’t his beta at that point. I didn’t feel it was my place to ask those kinds of questions.”

Sawyer pushes himself off the far wall he’s been leaning on. “I feel like we’re asking the wrong questions here and completely forgetting the most obvious one.” He looks around the room before looking at me. “If this Pru girl is actually Grey, why doesn’t she remember you? Or Remi? Or any of us for the matter? Her parents were the alpha pair. It’s not like she was never around the pack or never a part of pack activities.”

During the full moon each month, the alpha leads a pack run through the territory. It’s meant to create stronger inner pack relationships as well as boost overall pack morale. Usually, the young pack members who have not gone through the first shift stay back and play amongst themselves with a few pack enforcers watching over them. I remember every month being upset I wasn’t able to go on the pack run yet. But the second I saw Grey with her blonde braids and bright smile, I calmed down and was happy to stay back with the rest of the children.

“Well,” Remi begins, leaning forward in her chair, “Pruitt did tell us she was in an accident when she was younger. She has a brain injury that prevents her from remembering anything from before that day. She doesn’t even remember anything about her parents.”

“Are her parents alive then?”

“No, she told me they died in the same car accident.” Remi drops the strand of hair she had been anxiously playing with and frowns. “Pru was the only survivor.”

The room is silent as I continue to pace in front of the desk. I have a million more questions than I started with. But there is one thing I need to know right now. “Where is Grey now?” I ask my sister, my tone demanding.

“Well, her name is *Pruitt*,” Remington reminds me with a pointed look. “And I assume she went home since she wasn’t feeling well. Here I’ll text her now and ask if she made it home okay.” She reaches into her back jeans pocket and pulls

out her phone. She looks down at the screen, and her eyes go wide. “*Shit!*”

“What?” Everyone in the room demands. I’m already so on edge that if one more thing happens, I may lose control of my wolf and shift. That is something that hasn’t happened to me since I was fifteen years old.

“Addison has been trying to call me. I had my phone on silent for the party, I didn’t hear her calls.”

“Who’s Addison?” Avery asks as she stands from her spot on the floor.

“Pru’s aunt,” Remington tells Avery as she places the phone to her ear and waits for an answer. “Addison! What’s going on? My phone was on silent, and I didn’t hear—” Remi pauses, listening to something the woman is saying. “What do you mean she ran after a wolf? What the hell does that mean?”

All the heads in the room snap up at the mention of a wolf. I feel a bead of sweat roll down my back as bad thoughts fill my mind, many involving the rogue wolf I’ve been tracking. I knew that fucker was close to the territory; I don’t know how close.

“Wait, I’m putting you on speaker,” Remington tells the woman whose voice is now so shrill we can all hear it. “Addison, you’re on speaker. My parents are here, and so are my brothers.”

“Pru has been obsessing over this wolf since we moved here,” the woman begins, speaking quickly. “She’s told me she’s had the same dream every night about it since we moved here. Over the last couple of months, every time she hears or God forbid sees something resembling the wolf in her dreams, she goes after it. Just last week, she ran after a poor coyote one night when we were on a walk. And on her way home from your place tonight, we were talking on the phone, and she almost ran over a red wolf, or what she thinks is a wolf. But she ran into the woods after a wild animal, *alone*, and I can’t reach her.”

Listening to the woman's words, the blood drains from my body and I break into a cold sweat.

A red wolf.

I run my hand roughly over my face, a hundred scenarios going through my head. I turn and look at my father. "I haven't had time to tell you why I'm here," I begin, the room falling silent as everyone listens to what I have to say. "Sawyer, Avery, and I have been tracking a rogue wolf the past couple of weeks who's been growing more and more violent every day. I strongly believe he's in our territory."

I can't help but look out the window and at the setting sun. "The wolf we've been tracking is a red wolf, and if there's even a slight chance she's in the woods alone with that fucker, we need to go *now!*"

"Ryker, why didn't you tell me sooner?" my father demands, jumping to his feet. "Don't you think that information could have been a vital thing for me to know? I could have had pack enforcers out patrolling the territory?" My father is visibly upset with me, and reaching into his pocket, he begins sending texts to the enforcers who are on duty. Pack enforcers are the protectors of the pack, and in the pack hierarchy, they fall below the beta.

"Wait! *Ryker?*" The woman's voice coming from the phone goes up another octave. "Ryker Weylyn?"

"Yes, my brother Ryker is here. Why?" Remi questions the aunt.

"Crap!" the voice curses, and there's a slight pause before I hear her speak again. "I thought I had more time to explain everything to Pru. She isn't ready," the woman whispers, her voice full of concern.

Having enough of being in the dark, my father snatches the phone from Remi's hand and speaks to the woman. "What are you talking about? I want real answers, Addison. I'm growing tired of not having all the facts."

The woman doesn't speak for a second, but when she does, it leaves all our mouths gaping and my heart feeling like it's

going to burst. “I’ll explain everything to you soon, Alpha,” she says calmly like she had used the term before. Dad’s eyebrows shoot up in shock while everyone in the room gives each other questioning looks.

“But first,” Addison adds, “I need you to go find Grey. Yes, Grey Thorne is alive, but if what Ryker says is true, and she’s out there with a rogue wolf, she might not be for long.”

With that, my wolf bursts through my skin so fast, I barely have time to prepare myself for the shift.

PRUITT

I will be the first one to admit running after a wild animal when the sun is setting, was not a good idea. I'll also admit leaving my phone and flashlight in the car was a bad idea. I'll even admit not marking a path to remind myself what direction I came from was an epically bad idea. Because I am *so* lost.

After having my episode back at the Weylyns' house, I decided it was best I leave in case the week-old leftover Chinese food I ate last night wasn't the reason I puked my brains out. After leaving the Weylyns', I took the long way home. Instead of taking the better lit main roads, I decided I'd take the less traveled back roads. Again, I'll admit I am not making the best decisions tonight. But riding with the windows down and feeling the summer breeze on my face had a calming effect, and I wanted it to last. Which is why I chose a route I wasn't quite as familiar with.

I had called Addison to tell her how weird it was I got sick. I don't get sick often, and I never throw up. I was about to tell her about Ryker being there when out of the dark shadows of the treeline, a red wolf sprinted across the road. I had to swerve to miss him. And using my wonderful and smart decision-making skills, I decided to abandon my Jeep and run after the wolf. Fully aware the red wolf isn't even close to looking like my wolf. But I'm desperate to find him—I didn't care.

I lost track of the red wolf almost immediately and have now spent the last twenty minutes running aimlessly through

the woods. The farther I go, the darker it gets, the moonlight above barely cutting through the thick greenery. And unlike in the dream in which I know where I'm going and don't fear the dark, I have no idea where I am, and I am most definitely feeling afraid.

"You're a fucking idiot Pruitt Bailey," I mumble to myself as I duck under another long hanging tree branch. I'm lucky I saw this one because I ran into the last one and I'm absolutely sure I have a cut on my cheek now. "Who's going to be able to find your ass out here? Well, knowing Addison, she probably already called the cops, but how long do I have to be missing for them to even consider looking for me? Twenty-four hours? Forty-eight? Well shit. By then, I'm going to be squirrel food."

The horrible image of my face being eaten by the bushy tail rodents pops into my head, and I shudder. "Yikes, that is not the way you want to go out, Pru."

I kick at the brush under my feet in frustration. I don't know what it is about the black wolf from my dream that has me so caught up. I spend all my free time in my little art studio Addison built for me in the barn recreating the wolf's face. The entire hayloft-turned-art-studio is littered with portraits of him. Golden eyes stare at me from every surface. Remi always asks why she can't go up there, and I always lie and say it's where Addison keeps her new top-secret clothing designs. But truthfully, I don't want to explain to someone I'm not crazy and this wolf appeared to me for a reason.

But I *am* going crazy. I followed a wild predator into the woods and chased after it. No sane person would ever do something so stupid.

I think back to when I saw the golden glow around Ryker Weylyn. It was the same shimmering aura that surrounds the wolf in my dream. I'm hoping it was just a trick of the setting sun that made the effect. Otherwise, my crazy dreams are actually starting to come true, and that scares the crap out of me. Chasing after wolves in unfamiliar woods is one thing, but a golden aura surrounding my best friend's brother is another. I will absolutely need therapy if I see it again around Ryker.

That is, if I ever get out of these godforsaken woods.

I pass a tree that looks familiar, and then I laugh at myself for thinking a *tree* would look familiar. “They all look the exact same,” I grumble to myself.

I yelp when the tip of my boot gets stuck under a rock and causes me to fall to my hands and knees. I hang my head and let out a long breath. “You get lost in parking lots, and you thought you were going to be able to find your way out of these woods?” I question aloud.

I’m just about to pull myself up when the hairs on my neck rise, and I realize I’m not alone. In the dream, I’m never afraid because I know the wolf I’m there with will never hurt me, but something twists in my gut, telling me the *thing* that is out here with me now is malicious and hateful. I can’t see it, but I know it is somewhere in front of me.

I slowly rise back to my feet, carefully brushing my hands off on my jeans. The stinging on my palms most likely means I broke the skin there, but it’s so dark where I’m standing right now I can’t even see my hand in front of my face. *Great, hopefully, this thing isn’t like a shark and drawn to blood, because I feel a slight wetness building on my right palm.*

All the shows about animals I watched growing up fill my head as I’m trying to remember if I should make myself seem large or if I should make myself seem small. But my fight or flight response is kicking in and screaming at me to run.

What direction do I go?

Go right, the voice in my head suggests. I don’t know what’s in that direction, but it has to be better than the beast in the shadows that has starting snarling at me.

With one more look toward the dark shape in front of me, I take off as fast as I can to the right, my feet pound into the soft forest floor, but I know there’s no way I can outrun the thing behind me.

My leg muscles are on fire, and my lungs burn, but I push myself to run faster and to not look back. I try not to pay attention to the heavy breathing and snarling right behind me,

and instead, try to listen to my gut telling me I have to make it a little bit farther, and I'll be okay.

I recall Esme's tarot card did tell me to listen to my inner voice, so that's what I'm doing. There *has* to be a reason I was told to run this way, but I can only hope whatever it is I'm racing toward is close because I'm quickly losing steam.

I hear the animal gaining on me, and I abruptly take a sharp turn at a large pine tree, hoping it will buy me some time to gain ground between us. It only helps for a second because I feel the hot breath from the animal on my neck again.

"Shit!" I shout as I come to a halting stop, narrowly missing running straight into a large rock formation. I spin to my right and then my left and let out a sob when I suddenly realize I have no way out.

I slowly turn and face the large animal that has stopped at the entrance of the large boulders. I'm not completely shocked to find the red wolf from the road staring back at me. I am, however, shocked at its size, its large head comes up to my chest, and its paws are larger than my own human feet.

It doesn't make any move toward me, it stands there staring with his mouth foaming at the corners. I notice the animal's coat is patchy and sparse in some areas. Its legs are thin, and I can see ribs sticking out at the sides.

Great, I'm going to be dinner.

I can't help but feel bad for the animal. It's probably starving. That, of course, does not mean I want to be its meal, but I've read about how wolves are being forced out of their territory due to humans expanding into their woods and lands.

When I thought about coming face to face with a wolf, this is not what I had in mind. I wasn't supposed to be as afraid as I am right now. I wish I were looking into glowing golden eyes instead of the pitch-black ones I see now.

I quickly look around for another way out, even though I know there isn't one. But as I scan the small boulder-filled space, I see a large broken tree branch. Moving as fast as I can, I dart for the piece of wood, and my fingers barely brush

against the hard material before the wolf lets out a deep snarl, and I'm being flung against the rock wall.

The pain is immediate, it feels like I was hit by a freight train at full speed. My spine is the first to make impact, and the back of my skull quickly follows. The horrific sound my head makes when it connects with the rock echoes against the surrounding boulders and trees.

I know immediately this isn't good. My vision is starting to blur, and I start to feel like I'm underwater. I already know I'm not going to be able to stay conscious for much longer. Reaching behind my head, I touch the tender spot on my scalp and brush against the open gash. With shaking hands, I pull my fingers back to look and see dark blood covering them. My stomach lurches at the sight, but I hold it together.

Groaning, I slowly roll from my side to my back. I can still see the wolf pacing beside me, his dark gaze never leaving my bloodied body for long. Keeping him in my peripheral vision, and thankful he isn't attacking again—just yet, at least—I stare up at the sky. I can't see any stars tonight, which is something I have enjoyed seeing since I've moved here. In San Francisco, the city lights always hid the stars. I blink away hot tears as they stream down my face. I don't want to die here, but I can't move. My head is fuzzy and disoriented I can't get my legs or arms to cooperate.

As if this couldn't have gotten any worse, I feel a large raindrop bounce against my forehead and a steady stream of rain begins to come down, and lightning shoots across the sky. I almost smile when I remember Addison said there was a storm headed in our direction. She always has to be right.

The wolf shakes out his coat as the rain quickly soaks through it. I hear him huff in irritation as if a wild animal like himself could be put out because of some rain.

I blink slowly, trying to get my eyes to focus, but the inky blackness at the sides of my vision continues to grow.

Using the last bit of fight I have left, I lift my head in desperation, trying to get myself to move. But a heavy paw appears on my chest, and the weight crushes me. I can't get a

full breath now, and I feel the pull of unconsciousness starting to win.

At least I won't be awake as the wolf rips me to shreds.

I hear a low growl coming from behind the red wolf, and I glance over his shoulder in time to see a smaller light-silver wolf jump down into the small rocky area. The red wolf immediately takes a few steps back, removing its large paw from my chest.

The silver wolf positions its self over me and lowers its head, snapping its sharp teeth when the red wolf comes to close. The red wolf is about to lunge at us when another wolf, larger than the two already facing off, jumps in between them. The hair is raised on its back, and I only see a flash of teeth before this new wolf strikes at the red one.

It's difficult to keep my eyes open, and everything seems to be happening in flashes of time, almost as if I'm watching a slide show. One minute I see the two wolves fighting each other, and a second later, they're gone.

I feel a cold nose pressing on my cheek and neck, and I whimper in pain when a paw steps on my injured hand. Unlike the red wolf, I don't fear this smaller silver wolf. Nor was I afraid of the dark gray one that protected us. Something tells me these are good wolves.

I hear growling and other guttural noises coming from outside the rock structure, but I can't get my eyes to open right now. They're heavy, and my head is pounding with pain.

No longer able to keep my head straight, it flops to the side on its own, my cheek hitting soft dirt. I feel the wolf above me yip and bark at something, moving from its position above me. I hadn't realized how much of the rain the wolf had been blocking, and my body breaks out in chills when the raindrops hit my bare arms and face.

One second I'm lying in the dirt freezing, and the next, I'm being scooped up and held against a warm body. I want to snuggle into the heat and safety, but my body has finally had enough, and I allow the darkness to take over.

A strong tattooed chest is the last thing I see before I close my eyes.

RYKER

I don't have time to rejoice in the fact my mate is alive because every fiber in my being is screaming at me she's in danger right now. I know my dad is upset with me for not telling him about the threat sooner, but there's no way he's madder at me than I am at myself.

I throw my head back in a howl of frustration as I continue to sprint through the woods. Remi had told me the direction to head in before I left. Our group had split into two teams. My siblings took my truck and are taking the shorter way to Grey's house while Avery and Sawyer shifted with me, and we're taking the longer route. We figured someone would come across her car, and then we would know where to look for her.

Avery and Sawyer howl in response to mine as they struggle to keep pace with me. I don't have time to slow down for them. My mate is in trouble, and I have to get to her. The scenes in which we had found the red wolf's last victims flash in my head, and I try to not think about finding Grey in that beaten and violated position.

The last girl we found almost had her throat ripped out. The local pack doctors were able to save her life, although not her voice. Not only is the girl's body forever scarred, but she will never be able to speak again.

I feel someone nipping at me from my left flank, and I turn to look at the sandy-colored wolf running along my side. Sawyer.

“I see the Jeep. She couldn’t have gotten far from here,” he tells me through the pack link. Every pack is able to speak to each other through an internal link, and it only works if you’re part of the pack. Therefore we can’t communicate with Avery this way.

I look forward and see a black Jeep pulled off to the side of the road, the driver’s side door still flung open. I want to growl in irritation that Grey would be so reckless, but now is not the time.

I breathe in the air, and the red wolf’s scent assaults my senses. Mixed with the vile scent of the rogue is the light scent of vanilla—she’s close.

I nudge Avery with my head and direct her toward the right. We take off in that direction, the only sound I hear our paws pounding into the earth and our three heartbeats. The small animals that live in these woods sense predators are near and have quieted.

We run for a few hundred yards before Avery skids to a stop at a large tree with a low hanging branch. She leans up and sniffs. She motions to the right with her chocolate-colored head and takes off in that direction. My stomach tightens when I smell a slight hint of blood on the branch as we pass.

Thunder cracks above our heads and fat raindrops hit our coats. I barely feel the change in weather. My only focus is finding Grey. I can’t believe after all this time, I may actually end up losing her to a rogue wolf again, just like I had thought all those years ago.

“Ryker?” Remi’s voice comes over the pack link, something I hadn’t experienced in five years. It’s a nice change from only hearing Sawyer’s. *“Have you found the Jeep yet?”*

“We came across it about half a mile ago, she wasn’t there.”

“We’ll stay at her house in case she finds her way here.”

“I’ll reach out if we find anything.”

The sound of someone yelling in pain reaches my ears, and I growl. The noise came from a female, and my heart bursts at the thought of Grey being hurt by that fucker's hand. I dig deep for extra energy and strength, leaving Sawyer and Avery a couple yards behind me. I throw my head back again, this time as a warning to the red wolf.

I'm coming for you.

Sawyer and Avery echo my howl, and I hear two more join in from the north—Mom and Dad. I may have been away from them for a few years, but I would recognize those howls anywhere. My wolf barks in happiness at the idea of being with his alphas again. That pang of guilt resurfaces as I think about how hard it has been for Dad to not have his pack around him. But with Grey being alive, I have no intention of ever leaving our pack again.

I slow as I come up to a large rock formation that is part of a small cliff structure. I actually remember running around here when I was younger. I hear whimpering coming from the other side of a large stack of boulders, and a deep growl cuts through the sound of the rain. The thunder above cracks loud in the sky and lightning quickly follows, illuminating my surroundings.

I see the entrance to an alcove, and to my left, a large shadow of the rogue appears on the jagged surface of the rocks. Movement from the top of the boulder catches my attention, and I look up. My parents stand in their wolf forms, hunched down to not draw the attention of the rogue. But it was only a matter of time before he catches their scent.

"She's hurt," Mom says through the link. *"I can't tell if she's conscious, but she's breathing."*

"Sawyer, you and Avery draw his attention from her," I order, knowing Sawyer would get Avery to follow his lead. *"Dad, can you help them? Mom and I will take care of Grey."*

"He spotted us!" Mom shouts before I hear a bone-shaking growl followed by one that most definitely belongs to my mother. She is a fierce protector. She was never meant to

be a tough alpha female, but when someone threatens the lives of the people she loves, she goes all mama bear. *Wolf?*

I don't waste any time, I rush around the corner and find the rogue battling with my father. Mom stands over Grey's lifeless body, gently nuzzling her pale face with her snout. I can smell the blood before I see it.

"She's bleeding from a head wound, it's pretty bad." I watch my mom stick her nose against Grey's cheek. *"We need to get her out of here. She's freezing."*

It doesn't take much time for my father to push the rogue out of the small rocked alcove. I see Avery and Sawyer help by surrounding him, and still, the red wolf never backs down. He growls and snarls at each of them, his head low and his haunches tight, ready to spring into attack if necessary.

"I want him alive, we need to know if he's getting any help."

"I want to rip his throat out," Sawyer snarls back, his voice full of aggression.

"Not yet," the alpha responds, his voice calm as usual.

Knowing they have the rogue taken care of, I turn my attention back to my injured mate. Her head is turned, facing in my direction, but her beautiful green eyes are closed. My wolf whimpers at the bloodied state she's in. I can see her shivering when my mom takes a respectful step back, allowing me room to go to Grey.

She doesn't stir when I softly nudge her bloodied hand with my nose and still doesn't move when I gently place my muzzle to her throat. Her heartbeat is slower than it should be, but it's there.

I call upon the shift, and my wolf reluctantly disappears into my skin. Now in human form, I tenderly wipe the raindrops off her breathtakingly beautiful face. She stirs a little by this but doesn't open her eyes.

My mom, also now in her human form, comes up behind me. "I can't believe it's her," she whispers, and when I look

over at Mom I see the tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry you went all these years without her.”

“I’ve found her.” My voice is thick and full of emotion. I have spent the last fourteen years mourning someone who lies before me, injured but alive. My eyes burn thinking about all the years I’d spent wishing she was here.

I still have many questions about where she has been and why she was taken away in the first place. But right now, all I can do is tenderly reach down and pull my sweet mate into my arms. And the moment I have her protected against my chest, I can practically feel a piece of my broken and battered soul mend.

“I’ll run ahead to warm up her Jeep so we can get her out of here,” Mom whispers, her voice also shaky with emotion. “I’ll call Remi and tell her to meet us there with a change of clothes for you.”

I feel her slender fingers squeeze my shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry, Ryker, we will figure this all out soon. Her aunt will be back in a few days, and she promised to give us answers then.” Mom gives my arm one more squeeze before shifting and running into the dark woods. She gives my father a soft bark as she passes, letting him know she is leaving.

Grey’s head rests against my chest as I carry her away from the small, rocked-in area. I find my friends and father have the rogue wolf cornered, and I fully trust they will not let him get away.

“Get him back to the house and get him to shift back to his human form. I have some questions I want to ask him,” I tell them sternly as I pass.

Grey shivers. I hold her tighter to my chest, but her clothes are soaked, and the cool wind has picked up isn’t helping her current state. Holding her as tight as I can, I take off in a light jog, knowing I need to get her to the warmed up Jeep soon.

As I run through the uneven terrain, I can’t help but repeatedly look down at her face. Even with leaves and debris in her light-blond hair and a scratch across her dirt-covered

cheek, she is still beautiful. I smile when I see she still has the light dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. I used to tease her about those relentlessly growing up.

Grey lets out a soft whimper, I freeze and look down to make sure she is still unconscious. The last thing I want is to have to explain to her why I'm butt-ass-naked carrying her through the woods. That is a conversation my father had promised Addison we would wait to have when she got back in three days.

I still don't understand how Grey had never shifted into her own wolf form all this time. Even though we can't fully shift when we are kids, our eyes can still shift into wolf form, and for some kids like myself, fangs and claws can make an appearance at a young age. Grey used to be jealous when I would show off my claws, she always wanted to do it too but hadn't quite mastered that skill when I last saw her. I do remember, though, on many occasions, her bright-green wolf eyes would appear.

She should have shifted by now. But my family never sensed she was a wolf, and even now, as I carry her, the only wolf scents I smell on her are my mother's, the rogue's, and mine. Ransom's scent is also amongst them because she is wearing one of his old band t-shirts. I can't help but growl at the fact another male's scent is on my mate.

I stop jogging as I come to a small hill leading down to the road where the car is parked. I see the headlights are already on, which means Mom is down there waiting for us. I take careful steps down the incline, ensuring I don't slip and fall with Grey in my arms. She's already pretty banged up, and the last thing I want to do is add to her pain.

I pick up my pace when we are finally on a flat surface and make it to the Jeep in no time. Mom stands at the rear with a thick blanket in hand. "Here, I found this in the back." She knows I would refuse to put Grey down, so Mom carefully wraps the blanket around both of us. "Go sit down, honey, you must be exhausted."

Until Mom says that, I didn't realize how tired I am. I actually can't remember the last time I slept, but I imagine it was probably those few stingy hours I got at the shitty motel we stayed at in Alberta a couple days ago.

"Is Remi going to meet us?" I ask her as I cautiously take a seat on the rear of the Jeep. I shift Grey's weight in my arms but still refuse to put her down. If I had my way, I would never put her down again.

"Yes, they should be here any minute. Remi found her some clothes to change into, and the boys are bringing you something to put on as well."

My mother hesitates, then says, "Ryker, your sister is worried about her friend, even though Pru is your mate, she is also your sister's friend. Please try not to bite her head off if she puts herself between you and Pru."

I know it sounds like a reasonable request that I should allow my own sister near my mate, but my wolf is still very much at the surface, and I know if anyone were to try to touch her right now, I might rip their hand off their body. Even if they were just trying to help. Unfortunately, my wolf won't understand the difference. He'll just see someone touching his mate, and that isn't okay with him.

After a couple minutes of me staring at her face, I see bright headlights headed in our direction. The truck parks, and doors open and slam shut quickly after. The engine is barely off before Remington is sprinting to us, the twins close on her heels.

"Pru!" Remi shouts in our direction, a look of panic on her face.

I growl once when Remington reaches for her friend's shoulder, but I quickly get my wolf and myself together. "She's still not awake. She has a pretty nasty head wound. Did you guys happen to bring any first-aid supplies?"

"Pru keeps a box full of stuff in a compartment in the back." Remi points to where I'm currently sitting. "Go put her in the front seat, and I'll grab it."

My wolf protests at the idea of putting her down, but I know it will be easier to reach her wounds if she isn't intertwined with me.

After carefully placing her in the passenger seat, I keep a watchful eye as my mom and sister work on patching up my mate's cuts and scratches.

"Dude, what the hell happened?" Ranger asks.

"The fucking rogue wolf I've been tracking for weeks found her," I say, pulling the dark pair of sweats on Ransom handed me a moment before. "She's lucky he was in his wolf form the entire time she was with him. He's a nasty wolf but the worst kind of human imaginable. His last victim..." I trail off, not wanting to put those images in my younger brothers' heads.

"I still can't believe she's actually Grey." Ransom stands at my side, his eyes wide with confusion as he also watches the scene in front of me. "Do you really think she doesn't remember?"

"Dad talked to Addison," Ranger answers his twin, having obviously talked more to our father after I left, "And I'm sure he got more insight, but we'll get all our questions answered when Addison gets back into town. Dad told me she wants to be the one to tell Pru the truth." Ranger pauses then asks, "So, what do we call her now? Pruitt or Grey?"

"Grey," I say immediately.

"Pruitt," Remi interjects, having been listening to our conversation.

"That's not her name," I argue, irritated anyone would think differently.

"As far as she knows, her name is Pruitt Bailey. That's all she has known for fourteen years. She doesn't remember being Grey, and she may never remember it." Remi scowls at me. "She isn't the little girl you remember growing up with either."

"Remi's right," Ransom agrees, but a small smile starts to form at the corners of his mouth. "She was a cute kid, but now she's a smoking hot woman."

I'm not the one to punch my brother for his comment, although I was about to. It's our mom who delivers the blow as she passes him to get something out of the truck my siblings had driven up in.

"Next time, I'll let your brother have a piece of you," she hollers over her shoulder. She has also changed into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. The shirt is a couple sizes too large, which leads me to believe it's one of my dad's.

"We're ready to go home," Remi tells me as she puts some of the first-aid supplies back into the box. "We got what we could bandaged up, but mom also sent a text to Doctor V, and she'll be waiting for us when we get there. I'll drive us back if you want to hold her."

I look over at Grey and see she looks peaceful. "No, I don't want to move her again. I'll ride in the back." I open the rear door to Grey's Jeep and climb in. "Let's get her home."

Home. I never thought I would call it that again, but now it sounds right.

"I forgot to tell you." Remi starts the car and looks at me through the rearview mirror. "Guess what we found in her art studio."

I carefully unfold the piece of paper Remi passes back to me, and my breath catches in my throat when I see my wolf's eyes staring back at me from the page. His golden eyes look realistic, and the fur is perfectly illustrated, I swear I could reach out and touch it. She had even gotten the white patch of fur that sits on my chest right.

"What do you think that means?" Remi asks.

"It means I have more questions."

PRUITT

The black wolf patiently waits for me across the clearing like always. The cold wind picks up and causes a chill to run down my spine. There is electricity in the air I haven't sensed before. I've lived this dream many times before, but it feels different this time. The air around us buzzes and hums, drowning out the sound of my breathing and heartbeat.

I stand there watching the large wolf, afraid if I move, he will disappear like always. I stand as still as possible, willing him to stay longer. Just a minute longer this time, I plead to myself. But it will never be enough time.

The wolf cocks his head to the side as he watches me—almost like he's wondering why I haven't moved yet. I wish I could tell him I'm worried if I do, I'll lose him, but the humming in the air is too loud to hear anything else. And then he does something he's never done before.

He takes a step toward me.

I hold my breath expecting to be pulled out of the dream the second his paw leaves the ground, but to my utter shock, nothing happens. Nothing happens as he takes another step forward. I finally release the breath I've been holding when he makes it halfway across the clearing. My legs quake when I take my first step in his direction, but with each one, they get stronger.

With every inch closer, I expect to be jolted awake. And even as I'm standing a foot away from him, I'm bracing myself for when I'm inevitably pulled away, but it never happens.

When I put my shaking hand out, and he presses his large head against it, the air around us stills, and the rain that had been pouring down on our backs freezes. The deafening buzzing sound silences and I can once again hear my pounding heartbeat.

It's the calmness and feeling of completeness that settles in my soul that shocks me the most. My fingers dig deep into the fur at his neck, holding on tight to him.

All I can do is stand there and stare at him. I already have his face memorized, but I still take it all in, from the way his ears twitch and move when he hears something to the way his fur feels against my fingers. I take it all in, wanting to remember everything about him. And this time, when my surroundings swirl and grow dark, I don't panic about leaving him. Because I know in my heart this isn't goodbye.

WHEN I WAKE FROM THE DREAM, I NOTICE A FEW THINGS. THE first thing is I actually woke up in a bed instead the woods like I have the past couple of mornings. The second is I have the worst headache, and my body is sore and tender. The third is I know I'm not alone by the soft breathing I hear coming from across the room.

I stifle a groan as I slowly pull myself into a sitting position on the bed. I take a quick scan of the room I'm in and find I'm in one of the Weylins' guest rooms. I have never actually slept in here but have passed this room many times when walking to Remi's.

In the far corner, Ryker sleeps in the dark leather accent chair, his thick tattooed arms crossed over his chest. His head hangs at an awkward position, having fallen asleep sitting up. The only part of this scene that concerns me is the golden glow still surrounds him as the bright morning sun dances across the room.

Great. I really did see it yesterday at the party before I left.

Wait! Memories of last night flash through my mind. The red wolf I had foolishly chased after, the wild wolf hunted me

through the woods, the other wolves that showed up after it had attacked me. All of it comes crashing back to me, and I cringe when I remember the sound my head made when it hit the rock. I flinch when I reach back and feel stitches under the bandage that sits there.

Oh no, please tell me they didn't...

“They didn’t shave your head,” a deep, sleepy voice murmurs from the corner of the room. Looking over, I find equally sleepy blue eyes looking back at me. “If that’s what you were wondering.” A small smile appears on his face as he shifts into a more upright position.

“Read my mind.” I can’t help the shy smile growing on my own face. “Did you sleep here all night?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you do that?” I blurt before I can stop myself. “Sorry. I mean, wasn’t the chair uncomfortable?”

“I’ve slept in worse places.” Ryker grins at me. “How do you feel? You were pretty banged up when we found you.” He moves from the chair to sit on the edge of the bed, our legs brushing against each other. It’s impossible to ignore the electric feeling that shoots from my leg and up my spine. It’s similar to the zapping feeling I experienced when I first saw him in the backyard at the party. But this time, I don’t feel the nausea that followed.

I tear my eyes away from where his leg touches mine. “I’m going to need a bucket of pain reliever, but I’m sure I’ll be okay,” I tell him, clearing my suddenly dry throat. “But the good news is my head already hurts less than it did when I woke up a minute ago.”

“The doc said we have to watch you pretty closely the next few days. She was pretty sure you have a concussion. We took turns waking you up last night to ask you questions, do you remember?”

I shake my head. “No. The last thing I remember is being picked up and carried out of the woods.” I look at Ryker’s

tattooed covered skin and gasp. “It was you who was carrying me! How did you guys know I was out there?”

“Your aunt called frantic last night. She told us what happened and was worried about you. When you wouldn’t answer any of our phone calls; we decided to go look for you.” I don’t miss the slight flashing in his eyes as he stares at me. “You shouldn’t run after wild animals.”

I can’t help the nervous laugh that escapes. “Yes, well, lesson learned, I guess.” I give him a sheepish smile. In the past, when I’ve tried to talk to men, I felt like I could never find the right words. Everything felt uncomfortable and wrong. But talking to Ryker is easy. I feel like I could tell him anything, and I’ve just met him. I have also never been attracted to anyone before like I am with Ryker. My stomach is in a knot, just looking at him.

“You didn’t answer me before. Why did you sleep here all night?”

“I had to make sure you were okay,” he explains, his deep voice softening. He looks like he wants to say more but doesn’t. It’s almost like he’s trying to find the right words. “I was worried about you,” he adds.

“Thank you for getting me out of there last night. I don’t know what the wolf would have done if you hadn’t found me.” I shudder.

A serious look appears on Ryker’s face, his ocean blues darkening. “I would never let anything bad happen to you. I promise.” And somehow I know he’s telling the truth.

I feel my head cock to the side as I examine him again. His dark brown hair is cut shorter on the sides and is left longer on top. Right now it is disheveled from sleep, but I have a feeling it’s rarely neatly in place. His bright blue eyes are the same color as his siblings’, but unlike the sad look I saw there at the party, a look of joy is there now. He has a light scruff on his face I love. I can’t imagine what he would look like clean-shaven, and if I had it my way, he would never shave again. The rugged look works on him.

I feel a nudging at the back of my mind telling me he looks familiar, but I can't place where I had seen that crooked smile before.

"What are you looking at?" he whispers, his voice soft.

Not removing my eyes from his face, I simply answer, "You." I trail my eyes down his broad shoulders and to the arm he has himself propped up with. In bold black script, the name "*Grey*" sits on his forearm. "Why do I feel like I've met you before?"

Ryker sighs, "I have a lot of questions, too, but we have to wait for Addison to get back into town. She insisted she be here."

"What the hell does that mean?" I'm confused. What does my aunt know that she needs to be here to tell me? "Please, can you just answer my questions now?"

"I can't tell you yet, but I promise we will understand it all soon." His tanned hand reaches over, takes one of mine, and gives it a reassuring squeeze. His hands are rough, but his touch is light and tender. The zapping electricity travels from his touch up my arm.

"Do you feel it too?" I blurt. I need to know I'm not the only one.

"Yes, I do." His gaze looks at my hand when his thumb runs over the thick scar that sits on my palm. "How did you get this?"

"I was told it was from the accident," I explain, although I don't bother to look down at the mark I've always hated. "It's the only visible wound I have from that day. Well, I guess you could include the amnesia, but you can't see brain damage," I say, shrugging it off like it's no big deal even though I know it is.

"Remi says you don't remember anything from before the accident?"

"No," I say, clearing my throat when I feel it begin to burn with emotion. "I woke up not knowing where I was or even *who* I was. Addison was there, and she explained my parents

and I had been in a pretty bad car accident and they didn't survive. I was seven, and it took a long time for me to understand what she was saying."

"You don't remember your parents, either?" His thumb rubs back and forth over the scar as he speaks, and I find it comforting in a way. I shake my head and feel a single tear run down my face.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Do the doctors think you'll ever remember?"

"No, they called it retrograde amnesia, and if I were going to remember, I would have by now. It's been fourteen years, and I haven't remembered anything, so there isn't much hope."

"I've never been one to believe in miracles, but recent developments have caused me to have a change of heart." A hopeful smile appears on his handsome face. "Now come on, let's get you into the shower, you're kind of a mess. Remi should be back soon with a change of clothes for you."

I HEAR HUSHED VOICES STOP TALKING AS I WALK INTO THE kitchen. Three heads spin around to face me when I round the corner. I ignore my self-consciousness, knowing they were probably talking about me. Ryker had left me alone in the spare bedroom to change into some clean clothes that Remi had retrieved from my house.

"Good morning," I say brightly as I take a seat in the breakfast nook. "I'm sorry you guys had to take turns waking me up last night. I'm sure you all didn't sleep well, but I appreciate it."

"No worries, Pru." Ransom gives me one of his bright, boyish smirks. "We're all just happy it's only a concussion and nothing more serious."

"You're an idiot to run out there like that, by the way," Ranger adds, leaning against the countertop with a cup of

coffee in his right hand. “Your aunt sounded like she was going to have a heart attack. Why would you run after that wolf like that anyway?”

I was already well aware of the fact the Weylyn brothers all look very similar, but when you’re in a room with the three of them, it’s even more obvious they are related. If it weren’t for the scars that run through Ransom’s eyebrow and Ranger’s dimples, I would struggle to tell them apart. It also helped when Ranger started growing his hair out a couple months ago. Instead of the crewcut his twin still has, Ranger’s wavy hair now falls on his forehead and around his ears.

“I don’t know,” I lie because they would think I was crazy if I told them the truth.

“It doesn’t matter.” Ryker smiles softly at me from where he stands in front of the stove, cooking what looks like pancakes. “You’re okay, and that’s all that matters now.”

My heart skips a beat; I look into those blue eyes that are sparkling like the golden aura around him. “I can’t thank you guys enough for coming out there and finding me.”

“You’re family. We weren’t going to let you become a tasty snack for some mangy wolf.” Ransom ruffles my hair as he walks past me to sit at the table. I flinch and inhale quickly in pain. My headache has somewhat disappeared, but the stitched up spot on the back of my head is still tender and throbbing.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, Pru, I totally forgot.” Ransom reaches across the table, giving my forearm a squeeze. “Are you okay?”

A deep growl-like noise comes from across the room from where Ryker stands, his now angry gaze on his younger brother. If I hadn’t known better, I would have guessed there was an animal in the room with us, but it definitely came from Ryker. His knuckles are white from the tight grip he has on the spatula. Ransom quickly removes his hand as he holds eye contact with older brother. After a long pause, Ransom nods his head at Ryker, and it appears a silent understanding has transpired between them.

“Well, that wasn’t totally weird or anything!” I exclaim, and no one else says a word.

Instead of explaining or commenting on what happened, Ryker swiftly places a plate of food in front of me. My mouth starts watering when I see the golden pancakes and pile of bacon. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was until now.

“Wow, you can cook?”

“Only breakfast.” He winks, and my heart skips a beat.

“Can I have some—” Before I can finish what I’m about to say, a bottle shaped like a bear appears in front of me. “How did you know I like honey on my pancakes instead of syrup?”

“Call it a gut feeling,” Ryker smoothly answers before taking a seat next to Ransom. He also has a plate of food, but his is overflowing. Good to see he’s like the rest of his family. Whenever I’ve enjoyed a meal with any of the Weylyn family members, they always put away enough food for several people, at least. Even Margot and Remington have no problem shoveling large portions away. They always say it’s because they’re active, they burn a lot of calories.

“Want some honey?” I wave the bear-shaped bottle at him.

Ryker scrunches his nose and shakes his head. “Um, no, thank you. I’ll stick to maple syrup like a normal person,” he chuckles.

“Have you ever tried it?”

“A long time ago, someone convinced me to try it because that’s how her family always ate pancakes. I was never a fan.”

“Was it Grey?” I blurt, immediately kicking myself for asking. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. It’s just... Remi told me you lost someone when you were young, and that’s why you haven’t been home in a long time. She said it’s hard for you to be here because it reminds you of her or something.” I bite my bottom lip. “I saw the tattoo on your arm that says ‘Grey,’ and I figured—that was her name, right? Grey?”

Now would be a great time for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

The room is suddenly so quiet I swear I can hear a heart beating from across the room. Ranger still stands at the counter but isn't looking at us anymore. Instead, his focus is on the contents of his coffee cup. Ransom, who had been sneaking a piece of bacon off my plate, holds it halfway to his mouth, his blue eyes now looking anywhere but directly at us.

“Crap. I'm sorry, it's none of my business, and I don't know why I asked. You hardly know me. I'm just some stranger asking questions that are way too personal,” I stammer, trying to smooth over the awkward moment I created.

I tell him I'm a stranger even though I feel like the farthest thing from it. Just like when I met Remi for the first time, there is a familiarity with Ryker that would be impossible to not notice.

“I—I'm sorry,” I repeat.

Calmly, Ryker puts his fork down and clears his throat. “Yes, it was Grey who tried to convince me to eat honey on my pancakes. It was how her mother liked to eat them when she was a child, and she passed it down to Grey. She used to have sleepovers with Remi, and in the morning, when my mother would make pancakes, Grey would always ask for some honey.” He smiles at the memory. “She convinced us to try it once, but we never liked it the way she did.”

“Sounds like she had good taste. I can see why you were friends with her.” To change the awkward atmosphere and subject, I reach across the table and swiftly swipe my bacon back from Ransom. “Keep your paws off my food,” I mumble around the large bite I take.

“Hey!” he whines in protest.

We are all laughing and joking when the girl I saw at the party yesterday walks in. Her raven-colored hair is pulled into a sleek ponytail, and her almond-shaped eyes are narrowed in my direction. Nothing about her is soft or friendly. Her face is

all angles, and her mouth looks to be held in a permanent sneer.

She looks like she could be on the fashion runways in Europe with her tall, toned body and I'm suddenly self-conscious. I'm not short, but Ryker's six foot five frame makes me appear smaller than I am. My head only comes to his shoulders when we're standing.

"Ryker, we have a problem." Her amber-colored eyes slide away from me and look at the man sitting across from me. Something about her makes me uneasy, but I'm sure it's because I don't know her.

"Can it wait?" Ryker gives her a pointed look. "We're enjoying some breakfast. You're welcome to join us." He gestures to the empty seat to my right.

Oh, no, thank you.

"No, it can't wait, it's about our *guest*." I note her jaw is clenched, and her hands are held into tight fists.

Ryker and Ranger immediately make a beeline for the back door, not giving their food or me a second look. I sense a feeling of dread in the air as they rush out. I look at Ransom, who nervously cracks his knuckles as he watches his siblings leave.

"What's going on? Did someone stay the night?"

"We'll tell you soon," is all Ransom says, similar to what Ryker said earlier.

"I'm getting really tired of that answer," I growl and angrily push around a piece of pancake on my plate.

Ransom shrugs sheepishly before reaching for another piece of bacon. This time I let it slide, having lost my appetite.

RYKER

“**W**hat do you mean he got away?” I demand as I pace the boat shed the rogue had been held in all night. “You were supposed to be guarding him to make sure something like this didn’t happen!”

“I don’t know how he did it,” Avery insists as she stands at the entrance with her tanned arms crossed. “I’ve been outside the whole time since I relieved your beta this morning.”

I angrily kick a lawn chair at full force, sending it smashing into the far wall, breaking it into pieces. The growl that escapes my chest is more animal than human, but I can’t help it.

“I knew I should have been watching him,” I snarl at her, pissed she would allow something like this to happen. Instead, I spent most of the night watching my mate sleep, keeping a watchful eye on her to make sure the doctor hadn’t missed anything when she examined Grey after we got back last night.

Avery scoffs. “Yeah, right. Like you would have been able to pull yourself away from *her*.” An irritated look flashes across Avery’s face.

“I’m sorry, Avery, does me spending time with my mate bother you for some reason?” I snap, annoyed with her for letting the rogue get away and her attitude toward Grey. I know my mate didn’t miss the way Avery looked at her in the kitchen. I certainly didn’t. She would have had to be blind to miss the bitter expression on Avery’s face.

“What bothers me is you ignoring your work for a girl. A *human* girl.” Avery’s voice has a bite to it I’m not used to hearing.

“She isn’t just some girl. She’s his mate,” Ranger adds. Ranger has always been the peacekeeper and most level-headed of us siblings. But right now, I feel the anger coming off him. “He spent fourteen years thinking she was dead to not only learn she’s been alive this whole time, but she doesn’t *remember* him,” Ranger barks at Avery. “He’s earned a night off, don’t you? And he trusted you to make sure it didn’t get away, and you couldn’t even do that?” He shakes his head at the she-wolf, obvious disbelief on his face.

Avery has never been one to resolve things with her words, so I’m not at all shocked when she shoots across the room and tries to attack my brother. I had hoped she wouldn’t try to maim any of my family members while she was here, but I guess that was wishful thinking. Since I’ve known her, Avery has always had anger issues.

I lunge in front of her and take the full impact of her rage. Her body slams into mine, and we go flying across the small shack. We land on the other lawn chair, and it quickly shatters into pieces like the one I destroyed minutes ago.

My mom is going to be pissed.

“Enough!” a stern voice yells, cutting through the sounds of our snarling and growling. We both whirl around to find my father standing in the doorway.

I push off of Avery, being sure to give her one last warning growl before walking to my alpha. “He got away.”

“I can see that.” Dad’s dark gaze scans the room, narrowing when he sees the broken furniture. “Your mother is not going to appreciate you breaking her things,” he adds while continuing to survey the space. “How long ago did he escape? Do we have any chance of finding him again?”

“The last time I checked in on him was an hour ago. He’s miles away from here by now,” Avery answers, her hands busy

fixing her loosened ponytail. “I don’t know how he got past me. I was right outside the whole time.”

“Yes, it is strange he would have gotten past you,” My dad concurs, giving Avery a stern look. “How do we know you didn’t let this rogue wolf walk out of here?”

“Dad, she’s a hot-head, but she isn’t a total idiot,” I defend her. Avery has saved my ass on more occasions than I can remember. Since we found her last year, she has been a great help to Sawyer and me. “She hates rogue wolves as much as I do. Maybe even more since one forced himself onto her.”

“With all due respect, Alpha,” Avery replies, “You don’t know me very well. I’m a loyal person, and I would never go against my people.” She meets my father’s stare. “I would never betray Ryker.”

“Very well. I will send out teams of enforcers and an alert to the rest of the pack. Every female wolf is to be chaperoned and guarded until we find this threat. And Remi and Pruitt are not to leave this property under any circumstances. The rogue knows we have unmated females in the house, I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to come back and finish what he started.”

A low grumble rattles my chest as I think about him coming back for my mate. I would rip his throat out with my teeth the first chance I got. I wouldn’t bother keeping him alive for questioning if he dared return.

“I’ll leave right now to see if I can track him,” Avery offers, already tearing at her clothing so she can shift without getting caught in her tank top and jeans. “I’ll be back if I find anything.” The sound of bones cracking and popping quickly follows. A dark brown wolf now stands where Avery stood, shaking its coat, And with a huff, it darts out of the shack.

“Pru’s not going to want to stay here,” Ranger starts once Avery is passed the nearby treeline. “She’s already going to feel like she’s over-extended her welcome. You know how she gets.” He looks at my father, who nods in agreement.

I feel a pang of jealousy that my family knows my mate better than I do. I remember the young girl she once was while

my family knows the woman she's grown into. I know I will get to know her again once her aunt comes back and gives us all the answers. But until then, I'm going to have to make do with what I remember. For example, the honey on pancakes thing at breakfast. My heart soared when I saw the look on her face as I handed her the bottle. I was lucky she still enjoyed it, but it was worth the risk to see that look.

"Well, I'm not letting her out of my sight, we're going to have to come up with something because she can't leave this property."

"I'm sure Remi will come up with a plan on how to keep her here," Ranger offers.

"Yes, your sister can be very persuasive." Dad nods in agreement.

"And if that doesn't work, we can always just tie her up in here since that seems to be working out *so* well for us." Ranger grins.

"Let's call that plan B," I jokingly say.

"Kinky." Ranger wags his eyebrows, a sly smile on his face. He isn't quick enough, and my fist connects with his shoulder. "Worth it!"

"CAMPING?" SHE QUESTIONS, HER FOREHEAD WRINKLING IN confusion. "You want to go camping?"

"Yes, a sibling camping trip! We haven't had one in five years since Ryker was off brooding. But now he's back, and you're here, it's going to be perfect." Remington bounces in her seat on the couch as she explains her plan to Grey.

"Umm, not to point out the obvious, but I'm not a sibling." Grey leans forward in her seat, resting her forearms on her legs. "And I've already been enough of a burden, I don't need to get in your way anymore."

“Pru shut your face. You’re coming. End of discussion.” My sister shuts her down.

“You’re not supposed to be alone anyway, doctors orders,” I remind her. “And since your aunt won’t be back until the morning, you’re stuck with us.” *With me.* But I don’t add that part, figuring it’s best to not add to her confusion right now.

“I’ve never been camping.” Her green eyes widen in worry. “I grew up in the city! The closest I’ve ever been to camping is a tailgate before a concert or football game!”

“It’s going to be fun,” Remi exclaims, “I promise. We’ll take the jet skis out on the water for a bit, and then we’ll cook some dinner over the campfire. And of course, there will be the roasting of the marshmallows.”

When Remi got back from picking up some things for Grey at her house, we told her about the pack-wide lockdown we were on. She was a little upset about having to be constantly supervised but understood why we were doing it. She quickly came up with the idea of going camping as a way to keep everyone on the property but also entertained. We will be camping a mile away from the house, so close enough that we’ll be able to get back quickly if something happens.

“Okay, fine!” Grey throws her hands up. “I’ll go, but only if you promise I’m not intruding on family time.”

“We promise.” I smile at her. I’ve never been more excited to go camping than I am right now. “We want you here.”

I need you here.

“How many times do we have to tell you that you’re family?” Remi gets up from her end of the couch and moves closer to Grey. She plops down hard onto the cushion, bouncing both of them.

I can’t help the grin that comes over my face when I hear Grey laugh. I haven’t heard that laugh in fourteen years, and it’s music to my ears. It’s the same musical sound I’ve thought about often, but now hearing it for real, it’s even better than I remembered.

I wish I could tell her now she's more important to me than family. That she's more than that. But that's another conversation we need to wait till Addison is here to have.

The waiting is going to kill me, but I know dropping this information on Grey without her aunt present would be too much for Grey to understand. I hope she doesn't freak out too much when she learns the truth. But I also know there's going to be an adjustment period.

"I'll go help the twins get packed up. Be ready to leave in twenty minutes, okay?" I reach over and squeeze Grey's shoulder. "It's going to be great," I say with a quick wink, loving the shade of pink her face turns.

PRUITT

“Why don’t you ride on the back with Ryker?” Remi suggests as she pulls her t-shirt off, revealing a bright yellow bikini.

We made it to the campsite by riding in on four-wheelers, then spent the next hour setting up our things and unpacking the large bags of supplies Margot had sent with us. You would think we were spending a week out here based on the amount of food and provisions she packed.

The bulk of the time had been spent setting up the biggest tent I’ve ever seen in my life. It has to be able to fit at least ten people, and it has *rooms* in it. What kind of tent needs rooms? I was told Remi and I will be in one room while the boys are in the other.

And now we stand in our bathing suits on the lakeshore, getting ready to take the jet skis out. I’m wearing the black and white striped bikini Remi loaned to me and trying my best to not feel self-conscious. The Weylyns all look like they walked off the page of a fitness magazine, and I suddenly wish I hadn’t spent most of my days hiding away in my art studio because I’m so pale, I nearly glow in the dark.

“What? Are you crazy,” I hiss at her, not understanding why she would suggest such a thing. I’ve been doing everything in my power to not gawk at a shirtless Ryker Weylyn for the past ten minutes, and now she wants me to go wrap myself around him on the back of a jet ski?

“You should ride with Ryker,” she repeats, like it’s no big deal.

“Are you kidding me?” I squeak.

“Don’t act like you don’t want to. You and I both know you want to saunter your pretty little ass over there and hold onto him for dear life.” She smirks. “I’ve seen you staring at him, and a couple times, I think I saw some drool... Actually, I think you’ve got some right—”

“Oh, my God! Stop it.” I slap her hand away from my face with both of mine when she mockingly tries to wipe my face of imaginary dribble. I narrow my eyes at her when she starts laughing at me. “It’s not funny!”

“Honey, we *so* don’t care if you have a thing for my brother. *Trust me,*” Remi says after getting herself together. “And if it makes you feel any better, he’s been staring at you too.” She looks behind me at something, and I turn to find Ryker walking in my direction with a life vest in hand.

With wide eyes, I turn and look back at my friend, who just grins at me. “Go get ‘em, tiger,” she whispers before slapping me on the ass as she darts away.

“Ready to go?” his deep voice comes from behind me, and I gulp before turning to face him. He looks good in his clothes, but *holy shit*, he looks even better shirtless. Every muscle on his chest and stomach is defined and strong. The roadmap of various tattoos swirls over his tanned skin.

“Yep!” I quickly nod, trying to hide my nervousness. “Is that for me?” I point at the black and blue life jacket in his hand.

“Yes. Everyone is required to wear a life jacket on the water. I thought I’d help you since the buckles can be tricky,” he explains as he holds it out to me. I swiftly put my arms through the armholes, and his hands make quick work of loosening and tightening some straps and connecting buckles.

It fits snugly across my chest, and I laugh. “Lucky, I don’t have big boobs, or this would be really uncomfortable.” I immediately regret what I say and want to slap my hand over

my mouth or go drown myself in the lake. “Please just ignore me. It seems I can’t control my words when I’m around you.”

Ryker’s hands still from working the buckles, and his gaze meets with mine. He stares at me so intensely I swear he’s looking at my soul. One of his hands rises from where it held the vest and softly pushes a strand of blonde hair behind my ear.

“You’re perfect. Don’t ever think differently.”

I bite my bottom lip and nod because I don’t trust myself to speak right now. I know I’ll say something that will ruin the moment.

He takes my hand and leads me to the waiting jet ski. Just like before that electric current shoots up my arm, and I find myself holding his hand tighter.

We stand in about a foot of water as Ryker climbs on the jet ski in one graceful motion that I’m jealous of since I’ve never been very coordinated. He puts one hand out and quickly pulls me up behind him. My front is crushed against his back, only a few thick inches of life vest separate us now, and I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

“You had better hang on tight. We wouldn’t want you to go flying off the back now, would we?” Ryker jokes as he reaches back and grabs hold of my arms, wrapping them around his center. I don’t hesitate to tighten my grip around him, mainly because I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of him more than I already have. But also just on instinct. It feels nice to be this close to him. Something inside of me almost purrs in satisfaction at our close proximity.

“Let’s go!” Ransom yells before revving his engine and taking off at full speed across the water. His twin shouts something I can’t make out over the roar of the engines and swiftly takes off after him. I watch in amazement as they fly across the water.

“Try to keep up, love birds!” Remi calls over her shoulder before shooting after her siblings, easily catching up. I’m thankful my face is hidden from Ryker, so he can’t see the

blush that works its way up my face from her words. I've known Ryker for less than a day, why would she say something like that?

"Ready?" Ryker asks, and I feel his chest vibrate when he speaks.

"What are you waiting for?" I ask, trying to sound braver than I am.

I barely get the words out of my mouth before we're zipping across the water, the jet ski bouncing slightly from the small waves the others have caused.

As if my death grip on him already wasn't enough, I can't help tightening it more. It's a lot bumpier than I'd originally thought it would be, but it's also exhilarating. I can't help the squeal of delight that escapes my throat when Ryker takes a quick turn and water sprays all over.

Looking around him, I can't see his siblings anymore. "Sorry, you can't keep up with them with me on the back of this thing," I shout over the sound of the engine.

"Who says I'm not exactly where I want to be?" he calls out over his shoulder. I can only see the corner of his mouth from this angle, but I can see that it's curved up in a grin.

"If you say so. You're more than welcome to dump my ass off back at camp if you want to go after them," I can't help but offer, afraid I'm holding him back.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I feel his chest rumble as he laughs, and his shoulders shake slightly.

"Never."

And I honestly mean that.

RYKER AND I FLY ACROSS THE WATER. ALL MY NERVES FROM earlier have dispersed, and I'm now fully enjoying my time on the water, but mostly, I'm enjoying my time with him. He teases me every time I shriek when he makes a turn too fast or

when the jet ski shakes us too much for my liking. I've also been laughing more with him than I have with anymore, even when it's at my expense.

"Okay, you're doing that on purpose now!" I whine when another splash of water hits us. The first couple times he caused it to happen were funny, but now I'm soaked head to toe and look like I've been caught in a torrential downpour of rain.

"A little water never hurt anyone!" Ryker snickers back at me while he continues to direct the jet ski into tight circles. We spin and spin around, over and over again, until I feel sick to my stomach.

I squeeze him tight and rest my head against his shoulder blade, my eyes closed tight to avoid getting any more lake water in my eyes. "Ryker!" I plead. "Stop!"

"What's the magic word?"

"Seriously?"

"Nope. Not even close."

"Ryker!" I squeal when he goes even faster.

"Wrong again. Are you even trying?"

"Please!"

"Wrong, but since I'm such a nice person, I'll stop anyway." The jet ski slows, and finally, we come to a complete stop. Ryker cuts the engine, and for the first time in almost an hour, it's silent. I hadn't realized how loud it was until now. "By the way, the correct answer was *Ryker Weylyn is the most amazing and handsome person I know.*"

"You said *magic word*, not *words*," I remind him, grinning. My face actually hurts from how much I've been smiling.

Since we had been moving so fast, I hadn't been able to really look at my surroundings. The water is beautiful and glittering in the sunlight, almost like the glow around Ryker. The trees are so green, and they reflect off the water, creating a mirrored effect. Something I would love to draw someday if I can ever get myself to draw something other than the black

wolf from my dreams. My eyes scan ahead of us, and I notice a house.

Unlike the Weylins' large log cabin-style home, this one is more modern with large windows and contemporary architecture. It looks like whoever owns it now hasn't taken care of the property. The shrubs are overgrown, and the trim paint around the large windows is faded and chipping away. But the house looks like it could be bright and happy again with a little bit of love.

"Who used to live there?" I ask him. "Can we go closer?"

The happy look that had been on Ryker's face all day slips away. "That was the Thorne's home."

"Grey used to live there?" I loosen my hold on him, removing my arms from around his waist. "Do her parents not live there anymore?"

"Her parents also died. It's been empty ever since the accident." He stares straight ahead. "I used to sneak in there years ago when I was missing them. Well, missing *her*."

"She must have meant a lot to you since you had to leave Montana all together to get away from it all." I know I'm pushing now, but for some reason, I feel a deep need to understand how important she was to him. And *why*? "I understand you were good friends with her, but it seems like she meant much more to you."

Ryker is silent for a minute and I start to get anxious I've once again crossed a line, but as I'm about to take back my words, he says, "Do you believe in fate?"

"I don't know. I've never really thought about it. Addison used to say '*everything happens for a reason*' when she was trying to console me about my accident. But it never really made me feel better."

"I believe everyone has someone out there for them, that they're meant to be with. Sometimes it takes decades to find that person, but sometimes you find that person when you're just a child."

“And that was Grey for you? Ryker, you were just a kid. How were you supposed to know for sure?” The idea of finding a soul mate is far fetched enough for me, but the fact that Ryker thinks he found his when he was only a child worries me. When you’re a child, you’re not supposed to be thinking about whom you’re going to end up with or marry.

“It’s instinct. When you know, you know,” he says, not offering up any more information. “Are you ready to head back to camp?”

“Sure.”

As we ride back to camp, I worry my connection with Ryker is pointless if he’s still hung up over his childhood crush.

RYKER

It's strange talking about Grey *with* Grey. But I guess they really are two separate people. The little girl I remember and the girl that rides behind me now on the jet ski aren't the same person, and it's a tough reality to accept. But if I want any kind of future with this Grey—*Pruitt*—I'm going to need to stop looking at the past.

As we ride back to camp, I think about the Thornes' old house. I was always terrified someone was going to buy it, and a new family would move in. When I was still living at home, I used to sneak over there at night and sit with my eyes closed in the silence. I would imagine that I could still hear Grey laughing or Genevieve humming as she baked something. And sometimes I swore I could still hear them, but when I opened my eyes the place was devoid of life.

“Hold on tight!” I call over my shoulder. I pick up speed, so we're able to glide onto shore without having to climb off while still in the water.

“Wow, that was so much fun!” she exclaims. “Thank you for including me in this today.”

I look back at her for the first time in a while and see her light green eyes are sparkling bright, and a smile has covered for face for the past hour is still there.

“It wouldn't have been the same without you,” I assure her, wishing she would stop feeling like she's intruding on us. “I'll go get us something to drink. Why don't you go change into some dry clothes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she says, agreeing with me. I watch as she struggles with the buckles of the life jacket, and I can’t help the smile that appears on my face. The frustrated look on hers is comical.

“Good Lord, is this thing made by the same people who created straight-jackets?” She yanks hard on a strap, and it makes the vest tighter. “Shit, I’ve made it worse. Help me,” she pleads, turning toward me.

How could I ever say no to those big green eyes?

I easily unclasp the buckles and have her free in no time. “See, was that so hard?” I tease her. I almost fall over when she simply sticks her tongue out at me before turning toward the tent with a huff. I chuckle at her antics and yell after her. “You’re welcome!”

I can’t seem to get my eyes to remove themselves from her bikini-clad body. Earlier, it took all my strength to not punch Ransom right in the face when I caught him also staring at her. Grey Throne has grown into a beautiful woman with an amazing body. And I can’t wait till I’m able to sink my teeth into her perfectly smooth neck and leave my mark. I feel my wolf grumble in agreement as we watch her disappear into the tent.

After grabbing two beers from the cooler, I go sit down on the sandy shore, leaning against the log behind me. I’m surprised my siblings haven’t made it back yet, but assume they’re giving her and me some time alone. Just to make sure they’re okay, I reach out through the pack link.

“Are you guys planning on joining us again anytime soon?”

“We were giving you some time to reacquaint yourself with Pru,” Ransom immediately responds. I don’t need to be looking at him to know there’s a double meaning to his words.

“How did it go?” Ranger speaks up next.

“It... It was amazing. I haven’t felt this calm in years,” I answer honestly. After all, there’s no point in downplaying

how I'm feeling since the second they get back, they're going to be able to see it written all over my face.

"And it doesn't hurt that she looks amazing in the bikini I gave her," Remington adds. *"Too bad she had to cover herself up with one of these nasty-ass life vests."*

"Yeah, it's a real shame," Ransom agrees, and I growl at him in warning.

"Do you want him to hit you? Because I'll hold you still while he sucker punches you if necessary," Remi warns.

"Enough." My voice is stern when I snap at them. *"That's my mate you're talking about."*

"Ryker?" I hear a voice say from my left, and I look up to find her standing there with a worried look on her face. "I said your name a couple times, but you didn't hear me. Are you okay?"

"Yes. Sorry, I guess my thoughts were elsewhere." I pat the open space in the sand next to me. "Want to sit?"

"I'd love to." She sits just close enough that our elbows touch when we move. After having her pressed up against my back all afternoon, the loss of physical contact annoys my wolf and pushes me to slide closer.

"Here you go." I hand her a cold can of beer. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!" She taps her can against mine before popping the tab and taking a sip. I don't miss the smile on her face when she looks at the drink in her hand.

"What?"

"This is my first legal drink." She bites her bottom lip, something I've noticed she often does. "Don't tell Remi, but yesterday was actually my twenty-first birthday. I hate my birthday, so I didn't want to celebrate, and I knew Remi would have wanted to." She takes another sip from the can. "Although, when I thought about my twenty-first birthday in the past, I always imagined I would go to a bar and order a fruity drink. Instead, I was attacked by a wolf. But you know what they say about best-laid plans," she chuckles.

I wish I could tell her I had imaged her birthday similarly. Instead, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and give her a tight squeeze. “Well, happy belated birthday.” I smile when she turns her head to look at me. “Should I start singing now?”

“Don’t you dare!” she warns, reaching over and pinching my side in warning.

“Hey!” I shout and jump out of her reach. “Don’t start something you won’t be able to finish.”

“Oh yeah?” she challenges, her brows rising in question before swiftly reaching over and pinching me again.

“That’s it!” I jump to my feet in one fluid motion. “You asked for it!” I immediately burst into song, singing “Happy Birthday” at the top of my lungs.

Her face is a mix of emotions before she also jumps to her feet and attempts to stop me. She attempts to reach up and cover my mouth with her hands, but as I’m too fast and too tall for her to reach, I easily evade her efforts, not missing a beat of the song.

“Ryker, stop! What if Remi hears you!” she shrieks. “She’ll be pissed I didn’t tell her.”

I ignore her and start singing the song all over again, this time adding a clapping element to it. Maybe I’m making up for all those years I sang “Happy Birthday” to a tombstone, or maybe I just love hearing her laugh when she continues to fail at shutting me up.

When she attempts to pinch my sides again, I swiftly grab hold of her upper arms and throw her over my shoulder. I spin us both around while singing to her while she squeals and slaps at my lower back, begging me to stop. “Ryker! Stop it!”

“Still not the magic words!” I say breathlessly between verses.

“I’m not going to say it!”

“Then, enjoy the ride!” I spin us again, the sound of her giggling and my singing echoing through the forest.

“Fine! Fine, I’ll say it!” I slow my spinning but don’t stop completely.

“Alright, let’s hear it. You have to say the whole thing, or it doesn’t count!” I warn her.

“Okay fine, Ryker Weylyn is the most amazing and handsome person I know!” she shouts in one breath. “Now put me down!”

I easily lift her off my shoulder and put her down in front of me. She sways some on her feet, and I feel a pang of guilt. “Oh, fuck. I totally forgot about your concussion, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She reaches up and holds onto the front me for support, her pale hands a stark contrast to my tattooed chest. “I’m just a little dizzy—” She abruptly pushes off my chest and takes off running toward the woods behind us. “Just kidding!”

Watching her dart away, I laugh. Someone really should have warned her not to run away from a predator like me because I love the chase.

PRUITT

I take off running through the woods, but unlike the night before I'm not afraid for my life. This time it's Ryker who's chasing after me, and I wouldn't mind getting caught. But that doesn't mean I plan on making it easy for him. The sun is still shining brightly over us, so I'm able to dodge low hanging branches easily instead of running directly into them like I did last night. I make the mistake of looking behind me to see how close he is and almost run directly into a pine tree. I spin around it and sprint to the left, hoping to buy some time before he catches me.

"Shouldn't you be tired of being chased through the woods by now?" I hear him holler from behind me.

"Well, this time, it's fun!" I call over my shoulder. The sound of his chuckle bounces off the trees, and I grin. Making him laugh makes my insides twist and turn in happiness. I don't get the impression he's spent a lot of his time smiling or laughing in the past years, and I'm happy I'm able to do that for him. "Better keep up!"

I push my legs to their limit and leap over a fallen log. A burst of energy enters my body, and I'm suddenly flying through the trees, moving faster than I ever have in my life. If I had this energy last night, I might have been able to get away from the red wolf that chased me.

The trees are a blur as I sprint past them, and I barely notice my feet touching the ground.

Holy shit!

“Hey!” I hear Ryker’s voice shout at me, but it’s faint, almost a whisper. I don’t stop. I dig deep and move faster. I have no idea what is causing it or how it’s happening, but I’m enjoying it too much to slow down. I continue to jump over and evade trees with little effort. I make it into a clearing with yellow flowers blossoming all over and skid to a stop, my sneaker-clad feet digging deep into the earth. I’m moving so fast, I have to put my hands down to regain my balance.

Breathless, I stand up and look around the clearing. It’s similar to the one in my dream, but mine never had flowers and green grass like this one. The one in my dream is always so dark and ominous looking.

I hear bushes shift to my right and spin around. “Ryker?” I ask, but no one answers. “Ryker, is that you?” I ask again, this time a little louder.

My heart that was beating wildly only a second ago stops, and my stomach sinks to the ground. He stands in front of me, looking as he did last night, his soulless black eyes staring at me as he stands, observing the area around us. White foam still leaks from the sides of his mouth, and his patchy fur looks even worse in the daylight.

The red wolf.

“Shit!” I shout. When I had asked Ryker earlier today about the wolf, he had promised it had been taken care of. But someone is lying because that mangy animal stands only yards away from me.

His lip lifts in a guttural snarl, and he stalks forward. I can’t help the scream that escapes my throat as I watch in horror, unable to move this time. My body is frozen in place, even though I’m screaming at it to *move*. I was just running faster than I have in my entire life, and now I can’t get my legs to cooperate.

“Run! Get out of here!” Ryker’s voice doesn’t sound right when it bellows across the clearing, and I turn and gasp when I see him. His eyes are glowing gold, and his teeth have elongated into... *Fangs?*

What the fuck?

With a running start, Ryker lunges at the wolf, and all I can do is stand there and watch the transformation take place. One second I'm looking at the tattooed man I've been with all day, and the next I'm looking at the black wolf that occupies my dreams. I can't even gasp in surprise because, like my legs, everything else has stopped working, all I do is stand there slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

I want to blame what I'm seeing on the concussion from last night, but I can feel the ground shake as the two wolves charge each other, and the rush of air blow over me when the black wolf flies past me.

The black wolf—*Ryker*—slams into the red wolf, and it's a mess of claws and teeth before they finally come to a standstill a few yards away.

They slowly circle each other, each of them waiting for the other to make a move. It's the red wolf that finally grows impatient and attempts to take a bite out of the black wolf's leg.

But the black wolf is quicker and swats his attacker away with a large paw, wasting no time on a counterattack. He springs, and his teeth sink into the shoulder of the red wolf.

The smaller wolf cries out in pain and uses his sharp claws to scratch and swipe at Ryker's face, who has no option but to let go or be blinded by his opponent.

The red wolf is smaller, but he's quick. He moves so fast I barely see it happen, but suddenly he has hold of the black wolf's leg, and the sound of bones snapping makes me cover my mouth in horror. The black wolf throws his head back in a howl of pain, and it causes something in my heart to break.

No!

I did not spend the past ten months dreaming and obsessing over this black wolf to watch it die protecting me. I reach down and find a decent-sized rock, and without much hesitation, I hurl it at the red wolf's head.

The satisfying *clunk* it makes when it connects with his skull is short-lived with its soulless eyes looking at me. He lets go of Ryker's front leg and charges me.

I'm only able to back up a couple feet when my foot snags on a tree root, and I land on my butt. The red wolf's teeth are only inches away when they try to bite down on my leg, but something pulls it away just in time.

Looking over the red wolf's shoulder, I find Ryker's teeth locked onto its back leg, and the snapping noise of the red wolf's leg is a welcomed sound.

Moving so fast I barely caught the movement at all, the black wolf releases the hind leg and shoots forward, his powerful jaw locking onto the red wolf's neck. The smaller wolf doesn't even see it coming and doesn't have time to react when his jugular is crushed. It makes a whimpering noise, and after a minute or so of struggling, it finally stills.

The black wolf shakes his head in an action similar to what a dog would do with its favorite chew toy in its mouth. He shakes the lifeless animal, a low growl emitting from his throat, and all I do is watch, not knowing what I'm supposed to do.

The sound of movement behind me makes me turn around, and I gasp when three more wolves enter the clearing, all various shades of silver, gray, and black. The two larger ones head for where the black wolf refuses to drop his prey while the smaller silver wolf slinks over to where I still sit on the ground.

"Oh, no," I whisper nervously. After the past twenty-four hours, I have the right to be a little gun-shy around these animals. "Nice wolfy?" To my surprise, the animal makes a noise I swear sounds like a laugh. "Are you laughing at me?"

The animal shakes its large head before turning to watch the other three. The two larger wolves are softly barking and whining at the black wolf, trying to get his attention away from the carcass. I cringe when I see the blood dripping from his mouth.

“That’s disgusting,” I say aloud, even though I know no one will answer me.

But my words catch the attention of the black wolf—*of Ryker?*—whose big head whirls around to look at me. It’s as if he forgot I was sitting here, too preoccupied with his kill. Those golden eyes I’ve spent so much time thinking about, look at me, and then back at the animal in its mouth. I can tell he’s conflicted between giving up his prey and coming to me.

Slowly, I rise to my feet and the silver wolf that’s been at my side shifts with me, refusing to move from my left side, its large body so close to mine its fur brushes against my bare legs.

On instinct, I speak to the black wolf. “Are you planning on chewing on that the rest of the day, or are you going to drop it?” I ask, my voice soft, being careful to not spook him. “Because I have so many fucking questions, and I don’t think I’m going to be getting any answers if you don’t let that nasty thing go.”

Another low whine escapes his throat as he watches me. I know he wants to come to me, so I decide to force the issue. I turn my back on him and slowly walk away, hoping he’ll want to come to me more than he wants to protect his kill.

I take deep breaths as I walk toward the edge of the clearing, and the sound of bones snapping behind me causes me to stop and turn around. I’m pretty sure my jaw hits the ground because when I look behind me, all four of the Weylyn siblings are standing *butt-ass-naked* where the wolves had previously been.

“Oh, fuck!” I gasp, looking at all four of them. I quickly realize I’m staring at their very naked bodies and whirl back around, covering my eyes as I do. “What the hell is happening? How is any of this possible, and why are you *naked?*”

“Pru,” Remi says, speaking first, “We wanted to tell you sooner, but Addison said we had to wait for her to get back. And we’re naked because our clothes can’t make the change with us.”

“The change?”

“When we shift in or out of our wolf form,” Ryker explains. I hear footsteps coming up behind me, and I don’t have to turn to know that it’s him. *I just know.*

“Your wolf form? I... Wait, what—*what* are you saying?” I stammer, at a complete loss for words. “You’re... *werewolves?*” I choke out while still refusing to look back at them.

“We prefer the term wolf shifters, but yes, basically, we’re werewolves.” A hand grips my shoulder, and the electric current that shoots from it confirms its Ryker. I can’t help but shy away from his touch. It hurts me to do so, but this is all way too much.

“Will you please look at me?”

“How is this possible?” I ask him, and I reluctantly turn around to face him. I keep my eyes on his chest, afraid to look anywhere else. They all seem to be very comfortable in their nude state, but I’m *so* not okay with it.

“We need to go back home,” he says softly. “We’ll explain everything there.”

“We’re supposed to wait for her aunt,” Ranger reminds him, walking behind Ryker.

“I’m not waiting anymore. She saw us shift, and she just watched me kill another wolf. She’s needs answers *now*,” Ryker argues, and quite frankly, I couldn’t agree more. There’s no way I’m waiting until tomorrow for Addison to come back to get my answers.

The sound of bones popping and cracking makes us all turn around. The dead wolf that had been lying there had now shifted into a redheaded man. His throat is a bloody mess, and his leg is bent at a strange angle.

“Holy shit,” I breathe.

“Pretty cool, right?” Ransom asks, a stupid grin on his face.

“Dude, shut up!” Remi reaches around Ranger and slaps Ransom on the back of his head.

I look at the ground the whole walk back to the campsite, stumbling once only to have Ryker reach out to steady me, but I pull my arm out of his reach.

I feel horrible I’ve refused his touch twice now, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to be acting right now. So many things have happened in the past hour, and I need some time to come to grips with it.

I sigh in relief when we get back to camp. When I was running, I hadn’t realized how far I had gone, but the walk back was shockingly long. I guess when you’re able to move at superhuman speed, it doesn’t seem far.

“I’m going to run back to give them a heads up,” Ranger tells the group before shifting into a large gray and black wolf.

“Is this my new normal?” I wonder aloud.

“Would that be so bad?” Remi asks, her blue eyes soft as she looks up from digging in a bag for a change of clothes. “We’re still the same people we were before. You just know more about us now.”

A pang of guilt hits me when I think about the secrets I’ve kept from her. None of them as big as *I grow a tail and howl at the moon*, but still, I could have told her about my dreams or my sleepwalking. Or about the golden glow I see around her brother even now as I watch him change into a pair of athletic shorts.

“It’s a lot to take in Remi,” I finally answer.

“I understand, but just keep an open mind. Everything is going to make sense to you soon.” She reaches over and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I’m so glad we can finally tell you. You have no idea how hard it is to keep a secret.”

“Trust me, I know how hard it is to keep a secret.” I push my blonde hair off my sweaty forehead, wishing I had a hairband.

“Well, it sounds like we have some secret sharing to do.” She gives my hand one last squeeze before climbing onto one of the four-wheelers we rode in on. “Want to ride back with Ryker or me?”

“I...” I hesitate. I look between them, and both are looking at me expectantly. “I’ll ride back with Ryker. I’ll see you back at the house.”

I wave her off before turning to look at the man who has been in my dreams for almost a year now but in his wolf form. “I’m sorry I pushed your hand away,” I tell him. This is the first time I’ve really looked at him since the fight, and I see now his face has dried blood on it from various scratches and cuts. A long one starts at his forehead and makes its way down to his nose. I also notice he has a slight limp, and there are puncture wounds covering his calf.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he says. “This is all a lot, and I know there’s going to be a period of adjustment. I hope one day you can trust me and know I would never hurt you.” Moving slow, probably as not to spook me, he raises his hand to cup my face, and I instantly lean into his touch, finding comfort in it. “Now, let’s get you home.”

“Do we need to get you to a doctor? You’re limping pretty bad and your face...” I reach up and carefully wipe away some of the blood on his cheek, revealing a cut underneath. “That looks like it needs stitches.”

“No. Most of these wounds are superficial. They’ll be healed before we get home. My leg should be okay in a couple hours. Wolf shifters heal quickly, although some of the more serious wounds leave permanent scars.” He points at a couple raised lines that zigzag across his chest. “Like these.”

“Are those from other wolf shifters too?” I ask him, the term wolf shifter feeling foreign and odd when I say it.

“Yes.”

He doesn’t offer more information, and I don’t ask him for it. Instead, I change the subject. “What about all this stuff?” I

motion to the campsite, where everything still stands, including the tent that took us forever to set up.

“We’ll send someone to come gather everything,” he assures me. “Let’s go get some answers.” He climbs onto the four-wheeler, and I take his offered hand and hoist myself up behind him.

“About time, don’t you think?”

Like on the jet ski, I wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head on his shoulder. I may be confused about everything else, but I’m not confused about my feelings for Ryker Weylyn.

PRUITT

I'm still struggling to understand what I witnessed when we walk through the front door of the Weylyn house. Ryker and I had both kept quiet the whole way back, I assume, because like me, he didn't know what to say. Part of me wants to just blame this all on a bad hallucination, but the other part of me is too curious to walk away.

Other than almost being used as a chew toy, *again*, I had a really good day. I enjoyed my time with Ryker a lot. The pull I feel when I'm around him is hard to ignore. And even now, as I watch him speaking in hushed tones with his father, I want to go to him because the distance between us doesn't feel right.

Margot comes running out of the kitchen, a panicked look on her face. "Pru! Are you okay? Ranger told us what happened. I'm sorry you had to see that!" She pulls me into a tight hug and rocks us back and forth. "We hate those rogue wolves, so I can't say I'm upset Ryker had to kill him," she adds before letting me go.

"Yeah, it was pretty...bloody." I nod, feeling my face drop as I remember the gruesome sight of the torn-up body. "But Ryker was pretty amazing out there."

"Of course he was, he wasn't going to let anything hurt you." Margot grabs my face gently before turning to look at her husband, who's coming toward us. His face is stern, like it always is, but his eyes soften when he looks at me.

"I'm glad you're okay," he tells me. "I believe there's someone here who would like to say hello..." He turns to the

side so I can see around him.

Her light brown hair is disheveled and falling out of the low bun she's wearing it in, and I can also see the dark circles under her eyes from here. "Addison!" I call, breaking into a sprint across the room. I throw my arms around her and hold on for dear life. I knew I wanted her here, but I didn't realize how much until I feel her arms hug me tight. "I've been trying to call you!"

"I got an earlier flight, and in my rush to get home, I left my phone at the hotel. I was pulling into the driveway when Ranger came back." Addison pulls back and looks me over, her hazel eyes full of worry as she scans for any signs of injury. She touches the spot on my face where the tree branch had cut it the night before. "He told us what happened. I'm glad you're okay." I follow her gaze that's now aimed behind me, and I find Ryker standing there. "Thank you for protecting our girl today. And last night."

"I wouldn't let anything happen to her," Ryker tells her, similar to what Margot had told me a minute ago.

"I know." She gives him a knowing look before turning back to me. "I guess it's time for me to come clean."

WE ALL FIND A PLACE TO SIT AROUND THE LIVING ROOM, AND I feel all eyes in the room on Addison and me. Ryker refuses to sit down, opting to pace behind the couch Addison and I sit on. He had called Sawyer and Avery in to join us, and they're both leaning against the far wall. Avery has her usual scowl, and Sawyer looks relaxed as he nurses a beer.

A tall, middle-aged redheaded man with a thick auburn beard had also arrived. I've heard the others refer to him as Noah, and although no one thought to introduce us, I can tell by the way he stands close to Addison and the way he looks at her, there's a definite familiarity there.

"Addison, the floor is yours," Noah tells her, and I don't miss the affectionate look that passes between them.

Addison takes a big breath before turning slightly in her seat so she can look me directly in the eye. “Fourteen years ago, I had to make the toughest decision I’ve ever made by taking you away from this place and hiding you away from the people that loved you just as much as your parents did.” I freeze in my seat as I listen to her. I’m not even sure my heart is beating anymore or if I’m still breathing.

“Your real name is Grey Thorne, and I faked your death fourteen years ago when—”

“No,” I interrupt. “Wait. You’re telling me I’m... I’m Grey? *Ryker’s* Grey...?”

Addison simply nods, but I’m too stunned and confused to think clearly, and don’t even have time to take this revelation in before Addison starts up again.

“Your parents were killed by a man who didn’t take rejection well.” I look around the room and see no one else seems to be surprised by this. It’s just me who’s shocked by this news. “His name is Nicolai Volkov, and your mother Genevieve had been promised to him when she was a young girl. Her parents thought it was a privilege that a strong alpha male like Nicolai would want their daughter, and they had no problem agreeing to hand her off to him when she came of age. But a month before she was supposed to mate with Nicolai, she met Archer Thorne—your father. He was her true mate, and she knew she couldn’t follow through mating with Nicolai, so the newly mated pair ran off together, not telling anyone of their mating or where they were going.”

A sad smile appears on Addison’s face. “No one but me. I was Genevieve’s best friend since grade school, and she trusted me, a human, with her secrets. I remember laughing at her when she told me she was a wolf shifter. The first time she shifted in front of me, I wasn’t laughing anymore. It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“My mom was a werewolf too?” I ask, interrupting Addison again.

“Pru, let her finish,” Margot tells me softly. “I promise you’ll get all your answers.”

Addison nods at Margot before continuing. “So when she came to me and told me of her plans to run off with Archer, I supported her and agreed to keep another secret for her. I’d never seen her that happy, and I wasn’t going to ruin that for her. Genevieve and Archer came back here to Montana, where they were the alpha pair for several years before they welcomed a little girl named Grey.”

“And that was me?” I ask my voice, barely a whisper.

“Yes, that was you,” Addison confirms. “You were such a happy child. When I used to come to visit, you were always smiling and playing with the other children of the pack. You were very close to a young girl named Remington and her family.”

My eyes shoot to Remington, who’s sitting there with tears in her eyes. “You were my best friend,” Remi tells me, a sad smile appearing on her face. “I should have recognized you right off, but I didn’t, I swear. None of us did. Except for Ryker.” I look behind me at Ryker, who has paused in his pacing, and there’s a brief shared look between us before he goes back to his pacing.

Addison continues. “A week after your seventh birthday, Nicolai found Genevieve and Archer. He had spent nine years looking for her everywhere before hearing of the young alpha pair in Montana. He knew he couldn’t have Genevieve anymore since she was mated to Archer now, so he turned his eyes to *you*.”

“He wanted *me*?” I question. “But I was only a child.”

“It didn’t matter. He believed he was owed something, and he didn’t care if you were only a child. He was willing to wait for you to come of age before he mated with you.”

A growl rips through the room, vibrating against the walls, and everyone turns to look at Ryker. “Sorry,” he grumbles under his breath.

From the corner of my eye, I see the scowl on Avery’s face deepen, but I don’t have the time or mental energy to ponder what that’s about.

“Instead of bringing the pack into it, Gen and Archer decided to run away in the middle of the night. The last thing they wanted was for someone in their pack to get hurt or killed fighting Nicolai and his pack. So they called me, and we made a plan.”

Addison pauses and looks at Noah again. “But the plan changed when they were ambushed on their way out of town. Their car was run off the road, causing it to roll many times into a deep ravine. As far as we know, Archer and Genevieve fought so hard to stay alive, but they were out-numbered, and they died there in the ditch.”

Tears are streaming down many faces now, including mine. I sense Ryker drawing closer to me, so I’m not surprised when the sofa cushion dips, and I feel a strong arm wrap around me. I sink into him and the comfort Ryker brings just by being close to me.

“I was heading in the other direction with you asleep in your booster seat in the back. When they didn’t meet me at the safe house like we had planned, I knew something horrible had happened. And that’s when Noah found the wreckage. It had been set on fire with their bodies inside. I decided then I would never let you be found by those monsters, and I made a choice that would affect you for the rest of your life. I knew as long as you were a part of or remembered wolf shifters, you would be in danger—”

“So, you had her memory wiped,” Sawyer interrupts, snapping his fingers together as if he had solved a puzzle.

Addison nods. “I took her to the local witch who locked away her memories and her wolf. I thought if I locked away the wolf side of her, she would be safer. She would *just be human*.”

“My wolf?” I straighten in my seat and narrow my eyes at my aunt. “What do you mean, *my wolf*?”

“Both of your parents were wolf shifters, Pru,” Remi explains. “That means you also have wolf blood running through those veins. Or at least you used to...”

“You mean I’m going to shift into a wolf?” I screech, my voice going up a couple of octaves.

“I don’t know,” Addison admits. “You never showed any signs of your wolf surfacing growing up. But the first night we were here, I believe something changed in you. You started dreaming of a wolf, and you started sleepwalking into the woods. And then I saw all the drawings in your studio...”

“You knew?” I feel my face getting hot from embarrassment.

“Of course, I did! You weren’t as sneaky as you thought you were when you’d come back in the morning. And sometimes, when I would walk past your room at night, I would hear these noises. It sounded like a wild animal was in there, but when I would open the door, it was just you,” Addison tells me. “I think by bringing you back here, your wolf has started to wake up. However, you still haven’t shifted, and I honestly don’t know if you ever will.”

“Addison,” Elias speaks up, “one thing I still don’t understand is how there was a body if she was never in the car.”

“That’s where I come in, Alpha.” Noah steps forward, and I notice now he’s wearing a police uniform. “I lied about seeing Grey’s body, and I adjusted the official paperwork, it looked like she had been in the accident. But I knew she was alive and with Addison in California.”

The growl that erupts from Elias’ chest makes everyone in the room cringe. I feel something powerful rush through the room, causing the hair on my arms to stand. “You helped fake her death?” Elias growls.

“Yes. When I called Addison, she told me what was going on. Archer and Genevieve did all this to protect the pack, and I wasn’t going to go against one of their final wishes by bringing the pack into it.”

Ryker shoots up from his seat, causing me to almost fall over since I was leaning on him. I watch as he storms across the room toward Noah. “We could have protected her! You

didn't give us a chance to! Instead, we mourned. *I mourned her* for fourteen years!" he roars at him.

"But she stayed alive, and she was safe. That's what her parents wanted. Nicolai would have come back for her, and we would have had to go to war with him!" Noah defends himself.

"That's enough!" Addison also jumps up from her seat. "If anyone is to blame for all of this, it's me. I told him not to tell anyone. I'm the one who told Esme to wipe away her memories and lock away her wolf. This is on *me*."

"No, it's not on you." I also stand, grabbing hold of both my aunt's shoulders. "It's on the monster that killed my parents. You were just trying to keep me safe, and you did." I look in the direction of the very angry tattooed man. "Ryker enough, leave him alone."

I watch as he sends Noah one last glare before turning to face me. "I thought you were dead for fourteen years, and you've been a couple states away the whole time. I think I deserve to be upset for a little while."

"We are all upset right now, but that doesn't mean you need to be yelling at someone who helped save my life," I state, shaking my head at him.

"Why don't we all get something to drink and calm down a bit?" Margot offers the group. "I think we all need a minute to digest this information."

Everyone mumbles and nods in agreement before filing into the large kitchen. Margot passes out beers to the people who want one before pouring herself and Addison a glass of red wine. I decline any alcohol, knowing I need my head clear to understand all of this information.

I watch as Ryker storms out the back patio doors, slamming them behind him with so much force I'm surprised the glass doesn't break. I flinch when I watch him yell at the sky in frustration. Everyone in the room looks amongst each other, each appearing to try to decide who should go out there

to calm him. When no one else moves in his direction, I sigh and take a step toward the door.

“No.” Sawyer places his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll go.”

Sawyer rushes through the door and stops Ryker from punching one of the stone pillars. I can’t quite make out what Sawyer is saying to him now, but whatever it is, Ryker calms down some. He shifts around so I’m looking at his back, but I can see his shoulders heaving with each angry breath.

No one speaks for the longest time. Clearly, everyone is trying to digest all of this, but I can’t stand the silence, so I finally speak up. “If my wolf is waking up, does that explain how I was able to run so fast today, like *really* fast? Or the things I’ve seen lately?”

After the rogue attack today, I had forgotten about how fast I had been able to run in the woods.

“That would make sense,” Ryker says, having come through the door just then. “You’ll also probably find you can smell and hear things you couldn’t before, too,” he adds as he walks across the kitchen toward me, looking less volatile than he did when he stepped out. “What have you seen lately?”

I feel my face grow warm when I look at him. Embarrassed, I drop my gaze and look at the floor. But Ryker’s hand comes under my chin and gently lifts my head, so I’m looking at him.

“There’s a golden aura around you right now, like the wolf in my dreams,” I say as fast as I can while I still have the nerve.

Ryker’s breath catches before he asks, “You can see it?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my own voice cracking. “What is it?”

Ryker turns his head to look at Addison, his eyes pleading for her to help him.

“Remember, when I explained your parents were mates?” Addison asks me. I nod, and she continues. “Every wolf shifter has someone that is his or her perfect match. They are meant for each other, born to complete each other.”

Margot jumps in and says, “To help us recognize our mate, there’s this thing called the mating aura. It’s usually gold, and it appears around the person meant for you, but typically goes away after the mating ceremony.”

My eyes are wide as they shift over to look at Ryker. “If I can see it around you now, does that mean...”

“I’m your mate.”

PRUITT

This is way too much for me to comprehend. I'm trying hard to keep it together, but I'm this close to losing it.

If I hadn't seen Ryker shift into a wolf right before my eyes, I wouldn't believe a word of Addison's story.

But now, Ryker is standing in front of me, telling me I'm his *mate*, and I'm not sure if I should laugh or cry.

"No. This isn't possible," I finally say, sensing every eye in the room on me as I try to come to grips with what everyone has said. "I can't be your mate. I'm not a wolf shifter."

"Your wolf is just buried right now," Margot explains. "That doesn't mean you're not one of us anymore."

"I see the same aura around you now that you see around me," Ryker says as he reaches for my hand. "And when I touch you, it feels like I'm touching electricity. I know you feel it too, you told me so this morning."

"But how does any of this make us *mates*? I'm not completely sure I understand what being mates even means!" I hear the panic in my voice but can't seem to control it.

"It means I am not meant to ever be with someone else. That fate has destined us to be together, to be with no one else." Ryker's thumb runs over my knuckles. "We were created for each other."

"But what if I don't want to be with you? What if I want to be with someone else?" I pull my hand back, suddenly feeling

like I'm being trapped into something without any other options. "Could I be? Could you be with someone else?"

The feeling that these big life decisions have been made for me, and I don't have a choice in the matter is bursting to the surface with intense speed. Ryker is looking at me like I'm his everything, and I don't understand how he can believe full-heartedly I'm his *one*. Because he can see the glow around me, there is no one else in the entire world he could love.

Ryker stares at me with a pained expression. "You're telling me you would be okay if I were with someone else?" Ryker's voice is harsh as his eyes narrow. I haven't seen this side of him before, and it makes me take a step back.

"I have no right to dictate who you're with!" I fire back at him. "I've known you for like *one* day!"

Ryker moves so fast across the room, my eyes have trouble tracking him. Then he does something I never expected he'd do. He grabs hold of Avery's side and the back of her head and pulls her face to his. He crushes their mouths together with such force Avery doesn't have time to react. Everyone shouts and yells at him, but I stand quiet.

He was right, I would not be okay seeing him with someone else. As I watch him kiss her, something inside of me shatters, almost like a dam being broken. I feel the power wash over me and seep out of my pores. It vibrates in my chest so hard I feel nausea bubble up in my stomach. My hands are shaking at my sides, and I can no longer hear the uproar of voices around me. My beating heart is the only thing I hear as I stare at them, their mouths still locked.

All of a sudden, a deafening growl shoots through the room, causing everyone to jump. Ryker finally separates himself from Avery. Her face is flushed from the passionate kiss. I look around the room, and I'm shocked to find everyone staring at *me*, their eyes wide.

Holy shit...

"Was that *me*?" I ask with a gasp.

“I told you that you wouldn’t be okay if I were with someone else.” Ryker is the first to speak, and I want to punch him in the face for the cocky smirk that sits there now.

“You kissed her to prove a point?” I spit, my hands balling into fists at my sides, and the shaking from a minute ago subsiding.

“Well, yeah...” Ryker shrugs. “I told you, I’m not meant to be with or kiss anyone but you, Grey. I needed you to see I’m telling the truth. You don’t like seeing me touch another just as much as I don’t enjoy doing it.”

“Don’t call me that!” I holler. “That is *not* my name. Not anymore.” I shove my hands through my hair and look back and forth between Avery and him, my anger boiling up again as I replay the sight of them kissing.

The buzzing in my chest starts again, and I can’t seem to catch a breath. “I need some air,” I announce before storming out the door.

“Did you feel her power?” I hear someone ask before the door slams behind me.

THE COOL NIGHT AIR FEELS GOOD ON MY FACE AS I STAND ON the dock, looking up at the almost full moon. I can’t help but wonder if I’m going to start growing a tail and walking on all fours during the future full moons. One part of me is excited at the idea of turning into a wolf. The other is absolutely terrified. What if I turn into a wolf, and I can never turn back? Or worse, what if I’m never able to actually shift at all?

I sit down on the dock and dip my toes in the lake, mulling it all over.

It seems like days ago that I was out jet skiing with Ryker, but it was only hours ago. It’s crazy how fast someone’s life can implode before their eyes. I do, however, find some relief in knowing there is a reason I’ve been feeling like I’m losing my mind lately.

I've been dreaming about the wolf for months because he's *Ryker*. And Ryker is my *mate*.

Ugh! Will that ever sound like a normal term to me? I hope so because Ryker proved to me I would never be okay with the idea of him being with someone else. And I know in my heart I could never walk away from him. It would hurt too much to do so.

"Mind if I sit?" a voice asks from behind me, and I turn to find him standing there.

"Would you listen to me if I said no?"

"Probably not." Ryker sits down next to me, our arms brushing against each other. "I don't think I will ever get tired of that feeling."

"You enjoy feeling like you've been shocked every time you touch me?" I ask.

"I spent fourteen years thinking I would never touch you again, so no, I don't mind it."

I don't look at him, but I can feel his gaze on me.

"I remember when I first saw the mating aura around you," he says. "I was only ten, and you were five or six. I asked my mom why you were so sparkly. At first, she didn't understand what I was saying, but when I drew a picture of you in art class with a golden glow all around you, she finally realized what I meant. My dad and she had to sit me down and explain it. They told me I was lucky to have found my mate so young since most wolf shifters spend their whole lives looking for theirs, and some never find them. And it looks like I'm still lucky because I get a second chance with you...Pruitt."

He stumbles over my name when he says it. I can understand how hard it is for him to call me something else after all of these years, and I appreciate his willingness to do so. But after all the changes in my life in the last twenty-four hours, I need to hold onto the things I know, my name being one of those things.

"What happens if they never find their mate?" I ask him, curious about this whole *mating* thing.

“They go rogue.”

“Was the red wolf from earlier a rogue?”

“Yes. It isn’t really his fault he’s gone rogue, but it doesn’t change the fact he was a danger to others. He had attacked so many women before today. I’m glad I was able to stop him before he hurt anyone else,” Ryker explains.

“Why do rogues attack?”

“Every male shifter has an internal stopwatch of sorts that dictates how long we’ve got to mate before it’s too late. If we aren’t mated by then, we go rogue. Rogues are driven by pure need and desire, like a dog in heat. They have a bloodlust that’s so strong it takes over. I’ve spent the past five years tracking down every rogue wolf I can get my hands on.”

“Why?”

“We believed it was rogue males who attacked your family. I vowed I would kill as many rogue wolves as I could, avenging you and your family. My hope was I would eventually come across the ones that killed you.”

I turn to face him, and a sad look appears on his face. “How were you supposed to know I was alive? Everyone had told you I was dead, and you had every reason to believe it.” I reach over and take his hand. I’m still upset he kissed Avery, but my need to comfort him is stronger than my anger.

“I can’t help but think of all those years we could have been together.”

“I wouldn’t have been ready for you before,” I admit. “I want to believe I am now, but you’ll have to be patient with me.” At the hurt I see in his eyes, I add, “This is all new, and so much of it scares me. You turned into a wolf today and killed someone, Ryker. I have the right to a small adjustment period.”

“Take all the time you need.”

I’ve never found it easy to talk about my feelings, so I take a deep breath before I say, “Please don’t ever kiss her again,” I say. “I don’t know how long it’s going to take me to

understand this whole *mate* thing, but I don't like how it made me feel when you kissed her, and that anger is something I never want to feel again."

Ryker turns to face me more fully. "When are you going to understand the only person I ever want, or ever wanted is *you*?" He reaches up with both hands and cups my face, his thumbs lightly brushing my cheeks. I place my hands over his and look into his deep blue eyes that are swimming with emotion. "That I will never want to look at another woman, or touch another woman," he adds.

"I don't want you to feel like you're trapped with me, that I'm your only option. I know you said every wolf shifter has one person they are meant to be with, but I won't be mad if you decide you want to... I don't know, *look around*?" He raises a brow in disbelief, and I wince. "Okay, I'm lying. I will be mad, but I'll understand if you want to."

"Even if that were an option, I wouldn't want them." Ryker moves one hand from my face, slowly making its way down where it gently cups the back of my neck. His eyes never leave mine. I couldn't look away if I wanted to.

"I know, but what if—"

"Pru, shut up," he interrupts, "because I want to kiss you, and I can't if you don't stop talking."

"Okay." I barely get the word out before Ryker's mouth crashes into mine.

You know how in movies when the music starts playing, and the background fades away? That's what happens when my lips connect with Ryker's. Suddenly the only thing I'm aware of is how his mouth feels against mine and how I can taste the beer he'd been drinking on his lips. My hands wander up to his chest and grab hold of the front of his shirt, afraid if I let go, he'll disappear.

I've only ever kissed two other guys in my life, and both times felt awkward and forced. But kissing Ryker feels *right*. My mouth moves with his purely on instinct, and I get completely lost in it. I feel his mouth lift into a grin, and I pull

back to look at him. I reach up and lightly touch his face, my hands slightly shaking. Then I smile back at him before leaning up to kiss the corner of his upturned mouth.

“Can you do something for me?” I ask him in between planting small kisses to his lips.

“Anything,” he breathes against me.

“Will you shift for me?” I want to see the wolf when it’s not busy ripping the throat out of something. “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about him for months now and want to see him again. He’s basically all I dream about anymore.” I pull back from Ryker and bite my lower lip, worried I’ve asked for something I shouldn’t have.

“Of course.” He kisses me one last time before climbing to his feet and helping me up. I keep eye contact with him the whole time he removes his clothes, throwing them off to the side. Just like at the lake, his amazingly built body and his many tattoos captivate me.

“Do they all mean something to you?” I ask him, reaching out to lightly trace a dark swirling line on his shoulder.

“Most of them.” He puts his arms in front of him and inspects the artwork. “Many I’ve had for so long I don’t really think about them,” he admits before taking a step back from me, his skin glowing in the moonlight. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

The man in front of me crouches, and the sound of snapping bones quickly follows. In seconds, the man is gone, and a large black wolf stands in his place.

When we were in the clearing earlier, I didn’t get the chance to really look at him, but now I see he’s the exact same as in my dreams. Even the white patch of fur on his chest is the same. I smile when I see his right paw also has white fur on the toes. He’s much larger than a regular wolf I have no idea how they have been able to keep their existence a secret from humans.

The wolf walks closer to me and presses his large head into my chest. I reach up and scratch behind his ears. “Well,

hello there,” I say to him, and a happy sound comes from his throat, almost like a cat purring.

He looks up and with a quick swipe of the tongue, licks me across the face. “Yuck! Dog breath!” I wipe at my face, trying to remove all the slobber.

Ryker takes a few steps back from me and does something that makes my heart soar. He throws his head back and lets out a low, drawn-out howl. It echoes through the night, cutting through the trees around us.

Since moving to Montana, I’ve heard many wolf howls in the night, but Ryker’s is different. It pulls me in and hypnotizes me.

It’s the sounds of hollering that draws my attention away from the black wolf in front of me. When I look up at the house, I find the rest of the Weylyn siblings, Sawyer and Avery, all shedding their clothes.

“Fuck, yeah!” I hear Ransom yell down at us, before he flies down the patio steps, naked. He leaps down one of the small flights of stairs on the tiered patio and lands in his wolf form.

His twin follows close behind him, also shifting. The two large gray and black wolves nip and bite at each other. Playful growls come from them as well. Remi shifts next and joins in the fun, grabbing onto the scruff around Ranger’s neck, or at least I *think* it’s Ranger.

A soft whine draws my attention away from the commotion. Ryker is staring at his siblings, a look of longing in his eyes. “Ryker, go over there,” I say with a push on his shoulder, his black coat engulfing my hand. His fur is as soft as I thought it would be, maybe even softer. “I’ll be fine.” He snorts and shakes his head, refusing to move from my side.

“Ryk! Are you coming?” Avery calls down at us, still in her human form. She stands with her hands on her hips, unapologetically naked.

He still stands at my side, but I know he wants to go to his friends and family. “Ryker, I’m not going anywhere. Go have

fun with them. I'll be here when you get back." I softly brush his face with my hand and look into those bright gold eyes. "I promise."

That finally does it. I watch as Ryker takes off across the yard, his powerful body moving with such ease. I laugh out loud when he tackles the sandy-blond wolf that had jumped into the excitement. I assume it's Sawyer since I no longer see him standing on the patio. Moving as one, they all take off toward the woods, Ryker leading them as they disappear beyond the treeline.

I feel a pang of jealousy I'm not able to join in. I wish I could be out there, running and playing with them. I never thought I would wish I could shift into a wolf, but right now, I want nothing more.

With a huff, I march back to the house, intent on learning as much as I can about my past and now my future.

PRUITT

My feet are tucked underneath me as I sit on the patio, curled up on the loveseat. The early morning sun beats down on my bare shoulders, and I tilt my face up, enjoying the warmth it brings.

I had come inside last night after I watched my friends take off into the woods to find Addison had fallen asleep on the couch. I figured she was tired from her travels, so I didn't disturb her and decided to go to bed myself. I slept in the guestroom again, and when I woke, I found Ryker asleep in the leather chair again. Instead of waking him up, I pulled a soft blanket over him and left the room.

I didn't dream about the wolf last night like I have for the past ten months. Instead, my dreams were filled with Ryker and his tattooed body. I was a little bummed at first when I woke up, and my head wasn't swimming images of my black wolf, but that feeling went away the second I saw Ryker's sleeping form across the room.

Margot was already awake when I entered the kitchen, and she suggested we drink our coffee on the patio. "I love sitting out here in the morning. It's quiet and peaceful." She smiles over the rim of her coffee cup. "I didn't get many quiet mornings after having four kids. There was always someone who needed something."

"I love looking at the water," I tell her. "Our condo in San Francisco was over the marina, and I used to love watching the boats come in."

“Do you miss it?”

“Not really. It never felt like home. I never really belonged there. Don’t get me wrong, Addison provided me with an amazing life. I went on spectacular trips, and I never wanted for anything. But I never felt like I was in the right place. That was until I moved here.”

“This is your home.” Margot grins at me. “This is where you belong. I’m over the moon happy you’ve found your way back to us. Back to Ryker.”

I blush when she mentions his name, remembering our kiss from the night before. My stomach clenches when I think about how his mouth felt on mine. I’m still not one hundred percent sure on the whole mate thing, but I’m growing more comfortable with the idea by the hour.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask Margot. Addison still isn’t awake, and I figure Margot can answer some of my questions.

“Of course.”

“Last night, Addison said something about a *witch*.” After I had climbed into bed last night and replayed all the information I had learned in my head, I remembered Addison saying that she had a witch wipe my memory. “Does that mean witches are real?”

“Yes, and I believe you’ve already met Esme. She’s the high priestess of her coven here in Montana,” Margot explains. “Remi told me you had quite the meeting with her.”

“She read my tarot cards,” I smile when I think about what Esme said. “She told me the one I had been searching for was on his way to me. I guess that was Ryker.”

“Esme’s very good at what she does. It’s not very often she’s wrong.”

“So if there are wolf shifters and witches...does that mean everything *else* is real?” I’m almost afraid to hear her answer. I don’t know if I can handle any more mythical creatures.

“Depends on what you mean by *everything else*.” Margot grins. “There are different kinds of shifters. For example, there is a pack of cougar shifters not far away, and there is a large pride of lion shifters based out of Texas.”

“Lions and cougars? Are there bears? What about Coyotes? Foxes? *Oh my god*, are there zebra shifters?”

“Yes, to everything, but Zebras.” Margot laughs at me, and I blush in embarrassment. “For the most part, shifters tend to be predatory animals like you listed.”

“What else is there?” My eyes go wide when I ask. “Are there vampires?”

“Yes, there are vampires. They tend to stick to themselves, though. I’ve only ever met one before.”

“What are they like?” I can’t help but ask, completely fascinated by the idea of a vampire.

“They’re actually pretty normal. That’s something you have to remember about us, Pru, we’re still part human, and we tend to act more human than animalistic. Most paranormal creatures that exist are that way.” She pauses. “Well, except for demons. You’ll want to keep your distance from them.”

“*Demons?*” I blink. “Sure, why not. I don’t know why that shocks me. After what I learned last night, nothing should shock me anymore.” I shrug my shoulders dramatically.

“I’m proud of how well you’re handling all this. I would have bet money you would have been running for the hills by now.” She giggles.

“I don’t think everything has sunk in yet. I’m sure I’ll have a complete meltdown sometime soon.”

“Oh, yikes,” Addison’s voice comes from the doorway. “A Pruitt meltdown? Just give us a heads-up so we can all go take cover somewhere far, *far* away.” She has changed into some fresh clothes and looks much more rested than she did last night.

“Hey! I’m not *that* bad, and if I did have a meltdown, I think it would be very understandable given the situation! I

just found out that one day, I might sprout a tail and howl at the moon. You're all lucky I haven't checked myself into a psych ward by now."

I snap my fingers and point at Margot, "Oh, and I learned vampires and demons are real! *Demons*, Addie. Like this shit is getting *biblical*."

"Yes, I know. I've never met one, but apparently, they can be...*prickly*." Addison sits down in one of the cushioned chairs across from me.

"Prickly is putting it mildly," Margot comments with a sneer, making her distaste for the creatures obvious.

"Okay that settles it, I'll just add demons to the list of things I never want to meet. I'll put them right under sharks." I pause and look at Margot. "Shark shifters?"

"Of course not," she laughs at me.

"Well, I figured not, but thought I'd double-check." I shrug before picking my mug off the table. "You just said there are demons and vampires, but a shark shifter is where we draw the line," I mumble. As I lift my coffee cup to my lips, I find it is already gone, and I frown.

"Margot, where is Elias?" Addison asks.

"He had a quick meeting with Gage, the head of our pack enforcers. He needed to update him on the rogue wolf Ryker killed yesterday and *other* things..." She trails off, her blue eyes sliding over to me.

"You mean he had to tell them about me. That I'm really, Grey." The name is foreign, and it feels weird saying it. I have no connection to the name and honestly, don't know if I ever will. As far as I can remember, Pruitt is the only name I've ever had, and as far as I'm concerned, Pruitt *is* my name.

"Yes, he doesn't feel right keeping it from the pack, and if this Nicolai fellow really is a threat, then the pack needs to be warned."

"Nicolai Volkov is very much still a threat," Addison pipes up, her tone stern. "Make no mistake, if Nicolai learns Pru is

here and alive, he *will* come looking for her.”

“He’ll have to go through me.” A voice comes from the side door leading to the kitchen.

Ryker stands there coffee cup in hand, his hair still wet from the shower and slightly tousled. He has on a plain white T-shirt and a pair of well-loved jeans. Margot and Addison both wish him good morning, and he nods in their direction as he comes to stand beside me. He leans down and kisses my forehead as he passes.

“Good morning,” he mumbles before pulling away and settling in next to me on the love seat.

“Good morning,” I whisper back at him. I feel the flush on my cheeks with Addison and Margot watching us interact.

“Addison, if you think Nicolai is a threat, we need to make a plan on how to keep her safe,” Ryker tells my aunt.

Wait...do I still call her Aunt Addison? Even though she isn't really my aunt?

“Well, as long as we’re able to keep her existence concealed, he’ll never know where she is.”

“Sure. Please, talk about me like I’m not sitting right here. It’s cool.” I roll my eyes at them, annoyed they’re acting like I’m not actually part of this discussion.

“Sorry,” Ryker mumbles before turning his attention back to Addison. “You mentioned last night you faked her death. Clearly, that was to trick our pack into thinking she was dead so we wouldn’t go looking for her.”

While he talks, he notices the coffee cup in my hand is empty, and he replaces it with his own full mug. He never stops talking as he does this. He just casually leans closer and puts his arm around the back of my seat. These little actions make my heart swell.

“But how were you able to hide her all this time from Nicolai,” Ryker continues. “He obviously knew she wasn’t in the car that night.”

“Noah, he—” She pauses when both Margot and Ryker stiffen at his name. They’re not over his betrayal, it would seem. “He had heard of this forger who’s based out of Seattle. After I visited Esme, I drove straight there. He was able to create new identities for both of us. Grey became Pruitt, and I changed our last names to Bailey. It became impossible to track us after that.”

“Didn’t people know you were friends with Genevieve? Wouldn’t they make the connection that you had Grey with you?” Margot asks.

There’s that name again...

Addison shakes her head. “Gen’s parents and pack hated humans, so she kept our friendship a secret. And even though I knew no one knew we were friends, I would only visit when business brought me out this way after Gen moved here with Archer.”

“I’m still upset she was taken away from me for so long, but thank you for protecting her the way you did.” Ryker nods his head at Addison.

I can’t image how hard it was on Addison to give up her entire life and take on raising her best friend’s child, which prods me to ask, “Addison, I do have a question that’s been eating at me. Why now? Why did you bring me back here now?”

A sad smile appears on her face before she stands up from her seat. “Let’s go for a walk.”

RYKER

I stand on the back patio waiting for Pru and Addison to come back from their walk. I know my mate is going to need me when they're done talking. A wolf shifter's sense of smell is so strong we're able to pick up the scent of a deer up to three miles away. We can also smell when someone is sick, and based on the small amount of time I've been around Addison, I know she's very ill.

Addison is the only family Grey—*Pruitt*—has ever known, and now she might very well lose her. I don't know how my poor mate is going to cope with all this. She's learned so much in the past twenty-four hours. Learning Addison is dying might be the thing that makes her fall apart.

"Is she telling Grey?" a male voice asks from behind me.

"It's Pruitt now, and they're out on a walk," I reply with a nod, but don't turn to face Noah. I can't look at his face without wanting to punch it in. He knew this whole time that my mate was alive, and he never said anything. He was the officer that used to drive me home when I would get caught drinking and vandalizing shit when I was a teenager. He knew and understood why I was acting out, but he never said a word.

"She isn't going to handle this well." He comes to a stop next to me. From the corner of my eye, I see he is still dressed in his police chief uniform.

Noah isn't short by any means, but I still have a couple inches on the pack beta. I stand even taller when I turn to look

at him. “Pru will be fine.” I scowl at him.

“I’m not talking about your mate. I’m talking about Addison. She’s sacrificed her life to protect Grey—I mean Pruitt. And Addison feels like she’s failing her by getting sick.” Noah reaches up and scratches the side of his face. His auburn beard is starting to gray, just like his hair. “She doesn’t want to leave her.”

“No one is ever really ready to die,” I snap at him. “People talk a big game about being at peace with death, but it’s bullshit. If they had a choice, they would choose life over death every time. People just say that so the ones they leave behind feel better about losing a loved one. It sucks when things out of your control make choices for you, doesn’t it?”

“You want to do this before the girls get back, or would you like to wait for an audience?” Noah calmly asks as he removes his aviator sunglasses and places them on a coffee table.

“Now works for me,” I growl. Last night Pru had stopped me from going after Noah, but no one is here to stop me now.

“Alright.” Noah nods once and turns to face me straight on.

“You knew she was alive, and you kept it a secret from the pack, from *me*,” I start, deciding to begin with words instead of fists. “You saw how much I struggled after losing her, and you never said anything. I left my home, and the pack, my *family*, and you never said anything. How could you sit back and watch me fall apart when you could have fixed it with one simple conversation? She could have come back years ago, and we could have protected her, but you never gave us that option. You made the decision for all of us!” I roar at him.

“Have you ever once stepped back and thought about how this affected everyone else? Noah asks. “Or were you just busy thinking about yourself? You are so caught up in how having Grey taken away affected *you* and *your* life.” Noah’s voice is stern, but he doesn’t yell. He never yells. “How about you take a second to think about how this affected everyone else? Grey’s memories were erased, and her wolf was bound, maybe

forever. Addison gave up her entire life to take care of her dead friend's child. Your parents had to watch you self-destruct for years before you left. Every time I had to call them after you got in trouble with the law, they thought I was calling to tell them I found you dead somewhere. Your siblings, who love you very much, by the way, had to walk on eggshells around you their whole childhood because anything could set you off. And then after you left and didn't keep in touch, they thought many times you had been killed."

"But she was *my* mate!" I shout at him, shoving him in the chest.

"You're not the only one who lost the person they loved that day!" Noah shoves me back, something I was not expecting. Nor was I expecting his announcement.

"You loved Genevieve?" I ask, dumbfounded.

Noah doesn't say anything for almost a full minute. "No. I was in love with Addison." he finally admits. "I *am* in love with Addison."

"But she's human," I say, stating the obvious.

"No shit." He rolls his eyes at me. "Doesn't change the fact I've been in love with her for years. She was secretly in Montana to visit Genevieve, and I found them drunk on wine in a bar a couple towns over. It was a total coincidence I was even there. And the second her eyes met mine across the bar, I was a goner. But I suppose you know what that's like..."

Human and shifter relationships aren't unheard of. It's just they never last. They can be deeply in love with each other, but it will never be enough for the shifter. A shifter needs their mate, and since shifters can't mate with humans, the relationship eventually falls apart. Also, Shifters are only fertile after they have gone through the mating ceremony with their mate, and they have been bonded. That means a human and shifter could never start a family together.

"Noah, you know that relationship never would have worked, right?"

“Deep down, I know, but I still wonder if we could have been together.” Noah is notoriously private, the fact he’s being so open with me now shocks me.

“What if your true mate had come along while you were with Addison? Trust me, there is no denying the pull of your true mate.” I shake my head. “You would have had to leave Addison and the life you built with her. Even if you still loved her, you would love your true mate more.”

“Trust me, I know all of this, but I still can’t help how I felt, how I *feel* now,” Noah explains. “I wish we were able to mate outside of our species.”

“There would be fewer rogues if that was an option,” I offer. “The birthrate would rise too, I assume.”

“It would be interesting to see what a crossbred child would be like,” Noah muses.

We stand in silence for a while, both of us staring out at the lake. I think back to forty-eight hours ago and how this place felt like a graveyard to me. But now instead of looking down at the dock and thinking about how I stood there years ago when my father told me Grey died, I think about how I shared my first kiss with her just last night.

“How does it feel to have her back after all this time?”

I stop and think for a minute, trying to figure out the right words to use. “I never felt like I could breathe after that night. It was like I had to fight for every breath I took. And there was this aching in my chest, right here,” I say, pointing to my heart. “And whenever I thought about her, the aching would get worst. But the second I saw her standing there, the pain disappeared, and I took my first full breath of air for the first time in years.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you,” Noah apologizes. “I just knew I had to keep them safe. All of them safe,” he says, referring to the pack.

“I don’t like it, and it still makes me mad, but I understand why you did it,” I concede. I had always thought I was the only one who suffered after she died, but as much as I liked to

think I was alone, I wasn't. My family and pack had been mourning just as I was, and I never once considered that. "Sorry I was an asshole all those years," I joke.

"You weren't an asshole." Noah shakes his head. "You were a kid who didn't know how to deal with what he was feeling."

The sound of the door opening has both of us turning around. My chest tightens when I see her face. Her eyes are bloodshot and puffy, and her makeup has run down her face, leaving black streaks on her cheeks. Her chin is still wobbling when she looks up at me, those bright green eyes full of unshed tears.

"Pru..." I sigh, not knowing what I should say to comfort her.

She shakes her head and walks over to me, falling against my chest, and I immediately wrap my arms around her. I nod at Noah, who slips back into the house in search of Addison. All I can do is hold Pru against me and wait for her to be ready to talk. I feel her sniffing and hear the occasional sob escapes and hold her tighter.

After a minute, I hear her mumble something I can't quite make out. "What did you say?" I ask, keeping my tone soft and gentle.

Pru looks up at me with her hands still placed on my chest. "She's *really* sick."

"I know," I tell her, wishing there was something I could say to make her feel better. "I'm sorry this is happening." I reach up and gently wipe the tears away from her face.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without her. I've never been alone before," Pru whispers, her eyes widening in fear.

"You may lose her, but you'll never be alone, Pru." I hold both sides of her face between my hands. "I'm not going anywhere. Remi isn't going anywhere. My family and the pack aren't going anywhere. I promise you'll always have us. You'll always have *me*," I remind her.

“I know, but it won’t be the same without her.” Pru leans forward again and rests her head on my chest, her arms wrapping around my middle. “She’s the only family I remember having, and I don’t know how I’m supposed to make it through all this craziness without her.”

“You still have some time with her now. Focus on the days you have with her, not on losing her.”

“I don’t know how to do that. I know my parents died, but I don’t remember them, I mourned the *idea* of them more than I actually mourned *them*. I miss them, but without those memories, it’s different. Addison, though...” Pru shakes her head as if searching for the words. “As far as I can remember, she’s the only thing that’s always been in my life, my one constant, and to not have that, to not have *her*, I won’t recognize my life. Everything I knew or thought I knew is crumbling around me, and now Addie is going with it.”

“Your life isn’t crumbling around you. It’s changing,” I correct her. “Losing Addison will be a big change, but you will adapt to a world without her. You’ll be okay. I promise.”

“I just don’t see how that’s possible right now.” She holds me tighter. “Did you know she was in love with Noah? When she would visit my mom, she would sneak off and spend time with Noah. They would even meet up in different cities when Addison was traveling for work. She gave him up to raise me...”

It appears Addison disclosed more to Pru than just her diagnosis. “He loves her, too,” I confess. It may not be my secret to tell, but Addison doesn’t have enough time for secrets.

“Can they even be together? Since she’s human?”

“They can love each other as much as they want, but they can never be mated. That’s something special between shifters. And they both would have had to go through the change first before they can mate, in any case,” I try to explain the best I can. It’s hard to understand when you’re not raised in a shifter community. “Think of it as a sort of puberty shifters go through.”

“How old were you when you first shifted?” Pru asks as she pulls back from me. Tears no longer run down her face, and her eyes are already less red than they were.

“I was thirteen, which is the youngest anyone in our pack has ever shifted. Most males shift for the first time around sixteen, and females shift more around the age of eighteen.” I look down at the white shirt I’m wearing and find that black stains now cover the front of it. “I’m sending you my dry cleaning bill,” I joke with her, desperate to see her smile again.

“Oh please, like you’ve ever had anything dry cleaned before,” she says with a snort. A small grin appears on her face, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You said only shifters who have gone through the change can mate, what does that mean for...us?” She pauses. “Not that I’m ready to mate with you right now! I’m not saying I’ll never be ready to but... You know, just so I have all the facts?” she adds, stumbling over her words. It’s obvious, the idea of us mating makes her nervous.

“Pru, it’s okay. I know you’re nowhere close to being ready to go through the mating ceremony, and I can wait. I’ve waited fourteen years, what’s a couple more months,” I reassure her. If I had it my way, I would mate with her on the next full moon.

Wait, the full moon is tomorrow. Maybe that’s a little bit too soon...

“Ryker, I may never be able to shift, remember? So that means—”

“We might never get to complete the bond,” I finish for her, cursing the gods as I do. How could fate be this cruel to me? *To us?* We have waited so long to find each other, and now we might never get to *really* be together.

“Okay, there is only one thing for us to do.” Pru takes another step back and puts her hands on her hips, a look of determination on her face. “You need to teach me how to shift.”

PRUITT

“**Y**ou need to relax,” Ryker says for the four hundredth time.

“If you tell me to relax one more time, I’m going to hit you.” I keep my eyes closed as I snap at him. We’re standing in the woods not far from the house. Ryker is trying the best he can to explain to me how to “call upon” my wolf. So far it’s going *fantastically*. I’ve spent the past hour of my life having someone tell me to dig deep and picture my wolf. Then picture it taking shape where I stand. Oh, and I mustn’t forget the most important part—I have to *relax*.

Good God, how is any of this relaxing? I’m trying to call upon an animal that is caged deep, *deep* inside of me. Oh, and I just found out the only family member I’ve ever known is dying of an aggressive form of cancer.

But sure, let me just relax.

“It’s cute you think you’re fast enough to actually hit me.” He chuckles, and although I can’t see his face, I know there’s a cocky smirk on it.

“I did outrun you yesterday,” I remind him. “That was insane, by the way. I’ve never moved so fast in my life.”

“It was pretty amazing, which is why I know your wolf is in there and trying to break free of the binding spell. Well, that and the vicious growl you let out after I kissed—”

“Yep! I know who you kissed, there’s no need to bring it up again!” I crinkle my face at the memory.

“It proves your wolf is still awake inside of you, aware of her surroundings. She’s just, for lack of a better word, *stuck*.”

“Okay, how do we get her *unstuck*?” I ask, throwing my hands up in frustration. “Because we’ve been at this thing for a while, and nothing is happening.” Unable to stand it any longer, I open my eyes and look at him.

“I think our next step should be to go see Esme. She was the one who bound your wolf in the first place, she may know how to free it.”

“There’s nothing else we can do ourselves?” I bite my bottom lip. “I’m just not comfortable with asking a witch for help.”

“You’ve already met Esme, you know she’s harmless.” Ryker seems almost offended that I would feel this way. “Plus, she’s the high priestess of her coven, and arguably the most powerful witch on this side of the country. If anyone’s going to be able to help us, it’s her.”

“Okay, fine, set up a meeting with Esme.” I reach over and take his hand in mine, tracing the black and gray rose that sits there. “You realize how crazy all of this sounds, right? We have to go see a witch to free my wolf, the same witch who bound it in the first place because some evil werewolf wants me, and that’s only because he couldn’t have my mother.” I barely believe the words as I say them.

“It’s still not as crazy as my mate coming back to life,” Ryker says. “That will always be on the list of craziest things to happen to me. It will also be on the top of the list of *best* things to happen to me.” Ryker lifts my chin with his free hand, so we’re looking at each other. “I still can’t believe you’re here. I’m afraid if I’m apart from you for too long, you’ll disappear again.”

“Is that why you slept in the chair again last night?” I ask him.

“I don’t like being away from you, even when I’m asleep,” he answers simply.

“I don’t like it either,” I admit. When I was on my walk with Addison, I wanted to turn around and go back to him. I kept thinking *I wish he were here so I could reach out to him*. Just holding his hand makes me feel much calmer, and I needed that when Addison told me about her cancer diagnosis. “To be honest, it’s scary how much I don’t like it.”

“Like I told you last night, we’re meant for each other. We aren’t meant to be apart. When we are, our wolves tend to fight against it.”

I lean up on my tippy toes, so my face is closer to his. “I don’t think it’s just my wolf that doesn’t like being away from you, “ I confess to him before planting a small kiss to his mouth.

Ryker brings both of his hands up to my face, and he deepens the kiss. This kiss isn’t the tentative first kiss we shared last night. No, this one is full of need. And it’s not just Ryker who needs this, I’m right there with him. I hold on tightly to the front of his shirt at first before I release the material, and my hands slowly travel down to wrap around his waist.

With a deep growl, Ryker pushes us backward until I run into a nearby tree. I barely feel the bite of the rough bark against my skin. My head is spinning, and I’m fully consumed by his touch. This is the kind of kiss people swoon over in novels. It’s the kind of kiss people blush over in movies, and I can’t get enough of it.

Enough of *him*.

Ryker’s hands travel down my sides before grabbing right below my buttocks. “Wrap your legs around me,” he whispers against my mouth before hoisting me up. I immediately do what he says, my legs circling his waist and my ankles crossing at his lower back. “That’s better.”

Now that we are at the same height, the new angle allows him to deepen the kiss even more. My arms circle his neck, pulling him closer, but deep down, I know he will never be close enough, not until we are mated. My stomach flips at the

thought of officially mating with Ryker, both with nerves and excitement at the possibility.

Ryker's mouth leaves mine, and I whimper in protest, but then his lips trail soft kisses down my neck. He softly sucks on the spot where my neck and shoulder meet, and I shiver from the feeling. I move my head to the side to give him more access, and that's when I feel it—the sharp sensation of teeth, no *fangs*, scraping against my skin.

It's just like the electrical shock I've felt every time we've touched, but multiplied by a million. Jolts shoot from that spot all the way to my fingertips and down to my toes. I gasp in surprise and pull back from him.

“What is *that*?” I breathlessly ask.

“That's where one day, I will mark you.” He swipes his tongue across my neck again, and I groan.

“Mark me?”

“It's part of the mating ceremony,” he explains between kisses as he travels back up my neck and then to my chin. “I'll bite you there, leaving a mark, so everyone knows you're mine.”

“You're going to bite me?” I gasp, shocked at the prospect of allowing someone to sink his teeth—*fangs*—into my skin.

“Yes, and you'll do the same to me,” he casually adds before nipping at my bottom lip with his teeth. He leans back so I can see his face, and I suck in a breath.

“Your eyes are glowing gold,” I tell him. I saw them right before he shifted into his wolf form when the rogue wolf attacked in the clearing, but I haven't seen them this close up, not while he's still Ryker, a flesh and blood male.

“I know. They shifted when you first kissed me. I didn't want to scare you, so I've been trying to keep my eyes closed.” He blinks a couple times, but the gold remains.

“Why would they scare me?” I reach up and circle my finger gently around his eye. “They're beautiful, just how I dreamt they'd be.”

“I—” Ryker isn’t able to finish what he wants to say because the obnoxious sound of a phone ringing cuts him off. “Shit,” he growls before carefully lowering me to the ground.

My legs feel wobbly as I steady myself. Ryker puts the phone to his ear and snaps at the person on the other end, “What?”

I take a few steps away from him to give him some space while he’s on the phone. Running my fingers through my tangled mess of hair, I carefully remove the knots that are now there. I don’t need to walk back to the house and have everyone know I was just pushed up against a tree and making out with Ryker.

“Can’t someone else deal with it?” Ryker’s voice is less harsh than it was when he first answered the phone, but there’s still a bite to it. “I’m busy...” he says glancing at me then back at the ground. “I’m with Pru right now, can’t someone else... Okay, fine. We’ll be back in a minute.”

“Was that your dad?” I ask him once his phone is back in his pocket.

“Yes. There was a rogue wolf spotted not far from here, and since I’m the resident rogue killer, my assistance was asked for.” He shoves his fingers through his thick hair, making it stand all over the place.

“You’re leaving?” I try to conceal my panic at the thought of him leaving me, but I already know I did a horrible job.

“I’m not going anywhere.” As he reaches for me and pulls me to his side, I go willingly. “Let’s go back to the house and see what’s going on.”



“I’LL BE RIGHT BACK.” RYKER GIVES ME A QUICK KISS ON MY forehead before disappearing into the house. His shoulders are tight as he walks away. I’ve noticed Elias and Ryker don’t have the closest relationship, and they both appear to feel

uneasy around each other. I hope with Ryker back, they'll be able to fix whatever the problem is.

Resisting the urge to follow Ryker into the house, I go sit in one of the loungers by the pool. I need a minute to sort through my thoughts and figure out how I'm feeling about all of this.

I'm more worried about Addison than I am about the whole *wolf* thing right now. Addison refused to do treatment because it was going to make her feel sicker than she does now, and the odds of it even working were small. She told me her priority has always been keeping me safe, so getting me back to Montana was on the top of her list.

I feel guilty that she put my safety and happiness over her own health. But Addison has always put me first. It took years of convincing to get her to open her first boutique because she was afraid she would be away from me too much if she did. But I saw how happy she was when she would show me her designs and I couldn't keep her from that. And now, six years later, she has shops across the country and is very successful.

I make a mental note to ask Esme about possible things she could do to help Addison. If she's as powerful as Ryker says, she should be able to do something. Right?

"Do you love him?" An unfamiliar voice breaks into my thoughts, and I turn to see Avery standing not far away. She's completely naked and makes no move to cover herself up. She stands there, hands on her hips, completely okay with her nudity. Meanwhile, I'm *so* not.

I shake my head. "Wait—what? I'm sorry, would you like some clothes?" I stammer.

"No, I'm fine." She glowers down at me. "I asked if you love him."

"Ryker?"

"Yes, of course, I mean Ryker, who else would I be talking about?" she snaps. "Do you love Ryker?" She repeats, irritation written all over her face.

"I don't see how that is any of your business," I counter.

“He’s my friend, and he saved my life. I care about him, and I don’t want him to get hurt by some *human*.” She sneers at me like my existence alone offends her.

“Well, apparently, I’m not human.”

“As long as you can’t shift, you’re basically human, with some added bonuses sprinkled in.” Avery raises her chin. “And as long as you can’t shift, you can’t mate with him. And he’s running out of time.”

“What do you mean he’s running out of time?” I straighten in my seat, concerned. “Is he sick?”

Avery laughs. “No, it’s far worse than whatever is rotting your aunt’s body from the inside out.” Her harsh words hit me at full force, cutting deep. But I assume that was the point, to hurt me. “He’s going to turn rogue if he doesn’t mate soon.”

“How do you know that?” I question, raising from my seat. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because unlike you, I actually know Ryker.”

“I know him,” I say with a huff, offended she would insinuate otherwise.

“Okay, you think you know him? What’s his favorite color?” she fires at me.

“I—”

“It’s green.”

“What does he dream about?”

“I don’t—”

“He dreams about the little girl that died.”

“Well, surprise! I didn’t actually die.”

“Well, maybe you should have because it would have been easier if you were dead. Instead, you’re defective and can’t shift for shit!”

“How dare you!” I feel the vibrating in my chest, just like I did when Ryker had kissed her. I don’t know if it’s anger or if

it's the power that's trapped inside of me, but it starts to seep out. I can't see it, but I can feel it wrapping around me.

“No, how dare *you* come back here and fuck everything up. He was going to be fine without you! It would have taken some more time, but he was going to be okay! But now, he's found his *true mate*,” she emphasizes with a sneer, “Only he can't mate her because she's basically a fucking human!” she spits. “And now you're going to have to watch as he turns into the thing he's been hunting. A bloodthirsty, hormone-driven monster!”

My hand moves before I know what's happening. My palm connects with Avery's face with a loud *smack*. It hits with so much force her head flies to the side.

She whips back to face me again, her eyes now glowing bright amber, and her canines have elongated. Her wolf has taken control, and from the looks of it, it's pissed.

But so am I.

“You bitch!” She lunges at me. Her hands now have claws, and they swipe at me. Just like when I was running in the woods, I move faster than I knew was possible. I dodge her attack, smacking her hand out of the way as I do.

“Really, Avery?” I taunt her. Maybe I should be trying to defuse the situation, but my usually calm self has left the premises, and the part of me that remains wants to rip her face off. “You say you care about Ryker? What will he think if you hurt me? Huh?”

“I do care about him!” Her voice has changed too, it's deeper and gruffer than it was before. We circle each other, each of us trying to calculate the other's next move. Each time Avery tries to attack, I easily avoid her by either gracefully stepping out of the way or blocking her swings.

“Yeah, so do I!” I shout back at her.

“You're only going to bring pain to him and his pack!” She strikes out for my face, her clawed hand moving quickly. But I'm faster, and again, I spin out of her reach. I feel a small smirk grow on my face when she growls in frustration.

“Why would you even say that? I would never hurt Ryker or his pack!” *Block*.

“You’re putting them in danger by even being here. If this Nicolai guy finds you, Ryker will never let you go, and it will cause a war.”

“As long as Nicolai doesn’t know I’m here, then we’re safe.” I dance out of her reach. We’re now dangerously close to the pool. One wrong move and we’re both going in.

“You’re stupider than I thought you were if you believe that. He’ll find you, and then he’ll kill Ryker to get to you!” she snarls.

A sudden realization hits me, and I stop moving. I stand still and stare at her. “You don’t just care for Ryker. You’re in *love* with him,” I tell her, my smirk disappearing from my face. “You don’t hate me because I’m a human or a defective wolf shifter. You hate me because I’m his mate, and you’re not.”

“No.” She shakes her head vigorously, causing her black hair to fall into her face.

“Yes. It wouldn’t matter who his mate is, you’d still hate her because you want him for *yourself*,” I press, refusing to let up. She had used her words to cut me deep about Addison, and now it was my turn to retaliate.

“That’s not true.” Her hands are balled into fists at her sides, but I can see they’re also shaking with rage.

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry, Avery, but one day I’m going to be able to shift, and when that happens, I’m going to mate with Ryker because he’s *mine*. And if you think I’m going to walk away from him because of how you feel for him, then you’re insane.” The vibrating in my chest intensifies, and the power floating around us is almost suffocating at this point. “If I thought he felt the same way about you, I would let him go. I even told him so. But let’s be honest for a second.” I lean forward a little bit. “He doesn’t.”

With a battle cry like shriek, Avery leaps at me. I knew that was going to happen, and I had planned for it. I’m

standing with my back to the pool, and with one simple move to my left, I'm out of her reach. Her body flies past me, followed by a large splash.

The water from the pool soaks my shoes, but I don't care. It's all worth it to see Avery surface sputtering and coughing up water. I stand at the edge of the pool, glaring down at her.

"Are you cooled off now?" I ask her, my voice calm.

"Go to hell." She bares her teeth at me.

"You're important to Ryker and Sawyer for reasons I'll never understand, so I'm going to walk into the house like nothing happened. I suggest you do the same for Ryker's sake." I give her one more pointed look before spinning on my heels and making my way up the stairs up to the house.

"You should ask Ryker about that time we fucked!" she shouts after me.

I falter in my steps, the toe of my shoe catching on the stone step. But I quickly recover and straighten my shoulders. I don't look back at her because I don't want her to see the look on my face. I don't need to give her the satisfaction of seeing the hurt that now sits there.

"Go get dried off, Avery," I call over my shoulder.

PRUITT

I march into Remi's room, slamming the door behind me. A splintering sound follows along with the sound of metal hitting the floor. I look down at my feet and find the door handle sitting there. "Fuck!"

"So, we're going around breaking shit now?" Remington raises a perfectly arched brow at me from where she sits on her bed. "I mean, that's cool...you do you, girl. I just need a heads up, so I can start hiding the expensive stuff."

I raise my head and look at her, rolling my eyes as I do. "No, obviously I didn't do that on purpose."

"Yeah, okay. *Sure*," she drawls, a weird look on her face. "So I have just like, one small question." She climbs off her bed and makes her way toward me. "Are you aware your eyes are glowing?"

"Wh-what?" I stammer.

"Your. Eyes. Are. Glowing," she repeats one word at a time.

"I heard you the first time. You saying it slower doesn't help." I move to the mirror and gasp when I see my reflection. "*Holy shit, my eyes are glowing!*"

"Really? I didn't notice," she nonchalantly replies with a shrug.

"Remington!" I spin around, my chest filling with panic. "You're not helping. How do I make it go away?"

“Well, obviously something’s got you and your wolf upset, try to calm down,” she suggests.

“I can’t calm down because Avery is a horrible person, and I can’t make her go away because Ryker cares about her. But I really, *really* don’t like her. She’s mean. Well, I wasn’t very nice either, but she started it,” I ramble as I pace in front of the bed. “And now I sound like a two-year-old, but she said that thing about Addison, and it pissed me off. And then she said she knows Ryker better than me and oh God, Remi—” I stop pacing and look at my friend. “She does know him better. She really does, and I don’t know how to handle that. Well, I don’t know how to handle any of this, but that’s another issue entirely.”

“Dude—” Remi begins, but I cut her off before she can say more.

“Oh, and then she tried to *hit* me. Again, I wasn’t very nice either, so I guess it should have been expected, but it’s not fair because she has fucking *claws*. And then I realized something. She’s in love with Ryker. And I mean, why wouldn’t she be? He’s amazing and drop-dead gorgeous—”

“And, that’s my brother you’re talking about.” Remi dramatically pretends to gag.

“—And then she tells me I’m a danger to him and the pack. And that made me *really* mad because the last thing I want to do is hurt Ryker or you guys. I got even more upset. So then I told her she could never have him, and then she fell into the pool.”

I suck in a deep breath and face the vanity mirror again. “And now my eyes look like green glow sticks, and they won’t go away!” I slam my hand into the mirror, and it shatters into a million pieces. The loud crashing sound of glass hitting the floor hurts my ears.

“Oh, come on, really?” Remi jumps back. “I just got that.”

“I’m sorry.” I hold my now bleeding hand against my chest. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Well, I believe the term you’re looking for is *jealousy*,” Remington grumbles as she carefully steps over the glass. “And as they say, it’s a green-eyed monster. Hey!” She stops and points at my face. “You have green eyes. Oh, the irony.” She chuckles.

“Remi!” I whine at her.

You sound like a two-year-old again.

“What? It’s okay, it’s just a mirror, and your eyes are going to go back to normal once you get over yourself.” Remi reaches for my hand and examines it. “You need to stop getting hurt, this is getting really old,” she grumbles at me before picking a piece of glass out of my hand which I don’t even feel.

“I don’t know if I can get over it,” I cry. “He slept with her.”

Just saying the words out loud makes my chest burn. I thought that seeing them kiss was bad, but this is way worse.

“No,” Remi gasps. “That can’t be true.”

“She told me to ask him about it,” I murmur.

“What a bitch. I don’t know why Sawyer and Ryker put up with her. She seems totally unstable if you ask me.” Remi shakes her head at this. “You’re going to have to ask Ryker if it’s true. He’ll tell you the truth.”

“I don’t even know how I would bring that up.”

“I can help.” She grins at me, a look of mischief appearing in those blue eyes of hers.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll figure it out.”

“That’s probably for the best. It would be a little weird talking to my brother about his sex life.”

“Maybe a little.” I laugh, agreeing with her.

We both jump back when the door swings open with a loud bang, and I watch in horror as it falls off its hinges and slams against the floor. Ryker and Elias stand there, each of them with a look of confusion on his face.

“What the hell happened to the door?” Ryker questions as he takes a step into the room. “And why is there glass everywhere, and why do I smell blood?” he asks all in one breath.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It was fine until you touched it.” Remi shrugs at her brother.

“What? I didn’t—”

“Remi stop it.” I take my hand back from her. “That was me, I broke it. Elias, I’m sorry. I’ll pay for the damage.”

Elias examines the cracked doorframe before looking at me. “It’s quite all right. It’s only a door, and everyone in this house is guilty of breaking one or two.”

“Or four,” Remi adds with a guilty look on her face. “What? I was a fan of the dramatic door slam as a teenager.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain the glass or why you’re bleeding.” Ryker reaches for my hand, but I pull it out of reach.

“Or why your eyes are in wolf form,” Elias adds, taking another step into the room to get a better look at me.

“What? Still?” I look in what’s left of the mirror, and sure enough, they’re still a bright, glowing green. “They won’t go away!”

“I told you, you have to calm down.” Remi reaches around her brother to hand me a tissue to put on my hand. “The bleeding is minimal, so I’m not worried about you needing stitches.” Thank God, because I would be so embarrassed if I needed to be stitched up twice in one week.

Hello, walking disaster.

“Why do you need to calm down? Why are you upset?” Ryker’s voice is full of worry as he questions me.

I don’t know what to say to him, instead, I just stare at him. His eyes search my face for answers, but he doesn’t find any.

“Okay, fine, since she won’t say it, I will.” Remi shrugs before turning to face Ryker. “The new resident psycho told her about how you guys did the dirty.”

Any other time, the look of shock on Ryker’s face would have made me laugh. But I don’t feel much like laughing right now. There’s a rage growing inside of me I’ve never experienced before, and I don’t like it. I don’t like how jealous I feel, knowing he’s shared a bed with Avery.

“Pru...” Ryker starts, but I raise my hand to silence him.

“No, stop, don’t say anything,” I sigh. “I realize I don’t have a right to be mad. You thought I was dead, and it’s not like you were actually cheating on me. I need a minute to calm down because I’m not used to feeling this way.”

“Feeling what way?” he asks.

“Jealous,” I state simply. “I am so jealous of her; I want to break things.”

“Mission accomplished,” Remi mumbles under her breath.

“So...” I clap my hands together. “This is what I’m going to do. I’m going to go calm down.” I reach over and grab a large pair of dark sunglasses off Remi’s dresser. “By calm down, I mean go drinking. Because after my last forty-eight hours, I think I’ve earned it.” I put the sunglasses on and nod at Ryker, before walking over what’s left of the door.

“Pru, wait, you shouldn’t go alone,” Ryker calls after me.

“Who said she’s going alone?” Remi huffs at him as she follows me down the hall. “I love day drinking.”

“*UGH*, IT BURNS.” I SHAKE MY HEAD BACK AND FORTH AS THE amber liquid makes it’s way down my throat.

“You say that every time,” Remi mumbles around the lime in her mouth.

“I know.” I put the shot glass on the bar upside down to join the others that have been discarded there. “Okay, back to your brother.”

“Which one?”

“Ryker,” I huff. “Why do you think he slept with her?”

“Honestly?” Remi hiccups. “I think he was lonely, and she was there.”

I frown at this, upset it doesn't make me feel better. “But Ryker said that because we're mates, we aren't meant to be with anyone else. So how could he of been with her?”

“Well...” Remi swings around on her barstool, so she's facing me. “Shifters can have sex with other people before they find their mate, and for the most part, they do. But once they've laid eyes on their mate, there's no going back. Something changes in their body that makes it really hard to umm...” She snaps her fingers, trying to find the right word. “*Get in the mood*. Yeah sure, why not? We'll go with that. A lot of the time, an adverse physical reaction happens to them when they sleep with someone who isn't their mate. Sometimes it's nausea, sometimes it's body aches.”

“But if their mate dies, they can sleep with whoever again, right?”

“I mean, it's one thing to lose a mate before you're bonded and another to lose them after the mating ceremony.” Remi leans against the counter, using her arm to prop up her head. “Most of the time, if a shifter loses their mate after they've been bonded, they'll never look at another person romantically again.”

“Can wolf shifters have babies with humans?” I ask, thinking about Addison and Noah and what their relationship might have been if they had been able to be together.

“No, shifters can only have children with their mates, and only after they've completed the mating ceremony.”

“Okay, I guess that makes sense, and it matches what Ryker told me.” I nod my head a couple times before I snort.

“I’m lying, it doesn’t make sense at all. But maybe when I’m sober, I’ll understand it better.”

“Best of luck, dude, because I grew up around this shit, and it still confuses me.” Remi shakes her head. “My mom always says I’ll understand mating and how intense it is once I’m actually mated.”

“Do you want a mate?” I ask her.

A small smile starts to form on her face. “When I listen to people talk about finding their soulmate, I can’t help but want that for myself. To know I’ve found the person I’m meant to be with, that I was *made* for, it would be so special.” She looks at me with a serious expression. “You don’t realize how lucky Ryker and you are. Most of us will never find our true mate, and you guys have been given this second chance. I know you’re apprehensive and confused, but you have no idea how amazing your life is going to be having your mate at your side.”

“My feelings for him are already so intense it scares me,” I confess. “It’s also scary how jealous I am over this whole Avery thing.”

“She got one night with him, Pru,” Remi says, “but you’re going to get a lifetime. You’re the one who gets to have the mating ceremony. You’re the one who’s going to bare his mark and maybe his children one day.”

“I’m not even sure what a mating ceremony is,” I tell her as I make eye contact with the bartender. I motion with my hand that we need another round. “Is it like a wedding?”

“No, shifters don’t typically have weddings. We view the ceremony as a wedding of sorts, but instead of it taking place in front of your family and closest friends, it’s a private thing between mates.”

“I can’t have a wedding?” I frown at this. I had always pictured myself wearing a white dress and exchanging vows with the love of my life. I always wanted to get married outside with tons of flowers, and now I may not be able to.

“I mean, there’s no rule that says you can’t...” She trails off when the bartender puts two more shot glasses in front of us. “Thank you,” she tells the man before reaching for her glass and quickly tipping it back. “Ugh, that has to be the last one.” Her face wrinkles in distaste. “Anyway, most shifters view having a wedding as redundant since the mating bond is basically a marriage in its own right. But it’s much deeper than a piece of paper. It’s a bond that permanently connects your *souls*.”

I pause, shot glass halfway to my mouth. “Holy shit, that’s deep.”

“I know. Imagine hearing it explained to you by your ten-year-old brother when you’re five.” She grins at the memory. “He announced at the dinner table one night he found his wife. And he knew she was going to be his wife because she was sparkly.”

“The mating aura.” I tip the shot back and stuff the lime in between my teeth as quickly as I can.

“Yep! It’s rare that shifters find their mate that young. I mean, they can grow up in the pack together and spend years around each other before the mating aura appears. But with Ryker... He was only ten when it appeared around you one day.” Remi sways in her seat a little bit as she talks. “He was so happy when my parents explained to him what it meant.”

“And now he may never actually get to mate with me because my wolf is all locked up.”

“We’ll figure a way to get her out.” Remi reaches over and grabs my hand. “Esme will know what to do.”

“I hope so because I can’t do that to Ryker. I won’t be able to live with myself if I can’t do this for him, for *us*.” A newfound determination washes over me. I’m going to figure out this whole shifting thing because I do want Ryker. Every fiber of my being wants him.

“Now that’s the attitude I like to see,” Remi cheers loudly, making everyone turn and look at us. She grins and wiggles

her fingers at the spectators before turning back to look at the bartender who walked over.

I also turn in my seat to look at him. “We’ll take the check now.”

“Are you sure I can’t interest you pretty girls in another round?” A flirty grin appears on his face as he looks at me. “I would hate to see you leave so early. The night is still young.” He winks at me, making my skin crawl.

“No, that’s okay. Just the check would be great.” I try to give him a polite smile, but I know I’m failing.

“I’ll give you the check if you give me your phone number.”

“Uh—” is all I get out before Remi leans forward in her seat, a big grin on her face.

“Listen, Peter. It is Peter, right?” She waits for him to nod before she continues. “I know for a fact you aren’t allowed to flirt with the customers. You know how I know? I know the owner. He’s actually a really close family friend of mine,” she says with a bright smile, “and I can’t wait until the next time I see him so I can tell him about my experience at his bar. He’s always eager for any feedback. Do you think he’ll like what I tell him?”

“No,” Peter mutters, his face turning red.

“No,” she repeats, still smiling. “You know who else would be upset to hear you’ve been flirting? My big scary brother, who *just so happens* to be her boyfriend.” She points in my direction. “And ask anyone, Ryker is known to have some *anger* issues.”

“Ryker Weylyn?” The bartender’s eyes go wide, and his face pales.

“The one and only.” The previously bright grin on Remi’s face has turned into a mischievous, dark one. “Should I call him?”

Uh, oh.

“No, please. I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Peter backs up and raises his hands in defense. “I’m sorry if I offended you.” He looks at me, eyes pleading for forgiveness.

“It’s fine,” I tell him.

“Drinks are on me tonight,” he tells us quickly before disappearing around the corner.

I bust out laughing the second he’s out of sight. “Oh my God, I can’t believe you did that.”

“What? I wasn’t lying. Kody really hates when his bartenders flirt with the customers.” Remi shrugs like it’s no big deal she almost made a grown-ass man pee his pants.

“You called Ryker my boyfriend.”

“I figured calling him your mate was a little much for the poor human.” Remi looks down at her phone and smiles. “Our ride is here.” She jumps down from her seat.

“You called a cab?” I ask her, following her out of the bar.

“God no, that’s what big brothers are for. I made Ransom come and get us.” She scoffs. “God, I really want a cheeseburger.”

RYKER

I'm lying shirtless in bed, staring at the ceiling when she walks in. The light from the hallway shines behind her as she stands in the doorway. I can only see her silhouette because of the light, but I can tell by the way she hangs onto the doorframe for support that she isn't completely steady on her feet. Ransom sent me a text telling me he was going to go pick them up from Kody's bar. I was a little upset she didn't ask me, but I understood why she didn't.

She was upset about my past with Avery. Even though I didn't actually cheat on her, there has to be a level of betrayal there that's hard to understand. I don't even know for sure if there were men in her past, but I'm jealous of them regardless.

"Are you still upset?" I ask her as I sit up in bed.

She doesn't say anything. Instead, she shuts the door behind her as she enters the room. She kicks her shoes off as she walks toward the bed, stopping twice to reach down and remove her socks. She stops at the edge of the bed and looks at me, the soft moonlight coming from the window shining across her face.

"Can I sleep here?" she asks, instead of answering my question. "I don't like the idea of sleeping in a different room than you," she confesses, biting her bottom lip as she does.

"I don't like it either." I hold out my hand to her. "Come here."

Part of me is afraid she won't take my offered hand, but to my delight, she doesn't hesitate, putting her smaller hand in

mine. She climbs into the bed, still dressed in her jean shorts and a tank top. The house is warm from the hot summer day, so I don't bother putting the blankets over us. Instead, I wrap my arm around her while she puts her head on my bare chest. We lay in silence for a time, each other stuck in our own thoughts. I'm trying to figure out what I'm supposed to say to her to make the Avery situation okay.

"Remington called you my boyfriend tonight," she finally says, and I note her voice has a slight slur to it as she speaks.

"I've never been someone's boyfriend before." I grin at the idea. The terms boyfriend and girlfriend aren't used often in the shifter community, it's kind of strange to hear. "I like it."

She pauses again before speaking. "And no, I'm not upset anymore." She raises her head so she can look at me. "I just don't like it, and I *really* don't like her."

"Avery can be a lot sometimes." I wrap a strand of her hair around my hand before watching it fall between my fingers. "But don't ever think I care more for her than I do about you. We both have pasts, and we have to make sure we don't let them come between us. Okay?"

"Okay." She nods before lying back down and cuddling closer to me. "By the way, I'm drunk."

"I know." I chuckle. "Ransom texted me and gave me a heads up."

"Remi ate like *five* cheeseburgers on the way home."

"GOOD MORNING, SUNSHINE!" RANSOM TELLS REMI LOUDER than necessary as she walks into the kitchen. She must have fallen directly into bed after coming home last night because black makeup surrounds her eyes, and her hair is sticking out all over the place. "Sleep well?"

"Bite me," she growls at him as she plunks down into a chair at the kitchen table and immediately lays her head down, turned, so she isn't facing me.

“How much did you guys drink last night?” I ask her. “Both of you look like shit this morning.”

I swing my gaze over to Pru, who sits next to me wearing one of my old hoodies and is using both hands to hold her head up. Her usually bright skin is looking a little green, and she hasn't touched any of the breakfast Mom put in front of her.

“Gee, thanks,” she scoffs at me.

“Did you guys drink *everything* in the bar last night?” Ransom questions around a mouthful of food. *Polite as always, it would seem.*

“We didn't drink *that* much,” Remi defends, picking her head off the table.

“Well, considering the fact Pru is wearing her sunglasses *inside*,” Mom says as she comes around the corner with weirdly dull-colored smoothies in each hand, “I would assume that's a lie.”

“Ugh, that is so smart,” Remi whines when she lifts her head enough to look at Pru.

“Here, you can use mine. I'm starting to feel a little bit more human.” Pru starts to pass the sunglasses across the table to Remi, then pauses halfway there. “Can I even say that anymore? I mean, I'm obviously not human. But I can't shift into a wolf, so basically I *am* human? I'm so confused...” she whimpers.

“Shut up, you're hurting my brain.” Remi snatches the sunglasses out of Pru's hand.

Mom pats Pru's back as she places one of the smoothies in front of her. “Ryker and you have an appointment with Esme set for today, so you'll be able to get more answers on how to get your wolf out. Don't worry, dear, we'll have you shifting in no time. Now drink up, you'll feel much better after you get something into your stomach.”

“Thank you.” Pru gives her a strained smile before groaning and leaning against my shoulder for support. “Has

anyone seen Addison? I haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon."

"She went home last night," Ransom replies with a shrug. "Said something about needing to sleep in her own bed."

"I should probably go home tonight, too," Pru announces before taking a sip of the smoothie in front of her. She hides it well, but by the slight cringe of her face, it apparently doesn't taste great. "I can't keep sleeping in your spare bedroom."

"Why not?" I sit up straighter in my seat.

"Because this isn't my home."

"You said last night, you don't like sleeping without me," I remind her.

She glances around the table, losing what little color there is in her face and lowers her voice. "I know, and I meant it, but I can't stay here forever. Besides, I need to be with Addison. What if something happens and I'm not there?"

"We can send Noah over," I suggest even though I know it's not really a viable plan.

"Oh sure, let's send over the guy she's been in love with for twenty-some years but can't have," Pru deadpans. "Doesn't exactly sound fair to her, to *either* of them."

"It's so stupid that wolf shifters can only mate with other wolf shifters," Ransom grumbles. "Our birthrates are so low, and every year more males are turning rogue. It's only a matter of time before there aren't any females left, and we become an endangered species."

"Birthrates are low for wolf shifters?" Pru questions, her curiosity piqued.

"Unfortunately, yes," Mom says with a nod. "Wolf shifters have always struggled to conceive, and even then it's difficult for the female to carry to full term. And if they do carry to term, the chances of having a girl are very slim. The male to female ratio has been off for centuries."

"But you have four kids? How were you able to have so many?" Pru asks.

“I got lucky with my children, but I also miscarried many pregnancies between each of them. I lost two before I gave birth to Ryker.” Mom reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “He was my little miracle.”

“I’m sorry, Margot, that must have been very difficult,” Pru tells her. “But if the male population outweighs the females, that means there aren’t enough females to mate with. Which means...” Pru pauses when it all clicks for her. “That’s why there are so many rogues.”

“It’s a vicious circle.” I shake my head. “As long as the births of females are low, there will be an increase in rogue wolves.”

“Is there anything that can be done to help?” Pru asks.

“There haven’t been any breakthroughs thus far, but that doesn’t mean there won’t be one in the future,” Mom says before a smile appears on her face. “I haven’t given up hope of the prophecy coming true.”

“Uh, Mom, you’ve got to let that go,” Remi moans in frustration. “It was just an old wives tale they used to tell you when you were growing up.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Mom defends. She’s always been very defensive when it comes to the prophecy. Always believing it was true even when everyone around her believed otherwise.

“Wait. What prophecy?” Pru questions.

“It’s some story about how this white wolf will stop the decline of our population.” Remi shrugs dismissively.

“That’s not it, and you know it.” Mom rolls her eyes at Remi before looking at Pru. “The prophecy says *when the white wolf walks this Earth once more and finds her mate, so will the rest of us.*” Mom grins as she repeats the same sentence she used to say to us while we were growing up. Instead of bedtime stories, we heard about the white wolf.

“I don’t get it. What’s so important about a white wolf? I’ve seen white wolves at the zoo before...” Pru’s eyebrows gather in confusion.

“Yes, there are white *wild* wolves. But there has never been a white wolf *shifter*,” Mom explains. “This prophecy has been passed down for hundreds of years, and it’s very well known. Had there been a white shifter born, we would have all heard about it.”

Pru still doesn’t look like she fully believes the story, and I understand why. It all sounds farfetched. “People are holding out hope a white wolf will come into existence, and when she finds her mate, everyone else will too?”

“That’s the idea.” Mom nods. “There’s nothing wrong with having a little bit of hope that one day, things will get better.”

“There *is* something wrong with putting your hope into some fable,” Remi snorts. “Come on, Mom, be serious. You don’t honestly believe that do you?”

“I think there’s a reason this story has been passed down for so many generations and that it’s even widely known in other shifter communities, not just us wolves.” Mom does have a point there. It’s just not us wolves who’ve heard the prophecy of the white wolf, and it *has* been passed around to all other shifters. I’ve even heard the vampires know about it. “I’m going to remind you of this conversation if it actually happens,” Mom says, giving Remi a pointed look.

Shaking my head, I glance over at Pruitt. “We should probably head to Esme’s,” I tell her before I stand and move to pull her seat out for her.

“Do I have to change?” Pru looks down at the cut off shorts, and my oversized hoodie she’s wearing. I love the fact she’s wearing something with my scent on it, thus making her smell of me. It’s a way of marking her that makes my wolf happy.

“No, you don’t have to change,” I assure her, reaching for her hand as we walk out of the room.

“I still can’t believe we’re going to go see a witch,” she mumbles under her breath.

“You’re in our world now.” I smile at her. “This is just the beginning of the crazy.”

Behind us, I hear Remi choke on something. “*For the love of God*, what is in this smoothie, and why does it taste like dirt?”

“She isn’t wrong.” Pru covers her mouth with her free hand to stifle her laughter.

PRUITT

I look around Esme's shop like I did a couple of days ago, but this time I know Esme is a witch, and the things I'm looking at aren't just for decoration. They're meant for spells and charms.

"Well, if it isn't Ryker Weylyn," Esme's musical voice comes from behind us, and we spin to look at her. Unlike the other night when she was wearing the long skirt and loose blouse, she has on a simple pair of jeans and a floral top. It's understated compared to what she was wearing before. Her eyes are as dark as I remember them being, so black I swear they reflect the light.

"Esme." Ryker smirks at the woman, and reaches down to give her a big hug. "It's good to see you."

"I never thought I would see you in my shop again," Esme responds before leaning back to check him over. "Now, let me get a good look at you." She starts at his toes, and her gaze travels up, taking in every aspect of him. "Your aura looks much better than it did the last time I saw you. I would assume this pretty girl would have something to do with that." She waves her hand in my direction. "Having Grey back in your life must bring you such relief."

"It's Pruitt," I correct her. "My name is Pruitt. I...I don't remember being Grey Thorne. And that's actually why we're here."

"You were the one who locked away her memories and her wolf," Ryker explains. "And now we need you to get them

out.”

Esme’s face falls as she looks at us. “I told Addison fourteen years ago it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse those spells. Her memories, I’m certain are lost forever.”

“I’m not worried about my memories.” I step forward. “As far as I’m concerned, the person those memories belonged to died with my parents that night, and if I’m honest, I think it’s best I don’t get those memories back. I don’t *need* those back. But I *need* my wolf unbound.”

“I’m running out of time,” Ryker tells Esme, and I wince when he says the words. When Avery said them, it was easy not to believe her, but now Ryker is admitting that he’s feeling the consequences of not having a mate.

“How long do you have?” Esme’s voice is full of sorrow as she questions Ryker.

Ryker pauses before answering. “Not long, a couple months, maybe?”

“You’ve been feeling this way for a while?”

“Yes, it started about six months ago,” he tells us. “I thought there was no hope, I figured I would take out as many rogues as I could along the way then take myself out before I turned.”

“You were going to kill yourself?” I choke out, my stomach lurching as I speak.

“I couldn’t let myself turn into one of those monsters, and now I can’t have you watch me turn into one...”

“So, that’s still your plan?” I recoil when he reaches for me. “If I can’t shift, you’re going to kill yourself?” The vibrating feeling in my chest returns, and my heart rate increases, pounding hard in my chest.

“Pru...”

“Don’t! I did not—” I pause, shaking my head. “We did not go through all we went through to have you kill yourself if I can’t shift. That isn’t an option.” I whirl around to face

Esme. “You better tell us what we can do, because I’ve spent fourteen years thinking I was missing something, and now I’m not going to watch that something take his own life.”

“It would appear your wolf isn’t as bound as we had originally thought...” Esme breathes, her obsidian eyes scanning me.

“What? Why do you say that?”

“Pru, your eyes are glowing, and we can feel your power,” Ryker tells me, a proud look on his face.

“My *power*?” I repeat.

“Yes, every wolf has power,” Esme explains, “and it would appear you’re a very powerful wolf. Which is why your wolf has been able to break through the spell I bound her with. It’s not surprising considering Archer and Genevieve were both very strong alphas. Both *born* alphas if I remember correctly.”

“What’s a born alpha?”

Ryker steps in and clarifies for me. “A born alpha is a wolf who was born with a large amount of power. Versus an alpha who gains his or her power by moving up the pack rank, like my dad and mom. They weren’t born as alphas, but they acquired the power after they became alphas of the pack.”

“So, if my parents were both alphas...” I gulp. “That means I’m an alpha too?”

“You will be once we can get your wolf out.” Ryker smiles at me. “You’re going to be an amazing wolf.”

“Well, that’s only if she can work some literal magic and reverse what she’s done.” I give Esme a look of desperation. “So, can you? Can you help me? Help *us*?” I correct myself.

“There’s only one thing I can think of, and if it doesn’t work, I don’t know what else we can do.” Esme shakes her head. “I’ll reach out to the other high priestesses across the country and see what they say.”

“Thank you,” I sigh, feeling the tightness in my chest relax. “Sorry. That was...that wasn’t me.”

“It’s quite alright. You’ve certainly been through an ordeal lately.” Esme pats my shoulder as she passes me. “In the past, when your wolf has surfaced like that, has it been during emotionally charged moments like this?”

“Well,” Ryker starts, “the first time we felt her power was after I kissed someone in front of her.” Ryker holds his hands up in defense when Esme’s dark gaze narrows at him. “Whoa, hey! Don’t look at me like that. She didn’t believe me when I said she wouldn’t be okay with me being with someone else. So to get the point across, I kissed Avery...”

“He didn’t *just* kiss her either,” I mutter under my breath before I can stop myself. I wince and look up at him. “Sorry,” I tell him quickly before looking back at Esme. “It happened yesterday, too, when I had a *minor confrontation* with Avery. It resulted in her falling in the pool,” I say, refusing to look at Ryker when I feel his gaze on me. I thought Avery would have told him by now, but it would seem not.

“Other than your eyes and your power surfacing, are there any other wolf characteristics you’ve experienced?” Esme asks, not commenting on the whole Avery situation.

“She ran faster than anyone I’ve ever seen the other day,” Ryker offers.

“I moved pretty fast yesterday too when Avery drew her claws on me,” I elaborate with a shrug.

“Avery tried to hurt you?” Ryker demands, grabbing my shoulders, so I’m now facing him.

“Not now.” I shake my head at him, not wanting to rehash the events with him. “We need to deal with this problem right now. Those other things can wait.”

“I’m not done talking about this,” he growls before letting go of my arm.

Esme flips through a very old, very large leather-bound book while nodding her head. “So, like I said, emotionally charged events bring your wolf to the surface.”

“Is that a spellbook?” I can’t help but ask when I step closer to her.

“No, my dear, these are notes of past and current coven members have written down about wolf shifters. We have a book similar to this on each species.” She smiles at me over the page she’s reading. “Okay, here is the plan...”

“I STILL DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY WE HAVE TO GO TO THIS thing tonight.” I step over yet another tree branch that blocks the makeshift trail. “Don’t you think we have other pressing matters for us to attend to?”

“Esme said we don’t have to do it right at sunset. She said as long as the moon is in the sky, the ritual would still work.” Ryker holds out his hand to help me over a larger fallen tree. “The pack run starts at sunset and Dad thinks now will be the best time to tell them about you, since a majority of the pack will be there.”

“I don’t understand why we have to tell them now. Can’t we wait another month or so?”

“He doesn’t want the pack to think we’re keeping secrets from them.”

“Okay, but correct me if I’m wrong; isn’t my existence supposed to be kept a secret, so Nicolai doesn’t know I’m here?” I don’t understand how telling all those people I’m alive is keeping it on the down-low.

“The pack is family,” Ryker stops walking and looks down at me. “These people mourned the death of your family, just like I did. They would protect you with their lives, like they would have all those years ago if they had been given the chance.”

“Okay, if you trust them...”

“One day, you will too. They’re *your* pack too.” Ryker reaches for my hair and gives it a slight tug. “Your mom used to put your hair into braids like this when you were a kid.”

“Really? I didn’t know.” It’s always been my go-to hairstyle, mainly because it was the only one I knew how to

do. I had thrown it into a quick messy side braid tonight before we left the house.

“I used to pull on them because I knew it would make you mad.” He chuckles.

“So, you were literally the kid pulling little girls’ hair because you had a crush on them.” I roll my eyes at him, but can’t help grinning at the thought of a young Ryker chasing me around and pulling my pigtails.

“No, I was just desperate for your attention. I didn’t care if it was bad or good attention, just that I had it from you.”

“Well, you’ve got it now.” I reach for his hand. “Now come on, your Dad is waiting.”

We walk side by side in silence for a little bit longer. I’m sure this path is an easy one for real shifters to take, but I’ve needed Ryker’s help climbing over boulders and large trees along the way. I’m not sure how long we’ve been walking or how far away from the house we are now, but it feels like miles.

As we enter a large clearing, and I see what’s waiting for us, I wish we hadn’t come. At least forty people turn and look at us when we walk through the treeline. Some are still clothed, but the majority are naked.

How am I ever going to get used to this?

Elias and Margot are the first to walk over to us, thankfully they both still have their clothes on.

“Thank you for joining us.” Elias nods his head. “Hopefully, the walk wasn’t too hard for you.”

“It was fine, Ryker only had to carry me half the way down here,” I joke, my voice shaky with nerves. I can feel eyes on me, and I know they’re probably wondering what a human is doing here.

“I told you,” Margot says, slapping Elias’ arm with the back of her hand. “We should have had everyone meet at the house.”

“No, please, it’s okay.” I shake my head. “I’m sure the way back will be easier,” I lie to myself because I know for a fact that the way back is uphill.

Goddammit.

“Elias...” A middle-aged man with graying hair and goatee walks up to us with a wary look on his face. “I don’t mean to speak out of turn, Alpha, but why is a human here?”

“She isn’t human,” Ryker snaps at the poor man, stepping slightly in front of me.

“Ryker...” I hiss at him under my breath. “Relax.”

“I’ll explain everything in a minute, Kody. Please return to the group.” Elias quickly ushers the man away then looks down at me once he’s gone. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” *Um, hell no, I’m not.*

Elias turns to face the pack as Ryker moves us to stand at his father’s left side. I gulp when I look out and see every pair of eyes in the clearing are on us. *On me.*

“I have exciting news. It may be confusing to understand, but know what I’m about to tell you is very much true.” Elias pauses, taking a breath. “When Archer and Genevieve’s bodies were found, we believed their daughter Grey was among them. That information was false. For the safety of Grey and the safety of this pack, we were lead to believe Grey was dead, but she was actually being kept safe far away from here. But now she is back.” There is a loud collective gasp and then silence when Elias gestures to me.

“How are you sure it’s really her?” someone in the crowd calls out after a few seconds.

“I would recognize my mate anywhere.” Ryker steps forward. “Even if she didn’t have the mating aura around her like she does now, I would still recognize Grey Thorne.”

“How was keeping her away from the pack keeping us safe?” Kody asks.

“There is a man who believes he is entitled to Grey. He wishes to use her to produce a strong lineage,” Elias answers.

“And he was willing to go to war over it, so instead of causing destruction between the packs, Grey’s death was faked. But she has returned to us and returned to my son.”

“Is this man still looking for her?” An older woman is the one who speaks up next.

“We have to believe so,” Margot answers her. “But we won’t let anything happen to her. We lost Archer and Gen, but we don’t have to lose their daughter too.”

I watch as the group nods and agrees with Margot’s words, and I can’t help but feel guilty these people may need to one day put their lives on the line to protect me. Shaking my head, I step forward.

“You guys were my parents’ pack, but you don’t remember me or know me.” I clear my throat, trying to find the right words. “My parents tried to leave so they could spare you from getting hurt. I can’t stand here and ask you to protect me from Nicolai. It’s not fair to any of you.”

“Archer and Genevieve were our alphas,” Kody says, stepping forward, “and as far as I’m concerned, you’re the rightful leader of this pack. I would be honored to defend you if the time comes.” Kody falls to one knee and places his right fist over his heart. He looks at me once more before dropping his head.

“What the fu...” I start but quickly trail off. Instead, I watch in horror as one by one the people follow Kody’s lead and all fall to a knee. They move as one as they put their fists over their hearts and drop their gaze. “Oh my God, what is happening? Make them stop,” I plead, turning to look at Margot and Elias.

But instead, I find them both on their knees, heads bowed. “Wha—what? Why?” I stammer. I look to Ryker, who is thankfully still standing on two feet. “Why are they doing this?”

“You are the rightful alpha of this pack.” Ryker reaches for my hand, his thumb lightly caressing my knuckles as he

speaks. “Just like you were born to be my mate, you were born to be the alpha of this pack.”

“Oh, like hell, I was!”

RYKER

“Pru...” I try to get her attention, but she continues to stare at the kneeling pack. She doesn’t understand it yet, but what they just did was accept her as part of the pack, and also they acknowledged she’s their rightful alpha. When pack members kneel for their alpha, it’s a sign of submission and respect. She should be very flattered, but instead, she’s absolutely freaking out.

“Pruitt,” I repeat a little louder, so she’ll look at me.

“Why won’t they get up?” she asks, her panicked face finally turning to look at me. “I can’t be the alpha, I can’t even shift yet, and I don’t understand pack laws...” She pauses, her gaze sliding over them then back to me. “I can’t even look them in the eye yet because they’re all rocking their birthday suits!”

“All of that will come.” I try to calm her, keeping my voice low and steady. “One day, you’re going to be able to shift, and one day you’re going to understand the wolf shifter ways. And eventually, you won’t pay any attention to the fact they’re all naked.”

“Well, I don’t see how that’s possible,” she says under her breath. “Why won’t they stand up?” she repeats, her eyes pleading at me for answers.

“They’re waiting for their alpha to tell them to rise,” I tell her.

“But Elias is kneeling too...” She gestures at my father. “Oh. *Oh!*” She shakes her head back and forth in refusal. “You

mean me, don't you? Please tell me I don't have to be in charge of these people now? I'm...I'm not ready for any of this."

"Pru, you don't understand how amazing you're going to be as our alpha." I wave my hand at the pack. "Everyone here just accepted you into the pack and as their leader."

"I'm not ready," she repeats quietly before turning to the crowd of people. "I'm not ready for this," she repeats louder so they can hear her. She pushes her hair off her forehead with a shaky hand as she speaks. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready to be your alpha. And you all need a leader who's prepared for the job and has already been leading you for fourteen years. Elias..." She walks over to my dad and grabs his arm, urging him to stand. "Elias is your alpha and will continue to be until I'm ready. *If I'm ever ready,*" Pru adds.

Dad, now on his feet, faces the pack. "You may stand."

The pack hesitates, looking between each other to figure out what they should do. Kody is the first to rise. The people around him follow suit, and soon, everyone is on their feet. I hear the hushed conversations as they talk amongst each other.

Kody walks over to us with Logan, another enforcer, close on his heels. "Grey, I don't understand why you don't want to be alpha. You're the rightful leader of this pack."

"Your father would have wanted you to take your place," Logan adds.

"That's just it." Pru shakes her head at the men. "I'm not the Grey Thorne that you guys remember. I don't remember being part of a pack or being raised by alphas. I just learned the truth to all this two days ago, and I need to figure out *who* I am before I can lead a pack."

"I can respect that, but know the pack will struggle to accept Elias' authority knowing that he isn't our true alpha." Logan's voice is stiff as he speaks. I remember him being the most reserved of the enforcers. He observes and usually stays quiet, to hear him speak up like this...

Pru is taken aback by this and jerks at his words. “Okay, fine.” Her face turns serious as she addresses the enforcer. “If that’s how you see it, then, as your *possible* future alpha, I command you follow Elias until further notice, and you treat him with the respect he deserves.”

Both Kody and Logan straighten their backs and nod their head in respect at my mate. My chest fills with pride as I watch her. She’ll be a natural when the day arises for her to take over the pack as alpha, and I’ll be right there at her side when she does.

“Yes, Grey,” Logan answers.

“It’s Pruitt now,” she corrects him before giving each of the enforcers one more look then turning to me. “Okay, I believe we have something else we need to do.”

“Esme was of some help then?” Dad asks.

“She suggested we try summoning my wolf under the full moon while I stand in a circle of moonstone.” Pru shrugs. “The idea is the moonstone will absorb the light from the moon, amplifying its power. Since wolf shifters are most powerful during full moons and other lunar events, she believes the moonstone will give my wolf the extra kick she needs to come through.”

“She also has to drink this foul looking concoction that’s supposed to weaken the barrier between Pru and her wolf,” I add. The expression on Pruitt’s face when Esme was mixing up the drink was priceless. The complete look of disgust was something I wish I could have taken a picture of.

“Oh, yeah, forgot about that part.” Pru wrinkles her nose.

“We’ll meet you guys back at the house. Have a good run,” I tell my parents. The pack members behind them have started shifting into their wolf forms. My wolf nudges me to join them, but I have to push him down. As much as I wish I could go run with my pack, there’s something more important I need to do.

“Soon, you’ll be out here running with us, Pru.” My mom reaches for Pru and gives her a tight hug. “Everything will be

okay.”

PRU WAS QUIET AS WE MADE OUR WAY TO THE LAKE. WE decided we would do the ritual next to the water. Esme had mentioned the moonlight reflecting off the water could possibly help, and right now, we’ll take all the help we can get.

As we set the moonstones in a perfect circle and the same space apart, Pru is still quiet. “I know you’re scared,” I say, “but I’ll be here the whole time.”

She sighs from her crouched position as she digs in the bag for another stone. “The shift isn’t what I’m afraid of. Which is surprising since the idea of shifting into a *freaking* wolf should terrify me.” She dusts her hands off on her jeans as she stands. “I’m afraid this isn’t going to work, and if it doesn’t, then I don’t know what we’re going to do. You need—”

“No, don’t worry about me right now,” I say, cutting her off. “I already feel much lighter knowing you’re alive and breathing. Just knowing that has bought me some time. And Esme said there’s still a chance of your wolf coming through on her own.”

“Yes, but she said it’d have to be in a very emotionally charged moment,” Pru reminds me, “and I think it’s fair to say the most intense moments of my life have happened in the last couple of days, and I still didn’t shift.”

Esme had explained to us since Pruitt’s wolf is so sensitive to emotion and has come through during upsetting times, there’s still a chance she could shift during another intense moment. It would probably have to be during a severely emotional moment, but it could still happen.

“She said if the ritual doesn’t make you shift right away, it should still help break down the wall she put between you and your wolf. So maybe she’s wrong, and it won’t have to be some epic event that makes you shift.” I’m not usually the optimistic one. I’ve always been the one brooding in the corner. But this is a nice change.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed if this doesn’t work.” She wipes her face and looks away from me.

Careful not to step on any of the stones, I walk over to her, lift her chin, so she’s looking at me, and give her a reassuring smile. “You could never disappoint me,” I promise her. “Please, don’t ever think that.”

I kiss her forehead before pulling her in tight against my chest and holding her close, then she wraps her arms around me, and I place my chin on top of her blonde head. I close my eyes and savor the moment. It’s simple moments like these I always thought about when I would picture our life together. These are the moments I mourned, and now they’re the moments that make my heart swell with emotion.

“Okay, I’m ready,” she whispers after a couple of minutes.

“You have to drink that stuff first,” I tell her as I release her.

“Can’t be any worse than the cheap tequila I was drinking last night,” she chuckles.

“What?” I exclaim. “Did you see that sludge? It’s going to be disgusting.” I shake my head at her.

She slaps my arm. “You’re not supposed to say that. You’re supposed to say it’s going to be fine.”

I pull the bottle out of the bag and hold it up. Even in the moonlight, the brown muck still looks vile. “I’m sorry, but I can’t lie about this.” I pop the lid off and take a quick sniff of the liquid. “Oh, yeah, that’s going to suck... Bottoms up!”

Pru rolls her eyes at me before taking the bottle from my hand. “You’re lucky I like you,” she snaps at me, a smirk on her face.

“You more than *like* me, and you know it, baby.” I wink at her.

“No one likes a know-it-all.” Her eyes narrow at me.

“But I’m not wrong.”

“No, you’re not wrong.” She shakes her head at me, an amused look on her face.

“I’ve more than liked you for most of my life,” I tell her. “You’ve got some catching up to do.”

PRUITT

Ryker wasn't wrong. Esme's drink was absolutely disgusting. He had to hold my hair back when I thought I was going to throw it up. It was a struggle, but I was able to keep it down, thank God.

I'm standing in the circle with my arms crossed and eyes closed as I wait for something to happen. "Do you feel anything yet?" Ryker whispers from his spot outside of the moonstone circle. Esme left explicit instructions that once the ritual begins, no one is allowed to cross the moonstones.

"Nope," I sigh. "Did she write in her notes how long it's supposed to be before I feel—" I suck in a breath as a wave a pain washes over me. It starts at my scalp before spreading down to my toes.

Every single part of my body feels like it's on fire, and I fall to my knees, no longer able to keep myself upright. The pain in my limbs and torso is terrible, but the agony that wracks my skull is horrifying. I grab my head and clench my teeth, trying desperately not to scream out in pain.

"Pruitt!" Ryker rushes forward.

"No!" I gasp, throwing my hand out to stop him from crossing into the circle. "Don't!"

"What can I do to help?" I don't have to look at him to know he's panicking. I hear it in his voice.

I shake my head at him, no longer able to use my words.

Another intense wave of pain washes over me, and I'm no longer able to hold back the howl of pain that escapes me. I hear Ryker speaking to me, but I can no longer understand what he's saying. My brain is too occupied by the pain to comprehend his words. My hands reach down and dig deep into the dirt, searching for something to hold on to.

That's when I feel it, a wall of sorts starts to shatter in my brain. A rush of power drapes over me, making my chest vibrate and my skin sting. I sense another presence in my head, one I now know has always been there, but locked away. I also sense the delight it feels being freed and the nudging it makes at my mind, asking for control.

"Ryker!" I gasp as even talking hurts at this point. "I think... I think something worked. My wolf... I think she's free. I can feel something inside my mind..."

I hope he can understand what I'm saying because I don't know how else to explain it.

"That's your wolf, baby." I open my eyes long enough to see that Ryker is crouching in front of me on the other side of the circle. "Let her take over. Don't fight her."

"I'm not trying to," I growl between clenched teeth.

"I know it's hard to hand over the control, but she knows what to do." His voice calm, and I find comfort in his soothing voice.

"It hurts," I sob as sweat drips down my back.

"I know, but look," he says, pointing at my hands that have been on fire since this whole thing started, "You have claws."

"Wh-What?" I stammer as I bring my hands closer to my face so I can see them through the tears in my eyes. Sure enough, razor-sharp claws have replaced each one of my fingernails.

"And your fangs came in too."

I carefully run my tongue over my front teeth and, yep! Two elongated pointy teeth now sit there. "It's working..." I breathe, feeling some relief.

“Let your wolf get you through the rest,” Ryker says, reassuring me. “You’re doing amazing, Pru.”

I close my eyes and focus on the other presence that now occupies my mind. I try to visualize letting her take over or giving her the steering wheel. But no matter how hard I try to relax or how hard she pushes at what’s left of the barrier between us, she can’t break all the way through. Her frustration and the anger she feels from being locked away for so long is palpable.

I’m so sorry...

I don’t know if she can hear me, but I apologize to her anyway. I can’t imagine how trapped she must feel, and now the wall caging her refuses to completely break.

“*Pruitt?*” A voice answers back, one I’ve become very fond of.

“*Ryker?*” I think back tentatively.

“*I can hear you through the pack link!*” His voice sounds ecstatic, and when I open my eyes to look at him. His face looks the same, a big smile sits there, a smile full of hope.

“She’s still stuck,” I reveal to him, tears running down my face. “She’s sort of out, I can feel her, but there’s a piece of the wall still up or something.” I wipe my face with a shaky hand and see my claws are still out. “I don’t know... I tried. I really did try, but she’s still stuck.” A sob escapes my mouth before I can stop it. I can’t help but notice how weird my mouth feels when I talk with fangs.

Holy shit, I have fangs.

“I know you tried.” Ryker gets to his feet and steps over the stones. It’s clear to both of us the ritual is over. The pain has already dispersed from my body and the power we both felt left with it. Ryker kneels in front of me and wraps me up in his arms. “I know you tried, and you were so brave.” He kisses the top of my head. “I’m considering this a win.”

“Why? I didn’t shift,” I sniff.

“No, but your fangs and claws appeared, and even though she’s still tucked away, I can sense your wolf’s presence. That’s something I haven’t been able to do until now,” he explains, “and this means we’re that much closer to getting her out. We won’t stop trying. I promise we won’t give up on her. *I won’t give up.*” There’s a double meaning to his words when he says, “I promise I won’t ever leave your side.”

“Do you mean that?” I push back so I can look into his eyes.

“I mean it. I’ll hold on as long as I can.” He pushes away strands of hair stuck to my sweaty face. “Your wolf eyes are so beautiful,” he murmurs. “*You’re beautiful.*”

“Even when I’m a sweaty mess with *fangs*,” I counter with a grin. Even though I feel devastated this didn’t work, Ryker is still able to make me smile.

“Even then.” He presses his lips to my temple. “But you really do need a shower,” he whispers against my face.

“*CAN YOU STILL HEAR ME?*” I ASK RYKER THROUGH THE MIND link. *Again.*

“*I told you I could two minutes ago,*” he snickers back.

“*I’m just checking.*”

It’s weird to be walking right next to him and be having this conversation with him, *in our heads*. If anyone else were to walk past us right now, they would think we are walking in total silence. I’m not going to lie, though. I’m a fan of having Ryker’s voice in my head. I’ve already been dreaming about him for ten months, might as well have his thoughts in my head too. Right?

“You don’t have to keep checking,” Ryker says, speaking out loud this time. “Now that this part of your wolf is unlocked, you should be able to do it with anyone else in the pack, not just me.”

“So, I can talk shit about people with Remi, and no one will hear us?” This special little skill just unlocked so many possibilities.

“It’s usually so pack members can communicate while in wolf form, but sure you can use it to gossip with my sister.” Ryker shakes his head at this. “The two of you together have always been trouble.”

“Were we bad as kids too?”

“Worse.” Ryker chuckles. “You guys were always getting into things you weren’t supposed to.”

“I can picture that.” I grin.

I lied to Esme when I said I didn’t care about getting my memories back. I’ve mourned their loss for as long as I can remember, and there was always a smidge of hope that one day I would wake up and they would be back. So, now that I know for a fact there’s no hope of them ever returning, I can’t help but be a little sad.

I wish I could know what Christmases were like before the accident or what it was like to see my parents shift into wolves. I wonder what they were like as alphas? Considering how quickly the pack was willing to submit to me earlier, they must have been well-loved and respected. I can only hope that when the time comes, I’ll be able to live up to them.

As we walk closer to the house, I pause in my steps when I hear something. “Is that a heartbeat? Why is it so fast?” I ask, “and why can I hear it?”

“There’s a deer in the trees right over there.” Ryker points to the dark line of trees to our right. “He’s spooked because he can sense that we’re predators. Your wolf senses must have been released during the ritual also.”

“Oh, that’s great. I can do everything wolf shifters can except *shift*.” I throw my hands up in frustration.

“I told you. We’re aren’t giving up on that,” he says before glancing back at the house. Warm light shines out of the big windows that cover the rear, “Okay, let’s practice. Close your eyes and try to figure out who’s in the house.”

“What? Why?” I raise a brow in question.

“Humor me. I want to see how awesome my mate is at this wolf stuff.” My heart skips a beat every time he refers to me as his mate.

“Okay, fine,” I relent before closing my eyes. I take a deep breath and try to focus on the house. At first, all I hear is the sound of Ryker’s heartbeat and his breathing, but when I push past that, I also hear movement inside the house.

I hear footsteps on the hardwood floor. They’re too heavy to be Remi or Margot. The person stops walking, and I hear the sound of bottles clanking together, followed by a twist top beer being opened.

“Ransom’s in the fridge getting a beer,” I tell Ryker with my eyes still closed.

“How do you know its Ransom?”

“Elias only drinks beer when it’s on tap, and Ranger found this *artisanal* beer that he only drinks now, and he was bitching about how it’s been sold out at the store. Which means it has to be Ransom,” I tell him proud of myself.

“You know my family better than I do,” he jokes, but I hear the slight twinge of hurt in his voice, so I open my eyes and look at him.

“That’s only because I’ve basically been living with them for the last ten months,” I say with a sigh. “You’ll get close to them again now that you’re home.”

“I hope so,” he anxiously rubs the back of his neck. “I really messed up by being gone for so long.”

“It’s not too late to fix it.” I reach up and run my hand down his cheek. “You’re planning on sticking around for a while, aren’t you?”

“Good luck getting rid of me.” His expression is full of adoration as he looks at me.

RYKER

It's been a month since the night of the ritual, and ever since, Pruitt has become a natural when it comes to everything wolf shifter. Everything but shifting that is. We spend a lot of our nights out by the lake trying to call her wolf out. Pruitt is beginning to get more and more frustrated she can't fully shift. Her hearing and sense of smell are remarkable, better than anyone in my family. She can pick up on whispered conversations two floors away.

One night, I needed to go for a run and let my wolf out, and she decided to join me. Even when I'm in my wolf form, I struggle to keep up with her when she runs now. And every time she beats one of my siblings or me in a race, my chest fills with pride for my little mate.

She is absolutely extraordinary.

And now, as I walk up the stairs to her art studio for the first time, she blows me away yet again. Every surface of the small space is covered in her drawings and sketches. Many of them are drawings of my wolf, but there are other portraits and landscapes here and there. Each line drawn is perfectly placed and looks like she drew them with such ease.

"You're an amazing artist," I tell her as I move around the space so I can see each and every drawing.

"Thank you." She grins. "I know I look like a crazy person with all these pictures of your wolf, but he was basically the only thing I could draw for a while. I was a little obsessed with

him..." She bites her bottom lip as her gaze slides away from me.

"Well, the feeling's mutual. He's a pretty big fan of yours as well." I smirk at her as I make my way over to a painting easel with a big canvas on it. My black wolf stands there, his golden eyes staring at the ghost of a figure next to him where Pru has the outline of a wolf that hasn't been completed yet.

"I didn't know what color to paint her, so I left her like that," Prue explains, coming up behind me.

"You'll be able to finish it soon," I assure her as I pull her close to me.

Even though the past month has been filled with the frustrating fact she hasn't been able to shift, it has also been the best month of my life. I've gotten to know the grown-up Pruitt, not just the little girl that I remembered. She's still the headstrong and independent girl that I recall, but she's also so loving and caring toward all the people in her life. She's refused to sleep at my house since the night of the ritual, not wanting to leave Addison alone at nights, and she spends a lot of her days helping Addison run her business since her aunt hasn't had the energy to do it all.

I love how Pru jumps into everything she does headfirst, whether it's my crazy supernatural world or taking charge of a fairly large brand. She's even been holed away the last couple days working on clothing designs for the company. I haven't been able to see her much, and it's been making me crazy.

"I've missed you." I push my nose into her hair and breathe in the scent of vanilla that always accompanies her.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to spend much time with you," she mumbles against my chest. "Addison hasn't been having a good week, and I can't leave her alone."

"I know. That's why I asked Noah to come over so we can have the night to ourselves."

"You did what?" She pulls back from me, a questioning look on her face.

“Noah is going to come over in about an hour so I can take you on a proper date tonight,” I repeat. Even though we’ve been out to lunch or dinner a couple times over the past month, I haven’t taken her on an official date.

“Really?” she asks, her face lighting up with excitement.

“Really. I know being mates means we bypassed a lot of the usual dating that comes with relationships, I feel like we missed out on the first date experience.”

“True, but it’s pretty awesome if you think about it. We won’t have any of that first date awkwardness,” she says, smiling. “I’m excited.”

“Good. Go on and get ready. Noah should be here soon.” I nudge her toward the stairs.

“What? I can’t wear paint smudged clothes?”

“I’M CONFUSED... WHY ARE WE HEADED TOWARD YOUR house?” she asks from the passenger seat of my truck. Pru had changed into a pair of ripped black skinny jeans and a plain white tank top. She’s wearing her hair down, and while I miss her usual braid, I like the way the long blonde locks fall down her back in a waterfall of waves.

“Will you please just let me surprise you?” I beg her.

Sawyer and I had spent most of the day setting up the surprise for her, and I don’t want it ruined before she can see it.

I was lucky Sawyer was even able to help me since he’s been out hunting rogues with Avery all this time. He was also more understanding than Avery when I told them I wasn’t going to go with them. But to my surprise, Ransom offered to go with them as backup. From what I’ve heard, he’s a natural at tracking and hunting down rogues. Sawyer is always good about sending me updates on their progress. I told him if things go bad, I’d be there to help them out, but only if the

situation was dire. Sawyer understood why I didn't want to leave Pruitt; Avery, however, *did not*.

It was probably for the best I didn't join them again. Avery knows I'm upset with her about her fight with Pruitt and has been avoiding me for the past couple of weeks. The only reason I know she's upset is through Sawyer.

"Don't we think I've had enough surprises this month?" She gives me a pointed look, and her dark-red painted lips are held in a smirk. "I mean the whole werewolf thing takes the cake as far as surprises go."

"*Wolf shifters*," I correct her.

"*Whatever*," she drawls, rolling her bright green eyes.

"Trust me, I think you're going to like it."

I make a turn onto a back road that leads to a driveway I swore I would never go down again because it brought back so many memories I'd rather have forgotten. But now, as I drive down the dark drive, the beacon of light that sits in my passenger seat casts away all the shadows that used to haunt this place.

The Thorne's white mid-century modern house looms in front of us. Instead of looking dark and vacant like it has for so many years, soft light glows out of the windows. I come to a stop and cut the engine, then turn in my seat, so I'm facing her.

"Ryker..." Pru breathes when she looks at the house. String lights and lanterns hang from the large trees that surround the walkway up to the front door. Candles line the stone path as well. "How did you... How is this possible? Doesn't someone own it by now?"

"I do," I announce. "As of yesterday, it's mine."

"What!" She yelps.

Instead of answering her question, I hop out of the cab of the truck. I quickly run around the car to open the door for her. When I do, she's still sitting there with her mouth agape. She doesn't say anything when I help her out of the raised vehicle or when I take her hand and lead her to the candlelit pathway.

“I want it to be *ours*,” I say, taking a breath before I continue. “Even though your parents’ story ended tragically, the time they spent here together and then with you, were happy times. And I believe this is somewhere we can live and be happy. *Together*.”

“Ryker...”

“No, let me finish,” I plead. “I’ve spent a lot of years consumed by anger. I was angry at the world, angry at the rogue wolves I thought killed you, angry with myself for holding onto that anger. But I don’t want to feel that way anymore. I want to build a happy life with you, one where I wake up every morning with you next to me in bed, in a house that already holds so many happy memories. And I want us to build our own memories here in this house.” I stroke her knuckles with my thumb as I hold her small hand in mine. “So, what do you say?”

She turns her gaze away from the house and looks at me, her bright eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, no, are those sad tears?” I ask, scared I’ve made a huge mistake.

“No. No, I’m happy,” she sniffs. “I can’t believe you did this. It’s...”

“Too much? Totally crazy?” I fill in for her.

“No.” She laughs. “It’s perfect. I would love nothing more than to create more happy memories in this house with you.”

And that’s all I need to hear before I’m swooping her up in my arms and pulling her face to mine.

PRUITT

While some aspects of the house are dated, it's still the kind of home you drool over online. The layout is perfect, with tall ceilings and big windows that cover the whole back of the house. It has a perfect view of the shimmering lake below, and I have a gut feeling my parents used to sit on the patio at night watching the sunset over the water.

I'm heartsick I don't actually have those memories, and I must rely on people like Ryker to tell me about them. But if I close my eyes, I can almost imagine what my parents' life here was like. I imagine them laughing in the kitchen while making dinners together, I imagine them cuddled up on the couch in the living room watching movies on a cold night, and down the hall where the bedrooms are, I imagine my mom's voice coming through the doors as she reads me a bedtime story. And I imagine my life with Ryker here can be as happy as theirs was.

"We will have the kitchen and bathrooms redone before we move in," Ryker tells me as he whisks me around the house, giving me the grand tour. "And the floors probably need to be redone," he says out loud, but I think he's speaking more to himself.

"Ryker, how are you affording all of this?" I can't help but ask. I know for a fact that lakefront properties aren't cheap, and this one is on a fairly large lot.

“My grandfather was an oil tycoon and invested wisely in different companies like cattle and construction. When he died, he left a good chunk to each of his grandkids,” he explains. “I invested in some profitable companies and real estate myself and have been able to make some pretty good money off of that.”

“Wow, I had no idea. Remi never said anything.” I always assumed Margot and Elias paid for everything since they obviously have a decent amount of money themselves. “There was money left to me after my parents died. I feel guilty using it.”

“They would want you to use it,” he tells me. “That’s why they left it to you.”

“I’ve never needed to use it other than paying for school,” I say as we head down a hallway off the kitchen, the bootie heels I’m wearing clacking against the floor, and the sound echoing off the empty space. “I’ve designed some pieces for Addison’s clothing line, and she allows me to keep all the profit from them.”

“That’s nice of her.” Ryker pauses at a pair of double doors. “Close your eyes.”

“Okay.” I close my eyes tight, careful to keep them closed the whole time he maneuvers us into the room behind the doors.

I hear him walk away for a second and move some things around. I’m tempted to peek, but I keep my eyes closed the whole time. He had obviously invested a lot of effort in setting up whatever it is, and I don’t want to ruin it.

When he comes back, he positions himself behind me with his hands on my upper arms. “You can open your eyes now,” he whispers into my ear, his voice causing chills to run down my spine.

When I do and see what’s before me, I’m speechless. Strings of lights similar to what he put in the trees out front are the only source of illumination in the room, crisscrossing over the ceiling. In front of the fireplace on the far wall, pillows and

blankets are carefully placed to create a romantic seating area. I can see a bottle of wine and glasses sitting on the hearth of the fireplace next to a picnic basket.

“You set all this up?” I ask, spinning around so I can see his face.

“I had some help, but I wanted to do something special for you.” There’s a sheepish look on his face I haven’t seen before. Ryker is usually confident, and now he looks a little unsure of himself. “Is it okay?”

“Ryker!” I gasp. “How could you think this *wouldn’t* be okay?” I gesture around the room with my hand. “This room, this *house*? It’s absolutely perfect.”

“I just worried you’d think I’m moving too fast.”

I smile up at him, snaking my hands around his neck. “Like you said, we got to bypass the awkward dating phase and the time of uncertainty where we try to figure out if this is a relationship we want to pursue.” I kiss the side of his mouth softly before continuing. “We were made for each other.”

It’s funny to be the one to remind him of this since he was the one who originally had to convince me. I don’t need any convincing anymore. Even before the ritual, there was no doubting the connection I have with Ryker. And ever since my wolf was partially released that night, my feelings for Ryker have only intensified. I think it’s because it’s not just my feelings anymore. I’m feeling the adoration my wolf has for him too.

“Don’t ever forget that,” he says before placing a sweet kiss to my lips. “Come on, let’s go sit.”

He takes my hand and leads me over to the little picnic area he’s set up for us. We get comfortable and chat about everything while we eat the food he packed. I cry when I talk about Addison, and as always, he’s quick to comfort me and tell me everything is going to be alright. Even when so many things are uncertain about our future, he makes me believe everything will work out, and we will indeed be okay.

I'm warm from the wine I've been drinking and feel more content than I have in a while as I lay my head on his chest and cuddle into his side. Soft music plays from his phone, and the flame from the fireplace dances, creating shadows on the walls.

"I've been dreaming about moments like these for most of my life," he says, his voice cutting through the comfortable silence between us, "and now you're actually here...it's better than I imaged. I'm incredibly lucky."

"*I'm* the lucky one," I reply with a shake of my head. "Before coming to Montana, I spent my life feeling like a piece of me was missing. I thought it was my parents that I missed, and while I still wish they were here, it's you I really needed. Ever since the morning of the rogue attack, the empty hole I've always had has begun to fill in." I push off his chest so I can sit up and look him in the eyes when I speak. "Thank you for completing me, Ryker."

I can't quite make out the look on his face as he stares at me. Such intensity sits in his blue eyes that at first, I worry he's angry about something I said. I don't have much time to decipher his emotions because his hand wraps around the back of my head so fast I barely see him move. He pulls my face to his and covers my mouth in a hungry kiss. He takes advantage of my open-mouthed gasp, and his tongue thrusts inside. I don't hesitate to match his moves, moaning into his mouth as my tongue tangles with his.

There's an urgency in this kiss I've never experienced before. But I don't shy away from his lips or his exploring hands.

Instead, my body moves purely on instinct as I swing my leg over his lap and straddle him. At his angle, I'm able to press my body completely against his. I twine my fingers into his dark hair, pulling him even closer. "I love your hair. Don't ever cut it," I pant between toes curling kisses.

"Same goes for you." I feel his hand wrap into my own hair and borderline painfully tug.

"Okay," I manage to get out between clenched teeth.

Ryker's mouth leaves mine and begins trailing kisses down my chin and neck. My breath catches when his lips caress the spot on my neck that makes my skin burst into flames of pleasure, and I move my head to the side to grant him more access to the sensitive skin.

"I wish you could mark me," I whimper, my voice breathless.

"Soon."

As he sucks and bites at the spot on my neck, my hands make quick work of unbuttoning his shirt. Each button I undo reveals more of the artwork that decorates his chest, dark swirling lines create a beautiful image of a stopwatch nestled between roses, with roman numerals surrounding the edge of a clock.

"That's my birthday," I say as I push back to get a better look at the artwork. Now that his shirt is completely open, I push it down Ryker's shoulders.

"Yes." He tugs the shirt the rest of the way off. "It was the second tattoo I got after this one." He holds out the forearm that has the name "*Grey*" etched across it. "The time on the clock is the exact time my father told me you had died. I got it to represent the exact moment my heart also stopped beating."

I smooth my hand over his chest, and I can feel his strong heartbeat under my fingertips. "Seems to be beating now."

"Because yours is." His gaze, now a glowing gold, locks onto mine. "That's enough talking for now, don't you think?"

I laugh, but he quickly swallows my amusement when his mouth collides with mine again. He doesn't stop kissing me as he flips us in one fluid motion. I'm on my back now, and he looms above, careful to not put too much of his weight onto me. Unable to stop myself, I nip at his bottom lip. He growls at me before I swipe my tongue across the spot, soothing it.

Again, Ryker makes a trail of kisses down my chin and neck. But this time he doesn't stop at my shoulder. Instead, he continues, leaving wet kisses all the way down my sternum. I

shudder when I feel his lips caress the top of one of my breasts.

I open my eyes and look down at him. My heart skips a beat. I see he's staring right back at me, his glowing eyes filled with lust. His fingertips tentatively make their way under the edge of my tank top, lightly running across the edge, causing goosebumps to cover my skin. He looks at me for permission, and after I give him a quick nod, he swiftly pulls the shirt over my head. I can't keep from self-consciously trying to cover myself now that I'm only wearing a bra.

"*Don't,*" Ryker speaks through the link in my head, and with gentleness, takes hold of my wrists and pulls my hands away. "*You're perfect.*"

He starts kissing me where he left off, right between my breasts. My chest heaves, and my back arches into his touch. I tangle my fingers into his hair again, holding onto him for dear life. I don't have much experience with men, but nothing in the past has felt like this. I gasp loudly when his tongue swirls around my navel. Liking my reaction, he does it again, *and again*, until I've melted into a puddle below him.

We spend the rest of the night exploring each other's bodies, acquainting ourselves with each other's curves and scars. My wish comes true, and I'm able to trace many of his various tattoos with my fingers and sometimes my tongue. All the while, both of our pants stay on. Neither one of us has to say anything, but we both know we want to wait until the mating ceremony for our first time.

I fall asleep topless and extremely happy sprawled across his tattooed chest. It's something I look forward to doing every night in this house—*our home*.

PRUITT

The light coming through the bare windows pulls me awake as it's shining directly in my face. Ryker's chest rises and falls under my head since I'm still using him as my pillow. I reach up and make sure there isn't any drool on my face and sigh in relief when I don't feel any. As gently as I can, I move away from his sleeping form and sit up. My back is sore from sleeping on the floor, but it's worth it.

Best date ever!

I reach for my phone that sits on the fireplace hearth and frown when I find it's dead. I hadn't planned on spending the whole night away from Addison, and I need to send her a text to make sure her night was okay and she doesn't need anything, so I try looking for Ryker's phone in the pile of blankets and pillows we're lying on.

"Where are you?" I mumble to myself as I throw another pillow out of the way.

"It's right here." I turn to see Ryker sitting up. He blinks multiple times, trying to get his sleepy vision to clear. "I think I used it as a pillow..." He looks down at the phone in his hand and shakes his head. "It's dead from playing music all night."

"Crap," I curse. "I need to check on Addison. Hopefully her night with Noah was okay."

"I bet ours was better." He smirks.

“Even half asleep, you’re cocky.” I roll my eyes at him, but I feel my face grow warm when I think about our night. About his mouth...

Down girl.

“We all have to be good at something.” He shrugs, still grinning. His hair is standing up all over the place, and I would love to blame it on how he slept, but I know for a fact I did that. *Oops.* “There’s a phone charger in my truck you can use on our way back to the house. You can call her from there.”

We make quick work of loading everything into the bed of his truck, but then I can’t help but take a few moments to stand in the front doorway and stare at the empty house. I’m still completely in awe of Ryker and the fact he purchased my childhood home for us. My brain is already visualizing what our life is going to look like in this beautiful setting.

“I have a contractor coming over this week, so we can start our renovation plans.” Ryker swings a pair of keys around his finger as he walks toward me from the kitchen. “You can decorate however you want. My only request is no obnoxious colors on the walls.”

“Well, there goes my plan of having a sunshine yellow kitchen.” I pout. I can’t keep the smile off my face when I see how his face wrinkles at the idea, and I laugh. “I’m kidding. I’ve always been more into neutrals.”

“Another reason why you’re perfect for me.”

I’M WALKING ON AIR AS RYKER AND I MAKE OUR WAY HAND IN hand up to the front door of the Weylyn house. I’m laughing at something he said about Ransom when the door swings open and a panicked Remington comes flying out. I come to a screeching halt when I see her wide-eyed expression.

“What wrong?” I demand, “Is it Addison?”

“Why haven’t you been answering your phones?” she whispers, her tone harsh and urgent. “We’ve been trying to reach you through the pack link, too, but you were out of range. You guys need to leave. *Now.*”

“What? Why? What’s going on?” I look behind her into the house and don’t see anything.

“*He’s here!*” I’ve never seen Remington look scared before, but right now, her eyes are wide with fear, and I can hear her erratic heartbeat.

I raise my eyebrows in confusion. “Who—”

“Nicolai Volkov,” Remi says, cutting me off. “We’ve been buying you guys time, but you need to leave before he sees you.

A deep growl comes from Ryker’s chest, and I feel the anger radiating off of him. “I’m going to kill him,” he snarls, but Remi pushes him back when he makes a step toward the house.

“No, you can’t.” She shakes her head.

“Like hell, I can’t!” Ryker snaps. “Remington move! I’m going to rip his—”

“I’ve heard you were a charming individual,” a voice with an odd accent interrupts us from the doorway.

Our heads all snap up to look at the man who stands there in a sleek three-piece suit. Compared to the Weylyn men, he’s short and skinny. His graying blond hair is cropped close to his head, and his face is clean-shaven. His ice-blue eyes have a wicked gleam to them that set off alarm bells in my head.

“Grey. You look so much like your mother.” Nicolai’s evil gaze leers at me. “It’s a shame she didn’t get to see how beautiful you turned out to be.”

“You sick fucker,” Ryker spits at him as he moves to stand defensively in front of me.

“That temper...” Nicolai scolds. “What do you say we move this conversation off the front porch?” He turns to head back inside but pauses before entering the house. “As I’ve told

the rest of your family, I have a couple dozen of my associates stationed around town. If you try to leave before I say you can, or if any harm comes to me, they have explicit orders to kill the humans that reside in this charming little town. “

Remi bounces on her heels as she watches him disappear into the house. “This is bad.”

We follow Remi inside, and Ryker stays in front of me as my protector, but also blocking my view from the threat that now sits at the head of the dining room table.

Elias sits calmly at the table as well, his hands folded politely in front of him. Margot is also there, but she looks a lot less calm. Her eyes are blazing with anger, something I’ve never seen on her. She’s usually so calm and happy, but now she looks like she wants to reach across the table and tear into Nicolai.

I note Nicolai’s teeth are oddly pointy-looking when he grins, and it makes my skin crawl when I feel his eyes on me. I refuse to allow him the privilege of seeing me scared. I stand straight and tall, and bravely meet his gaze.

“So strong...” he muses aloud as he tilts his head to the side. “Your mother was a strong wolf herself. That’s why I wanted her to be mine.”

“And we know how well that turned out for you,” Remi retorts from her spot next to Ryker.

“What’s the plan?” Remi asks through the pack link.

“I say we kill him,” Ryker responds. I look down at his hands and see his claws are out, his fingers twitching in anticipation of a fight.

“It’s not that easy,” Elias calmly answers. *“He didn’t come here alone. He had two enforcers with him, but he ordered them to leave when we heard your car coming up the driveway. And there are human lives on the line.”*

“My mate’s life is on the line,” Ryker argues. *“She comes first.”*

“I agree with Ryker,” Margot adds in. “We take him out, and then we send the pack out to protect the humans.”

“Where are Ransom and Ranger?” I question.

“They went with Sawyer to check out a possible rogue attack,” Remi explains. “They’re too far away for us to communicate with them through the pack link, and this asshole had his enforcers take our phones from us when he caught me trying to call you guys.”

Nicolai clears his throat, drawing our attention back to him. “The way Grey’s eyes are moving between each of you, I would assume you are speaking through your pack link and trying to figure out if there is a way to get her out of here,” Nicolai calmly says as he leans back in his chair. “Very impolite, but I understand why you’re doing it.”

“Our apologies, Mr. Volkov.” Elias politely nods his head at the man. “You can understand, given your past involvement with my pack, why we would be trying to protect my son’s mate.”

“Yes, what happened to Genevieve and her mate was, well, *unfortunate*. But she knew there would be consequences to her actions when she fled from me,” Nicolai says with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

Unable to stop myself from reacting, I whirl out from behind Ryker and charge at him. “You killed them! They were innocent, and you slaughtered them!” I yell at him. My chest begins to vibrate as my power rolls off of me in angry waves. Ryker’s hands grip my upper arms, and he pulls me back against his chest, stopping me from attacking the evil man.

Nicolai leans forward in his seat, and his gaze once again scans me. “I had heard you are quite the powerful little wolf, but I had to feel it for myself.”

We all look around the room, each of us thinking the same thing. There is an informant in the pack, not just someone who divulged my presence, but someone who is also feeding information to Nicolai Volkov. How else would he know this about me?

“What is it that you want, Mr. Volkov?” Elias rises from his seat, and standing to his full height, he towers over Nicolai.

“I thought I had made it obvious.” Nicolai also stands from his chair, a malicious grin plastered on his face. “I’m here to collect what I am owed. I am here for the girl.”

That’s all it takes for Ryker to lose control. With a venomous growl, he throws himself at the vile man.

RYKER

I only make it halfway across the room before the sound of breaking glass echoes through the air, and two men crash through the windows. I'm so distracted by the new additions that I turn my attention away from Nicolai. He takes advantage of this and delivers a powerful blow to my chest with his hand. He may be smaller than me, but he is *strong*.

I stumble back a few steps and prepare my retaliation, but as I'm still steadying myself, two powerful beings body slam me from both sides, and I crash into the floor. The air is knocked out of my lungs, and my head snaps back, colliding with the hardwood. I hear screaming and yelling, but the one voice I focus on is hers.

"Ryker! Get up!" Pru pleads, her voice cracking.

Two sets of hands roughly grab onto me and haul me up. They stand on either side of me, holding me in place. My arms are pulled behind my back and held at a painful angle. The more I fight their hold on me, the more they twist my wrists. One of the men reaches up and digs his claws into my throat.

"Well, that was exciting!" Nicolai's metallic laugh makes me cringe. "I do appreciate your efforts, Ryker, but know they are futile."

I look over at Nicolai and find him standing behind Pruitt, his claws held against her jugular. Her bright-green gaze is on mine as she stands there shaking with tears running down her face. I try to jerk out of the men's grasp, but when I do the one on my right growls before violently twisting my wrist once

more, sending the sound of a cracking bone through the now quiet room.

“Fuck!” I holler in pain.

“Leave him alone! Please stop—” Pru’s words are cut short when Nicolai presses his claws into her throat, the scent of her blood overwhelming my senses. My parents or sister don’t dare make a move toward us. The way they have Pruitt and me held, it would only take a second for them to kill us.

“Now that I’ve got your attention, this is how it’s going to go,” Nicolai growls between clenched teeth. “I’m going to walk out of this house with my men. Ms. Thorne will not be coming with me today. I made a mistake with Genevieve. She didn’t get a choice in whether or not she came with me. This time, however, Grey will make that choice on her own and do it willingly.”

“What makes you think she will ever choose to come to you?” Dad’s voice has an angry bite to it.

“She’ll come to me because every day that she doesn’t, I will have one of your pack members killed,” Nicolai says, simply. “And then I will have their bodies delivered to your front gate every day at dawn.”

Nicolai’s pale hand reaches up and twists into Pruitt’s hair. He pulls her face roughly to his, making her whimper in pain. “I’m going to enjoy my time with you,” he whispers into her ear before bringing the hair in his hand up to his face. He pulls in her scent and then sighs in satisfaction. “You’re going to make a lovely mate.”

Prue tries to pull away but stops when she feels the claws in her neck again. “There’s something you should know.” Despite being scared, her voice is strong when she speaks. “I can’t shift. I’m useless to you.”

“I heard, and I’m not worried. I have a lot of experience with reluctant females.” I watch in horror as he runs his tongue along her shoulder, right where I’m meant to mark her. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve when it comes to forcing a shift upon someone. I look forward to using those skills on you.”

He breathes her in one more time before abruptly shoving Pru forward with such force she falls to her stomach on the floor with a loud *thud*.

Pruitt begins to pull herself up, but Nicolai shoves his dress shoe clad foot into the middle of her back and forces her down again. “I’ll see you soon,” he promises her. He motions at his goons to let me go, and they mimic what he did to Pru, shoving me back to the floor.

I skid to a stop right in front of Pru, and the second the front door slams behind them, she begins sobbing. Her whole body shakes with emotion. I pull myself into a sitting position, careful to not put any pressure on my broken wrist, and hiss in pain when I feel it radiating from my ribs. One of those assholes must have broken one when they bodyslammed me.

I stay sitting on the floor and pull Pru into my lap. She comes willingly and sinks into me when I wrap my arms protectively around her. Her hands ball into the front of my shirt as she cries into my chest.

I hear my father on his phone, making calls to the enforcers. He alerts them that we are on a pack-wide lockdown and to go to the various safe houses around the city. Many of them with small children will end up staying here with us since it’s safest.

“Are you alright?” Mom kneels at my side and puts a soothing hand on Pru’s back. “Honey, what can I get you?” she asks her.

Pru shakes her head and continues to hide her face in my chest.

“We need something to clean up her neck.”

PRUITT DOESN’T EVEN FLINCH WHEN REMINGTON PRESSES A swab with antiseptic into the wounds on her throat. I know for a fact that stuff burns like a motherfucker, but my strong little mate sits stone-faced. It took her several minutes to calm down

enough that I could carry her over to the kitchen countertop where she now sits.

We all turn to look when we hear footsteps walking on the broken glass from the windows. The twins walk into the kitchen, anger distorting their features. Ranger's eyes flash into their wolf form when he spots Pru. He hurries over to her, Ransom close on his heels.

"Pru, are you okay?" Ranger asks.

"Do you need anything?" Ransom questions at the same time.

It warms my heart that my brothers are as worried about my mate as I am.

"I'm okay," Pru promises with a reassuring smile.

Remi rolls her eyes at our brothers' worried faces. "Good God! Stop hovering and move out of my way so I can work," she scoffs. Remi carefully places the bandage over Prue's neck, covering the angry red puncture marks.

"Where is this fucker?" Ransom demands. "Why did you let him get away?"

"We didn't *let* him get away." I scowl at my brother. "He threatened the lives of the humans in town if we tried anything."

"Is he planning an attack?" Ranger has his arms folded over his chest.

"No." Pruitt jumps off the counter. "He's waiting for me to turn myself over to him."

"Which isn't going to happen," I growl.

"Every day that I don't, he's going to kill someone in the pack!" she exclaims as if I don't remember Nicolai's words.

"We're going to do everything in our power to prevent that," Dad intercedes. "Until further notice, no one in the pack is to be alone. Everyone must travel or move in teams of at least two. This house is in lockdown—no one leaves," Dad commands. "Pruitt, you will be staying here."

"What about Addison?" she asks.

“Noah is already with her. He’ll keep her safe.” I reach for Pru, and she quickly intertwines our fingers. I think back to last night and this morning and frown. It’s scary how quickly your life can explode in front of you.

“We’ll be doing hourly check-ins with each pack member,” Dad continues, “and two people will be on patrol around the house, working in hour-long shifts. Ryker, where are Sawyer and Avery?”

“Sawyer sent me a text and said they were on their way back now,” I tell him.

While the twins had been looking into the possible rogue attack west of here, Sawyer and Avery were following their own lead about a dismembered body south of town. I feel guilty I haven’t been able to help them with the rogues, but I’m thankful my brothers were willing to step up to contribute. There has been such an influx of attacks lately; we can use all the help we can get.

“Okay, good.” Dad nods. “I’ll take the first shift of patrol with Ranger. Ransom and Remi, you’ll be next. Any questions?”

Remi raises her hand then points at Ransom with a slender finger. “Can I request a change of partner?”

“No.”

“Worth a try.”

PRUITT

I stand in the window, or what's left of it, and watch as two more people go out to replace the pair already on patrol. This time it's the enforcers, Kody and Logan, replacing Margot and a pack member I haven't met before named Hallie. Hallie looks like she's fairly young, and I feel horrible she has to spend her night patrolling the woods for danger, danger she's only in because of me.

I should never have come back...

"Is that what you think?" Ryker questions as he comes up behind me. *Dammit*, I need to learn not to broadcast my thoughts. "That it would have been better if you'd never come back to Montana? To the pack? To me?"

I cross my arms defensively in front of me as I face him. "Right about now? Yes, I'm thinking that," I say. "The man who's responsible for my parents' deaths is threatening everyone I care about because he wants me to be his mate. If I hadn't come back, he would still have no idea where I was, and you would all be safe."

"Pru, we're all going to be okay, and we will keep you safe." Ryker's face softens as he looks at me. I know my words must have hurt him, but he doesn't react.

"That's another thing!" I exclaim, throwing my hands up. "I'm tired of people having to protect me! Everyone keeps putting their lives on the line to keep me safe. First my parents, then Addison and now the pack. And Jesus, Ryker! You've had to fight off a rogue wolf twice for me now. And

today, you had your wrist snapped and ribs broken trying to protect me.”

“I’m okay, though. They’re healing.” He holds up his hand and moves it around in a circular motion, proving there isn’t any more pain.

“What if next time you can’t heal because you’re so hurt? Huh? What then?” I question. “What happens then? Because I know for a fact there will be no coming back for me if you die protecting me. I can’t allow that to happen because *I* won’t be able to survive it.”

“Nothing will happen to me. I can promise that.”

He reaches for me, and at first, I jerk from his grasp, but when I see the hurt look flash in his eyes, I stop fighting him. Sighing, I put my head on his chest and wrap my arms around his middle.

“Want to know how I can promise you this?” His hand rubs circles onto my back as he speaks. His touch settles the pacing wolf in my head. She’s just as frustrated as I am right now, maybe more.

“Yes.” I close my eyes and try to focus on Ryker and his touch, instead of the danger that looms somewhere outside.

“I’m too fucking stubborn to die.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “And I made a promise I would never leave your side again.”

I soak up his words, trying to find comfort in them. “This wouldn’t be a problem if I was able to shift,” I mumble.

Ryker pulls back some so he can look down at me. A determined look is on his face as he speaks. “I promise you, Pruitt, one day, we will be mated.”

I really want to believe that...

This time I’m careful to keep my thoughts to myself. Only, I have this pit in my stomach that something terrible is going to happen, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

I SPEND THE REST OF THE DAY LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW, trying to come up with a plan that doesn't get anyone killed, but by nightfall, I'm still drawing a blank. I try to get some sleep, but when Ryker gets up in the middle of the night to take his turn on patrol, I can't fall back to sleep. So instead, I lie in Ryker's bed, watching the ceiling fan spin.

Light is starting to come through the window when I decide to finally give up on sleep and climb out of bed. I change into a pair of workout leggings and a cutout tank top Remi lent me since I can't go home to grab my own clothes, and slip on the pair of sneakers she also left before jogging down the stairs.

Halfway down the steps, I hear yelling and commotion coming from the basement. I've never been down there before, but the door leading to the steps is open, I slip through it and descend another flight of stairs. The main area is empty, so I follow the sound of grunting and growls coming from behind a double doorway.

When I push the doors open, I find at least twenty pack members standing in what looks like a home gym based on the exercise equipment and floormats. Everyone stands in a big circle around one of the floormats, and in the middle is Ryker and Ransom—*fighting*? Ransom throws a punch at Ryker's face, and the sound of it connecting with my mate's chin makes me wince.

No one seems to be putting a halt to this, so I rush forward to intervene, but someone grabs my upper arm, stopping me in my tracks. I turn to see who it is and find Ranger standing there with a cut on his upper cheek and dried blood under his nose.

“What the hell is happening down here?” I demand, pulling my arm out of his grasp. “Why aren't you stopping them?”

Ranger watches his siblings spar with a smirk on his face, the dimple on his right cheek showing up as he does. I don't know if it's the weird basement lighting or the way his hair is pushed back and sticking up in all kinds of direction, but he looks so much like Elias right now. The Weylyn siblings get their height and jawlines from their father, but their bright blue eyes and personalities from their mother. They're all the perfect combination of Elias and Margot.

"They're just sparing," Ranger explains. He wipes at the blood on his face with the white rag in his hand. "It's a good way for everyone to get out some aggression, and it's good practice if we do end up having to go to war with Nicolai's people."

I say something but close my mouth and instead spin around to watch the two brothers duel.

Ryker's chin is a little red from the punch he received, but other than that, he looks fine. Ransom has blood dripping from his mouth, and when he sneers at Ryker, his teeth are also red with blood. I used to take a kickboxing class back in San Francisco, and this reminds me of that, but a whole lot *bloodier*.

"It's all superficial wounds," Ranger says, still standing behind me. "They'll be healed in no time."

I continue to watch them, my head cocking to the side as I study how they evade and deflect each punch or kick. They have so much practice protecting themselves and fighting off attackers, something they will need if and when Nicolai makes his move. Then something dawns on me...

"I want in," I announce, feeling a grin form on my face.

"Excuse me?" Ranger sputters.

"Nicolai isn't going to go away without a fight," I say. I spin on my heels to face him. "I can't always rely on you guys to save my ass if something happens and something *is* going to happen." I grab my stomach. "I can *feel* it."

"Ryker isn't going to let you—"

“He isn’t in charge of me,” I interrupt. “This is happening.” I grin. The new part of me I don’t quite understand yet is itching to punch something. I’ve never been an aggressive person; I’m usually the one who tries to stop situations like this, but I—*my wolf*—wants to join in on the fun, and I’m trusting she’ll take control once we’re in the makeshift ring.

“This is going to be bad...” I hear him mumble as I turn to watch the end of the fight. Ryker is on top of Ransom, delivering blow after blow to his head and chest. Luckily, Ransom has his hands up in front of his face, so he’s able to deflect many of the hits. Then Ryker manages to land a punch square in Ransom’s face after a few tries.

Ransom taps the floor, and Ryker lets up. I’m prepared for Ransom to be pissed at his older brother, but instead, when Ryker pulls him to his feet, there’s a big smile on Ransom’s bloody face.

“You broke my nose, fucker,” he jokes, shoving Ryker’s shoulder.

“Should’ve kept your hands up.” Ryker just shrugs.

His gaze scans the room and lands on me. The smile on his face makes my heart flutter. Even sweaty and covered in Ransom’s blood, he’s smoking hot.

“Good morning,” he says before kissing my forehead.

“Good morning,” I reply to both Ryker and Ransom. “You’ve got some blood—” I gesture to his whole face, “—*everywhere*, Ransom.”

“I know. Every time I spar with this *asshole*, he breaks my nose.” Ransom touches his nose lightly, wincing in pain when he does.

“And yet you still challenge me.” Ryker smirks, looking proud of his achievement. “Did you sleep well?” His brows furrow when he looks at my face. “You have dark circles under your eyes...”

“I couldn’t fall back to sleep when you left for patrol.” I wipe at my face even though I know I can’t wipe off dark

circles. “It’s fine. *I’m* fine,” I insist when I brush off his hand as he reaches up to touch my face.

Logan steps onto the mat behind Ryker. He’s shirtless, like many of the men in the room. Black tribal tattoos wrap around his dark skin, and I can see there’s bruising starting to form around his ribs.

“Who did he fight?” I ask.

“Me,” Ranger admits lifting a hand. “He got me in a chokehold, and I had to tap out.” Ranger winces when he touches his neck, and now that he mentions it, I can see dark bruises forming on his jugular.

“Loser,” Ransom says under his breath, and all our heads turn to stare at him.

“That was you tapping out just a minute ago when Ryker kicked your ass, right? Or am I mistaken?” I raise a brow at him and hear Ryker cough on a laugh behind me, but I keep my focus on Ransom.

“Well *yeah*,” Ransom says with a shrug, “but it was *Ryker*. No one ever beats him at these things.”

“You should remember that next time,” Ryker tells him.

We’re laughing and teasing Ransom more when Logan’s deep voice booms through the room. “Ryker won the last match,” Logan calls out to the room. “Anyone want to challenge him?”

Everyone is silent as they all glance around at each other, averting their gazes when Ryker looks at them. It seems no one wants to draw attention to themselves. I also notice some of them even go as far as to take a step back in an effort to distance themselves from Ryker.

Fuck it.

“I will.” I shrug. Who else is better to teach me the ins and outs of fighting than the one they’re all afraid of?

I didn’t think the room could get any quieter than it already was, but it turns out I was wrong. Everyone looks like all the

blood has drained from their faces, and their heartbeats are erratic.

“I think the fuck not!” Ryker growls.

“Why not?” I ask him, bouncing on my toes. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m not going to be responsible for hurting my *mate*,” he scoffs.

“You won’t hurt me. Look. See?” I put my head back and point at my neck where the gashes have almost completely healed over. “I heal fast now too.”

He shakes his head at me, a slightly irritated look now covering his attractive face. “Absolutely not.”

“What? Come on, please?” I even go as far as batting my lashes at him.

“*No!*”

I cross my arms and glare at him, annoyed he won’t do this for me. I’m about to say something to him when Remington pushes through the crowd wearing a pair of black leggings and a neon green sports bra.

“I’ll do it.” She grins at me. “Since my brother is too much of a *puss*—”

“*Remington*,” Ranger scolds.

Ryker shakes his head at his sister. “You guys aren’t doing this.” He scowls. “She doesn’t have any experience with hand to hand fighting.”

“She held her own with your psycho friend a couple weeks ago, didn’t she?” Remi points out as she kicks off her tennis shoes.

I think back to when Avery tried to attack me and how fast I was able to move. I pull my long hair into a ponytail, so it’s out of the way. “Yes, I did.” I lift my chin in defiance. “I’m doing this,” I tell him before I also kick off my shoes and walk onto the mats.

“Pruitt...” he warns me, but I don’t look back at him.

Remi and I bump fists, grinning at each other as we do. I can already feel my wolf coming to the surface in preparation for the fight. My whole body buzzes with excitement, nerves, and *power*.

“I’m not going to go easy on you,” Remi warns me as she pulls her shoulder-length hair into a knot on top of her head. Her gaze slides over to where Ryker stands. “He just doesn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I know, but he can’t protect me from everything,” I sigh as I stretch my arms out. “He also doesn’t get to tell me what I can or can’t do,” I tell her, but I also tell Ryker since I know he can hear what I’m saying.

“That’s my girl,” Remi nods in approval.

Logan walks over to stand next to us. “No claws or fangs allowed and no eye jabbing either,” he says, speaking to me since Remington knows these rules. I don’t miss the look he gives me as he talks. It’s a mix of fear and respect. “Tap the mat when you’ve had enough.”

We both nod at him, and he walks away.

“So do we just begin or—“ I start to ask her when her fist comes flying at my face.

I barely have enough time to evade her punch, and as I lean back, I feel the air *whoosh* past my face. I duck quickly when she wastes no time aiming another punch in my direction.

“Good, you’re quick. That’ll be useful,” she praises, but the moment is short-lived when she spins around and sends a roundhouse kick to my abdomen, knocking the air out of my lungs. I stumble back a few feet, grabbing my stomach and trying to catch my breath.

“Watch where my muscles tighten and anticipate my moves,” she coaches.

I nod in understanding and right myself again. I hold my arms in front of me to block any more of her attacks as we begin circling each other. I feel my wolf getting irritated with me that we aren’t attacking first. Like Remi said, I need to

learn how to anticipate someone's advances, so instead of attacking, I watch how her muscles tighten and move.

When her shoulder tightens up, I raise my hand and block the punch that's thrown in my face. I grin at this, proud of myself for seeing it coming.

"Don't get cocky," Remi scolds before she kicks out her leg in a sweeping motion, causing me to lose my balance and fall onto the mats. I land on my back with an *oof*.

Dammit!

I see a flash of movement, and I roll out of the way just in time. I watch as Remi's fist connects with the mat right where my head had been a second ago. But I don't move quickly enough when her *other* fist comes down and connects with my chin. I taste blood immediately.

When I attempt to move out from under her, she grips my shirt, causing it to tear. I push her with all of my strength and send her flying backward.

Grunting, I roll and spring to my feet. I look down at what's left of the shirt I'm wearing and quickly pull it over my head. Now standing in a plain black sports bra, I throw the damaged shirt to the side, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and keep my eyes on Remi.

"Pru, that's enough. You're—" Ryker starts to say from the sidelines.

"Shut up, Ryker!" I yell, silencing him.

I don't have enough time to worry about the look on his face when I say it. Instead, I'm too focused on the she-wolf that's circling me and the vibrating power building in my chest and limbs. I feel my eyes shift into wolf form, and I know they're now glowing bright-green. I sense the wolf side of my subconscious take over mine, and I'm unable to stop the grin that appears on my face.

My wolf is in charge now, and she's ready to fight.

My body springs forward and in rapid-fire succession, delivers two blows to Remi's head and face. While she's still

recovering, I wrap my hands around the back of her neck and force her chest forward at the same time I bring my knee up, ramming it into her middle.

She's hunched over trying to catch her breath, and even though now would be a good time to attack again, I don't. I want her to be able to fight back when I do.

Remi is breathing hard when she straightens. "Good. Now it's a fair fight." She smirks, her eyes now glowing in wolf form too. Unlike Ryker's gold or my green wolf eyes, Remi's are a vibrant silvery-blue.

She snarls before launching herself at me again, and I barely feel her fist connect with my cheek or the second blow to my stomach. I retaliate with my own punches and kicks to her body.

I grab hold of her arm when it flies in my direction and use the momentum behind her swing to flip her over my shoulder. I allow my body to fly back with her, and we roll multiple times onto the mat.

When we finally stop spinning, I find myself positioned behind her. I wrap my arms around her slender neck and apply pressure, slowly choking the air out of her.

I feel the strength and power seeping out of me as I hold onto Remi, and I also hear the voices all around us, but I don't understand what they're saying. I'm too focused on getting my opponent to surrender. Remi still struggles against my hold, and I apply more pressure to her airway. I watch her hands, waiting for her to tap out.

It feels like forever when she finally bangs her hand on the mat. I remove my arms from around her neck and roll out from beneath her body weight. When I stand, my legs are shaky with adrenaline, and I'm out of breath.

The room is still silent as I glance around at the people who stand there. Everyone looks at me with shock and wonder on their faces, and honestly, I understand why. They think since I can't shift into my wolf, I'm weaker than them. But

they just learned that isn't the case. I'm just as strong as they are, whether or not I can shift.

The proud and total look of astonishment on Ryker's face makes me break into a big grin, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm running across the mat and launching myself at him. I wrap my legs around his middle, and my arms circle his neck. I hold him close when he spins us around. The room erupts into cheers and laughter as they watch us.

"I hated every second of that," he tells me as I slide down his body and stand in front of him, "but you were absolutely amazing."

"I let my wolf take over and..." I shrug not needing to explain further since he witnessed what went down.

"Are we sure we want you to learn how to shift?" Remi has a slight limp as she comes up behind us. "She's kind of a brutal bitch," Remi says, referring to my wolf and wincing as she touches her ribs.

"Seriously." Ranger nods his head in agreement. "The power that was coming off of you when you were in the ring was intense."

"Of course it was, she's a powerful fucking alpha wolf!" Ransom cheers and I high-five his out-reached hand.

Some of the people loitering around hear Ranger, and they shout and nod, approving his comment. Their reaction makes my face heat up some. Regardless of the fact I'm not their alpha now, they still look at me as a leader, and that thought makes my stomach flip with nerves.

I duck my head quickly, turning toward Remi. "Are you okay? I'm sorry. I didn't know that was going to happen." I wince when I see her busted lip that mirrors my own.

"Shut up. I was the one who punched first." She grins at the thought. "That was a good punch, though."

"Yes, it was." I laugh. "Hopefully we all heal quick—"

The sound of a blood-curdling scream echoes through the house, piercing my eardrums. Even without wolf shifter

hearing, someone could have heard it from miles away.

My heart skips a beat, and my stomach flips when I watch as everyone sprints out of the room. With Nicolai's threat looming over my head, I'm afraid of what we're going to find upstairs.

RYKER

Sawyer and Avery found her hanging from a tree on the edge of the property when they were on patrol. She had been strung up with her hands tied behind her back, and her feet were bound. Her bound limbs weren't necessary since she had been killed before they hung her by her neck. The deep claw marks that extended ear to ear were clearly the cause of death.

Hallie was only twenty-three years old. Her usually tan skin is pale, and her once vibrant hazel eyes stare lifelessly back at us. Blood and debris are stuck in her curly blonde hair, and her clothes are covered in dirt.

"She put up a fight," Ranger sighs, gesturing to the defensive marks marring her forearms and hands.

"Too bad it wasn't enough," Ransom whispers back to his twin.

Dad made most of the pack leave the room where Hallie's body is laid out. Her mother, who had been the one to scream, refuses to leave her daughter's side. My mom had tried to get her to walk away, but she declined, so she sits, holding her daughter's lifeless hand and stroking her hair.

Pru had nearly thrown up on the floor the second she saw the lifeless form lying on the kitchen table. Remi had gone with her to the bathroom, and I haven't seen either one of them since.

I can't even imagine what Pruitt is thinking right now. Knowing her, she'll blame herself for the death of Hallie.

“Kate, I’m so sorry,” I tell the mourning woman. Apologizing for the death of her daughter doesn’t seem like enough, but what else am I supposed to say to her? What do you say to a woman whose daughter died because a psychopath is hell-bent on taking your mate as his own? Right now, saying sorry is all I have to offer her.

Kate shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“I promise we’re going to kill this fucker for what he did,” Ransom assures her.

“What happens tomorrow?” Kate lifts her head and looks at my father, who stands respectfully off to the side.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean?” Dad’s eyebrows draw together in confusion.

“What happens tomorrow when Pruitt refuses to go to him? Will he kill someone else’s child?” Kate’s voice is cold and bitter when she speaks. Not that I can blame her.

Dad frowns at the woman. “We tried very hard to prevent this, and we’ll try even harder tonight and tomorrow. But we can’t very well go turning over my son’s mate to a man like Nicolai Volkov.”

“So, people will just keep dying,” Kate snaps, “and you’re okay with it as long as it’s not someone you love?”

“Kate!” Mom gasps.

“What Margot!” Kate whirls around to face my mother. “My daughter died because you people refuse to think of the greater good of the pack. If you would just turn *her* over then ___”

“Then what?” I push off the wall I’ve been leaning on and stalk closer. “Then a man will torture and violate my mate, that’s what. We’re incredibly sorry for your loss, and we truly thought we had a plan to prevent something like this from happening, but we failed. We failed you, and we failed Hallie. But that does not mean you get to suggest I hand my mate over to this monster.”

The cold look she gives me is so chilling it has me taking a small step back. “She never should have come back to Montana. We were safer without her here.”

“You’re probably right.” I didn’t hear Pruitt enter the room and spin around to face her after she speaks. A little bit of color has returned to her face, although her cheeks are slightly flushed, and her eyes are wild looking. “I’m sorry that me coming back here—back *home*—has caused you to lose your child. I know nothing I could ever say will make this okay or bring Hallie back, but I want you to know we will do everything in our power to avenge your daughter’s life.” Pru now stands behind Kate. She reaches forward and grips the woman’s shoulder. “We won’t let her die in vain.”

Kate tries to keep a stern face, but the second Pru touches her shoulder, Kate breaks down in tears. Pru lets the woman sob against her, holding onto her as she does, and never looks away from Hallie’s body as she tries to soothe the distraught mother.

“You remind me of her,” Kate chokes out after a couple of minutes, then she pulls back from Pru so she can look at her face.

“Of Hallie?”

“No, Genevieve—your mother.”

Tears form in Pru’s eyes, but she quickly blinks them away. “Thank you. I’m sure Hallie was a lot like you too.”

“She was always stronger than me,” Kate sniffs. “I don’t know how to be strong for her.”

“I’ll help you,” Pru assures her.

WE ALL STAND AROUND MY FATHER’S OFFICE LATER THAT DAY. Everyone has been pretty quiet since we found Hallie’s body. No one knows what to say to each other or how to make the situation better. It’s never easy when a pack member dies.

Even though they weren't your blood, they were part of your family, and they're still important to you.

Avery and Remi aren't here since they volunteered to be one of the other patrol teams. Since the attack this morning, we decided to have multiple teams working at one time. I hope Avery and my sister are keeping their cool around each other, both of them have such strong personalities, and I can see them clashing.

"How are we going to stop him?" Pruitt questions from where she stands, leaning against my father's large desk.

"We could always challenge him," Ranger suggests. His usually carefully styled hair is wild and sticking up in odd directions on his head. He looks a lot more like Ransom right now because of it.

"What does that mean?" Pru asks the group. Sometimes I forget she isn't accustomed to pack law.

"It's a fight to the death between two challengers," Dad explains. "It's used most often between two wolves vying for the alpha position of a pack, but it can be used in other situations as well."

"Does someone always die? Or can they tap out?" She sits up straighter as she listens.

"The fight isn't over until one of the wolves is dead," I tell her.

"Well, we aren't doing *that*." She shakes her head. "Nicolai is strong. There's no guarantee we could win."

"Ryker could beat him," Ransom tells the group. "He could challenge Nicolai."

The growl that rips through room has everyone turning to look at a pissed off Pru. She's no longer standing in front of the desk. Somehow, she moved across the room so quickly no one saw it. She stands in front of Ransom and is glaring down at him.

"Don't *ever* suggest that again," she snarls at him.

The look of fear on my brother's face has me moving toward them. When I take hold of her shoulders and pull her away from him, her skin is burning hot to the touch.

"Pru," I whisper, "it's fine."

"I'm sorry. It was j—just a suggestion," Ransom stammers.

Pru keeps staring at Ransom as we back away together, then takes a big breath after a couple seconds.

"I need a minute." She slips out of my grasp and stalks out of the room. The door slamming behind her makes us all jump.

"Her wolf is a hothead," Ranger says after we listen to her stomp down the hallway.

"Yes, she is," I agree.

PRUITT

I pace in front of the fireplace in the living room, trying to figure out how my life has come to this. People are being killed to protect me, and I don't know how I'm supposed to come to terms with that. How am I ever going to look at these people, knowing a young girl died because I needed protecting?

And her mother...

I don't think I'll soon forget the gut-wrenching scream that came from her when she saw her dead daughter. It still echoes in my head as I stand in the quiet room. How is she ever going to forgive me for her child's death?

She was right when she said the pack was safer when I was away. My mind starts going through different plans that could draw Nicolai away from the pack. I don't think if I left like my parents did, he would leave the pack alone. He would just continue to hold their lives over my head until I returned.

I wish I could go home and see Addison, but everyone agreed it would be safer for both of us to stay where we are. She's in good hands with Noah, I know, and I have almost the whole damn pack protecting me. I wish she were here so I could cry on her shoulder about Hallie's death and the whole unfair situation.

"Are you okay?" Ryker leans against the wall, watching me with his intense blue eyes.

"No, I'm not *fucking* okay, Ryker." I don't stop pacing as I talk to him. "How long are we going to be able to protect the

pack from Nicolai? We can't keep this up forever, and he won't give up." I spin on my heels and switch directions.

"We'll do this as long as it takes because you going to him isn't an option." He scowls. "We're doing everything we can to keep everyone safe."

"Maybe we should send everyone away," I suggest. I'm just throwing options out at this point because the pack lockdown and patrols aren't going to work forever. "We buy plane tickets for everyone, and we just *send* them away. Far, *far* away from here and Nicolai." I wave my hands around me as I speak.

"We can't send them away from their home, Pru," Ryker sighs. "Besides, we're stronger together and as a pack. It's in our blood. We're pack animals, and we need each other."

I stop in my pacing and throw my hands up in the air. "Then what do we do!"

Ryker's expression softens as he walks over to me. "We keep doing what we're already doing."

"It doesn't feel like enough." I walk into his open arms and interlock mine around his lower back. Resting my head against his chest, I listen to his heartbeat. I find comfort in the sound. It soothes me, and I feel my wolf relax inside me. "I won't let anyone else die."

Ryker doesn't say anything back. Instead, he rests his head on top of mine, and we enjoy the moment of calmness together. It feels like ages ago that we spent the night together in the house he bought for us. I would give anything to have the contented happiness I felt in those moments back. The sense of uncertainty and fear has replaced those happy feelings is all-consuming, and I'm afraid they'll never go away.

There are only a few options for how this is going to end, and I'm not optimistic about it ending in my favor. I know the only way I make it out of this is if Nicolai dies. And I wouldn't mind being the one to end him.

The sound of the front door opening and then hitting the wall behind it with a *bang* has us jumping back from each

other. We both rush around the corner and find a very weak and *bloody* looking Avery.

My body fills with dread when I take in her battered state. Blood drips from a long slash mark across her face, and her arms are marred with defensive marks. I halt in my steps and watch Ryker catch her in his arms before her body crashes to the floor. Her legs are unable to hold her up anymore, and Ryker scoops her up.

Wait!

“Avery, where is Remi?” I question, my voice full of panic. Avery doesn’t answer me. Instead, she stares up at Ryker with wild-looking eyes. “Avery!” I shout, trying to get her attention.

“They came out of nowhere,” she slurs.

“Who did?” Ryker asks, his voice softer than mine. “Where is Remington?”

“Nicolai’s men.” Avery’s head bobs back when she answers him. “We didn’t hear them approaching, they came out of nowhere,” she repeats.

Losing patience, I march over and grab her chin with my hand and jerk her head to look at me. “You’re not answering us. Where is Remington?”

I barely notice her warm blood trickle down my fingers. Her amber eyes stare at me, and I can see they’re regaining some of their focus. “They have her—they took her.”

“Oh, God!” I cry before I break into a sprint down the hallway toward the office everyone is still sitting in. I try not to let my mind stray to what Nicolai could be doing to Remi or what he’s going to do, and still, the image of Remi’s body being strung up in a tree like Halle’s fills my head. I crash through the oak doors at full speed, and everyone’s head spins around to look at me.

“Pruitt, what’s happening?” Elias asks, standing up from his seat behind the desk.

“Nicolai has Remington.”

NO ONE IS MAKING ANY SENSE BECAUSE THEY'RE ALL speaking and yelling over each other. The noise at this point just sounds like a constant buzzing in my head. People keep pushing and bumping into me too. Elias had called a lot of enforces and pack members back to the house, and they have all crammed into the living room. I stand in the middle, glaring down at my feet as I process what's happening. My body is humming with anger, and I can feel my wolf pacing back and forth in my head.

I can't believe Nicolai has Remi. I want to yell at Elias and Ryker for believing the patrol groups would keep everyone safe. I want to yell at myself for knowing everyone wasn't safe but not doing anything about it. I want to *scream* at Nicolai for killing Hallie and taking Remington.

But mainly, right now, I want to yell at everyone to be quiet and be still for one minute so we can all catch our breaths. So that's what I do.

I climb onto the coffee table so everyone can see and hear me when I address them. "Everyone shut up!" I feel the rush of power escape me when I yell. I watch as one by one the people in the room stop talking and moving before turning to look at me. All except one, a middle-aged man in a collared shirt still complains to his friend. "Hey! Yes, you in the green polo, *shut up!*"

"Pru, what are you—" Ranger starts to ask, but the glare I give him promptly shuts him up.

"I know you're all scared and worried for Remington, but yelling and talking over each other isn't going to get us anywhere. So enough of that—I'm *begging* you to stop." I've always hated public speaking. Talking to all these people makes my palms sweat, but I push forward. "The plan we have in place right now isn't working. We all knew that when Hallie was killed and now Remington has been taken too. So we are—I *am*—changing the plan. You're my pack, and it's my

birthright to lead and protect you. So that's what I'm going to do." I feel Ryker's and Elias' gazes on me, but I don't look at them. "I was reminded tonight that we're pack animals, and we're stronger together. Here's what we're going to do, we're going to get through this *together* in this house. *Everyone* is going to come here, and we'll fortify this house."

Sorry, I just offered up your home Margot...

"There are sixty-some members of the pack, and you expect us all to stay *here*?" a woman calls out.

"Yes, I do. It's a *really* big house." I've lost track of how many bathrooms are in this place. "So go. Collect your families and your things. No one travels alone, especially women and children. Watch each other's backs. Enforcers, how many of you are there?"

"Eight." Logan steps forward with two other muscular men at his side. I recognize one as Kody, and the other is a dark-haired man I've never met.

"It's going to be a long night, and I apologize, but you guys will be stationed around the outside of the house. Anyone else who feels up to it is more than welcome to join them. The more eyes and ears, the better." I look between the three enforcers standing there.

"Yes, Alpha." Kody nods his head respectfully.

"What? No, I'm not..." I trail off. How can I deny being the alpha when I just commanded a room full of people? "Just let me know if you need more manpower out there. I'm sure we can find some volunteers to help you boys out." I sigh, not knowing what else to say.

After the people file out of the room and all that remains are the Weylyns, I climb down from the coffee table and give Margot and Elias a sheepish look. "I'm sorry I offered up your house." I bite my lip. "I didn't know what else to do, and it's the only plan I could come up with. Oh, and I'm sorry I stood on your furniture, Margot."

"It's a good plan, Pruitt," Elias says. "You were a natural up there."

“I’m also sorry I undermined your authority, I just couldn’t allow anything else to happen to one of them,” I tell him.

“How can I be mad when you’re doing what you were destined to do.” Elias gives me a reassuring smile. “They’re *your* pack, you’re *their* alpha.”

“I don’t think I’m ready.” I still haven’t been able to shift, and with this whole Nicolai situation, I may never get the chance to be their alpha.

I look over at Margot since she’s been silent the whole time. The second we make eye contact, her eyes fill with tears and drip down her face.

“Margot, I’m sorry.” I wrap my arms around her and hold her close. I feel her shoulders shake as she cries against me.

“I keep thinking about what he might be doing to her,” she sobs. “She’s my little girl, and she’s probably so scared.”

“We’ll figure something out. I promise we’ll get her back,” I say as I pull away from Margot. I watch as Elias pulls his mate into his side and holds her close. I can see her visibly calm being close to her mate, something I’ve personally experienced with Ryker.

I turn and look at him. He’s been standing silently across the room, but I felt his eyes on me the whole time. I can always feel his presence through the pack link when he’s close. I felt alone a lot growing up, and now I’m never alone.

“*Come here,*” he says, reaching out through the link. I feel his mind brush up against mine, causing me to shutter as chills shoot down my spine.

I cross the room and lean against the wall that he’s next too. He reaches over and interlocks our fingers before bringing our joined hands up to his mouth and placing a soft kiss to the back of mine.

“It was amazing to see you take charge like that. You’re a natural leader.” His voice is quiet as he speaks. “I knew you would be.”

“I’m still not ready to be alpha.” I shake my head. “We need to get Remi back before I can even consider leading the pack.”

“Remi is strong.” Ryker’s thumb starts to move back and forth over my knuckles. “Almost as strong as you are.”

“At least she’s able to shift.”

“She won’t be able to if Nicolai puts a silver collar or cuffs on her.”

“Wait!” I jerk back. “Silver actually affects wolf shifters? Why am I just hearing about this now?”

“Sorry, I thought you knew.” He shrugs. “Silver makes us weak. It won’t kill us, but it’ll make us just weak enough we can’t shift.”

Something dawns on me, and I stifle a laugh with my other hand.

“What?” Ryker asks.

“I remembered I got Remington a pair of antique silver earrings for her birthday.” I laugh. “And now I know why she never wears them.”

“I’m sure she appreciated the thought.” He smiles. “But I’m also sure she laughed her ass off later when you weren’t there.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she did too.” I crinkle my nose.

My phone ringing cuts through the room, and I pull it out of my back pocket. The smile that was on my face disappears when I see the caller ID picture on my phone screen. It’s of Remi making a funny face at the camera while wearing reindeer antlers on her head in a Christmas onesie. I had taken the picture this past Christmas Eve when she came over to exchange gifts.

I accept the call and hit the speaker option so fast I almost drop the phone.

“Remington?” I croak as I look at Ryker.

Everyone in the room heard me answer the phone, and they all come rushing over to me so they can listen to the call. The line is quiet for a second, but I hear breathing coming from the other side, so I know someone is there.

“Who is this?”

“Your friend is quite pretty,” the person on the other end of the phone answers. “She’s a pretty good fighter too. She took out one of my men before we could get her into the car.”

The world around me stills, and my blood runs cold with fear as I place the owner of the voice. It’s a voice that will haunt my dreams for the rest of my life. Margot gasps, and her hand flies to her mouth to silence any other sounds of her distress.

“Nicolai,” I say with a sneer.

“Hello, Grey,” he purrs back. “I’m sorry it had to come to this. I truly thought I could be more patient and allow you to come to me. But as it turns out, I’m not. I’ve decided to give you a little—*push*.”

“Don’t hurt her,” I warn him. My voice is strong, despite the fact my whole body is shaking with fear.

“Well, Grey, that it is entirely up to you.” The tone of his voice is full of delight. He enjoys torturing me. “You willingly come to me, and I’ll send Little Miss Remington back to her family. Reluctantly, of course, since she’s such a strong and attractive specimen.”

“I…” I mutter, trailing off.

“Pruitt isn’t going anywhere.” Ryker snatches the phone out of my hand as he yells at the man on the other side. “If you hurt my sister, I swear to God, I will make you wish you were dead.”

“Ah, Ryker. I was hoping you were going to be around when I called.” Nicolai’s cheerful tone picks up a notch when he talks to Ryker. “I thought I had made it abundantly clear my only interest is in Grey Thorne. I am more than happy to trade Remington for her.”

“And we thought we had made it pretty clear you aren’t getting her,” Ryker growls back.

“So, you’re willing to let your sister die instead of handing Grey over?” Nicolai questions.

Margot chokes back a sob, and Elias takes a step forward. I watch as the helpless looks on both their faces intensifies. I can’t imagine how hard it is for them right now.

Ryker pauses for a second before he speaks. “No one is going to die, but you,” he snarls into the phone. “Nicolai Volkov, I formally challenge you to a fight to the death.”

It’s me who’s gasping in shock this time.

RYKER

Nicolai was quick to accept my challenge. He even seemed excited over the prospect of it. We agreed on meeting at a large open field in the middle of the forest, north of the property at sunrise tomorrow. He's to bring Remington, and we were told to bring Pruitt. Which I told him wasn't happening. He shrugged it off since he believes he will win and be able to come and collect her for himself.

We've been setting up a plan for the duel tomorrow for the past two hours. We're leaving two enforcers and Sawyer at the house with Pruitt. They have instructions to get her out of Montana as quickly as they can if I'm not able to beat Nicolai. Based on how fast he can move, and how hard he could hit the other day, he will not be easily defeated.

My mother has been sobbing in the corner, and Pruitt has been fuming in the other room since I disconnected the call. She won't even look at me when I go in and check on her. She's furious I would make this decision without consulting her. But she was right when she said we couldn't hide away and protect every pack member forever and just hope Nicolai gives up.

And now he has my sister.

"Who's staying here with Pru again?" Ransom asks. We sit around the dining room table, going over the plans. Ransom sits across from me next to Ranger, and Dad sits at the head of the table. Enforcers are in the other available seats.

Kody speaks up first. “I would like to offer to stay with her if that’s okay?”

“I’ll stay as well,” Gage offers. He’s about thirty with dark hair and a bushy beard. He’s our head enforcer and one of the stronger pack members. I’m thankful that he’s offered to protect my mate.

“Thank you both.” I nod at them. “You’ll stay here along with Sawyer, and if this doesn’t go our way, you know the plan.”

“Yes.” Kody nods. “We grab Pru then the aunt, and we head to the safe house in Colorado.”

“What about Noah?” Ransom interjects.

“I’ve kept him in the loop,” Dad tells him. “He’s aware of the plan, and as long as both Pruitt and Addison are safe, he doesn’t care that they leave Montana.”

“You three realize you aren’t going to be able to come home for a while, right?” Ranger questions them.

“We understand and are willing to make that sacrifice if it means we keep them safe,” Gage says. He’s always been loyal to the pack, but we’re going to have to test that loyalty now.

“You’re all good men,” Dad tells them both.

Knowing there’s someone I need to go talk to, I stand. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a very pissed off mate I need to go talk to. I’ll be back in a couple minutes, and we can go over the plan again.”

“Best of luck, dude,” Kody says. “I saw her fight Remington, and all I can say is, I would not want to be on that she wolf’s shit list.” He whistles.

I chuckle and shrug off his comment, but I know he’s right.

I’m in deep shit.

I KNEW SHE WAS MAD, BUT I HADN'T IMAGINED SHE WAS angry enough to throw an old football trophy at my head when I enter my bedroom. I barely duck out of the way in time before it goes crashing into the wall next to me. I watch as drywall pieces fall to the floor and land around the broken trophy.

“Really?” I shout, shutting the door behind me. “I won that trophy in elementary school.”

“I don't care,” she snaps, crossing her arms over her breasts. “How could you do this?”

“It's the only way I can think of to protect *both* you and Remington.” I sigh. “What other choice did I have? There were no good options available, Pru. It was either sacrifice you to save Remington or sacrifice Remington to save you, and I couldn't live with myself if I had to choose.” I lock the door and turn back to her. “So, I'm not going to choose.”

“You did make a choice, though.” She glares. “You *chose* to sacrifice yourself instead.”

“Hell, yes, I did!” I yell at her. Her arms drop to her sides, and she takes a step back. “I'm not going to let anything happen to you or Remington.”

“But if you die tomorrow, you're going to leave me behind.” Her voice breaks. “And then what?”

“There is a possibility I could win the challenge,” I point out as I walk toward her. My wolf is nudging me from my head, urging me to comfort our mate.

“You *could* die.”

“I *could* win,” I counter.

“I'm not willing to take that chance,” she sniffs.

I stand in front of her and watch the tears stream down her face. “You're so strong,” I tell her as I wipe away one of the tears with my finger. “You're probably the strongest person I know.”

“Really? Because I feel like I've been crying a lot lately.” She turns her head away from me when I try to tilt her chin up

so I can look her in the eye.

“Having emotions and caring for people doesn’t make you weak.” I shake my head. “If anything, it makes you stronger when you care about someone. It means you have someone to fight for. Someone to *live* for other than yourself.”

“And now you want to walk away from that?” More tears run down her face. “From me?”

“I would never want to leave you, Pru, but I would rather it be me than you.”

“You just promised me you would never leave my side,” she reminds me, “and now you’re going back on that promise.”

“I also said I’m too stubborn to die.”

“What happens if you do?” she asks.

“We have plans in place to get you away from here as fast as possible. There’s a safe house we have in Colorado they’ll get you too, and they’ll keep you safe.” This time when I reach for her, she allows me to guide her face up to mine. I caress my thumb along her jaw. “I only care that you’re safe.”

“All I want is for you to be safe too,” she whispers, her big green eyes looking up at me. “I need you to stay alive.”

“I will,” I promise her, even though it’s not something I can guarantee. But I say it anyway. I lean down and brush my lips softly against hers, sealing my promise.

PRUITT

I stand in the window, staring up at the moon as I contemplate my next move. The soft kiss Ryker had given me before he left almost felt like a goodbye kiss, and that worried me. This whole situation worries me. I'm worried about Remington, I'm worried about the safety of the pack, but most of all I'm worried about Ryker. There's a fairly big chance Ryker won't be walking away from this fight, and I can't allow that to happen.

So that's why I've come up with this plan. A good plan? Absolutely not. But it's the only plan I can think of that will keep everyone I care about safe and Ryker alive. And that's my main priority right now—keeping the man I'm deeply and madly in love with alive.

I look down at the phone I hold in my hand and tap my fingers on the screen. I know what I need to do, but it doesn't make it any easier. I know people will be upset, especially Ryker. But I'm willing to have him upset with me if it means he's breathing. I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly to steady my nerves before I open the phone and go to my contacts.

I click Remi's name and place the phone to my ear. With every ring, my heart beats faster and faster. My hands are sweating and shaking, and my stomach drops when the phone goes to voicemail.

No, he has to answer!

I end the call and immediately call the number again. I do this four more times before someone on the other picks up the phone.

I can hear the smile in his voice when he answers. “Grey,” he purrs.

“Nicolai,” I reply, my voice void of any emotion. “I want to make a deal.”

“I’m listening.”

I PLACE THE BLANKET OVER MARGOT’S SLEEPING FORM. SHE had finally cried herself to sleep on the couch. I can tell by her fast heart rate her sleep is not peaceful, and even in sleep, she’s worried about the safety of her children. I want to tell her they’ll both be okay, that the deal I’ve made makes sure of it. But I can’t tell her what I’ve done; she’ll try to stop me.

And I can’t let anyone stop me, but I am going to need some help to make my plan work, after I hung up the phone with Nicolai, I reached out through the pack link to the two people I believed would be willing to help me and would also be able to keep a secret from Ryker.

Ryker is taking a shower right now, and the house is quiet and still. Part of the deal Ryker made with Nicolai was that he would leave the rest of the pack alone until the challenge. Nicolai swore on his life he wouldn’t take any more pack members, and he was more than happy to take Ryker’s life instead during the challenge. Everyone is still on high alert, but we didn’t feel it was necessary to have everyone stay at the house tonight like we had planned.

Ransom and Ranger are still patrolling around the house with a couple enforcers. They didn’t believe Nicolai when he said he would leave me alone until tomorrow also, they felt the need to guard the house and me all night.

I quietly pad down the hallway and push open the heavy wooden doors that lead to Elias’ office. I close them as softly

as I can behind me, so Margot doesn't hear and wake up. I look at the two men I had called here to meet me and give each a nod.

"Thank you for coming," I tell them. "We need to make this quick, Ryker is almost done with his shower, and I know he'll come looking for me."

"What is this about, Pruitt?" Sawyer asks, his hunter green eyes narrowing at me. "Why can't Ryker be here?"

"Because he'll try to stop me, and I can't let that happen," I tell them. I walk further into the room and farther away from the door.

"Stop you from doing what?" Sawyer crosses his muscled arms over his broad chest and looks down at me. "What are you planning to do?"

"I made a deal," I say simply. I look at the older man who has been standing there silently and give him a sad smile. "I couldn't risk letting anything happen to your children."

Elias' face is void of emotion, but I don't miss the slight widening of his eyes. "You're going to turn yourself over to him, aren't you?"

I nod. "It's the only way I could think of that would ensure Remington and Ryker's safety. And they're my priority now."

"What the hell were you thinking?" Sawyer snarls. I know he wants to raise his voice, but he doesn't.

"That I don't want Ryker or anyone else in the pack to die for me," I tell him.

"Ryker could win the challenge," Elias says.

"And he could also lose," I snap. "I'm not willing to take that chance."

"You're not thinking this through—" Sawyer starts to say, but I quickly interrupt.

"I didn't ask you here for your opinion. This is what's happening, and I need your help to make sure it works." I hold up my hand, silencing him when he starts to speak again. "I

know you both love Ryker as much as do, so, please. Help me keep him safe.”

“What happens after Nicolai takes you? How are we supposed to get you back?” Elias asks. “I want to keep my son safe, but if you’re gone, he’ll go to the ends of the Earth to find you. He’ll fight anything that gets in his way.”

“You’re not going to try and get me back.” I lift my chin. “As long as I’m with Nicolai, he’ll leave Ryker and the pack alone; you guys will be safe. And like I said, that’s all that matters to me.”

“Ryker is going to be devastated.” Sawyer grimaces.

“But he’ll be alive,” I remind him, “and so will Remi. Will you guys help me or not?”

Elias looks at me long and hard before finally speaking. “You’re just like your parents. They were so strong and always willing to put the pack before themselves. I’ll remind you that by doing so, they lost their lives.”

“I know.” I nod and bow my head. “But I understand now why they did it.”

“What do you need us to do?” Sawyer asks.

“First, I need you to make a phone call.”

I OPEN THE DOOR TO RYKER’S ROOM AND FIND HIM SITTING IN the dark on the bed with his back to me. His hair is still wet from the shower, and he’s bare-chested. I lean against the doorframe and scan his shirtless form. I knew there were angel wings on his back that extend over his shoulders and down the back of his arms, I never paid any attention to the fact that they were connected to a beautiful angel with dark tears streaming down her face. It’s a gorgeous piece, but very somber at the same time.

He doesn’t turn around to look at me when he speaks. “Are you still mad at me.”

“No,” I sigh, closing the door behind me. I walk across the room and sit down next to him on the bed. I lean into his side and rest my head on his shoulder. “I just want you safe.”

“I’m going to try really hard to come back to you,” he whispers to me before wrapping his arm around me and pulling me close.

“I know,” I tell him. I push down the guilt I feel when I say it. I don’t need him to pick up on it and ask what’s wrong. “It sucks. It shouldn’t be like this.”

“No, it shouldn’t.” He sighs. “But no matter what, you’re going to be safe.”

I feel my body stiffen up when he says that. I have no idea what my future looks like, but I know for a fact I will more than likely *not* be safe. Nicolai does not give off the warm and safe vibe. I force myself to relax and push down those thoughts.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore tonight.” I rise up from the bed and stand in front of him. I gather all the confidence I can muster before reaching for the hem of my t-shirt and pulling it over my head.

Ryker’s eyes widen and shoot up to look at me. “What are you doing?”

“Our lives are full of uncertainty right now, and we don’t know what our future together looks like,” I start, “but right now, at this moment, I’m certain how I feel about you, and I know that I want to be with you.”

“Pru...”

“I love you,” I say, rushing the words. “I’m so in love with you, Ryker, my heart feels like it might burst.” I place my hand over my heart as I look into his ocean-blue eyes.

Ryker doesn’t move. He doesn’t blink, and I barely see him breathe. He sits there staring at me with wide eyes. But then he moves so fast I barely register it. He pulls me onto the bed, and I can’t help the yelp of surprise when my back bounces against the mattress. My breath catches in my throat when I look up and find him looking down at me. He’s

positioned himself over me, and only my thin cotton bra separates our chests.

“I never thought I would have the opportunity to tell you how much I love you. I always thought my only option was saying it to a headstone, but now...” He pauses. “To be able to tell you I’ve loved you since the day that golden halo of light appeared around you when we were kids is the greatest gift. I loved you as Grey Thorne, and I love you even more as Pruitt Bailey.”

My cheeks hurt from how hard I’m smiling at him. I reach up and hold his face between my hands. “I love you,” I repeat. “Please kiss me now.”

Ryker’s mouth crashes into mine with almost painful force. But I happily meet his passion and part my lips when his tongue pushes forward. This kiss isn’t soft and sweet, it’s full of desperation and pure instinctual *need*. Something primal comes over me, and I growl against his mouth and bite at his bottom lip.

His lips don’t leave mine as he makes quick work of unclasping my bra and throwing it off to the side somewhere. I rake my nails down his back as his mouth travels down my chin to the sweet spot on my neck. I shudder and groan beneath him when his tongue swipes against it.

I never thought I would want someone to bite me, but right now, I want nothing more than to feel his fangs sinking into my skin.

He nips lightly at the spot before abandoning it altogether and making his way down to my breasts. His hands lightly caress the sides before his hot mouth covers one of the peaks. My back arches into him when I feel his tongue swirl around a sensitive bud. I look down at him and find his glowing eyes staring back at me.

When he moves on to the next one, I hiss out a breath, and my eyes flutter closed. Just like the other night, starting between my breasts, he places a trail of kisses down to my naval. But this time he places two kisses on my hipbones too. He rises to his knees, and I feel his fingers undo my jeans. He

looks at me in question, and after I give him a quick nod, he hooks his thumbs into my waistband and pulls both my jeans and panties down my legs.

The feeling of self-consciousness creeps forward, but I push it away as I lie completely naked in front of him. Ryker is my mate, and we're meant for each other. *Every part* of us is meant for each other.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers to me, and I feel my face heat up. "I wish you could understand just how beautiful you are to me."

I can't help but watch as he pulls the low-slung athletic shorts down his hips, and he quickly kicks them off to the side. He keeps his boxer briefs on as he lowers himself back down to me. I wrap my arms around his neck and guide his face back to mine.

As I kiss him, my chest floods with emotion. I try not to think about how this is one of the last times I'll kiss him or the first and only time I will make love to him.

Ignoring the sorrow, I move my hands down his sides. My fingers lightly trail down his sensitive ribcage before tugging at the waistband of his boxers. When he pulls back to look at me, I smile at him.

"I want this," I promise him. "I want you. *All* of you."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything," I assure him. "I've never slept with anyone because it never felt right—*they* never felt right. But I know *you're* right."

He lets me pull down his boxers, and when I can't get them all the way down from my angle, he reaches down and removes them himself. Instead of bringing his mouth back down to mine, he positions himself lower and kisses the top of my thighs. I tremble and feel my skin break out into goosebumps.

His hand makes its way between my thighs, and I find myself arching into his touch. A single finger slips between my folds and strokes that sensitive center. I jerk and moan at

the sensation. My hips lift on their own, aching for more. My breath catches in my throat when I feel his finger nudge my opening and stroke inside.

Within seconds, I'm groaning and shaking with need below him. Just when I think I'm not able to take anymore, his mouth replaces his hand, and I'm coming out of my skin when his tongue swipes against me.

"Ryker!" I gasp, rising to my elbows and looking down. With fascination, I watch his mouth move against me, and with every stroke of his tongue, my heart beats faster and faster.

While his tongue continues to lap at me, I feel his finger enter me again. Both touching me at the same time causes me to fall back onto the mattress. I find myself throwing my head back and moaning so loud I'm afraid someone else in the house may have heard. The concern only lasts a second because suddenly, Ryker's mouth and hand leave me.

He repositions himself back over me, and I look into those brilliant blue eyes as he settles between my legs. I can't help but reach up and trace his beautiful face with my finger. I want to remember everything about him. I want to remember how his eyes light up when he sees me or how, when he smiles, it's slightly crooked. I want to remember the thin scar on his chin. I want to remember how amazing and safe I feel in his arms.

The good, the bad, and the beautiful parts—I want to remember everything.

Ryker turns his head and presses a kiss into the palm of my hand. I smile up at him and pull his face back down to mine. I guide his mouth to my lips as I lift my hips, urging him to continue.

His mouth swallows my gasp when he presses into my core. I feel myself holding my breath and stiffening up, but when pleasure replaces the quick bite of pain, I relax into him.

We move with pure instinct and primal need. There's no awkwardness or uncertainty between us, only love and pleasure. His head rests on my shoulder, and I tuck mine into

the side of his neck. Our breathing becomes quick, and I occasionally feel his teeth scrape against my sensitive skin.

I bite down—hard—on his shoulder when every nerve in my body explodes in pleasure. I barely taste the slight copper taste of blood as I whither and shake beneath him. Then instantly, his breathing quickens even more, his muscles lock up, and he shutters against me. He presses a sweet kiss to the corner of my mouth before he pulls out of me and rolls us to our sides.

I'm wrapped up against his body with his big tattooed arm thrown protectively over me. When I snuggle my back into his chest and close my eyes, a hot tear rolls down my cheek. I'm thankful I'm facing away from him, I don't have to explain my sadness.

"Everything will be okay tomorrow," he whispers after several minutes. "I promise."

"I know you'll be okay," I whisper back.

RYKER

I never fell asleep. Instead, I spent the night holding Pru in my arms and memorizing her face. If the challenge doesn't go the way I want it too, I want to make sure I soak up as much of her as I can, and there's a voice in my head telling me to hold her tight and breathe her in because it's going to be the last time I ever do.

It's still dark out when I climb out of bed and throw on some clothes. I look once more at Pruitt's sleeping form. I decide to let her sleep a little bit longer, she looks peaceful, and God knows today will be anything but.

I quietly slip out the door and head downstairs. I'm not surprised to find my mother already in the kitchen with a cup of coffee in front of her. The coffee is untouched, and she stares blankly out the back windows.

"Mom?" When I reach over and give her shoulder a squeeze, she jumps a little at the sound of my voice.

"Hi, honey," she sighs, reaching up and placing her hand over mine on her shoulder.

"It's going to be okay," I tell her—the same thing I said to Pru, but the more I say it, the more I don't believe myself.

"I really want to believe that."

My stomach sinks when I hear her voice break. The last thing I want to do is hurt my mother, but we're all out of options. I can't pull out of the challenge, especially when my sister is being held, and my mate's life is on the line.

“I do too.” I move to her side, leaving my hand on her shoulder, and we sit in silence, both looking out at the still dark sky.

“I’m sorry I was away for so long,” I say after several minutes of silence. “If I could take it back, I would. I didn’t realize how much I missed you guys until I was home.”

“I hated that you were gone, but I understood why you had to be. There was too much pain here for you, and being here just caused you more.” She pats my hand. “I just wish we had more time. And I wish you had more time with Pru.”

“Me too.”

I WALK UP THE STAIRS, AND I HEAR PRU TALKING TO SOMEONE, but when I walk into my room, she sitting on my bed looking at her phone.

“Were you talking to someone?” I ask, leaning against the doorframe. Her long hair looks even longer right now because of the way it’s thrown over her shoulder.

“I was talking to Addison.” She gives me a soft smile. “I told her you guys would be leaving soon.”

“We actually have to leave right now.” I cross the room and hold out my hand for her to take. She immediately reaches forward and takes it in hers, holding it tight as she climbs off the bed.

“Already?” Her brows draw together as she looks up at me.

“Yes. They’re waiting for me outside.”

We don’t say anything else as we walk downstairs hand in hand. We’re both trying to put on brave faces, but on the inside, I know she’s falling apart just like I am. I never thought I would be the one to leave her. But here I am, about to say goodbye to the love of my life and there’s a possibility I won’t

be returning to her. And that thought alone is enough to make my heart break in two.

My parents, brothers, and a couple enforcers stand in front of the cars waiting for me. They all nod their heads at us before turning away so I can have a moment with Pruitt. She stands in front of me, head tilted up so she can look at me.

I'll never get tired of seeing those bright green eyes looking at me. They hold so much emotion and are so expressive, and now as I look into them, I can see the pain shining through the strong facade she's trying to show.

"I'm going to be okay." I tuck a strand of blonde hair behind her ear before placing both hands on either side of her face. "I'll come back to you in no time."

"I know." Her smile wobbles slightly. She holds onto my wrists, and I feel her thumb caress the "*Grey*" tattoo that sits there. "Everyone is going to be okay."

"I love you, Pruitt." As I say it, it doesn't feel like the right words for how I feel for her. My love for her is all-consuming, and the thing that keeps my heart beating. My love for her is what is going to keep me alive today.

"I love you more," she whispers as tears run down her face.

"I've loved you longer," I feel my own eyes sting with emotion as tears begin to flow.

After an emotional kiss goodbye, I climb into the passenger side of my truck. My eyes never leave the rearview mirror as I watch her, standing there alone in the driveway, her long hair blowing across her face in the wind.

Even a minute later, when I can no longer see her, I keep my eyes on the mirror, hoping I'll get one more glance at my beautiful mate.

But I know one more glance or look would never be enough, and that's why I have to kill Nicolai Volkov today. I have an entire lifetime of love planned for Pruitt and me, and I'm not willing to give that up.

PRUITT

I don't have time to fall into a sobbing mess on the driveway like I want to. Instead, I watch the taillights disappear down the road and then jump into action. This is all very time-sensitive. I have to make it to the meeting spot before Nicolai and Ryker start the duel.

I march into the house and find Sawyer standing in the entryway waiting for me.

"Are you okay?" he asks. I want to laugh at his question because what part of this situation would make me *okay*?

"No, but it doesn't matter," I respond as I walk past him. "Is she here yet?"

"I had to sneak her in through the backdoor so no one would see her and ask questions." He follows me as I step back inside. "She's in the kitchen now. Kody and Gage are on patrol around the house. I'll go keep them occupied so you two can have time to talk."

I pause and turn around to look at Ryker's best friend. "Thank you for helping me even when you didn't want to."

Sawyer's face softens. "You're welcome. Ryker is going to kill me."

"He'll probably think about it." I smile at him, "But he won't actually do it."

"You've never seen him truly angry, and when he learns I helped you, he's going to be *beyond* mad."

“And you’re going to let him be mad, and when he finally stops being mad and needs his friend, you’ll be there for him. Just like you’ve always been.” I place my hand on his upper arm and nod at him. “It’s all going to be okay.”

Sawyer leaves to find the other enforcers, and I go to the kitchen to meet with my guest.

Her pitch-black eyes stare at me when I enter the room, her curly hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun today, instead of flowing down her back like I’ve seen it in the past.

“Esme,” I address the witch who sits at the kitchen table. “Thank you for this.”

“It wasn’t a problem, my dear.” She reaches for my hands and gathers them between her own. “I’m sorry this is what it’s come to.”

“When Remington and I visited your shop last month, you told me I was going to have to make a painful decision, but I would know it’s the right choice to make.” I narrow my eyes at her. “You also told me two people were coming for me, one light and one dark, one good, one evil. That was obviously Ryker and Nicolai. Did you know this was going to happen? Did you know I was going to have to leave Ryker?”

Esme sighs, and her dark eyes look down. “I have the gift of sight and sometimes, the things I see are painful and heartbreaking. But I can’t interfere with fate.”

“You knew this was going to happen the whole time?” I pull my hands out of her grasp. “You could have done something to stop it!”

“No, I couldn’t have. I’ve seen many different versions of your life, Grey Thorne, and every time you end up right here—sacrificing yourself for the people you love. For the man you love.” She shakes her head. “I saw this very scene the first time your parents introduced me to you. You were only three, and even as an innocent toddler, I saw the darkness that would intertwine itself into your life.”

“What about after? What do you see after today?” I want to know what else my future holds, what kind of pain and

sorrow I'm going to experience from Nicolai's hands.

"I don't know." She shakes her head. "I've never been able to see past today. I've tried on many occasions, but every time the only thing I see is you leaving today. After that, it is just white—pure white."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I need to calm down—I need to be strong. "Did you bring what I asked you to bring?"

"Yes, I've got it right here." She pulls a syringe out of her brightly patterned bag and hands it to me. "This has the same effects silver has on wolf shifters, but it will be much more powerful. It will make him unable to shift, and the paralytic I added will make it impossible to move."

"Will he still be able to breathe?" I don't want to cut his oxygen off, I just want to make it impossible for him to attack Nicolai or chase after us. The whole reason I'm doing this is to make sure Ryker stays alive. Nicolai warned me if Ryker still ends up attacking him, he'd have his enforcers dismember him and make me watch.

"It won't affect his cardiovascular or respiratory systems," she assures me.

"Okay." I stare down at the syringe in my hand and feel tears build up in my eyes. I clear my throat and wipe them from my face. "This is really happening."

"I'm afraid so." Esme stands and gathers me in her arms. "I don't need my gift of sight to know this isn't the last time we'll see each other."

"I hope you're right."

"I always am."

RYKER

We arrive at the clearing before Nicolai and his men. I'm actually a little shocked by this. I figured they would have been here waiting for us. A couple other pack members met us here, adding to our numbers. The rules of a pack challenge are that only the two wolves fight, their pack members or allies are not allowed to fight each other before, during, or after the challenge. Once one of the challengers dies, the other wolves are to kneel to the victor. It's to show acceptance of the fight, a promise of sorts that they won't debate the results. And even though they shouldn't end up fighting, it's safer that more pack members are here.

We stand together on one side of the clearing watching the stars and moon disappear.

"Shouldn't they be here by now?" Ransom asks as he bounces on his toes. We're all feeling the anxiety of the situation and are all a little twitchy. I've been cracking my knuckles nonstop for the last twenty minutes.

"They should be here soon," I tell him. We agreed on sunrise, and the light is just starting to peek over the tall pine trees.

"Do you think Remington is okay?" Ransom questions the group.

"She better be. Nicolai said he wouldn't touch her," I say. He had also said he would save all his touching for Pru, but I'm choosing not to think about what will happen if he gets his hands on her.

“Wait, stop talking!” Mom interjects. “I hear something.”

We all shut up and listen to our surroundings. The sound starts out low, but as it moves closer, the whirling sound gets louder. “Is that a...?” I trail off.

“It’s a helicopter,” Dad confirms with a nod.

A couple seconds later, a black helicopter comes into view. We have to put our hands over our faces, the strong wind making us all duck down and cover our eyes because the powerful spinning blades kick up all sorts of debris. In my head, I’ve tried to go through all the possibilities and scenarios of how today was going to play out, but not once did I factor in a helicopter.

The sound of large SUVs approaching draws our attention from the helicopter. Three black cars speed into the clearing, and ten or so men pile out of them. Their engines stay running, and the drivers stay put. It appears they’re planning for a fast getaway, and that concerns me.

The helicopter lands across the clearing from us. I hear the engine turn off, and the blades slow down. One of the men walks over to the side door and pulls it open.

I have to stop myself from reacting when I see my sister. I want to run across the field and rip her out of his arms. Nicolai holds her by her upper arms and guides her forward.

Remington has a gag in her mouth, and her hands are bound with duct tape. Her clothes are dirty, and her hair is disheveled. As they get closer to us, I see dried blood on her knuckles and on her forehead. They look like defensive marks, and I assume she got them trying to fight off Nicolai’s men when they abducted her. But as he promised, it doesn’t look like Nicolai harmed her further.

He passes Remington off to one of the men and makes his way toward us. He stops about halfway across the clearing and doesn’t come any closer. Nicolai’s face lights up when he looks at me. His pale, almost dead looking eyes shine with excitement.

“Good morning, Weylyn family,” he greets us, projecting his voice across the field. “And Weylyn family friends.” He smiles at our pack mates that stand behind us and gives them a quick wave. “I’m excited. Are you all excited?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ransom yells, and I block him with my arm when he tries to take a step forward.

“Remington, are you okay?” Mom calls out to her daughter.

Remi tries to jerk out of the man’s arms, but he only grips her tighter. She tries to tell us something, but the gag in her mouth prevents that.

“Of course she’s okay. I didn’t touch a single hair on her pretty, *pretty* head.” Nicolai gestures at her with a wave of his hand. “Though I was very tempted to keep her. She’s so... feisty. I enjoyed her company. But I’m sure I’ll enjoy Grey’s more.”

“You’re not getting your hands on her,” I growl at him.

Nicolai tilts his head and gives me an odd look. “Interesting...” is all he says.

“Enough talking, let’s get this moving along.” I stand tall and square my shoulders as I step forward. “Normal pack challenge rules. If I win, your men are not to attack us in retribution and vice versa.”

Nicolai’s blond brows pull together, and a wicked sounding laugh follows. “I won’t be fighting you, boy.” His sharp-looking teeth come together in an amused smile.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demand, taking another step toward him.

That’s when I smell it—smell *her*. The scent of vanilla and sunshine floats through the breeze, and panicked, I look around for her.

“*Pru!*” I shout through the pack link.

“*I’m sorry,*” she responds immediately.

And that's when I see her walk out from the line of trees. Her chin is held high, and she glares at Nicolai as she moves toward us. She's dressed head to toe in black athletic clothes, and her long hair blows around her shoulders, like it was when I left her in the driveway.

I lunge in her direction, but I feel hands grab onto me and pull me back. Confused I look over my shoulder and find my father and—*Sawyer?*—holding me in place. They have to use all their strength as they struggle to keep me from escaping their grasp.

“What are you doing?” I roar at them, my booming cry echoing around the clearing. “Let go of me!”

They twist my arms behind my back, and I feel one of them kick my legs out from under me. I fall painfully to my knees, but I don't stop fighting them. I'm a strong wolf, and still, I can't break free of their painful holds. I hear my mom questioning them, and my brothers are yelling something, but I can only focus on freeing myself.

Then I feel her soft hand on my face, and I turn my head to find her kneeling in front of me. She gives me a small smile before I feel something stab into my neck. I look in horror as she removes the syringe and throws it off to the side.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers over and over as she holds my face in both of her hands now. “I'm sorry.”

“Pru...” I gasp as I feel my limbs lose all strength and feeling. It starts at my fingers and spreads to the rest of my body. “I can't move. I can't feel my legs or—” I suddenly lose the ability to speak too, my words dying on my tongue.

“Shh, it's okay. You're going to be okay,” she soothes. She holds my head up with her hands since I'm no longer able to do it myself. My father and Sawyer continue to hold me upright so I can continue to look at her. My vision blurs a little, and I have to blink excessively to keep my focus on her.

“*What did you do?*” I ask her through the pack link.

“I couldn't let you or Remi die,” she explains aloud so everyone can hear her. “I made a deal with Nicolai. I'm going

to go with him, and you're going to be safe."

"No!"

"It's okay, Ryker." She leans forward and presses her forehead to mine. "I'm going to be okay. I promise."

"I'll find you," I promise her.

"You have to stay away." She leans back and shakes her head. "He'll kill you and your family if you try to find me. You have to promise me, Ryker. You can't try to find me."

"I can't make that promise."

"You have too," she pleads. "Promise me, Ryker. I'm begging you, you have to promise."

"I can't."

"This is all very touching, but please wrap it up now," Nicolai's impatient voice interrupts, and Pruitt turns her head to look at him.

"Fuck you," she snaps before looking back at me. "I'll be okay. I'm also too stubborn to die." She grins before leaning forward and pressing her lips against mine.

"Pru, please don't do this!" My voice is full of desperation as I watch her stand and turn to face Nicolai. *"Please don't leave me again."*

"I love you."

"Are you done now?" Nicolai raises a brow at her in question.

"We will be once Remington is back with her family." Pru crosses her arms in front of her.

"Ah, very well." Nicolai nods. He gestures at his men behind me, and they push Remington forward.

Once free, Remington breaks into a run, and Pru takes off, meeting her halfway. Their hug is awkward since Remi's hands are still bound, but they hold each other as tight as they can. Pru carefully removes the gag from my sister's mouth

before leaning forward and whispering something into Remi's ear. I can't hear what Pru says, but Remi reluctantly nods.

Pru walks back over with Remi and hands her off to my mom's waiting arms. Since I can't turn my head, with my peripheral vision, I see Remi collapse against Mom, who uses one of her claws to remove the tape around Remi's wrists. I also see the flash of a silver cuff being thrown to the ground.

Remi whirls around and stomps toward Nicolai. "Where is she?"

"Who?" Nicolai asks, but I can see a sly smirk build on his mouth.

"You know damn well who I'm talking about. Now tell me where that fucking bitch is." Remi demands.

"Very well." Nicolai looks over at one of the men still by the SUVs, and he opens a backdoor to let someone out.

I'm in complete shock when I see Avery slip out of the car and saunter toward us. There's a pleased look on her face I've only ever seen after she's torn out a rogue's throat.

"Avery?" Sawyer shouts. He's obviously just as confused as I am. "What are you doing here?"

"She works for Nicolai." Remi sneers. "She's the one who attacked me when I was on patrol. She handed me over to this sick fucker."

"What? Why?" Sawyer questions.

"Isn't it obvious?" Avery tilts her head to the side as she looks down at me. "I did it for us. We can finally be together. I just had to get *her* out of the way."

I see a flash of blonde hair fly across the space, but it's pulled back just as fast. Nicolai holds a pissed off Pru by her hair. His pale hand is wrapped around the long locks, and he pulls them back violently, forcing Pru to lean back into his chest.

"So quick to violence," he observes as he runs a finger down her cheek. "It's okay. We'll be sure to condition that out of you as well." He doesn't let go of her as he addresses the

group. “I’ve known Avery for quite some time now. Her pack was—*allies* with mine. They provided me with strong *specimens*. And I believe you found her when she was trying to deliver one to me. Isn’t that correct?” He looks at Avery for confirmation.

“They thought the rogue was attacking me, but we were actually just fucking.” Avery shrugs. “I had to think fast on my feet so you wouldn’t kill me, too, so I ripped his throat out. It actually worked out great for me. You guys would do all the heavy lifting of finding the rogues, and I would cover up the scent and make you believe you lost them before passing them over to Nicolai.”

“That’s how the red wolf got away from us so many times,” Sawyer gasps. “You let him go.”

“Just as I suspected,” Dad snarls.

“You made me a little nervous there for a second Elias when we were in the shed. I thought you had figured it out, but you trusted your son’s judgment.” Avery grins at my dad before looking at Sawyer. “And Clay, that was his name, by the way, wasn’t just a rogue wolf, he was my coworker. He was on a job for Nicolai when you caught his scent. He should’ve just left when I gave him the chance, but he was having too much fun toying with you. By the way, I forgive you for killing him.” She winks at me.

I wish I could move right now because I would really like to sink my claws into her neck.

“I didn’t realize the Grey you lost was the same Grey Nico was always going on and on about. But when you brought me to your home, and she was miraculously there...” Avery gestures at Pru with an annoyed look on her face. “I put two and two together and gave Nicolai here a call.”

“I waited a while before coming back to Montana because I wanted you to be able to shift before I came and collected you.” Nicolai runs a finger down Pru’s face, and she tries to move her head out of the way, but her hair is too tightly wound around his hand for her to move. “But like I’ve said, I’ve

become pretty impatient with age, and now that we have this all settled, we should be leaving now.”

Still holding Pru by her hair, Nicolai begins to walk them back toward the waiting helicopter. When Avery makes a move to join them, Nicolai laughs at her. “Now, where exactly do you think you’re going?”

“Back with you. I figure Ryker could use some time to calm down before he’s ready to be with me,” she says.

“You’re stupider than I thought,” Nicolai huffs. “You aren’t going anywhere with me. Your services are no longer needed.”

“But…”

“Best of luck, Avery.” Nicolai gestures at all of us. “Based on those angry faces, you’re going to need it.”

Ransom and Ranger lunge forward in unison and seize her. They drag her back to our group and force her to her knees, similar to how I’m being held up by my father and Sawyer.

Prue keeps her eyes on me as long as she can. I hear her faint voice whisper, “*It’s okay,*” before she’s forced to turn around and walk forward. As Nicolai pushes her to move faster and she spins around to growl something at him, his fist rears back, and he punches her as hard as he can. Pru falls to the ground, and Nicolai reaches down and hoists her over his shoulder. She hangs limply down his back.

“*Pru!*” I yell as loud as I can through the link, but she doesn’t answer.

I watch, unable to move or fight as Nicolai loads her into the cabin of the helicopter. He salutes us before sliding the door closed behind him, and I feel my soul and heart shatter into a thousand pieces as the helicopter begins to rise off the ground, taking my mate with it.

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go. If anything it should be me leaving her this time, but instead, it’s her who leaves me again, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to survive it this time because the darkness I’ve been fighting off for months is creeping back inside and with it, an anger I’ve never known.

“WHAT DO WE DO NOW?” RANGER ASKS AS WE WATCH THE helicopter rise higher and higher. Even though I could answer him though the pack link, I don’t. I don’t have anything to say to anyone right now. I feel betrayed and incredibly pissed, but most of all, I feel the loss of my mate. That empty, hollow feeling in my chest has returned. “Do we follow them?”

“Of course, we do.” Ransom nods, still holding onto Avery. “We’ll be faster in wolf form.”

“Pru made us promise we wouldn’t go after her,” Sawyer interjects. “Nicolai will kill anyone if they try.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Remington snaps at him. “I saw what Nicolai does to the women he takes, and we need to get Pru the hell away from him.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t recommend the Nicolai *day spa* to anyone,” Avery says with a chuckle, “it’s more torture than massage.”

“I’m so sick of your goddamn mouth.” Remington charges toward her. “You’re the reason we’re all in this mess to begin with!”

“She took what was mine!” Avery screams back. A crazy look flashes in her amber eyes.

“He was never yours,” Remi snarls before her hand swipes out, and a splatter of hot, sticky blood sprays across my face.

I hear Avery gurgle a couple of times before she falls to the ground on her chest. Ranger and Ransom both stare down as the grass below her starts to turn red. If I could smile, I would. If Remington hadn’t done it now, I would have the second I could move.

“Remington Everett Weylyn!” I hear Mom screech. I can’t see Mom, but I know she has her hands over her mouth in shock. It’s what she always does. “What did you do?”

“I eliminated a threat to the pack.” Her eyes are cold as she looks down at Avery’s still form. “I’m going after that helicopter. At least to see what direction it’s headed in.” She announces as she tears off her clothes.

“I’ll go with you,” Ransom tells her as he removes his own shirt.

“Me too.” Ranger steps over Avery’s body and stands next to Remington.

As I watch my siblings shift, a chorus of cracking bones comes from behind me. The enforcers and other pack members have decided to go with them. I don’t know how long this paralytic will last, but the second I’m able, I’m going to try to find my mate.

And I will kill anyone who tries to stop me.

PRUITT

I remember regaining consciousness on the helicopter, but the second Nicolai saw my eyes open, he stuck me with a needle and injected me with something that made the world go dark again.

This time, when I wake up, I'm lying on a metal table, staring up at bright fluorescent lights. The room is cold and sterile. The walls are white with nothing on them, not even a window. I wish there was a window I could look out so could tell what time it is.

I blink rapidly to fight the leftover fogginess of the sedative Nicolai gave me. I pull my hands up so I can touch the sore spot on my face where his fist made contact, but I find my hands are chained to the table, and when I shift my feet, I discover they're also chained down. With all my strength, I fight against the restraints. I kick and pull against the chains, but it's no use, they won't budge.

I throw my head back and shout in frustration. I knew whatever Nicolai had planned for me wasn't going to be fun, but I chose to go to him anyway. I take a breath, close my eyes, and remind myself that as long as I'm suffering, the pack and Ryker aren't.

"That was a good effort," a voice I don't recognize comes from behind me. I jerk my head to look at the man who has suddenly appeared. The smell of smoke fills the room. Not the scent of a cigarette or bonfire, no, this odor is different, not easily identifiable, just the smell of something *burning* that

disappears as quickly as it appeared. “However, those chains are charmed with magic,” he says. “And there’s no getting out of them.”

The tall, lanky man walks to the side of the table where I’m able to see him better. He has a dark olive complexion that is shockingly perfect. His hair is black, not just a really dark brown, but *black*, and it shorn short on the sides. The style reminds me of Ryker’s, but this man’s hair is much longer on top and pushed back. Some longer tendrils fall forward onto his forehead and around his face. He’s actually very striking. His face is all sharp angles, with chiseled cheekbones and a defined jawline, although it’s not his face that captures my attention. It’s his eyes. They’re *violet*.

“Who are you?” I ask, then, “*What* are you?”

The man smiles down at me with perfectly straight and white teeth. “Are we allowed to go around asking people *what* they are? Seems a bit... *intrusive*, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, well, I’m tied to a table. All my manners went out the window the second Nicolai punched me in the face.” I sneer.

“Well, you can hardly tell where he punched you.” The man examines my face. “You’re a fast healer. Which is good. You’re going to need that little skill with what his plans are for you.”

“What *are* his plans for me?” I narrow my eyes at the man.

“For starters, he needs to force the shift onto you.”

“Well, jokes on him. I can’t shift. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

The man’s eyes flash with an emotion I can only pinpoint as pity before he sighs. “He’s going to torture you, and he will keep torturing you until your wolf makes her grand entrance.”

I figured it would be something like that. Since my wolf has a tendency to break through in highly stressful or highly emotional moments, what better way to force her out than by hurting or torturing me?

“You never answered my question.” I stare up at him.
“Who are you? What are you? And I also want to know why you’re here?”

“My name is Jax. I’m a demon, and I’ve been asked to help torture you.”

RYKER

They ended up losing the helicopter almost immediately, which wasn't surprising. But they did see it headed east. It's a start, but not enough to know where Nicolai is holding Pruitt.

It's been ten hours since I watched Nicolai drag her away from me, and every hour that she's gone, my anger and the darkness surrounding my heart grows.

I took that anger out on my room. I tore everything off the walls and threw it all either back at the walls or sent it smashing into the floor. I even shattered my bedroom window, and the curtains that are partially ripped off the walls wave in the breeze coming in from outside.

I stand in the ruins, leaning against my dresser, staring at myself in the cracked mirror that hangs crookedly above it. The person who I thought died when I found Pruitt, stares back at me. He looks a lot like me, but his blue eyes are empty. There's no light or happiness there anymore. My hair is standing up on my head in every direction from where I kept reaching up and grabbing it in frustration, and Pru's words float into my mind.

"I love your hair."

I hear it over and over again as I storm into my bathroom and pull the clippers out of the drawer. I hear it still as I bring the clippers up to my head and run them through my hair. Flashes of that night we spent together at the house come to

my mind. Images of her reaching up and tangling her fingers in my hair appear as the locks fall into the sink below.

“Don’t ever cut it.”

I had promised her I wouldn’t cut it, but she’s not here to stop me. She’s not here to make sure I hold up my promise. She’s not here to keep the darkness at bay. She’s not here to make me smile or laugh. *She’s just not here.*

“Fuck!” I slam my fist into the bathroom mirror, and it shatters into pieces. My head drops, and I breathe heavily, standing in the mess of glass and cut hair.

There’s a soft knock at the door, and I find Remington standing there. If she’s shocked at the state of my room and what I’ve done to myself, she doesn’t say. Instead, she holds up a flash drive in her hand.

“She gave this to me,” Remi explains. “I promised her I would make you watch it.”

“Watch what?” I growl.

“I don’t know. Let’s go find out.”

REMYINGTON DRAGS ME DOWNSTAIRS AND FORCES ME TO SIT down in the living room with the rest of the family. I refuse to look at my father or at Sawyer, who has also joined us as Remi plugs the flash drive into the television so we can all watch what Pru has left us.

“Hey, guys.” Her beautiful face appears on the screen, and my stomach sinks. “I know you are all really confused and upset with us—with me, but I want you to know I didn’t make this decision lightly or easily. I want nothing more than to be sitting there with you all right now, but I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to Remington or to the pack.”

I remove my eyes from the screen for a second and look at my sister. I wonder how she feels about all of this. I haven’t

been able to get a good read on her emotions since she killed Avery in the clearing.

Pru's voice draws my attention back to the television. "Fourteen years ago, my parents left to protect you guys from Nicolai, and now I'm doing the same. Please don't be upset with Sawyer and Elias, they only did what I asked of them. They helped me because they love you, Ryker."

I slide my eyes over to Sawyer and find him sitting with his head down, staring at his folded hands. What Pru says makes sense, but it doesn't soothe the pain of betrayal.

"I knew Nicolai would never leave us alone," she says, "and would only bring death and destruction to the pack, and I couldn't allow that to happen. Please try not to worry about me too much—I'll be okay. I'll find a way to be okay."

"I spent fourteen years feeling like I was missing something, something *really* important. I always figured it was my parents, but it turns out I had another family out there that was missing me—and a mate who was mourning me. These last months with you guys have been some of the best in my life. Thank you just doesn't quite seem like enough, but thank you anyway."

Even though she's smiling, I can see the pain in her eyes as she talks to the camera. "Thank you, Remi, for being the sister I never had and for being the friend I always wanted. Don't blame yourself for this either. I don't blame you, and I know you'd do the same for me."

"Ransom and Ranger, thank you for making me laugh harder than I ever have before. Take care of each other, okay? And Sawyer, thank you for helping me today, even though it meant betraying your best friend. I know one day he will forgive you, forgive *us*. Give him some time and take care of him for me."

"Elias and Margot, thank you for welcoming me into your family with such open arms, even though it was only for a short time. Your love and acceptance mean the world to me. Thank you for taking care of my parents' pack since they no

longer could. I'm sure my father is proud of the alphas you've become. But most of all, thank you for raising the man I love."

I don't have to look around the room to know everyone is looking at me now. I can feel their gazes on me. I hear my mom sniffing, and I'm sure she's wiping away tears, and I should probably do the same, but I let my strong façade crack, allowing the tears building in my eyes to fall.

"Ryker, I know you're angry and making plans on how to get me back. I know you would burn down the world to find me, but I need you to promise you won't.

"I made a deal with Nicolai that if I turned myself over, he would leave you and your family alone. He won't hesitate to retaliate if you go after him or his people. If you do that, then what I've done today will be for nothing.

"Please don't let this heartache be for nothing. It will be hard, but I need you to stay away, promise me, Ryker. I know you feel like you've lost everything because the idea of leaving you is killing me too. But remember you're not alone, even though you feel like it right now, you're not. Your amazing family is right there next to you. Lean on them now, don't run away like you did before. We aren't meant to be alone, Ryker. You're always telling me we're pack animals, and we need each other. Remember that, baby.

"Okay, I can hear you coming up the stairs. I love you all and wish the best for you guys."

The screen goes black, but I continue to stare at it. I know she thought leaving me this video would make me feel better, but it doesn't. If anything, it's only fueled my need and drive to get her back.

"She loves you so much," Mom sniffs. "I wish she were here with us too, Ryker, but what she did was so brave."

"She would still be here if they hadn't helped her," I snarl as I get to my feet. I finally look at my father who looks exhausted, and Sawyer whose eyes are bloodshot.

"Ryker..." Sawyer takes hold of my shoulder when I leave. "Can we please talk about this. We didn't—"

He doesn't get to finish what he's saying because my fist slams into his jaw. The force behind my blow sends him flying back. He falls to the ground and skids across the wood floors. I stalk toward him, fully indenting to continue my assault, but two sets of arms wrap around me, pulling me away.

"Get off of me!" I howl at my brothers who are struggling to keep me in place.

"He was trying to save your life!" Ranger growls.

"This isn't going to bring her back!" Ransom adds.

"She shouldn't be gone!" I roar and lunge once more at Sawyer. His dark green eyes are wide with fear as he stares up at me. "And as long as she is and not safe in my arms, you're both dead to me!" I look between Sawyer and my father as I speak. When I stop struggling against my brothers' grasps, they loosen their hold some, and I'm able to shove their hands away.

"Ryker!" Mom gasps, appalled I would say something like that, but I mean every word of it. I give them all one last look before turning my back on them.

I stalk out of the room, ignoring my mother's calls as she yells after me. I storm out the back door and down the patio steps, not knowing where I'm going, but I don't stop. I move across the yard and disappear into the woods surrounding the house. I need a minute to collect myself, and I can't do that when I'm in that house, so I walk toward another one—toward the one I bought for *us*.

The house is a couple of miles away from my parents' home, and the whole way I see her face. My head swims with images of Pru as I hike through the woods. I think back to the night I carried her out of here after the rogue attacked. Images of her stunned face after I shifted in front of her the first time follow. I see the look of pure happiness on her face after I told her I bought the house for her—for *us*.

The house sits dark and empty as I walk up the driveway. The lights I had strung are hanging loosely from the trees, the strands blowing softly in the wind. It feels like ages ago that I

brought her here, but really it was a few days ago. We're supposed to be meeting with the contractor about renovations and changes we want to make.

Once inside the house, I sit down on the counter in the kitchen. I look out the large floor to ceiling windows to the moonlight reflecting off the lake and casting light into the house.

The feeling of complete hopelessness I have grows as I sit in the quiet of the house. Before, when I thought she had died, I found some solace, knowing she was at peace.

But this time, there is no peace. Nicolai would never allow her to have that. I saw it in his eyes when he looked at Pruitt. I saw that his plans for her were the opposite of peace and tranquility, and there is nothing I can do to stop him.

We have no idea where he's keeping her. Nicolai was smart by bringing the helicopter. It doesn't leave tracks or a scent trail we can follow, and once in the air, they could have gone anywhere.

"I'm so mad at her!" Remington's voice cuts through the silence of the room. I hear footsteps to my left and turn to find my sister standing at the entrance to the kitchen. She looks exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes, and her skin looks paler.

"I am too," I admit.

"And I feel guilty for being mad at her because she did what she did to save me—to save us." She walks into the kitchen and stands next to me.

"I wish I could feel guilty. All I feel right now is angry and betrayed." My wolf is equally as pissed, and he's clawing to get out. "I just don't understand. Did she not believe I could win the challenge?"

"I don't think that's it." Remi shakes her head. "She wasn't willing to allow anyone else to get hurt trying to protect her—especially you."

"But I *am* hurt!"

Remi wraps an arm around my shoulders. “I know.”

“How am I going to get her back, Remi? I don’t even know where to start looking for her. We know nothing about Nicolai or where he’d take her.”

“You’re right. *We* don’t know anything about Nicolai.” Remi suddenly stands straighter. “But there’s someone who might.”

PRUITT

Jax left the room right after he introduced himself as a demon and as my torturer, and I haven't seen him or anyone else since. The fluorescent lights shining bright above me never dim or turn off and I struggle to know what time it is. I try to fall asleep, but the metal table I'm chained to and the light above make it difficult, and despite knowing that my chains are magically strengthened, I can't help but pull against them over and over again.

I spend the majority of my time thinking about Ryker. The look on his face when I walked into the clearing will probably haunt me until the day I die. I know how hard it was to leave him, but I can't imagine being the one who was left behind.

If by some miracle I'm ever able to see him again, I don't know how I will ever look him in the eye knowing the hurt I've caused him.

I have absolutely no idea how long it's been since Jax left, but I jump when the electronically locked door buzzes open behind me.

I can't see him, but I recognize his scent and know this can't be good.

"Good morning," Nicolai's annoyingly chipper voice comes from my left. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby. The metal chains and this table were *so* relaxing. I don't know how I ever slept without them," I snap at him.

“Well, it won’t be like this forever, Grey.” He smirks and pats my shoulder, reassuringly, causing me to recoil from his touch. “Once we’re able to break that stubborn wolf out, and we are mated, I’ll have you moved to a more—*comfortable* room.”

I want to gag at the idea of mating with him, but I don’t let him see my disgust. Instead, I clench my teeth and give him a tight grin before saying, “Can’t wait. Also, my name isn’t Grey anymore.”

“Ah, yes. Avery told me you went by Pruitt now.” Nicolai nods. “Do you know why that name was chosen for you?”

I pause, realizing it was something I never got the chance to ask Addison. “No.”

“It was your mother’s maiden name.” Nicolai smirks. “Genevieve Pruitt.”

My blood boils when I hear her name come out of his mouth. “Don’t ever speak my mother’s name again. You lost all right to talk about her the night you had my father and her killed.”

“You’re not exactly in a position to be making any demands.” Nicolai runs a finger down my face, starting at my brow bone before traveling down to caress my jawline. His soft touch changes abruptly when suddenly his hand is wrapped around my throat, slowly applying more and more pressure to my airway.

“You’re going to need to learn your place here, *Pruitt*,” he says, spitting my name out. “You don’t get a say over what I do or what I say, especially what I do to *you*. You gave all that up the second you called me.”

“You talk a lot, Nicolai,” I snarl. “But so far, I haven’t seen much action from you. What’s the matter, Nicolai? Performance issues?”

I don’t know why I’m taunting him. I know it’s only going to come back to bite me in the ass, but I do it anyway. Maybe it’s because of the look on his face when my words slap him,

or maybe it's the fact my words are all I have left. I can't move or change my situation, but I sure as hell can piss him off.

"You stupid little bitch," he growls before his grip tightens on my throat, and he pulls my head off the table, slamming it back down on the metal surface.

I groan and clench my teeth against the pain. I know before I even open my eyes they have shifted into their wolf form because I feel my very angry wolf come to the surface, and when I look at Nicolai, there's an expression of pure joy when he sees my eyes.

"Ah, there she is," he says gleefully, removing his hand from my neck. "Now that we've got her attention, we can begin."

The aroma of smoke from earlier fills the room, and suddenly Jax appears out of nowhere at Nicolai's side. He's dressed head to toe in black just like he was the last time I saw him, although today, he wears a loose black Henley shirt with the sleeves pulled up to his elbows.

"I never thought you would be one to outsource your work," I say to Nicolai, even though I'm glaring at Jax.

"As much as it pains me to admit, Jax has a special set of skills that I don't have," Nicolai says. "He's the best we've ever had here at the facility."

"Thank you, Sir." Jax grins and nods his head, and I can't help but notice his smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"As you know, Jax is a demon," Nicolai says, his pale eyes scanning Jax, "and he has a very special skill of being able to control the fires of Hell. He uses this skill to do many different things, but the one that is most useful to my cause and me is his ability to infuse hellfire into your blood." Nicolai's sharp teeth mash together in a pleased smile. "You're going to feel like you're being burned from the inside out, *Pruitt*. And we will do this every day until your little wolf decides to make her appearance. When you can finally shift, I will mate with you, and you will bear me many sons."

“Just like these chains,” I say, lifting my hands, causing the chains to clank against the table, “my wolf is magically bound. In fact, the High Priestess herself did the binding. Do you really think you’re going to be able to break her free?”

“Every spell can be broken. It sometimes just requires a little sacrifice and a lot of hellfire.”

Nicolai nods at Jax. “I’ll be back in an hour to check your progress.”

NICOLAI LEFT THE ROOM BUT NOT BEFORE GIVING JAX AND ME a knowing smirk. The excitement in Nicolai’s eyes frightened me, but I refused to allow him to see me afraid or in pain. That’s what he wants. He wants to see me broken and scared. I’m sure it makes him feel strong and in control, but really it makes him look weak.

I watch Jax, who is searching for something in the white cabinets off to the side. I don’t even want to know what kinds of torture devices are stored in there, so instead of worrying about what kind of pain is headed my way, I begin to ramble.

“So do you have horns? A tail, maybe? No, wait! Wings—do you have wings?”

“There you go again, asking all kinds of personal questions. Didn’t we already have a discussion about this yesterday?” Jax’s words are distorted and muffled since his head is almost completely in one of the cabinets as he looks for whatever he needs.

“Didn’t I tell you I no longer care about having manners?” I roll my eyes.

“Your friend also didn’t have many manners.” There’s a smirk on his angled face when he turns around. “That girl almost took a guard’s eye out when she tried to escape.”

“What friend?” I ask him.

“Rimy, Rumi? I don’t know—something like that anyway.” He shrugs. “She had a mouth on her too. I swear I saw one of the former marine guards blush when she verbally attacked Nicolai.”

“That’s Remi.” I can’t help the small smile on my face when I picture what she must have been like when they took her hostage. Remington has an attitude problem on a good day. I can only imagine she was a nightmare when being held. “She’s my best friend and my mate’s sister.”

“Remi,” Jax repeats like he’s testing her name on his tongue. “I must say, she fought a lot harder against those chains than you have. What’s wrong, Blondie? Don’t feel like leaving?”

“I’m exactly where I need to be.” I lift my chin. “As long as I’m here, the people I love are safe, and that’s all that matters to me.”

“You say that now, but you haven’t felt the effects of the hellfire yet. After we’re done today, you’ll be begging me to let you go.” Jax walks closer to the table. I know he’s holding something, but I can’t quite make out what.

“What is that?” I ask.

“It’s a mouthguard.” He pulls the rubber guard out of its case. “We don’t want you cracking your teeth in half or biting off your tongue from the pain.”

I feel myself break into a sweat and my heart rate picks up. “Is it really going to be that bad?”

“It will be the worst pain you’ve ever felt.”

I scoff. “My mate thought I was dead for most of his life, and we recently found each other again. I then proceeded to lie and scheme behind his back before temporarily paralyzing him and leaving him behind for the second time. If that didn’t completely break me, nothing will.”

“I hope you’re right because I’m starting to enjoy your company, and I would hate to see you not survive this.” The demon grabs hold of my chin, and after a couple seconds of hesitation, I allow him to push the mouthguard over my teeth.

“And for what it’s worth,” he adds, “I’m sorry it has to be like this.”

That’s all he says before he places his palm on my chest, directly over my heart. I watch how his face contorts, and his eyes flare an even more vibrant violet.

At first, I think it’s just the heat from his palm, but the burning hot sensation builds and builds. The heat spreads, and I swear I can feel my blood start to bubble and boil. And then it hits me. It feels like someone has dumped a bucket of lava and hot coals over my body. I scream in pain around the mouthguard. I wish I could spit the damn thing out because it feels like it’s suffocating me; my lungs struggle to expand and fill with air when I breathe.

The pain started on my skin—the whole surface of it feels like it’s on fire, and now the burning sensation is in my chest and growing from there. My muscles feel like they’re being pulled apart, and my bones feel like they’ve all been shattered.

I rear up, fighting against the chains so fast that Jax takes a hasty step back. When I look down at my body with blurry vision, I expect it to be covered in flames, but nothing is there. If someone were to walk into the room right now, they would not see anything physically wrong with me. There’s no wound or blood.

I collapse back against the table as another searing round of pain enters my body. This time my back arches, and my arms and legs start to kick and thrash.

“Make it stop!” I scream at Jax. “Oh my God, please make it stop!”

“I can’t,” I hear him respond.

My eyes will no longer focus, and I can only hope it means the sweet relief of passing out will soon follow.

RYKER

Addison's back is turned to us when we enter the barn. She has on a knitted cardigan than falls off one of her boney shoulders. Over the past month, since she told Pruitt she was sick, her health has taken a dramatic turn, and I can't help but worry that now with Pru gone, she will give in to her illness. But I won't allow that to happen because we will get Pru back, and when we do, she's going to need her aunt in her life.

"Noah said you guys were on your way here," Addison says softly, without turning around to face us.

"We hope we aren't interrupting, we just wanted to ask you a couple questions." Remi pushes past me and walks toward the woman. I watch as Remi pulls her into a tight hug, and they both sink into each other.

I think back to when Noah and I talked and how he accused me of being selfish. He was right—I *am* selfish. I keep forgetting I'm not the only one who lost Pru this time. Remington lost her best friend, and Addison lost the girl she has raised as her own daughter.

I cross the space and lean against a nearby table where the whole surface is covered with sketches and colored pencils. I notice a large sketchbook with Pruitt's name elegantly scribbled across it. I look at Addison first and find her still wrapped in Remi's arms, then I reach for the notebook and trace Pru's name with my finger. It took me a while to get used

to the name Pruitt, but now I don't know if I could ever go back to calling her Grey.

I fell in love with the name Pruitt, just like I fell in love with the woman.

I quietly flip open the sketchpad, and my breath catches in my throat when I see what she'd sketched out last. I knew she was an amazing artist, but I didn't realize she was a very talented designer as well. The gown she had drawn looks to be made of lace with a long veil to match.

"It's a wedding dress," Addison says, drawing my attention back to her. "I decided earlier this year I wanted to try adding wedding dresses to the boutiques and Pru—she was so excited, and she volunteered to help."

"They're beautiful," Remi whispers after she takes the notebook from me and begins spinning through the designs. "I wish we would wear wedding dresses during the mating ceremony."

"Pru used to talk about her wedding all the time when she was growing up. She watched all those television shows about the brides picking their dresses. She would steal my white bedsheets to create make-shift dresses, and then she'd do a fashion show for me." Addison smiles at the memory. "I guess a wedding was never in her cards..."

"She did seem a little bummed when I told her wolf shifters don't have weddings," Remi agrees. "Oh, wow, this one is beautiful."

"She worked so hard on that one. I honestly believe she was designing it for herself." Addison chuckles. "She'd shown me the other designs, but never that one. I think she was keeping it a secret so I wouldn't put it in the store. I don't think she wanted to share it."

"I don't blame her, it's amazing."

"She was very talented." Addison frowns before correcting herself. "She *is* very talented."

"I'm going to get her back," I promise her. "But we need your help, Addison. We need to know more about Nicolai."

“I don’t know that much about him...” Addison shakes her head. “I only know what Genevieve told me.”

“Anything will help, Addie,” Remi says, keeping her voice soft. “Our biggest problem is we have no idea *where* to start looking. Where is Nicolai from?”

“I know he was born in Russia before relocating here. He killed the alpha of the largest pack in British Columbia, and he became their alpha. During a nationwide pack summit, he met Genevieve’s older brother, and that’s where he learned of her,” Addison sighs. “I’ve never told anyone this because Gen never wanted anyone to know where she was originally from in fear someone would slip and tell the wrong person, but the pack Genevieve was born into is based out of Vancouver, and that’s where we met.”

“You’re Canadian?”

“I was born in the states but moved there when I was in grade school,” Addison corrects.

“Do you think Nicolai would go back to Canada?” I question.

“I’m not sure. I know after Genevieve died, he walked away from his pack there and created another pack elsewhere. Noah had heard rumors his pack was made up of rogue wolves, but who knows if that’s true.”

“Addison, why would Genevieve’s parents sell off their daughter?” I ask her. I don’t understand how anyone would willingly hand over his or her little girl to a monster like Nicolai. You can practically feel the ill-intent rolling off of him. “They had to have known what kind of man he was.”

“I don’t think it was really their idea,” Addison starts. “Genevieve’s brother William was actually the one who pushed them to do it. He was much older than Gen, and from what I’ve heard about him, I think he was a little resentful of Gen.”

“Why?” Remi asks.

“She was the baby of the family, and I think she got most of their attention,” Addison answers. “But I think what he was

truly jealous of is the amount of power she had. Even from a young age, Genevieve was stronger than William would ever be.”

“Jealousy is a strong motivator.” I reach up and rub my temples. I haven’t slept since Pruitt left, and my head is starting to pound. Between the lack of sleep and my wolf constantly trying to push forward, my skull feels like it’s going to crack open.

“Where is William now?” I ask.

Addison sits up straighter, and her eyes widen. “I totally forgot!” With newfound energy, she climbs off the stool she was perched on and rushes to the open barn door. She leans out the door and hollers, “Noah!”

“Addie, what is it?” Remi’s eyes are full of concern. “What did you remember?”

Addison turns back to face us. “You have to remember I never actually met Gen’s family. Anything I ever knew about them was told to me by Gen, and I was so young when she talked about William. She never talked about him after she left with Archer.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t answer my question,” Remi draws.

“When William met Nicolai, he had just graduated and was looking for a job—” She starts but stops when Noah walks into the barn. He’s dressed in a button-down flannel and dirty jeans. We don’t often see him out of his police uniform since he’s always working, and it’s nice to see that he’s taken some time off to be with Addison. “Noah! After the accident when I asked you to look into Genevieve’s family, didn’t you find that William was working for Volkov Industries?”

“Volkov Industries?” I push off the table and walk closer to the pair. “As in Nicolai Volkov?”

“Yes, if I remember correctly, William got a job working for Nicolai’s company.” Noah’s thick brows furrow as he tries to recall the information he’d gathered many years ago. “It’s a medical company of some sort, I could never figure out

exactly what they did there. William started off as an intern or something, but the last time I checked, he was the head of financials.”

“Which means he works closely with Nicolai,” Remi deduces. “Which means—”

“We have a place to start looking,” I finish for her. For the first time since Pru got in the helicopter, I feel hope returning to my body. It may be a small start, but at least it’s something. “What do you say we go pay William a little visit?”

PRUITT

I never passed out. No matter how much I wish I could have, my body never allowed it. Instead, I was conscious for every burning moment of Nicolai's special form of torture. I felt every single cell in my body burst into flames, and every nerve singe away. And now, almost an hour later, my body still shakes with spasms. The burning sensation has dissipated, but every muscle and bone in my body is sore, and it hurts to even breathe.

I turn my head to look at Jax, who sits reading a newspaper that had magically appeared. He never left the room, even though there was nothing else for him to do until the dose of hellfire faded. He never said anything as he watched me convulse and scream in pain. He just stood watching, the emotion on his face something I couldn't quite decipher. I swear there was a moment when I could no longer draw in air and was suffocating that he looked worried. But he still never did or said anything.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I tell him, my voice hoarse from screaming for the past hour.

Jax lowers the newspaper and looks at me over it. His purple eyes scan me before he stands from the plastic chair he's sitting in. "We're lucky you didn't piss all over yourself. I've done this to many people, and most can't control it. You actually handled it a lot better than anyone I've ever used hellfire on. Good for you, Blondie." He sarcastically gives me a thumbs up.

“Gee, thanks.” I scowl. “Your praise means the world to me, Demon Boy.”

I hear Jax chuckle as he comes around the table to mess with the chains on my ankles. “*Demon Boy*,” he mocks. “Don’t think I’ve ever heard that one before.”

“Whereas I’ve heard blondie a million times.” People always assume my hair is bleached and dyed, but my white-blond locks are all-natural. “I’m not going to lie, Jax, I’m a little disappointed with your choice of nickname.”

“Well, there’s no going back now.” He shrugs as he starts removing my left ankle cuff. “You’re stuck with it.”

“Well, it would seem I’m going to be here a while, so maybe we can come up with a new one.” I want to laugh, but talking is painful enough. I lift my head when I feel the cuff fall off my ankle. “How are you able to remove these if they’re magically bound.”

“I’ve still got some tricks up my sleeve.” He winks at me before moving to work on my arms next.

“Can demons use magic?” I ask. “I honestly just learned about all this supernatural craziness, so I don’t know anything about demons.” Margot said they were assholes and to avoid them at all costs. But Jax doesn’t seem that bad. And yes, I know he just tortured me, but I don’t think he really had any choice.

“Demons have their own set of skills, but they can’t do magic.” The second the cuff is off my right wrist. I pull my hand away from his grasp and stretch out my arm. My muscles groan in protest as I move.

“Then how can you?”

Jax stops working on the last cuff, and his eyes meet mine. He stays quiet for a moment before finally answering me. “I’m not just a demon.”

“What? How is that possible? I heard cross-breeding is impossible.”

“They—”

Jax is interrupted when Nicolai saunters into the room. “You’re right, Pruitt, it was impossible to crossbreed species, but we’ve been working very hard to rectify that.” Nicolai looms over me, scanning my body head to toe. “What a shame, the hellfire didn’t bring out your stubborn little wolf. Oh well, we’ll just have to try later tonight.”

“Sir, I don’t know if she’ll be able to survive another round so soon,” Jax interjects. I feel the last cuff fall from my wrist, and I pull my other arm to my chest.

“Yes, she will. She’s a strong one.” Nicolai caresses my cheek, and I jerk back from his touch. No longer tied to the table, I push his hand away and sit up for the first time since I’ve been here. “Run along and go to the bathroom,” he says. “When you’re finished, we’ll go on a little tour of my facility.”

I watch the way Jax’s face tightens when Nicolai speaks, and it becomes even clearer to me—Jax doesn’t want to be here any more than I do. And maybe I do have an ally here, after all.

NICOLAI PUTS ANOTHER PAIR OF MAGICALLY ENHANCED handcuffs on me when I exit the bathroom connected to the room I was held in. Once he’s sure the cuffs are secure, he pushes me out the door.

The hallway is all white just like the room I am in. Floor to ceiling, nothing but white. I notice multiple doors with small windows as we walk down the hallway. I have no idea what we are walking toward, but the way Jax stiffens as we draw near, I know it’s not good.

“What is this place?” I ask them. I don’t care who answers at this point. I just want answers.

“It’s one of our many medical facilities,” Nicolai says with pride in his voice, “originally created to find the reason behind the poor wolf shifter fertility, although it’s grown quite a bit from there. We figured why stop with only solving the fertility

issue? We're currently on stage three of our breeding program."

"Breeding program?" I gulp, and my stomach drops. As we near a set of heavy metal double doors, my wolf starts to freak out in my head. She's screaming at me not to go in there.

Nicolai stops by a keypad and punches in a code. I can't stop myself from trying to see, but he blocks it just well enough I'm only able to make out the last two numbers.

Seven...Nine...

The door buzzes and Nicolai walks through the automatic doors, dragging me behind him. "My partner is fascinated with crossbreeding species," Nicolai begins. "He wants to take the strong traits from each species and put them into one being. There has been a lot of trial and error, but we think we are getting closer to figuring it all out," he explains as we walk toward a sliding frosted-glass door. "This is just one of the wings of this facility. I believe this is the witch wing..." He glances over at a plaque on the wall and nods. "Yes, witches. We have eight subjects in here, four of which are pregnant."

The sliding door opens, and I almost fall to my knees when I see what's on the other side. It's a large half-moon shaped space with ten different rooms—more like jail cells. The walls are made of glass, giving no privacy. In each room is a hospital bed, and I notice most of them have an occupant.

"Holy shit," I breathe. This is a scene from a psychological horror movie.

This can't be real life...

"Don't worry about the ones who are unconscious. They aren't in any pain," Nicolai assures me before walking further into the room.

My feet stumble when Nicolai pulls me behind him, and Jax catches me before I face plant on the cold tile floor. I nod at him in thanks before pulling away. My bare feet pad across the floor as I'm tugged along behind Nicolai. When we near one of the cells, I see the poor woman who lies on the bed has a ventilator in her mouth, and her swollen pregnant belly has

all kinds of monitors on it. Her skin is ashen, and her body looks frail.

“What happened to her?” I turn to face Nicolai, not wanting to look at the poor woman anymore.

“She tried to escape.” Nicolai looks at Jax for confirmation. “We don’t tolerate insubordination here. She knew the risk when she tried to leave.”

“So, she’s here against her will?”

Nicolai smirks at me. “Do you know many women who would willingly be impregnated with an experimental embryo? Repeatedly? With little to no chance of a viable offspring?”

I stare at him, not willing to answer him. Of course, I don’t know anyone who would willingly be a test subject such as this.

“Didn’t think so.” Nicolai nods when I don’t answer. “These women have been collected from all over North America. Avery was one of my little gatherers, bringing me subjects to add to the program. She was tasked with collecting rogue wolves. I have others who bring me witches, wolf shifters, and so on. We even have a couple demons here.” My eyes slide to Jax at Nicolai’s last statement. “Jax is part demon, yes,” Nicolai continues, “but as he told you, he’s not just demon.”

“What are you?” I ask Jax for the third time since I’ve met him.

“I’m mostly demon, but I’m part witch and wolf shifter as well.”

Nicolai pats Jax proudly on his back. “Jax is our first successful subject from the breeding program.”

“I WASN’T KIDDING WHEN I SAID I WANT YOU TO DO ANOTHER session of hellfire on her, Jax,” Nicolai calls over his shoulder when he exits my room. We had left the wing of locked up

witches and returned to my own torture chamber. I never thought I would be happy to be back in here, but compared to what I just saw, I've got it easy.

I just have to survive another round of hellfire. No biggie.

When the door slams behind Nicolai, I spin and glare at Jax. He leans against the far wall with his long arms crossed in front of him, and his head hangs down. He doesn't look up at me, even though I know he feels me staring at him.

After a minute of staring, I finally snap. "What the fuck, Demon Boy?"

"What?" His head shoots up, and he finally looks at me. "What did I do?"

"It's not what you've done, it's what you *haven't* done!" I rage, marching toward him. "You've sat back and watched them do this to all these poor people, and you haven't done anything to stop them!"

"Who says I want to?" he says with a sneer before pushing off the wall and standing at full height. He's tall, but not as tall as Ryker or the twins.

"You might not be saying anything, but I've seen the way you look at Nicolai. You hate him and this place just as much as I do—maybe even more!"

"There's nothing I can do." He shrugs.

"That's bullshit, and you know it." I jab him in the chest with my finger. "You're a wolf, witch, and a fucking *demon*. I bet you could take out Nicolai with the snap of your fingers."

"I can't!"

"Yes, you can!"

"I can't because I need him to find my father!" Jax snarls, lowering his voice so no one can hear, I assume, as his gaze flicks toward the door.

Confused, I take a step back from Jax to give him some space. "Your father?"

“Nicolai’s partner—I’m pretty sure he’s my father,” Jax explains while pushing his hair back off his forehead. “My mother told me before she died, she thought he was the father. He used his own—*genetic material* to create the first hybrid embryos.”

“Gross.” I cringe.

“He was the one who took my mother out of her own bed when she was sixteen. He’s the one who experimented on her and then killed her and left her body in a ditch somewhere when she could no longer carry a child to term. He’s responsible for all of this—not Nicolai, who likes to think he’s important, but he’s just another pawn in this guy’s organization.”

“You don’t know who he is? Or what his name is?”

“I’ve heard people call him Sterling, and I have a vague idea of what he looks like based on what my mother said about him. But that’s all I have.”

“Your name is Jax Sterling?” I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from laughing. “You sound like you should have a magic show on the Vegas Strip.”

“My last name is *not* that fucker’s name,” Jax growls as his eyes glow in anger.

“Okay, okay.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “What is your last name, then?”

“Whitlock.”

“Jax Whitlock. I like it,” I tell him. “I was born Grey Thorne, but go by Pruitt Bailey now.”

“I heard about your childhood.” Appearing uncomfortable, Jax rubs the back of his neck. “At least you didn’t spend your adolescent years in a twelve by twelve cell.”

“You’re right. I didn’t spend my childhood in a jail cell, but Nicolai did take away the life I was supposed to have—should be having *right now*.” I back away from Jax, noticing I’m still standing too close to him. I lean against the wall

behind me, mirroring the way Jax stood when I entered the room.

For the first time today, I allow my mind to wander to Ryker. I've been trying not to let myself to think about him because when I do, I want to fall to the floor and cry. And I can't let that happen—I can't show weakness here. I will not allow Nicolai to break me. I will stay strong for Ryker, no matter how much I miss him and wish I were back home with him.

Jax sighs. "I'm sorry I can't help them or you right now. I've been building Nicolai's trust for years, and I'm so close to meeting Sterling—I'm not willing to risk it. My whole life I've been trying to get close to the man, I've thought of nothing else." Jax's violet eyes turn away from me, almost like he's too ashamed of himself to look me in the eye.

"So, what are you going to do when you find him?"

"I'm going to rip his heart out of his chest."

"How can I help?"

RYKER

I booked a flight to Vancouver before Remi and I ever left Addison's house. We had to convince Pruitt's aunt it would be best for her to stay home instead of coming with us. It was something Noah said that finally convinced her. My mom will also be staying behind, but my father and siblings will be joining me. I was surprised when my dad insisted on coming along. He hates traveling and being away from the pack.

"This says we're only twenty minutes away from Volkov Industries Headquarters," Ranger tells us from the backseat of the SUV we rented once we landed in Vancouver. "I'll call the front desk and ask if he's in the office now."

I don't turn around to look at him from my spot in the passenger seat. "Don't bother calling. We aren't going to talk to him at the office. We're going to talk to him at his house." I look down at the address Noah forwarded to me.

We were lucky Noah still had a friend in the Vancouver Police Department. His connection was able to find a current address and phone number for William.

"Smart." Dad nods as he takes a left on a narrow downtown street. "There would have been a lot of security at Volkov's office, we wouldn't have been able to get to him there."

"He lives in a high-rise penthouse, there'll still be some security we have to get past," I warn him, not wanting him to think it's going to be easy. I'm still furious with my father for his contribution to Pru's plan, but I'm thankful he's making an

effort to rectify his actions. And I meant what I said to Sawyer and him—as long as Pru isn't in my arms, I won't forgive them.

“I'm ready to start knocking some heads together.” Ransom cracks his neck and shakes out his fists. “I'm sick of sitting back and watching this asshole fuck with your life, Ryker. Time to get a little payback.”

“We aren't even sure William is going to know anything.” Remi shoots Ransom a look. “Then again, he's not an innocent party in all of this. He's the one who brought Genevieve to Nicolai's attention in the first place.”

“No one is ever innocent,” I comment as I sit back in my seat. While we're both exhausted and running on very little sleep, my wolf and I are itching to get our mate back.

THE FOUR OF US STAND BACK AS WE WATCH REMINGTON saunter up to the security guard at the front desk at William's condo building. We lucked out as only one security guard is in the lobby right now. The lobby is contemporary with clean lines and chrome accents. A giant abstract lighting fixture is the focal point. The whole space is cold and unwelcoming, and I have no idea why someone would want to live somewhere like this.

Remi laughs louder than necessary at something the bald security guard says, and I roll my eyes when she tosses her hair over her shoulder. The man is so enthralled with my sister. I motion to my brothers and dad to make their way to the elevators off to the right. I hang back a couple seconds, and once they're out of sight of the front desk, I follow them.

“I'm actually here to see William—he lives in the penthouse. Is he in?” I hear Remi ask him, her voice huskier than usual. I walk toward them. I'm about halfway there when the guard sees me over Remi's shoulder.

“He just got back in actually—Hey!” the guard yells. “All visitors have to check-in at the desk!”

“I’m just visiting an old friend,” I calmly explain, even though I have a feeling it’s not going to work. “He knows I’m here.”

“Are you on the approved visitors’ list?”

“He said he was going to add me to it.” I move closer to the desk. The short, slightly pudgy guard scans my large frame, and I notice he takes a step back as I near.

“What’s your name? I’ll see if you were added to the list,” he offers, shooting Remington a friendly smile before rifling through some paperwork.

“Oh, it’s—”

Remi moves so fast he doesn’t have time to react when she reaches out for him and grabs hold of the back of his head. She slams his face into the desk so hard I hear the glass chandelier above us rattle. The man slides off the surface and falls into a heap behind the desk. Blood pours from his broken nose and a gash on his forehead.

“He’s going to have a massive headache when he wakes up.” Remi purses her lips before she shrugs casually. “Help me drag him into the utility closet over there.”

I grab his security card and his keys off his belt before helping Remington push him into the closet with a mop bucket and a couple of brooms. I shake my head at Remi when she pats his chubby cheek and whispers, “Sleep well, dude.”

We break the door handle from the closet door, so he isn’t able to escape or phone for help. And if anyone were to find him in there, it’ll take a while to get the door open again.

We join the rest of our family in the elevator, and I swipe the security card to grant us access to the penthouse floor. No one speaks as we quickly pass each level. The only sound is the *ding* the elevator makes after each floor. We know nothing about William, so we have to be prepared for anything. Genevieve was a strong wolf, so we have to assume her older brother would also be.

The elevator doors open right into William’s Penthouse. Two of the four exterior walls are all windows, giving us a

pristine view of downtown Vancouver. The interior design is masculine, with pops of navy-blue thrown in here and there.

“Damn!” Ransom lets out a low whistle, obviously impressed with the apartment. “How much do you think a place like this goes for?”

“You could never live somewhere like this!” Remi snickers. “It’s *way* too fancy for you. You’d litter it with beer cans and pizza boxes within a week.”

“A week is being generous,” Dad adds in. “I’ve seen what his room looks like.”

“I bet he breaks something before we leave,” Ranger scoffs.

“Are you guys done?” I snap at them, annoyed they aren’t focused on the task at hand. “Ransom, Ranger, take the upstairs.” I gesture to the metal spiral staircase across the room. “Dad and Remi, you guys go that way, and I’ll head down this hallway. Holler if you find him.”

I don’t wait for their replies. Instead, I turn away and move down the hall. I’m not sure what’s at the end of it, and I don’t know how many times I’ve accidentally walked into an ambush while hunting rogue wolves.

Usually, Sawyer is here to watch my back, but when we left, I wasn’t ready to have him join us. Somehow it hurts more that Sawyer went behind my back and helped Pru. Sawyer has been the one person I could really rely on for the past five years, and to have him betray me—I’m struggling to move past it.

When my ears suddenly pick up on the erratic heartbeat behind the last door, I wish I had him here as reinforcement. I pause outside the door and listen to whoever is on the other side. My wolf breathes in the air and picks up on the wolf scent that surrounds the nervous person who stands on the opposite side. I don’t hear or smell another person with them. I step back and ram my foot against the door with all my strength. The wood door splinters and flies open, slamming

against the wall behind it before completely coming off its hinges.

A man with golden hair and bright green eyes that remind me of Pru's stands in the middle of a room that looks like an office. He wears a nice dark-blue suit with a patterned tie hanging loosely around his neck. The smell of fear surrounds him.

Good.

"Are you William?"

"I—Who are you?" he stutters. "What do you want?"

"I want you to answer my fucking question. Are you William?" I growl at him while advancing farther into the room.

"Y—yes, I'm William. What do you want?" he repeats.

I grab the back of the rolling office chair and swing it around. "Take a seat, William. I have a couple questions."

"Please don't hurt me. I'll give you whatever you want," he begs as his skinny legs shake, and he drops into the chair. Watching how he cowers and trembles makes me question if he's truly related to Genevieve and Pru. It's almost pathetic how much stronger and braver they are than him.

"Good, because I'm not leaving here until I have the information I need." I hear footsteps running down the hallway, and soon, my dad and brothers appear at the damaged doorway. "Found him."

"He looks like Genevieve," my dad comments when he looks William over.

"Genevieve? What does my sister have to do with this?" William demands. "I haven't seen her since she was twenty—she ran off with some man. That was almost twenty-four years ago."

"She died fourteen years ago when your employer hunted her down and slaughtered her." I perch myself on the edge of the desk and glare down at him. William may say he doesn't know anything about Genevieve and her death, but when I tell

him she's dead, there's no surprise or remorse on his face. He just looks blankly back at me. "And now that same employer of yours has my mate, and you're going to tell me where Nicolai is holding her."

"I don't know what you're talking about." William pales and shakes his head. "Yes, I work for Nicolai, but I don't work directly *with* him. I haven't seen him in months."

"I don't believe you," I snarl at him. "Everything about you right now tells me you're lying. Your pulse is fast, you refuse to make eye contact—you're a horrible liar, frankly. So let me ask you again, where would Nicolai be keeping her?"

"I don't know! I swear!" His voice shakes when he speaks. "I just do finance work for Mr. Volkov. I'm not involved with that side of the company."

"*That* side of the company?" Dad steps forward and crosses his arms. "What exactly is Nicolai's company?"

"It's a medical supply company," William explains. "I swear it's a legit company."

"You make sure it *looks* like a legit company," Remi comments as she walks in with a tablet in her hand. "You should really password protect your tablet, anyone could pick it up and look through it." Remi pauses and cocks her head to the side. "What is the *breeding program*?"

All the color drains from William's face, and his eyes widen, but he doesn't answer her.

I'm about to reach for his jugular and squeeze the answer out of him, but my father beats me to it. The alpha's power that flows through my father's body begins to radiate into the room. My siblings, being more submissive than I am, all take an instinctive step back, but I stand my ground.

"She asked you a question—what is the breeding program?" My dad bites out between clenched teeth.

"It's a program to further our species' advancement," William coughs out. "We're trying to strengthen the wolf shifter species."

“What does that mean?” I question.

“It means we were tired of waiting for some prophecy about a white wolf to come true, so we took science into our own hands, and now we’ve created the first-ever crossbreeds. We weed out the genes that make each species weak and implant the strong genes into one embryo. You should see what we’ve created—they’re magnificent. They’re stronger than you’ll ever be, and every day we’re learning ways to make them stronger still.”

Some people believe the White Wolf Prophecy is pure fiction and believe it to be a fairytale more than anything. And then there are people like my mother who believe it will one day come true. I’m one of the people who have trouble believing it is real. While I think it would be great if the prophecy were true, and it could break the vicious cycle of our low fertility rates and slow down the creation of rogue wolves, I’m not holding my breath.

“That doesn’t explain why Nicolai wants Pru,” Remi growls at him.

“We need strong mothers to make strong offspring.” William shrugs like it’s obvious. And now, looking back, it all makes sense to me. Nicolai has been working on this program since he set his sight on Genevieve.

“You volunteered your own sister for his little experiments?” I accuse him. I shoot to my feet and get right down in his face. “And when he couldn’t have her, he decided he wanted my mate.”

“The stupid little bitch deserved everything she got. Genevieve never should have run away with Archer like she did. She knew the risks when she chose him over Nicolai. Unfortunately, it’s my darling niece that has to pay her debt now.” The fear that had been masking William’s face disappears, and a cold look takes its place. “But she’s useless to Nicolai as long as she can’t shift. He’s growing more impatient. None of the torture he’s inflicted has worked thus far. He’ll grow bored of waiting and just... *dispose* of her soon.”

“*Where is she?*” I roar as I replace my father’s hand on William’s neck with my own. When I extend my claws and dig them deep into his jugular, blood begins to trickle down his throat and my fingers.

William smirks and laughs, his eyes full of amusement as he stares up at me. “Why would I ever tell you?”

“Because if you don’t, I’m going to rip your arm off and feed it to you,” I threaten. I feel my fangs lengthen, and my eyes shift into their wolf form. I’m losing control of my beast; if this asshole doesn’t give me the information I want in the next few seconds, I’m going to shift in the middle of his penthouse, and then he’ll really be fucked because my wolf’s bloodlust is out of control right now. I’m barely holding him back.

“Do it.” He bares his teeth. “Nicolai is still going to fuck your mate—mentally and physically.”

“Fuck this!” Ransom barks from behind me. “Finish him, Ryker! Or at least let me!”

I dig my claws a little deeper and am about to deliver the lethal blow when Remi yells, “Wait!”

“What is it?” Dad asks.

“I have an address,” she breathes. “Well, there are two. But one of them has to be the right one.” She marches forward and thrusts the tablet into William’s face. “Which one is Pru at? Which one is Nicolai holding her in?”

William stares at the screen before his gaze slowly slides away, but then he looks back at me defiantly before finally answering. “She’s at the facility off Frontage Road. It’s two hours away from here.” His smirk returns when he looks back at the screen. “You’ll never be able to get to her. You’ll be killed the second you walk up to the building.”

“I’m willing to risk it.” I let go of his neck and kick the rolling chair with my foot as hard as I can. William flies across the hardwood before crashing against the large window.

“We’ll have the element of surprise, there’s no way Volkov knows we’re here,” Ranger says.

“No, he’ll know we’re here.” I shake my head.

“How?”

“William here is going to call and tell him we’re on our way.” I sneer down at the man. “*All* of us are going.”

PRUITT

Jax upped the hellfire dosage this time. My body is weak, and I'm barely able to keep myself upright as I shift positions on the bathroom floor. After an hour of uncontrollably screaming and thrashing, nausea had kicked in, and I was unchained from the table and allowed in the bathroom. I've been hugging the toilet and hurling from the pain for a while now. My hair sticks to my sweaty forehead, and I feel beads of sweat drip down my back. I haven't showered, and I feel disgusting. And now, after throwing up multiple times, I would kill for a toothbrush.

Unable to keep myself upright any longer, I lay down on the cool floor of the bathroom. I don't even care at this point—I'm already filthy. I groan in pain when I rest my cheek against the tile. My fangs had made an appearance this time around, and I had accidentally bitten my cheek when I was convulsing in pain.

"You look horrible," Jax comments from the doorway of the bathroom. "I'm sorry I had to do that again."

"We all do things we regret," I mumble back. I feel weak, and keeping my eyes open is difficult. *Breathing* at this point is difficult. I'm so exhausted. On top of not showering, I also haven't slept since my arrival here. I'm sure my lack of sleep is factoring into my weakness

"If doing this brings me closer to Sterling, then it will be all worth it."

“Oh, okay, then.” I roll my eyes and immediately regret it when it causes excruciating pain to radiate from my sockets. “Whatever makes you sleep well at night, Jax.”

“You said you were willing to help,” Jax reminds me.

“Yeah, asshole, I meant I would try to find out more about Sterling from Nicolai,” I grunt. “Not that I was cool with the extra-strong dose of hellfire.”

“Volkov would have known if I hadn’t.” Jax slides down the doorjamb and joins me on the bathroom floor. “Your fangs and claws came out this time.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but that’s happened before.” I remember the first time they showed up after Esme’s ritual. That was the same night I gained the ability to talk to Ryker through the pack link. “Looks like your torture tricks don’t work on me.”

God, I miss hearing his voice in my head.

“I don’t know how much more hellfire I can infuse into your body before it kills you. I’ve already done twice as much as I usually do. Your wolf must really be bound.”

“No shit.” Feeling a little bit better, I push myself off the floor and transition into a sitting position. “A high priestess cast the spell that bound my wolf and wiped my memory. Apparently, she’s the strongest witch on this side of the country or something.”

“If she’s that strong, you’d think she’d be able to reverse the spell.”

“Yeah, one would think.”

We sit in silence for a while. Each of us lost in our own thoughts. Of course, mine wander to Ryker and how I left him behind. I wish I knew what he was doing right now—if he’s okay. I want to laugh at that. How could he possibly be okay? I’m sure as hell not okay.

“One of the last things I told him was I was going to be okay,” I say aloud before I can stop myself. Jax shoots me a confused look, and I sigh. “Before I left Ryker, I promised him

I would be okay, but the hellfire isn't working, and Nicolai isn't going to be patient much longer. I'm starting to think I'm not going end up being *okay*."

"I don't know what else to do to get your wolf out. You're the strongest person I've ever used hellfire on—the amount I used on you tonight probably would have killed anyone else. But not you. It's almost like your strength and power are working against you."

"Of course, they are." I lean my head back on the wall behind me. "Nothing about my life has ever been easy—so why should this be?"

Jax is quiet for a minute before finally speaking up. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, why not?" I shrug. "Not like I'm in a position that I can tell you *no*."

"Why haven't you cried since you've been here?" he asks. "Every other person who is trapped here usually cries for days before finally giving up, but you haven't."

"I told you before I'm exactly where I need to be. As long as I'm here, the people and the man I love are safe." I pause for a second while I really think about his question. "Both of my parents were alphas of a pack, and now I'm technically the alpha of the same pack. My parents sacrificed themselves for their pack, and now I'm doing the same thing. I never had anyone but my aunt, and now I have an entire pack of people depending on me to protect them..." I trail off.

"I've always been on my own—my mom died when I was young." I notice he swallows hard when he pauses like he's fighting back emotion. "I don't know what it's like to have someone other than myself to depend on or care about. Then again, that might be the demon in me speaking—we are known for our lack of humanity and empathy."

"You're not just demon, Jax," I sigh. "That's a small part of *what* you are, but it's not *who* you are. You're your mother's son—and from what I've seen, I believe you are a lot more like her than you think."

“I don’t remember much about her, but I remember at night she would sing me to sleep. She had such a beautiful voice...” Jax looks away, trying to hide the pain in his eyes, but it’s pointless since I hear it in his voice, although I don’t tell him that. He’s had to be strong all his life. I’m sure showing weakness is not easy for him.

He takes a minute before looking back at me, his violet eyes clear of any signs of distress. I’m actually amazed at his ability to hide it. “I bet you’re famished,” he says. “Do you want something to eat?”

“Seriously?” I sit up straighter and look at him, confused.

“I mean, I probably can’t score you a steak dinner, but I can bring you back a little something.” Jax pulls himself to his feet and offers me a hand. I reach up, and he helps me rise. My bones and muscles groan in protest, and I sway on my feet for a second before I finally find my balance again.

“I’m actually starving,” I admit, my stomach growling in agreement. “But don’t bring me anything if it will get you in trouble.”

“Nicolai will never know I left.” Jax’s eyes gleam, and he takes a step back from me.

“How are you going—”

One second, Jax is standing in front of me, the next he’s gone in a cloud of black smoke. I look around the room and don’t find him anywhere. It reminds me of a bad magic show, but this time I think it really *is* magic. When the smell of that black smoke hits me, it all begins to click. When I first met Jax, I smelled smoke. He must have done this then as well.

That’s so cool!

I make a mental note to ask him what else he can do. I wonder if he’s able to shift into a wolf as well and what other magic he has up his sleeve.

A sudden wave of jealousy hits me. Jax can do all sorts of things, and all I’m able to do is occasionally grow fangs and claws. And if I were able to fully shift, I wouldn’t be here

since I'd already be mated with Ryker. I'd be useless to Nicolai.

I PULL MY SHIRT OVER MY HEAD AND USE IT TO DRY MY FACE. I wish I was able to take a real shower, but splashing some water on my face is going to have to do for now. I don't know how long Jax is going to be gone, but I decide to take advantage of not being chained to a table and clean myself up as best as I can. I look down at the damp shirt in my hand and wonder if Jax could score me a new set of clothes.

I walk out of the bathroom in my sports bra and leggings and move to hang my shirt over the plastic chair to allow it to dry out. I barely make it a foot into the room before the main door swings open, and Nicolai saunters in. His hair is sticking up all over his head like he had been nervously pulling at it, and his pale eyes are wild-looking. I immediately take a step back and hold the shirt in front of me, not wanting him to see me in just a bra.

It's probably better not to add any fuel to that fire.

"Why aren't you chained?" he questions when he scans the room and then me. "Where's Jax?"

"He stepped out for a minute." Not wanting to get Jax in trouble, I don't offer any more information than that.

"I see the hellfire didn't work."

"What, really? I totally thought I had grown a tail and a set of pointy ears." I pat my head before turning around to look at my rear end. I turn back to Nicolai and attempt to look disappointed. "Oh shoot, better luck next time?"

Nicolai roars in rage and flies across the room at me so fast I don't have enough time to react. He slams us into the wall behind me. My spine and shoulders take the brunt of the hit, and I groan in pain.

"I'm so fucking sick of your mouth," he growls, his breath hot on my face. "I really didn't want to mutilate you since

you're so enjoyable to look at, but I'm seriously considering cutting your tongue out."

"We both know you won't." I smirk. "You get too much pleasure out of our witty banter."

"You're overestimating my fascination with you. I wanted your mother, and while you're a strong alpha wolf and would make a great addition to the program, you're still not *her*."

"If you don't care about me, why don't you let me out of here?" I ask.

"Because I still want what is owed to me. I will break you, Grey—I can promise you that. I will break your spirit, and then I'll break the binds that hold your wolf prisoner. And lastly, I'm going to break you physically. And I know exactly how I'm going to do it." The look of delight on his face makes me very nervous. "Go ahead, ask me how I'm going to do it."

I don't do what he asks at first, so he presses me harder into the wall and digs his claws into my upper arms where he holds me.

"Fine," I huff. "How are you going to do it?"

Nicolai leans forward and speaks low into my ear. "I'm going to make you watch as I kill Ryker, but first, I'm going to make him watch as I fuck you."

I jerk back and glare at him, confused. "You promised you'd leave him alone. I did what you said—I voluntarily came with you! You said you wouldn't hurt him if I did."

"You're right, that is what I said. I believe I also said as long as Ryker stayed away and didn't try to find you, I wouldn't touch a single hair on his head." Nicolai releases me and takes a step back. "Well, guess who's found you?"

Ryker...

NICOLAI DIDN'T CHAIN ME BACK UP WHEN HE LEFT, SO I PACE back and forth across the small room while I wait for Jax to

get back. I'm a combination of pissed off and elated Ryker has found me. My skin prickles at the idea of him being close to where I am, but my stomach twists in knots and fear at the idea of him being close to me. Because it's not just me who he's getting closer to, Nicolai is here too, and he wants blood.

I'm pissed because in the clearing and also in the video I left, I begged Ryker to stay away. Like I had told him in the video, all of this will be for nothing if he shows up and is killed by Nicolai. I'm also angry Elias or Sawyer would allow him to go after me. I had made them promise to keep Ryker safe, and him coming here is anything but *safe*.

"Fuck!" I shout, slamming my fist into the drywall. Dust and debris fall to the floor when I remove my hand.

"What the hell?" Jax says when he suddenly appears across the room with a grocery bag in his arms. The smell of smoke fills the room before quickly fading. "What happened to you?"

"He's coming here, and Nicolai is going to kill him." My voice is flustered when I speak. "And he's going to make me watch as he does it."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jax shakes his head as he digs around in the bag of food. "Granola bar?"

"What? No!" I slap his hand away when he holds up a green package. "You're not listening to me! Nicolai is going to kill him!"

"Again, I don't know what or who you're talking about." Jax puts the bag down on the table and turns back to me. "Slow down, and tell me what happened."

"Ryker found out where we are, and he's on his way here." I try to get the words out as calmly as possible. "And Nicolai said he's going to kill him. Ryker has no idea what he's walking into. I've only seen part of the facility, but from what I've seen, this place is a fortress."

"He'll never make it past the front gate," Jax agrees. "He's basically on a suicide mission."

“Oh, my God! Don’t say that!” I know my voice is shrill and full of panic, but I can’t stop it. “I doubt he’s here by himself. I would bet money Remi is with him, and if she’s here, then the twins probably are too. Fuck! I left all of them to save them and now...” I can’t even bring myself to finish the sentence.

“How does Nicolai know Ryker’s on his way here?”

“He said someone called him to warn him.” I push my hair off my forehead and tug at the strands. “That’s not important. How am I going to help them? How am I going to *warn* them about the ambush I’m sure is waiting for them now.”

Nicolai is smart. I’m sure he’s getting a team together as we speak to take out Ryker and whoever’s with him before they even get to the gate.

Jax stands there staring at the wall behind me, a series of emotions rolling over his face. “You’re right, you can’t warn them.” Jax gives me a look I can’t quite decipher. “But I can.”

I pause in my pacing and look deep into those violet eyes. “You’d do that? Even if it means risking your chance of finding Sterling?”

“You told me I’m more than just a demon, and that made me realize I’m also more than my revenge. You also made me realize I can’t sit back any longer and allow this all to happen. So yes, I’ll help Ryker *and* you.”

“And when the time comes, I’ll help you find Sterling.” I act without thinking and pull Jax into a hug. He immediately stiffens up and jerks back a little. But to my surprise, a moment later, he relaxes and hugs me back. I mean it when I tell him I’ll help him find Sterling. I make a promise to myself that if one day, Jax shows up asking for help, I’ll drop everything and go—no questions asked.

“Just promise me one thing, Blondie,” I hear him whisper.

“Anything.”

“Kill him. Kill Nicolai.” I hear the change in Jax’s voice. It’s thick with anger. “Promise me you won’t let him get away with this.”

“I promise.”

RYKER

“Pull over,” I order when we’re a couple miles away from the facility. From what we’ve been able to find online, the building Nicolai has Pru in is part of an abandoned industrial park he bought. The official papers say it’s used as a distribution center for Volkov Industries, but we know now what it’s really used for. “We need to come up with a plan.”

Dad pulls the car over, and we all climb out and gather around the hood of the car to look at the pictures and map. Before we left William’s condo, Remington had printed out satellite images of the facility, so we have a good idea of the layout.

“My main concern is there is only one road in and out of the facility,” I tell them as I pick up a picture to get a better look at one of the main buildings.

“That’s if we can even get out,” Ransom says under his breath.

“That’s another thing,” I sigh and look away from my family. “I think I should be the only one to go in. I don’t want any of you getting hurt, and we all know how Pru feels about putting you guys in danger,” I add, thinking about how protective my little mate is of her family and pack.

When no one says anything in response, I lift my gaze and find them all staring at me, each of them looking equally annoyed.

“Ryker Alexander Weylyn, you’re fucking delusional if you think I’m going to allow you to go in there by yourself,”

Dad snaps at me. I don't have to question how serious he is since he cursed *and* used my middle name. He always reserves those for serious moments. *Like this.*

“We don't really know what we're walking into. Nicolai has proven time and time again that he's smart but also ruthless. I'm okay with me getting hurt or worse, but not you guys.” I shake my head. “What if I go in alone, and while they're distracted with me, you guys find Pru? I only care that she gets out safe, and all of you leave here alive.”

“Ryker—” Remi starts to speak, but the sound of someone clapping from next to the driver's side door of the SUV has us all spinning around. I smell something burning for a moment, but the odor floats away in the wind.

A tall, lanky man with dark hair leans against the silver vehicle. He continues his clapping for several more seconds before crossing his arms and smirking at us. “Wow, that was so moving. I'm very impressed with the whole—*martyr* thing. I mean, Pruitt sure as hell won't be happy to hear about you being the sacrificial lamb. She's already pretty pissed you're here, so we probably shouldn't add any fuel to *that* fire.”

“Who the hell are you?” Ranger asks the man.

“Or right, sorry. Hello. I'm Jax,” the man—*Jax*—says, grinning at us. “I was the one tasked with torturing Blondie, but I think we're friends now—no wait.” He holds up a hand and tilts his head to the side like he's thinking about something. “Yes, I can confidently say we are friends now.”

“You have a lot of balls showing up here and admitting to torturing my mate,” I growl at the man. My wolf bristles at the thought of Pruitt being tortured and my claws lengthen on their own. After the past few days, my wolf is ready to sink his teeth into something, and he's more than happy to start with Jax.

“You must be Ryker.” He nods in my direction as he pushes off the car and stands straight. “I wasn't sure which one of you was. Also, Blondie, I mean, Pru, isn't mad at me about the whole torture thing. You shouldn't be either.”

Images of Pruitt being tortured and in pain fill my head, and my legs push off the dirt road shooting me forward toward Jax. Fueled by rage, I bring my fist back, fully intending to smash this guy's face in, but in the blink of an eye, he disappears, and the smell of smoke fills the air. I look around and don't see him anywhere. My family does the same thing, their gazes glancing frantically around the car and the nearby treeline for him, but he's nowhere to be found.

"What the *hell*?" Remi drawls.

"Only part hell, sweet cheeks." Jax suddenly appears at Remi's side. "Try to kill anyone recently? I think the guard you almost took down while you were being held by good Ol' Nico had to go to therapy."

"How do you know me?" Remi takes a step back from him and scowls. "How are you doing that?"

"I was lurking around when Nico brought you back to his hideout in Montana. As for your other question... I'm part demon, and I'm fairly good with the whole hellfire thing—it's a rare ability, but I can use it to travel between the physical planes of the world..." Jax trails off and gives her a look. "I— is this really important right now? Don't you think we have more urgent business to attend to?"

"How do we know you can be trusted and you're not just one of Nicolai's loyal soldiers?" Ransom questions him before I can.

"You people are *so* paranoid," Jax says, huffing. "Pruitt asked me to come here and help you guys. Nicolai told her his plans for Ryker, and she's freaking the *fuck* out since she knows he's more than capable of doing what he promised."

"I still don't know how we're supposed to trust you." I cross my arms and narrow my eyes at him. "You're a demon, after all. They *are* notoriously untrustworthy."

"*Part* demon," Jax corrects. "Pru told me that the last thing she told you before she left was she would find a way to be okay, but if we wait out here any longer, she's not going to be *okay*."

I hadn't been able to wipe away the tears streaming down her face when she told me that since I was under the effects of the paralytic, but her words had broken my heart. She was trying to be so strong for me—for *all* of us. There is no way for Jax to know what Pru whispered to me in the clearing without Pru telling him herself.

“Okay, I believe you,” I concede. “Now how do I get my mate out of there alive? Preferably with all of us alive?”

“I have a plan, but we're going to have to act fast if it has any chance of working.” Jax takes a couple steps down the road before turning back to look at all of us. “Leave the car here, it will probably be for the best you don't literally drive through Nicolai's front gate.”

I'm the first to follow the demon, while my family hesitates at first. Each of them has a worried look on their faces. I should probably be more worried than I am, but I'm less than a mile away from my mate, and that's all I can think about. My dad is the one who finally makes a move to follow us, and then my siblings fall in line behind.

As we pass the back of the SUV, we all hear the muffled sounds of someone gagged and trying to call out from inside. There's also a slight thumping noise that follows the faint calls.

“Is there someone tied up in your car?” Jax raises a brow in question when he looks back at us.

“Yes. It's Pru's uncle, actually.” Remi grins proudly.

Jax looks between the car and us before a smirk appears on his face. “*Awesome.*”

THE SATELLITE IMAGES WERE A COUPLE YEARS OLD AND didn't show the ten-foot brick wall with barbed wire on top of it. And from what I can see from our vantage point behind a thick cluster of trees, the only way in or out is the metal gate has been conveniently left open. Being wolf shifters, we're

able to see really well in the dark, so while the human guards patrolling the area can't see us, we can see them.

But for Jax's plan to work, they can't see us until we want them too.

I wait for a guard to pass us before reaching for William, who's still bound and gagged. We had put a silver cuff on his arm before we left his apartment building, so he's unable to shift. His eyes widen in fear when I drag him closer to me. Jax had laughed when he saw William hog-tied in the back of the car, and honestly, under other circumstances, I would have too.

I grab hold of the tape over his mouth and rip it off. Lucky for him, he's clean-shaven, so I doubt it hurt as bad as it could have.

"Dammit!" he growls in pain.

"Shut the hell up, you big baby." Remi rolls her eyes at him.

"I'm going to laugh when Nicolai tears you all apart." William sneers at us. "And you," he adds, glaring at Jax. "When he finds out you're helping these people—well, you're going to wish you were never created."

"Too late for that, buddy." Jax flips him off.

"Shut up," I growl at them all before I push William out of the treeline we're hiding in. He stumbles but quickly regains his balance. "Go call for help and pray to God I don't ever get my hands on you again because if I do, I'm going to kill you."

William gives us all one last look before he takes off running down the dirt road. His movements are weird and awkward since his arms are still tied behind his back.

"They're down there! Someone go fucking kill them!" he yells at the guards. "Why are you just standing there? Did you not hear what I said? They're right there!"

The guards do exactly what we thought they would do. They run from their positions and gather around William. From where I stand, I can see at least fifteen men now standing in clear view and out in the open. Which is right

where we want them. This way, we don't have to go search for each of them. Instead, they've revealed themselves to *us*.

"Ready?" I ask Jax.

"This is going to be awesome." His eyes flash bright before he disappears in a cloud of smoke.

We watch as Jax appears in the middle of all the guards. At first, they don't notice him, so he lets out a small whistle, and they all turn around to face him. Jax holds both of his hands out, palms up, and he sends out a flash of hellfire. Jax had explained to us that it was like a bomb of sorts. The hellfire will attach itself to anyone within fifteen feet, hence the reason we're staying back. I don't know much about how hellfire works other than that, but I do know it's supposed to be the worst pain imaginable if it touches you.

Almost at the same time, each of the guards begin to fall to their knees, their screams of pain piercing the night. I have never seen so many grown men break down into tears so quickly.

When I see William withering in the dirt with them, I can't fight the smile of satisfaction that grows on my face. This man put everything into motion all those years ago, and it's finally coming back to bite him in the ass.

Movement coming from the trees behind Jax draws our attention. We knew there was a chance not all of the guards would rush to help William, and it looks like we were right. A handful of men rush out from the treeline and move toward Jax.

"Watch out!" Remi shouts as she breaks in a sprint down the road.

Jax disappears just in time to avoid one of them. I don't see him reappear, not even when I follow my sister's lead and charge down the road. I slam all of my weight into the nearest guard and send him flying backward. He lands with a satisfying grunt on the ground a couple yards away.

I spin to face another one who is coming at me with a silver knife. From my peripheral vision, I see my brothers take

on one of the larger guards, and I hear my father fighting with someone else not far away.

I don't have time to take in how amazing it feels to be working as a team with my family again because the asshole with the big blade takes a swipe at my chest. I'm able to jump back in time to avoid adding another scar to my ever-growing collection. I wait for him to strike again before retaliating. When he does, I grab hold of his wrist and twist his hand around, so it's pointed toward his chest. This man is human and doesn't stand a chance against my strength. No matter how much he tries to push me away, he'll never be strong enough. He grunts and his eyes go wide when the blade disappears into his chest.

My focus is on the man bleeding at my feet now. I don't hear the other coming up behind me until it's almost too late. I turn to face him just in time to watch him fall to the ground and scream in pain. Jax stands behind him with his hand still out and a cocky grin on his face.

"Man, you're going to owe me big time when we leave here." Jax smirks. We both look around, and every one of the guards is on the ground, either dead or still feeling the effects of the hellfire. Jax turns to me and says, "What are you still doing here? Go find her."

I look at the building looming in front of us and back at my family. I'm hesitant to leave them out here alone.

"We'll be fine, Ryker." Remi steps forward with speckles of blood that isn't hers now decorating her face. I didn't see her take a guard out, but apparently, she did. "Go!"

That's all I need to hear before I take off running down the road toward my mate.

EVERY STEP I TAKE TOWARD THE DARK BUILDING, I EXPECT A guard or Nicolai to appear, but I make it past the gate and all the way to the entrance to the building without anyone

stopping me. In fact, it's almost too quiet as I make my way up the stairs leading to the door where Jax said I could find Pru.

It's also extremely dark. There isn't a single light coming from this building or smaller surrounding buildings. The only illumination provided is from the moon and the stars in the sky.

I hear a heartbeat and pick up on the scents behind a door a couple seconds too late. When I swing the door open, I barely have time to take in my mate's scared expression, and her shouts of warning before two very large wolves launch themselves at me. I'm able to put my arms in front of my face and neck in time, so instead of their teeth sinking into my jugular, they embed in my forearms. The momentum of the wolves' attack sends us flying backward, and down the short flight of stairs I had climbed moments before.

"No!" I hear Pru scream.

All three of us roll multiple times before landing in a heap at the base of the stairs. The wolves don't waste any time before continuing their attack. I slash at them with my own claws and use my legs to kick them away. Through the snarling and growling, I hear Pruitt's voice. She's screaming at Nicolai to call them off. I can't quite make out what he yells back at her because one of the wolves moves in closer to my ear. He is so close I feel his hot breath on my face and neck.

We continue to fight against each other in a mess of claws and teeth. If I had enough time to shift into my own wolf, I could take both of these bastards out within seconds. I'm a good fighter as a human but have always been more skilled at disabling my attackers when I'm in wolf form. I can feel myself losing this battle since I'm at such a disadvantage being stuck on my back while they fight me from above. I'm barely able to keep their teeth away from my neck and face. I know for a fact I have dozens of bites covering my arms and legs already, but at least they aren't fatal.

The sound of multiple guns cocking above us suddenly draws all our attention to the guards that now stand there. The wolves release my arms from their mouth, and their weight is

lifted off my torso. Three men keep their guns that are most likely filled with silver bullets pointed directly at me while two grab me and pull me to my bloody knees. They twist my arms behind my back and hold me in place. I feel blood dripping down my arms and face now that I'm upright. I don't even bother to look down and assess the damage. Instead, I look to my mate.

As I look up at the last place I saw Pru, I see her fighting against Nicolai as he pulls her down the stairs with him. I take a quick survey of her body to check for any wounds or damage. Aside from looking exhausted and a little malnourished, she looks to be okay. Even though I'm on my knees with a gun pointed at the back of my head, I can't help but find relief in seeing her breathing.

"Ryker!" I hear Remi scream from my left. She runs toward us, my brothers and father close on her heels.

"Oh good, the whole family is here," Nicolai comments dryly when he sees them. "I was hoping for a family reunion. Very well, we'll just have to take care of them all at once."

Nicolai motions to one of the guards who raises his large gun at my family as Pruitt and I both struggle against the men holding us in place. Nicolai nods at the man, and I watch in horror as he pulls the trigger. I feel like I'm watching this all happen in slow motion.

The bullet flies through the air directly toward my sister, and I'm completely helpless to do anything about it. I'm filled with remorse, knowing I'm the reason Remi's even here. If I'd listened to my gut and refused to allow my family to come they would all be safe, and now here I am holding my breath and watching her scared face, waiting for the moment it reaches her.

But it never does. She stands completely unscathed, but it's Jax who lies bleeding from his chest on the ground in front of her. He had appeared in front of Remi just in time and had taken the bullet instead.

"Now look what you've done!" Nicolai shouts at Pru, who is staring wide-eyed at Jax. "You and your goddamn family

have been fucking up my plans for years, and now you got my prized medical miracle shot. You couldn't behave and hate the demon like the rest of us? You had to go make friends with him and now *look*—he's probably going to die tonight just like your mate is.”

“No, stay away from him!” Pruitt cries when Nicolai passes her off to another guard who holds her tight against his chest. “If you hurt him, I will kill you! I swear to God, I will rip you to shreds!” she screams at the back of Nicolai's head as he makes his way down the stairs to me.

As always, he walks with an air of arrogance around him. When he grins down at me, I see the sharp points of his own fangs, and his eyes shift into their wolf form. And when he takes the place of one of the guards and stands behind me, I expect to feel his claw wrap around my throat. Instead, I feel the hard metal of a gun barrel pressing into my back.

“Any last words for your little mate before I kill you?” he asks with a sneer.

I look at Pruitt, who is thrashing and fighting to break loose from the guard holding her in place. The whole time she keeps her eyes on me, never removing them from my face, and the look of pure panic and fear on hers breaks my heart.

“*I love you,*” I tell her through the link in our heads.

“I'm going to enjoy watching you bleed,” Nicolai growls at me before pressing the gun harder against me.

PRUITT

Everything I was trying to avoid when I left them is happening before my eyes, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. Remington is pressing her jacket into Jax's chest to slow the bleeding from his gunshot wound. Elias, Ransom, and Ranger each have a gun pointed at them, and then there's Ryker. Ryker is covered in bleeding bite and claw marks, and Nicolai stands behind him with a gun pressed to his back, fully intending to shoot him while I watch.

My heart is beating so fast and loud I can't make out what Nicolai says to Ryker. Ryker doesn't respond to Nicolai. Instead, I hear him in my head, telling me he loves me. Having his voice in my head is usually calming, but the way he says, "*I love you*" sounds like goodbye, and I refuse to accept that.

I *refuse* to sit back and watch as the family I've created for myself is killed. I *refuse* to be a pawn in Nicolai's sick game.

"Don't do it!" I shout as I kick and scream against the man holding me back. At one point, I'm able to break free of his hold for a second, but I only get a foot away when his arms wrap around my middle, and he hauls me back. My feet aren't even touching the ground anymore as he holds me against his chest.

My wolf is going nuts in my head. She's fighting and growling just as hard as I am to get free. I feel the same panic she does, knowing her mate is in grave danger. I feel the same amount of desperation as she does, watching Nicolai stand with a sickening grin on his face behind Ryker.

“You really should have listened when she told you to stay away,” Nicolai tells Ryker before the deafening sound of a gun going off echoes through the night.

My whole world stops as I watch Ryker’s body jerk as the bullet enters his back and exits through his chest. His beautiful blue eyes blink slowly as he looks away from me and down at the spot on his chest where a bloodstain blossoms. His blue eyes find me again, and already it looks like a light has gone out in them. I hear the twins and Elias roar as they watch from the sidelines, and all I can do is watch as Ryker slumps over and falls to the dirt on his back. I can’t breathe or move anymore—just watch in horror as my mate collapses at Nicolai’s feet.

My wolf howls so loudly in my head, I flinch at her cries of pain. With a tenacity I’ve never felt before, she crashes against the binding that keeps her trapped inside. I hear her pounding against it, and it almost sounds like someone banging on bulletproof glass. Just this dull thud over and over again.

The man holding me allows me to fall to my knees in front of him, and every ounce of pain rushes forward, and I scream, “No!” at the top of my lungs.

And then I feel it. Something shatters inside of me, and an overwhelming amount of power rushes forward. The banging sound silences and I know it’s because she’s no longer behind the glass. My body shakes and spasms as she rushes to the surface. My human screams of pain turn into howling and snarling. My hands that were digging into the ground below me shift into paws.

I fell to the ground as I human, but I rise for the first time as a wolf.

I’ve never felt stronger in my life, and I refuse to let that strength go to waste. Through new eyes, I look up and take in Nicolai. He still stands above my wounded mate, but the look on his face is no longer full of arrogance. Instead, a look of panic now sits there.

Good.

I don't test the waters of being a wolf. I don't take a couple steps to find my footing and figure it all out. I don't have time for that. Instead, I launch myself down the stairs in one fluid movement, landing right in front of Ryker and Nicolai. No matter how much I want to look at Ryker and see if he's still breathing, I can't draw my eyes away from my enemy. I lower my head, and my ears flatten when I let out a menacing snarl.

"If I had known getting your wolf out to play only required I shoot your mate, I would have done it days ago," Nicolai snarls at me.

I bare my teeth again at him before I use all my strength to catapult my body into his. My front—*paws*—ram into his chest, and I send us flying backward. He lands on his back with a satisfying grunt. He tries to sit up and he can back away from me, but I put my large paws on his chest, stopping him from escaping. I wish I could communicate with him now and tell him I will savor the taste of his blood on my tongue, and I will enjoy watching the life drain from his eyes. But by the look of fear on his face, I think my intent is pretty clear.

I snarl at him one last time before I shoot forward with a speed I'm not used to. I sink my new, sharp teeth into his throat and bite down as hard as I can. The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth while Nicolai struggles against my hold. He pushes at my head, but I don't budge. I refuse to let go of him. I hear him gargle and struggle for breath. Seconds later he isn't moving, and I want to let go of him, but something instinctual overcomes me, and my wolf wants to hold onto her kill.

I hear footsteps come up from behind us, and I growl, warning that person to not get any closer.

"Pruitt..." Elias says softly, trying not to spook me. "You can let go of him now. He's gone."

Another low rumble comes from my chest, and I back up.

"Listen for his heartbeat." Elias squats low, so he's eye level with me now. "It isn't there anymore. You can let him go now, he can't hurt any of us anymore."

He puts his hand out, and for reasons I don't understand, my wolf takes that as a threat, and she growls at him again and backs up even farther, dragging the lifeless man with her. I can't do anything to stop her. The instinct of a wolf's prey is strong, and though I would like to let go and check on Ryker, I can't.

"Pru..." From my left, I hear Ryker's breathless voice. Immediately my ears perk up, and my eyes shoot to him. Ryker is now in a sitting position thanks to Ransom helping him up. His shirt is completely soaked with blood, and he looks pale, but he's still breathing. "It's okay, baby, let him go. You're okay—I'm okay."

It's like something clicks when I see Ryker is still alive. The adrenaline and fear I had been feeling moments before subside and my wolf calms down. I let go of Nicolai and back away from him. I look around at the people surrounding him. Remi has helped Jax sit up, and they're both staring at me with shocked looks on their faces. The men who had worked for Nicolai have dropped their guns and are looking a little green. Ranger walks up behind Elias, and they both have a look of awe on their faces.

They must be shocked I was able to shift because I sure as hell am. I thought I was never going to be able to do this, and now I stand before them as a wolf.

RYKER

My chest still feels like it's on fire, and it's a little hard to breathe, but luckily, I'm still alive. Since the bullet went through my chest and didn't lodge itself inside, the effects of the silver will be minimal. If the bullet had gotten stuck in my chest, the silver would have leaked into my bloodstream and caused my heart to stop. Although the small amount of silver from the bullet passing through will most likely leave me weak for a short while, I'll live. I can't say the same for Nicolai Volkov, however. My strong mate made sure of that, and now he lies lifeless at her feet.

Even though my body was in shock from being shot, and my vision was a little blurry from the pain, watching Pruitt shift into a wolf was the most amazing thing I have ever witnessed, and I know everyone around me can agree because not only is she finally able to shift, but she has shifted into a *white wolf*.

Her fur is as white as snow, and her eyes blaze a brilliant green. She's taller than most female wolf shifters but still leaner than a male. She's absolutely stunning even with the blood covering her muzzle.

The second Nicolai's guards saw her shift into a white wolf, they dropped their guns and stood in shock as she crushed Nicolai's throat. They saw her temper and how fast she is, and I have to assume they were a little nervous about being on the receiving end of her bite seeing how it didn't work out so well for their boss.

“*Holy shit,*” Ransom whispers from my side, “she’s *the* white wolf.”

“She’s amazing,” I agree, never taking my eyes off my stunning mate. I’m still feeling weak, and my legs are a little sluggish when I try to stand so I can go to her. Ransom helps steady me once I get my legs and feet under me. “Go check for more of Nicolai’s people, I’m going to try to get her to shift back.”

The scariest part of shifting for the first time is having to shift back to your human form. It can take some young shifters hours to accomplish, and I can tell by the look in Pruitt’s eyes she’s already starting to panic. That’s the worst thing a shifter can do when trying to shift is panic or overthink it. The trick is relaxing and allowing your body to do what it already knows how to.

I push through the pain as I crouch down in front of her. Her eyes stay on me before shooting back to look at the people standing yards away from us.

“*Don’t worry about them,*” I tell her through our link, “just look at me. *Wow, baby, you are so beautiful, and I’m so proud of you.*”

Her body stills for a second, and she focuses solely on me. “*Ryker, I’m scared. How do I shift back? As cool as it is to finally be able to be a wolf, I would like to be human again right now.*”

“*It’s okay, just relax. Remember when we tried to get you to shift before, and I told you to visualize paws and fur? This time visualize what you look like as a human.*”

A whimper of distress comes from her before she says, “*Oh God.*”

“*What?*”

“*I’m going to be naked! Your brothers cannot see me naked, Ryker.*” Her voice is full of panic when she realizes her clothes are torn to shreds.

“*I don’t think either of us would enjoy that,*” I agree with her before turning to look at my family that stands off to the

side. “Can you guys go do a perimeter check for a minute while she shifts back? And Dad, can I borrow your coat?”

I take the jacket from my dad as they pass us. I wait for them to round the corner of the building before turning my attention back to my scared mate.

“*Okay, we can do this. Just do what I said,*” I assure her calmly. “*Picture yourself in your human form.*”

“*Okay.*”

It takes several minutes before the white fur starts to be replaced by tanned naked skin and long blonde hair. Her vibrant green wolf eyes shift back into their equally pretty human ones, and her fangs and claws retract. As happy as I was to see my mate in wolf form, I’m more ecstatic to see her crouching in front of me as a human.

“Hey,” I say when she looks up at me, and I can’t help the goofy smile that appears on my face.

“Hi.” She smiles back before she launches herself at me. She wraps her arms and legs around my middle and holds me tight in her grasp.

I fall to my butt, and my chest still burns, but it doesn’t stop me from wrapping her up in my arms and holding her close to me. My wolf howls in happiness in my head, having her safe back in my arms. I hear her sniff a couple of times and I feel my own eyes sting with tears of pure joy.

We stay like this for several minutes before she leans back and presses her mouth against mine. I immediately kiss her back, and after the last few days of being away from her, I’m desperate for her touch.

Her fingers travel my back and neck before stopping at my scalp. Her mouth stills, and she pulls away, her eyes narrowing as she frowns and glares at me. “What the *hell* did you do to your hair?”

THE ONLY TIME I LET GO OF HER HAND IS WHEN SHE PUTS ON A pair of clean scrubs Ranger found for her somewhere inside. But other than that, I never leave her. Even now, as she's hugging Remington, I hold one of her hands. I have a feeling it's going to take a while before I'm ever willing to let her out of my sight. And I'm sure that's going to go over *great* with her.

“Oh my God, Pruitt!” Remington squeals into her shoulder as she holds her tight. I notice Remi's hands are still stained with Jax's blood from trying to stop the bleeding. “That was amazing. Kind of gross, but amazing.”

“I—I can't believe I can shift.” Prue smiles so hard, I swear her face looks like it's going to crack.

I waited for Pru to say something about her white fur when she shifted back, but when she didn't, I decided we would wait until we got home to tell her. She's had a tough couple of days, and I don't think adding to it right now would be wise. She needs a minute to calm down and breath before we drop that bombshell.

“That was pretty cool, Blondie,” Jax adds from where he leans against the brick building. “And you killed him like you promised.”

“I told you I would.” She gives Jax a knowing smirk.

“If you hadn't done it, I would have found a way to. The fucker had me shot.” Jax rubs the spot on his chest. “Shit fucking hurt.”

“Are demons affected by silver too?” I ask him.

“No, but that doesn't mean a bullet entering my body didn't still hurt.” Jax rolls his purple eyes.

“And he's only part demon,” Pru says.

“Yes, we saw how *handy* he was with hellfire.” I glare at Jax. “I'm still not happy about him using it on you, though.”

“He didn't have a choice,” Prue says in defense of Jax, shocking me. “And I think he's more than made up for it, don't you?”

“Yeah,” Jax chimes in, “and it got me shot, so a little thank you would be appreciated.” Jax sticks his finger through the bullet hole in his shirt. “Ruined my favorite shirt as well,” he says under his breath.

“Thank you for your help, Jax,” I concede. I hate to admit it, but I don’t think we would all be alive if Jax hadn’t taken out as many of the guards as he had. Which reminds me... “Was William with the passed out guards you rounded up?” I ask him.

“No, bastard must have woken up before everyone else and gotten away. I can go find him if you’d like?” Jax offers. I’m not surprised he’s gone. He is a wolf shifter after all, and most of the guards were human. Meaning the effects of the hellfire probably wore off faster on William, and he got the hell out of Dodge.

“Who’s William?” Pru asks.

“He’s your uncle.” Jax shrugs. “They had him tied up in the back of their SUV when I found them. It was awesome.”

Pru shoots me a confused look, and I shake my head. “I’ll explain it all later,” I tell her.

PRUITT

We all agree we can't leave these poor people locked up in this hellhole any longer. We break off into teams to open all the doors. The ones who want can leave or wait for the authorities we've already called. We figure we have about fifteen minutes before the cops get here, and we work fast since we want to be gone before then.

"You're safe now," I tell another scared coyote shifter. She looks at the open doors and then back at me. "I promise this isn't a trick. Now go before the authorities show up."

The woman shifts into a petite coyote and sprints out the door. She pauses down the hallway and looks back at us. I swear I see her nod her head, almost like she's saying thank you.

"I'm glad we're able to help them," Ryker says after she's gone.

"Me too, but this is just one facility. Jax thinks there's more located all over North America." I frown at the thought that there are more women being treated like this. "And Nicolai wasn't the mastermind behind all of this either. There's some guy out there named Sterling who is funding and creating this madness."

My stomach rolls when I remember the taste of Nicolai's blood on my tongue. I have no remorse for killing Nicolai, but no matter what, I took someone's life today, and that's something I can never take back or undo. When we walk past another empty room of a recently liberated woman, I

immediately feel better that by me taking the life of an evil man, I was subsequently able to save the lives of many.

“We’ll find them all.” Ryker pulls me to his side and wraps his arm around me. “We will find this Sterling guy too.”

“Glad to hear you say that because I promised Jax that if one day he needs my help finding Sterling, I would be there no questions asked.” I bite my lip nervously as I can tell by the way Ryker looks at Jax that he isn’t a fan of the demon. I’m afraid he’ll be mad at me for making such a promise.

“After what he did today, I think it’s safe to say we owe him one.” Ryker leans down and kisses my head. “Although I’m still not happy he used hellfire on you.”

“He was created in one of these labs, Ryker, and he’s made it his life’s mission to find Sterling and kill him. He thought doing what Nicolai told him to do would bring him closer to that goal, and honestly, I don’t blame Jax for being willing to do anything to find and stop that man.”

I look inside the glass cell and find another woman on a ventilator, connected to all kinds of machines. “Look at her. I would probably do the same thing Jax did if it meant I could save them.”

Unfortunately, we can’t do anything to help the woman connected to the machines since don’t want to cause any further damage. The best we can do is wait for the cops to call in a medical team. Elias has already put a call into Noah to tell him what’s going on here. Noah then, in turn, called his wolf shifter contacts in Vancouver, and that’s who’s on their way here now. We didn’t want human cops and doctors sniffing around this place, but still, we’d rather not be present and have to answer a lot of questions.

“There’s still something we need to do before we can bring down the breeding program.” Ryker stops walking and looks down at me. “I want to do the mating ceremony as soon as we get home.”

I smile at him so big, it’s almost painful. “I couldn’t agree more.” I rise on my tippy toes and plant a soft kiss on his

mouth. “I can’t wait to be mated to you.”

“Me too.” He smiles back at me, but there’s also an odd look in his eyes when he looks down at me.

“What is it?”

“When you shifted—” he starts to say but is interrupted by Ranger coming around the corner with blood on his hands.

“Ranger!” I gasp before rushing down the hallway toward him. “What happened? Are you hurt?” I ask as I look him over, searching for the source of blood.

“It’s not mine.” His face is void of any emotions. “It’s hers.”

We look into the room he’s pointing to and through the open doors of what looks like an operating room or sorts. In the middle of the room in a single operating table with a lifeless woman lying there. Her glassy eyes stare blankly up at the ceiling.

“What happened to her?” Ryker asks as we move to the doorway, and now that we are closer, I see and smell the fresh blood coming from a large incision on her still swollen belly.

“They just left her here.” Ranger looks at the woman. “They cut out her baby and they just...left her here.”

“Oh, God.” I put a trembling hand over my mouth. “Where is the baby now?”

“They took it.” Ranger shakes his head and looks away from the lifeless body that lies before us. “She said it was a girl,” he adds before he turns and walks down the corridor without us. His head hangs low, and I can see from here his blood-covered hands are shaking.

WHEN WE LEAVE THE BUILDING, THERE IS NO SIGN OF RANGER. I’m worried about him and thinking of little else as we head toward the car they said they left a mile or two down the road. Everyone is quiet, and Ryker still hasn’t left my side. I get the

impression he has no intention of ever doing so again, and right now I'm okay with that.

I've never been so scared in my life as I was when I watched Ryker slump to the ground after the bullet ripped through his chest. I will forever be grateful for the fact shifters can heal fast. I know if Ryker had been human, he would have bled out instantly. Since the bullet was silver, he'll be a little sluggish for a few days, and he may not be able to shift until all the silver particles have cleared his system, but that's okay.

We're okay.

When we get to the car, we find Jax leaning against the bumper with his arms crossed in front of him. He lifts his head when he hears us nearing. Like the rest of us, he has dark circles under his eyes, and he looks exhausted. I know I haven't slept in... I don't actually know how long, but I know it's been too long, and with the threat lifted from the people I love and myself, I feel the exhaustion starting to settle in my body.

"Get everyone out okay?" Jax questions.

"Almost." I smile sadly when I think of the dead mom. "I hate these people."

"Don't have to tell me that." Jax gives a knowing look. I told Ryker about how Jax was a product of the breeding program, but I didn't tell him Jax's father is, in fact, Sterling. While I'm not keen on keeping secrets from Ryker, it's not my secret to tell.

"I know." I lean against the car next to him. I can here Ransom and Ryker talking to Ranger on the other side of the car. I sigh in relief, knowing Ranger is here and not off wandering the woods. "So, what's next for you?"

"I'm going to find my father," Jax announces, his voice full of determination. "And along the way, I'm going to take out as many of these fucking places as possible."

"Sounds like a good plan," I praise. "Let me know when you need help. I'll be there."

Jax looks at the ground and smirks. “You know, before I met you, I didn’t trust anyone. I mean, why should I? But now, when you say you’ll be there to help me, I believe you.”

“Of course.” I pat him on his shoulder. “That’s what friends are for.”

Jax’s violet eyes light up as he looks around to see if anyone was listening to what I said. “I told them we were friends!”

I laugh at this because who would have thought I would have made a friend out of all of this? I went in to be tortured and left with my torturer being an ally. “Never thought I would have a demon as a friend,” I joke.

“I never thought I would have a friend.” Jax smirks. “Thank you for that.”

“Only took a couple doses of hellfire for me to like you.” I smirk at him.

“I’m still impressed by you, Blondie, but now that I’ve seen you shift, I understand why you were able to survive the hellfire.” Jax gives me a look I don’t quite understand. It’s similar to the look Ryker was giving me before Ranger showed up covered in blood.

“What does that mean?” I question. “Did something else happen when I shifted?” I didn’t think anything special happened when I shifted. I figured all the weird looks I was given were because my wolf finally broke through.

“You don’t know?” Jax raises his dark brows in question.

“Know what?” Ryker asks when he comes around the car and stands next to Jax.

“You didn’t tell her she’s a white wolf? And the whole prophecy thing?” Jax looks at Ryker and cringes when he sees the disturbed look on Ryker’s face. “What? I thought you would have told her by now! It’s kind of important information.”

“I—” Ryker starts.

“Hold up.” I raise my hand to get them to stop talking. “When I shifted, I was a *white* wolf? Like from the story your mom told us about?” When I shifted, it didn’t even occur to me to see what color my fur was. That was the last thing on my mind at that point.

Ryker scratches the back of his neck before huffing out a breath. “I was going to wait until we got home before I told you. I figured you needed a couple of days to adjust to everything before I added *that* in...” Ryker looks me in the eye when he says, “You’re a white wolf, the first white wolf shifter to be born in centuries.”

I think back to the morning Margot told us the fable-like story about the white wolf. She had said, ‘*when the white wolf walks this Earth once more and finds her mate, so will the rest of us.*’ I honestly didn’t put much thought into it when Margot recited the tale, but now I’m starting to think I should have asked her more questions.

“Just because she’s a white wolf doesn’t mean the prophecy is true,” Remi interjects. “Okay, yes, technically she is *a* white wolf, and that is *very* shocking. But I don’t think that immediately makes her *the* white wolf.

“That’s true,” Ransom agrees with her, “And besides, Pru already *found* her mate, and nothing happened.”

“Exactly,” I nod at him as I push off the car and stand up straight. “You know what? I don’t want to deal with this right now. Can we please just go home?”

When I think of home, I think of Addison. I haven’t gotten a chance to call her and talk to her myself, but Elias has been in contact with Noah, so she knows I’m okay.

“Of course.” Ryker pulls me to him, and I rest my head against his chest. I don’t even care he’s still wearing his blood-soaked t-shirt. “Maybe we can contact Esme when we get back. If anyone is going to have more information about the prophecy it’s her.”

“That witch knows everything,” Elias sighs. “Sometimes I think she knows too much.”

“Is this the same witch who did the spell that bound your wolf?” Jax asks.

“The one and only.” I nod.

Jax lets out a low whistle. “Give her my regards. That was one hell of a powerful spell that even my hellfire couldn’t burn away.”

“Where will you go now, Jax?” Remi asks him. I don’t miss the look on her face when she looks up at the attractive demon. “Ever been to Montana?”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “And I don’t know where I’ll go yet. I have to chase down a couple leads, but I’m sure you’ll all see me again.”

“Can’t wait,” Ryker says dryly, causing me to elbow him in the ribs.

“You don’t have to lie, I know you’ll miss me.” Jax smirks at Ryker before he starts to back away from the group. He smiles and winks at me before saying. “See you later, Blondie.”

“Be safe, Demon Boy,” I reply.

And then he’s gone.

“Is it bad I want to be a demon so I can do that?” Remi asks, breaking the silence that fell over the group after he disappeared.

“Yes,” Elias grumbles from the front seat of the car.

“Is it the hellfire power or the demon thing you don’t approve of?” I hear her ask while she climbs into the back seat with Ranger.

“Both,” Elias replies.

I smile at them and then up at Ryker. “I’m still mad at you for putting your life at risk to find me... but thank you.”

“I’ll always find you.” He presses a kiss onto my forehead. “Let’s go home.”

PRUITT

I've been home for a week now and have been splitting my time between the Weylyns' house and Addison's. But no matter where I decide to spend the night, Ryker is there. He made it clear when we got back he wasn't letting me spend the night away from him again. And after spending a couple nights chained to a metal table, the idea of sleeping curled up against him sounded great to me.

Since I've been back, I've been waking up in the middle of the night with nightmares of Nicolai killing Ryker, and having nightmares is something I've never experienced before. Sure I've seen some scary movies that caused some unpleasant dreams, but the ones I've been having since I've been home have felt so real. Similar to when I was dreaming about the black wolf that ended up being Ryker, I feel like I'm truly living these dreams. I wake up yelling and drenched in sweat, but every time it happens, Ryker calms me down and holds me close until I fall asleep again. I feel terrible I'm waking him up every night, but I'm thankful he's there.

Right now, I'm standing in the middle of the empty living room of my childhood home, and in a few short weeks, it will be my home again.

Ryker didn't skip a beat when we got back. He jumped right into making plans with the contractors, and he even handed me his credit card and made the mistake of saying, "*Buy whatever you want.*" After he sees his billing statement, I'm sure he'll never say that again.

Oops.

This is also the first time I've been alone since we got back. Ryker is with Sawyer, apologizing for how he behaved after his best friend helped me. It took some convincing, but Ryker finally agreed with me and gave his friend a call. From what I've heard, Ryker is lucky his friend is willing to even sit down with him right now. If I had been talked to the way I hear Sawyer was, I would be a little hesitant to agree to it. I feel guilty I came between them, but I'm optimistic they will recover from all of this.

Ryker promised he would be back soon since we both agreed tonight was when we wanted to complete the mating ceremony. The full moon is tonight, and we don't want to have to wait another month. I'm excited but also a little nervous as well since I still don't have complete control over my wolf. Ryker convinced me to shift a couple nights ago so we could show Addison and Margot. But it took me over an hour to be able to shift back.

Margot was absolutely ecstatic when she saw I had a pure white coat. She, of course, believes it means I'm the wolf from the prophecy, but I'm still not convinced it's the case. The more we talked about the prophecy, the more we realized we don't really understand it. It says, "*so will the rest of us,*" but we aren't clear on what that means.

I'm walking across the room to measure the fireplace mantel when I hear a car pull up and footsteps make their way to the front door. I know by the sound of the steps it isn't Ryker. I meet the person at the door and swing it open before they have time to knock.

"Esmel!" I'm shocked to see the high priestess standing there. "What are you doing here?"

"I found it!" she cheers as she pushes past me and hurries into the house. "It took some digging and a pretty powerful locator spell, but I finally found it!"

"Found what?" I question, following behind her as quickly as I can. She moves around the house and finds her way into

the kitchen. It dawns on me she's been here before when my parents lived here.

She pulls a small, old book from her bag and carefully places it on the counter. The binding is torn and beat up, and the writing embossed on the leather cover is almost worn off at this point. "It's a book written by one of the oldest known wolf shifters. It's a brief history of how your species came to be. It's actually a very interesting read, but that's not what's important." She flips through the pages looking for something specific. "The important part is where they discuss the White Wolf. This book—the prophecy originated from this *very* book."

"What does it say?" I look between the book and Esme's obsidian eyes.

"Over the past three hundred years, this whole book has been reduced to a single sentence: '*When the white wolf walks this Earth once more and finds her mate, so will the rest of us.*' Generation after generation forgot what it really meant, and we were left to speculate and guess as to what the actual meaning was. And we did get some of it right, but it's so much more than we thought," she rambles with excitement.

"Esme, stop!" I put my hands on her shoulders, hoping she'll pause long enough to take a breath. "Just tell me what it says."

"It's in a different language, but I was finally able to figure it out. Basically, it recalls a time when mates weren't strictly based on fate like they are now. Instead mate bonds were created when two people, *regardless* of what species they were, truly fell in love. The writer talks about a demon and a wolf shifter falling in love and mating with each other." She pauses and looks at me, her face softening. "Pru, they were able to have children together."

"What happened then? Because that's not possible anymore." I shake my head. The whole point of Nicolai's breeding program was because all of this isn't possible.

"A curse happened," Esme explains, a look of awe and wonder on her face.

“A curse?”

“Yes. One of the first and most powerful witches to ever exist created a curse when her son fell in love with a wolf shifter, a *white* wolf shifter. She was all about keeping the bloodline pure, and when she heard they were going to mate with each other, she—for lack of a better saying—*freaked out*. She didn’t want her grandchildren to be crossbreeds and found a way to make it impossible.”

“By creating a curse that would only allow mating between the same species?”

“Exactly.” Esme nods.

“Okay...” I ponder what she’s saying. “I’m still confused about what this means for me or the whole white wolf thing?”

“You weren’t randomly selected to be the white wolf, Pruitt, this goes back generations. The curse requires that for the white wolf to exist again, the bloodline of the original white wolf had to be recreated, and by your grandparents meeting up, and subsequently, your parents, and then them creating you, recreated the bloodline.”

“So what you’re saying is, I can blame all of them for this?” I bite my lip to keep from laughing at the expression on Esme’s face. “Okay, I’m sorry. I won’t make a joke again.”

“If all of this is true...” She begins, but then her words trail off.

“Esme, if this is all true, then why hasn’t there been any interspecies mating yet? The prophecy says ‘*when the white wolf finds her mate*.’” I make little air quotes with my fingers when I recite the line from the prophecy. “I found my mate, and still, nothing has happened. Noah and Addison are very much in love, and they don’t see a mating aura around each other, and if anyone should, it’s them. They’ve waited so long to be together, and now you’re telling me there’s a chance they’ll *really* be able to?”

“I believe when the prophecy says she ‘*finds*’ her mate, it means when she is mated to her mate.” Esme rereads a part of

the book before nodding. “Yes, that’s what makes the most sense to me based on what I’ve read.”

“We’ll find out after tonight it’s all true.” And suddenly my nerves about tonight grow and my stomach drops. “No pressure.”

EVEN THOUGH I KNOW THE MATING CEREMONY ISN’T A wedding, I still want to look my best. I take my time curling my hair and applying my makeup. Tonight is something Ryker and I will look back on for the rest of our lives, and I want to think about how beautiful I felt when I walked outside to meet him.

We had agreed to meet on the back patio of the Weylyns’ house a few minutes from now, and together we will walk to the spot he’s chosen for us to complete the ceremony. I haven’t seen him since he left to see Sawyer, but when I called him to check in, he said they were good. I’m already stressed about my conversation with Esme and the mating ceremony, and I don’t have any room left to worry about Ryker and Sawyer’s friendship, so that was a weight lifted when I heard they were okay.

I decided I would wait to tell everyone about my conversation with Esme. I don’t want to get everyone’s hopes up if the prophecy ends up being the fairytale it sounds like it is. After learning about demons and vampires, an old prophecy and curse shouldn’t sound as far-fetched as it does to me, I know. For the people who are like Addison and Noah, in love but no chance of a future, I hope the prophecy is true. After all, Addison has been through, she deserves to be with the man she loves, even if it can only be for a short while.

“You look beautiful,” Addison says, appearing in the doorway of the room I’m getting ready in. “I know your mom and dad would give anything to be here with you tonight.”

“They are, though.” I smile and look out the window to the lake and forest that surrounds us. “They’re a part of everything

and everyone here. I've never felt more connected to them than I do now."

I still wish my memories of them could have been recovered, and I could remember what it was like before Nicolai had them killed. But with the stories and memories everyone has shared with me over this past month, in some ways, I feel like I do remember them, and for now, that's enough for me.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to bring you back here. I can't help but think I waited too long, and you missed out on time with Ryker." Addison walks into the room and helps zip up the navy blue dress I had picked for tonight.

"I don't know... I feel like we came back at the right time." I smile at her reflection in the mirror. I know she doesn't feel well, but she gathered the energy to be here tonight. "Addie, I never said it before, but thank you for giving up the life you could have had and protecting me instead. I know making that choice couldn't have been easy."

Addison stops fussing with my hair and meets my eyes in the mirror. "It was the easiest decision I've ever made. Pruitt, you are my greatest accomplishment, and it means everything to me I was able to watch you grow into the amazing woman you are today. If I could do it again, I would make the same choices. Every one I made led me to being able to raise you. And I will cherish every second I have left with you."

"Addie..." I sniffle before turning around and wrapping her thinning frame into my arms.

"Don't mess up your makeup," Addie whispers into my hair when she hugs me back.

"Too late."

After we embrace, Addison helps me fix my makeup and gives me one last scan before grinning in approval. I slip on a pair of nude heels, and we make out way downstairs.

I'm surprised when we get down there that no one is around. Everyone had said they wanted to see us off, but the kitchen and living room are silent.

“Where is everyone?” I ask Addison over my shoulder as I walk toward the back door. All the blinds on the big windows are closed, which is weird since they’re typically wide open, allowing everyone to enjoy the view. The hanging blinds on the back door are even closed tight.

I swing open the door and look outside. When I see what’s on the other side of the door, I freeze, and my heart skips a beat.

Ryker, who is wearing a simple black suit, is on one knee in front of me. Shocked and confused, I look behind me for Addison, but she’s no longer there.

“What is going on?” I ask Ryker as I take a step onto the patio. “What are you doing?”

“I realized a few things when you left me,” he starts. “First, I realized you are the strongest person I’ve ever known. You walked away from everyone you love to protect them, fully knowing you would have to endure unbearable pain at the hands of the man who killed your parents. I also don’t think I would have been able to be as strong as you were to survive hellfire. Secondly, I refuse to live in a world without you ever again. I already did it for fourteen years, and the three days you were gone this past week were some of the worst days of my life. Please, never sacrifice yourself again, because I won’t survive it.”

Ryker takes a deep breath. “And lastly, I realized I had forgotten you were raised as a human most of your life, and there were human traditions you were missing out on. I was selfish and assumed my traditions would be enough, but when I saw the designs of the wedding dresses you had made, I knew I was wrong.” Ryker digs in his suit jacket and pulls out a small jewelry box.

“Ryker!” I gasp in shock when he flips the lid of the box, and I see a large princess cut diamond staring back at me.

“You’ve been so willing to be part of the world I was raised in, but now I want to be part of yours. Will you do me the honor of being my mate and my *wife*?”

RYKER

I've never been more nervous than I am right now. I'm on one knee proposing to my mate.

I had put this plan into motion the second we touched down in Montana a week ago. I had called Addison and first asked for her permission, and she quickly burst into tears and said yes. My mom was immediately on board and was thrilled to be planning a wedding for the first time. My dad took a little bit more convincing but he eventually came around. Remington was pretty much on the same page as my mom. Since shifters never have weddings, she was excited to be part of one. My brothers don't understand why I want to do this since marriage is basically a piece of paper legally binding us, whereas the mating ceremony binds our souls together. I tried to explain to them it wasn't for me, it was for Pru, but I'm not sure it sunk in.

"Ryker, are you serious?" she whispers as she takes another small step forward.

"I've never been more serious. I want us bound together in every way possible, and a legal human marriage is one of those ways." Addison had warned me Pru would feel like I felt forced into doing this. But it couldn't be farther from the truth. "And I know for a fact you've always dreamt about your wedding, and I would hate to take that dream away from you. I want to be part of it."

"I want you to be part of it, too." She smiles as she drops to her knees in front of me.

“Good because I want to walk through this life as your mate and your husband.” I lift the ring up a little higher as I repeat my question. “Will you marry me, Pruitt Bailey?”

“Yes, Ryker, I will marry you!” she cries before she launches herself at me and wraps her arms around my neck. She laughs happily into my shoulder, and that sound alone is all I need to know it’s all worth it.

“Do you want the ring?” I chuckle back.

“Yes! Yes, please.” She pulls away and holds out her dainty left hand. I pull the ring from its box and carefully slip it onto her slender finger. The center stone I had picked out for her is the same cut as the one Genevieve used to wear, according to Addison—just a *lot* bigger. Yes, I may have overdone it, but I want only the best for my girl.

“It’s beautiful!” She holds her hands away from her so she can look at the ring from all angles. “I’m actually so excited to plan a wedding.”

“About that...” I lift her to her feet as I stand. “How do you feel about getting married right now?”

“Right now?” Her green eyes widen.

“Just through those trees over there, the pack and my family are waiting for us.” Mom and Remington have been working hard at setting up the outdoor ceremony all day today. It’s been hard to keep it all a secret, but I think we pulled it off.

“But I don’t have anything to wear.” She looks down at the blue dress she has on now.

“Addison figured you’d say that, she made you a little something.”

A HALF-HOUR LATER, I STAND AT THE END OF THE AISLE AND watch my beautiful mate walk toward me in the lace dress she had designed herself. Addison had been working on it in secret all week, and she did a remarkable job putting together Pru’s

dream dress. I've never seen her look more beautiful as she moves down the aisle with the setting sun behind her. A long veil flows down her back, and I'm happy she doesn't wear a veil that covers her face. I want to see every emotion cross her features when she takes in the ceremony we created for her.

The aisle is made of white flower petals, and lanterns line the walkway. The guests sit in white chairs on either side, and Remi worked hard hanging string lights in the branches of the tree I stand under. Long strands of flowers and paper lanterns also hang from the trees. For being so last minute, I'm amazed at what my family was able to accomplish, and the way Pru's eyes shine when she takes it all in, I know she likes it too.

Addison, who had walked her down the aisle, passes Pru off to me. I lean down and hug the woman who had been responsible for keeping Pru safe and alive all these years. I'll never be able to thank her enough for that. I take Pru's hand, and we stand in front of Esme, who had agreed to marry us.

"It took us a long time to get to this point, but we can all agree we could not be happier for these two amazing people," Esme addresses the pack and us. She gives a speech about how fate had brought us back together after all this time, but I'm not really listening to what she's saying. Instead, I get lost in Pruitt's eyes.

I knew this gorgeous girl would be my mate, but there is an excitement in knowing she will also be my wife.

"Ryker, do you take Pruitt to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death us do part?" Esme asks.

"I do," I answer without any hesitation.

"And Pruitt, do you take Ryker—"

"Yes, I do!" Pruitt interrupts, nodding enthusiastically, and everyone starts laughing.

Esme chuckles before smiling at both of us. "By the power vested in me by a website I found online, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!" she cheers.

I place both hands on Pru's waist before bringing my mouth down to hers.

The second our lips touch, the crowd behind us erupts into cheers and applause. Pru's arms snake around my neck and hold me close. She smiles against my mouth when we hear Ransom start howling, and everyone is laughing and joining in. Pru and I look up in time to watch almost everyone tilt their heads up to the sky in howls of joy.

I sweep Pruitt off her feet and carry her bridal-style down the aisle. The whole time I make my way down the flower petal-laced ground, I keep my eyes on my wife.

"One ceremony down," I whisper into her ear, and the heated look she gives me in response almost has me breaking into a sprint to the place I've set up for us, "one to go."

PRUITT

Ryker has set up a beautiful space with pillows and blankets on the dock behind our house. I don't know when he had time to set all of this up today, but he did an amazing job, and I couldn't have picked a better place for us to complete the mating ceremony. The full moon casts down on us, and the soft sounds of the water on the lake moving under us is peaceful. After the amazing wedding he had planned for us, I didn't think I could be any more in awe of him. But I was wrong.

"This is perfect." I look between him and the moon. "Everything today has been absolutely perfect, and I don't think I've ever been happier."

"That's all I ever want for you, Pruitt. To be happy and safe." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. I had left my long veil back with Addison before we retreated, so it didn't get dirty as we walked through the woods to get here.

"I can't believe we're married." I look down at both of our joined hands where our new rings sit. "I bet you lose that ring the first time you shift," I can't help but joke.

"Oh yeah, this thing will be gone within the week." Ryker chuckles. "I'll just go get a wedding band tattoo."

"I like that idea." I smile up at him. "Maybe I should get a tattoo too. I feel a little left out."

Ryker leans down and kisses my shoulder. "Don't, I love how perfect your skin is, and the only mark I want to see on it is *my* mark."

I shudder when he runs his fingertips down my spine. My backless dress gives him perfect access to the exposed skin there. I lay my hands on his chest and tilt my face up to his. There is intensity in his eyes when he brings his mouth down to mine. No matter how many times I touch Ryker, I never get used to the toe-curling electricity that shoots through my body when our skin meets. It's even more powerful when we kiss.

I take on the task of undoing his buttons on his dress shirt while he deepens the kiss. I never pull away to look at what I'm doing. Instead, I go completely on feel. I'm thankful he chose not to wear a tie tonight because I don't want to waste my time undoing it.

When my fingers brush against his hard stomach, I feel him shiver beneath my touch. While my hands work on taking off his shirt, Ryker's works on taking all the pins from my hair, and one by one, my hair falls in soft curls down my back.

Once I have the buttons undone on his shirt, I reluctantly pull away from his mouth and push his shirt and jacket off his shoulders. I will never get tired of looking at all of his tattoos. Every time I see him shirtless, I swear I find a new one. I lean forward and press my lips into the center of his chest, where the tattoo with my birthday sits.

"Loosen the corseting at the bottom," I tell him as I turn around so he can untie the ribbons at my lower back and butt. I love my dress, but I want it off as soon as possible.

Once the ties are loosened, Ryker is able to push the thin straps off my shoulders, and the whole dress falls down around my feet. I carefully step out of it and step toward him fully nude, since I didn't wear any undergarments under my dress. I watch as he pulls the zipper down on his slacks, and soon, he's standing in front of me naked as well.

I don't feel the wave of self-consciousness I usually do when I stand in front of him this time. Ryker was right when he said as a shifter, you get used to nudity fairly quick.

"Come here," he growls at me before he reaches down and lifts me up around his waist. I wrap my legs around his torso

and guide his mouth to mine in a passionate kiss. His strong hands dig into my thighs, where he holds me up against him.

I hold on tight when Ryker lowers us onto the bed of pillows and blankets he had set up. Instead of lying us down, he stays sitting up, and I find myself straddling him. Ryker breaks the connection between our lips to kiss a trail down my neck and then to my shoulder. And like every time he does it, electric shocks radiate from every spot he scrapes his teeth against.

The combination of the cool wind and Ryker's touch causes my nipples to harden. I moan and jerk when the pad of thumb tweaks one. The sensation causes my hips to tilt forward against him, and that's when I feel his hard arousal against my thigh. Feeling bold, I snake my hand down between our two bodies and lightly stroke him with the palm of my hand. When Ryker hisses out a breath, and his eyes close tight, I figure out fairly quickly what makes him moan, and I find pleasure in knowing I'm doing that to him.

I'm no longer able to stand the distance between us—I want him touching every inch of me. But more importantly, I want him inside of me. I raise up on my knees and guide him into my hot center. We moan in unison, and I throw my head back as my body sinks down onto him.

“*Fuck.*” Ryker hisses into my ear when he's fully settled inside of me. We move together in perfect rhythm, not once do we fall out of it. I match each one of his moves as he arches into me.

Ryker pushes my hair from my right shoulder, and once again, I feel his teeth press lightly into the tender skin there, but this time, his teeth are a lot sharper, and I know his fangs are out and ready to mark me. And then I feel my own fangs brush against my tongue when I clench my teeth together.

“Do it,” I urge him.

He kisses the spot softly before he sinks his fangs into the spot where my shoulder and neck meet. The pain is sharp and shooting, but it quickly goes away, and only a warm sensation is left. I freeze for a moment and shudder against him as the

warmth spreads throughout my body. Ryker leaves his mouth there a second more before he pulls away and tenderly licks the wound with his tongue.

“Your turn,” he whispers into my ear, his voice husky with desire.

I run my tongue over my sharp fangs and try to push down the nerves. At his tender urging, I lean down and copy his actions. First, I kiss the spot gently before sinking my fangs into his flesh. His blood rushes into my mouth, and I expect to be disgusted by the taste, but shockingly, I don't taste the coppery flavor I was expecting. It tastes like *him*.

Ryker stiffens up for a split second but quickly relaxes when the pain of the bite goes away. I lick away the blood just as he did when I retract my fangs.

The air around us starts to hum with energy when I lean back to look at him. At first, I swear it's the moonlight playing tricks on my eyes, but I quickly realize what it actually is. The mating aura that has always surrounded Ryker is growing and expanding all around us, and with it, a blanket of warm air falls over us, making my skin tingle.

The power grows strong and makes the air thick with magic. The comforting warmth that spreads over us grows hotter by the second. When I look into Ryker's eyes, I expect to find his usual blue ones, but instead, his wolf's golden ones shine back at me. I don't have long to wonder if my eyes have also shifted into my wolf form because another, more intense wave of power rushes over me and causes me to throw my head back and yell out. Ryker's fingers dig roughly into my hips, and I swear I hear him shout, but the rushing sound of the energy around us muffles any other noise.

Suddenly, the glow that had been growing around us explodes with a bright flash of light. There is so much power behind it; I see the leaves of the trees blow and sway in the rush of wind.

After everything stills around us, I look back at Ryker and find the mark I had made on his shoulder is glowing gold, the same color as the mating aura that is no longer around him or

us. The bite glows for a second longer before it fades into his skin.

Panting, I collapse against his chest. I feel his large protective arms wrap around me, and I hold him close. My wolf is the most content she has ever been since I've been aware of her.

I would be lying if I didn't also find gratification in knowing Ryker is officially mated to me. No more can someone try to come between us because we are bound to each other and each other only.

"We're mates," he says softly into my ear.

"We're *married*," I tell him back.

WHEN WE WALK INTO THE WEYLYNS' HOUSE THE NEXT morning, we are shocked to see everyone sitting in the living room waiting for us. I'm even more shocked to see Addison, Noah, and Esme there. The second the front door closes behind us, everyone jumps from their seat and starts talking over each other, their voices becoming increasingly louder.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us about the book Esme found!" Margot shouts.

"I—" I am cut off when Remi marches closer.

"That would have been good information to know!" She puts her hands on her hips with an annoyed huff.

"I'm sorry," I tell the group. "I thought it would be better to wait to tell you. I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up in case it didn't end up coming true."

I haven't even had a chance to tell Ryker yet, and I can tell from the look on his face he is completely lost on what we're talking about. I explain to him what Esme had found in the book with the original script that elaborated more on the meaning of the prophecy and the bloodline requirement. He's a little upset I didn't tell him before the mating ceremony.

“She didn’t want to add any more pressure to you,” Ransom jokes. “It would have been awkward if you couldn’t have...*performed* properly will all *that* stress.”

“Ransom James!” Margot scolds before slapping the back of her youngest son’s head. “I swear, sometimes I wonder who raised you.”

I shake my head at him and turn my attention back to Ryker. “Like I said, I wasn’t sure if it was true, and I don’t understand why everyone is up in arms over it. Did something happen?”

“You could say that...” Addison drawls. I notice an odd look pass between her and Noah. “Last night, Noah could suddenly see the mating aura around me—it just *appeared*, and as of this morning, we are mated.”

Everyone in the room is silent as they look back at me. I stand there in shock as I process what I’m hearing.

“Holy shit, you *really* are the white wolf!” several exclaim in unison.

THE SOUND OF OUR FAMILIES LAUGHING AND TALKING FROM the upper patio fills my ears while I stare at the lake. I stand in the same place on the dock where I had my first kiss with Ryker. It feels like yesterday I found out I was Ryker’s mate and the truth about my past. But at the same time, it feels like a lifetime ago.

I smile when I feel Ryker’s arms wrap around me and pull me back against his chest. I think about all the things we have had to overcome to get to this point. We fought for our love, and even when people and things worked against us, we found our way back to each other. And now that we know the White Wolf Prophecy has come true, our love has granted others the chance of finding love. I can only hope people like Addison and Noah will be able to be as happy as I am with my mate and they will be able to know how amazing it is to find the person meant for them.

Ryker kisses my temple and whispers, “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

I will never get tired of hearing those three simple words come out of his mouth. Even though he shows me on a daily basis how much he loves me, there is still something special in hearing him say it. I make a vow to myself that I will tell him how much I love him and how much I cherish our time together as often as possible because you never know what life is going to throw at you.

If Addison’s diagnosis has taught me anything, it’s that you never have as much time as you think or want. So I will hold him close. I will tell him and show him how much I love him every day, and I will enjoy every second of my crazy, wonderful life with him.

Thank you for reading *WOLF BOUND*

Keep reading for a sneak preview of Ranger and Winslow’s story in *SOUL BOUND*!



What did you think of *WOLF BOUND*?

If you could spare a few minutes, it would be greatly appreciated if you could leave a quick review on the website you purchased this book from. Your feedback is helpful to other readers and I would love to hear your thoughts on Pruitt and Ryker’s story. Thank You!

SOUL BOUND

“YOU’VE BEEN VERY QUIET DURING OUR GROUP DISCUSSION today, Winslow. Wouldn’t you like to share?” Dr. Beverly asks from across the circle of chairs, her *handy-dandy* blue pen at the ready to write down everything I say.

Which I’m sure she’ll immediately relay to my parents.

Dr. Beverly showed up a few days ago with a new haircut. She keeps saying she thinks it’s edgy and chic, but if you ask me, her box-dyed blonde hair looks like it lost a fight with a lawnmower. And lying has never been my strong suit, so when she asked for my opinion, I told her exactly that.

It did not go over well.

“Nope, I’m good,” I tell her with a smile I hope comes across as friendly and not homicidal.

“The programs here work because we share our problems and thoughts with the group.” She looks around at the other patients and gives them a reassuring nod.

It’s not entirely shocking when half of them refuse to meet her eyes, as a mass majority of the patients in this facility struggle with eye contact. I know for a fact that Nora—or Nutty Nora, as I endearingly named her—believes that eye contact is how the demons get in. She had to be sedated when she saw that my eyes are two different colors.

“I would like for you to share, Winslow.” Dr. Beverly’s voice is still calm, but I can see how her smile tightens, and her botox-filled forehead pulls slightly that she’s growing irritated with my lack of participation during her group sessions.

Okay, lady...you asked for it.

I stand and place my hands on my hips with a sigh. “Hi, my name is Winslow, and I see dead people. No, wait! I’m Sorry. My bad. I forgot what support group I was at for a second, I’m just in so many here at Cresthill Psychiatric that I have trouble keeping them straight. Let me start again. Hi. My name is Winslow, and I’m a drug addict,” I cheerfully announce. This isn’t like a narcotics anonymous meeting where everyone greets you back. I don’t even technically have to introduce myself, but I get a kick out of it.

I’ve been here for going on two months now, so at this point, it’s the little things like this that get me through my days.

“Like everyone else in this group, I self-medicated with drugs. Not that what I have can be fixed with medication, but that’s another problem altogether that we don’t have to get into right now.” I watch as everyone looks to the doctor. I know I only have about twenty seconds before she calls the orderly, and I’m removed from the group, so I start talking fast, so I can get it all out. “Also, like many of you, I wasn’t sent here by choice. But unlike many of you, and I say this with love because I don’t think there’s anything wrong with getting help, I don’t need to be here. Yes, I see dead people, but they’re *real*, unlike the aliens with the laser eyes that Daniel sees.” I smile over at the middle-aged bald man who’s so overmedicated he’s staring at his shoes. “Poor guy,” I say with a shake of my head.

“Anywho, thanks for letting me share. You’re right Bev, I should do this more often, I feel *so* much better.”

Right on cue, the door buzzes open and Martin, the orderly, comes marching toward me. Martin is actually a cool guy and the only orderly who doesn’t treat the patients here

like complete shit. His dark gaze narrows when he looks at me, and I know I'll be getting a lecture on my way back to my room about how he's disappointed in me for not taking the program seriously.

"Let's go Montgomery." Martin sighs, motioning for me to come with him. He has a thing where he calls everyone by their last names. Dr. Beverly hates it. There's a reason she goes by her first name and it's not so patients will feel more relaxed around her. It's because her last name is *Pincock*, and it's safe to say some unflattering nicknames come with that.

I give the doctor a quick curtsy before I follow Martin out. He's silent most of the way to my room, but he eventually breaks down.

"Winslow, as much as I like to see the doc get her panties in a twist, you need to stop. If you'd only put the same effort into the program as you do in pissing her off, you'd be out of here in no time," he tells me as he opens another metal door with his keycard. "You'll feel so much better once you accept the help that everyone here is offering."

"Martin, I like you, but I'm never getting out of this place. It's cute that you think so, though."

My parents made sure I'd never see outside of these cold, sterile walls again. I guess having a daughter who believes she can see dead people is a real public image disaster.

Martin leads me down the hallway where my room is in, the squeaking of his sneakers echoing off the empty walls. When he pauses at my door, he turns to look at me. I can see the pity written across his face. "You know why you're in here Montgomery. You need to stop blaming your parents for all this and accept responsibility for your actions."

He holds the door open for me, motioning with his head for me to enter the small, jail cell-like room. I pause and narrow my eyes at him. "How are you enjoying your new salary, Martin? If you'd like, I can give you my parent's address for you to send them a thank you card. I'm sure they'd appreciate knowing you were able to buy the car you always wanted." His face whitens, and his eyes widen, but he doesn't

say anything. Instead, he grabs my upper arm and pulls me into my room.

Before he can slide the metal door shut, I give him a knowing smile. “Oh, by the way, *Little Goose*, your mom says hello.”

We both know his mother used to call him that when he was growing up, and we also know that she’s been dead for fifteen years.



I USED TO WISH ON SHOOTING STARS AND FOUR-LEAF CLOVERS THAT I could spend time alone. Between my parents, the staff hired to care for me, and the weekly ghosts that haunted me, I was never left alone. Now, I’m alone more often than I’d like. I guess they were right when they said, “*careful what you wish for*” because the amount of time I spend alone here is enough to make me truly go batshit crazy.

I’ve done every puppy puzzle available in this joint, and the only books here are self-help nonsense written by whack-jobs. And because I’m so freaking bored in here, I’ve read every single one of them.

It’s been two months since I was ripped out of bed at the shelter in the middle of the night by men I didn’t recognize. Two months since my parents had me drug me in here kicking and screaming, two months since I watched my spiteful mother smirk at me as the metal doors slammed behind me, and two months of listening to the patients cry and wail all night long, keeping me awake most nights.

I always try to go to bed early, hoping that by the time the screaming starts, I’ll have already slept for a couple of hours. But tonight, the cries started earlier than usual, and I’ve been awake, just staring at the opposite wall for an hour.

I'm wondering what the original paint color of the walls used to be since they've now turned a yellowish color when a chill runs down my back. The hairs on my arms rise and my skin breaks out in goosebumps.

I know what's coming before I see them. This isn't the first time this has happened, it's not even the first time this week that I've experienced this, but I was hoping I was going to have the night off.

With a huff, I roll off the bed. The mattress springs creak and groan under my shifting weight. The room has already dropped thirty degrees by the time I'm standing in the middle. I shiver and reach for the sweater that's thrown over the chair, even though I know the extra layer of clothing will do little to help.

I scan the room, waiting for him or her to show themselves. Sometimes this can take a while. It takes a lot of energy for a spirit to make themselves visible, and time to build up the strength. But I can tell this one is strong by how fast this is all happening. The temperature drop is usually a gradual thing, but I can already see my breath in front of my face just after a minute.

"Hello?" I whisper, just in case there's someone in the hallway who can hear me. I see something flicker from the corner of my eye and spin around, but nothing is there. *Yet.*

When I turn back, I glance at the mirror bolted to the wall and notice that a layer of frost has already formed there and when I check the window, I see the same thing. They can rarely make the room so cold ice forms, but it would appear this spirit is strong enough.

I anxiously rub at the scars on my wrist and shift back and forth on my feet, waiting for him or her to show up. My fingers feel numb and stiff and my teeth chatter from the cold. The sound of squeaking draws my attention back to the mirror, and I see the word HELP has been written across the frosted glass.

"Help you how?" I ask, shaking my head in confusion as I step closer to the mirror. "I'm stuck in here, so I don't know

how much help I'll be to you.”

I watch in fascination as another word is written across the mirror, followed by two more. I've never had a ghost write me a message asking for something. For the most part, they wander around, wailing about not being able to find their family or not understanding why they're there. I typically just help them accept their new reality and encourage them to move on, but not this spirit. This one's asking for something more than I can offer.

I reread the message on the glass and frown. Sometimes, it's hard for the spirits to communicate clearly with the living. Their messages are occasionally all garbled and not in the right order. It's not very often that I can actually understand what they want.

I spin around the still empty room and ask, “I don't understand what you want from me, is that a person or a place?”

When I look back to the mirror again, I find a woman in a bloodied hospital gown looking back at me. Her eyes, like all spirits, are a milky ice blue. She never blinks but her head cocks to the side as if she's just realizing I can see her standing there. Her golden hair is stringy and knotted and strands hang in her face. Her lips have lost all pigment and blend in with her pale complexion.

When I feel a presence behind me, I whirl around to find her now standing behind me.

“Jesus Christ!” I gasp, clenching my chest with a shaking hand. “Not cool lady.” I narrow my eyes at her. I've seen a lot of spirits in the past ten years, but she takes the cake for the creepiest. It's not very often that I see a spirit look this...*dead*. Their eyes are always like hers, but they never look like a walking corpse the way she does.

“Help...” she whispers in a hoarse voice.

“I can't. I'm stuck in here.” I shake my head and point to the locked door. “Do you want to talk about it? I'm sure you're ready to move on—”

“No!” she snaps, her expression turning angry.

“Okay, so no talking. That’s fine with me. Honestly, after the past couple of months I’ve had, I’m starting to think talking about our feelings is overrated.” I back up a foot or so away as I babble, just in case she isn’t *friendly*.

“Help me,” she pleads, closing the distance I just put between us.

Great.

“I don’t understand what you need me to do; your message I don’t understand it.” I look over my shoulder and see the message has started to fade, her letters barely visible. “Is that a person? A place?” I point at what’s left of her writing.

“Help me!” she wails, her hoarse voice cracking. “Go to him and he’ll help you find her.”

“Find who?” I ask, feeling bad that I’m just asking more questions and not helping in the least.

“My baby,” she sobs, gripping the bloodied gown over her abdomen. “They took her. They took my baby from me. He promised he’d help me find her. Please help me. Find *him*.”

My heart breaks for the woman standing in front of me. She probably doesn’t fully understand what has happened to her, and on top of that, she’s missing her child.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to find your baby. Or how I’m supposed to find *him*. Him who?”

The woman points a boney finger at the mirror. “*Him*.”

So, the words she had written out were a person, *and* a place. The last word is Montana, so I was starting to think it was a location, but...

“Who the *hell* is Ranger Weylyn?”

To be continued...

THE WHITE WOLF PROPHECY, BOOK TWO

COMING FALL 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have to thank my family for supporting me, not only in my writing endeavor but in everything I do. Thank you for letting me ramble on about vampires and wolf-shifters for months. Even though I'm sure you all get tired at times of hearing about my wild ideas.

Huge thanks to Gina, my editor, for being my sounding board and holding my hand throughout this whole crazy process. I couldn't have done it without you!

Lastly, thank you to my readers. I really appreciate that you took a chance not only on this book but on me. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kayleigh lives with her family in Denver Colorado, just two hours away from some of the best skiing in the world. A luxury completely lost on her considering she avoids snow at all costs. When she's not working as an esthetician, she can be found in front of her computer. She's most likely looking at funny animal videos on Facebook instead of actually writing, but she'll eventually get around to it (usually around 3 o'clock in the morning since that's when creativity strikes).

Paranormal romance is one of her favorite genres and after reading a couple *hundred* books where men tear off their shirts and howl at the moon, she decided to write her own. *Wolf Bound* is her debut novel, but don't worry, there's a lot more to come!

