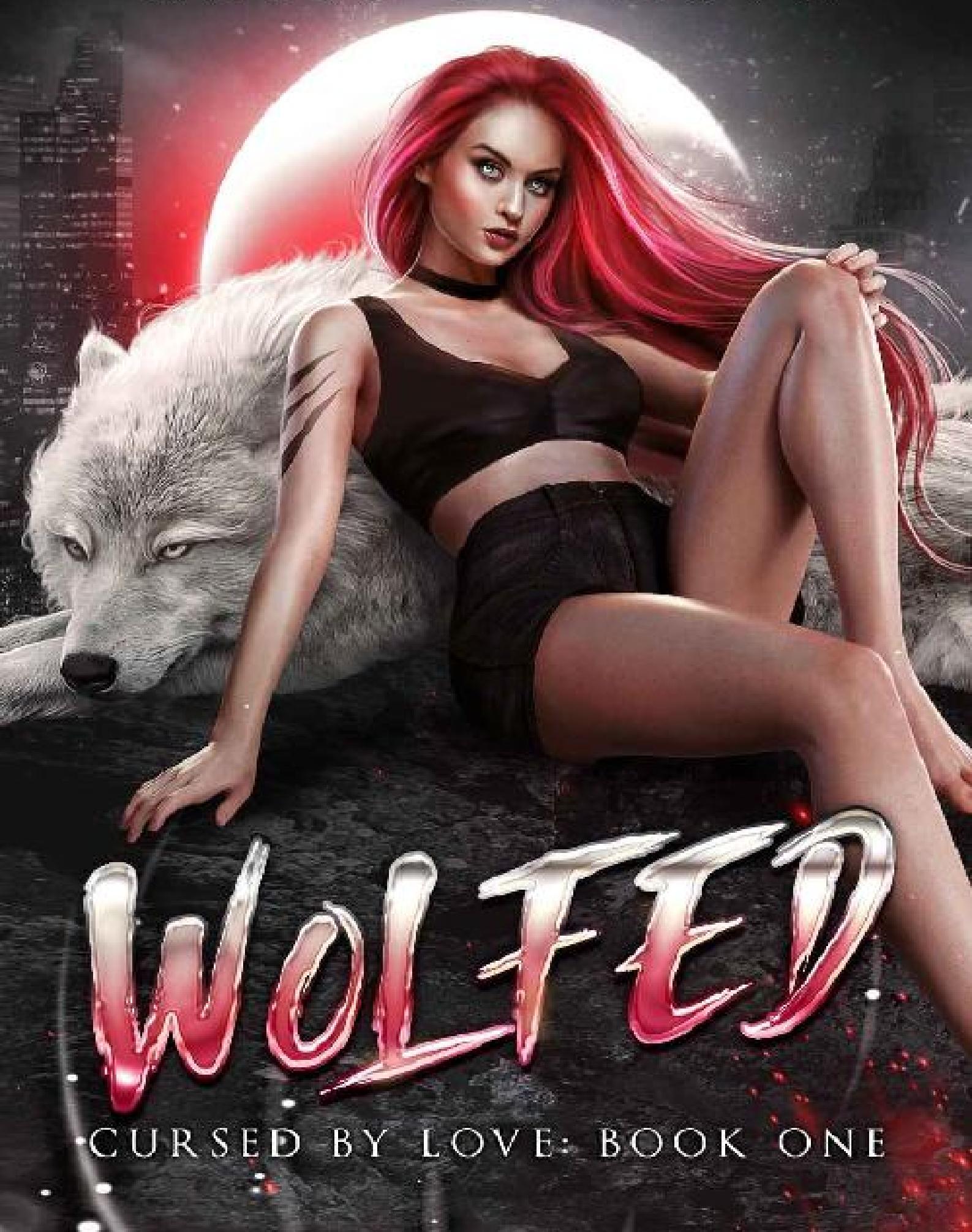


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LEIA STONE



WOLFED: CURSED IN LOVE

BOOK ONE

LEIA STONE

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ONE

I finished wiping down the bar and then walked to the back office to clock out.

“See you tomorrow, Ronan.” I peeked my head into my boss’ office. It was three a.m. and fatigue was pulling at my limbs. Ronan was leaned over a stack of invoices, glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he stroked his red bushy beard.

“Night, lass. Be safe,” he called out in his thick Irish accent.

I tapped my purse and the Walther P22 that I carried. “Always am.”

Ronan was a motorcycle-driving, forty-five-year-old buff dude who drank more scotch than he did water. He was like a father to me, especially considering I never knew my own father. My mom and Ronan grew up together and had known each other since kindergarten. He always checked in on our family to make sure things were okay. It was just me and my mom and our little house on Lake Pend Oreille in Sandpoint, Idaho. Sandpoint was basically a tourist stop for out-of-towners and “locals” coming up from Coeur d’Alene and Spokane. It had a San Diego beach vibe without all the parking issues and nineteen-dollar margaritas.

I’d started out cleaning tables at the Rusty Spoon when I was sixteen, but this January I’d turned nineteen and Ronan let me bartend.

The tips were way better.

When I stepped outside into the cool night air, I hopped on my bike and pulled up the kickstand. My mom owned the little house on the corner of Larch Street and 3rd Ave. She'd bought it twenty years ago for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but with the hot market we were in now she could probably get half a million for the tiny two-bedroom. As if I'd ever let her sell. I wanted to be buried in that beach house.

I pedaled past McDuff's and waved to Nik, who was just getting off his shift.

"Hey, beautiful. Good tips tonight?" he hollered.

"Not bad!" I called back as I rode by.

Nik was the bartender of McDuff's; we flirted often but nothing ever happened. He was a manwhore and I didn't mess with those. Even now there was a blonde waiting for him by his car. I shook my head and chuckled.

Riding past Bonner General Hospital was usually the highlight of my night. I always liked to peer inside in an attempt to see something exciting. I once saw a woman running inside with a bloody thumb in a bag. I'd always loved those ER shows; it was part of what inspired me to apply to veterinary school. I loved animals more than people and didn't faint at the sight of blood, so becoming a vet was a given. Slowing my bike as I passed the hospital, I gazed through the windows, but other than some people sitting in the lobby with throw-up buckets, there was nothing cool.

Lame.

I was about to race on home from there when I saw a trail of blood that left the sidewalk and trickled into the woods behind the hospital. I skidded to a stop, leaving a black tire streak on the clean concrete.

The fern bushes and grasses were all mashed down as if someone had stumbled in there.

Holy crap.

Was today the day I actually saw a gunshot wound or something cool like that? Crime in Sandpoint was pretty nonexistent, and I didn't wish harm on anyone... but what I

wouldn't give to see something really gnarly. There was probably something wrong with me that I didn't shy away from gore. I just thought the human body was so fascinating. Biology was my favorite subject in high school, and dissecting frogs didn't bother me one bit.

A moan came from the woods and I froze, swallowing hard as the hairs on my arms stood straight up. Okay, this just got real.

“H-hello?” I called into the woods, and an injured whine called back almost immediately.

Was it an animal? That got me moving. Humans were okay mostly, but animals were pure-hearted creatures that I would take my chances with over a human any day. Parking my bike at the edge of the sidewalk, I pulled out my gun and kept it loosely at my side, finger off the trigger. Even though Sandpoint was considered semi-liberal for Idaho, everyone I knew carried a gun. It was like having a cell phone, you just didn't go anywhere without it.

Stepping off into the woods beside the hospital, I did a mental sanity check. Was I really following a trail of blood into the woods? Yes. Was this a smart thing to do? No.

Eh, I had a gun. What could go wrong?

“I'm not going to hurt you, but I do have a gun in case you try to attack me,” I told the dark empty woods. Human or animal, I wouldn't hesitate to shoot if my life was threatened.

That whimper came back to me and it was definitely *not* human. Crap. Did I really want to run up on an injured cougar right now? Bears didn't whimper, and local hunters were usually good about tracking down their kills, but maybe one got away.

“Don't bite me or I'll finish you off!” I told the dark trees. I should probably call for help; it was three in the freaking morning and if I got attacked no one would know. But I'd left my phone in my purse, which was hanging on my bike.

The next whine came from my left and I scurried that way, scanning the ground as my eyes adjusted to the moonlight. It

was full, luckily, and bright enough for me to see the—

“A wolf,” I gasped as my gaze fell on the magnificent creature.

He was huge and grey, but the coloring was so light it was almost a silverish white which gave his fur dimension. He was panting hard, and a wound at his back leg was bleeding freely.

“Shit.” I stepped closer and his lips peeled back from his teeth.

I pulled out my gun and pointed it right at him and he stopped.

Smart wolf.

My mind raced a mile a minute. Did I shoot him and put him out of his misery or try to get him some help? As messed up as it sounded, it was encouraged to cull the wolf population here in Idaho. They were reducing the population of elk and deer, which was frowned upon. It was something as an animal lover I didn’t agree with.

Wolves didn’t die from leg wounds though, right? It looked like clean puncture wounds. Maybe another animal had bitten it? But the flesh wasn’t hanging off, so it could be repaired. I considered calling Dr. Gassly and seeing if he would stitch him up but dismissed the thought immediately. Gassly wouldn’t treat a wild wolf; he would probably say it had rabies.

“Dammit,” I growled as the situation tore at my heart. I couldn’t kill a wolf. Wolves were freaking badass. Bears too. Deer carried Lyme disease so I was totally okay busting a cap in their asses, but wolves... *no*. I couldn’t, wolves were like giant puppies with rage issues.

My gun was for idiot drunk male humans, not injured wolves. Beautiful wolves with golden honey eyes like this one deserved to live. I reached out and the wolf froze.

“*Don’t bite me,*” I told him, and touched the fur on his back with my fingers. If I could just test his nature, maybe if he were docile, I could...

He snapped at me and I withdrew my hand, shoving my gun in his face. “I’m trying to help you!”

He looked at the gun and growled.

Okay, maybe this wasn’t the best way to get him to trust me.

Don’t be stupid, Averly, I told myself as I put the gun down in the grass.

The wolf tracked my movements and I found it odd that he was so responsive. Genius wolf.

“Friendly neighborhood bartender Averly here,” I told him and reached out with my free hand again.

He stilled, but let me rake my hands over his uninjured back.

Hmm. He was pretty docile when I wasn’t waving a gun at him. “I wonder if you’d let me give you stitches,” I mused aloud. “I’ve done hundreds on a banana and I’m getting really good.”

I might only be one year into my schooling but I was a quick study. He cocked his head to the side as if this interested him or he found it humorous or something. But that was stupid because wolves didn’t understand English. This wolf must have been a pet; he was way too comfortable around humans, but that might work in his favor. It was frowned upon, but I knew a few people up in Bonner’s Ferry who kept wolves as pets and bred them with dogs. Wolfdogs fetched a lot of money around here, maybe he was one of those.

I was just figuring out how I could get him to my house when leaves crunched behind me. The hackles on the back of the wolf raised into a mohawk, and his lips peeled back as a low growl rumbled in his chest.

Oh crap.

I yanked my hand back and turned, while simultaneously reaching for my gun on the grass. My eyes fell on another wolf coming right for me. He had black fur and a menacing snarl, and shock rippled through my body. The wolf sailed through

the air and landed on top of me, knocking me backward and out of reach of my gun. My head cracked against something sharp and hard, and dizziness washed over me. The wolf walked over me like I was a minor inconvenience as he tried to get to the grey injured wolf behind me. There was blood on his lips and I wondered if *he* had been the one to attack my new grey wolf friend. An unexplainable possessive urge reached up inside of me and I lifted my leg at the last second, connecting with the black wolf's gut and flinging him sideways. He was giant and I wasn't that good of a kicker, so all I did was force him to awkwardly land on me.

Awesome.

Growls and snarls rang throughout the forest and the hairs on my arms stood.

My head whipped to the side and I gasped. *Holy crap, there were more.* An entire pack.

The black wolf leapt off of me and lunged for my new friend. I threw my arm up to punch it in the face, but instead I just inserted it into his snarling mouth. The sound of crunching bone registered before the sharp hot pain ripped through my right forearm. An ear-splitting scream tore from my throat as the wolf fully bit down on my arm. I reached up with my free hand and punched him in the side of the neck. He detached from my arm and leaped onto the grey injured wolf.

Mother fricker!

He bit me. A wild wolf bit me. Now I'll probably get rabies. Peering out into the open forest, I saw half a dozen shadows stalking forward.

Okay, this had gone far enough.

This little furry bastard was about to cross the rainbow bridge. My love of animals only extended to ones that didn't bite me or attack others. Rolling over, careful not to move my injured arm too much, I scooped up my gun and clutched it tightly in my left hand. Reaching over with my injured arm, I winced at the pain it caused to cock it backward.

The black wolf was tearing into the grey wolf; now I was going to have to shoot them both. One to kill the rabid psycho, the other to put the nice grey wolf out of his misery.

I stood on shaky legs and hovered over the vicious snarling creatures.

“Get off of him, dog breath!” I screamed, but nothing happened. The movement behind me sped up and I knew I had little time before the entire pack descended on me and ripped me to pieces.

Reaching out, I snapped my right boot forward and felt the satisfying crunch of the asshat’s ribs. The attacking wolf yelped in pain and fell to the side. Wasting no time, I relied on my gun training with Ronan and his buddies. I aimed and popped five shots off right into the wolf’s chest. He went down like a sack of bricks, limp and no longer breathing.

I had about two seconds to feel victory before the pain in my arm suddenly ratcheted up ten levels. A moan of agony escaped me and I dropped my gun. It felt like someone had just poured sriracha in my wound.

I fell to my knees before the injured grey wolf and he looked at me with those golden honey eyes. There was an intelligence there, and concern for me. His brows drew together like a human’s would. I felt bad he’d been attacked again, and that I couldn’t protect him. I didn’t want him to die like this.

“I’m sorry,” I huffed as blackness danced at the edges of my vision. He was going to bleed out and I was going to faint from this never-ending pain. I’d never been good with pain; admittedly I was a bit of a drama queen. I once stubbed my toe on the couch and went to urgent care, thinking it was broken. It just needed ice. But this was *epic* level pain. Pain that mothers must feel right before pushing out a baby; this pain was intolerable.

I wanted to die.

Howls rose up in perfect harmony throughout the forest and I prayed someone from the hospital would investigate

those gunshots before this pack of wolves ate me. I still had five rounds in the gun if I could just get to it. The wolves were circling us and snarling with their lips pulled back and saliva glistening from their teeth. Me and my wolf buddy were about to become dinner.

The faster they circled, the more intense the pain became. Sweat drenched my clothes as I wailed into the night, rolling closer and closer to the grey wolf until I was tucked up against him. The moment my skin touched his fur, it was like a balm had been placed over my wound and the blackness at the edges of my mind retreated for the slightest second.

The wolves paused for a moment as well, then they stepped closer, growls and snarls ripping from their throats as they circled.

My breath came out in ragged gasps; the grey wolf panted. I panted, he whined. I wailed, my pain, his pain. For a moment, I was so delirious I didn't know where I began and he ended. The blood from my wound dripped onto his injuries as I clung to his fur in fear.

This wasn't how I wanted to die. This wasn't how anyone wanted to die, but when I looked up into honey-colored eyes, a peace fell over me. At least I wasn't alone, we were in this together and we would die together. I died protecting something—his life had value and I'd done my best to honor it.

One of the pack wolves lunged for me and the grey wolf leapt to his feet with surprising strength. Baring his teeth, he stepped over my body so that I was tucked under him in a protective gesture. He snarled at the pack circling us, and whines filled their throats one by one as they backed away, heads and tails down.

What the...?

When the grey wolf looked back down at me, his eyes were... *glowing*?

He licked the bite mark on my arm and then the pain reached such epic levels that it killed me. There was no way I

could survive this amount of agony. Everything went black and I surely died.

TWO

“Averly! Come get breakfast before my shift.” My mom’s voice shredded into my sleep and woke me from the gnarliest dream I’d ever had.

The *wolves*. The blood. I shivered. No more horror movies. With a yawn, I rolled over in bed and winced when I felt pain in my arm.

No way, it couldn’t be—

“Real?” I looked down at the scabbing animal bite marks on my right arm. *Holy crap*. That really happened. My clothes were the same I’d left the bar in, and I was covered in dried blood.

“Averly?” my mom called.

I flew off my bed and into my bathroom in record time. “Uh, running late! Just leave me some eggs! Love you!” I screamed.

When I stepped into the bathroom, I peered in the mirror and winced. I looked like hell. My long red hair was ratted on one side and a few pine needles were stuck in there as well. Dark, almost black dried blood covered my shirt and arm, and my clothes were covered in grey wolf fur.

“Okay, no biggie. It was real. I walked home and stumbled inside and now I’m fine,” I told the completely panicked woman in the mirror.

But it was a big deal and I couldn’t handle it alone. I needed to tell someone what happened last night. Opening the

bathroom door, I spied my purse on the floor, covered in dirt. I stepped over and pulled my phone from it before scurrying back into the bathroom. I noticed the corner had crusted blood on it, and on top of that it only had ten percent battery.

Pulling up my text chain with my bestie, Leah, I shot her a message.

Averly: Get over to my house now. Porcupine.

Leah: For reals?

Averly: Porcupine!

Leah: Crap, on my way!

I'd only ever used our special 911 emergency code twice, once when Zander dumped me in seventh grade, and now. Leah would know this was not a drill and to drop everything and get over here.

I paced my bathroom for five minutes wondering if my bike was still out front and if I should go to the ER and get a rabies shot. I was three seconds from calling the sheriff to report a rabid pack of wolves when Leah banged on the bathroom door.

“It’s me!” she whisper-screamed.

My mom must have let her in. That, or she used the code, which she’d known since we were eight years old.

I opened the bathroom door and my bestie grabbed her mouth to stifle a scream as her gaze raked over my appearance.

“I know,” I whimpered.

Her eyes flicked to the crusting bite mark on my arm, and then my hair, and then all over. “Were you attacked by a bear?” She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

I shook my head. “Close. A wolf.”

Her green eyes widened. “Like for real? Because I was kidding.”

I gave her a closer look at my arm, which held a u-shaped bite mark with crusted red scabs.

She sucked in a breath. “Coming back from work last night?”

I nodded. “Did you see my bike outside when you came in?”

She shook her head. “But I wasn’t really paying attention. You should tell your mom, get stitches and a rabies shot or something.”

I winced. For some reason I didn’t want to tell anyone else. It was such a weird incident I wasn’t even sure I believed it.

“Let me take a quick shower and then we can see if my bike is still there,” I told her.

Leah chewed on her lip. “What if it gets infected?”

I remembered the grey wolf licking my wound and nodded. “I’ll get antibiotic ointment.”

It was already healing, which was weird. I’d have sworn by the amount of pain I was in last night that he’d bitten down to my bone. But I was a wuss when it came to pain, so maybe it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought.

Ten minutes later I was clean, had rubbed an entire tube of Neosporin on my wound, and wrapped it in gauze.

A few minutes passed and I’d inhaled some scrambled eggs, grabbed my backpack for class, and Leah and I were headed out the door.

“What are you doing?” I peered over Leah’s shoulder because she was glued to her phone, which was very unlike her.

Leah, my beloved brown-haired five-foot-one bestest of best friends, was a conspiracy theorist. She preferred the name *truther*, but I was saving that title for when she actually proved to me that sasquatch were real. Leah hated technology and swore the government was spying on her. Her Twitter account had over 100K followers. That’s right, over 100,000 people believed that sasquatch were real.

I read her phone over her shoulder: *What are the symptoms of rabies?*

“Hey!” I smacked her arm.

She shrugged. “Just looking out for you.”

My bike wasn’t out front. I frowned, hoping it hadn’t been stolen. Maybe I was too dazed to lock it up last night. We walked the few blocks to the hospital and my heart sank when I didn’t see my bike on the path either. There was dried blood however, which reminded me of my stupid idea to run into the woods and investigate. I also noticed the black tire mark where I had skidded to a stop.

Leah gasped. “What if a sasquatch bit you?”

I frowned. “Leah, I was conscious the entire time. It was a wolf. An entire pack actually.”

She raised one eyebrow and then pointed to the woods. “Your bike.”

I followed her gaze and saw the glimmer of red metal. Racing forward, I trudged through the brambles to get to it. It was in perfect condition, just knocked over. To hide it? So it wouldn’t get stolen? Then how did I get home? Maybe I was in such a daze I ditched my bike and walked...

Somehow, I didn’t find that possible. I stepped farther into the woods and found the spot where the attack had taken place.

“Holy murder scene.” Leah pulled out her phone and started to take pictures of the blood-soaked earth and claw-marked ground. The blood had congealed and looked extra gnarly, but I didn’t look away from it. I couldn’t.

It was real.

This was proof that my dream wasn’t a dream and this bite mark on my arm went down exactly as I remembered it. My head snapped to where the wolf I’d shot had lain, only to find flattened grass and my sleek black gun still there. I picked it up and tucked it in the waistband of my jeans.

“Tell me you shot the rabid wolf?” Leah said, eyeing my gun.

I nodded. “It wasn’t rabid.” I was mostly saying that because I really didn’t want the series of five rabies shots they gave humans when bitten by a wild animal. Sure, the wolf had been hostile, but he didn’t look sick. He wasn’t foaming at the mouth or skinny or... I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

Leah did a slow circle. “Where is its body?”

“It was crazy. Maybe the rest of his pack dragged it off.” But there were no drag marks. *It was like we all got up and walked out of here.* I burst into laughter at the thought and Leah looked at me weirdly.

She pointed at me. “Abnormal behavior! A sign of rabies.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine. Come on, we have class.”

I HAD to take two ibuprofen in order to get through the day, and I also may or may not have stolen some canine antibiotics from my pharmacy class. Mom and I didn’t have insurance and I wasn’t about to waste two hundred dollars on urgent care so some twenty-year-old physician’s assistant could scribble on a script pad. Besides, the canine antibiotics would work the same so long as I got the dosing right.

After classes, I was hit with a mild fever and fatigue, so I popped two of the antibiotics—to account for my weight being double that of a medium-sized dog—and took a nap at home before my shift at the Rusty Spoon tonight.

ALMOST FOUR HOURS LATER, I woke up with a ravenous hunger. My mom had made lasagna and was already in bed. She had the five a.m. grocery store shift three days a week, so we were often ships passing in the night.

After eating nearly half the pan of lasagna, I threw on some skinny jeans and a crop top and ran a brush through my long hair. My arm barely hurt anymore but I was too scared to peek under the gauze. If there was pus or a rash, I would definitely need to be seen, and they would totally rabies shot me.

I preferred to ride the *everything is fine* train... until it crashed.

My bike ride to the Rusty Spoon was uneventful, as was the first hour of my shift with my co-bartender, Clara. That was until the after-dinner rush came in. One second I was chatting with old drunk Joe and the next we were slammed: bar full, tables full, line out the door.

“Bud Light!” Clara called to me, and I slid one down to her. I loved tending bar with Clara. She stuck to her half of the bar; she cleaned well and she made work fun. I poured drink after drink until my wrists were sore and the crowd had thinned to a manageable amount. When I was just wiping down a sticky spot on the counter, a large tan hand gently reached out and stroked the top of my gauze wrap.

“You okay?” a husky male voice said, and chills ran down my spine. I looked up and into two of the bluest eyes I’d ever seen. They were attached to the hottest face I’d ever looked at as well.

“Hello, can I help you?” Clara tried to butt in on my customer, and I aimed the soda water sprayer at her.

“Back off, he’s mine,” I growled.

I had meant it playfully, but for some reason my tone was way more possessive than intended.

Clara grinned and spit her tongue out at me.

“For the tips, obviously,” I felt the need to say and now felt stupid.

I glanced back at the guy to see him barely concealing a grin. “Just for the tips?” he asked with a flirty tone.

Lord help me, he was way out of my league. Don't get me wrong, I had a good sense of self-esteem and I knew I was pretty, but this guy... yum. He was my ideal guy—tall as a basketball player, built like a football player, and tattooed like a felon.

"What can I get you?" I asked, clearing my throat.

His eyes searched the bottles, then finally he looked back at me intently. "Bartender's choice."

Okay. Cool. No pressure.

I observed him more intensely now to try to get a read on what his drink might be. Dark brown hair that fell to his jaw, well-trimmed beard, muscles for days. His clothes were nice though, dark wash jeans and a teal Henley that made his eyes pop. He looked like he was in his early twenties, but something about his eyes made me think he was an old soul.

He was like lumberjack met surfer dude.

"What's your name?" I pursed my lips, trying to get a read on whether or not he might dig scotch.

"Brayden." His husky voice warmed my belly. That name was just so perfect.

He wasn't a mixed drink kinda guy, I could just tell. Guys named Brayden didn't drink scotch. Reaching out, I pulled the spout of a local India pale ale, filled a cold glass, and then set it in front of him.

He hadn't taken his eyes off me since we'd first spoken, and now I was transfixed by him. I stared as he put the beer glass to his lips and took a long swig.

I watched as his Adam's apple bobbed and my body broke out into a fever again. Heat overwhelmed me and I swallowed hard.

It was time for my next dose of antibiotics. Giving the dude a friendly smile, I turned and walked to the middle of the bar, where my purse was tucked into a cubbyhole.

Geez, Averly, you practically eye screwed him. Get a grip.

Hot guys came into work all the time, but there was something different about this guy. Something intense. I popped two more pills and chugged them down with some water, but the entire time I could feel the guy's eyes on my back.

Standing, I turned, and sure enough he was watching me.

"Yo, are you deaf?" Someone rapped on the wooden bar top in my section. "I asked for two cosmos!" the guy yelled to the right of me and I froze.

Bastard.

I turned in the guy's direction, ready to tell him to screw off, when Brayden flew from his seat and grabbed the jerk by the back of the neck. The guy's eyes widened and I clutched the soda sprayer, preparing to soak the both of them if they started brawling. Brayden whispered something in the dude's ear and he nodded fearfully, looking at me.

"I'm sorry. I... apologize for speaking to you like that. I'll go home now," he mumbled.

Brayden released him and the guy ran out of the bar faster than a cat with its tail on fire. I stood there in shock as Brayden tipped his head to me and walked back over to his seat at the bar and sat down.

The nerve of this guy! For some reason the fact that he thought I needed to be saved pissed me off.

Stomping over to him, I leaned on the counter and got in his face. "That was real chivalrous, but I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" he asked, and his gaze flicked to my bandaged arm.

I gasped. *Bastard!*

I was about to retort when he reached up and rubbed his temples as if this was giving him a headache. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. What's your name?"

"Averly." I waved at him with my dishtowel, then felt stupid and dropped it in the soap bucket.

“Woman, give me two beers, STAT!” a familiar female voice called and I grinned, turning away from Brayden and moving to give Leah a hug. She squealed and leaned over the bar top, pulling me in tightly as she wrapped her arms around me. She’d brought a few friends from her journalism class and I gave them Shirley Temples and soda. I wasn’t about to lose Ronan’s liquor license over my underage friends sneaking in. Clara, who was twenty-three, always turned a blind eye to their fake IDs and let them in, but we didn’t serve them alcohol. It’s just that there wasn’t much to do in this town and so this was the hangout.

When I turned back around, Brayden was gone. My heart plummeted. For some reason I didn’t want him to go yet, even if he was a bit intense.

Only when I did a scan of the back of the bar did I notice Brayden had claimed a two-top and was staring at me with a burning intensity.

Weird.

As the night passed and I made last call, I glanced over to catch Brayden still watching me. How could someone stare at you for three hours straight and not be some kind of deranged psycho? It was a shame, because other than his staring problem and overly protective instincts, he was my dream guy.

“Yum,” Clara said beside me.

I startled, not realizing she was even beside me.

“Oh yeah. He’s cute. For an axe murderer.”

Clara laughed and I busied myself with wiping down the bar. Brayden had come in at eleven and then stayed until nearly two a.m., while sipping the same beer. Who sipped one beer for three hours?

I must have said that out loud because Clara answered, “Someone who doesn’t drink?”

I frowned. Why come to a bar if you don’t drink?

“He tipped me twenty bucks on a five-dollar beer. That’s annoying, right?”

Clara laughed again. “Honey, he obviously likes you. Probably in town on his way to Canada or something. Why not have a fun night with him?” She waggled her eyebrows and we both giggled. Clara knew I wasn’t into that one-night-stand stuff.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, and then grabbed a stack of dirty glasses to bring into the kitchen.

I was just about to walk over and tell Brayden we were closing up, and that he would have to go, when the door burst open and six giant dudes walked in.

“Whoa, is there a football convention in town?” I muttered to myself and stepped out from behind the bar. “Sorry, we’re closing,” I told the dudes, and scurried to step in front of them so they couldn’t get farther inside as I shooed them towards the door.

They all stopped in unison and glared over my shoulder at Brayden.

The big one in front had a shaved head and beady brown eyes and looked like trouble. He was closest to me and leaned forward, inhaling through his nostrils as if smelling me.

Gross.

I blinked and then suddenly Brayden was standing in front of me. Holy moly, he was fast. Maybe they really *were* on a football team.

“Leave,” Brayden growled and the sound seemed oddly familiar.

“Is this her?” the big dude asked, and my head whipped backward. This guy didn’t know me.

“She’s *mine*,” Brayden said, and I froze. Okay, he was definitely an axe murderer. A really cocky possessive one with a nice jawline.

“Excuse me!” I looked up at Brayden with the craziest face I could muster. A face that said if you tried to kill me I would go psycho on you and rip your manhood off.

Brayden looked unfazed by my crazy eyes, so I peered back to the six dudes.

Every single one of them was staring at me.

“Is she—?” one of them said, but Brayden stepped forward and he must have been wearing a scary look on his face because all six dudes stepped away before turning around to leave.

“What the hell, man?” I yelled at Brayden’s back. “Are you in the mafia or something?” Sometimes I couldn’t help the stuff I blurted out. Okay, most of the time.

When he turned to face me, I gasped. His blue eyes were threaded through with honey yellow.

“I have a lot of enemies,” he said flatly.

Okay, so maybe the mafia comment wasn’t far off.

This was the first time I’d seen him walk and noticed he was favoring his left side. Football injury? Mafia injury? Axe murderer injury?

“Are you guys on rival sports team or something?” I said, grasping at straws to explain this weird behavior. Maybe they hadn’t been talking about me.

He swallowed hard. “Something like that.”

Okay. This was super-duper awkward and now I just wanted him to leave. “Well, we’re closing so...”

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “Hey, are you feeling okay?” He pointed to my arm. “You look a bit flushed and I couldn’t help but notice you were injured. I’m a doctor, I could take a look for you?”

I reached up and touched my cheeks.

Damn, a fever again. I didn’t believe for one second this hot lumberjack surfer in his early twenties was a doctor, but I’m sure the pick-up line worked often.

“I’m fine,” I growled, unsure why I was snapping at this guy for asking a sweet question. *Probably because that’s what murderers do before they kidnap you.*

His gaze narrowed and he opened his mouth to speak again when I cut him off.

“I had a long night. I just need sleep,” I assured him, wondering why I was even divulging so much to this dude, but the intensity of his gaze was a bit overwhelming.

He nodded, looking apprehensive. “Well, goodnight, Averly.”

The way he said my name was like he knew me. Like we’d been friends for years. And for some reason I liked it. The fact that I’d told him my name once three hours ago and he’d remembered it was impressive.

“Goodnight, Brayden.” I swallowed hard and watched him walk out of the bar.

That was the hottest, strangest, most intense guy I’d ever met. I should be super scared of him. He just told a group of guys that I was his... but I wasn’t scared. Maybe he’d done that to protect me. Maybe those guys were bad. My mind chewed on a hundred different explanations as he left the bar.

“Bye, beautiful!” Clara called after Brayden in the most annoying valley girl voice possible, and I chuckled when Brayden tensed, looking over his shoulder at her.

Brayden gave her a head nod and left.

“These tables won’t wipe themselves,” Ronan called out of the hallway to both of us, and then Clara and I started to wipe everything down in record speed.

BY THE TIME I locked the bar door behind me and gave Clara a double cheek kiss, it was nearly three a.m. I’d texted Leah that I was too tired to after-party. Now my plan was to bike home and pass out for a week. I was hungry and my body felt ten times heavier than normal. It was as if I couldn’t even hold up the weight of my own head.

Maybe I should have gotten the rabies shot.

“Go away!” a familiar male voice snapped across the parking lot, and I froze with my hands on my bike lock. Craning my head, I followed the noise to peer under the streetlamp. Brayden was talking to some smoking hot blonde chick.

“You just going to follow her around to see if she changes?” the girl said.

“If I have to. She’s *my* responsibility,” Brayden growled.

How could I hear them this far away? They were at least thirty feet away and it was like they might as well be right next to me for how clear their voices were coming in.

It sounded like Brayden had girl problems. I knew he was too good to be true. Unclicking the lock, I yanked my bike from the rack and pointed it home. I didn’t want anything more to do with this guy. When my gaze fell to the streetlamp, Brayden was watching me, sans the blonde.

My heart pounded in my chest under his gaze. It was rude, you didn’t just stare at people like that unless you were going to kill them. Or kiss them.

I’m outta here.

Other people were filtering out of bars nearby; the noises of drunk people trying to figure out their rides home filled the air. Pushing off my bike, I crossed the street and pedaled home. When I passed McDuff’s, Manwhore Nik was outside smoking a cigarette with a brunette sucking on his neck. “Hey, beautiful Averly. Good tips?”

I chuckled. “Not bad!”

He’d grown on me. What could I say? I was a creature of habit and there was something comforting about Nik constantly hitting on me.

Coming up to the hospital, I slowed, thoughts about last night rushing back to me. Pain pulsed in my arm at the mere memory of being bitten and I winced.

The last thing I remembered before I’d passed out was the honey-eyed stare of the grey wolf standing over me. Protecting

me.

I suddenly felt a presence at my back and slammed on the brakes, turning in my bike seat while also reaching for my gun.

But no one was there.

I laughed to myself and then wondered if I *did* have rabies. I didn't quite feel like myself, and clearly I was imagining things. I rode the rest of the way home lost in my thoughts, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being followed. I wondered then if my protector grey wolf was okay. The missing body of the black wolf I'd killed, and the blood Leah and I had found today, made me wonder what had become of the both of them.

Stumbling inside my house, I felt the fever searing my skin and I chugged down two more antibiotics, wondering if maybe they were expired.

I'll go to the doctor tomorrow, I just need sleep, I told myself after I brushed my teeth and climbed into bed.

The last thing I thought about before slipping into a delirious fever-dream slumber was Brayden and my protector wolf. Their faces kept morphing in and out until they became one.

Alpha, a dreamy voice said in my mind, and then everything went black.

THREE

The next day I was shaken awake by my mother. She was screaming bloody murder and my brain felt like it was going to explode.

“Staaap,” I mumbled, and cracked open an eyelid.

My mom looked down at me frantically, her phone in her hand with the numbers 911 typed in. I sat bolt upright, almost cracking her in the head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, but as I said it I knew what was wrong.

Me. I was drenched in sweat, hotter than the center of the sun, and famished beyond belief.

“You wouldn’t wake. You’ve slept all day and night. It’s eleven p.m. and you didn’t show for your Saturday shift. Ronan just called.” My mom’s voice was so panicked I immediately felt awful for scaring her.

“I’m sick,” I muttered, and then decided now was a good time to tell my mom about the bite and possible rabies I was carrying.

“I tried to help an injured wolfdog the other night and... it bit me.” I held up my bandaged arm. “I think it’s infected.”

My mom grabbed her chest. “Oh, honey, let’s go to the doctor.” She put her phone down and I was relieved she hadn’t called 911. That would have been super embarrassing.

I could see the *Sandpoint Reader’s* headlines now: *Ambulance Wheels Out Girl For Infected Wolf Bite.*

Lame.

I nodded. “Can I have some food and water first? I’m starving.”

My mom looked torn between wanting to rush me to Bonner General and the desire to feed me.

“I’ll make a quick sandwich.” She rushed out of the room and I decided that now was a good time to check on my wound.

I had only cleaned the thing one time in the past thirty-six hours. What a shitty vet I was going to make one day! I started to unwrap the gauze and then steeled myself for a gnarly, green, smelly, puss filled wound.

When my gaze fell upon peach scab-free skin, I yelped and flew backward into the wall.

No.

“Averly!” My mom came running in.

I checked both arms to be sure, and then ran my fingers over the clear skin. It wasn’t even scarred. There was *zero* evidence I was bitten at all.

“I...” This wasn’t happening. Was it all a dream, a fever dream? Had I dreamed the bite and wrapped my arm?

No.

Leah came over, she saw it. “I don’t understand,” I mumbled to myself.

My mom swam into view and clasped both sides of my face. “Okay, honey, you can eat later, you’re burning up. We’re going to the ER. You’re scaring me.”

I nodded. I couldn’t really argue with that. Either the bite was real and it healed in a day, which made me a superhuman freak, or I’d hallucinated all of it. Either option wasn’t ideal.

THE WAITING room to the hospital was packed. I guess Saturday night was an ideal time to get hurt for some reason. A nice woman with brown hair at the sign-in desk started to hand me a clipboard and paper when a doctor in a white coat intercepted us.

“Averly, are you okay?” a familiar male voice asked.

My gaze flicked up to the blue-eyed stare of the man from the bar. My stalker with a girl problem.

“Brayden?” I asked, confused. Maybe this was part of my hallucination.

“You know him?” My mom sounded impressed. “Doctor, please help us. She’s got a fever and has slept over twenty-four hours. She’s acting strange and—”

“I’ve got this, Gracie,” he told the woman at the desk. “Right this way,” he said to me, and then he caught me by the elbow and steered us away from the sign-in desk and towards the side hallway.

He really was a doctor? The possessive hot guy from the bar was a local doctor? My mind couldn’t process this.

The walls started to blur as dizziness washed over me, and I pitched forward.

“Averly!” my mom yelled.

Two strong arms wrapped around my shoulders and then behind my knees, and the next thing I knew I was being cradled in Brayden’s strong arms. It felt good to be carried—it was embarrassing, but I was so tired it felt nice to not have to walk right now.

“This way,” a female voice called out to my right, and suddenly a nurse joined us. A door opened and I lost consciousness for a second. Everything just went black, and when I came to I was inside of a small room on top of an examination table. Brayden had laid me down and was now looking at a woman who I assumed was the nurse, though she wasn’t dressed like one. She wore knee-high boots over fishnet stockings and a black leather corset.

What kind of hospital is this?

“Please explain to the mother what’s going on,” Brayden said, and his eyes flashed yellow.

Whoa.

The girl nodded, her long cotton candy pink hair shaking around her shoulders. “Come with me, ma’am.” She placed a hand on my mom’s shoulder and a blue light emanated from her palm.

What the hell?

“What was that!?” I yelled. “Mom! Mom, don’t go with her.”

The girl steered my mom out of the room, whispering something into her ear with her glowing blue palm on my mother’s shoulder and my mom never turned around to look back at me.

A pit sank in my stomach and I reached out to grasp the lapels of Brayden’s white lab coat with what little strength I had left. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but if you hurt my mother, I will skin you *alive*,” I growled for good measure.

He nodded. “I will protect her as if she were my own.”

His sincere response shocked me; my hands went limp and fell to the bed as a sob ripped from my throat. The fever had officially given way to pain. “What’s happening to me? I feel so weak, so tired, so confused.”

Blackness started to creep at the edges of my vision, and Brayden placed a hand to my forehead. “Your old self is dying. When you awaken, you will be born anew.”

What the cryptic hell did that mean?

The door opened and my blurry gaze flicked to the entryway hoping to see my mom. Instead it was a blonde chick, the same one he’d been arguing with under the streetlight the other night at the Rusty Spoon.

“They’ll come for her,” Blondie said.

“She’s *mine*,” Brayden growled, and small patches of fur rippled down his neck.

I gasped, too weak to try and run. “What are you?”

“Is she really worth it?” the blonde girl asked. “Do you really think it’s her? After all this time?”

Brayden gave her a look that I couldn’t see, but it must have been scary because she immediately dipped her head in submission and focused on the ground.

Blondie softened her voice. “If she is who you think, she’ll be even more valuable and Silas will try to claim her.”

Brayden’s voice was more animal than human. “I made her. She’s *mine*.”

I made her? My delusional mind tried to follow the conversation.

Blondie shook her head. “If she even is—”

“You saw what she did, she threw herself in front of a pack of wolves for me,” Brayden stated.

I gasped, shock ripping through my entire system at his words.

That’s why he looked familiar. Those eyes. The fur.

My grey wolf?

No. This was a hallucination, this wasn’t real.

Blondie looked sadly over at Brayden. “I hope you’re right. Come on, let’s get her home before she starts howling.”

Howling? I opened my mouth and screamed, but seconds later Brayden’s giant hand clamped over my mouth. He peered down at me with pulsing eyes. Blue-yellow, blue-yellow, they flashed back and forth constantly.

“You’re going to have to trust me,” he said, and then released my mouth and scooped me up into his arms again.

I was too tired to fight, too tired to yell.

All I could manage was to look up at the beautiful and scary man carrying me and whisper, “*What are you?*”

He looked down at me, confliction wrestling in his gaze. “A werewolf,” he whispered back as the darkness finally pulled me under and I felt pain no more.

I MOANED, rolling around in my sheets as the sleepiness clung to my limbs. I could easily snooze for another ten hours but my stomach was eating itself and so I reached my arms above my head and stretched, yawning. When I opened my eyes, I froze.

Where was I? Fear seized my body as I sat up and looked around the foreign room. I was in a large bed with black and white flannel sheets and facing a wall full of windows that displayed a thick forest of trees... and not a house to be seen for miles. I peered down at the hardwood floors and saw my shoes and socks.

My heart hammered in my chest as the memory of last night came back to me.

My mom took me to the hospital. That guy Brayden was there and he was a doctor. A lady with pink hair and glowing hands had led my mom out and then Brayden told me he was a werewolf.

I tipped my head back and laughed maniacally.

A werewolf. The rabies had worked its way into my system and now I was fully losing my mind. I looked down at my arm and once again admired the smooth blemish-free skin. How could I have rabies if there was no bite?

There was a knock on the door and I reached out and grabbed a pillow as a weapon.

What was I going to do with this? Smother my assailant?

Dropping the pillow, I grabbed my boot instead.

“Just let me go and I won’t even tell the cops!” I yelled.

Rabies and hallucinations or not, Brayden might have kidnapped me, that much I was sure of.

The door creaked open and the blonde woman from the hospital poked her head in. “Tell the cops what? That you stupidly jumped in front of an alpha werewolf fight, got yourself bitten, and now Brayden and I are trying to save your life? Good luck with that.” She rolled her eyes.

I dropped the boot. “What did you just say?”

Something about what she said rang true. Those wolves, that night I’d gotten bitten, they hadn’t seemed like normal wolves. I thought the one wolf was just really tame and let me pet him.

No.

“That’s why your arm healed so fast. You have werewolf saliva inside of your bloodstream right now and it has magical healing properties.”

Annnnd the last thread of my sanity broke in that moment. I burst into sobs, collapsing backward on the bed.

“Oh man. Don’t *cry*.” The blonde winced as she watched me have a nervous breakdown. “I don’t do the emotionally girly thing well.”

“Then get out!” I yelled at her. But she didn’t move. Closing the door behind her, she slipped inside and sat on the bed next to me. She patted my knee twice, really hard and awkwardly.

“Okay, get it all out so we never have to see this blubbering mess again,” she said.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. This girl was annoyingly blunt but in a comical way.

“Screw you,” I muttered, but there was no heart in it.

“Sorry, I’m into guys, but otherwise yeah, you’re not bad looking,” she retorted, which just made me laugh again.

She gave me a small smile and I was actually grateful for her light joking in this moment.

“I’m Averly.” I started with something normal. I needed normal right now.

“Maddy. Brayden’s sister and second-in-command.” She puffed up her chest.

Sister? That made so much sense now; they sure bickered like siblings. Second in command? That was a weird title. “Like the army?” I asked.

She looked impressed. “You know, it’s not unlike that. Brayden is the admiral of this sinking ship, and for some reason I’ve stayed on board until we all drown.”

I frowned. “Huh?”

She waved me off.

“Never mind. All you need to know is that Brayden is the alpha of Upper River Pack. We used to have over seventy wolves, but he lost the last fight, so it’s just the two of us. Well, three now.”

I swallowed hard, not sure if I should take her seriously or not. My brain couldn’t really process what she said.

“Alpha. Pack. Werewolf.” I laughed nervously. “This can’t be real.”

The door opened then and Brayden walked in, shirtless and covered in dry, crusted blood. “We need to keep moving, he’s at the edge of our border,” he said, totally calm.

I didn’t know what shocked me more, his amazingly sculpted chest or the blood and gashes that seemed to heal before my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Whatever weird shit was going on here, I felt bad that the dude was hurt, even if he had kidnapped me and taken me from my mother.

My mom. My brain was processing things too slowly. I’d totally forgotten about my mom. “Where’s my mom?” I growled, suddenly not feeling so nicey nice with my kidnappers.

“Safe at home,” Brayden said as he moved to the closet to grab a duffle bag. “A friend is watching over her. Her memories have been spelled so she thinks you’re camping for

the next few days.” He began to shove clothes into it as I watched on in shock.

Spelled. He. Said. Spelled. An image of the “nurse” with cotton candy pink hair and a glowing hand rose in my mind.

“Okay, well, I want to go home now. I feel better.” I slipped into my shoes, afraid they were about to tell me I couldn’t leave and totally acting like this conversation about spelling people was normal. I just needed to play it cool so I could get out of here.

“You can’t,” Brayden and Maddy said in unison, and my stomach dropped.

I eyed the open door, and while Maddy moved to help Brayden pack some other items, I bolted for it.

“Dammit!” Brayden’s growl, and then footsteps, followed me out into the living room of a small cabin. I pumped my legs so fast I could barely make sense of where I was going. I tripped over the coffee table because I was running so hard, and then went down, clipping my chin on the hardwood floors.

Pain burst along my jawline, and before I knew it Brayden was sitting on top of me, pinning my arms to my sides.

Fear and panic like I’d never felt before seized me.

“Just relax, I’ll explain everything,” he said calmly.

Maddy looked down at me with her head cocked to the side. “I forgot how crazy they are when they first find out.”

Brayden nodded. “But we need to get her out of here before Silas finds her.”

They were going to keep me captive, they were going to move me to new locations every time someone tried to find me.

Frick! This was stuff you saw on crime TV.

The panic inside of me turned to anger and a searing heat burned along my spine. Unbridled rage bubbled to the surface of my skin and Brayden’s eyes bugged.

“Holy crap she’s shifting,” Maddy said, stepping closer as if to get a better view.

“No, no, no, just calm down.” Brayden stepped off of me and held his hands out in a placating gesture.

Calm down. He kidnapped me and pinned me to the floor. Being calm wasn’t in the cards.

Agony consumed me. My body pitched forward and my back felt like it snapped in half. I wailed in pain, looking at my hands as I lay in an awkward position on the carpet.

“What’s happening?” I whimpered. My bones were breaking, I could feel them.

Snap, snap, snap.

Light grey fur grew on my palms and I gasped, then my fingernails elongated into claws.

No. This wasn’t happening. This was a dream.

Suddenly Brayden’s face swam into view. “Silas Ashwood of Deep Woods Pack bit you, which would have killed you had I not licked the wound with my saliva. The saliva entered your system, which slowly changed your body into a werewolf. This is your first shift, and the most dangerous. It’s the one that kills seventy-five percent of new werewolves.”

What the *hell* did he just say?

A scream ripped from my throat as my femur bone snapped in half. I had a come-to-Jesus moment where in the span of two seconds I believed everything he and Maddy had told me. How could I not? I was living it right now, and all I wanted was for the pain to stop.

Snap, snap, snap.

“We have to go.” Brayden scooped me into his arms as my contorted and broken body continued to change.

“I’ll drive, you can be with her in the back.” Gone was all of Maddy’s joking. A very real this-girl-is-totally-going-to-die look was now on her face. I must have blacked out for a second, because I blinked and then I was in the back of a truck

bed lying on Brayden's lap. He peered down at me with golden eyes, the same golden eyes I recognized from the grey wolf I'd protected in the woods.

Pain laced along my back and I looked down at my body... and screamed. One leg was a wolf, one was human but broken in at least five places. My torso was ballooned in such a way I was pretty sure all of my organs had exploded.

"Kill me," I begged him. "Please, it hurts. Just kill me."

A pained look crossed his face and he leaned down, brushing his lips against my ear. "You *will* survive this. I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

I didn't know if it was his faith in me or what, but a little bit of my pain eased at his words.

"She might not be Lena," Maddy said from the driver's seat, yelling through the open window into the cab as we drove over rugged terrain, every bounce bringing a new pain to life in my body.

Lena? Who the hell is Lena?

"She is. I'm sure of it."

I didn't have time to wonder what they were talking about. All of the bones in my face cracked then and a howl ripped from my throat before everything went dark.

FOUR

Maddy's voice was the first thing to reach me: "If she keeps passing out we're going to need to invest in smelling salts."

"Stop. I'm not in the mood for jokes." Brayden's stern tone shut her down.

Everything was dark and I had yet to open my eyes. I was afraid to. Instead, I just focused on my body, and how I was feeling. The searing pain was gone, and in its wake it left a slight burning all along my skin. I breathed in, I breathed out. It was manageable.

I was alive.

When my eyelids snapped open, Maddy was right in my face. I was lying in some bed with a tacky orange floral printed comforter.

"She's alive," she breathed.

A giant hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her backward and then Brayden was hovering above me. His blue eyes raked over me and he swallowed hard, relief written on his features.

"You made it." His breath washed over me and the scent of cinnamon gum surrounded me.

I guess you were right, I meant to say, but instead a howl came out of my mouth.

What the...?

I looked down at my body to see that I was... a light colored grey *wolf*.

I sprang to my paws and bolted off the bed.

Brayden held his hands out. "Whoa. Easy there. You're still going to be sore."

I'm a wolf. I'm a wolf. I'm a freaking wolf! I yelled and then my bones started to crack again as I was thrown forward.

"No!" Brayden shouted. "Don't shift back so soon."

He sighed, placing his palm over his face as my fur slowly turned to skin. There was a tight pressure all over my body, a burning and stretching, but not unbearable pain. In under thirty seconds I was standing on two feet.

He looked at Maddy. "Bowl."

Bowl?

She handed him a plastic Tupperware tub and my stomach roiled from the sudden transition of wolf to human.

When I looked down, I noticed that I was completely naked.

I gasped, but the nausea was of more a concern than my nakedness. "I'm gonna be—"

He shoved the bowl in my face and I vomited straight into it. As I looked up from the bowl, Brayden's yellow eyes were watching me.

Awkward.

He turned then, giving me his back while Maddy stepped closer.

"Would you like to take a shower?" she said as I scanned the room quickly to see that we were in some dodgy motel that looked like it was stuck in the eighties.

I nodded, pinched my legs shut and covered my arms over my naked chest while also holding my vomit-filled bowl.

Kill me now.

“Bathroom is that way,” Maddy said, pointing to a closed door. She then reached over and grabbed a folded stack of clothes and handed them out to me. I took the clothes from her and walked across the room with my head held high, trying to cover the fact that I was writhing in mortification. Forget the fact that I was some shapeshifting creature, this hot dude I barely knew just saw me barf naked into a Tupperware bowl in a seedy motel. Things could only go up from here.

Shutting the door behind me, I upended the bowl into the toilet and flushed before rinsing it in the sink. When I washed my hands, I looked into the mirror and burst into sobs.

Golden yellow threads wove throughout my normally hazel eyes. My red hair was ratted on one side, and there was blood on my cheek and neck. A memory of my collarbone piercing through flesh hit me then and I whimpered. My body was spotted all over with bruises. I looked like a Dalmatian.

Who was this girl in the mirror?

“You okay in there?” Maddy’s voice was full of awkwardness and I lied when I said it couldn’t get any worse. This was *so* much worse. I could puke naked and *then* be heard sobbing.

Reaching out, I turned on the shower to muffle my breakdown and then inspected my body more closely. There was a lot of light green and purple bruising on my abdomen, but otherwise I seemed okay. How the hell did I just change from wolf to human and stay alive to tell the tale?

I needed to do something to busy my mind, so I grabbed a brand-new toothbrush from the counter, assuming it was bought for me, and tore it free from the packaging. Applying an ungodly amount of toothpaste, I started to brush in a fever.

I went over what I knew. I was a wolf. Well, a human-slash-wolf so... werewolf? That guy Brayden was the grey wolf—er, *werewolf* that I’d helped that night, and Maddy, his sister, seemed to be one of us too.

I spat into the sink, suddenly wondering if aliens were real, or trolls, and every other supernatural creature I’d read about.

Portals, other worlds, magic.

Fear gripped me.

Fallen angels? Demons?

Needing to busy my mind, I stepped into the shower, squirting some shampoo into my hair and then scrubbing my scalp so hard it hurt. I didn't like this new world, I missed the old world where I knew everything. The old world was safe.

I wanted my mom and Leah. I wanted to rewind the past few days and never follow the trail of blood into the woods. If I could write my past self a letter, it would go something like this.

Dear, Past Averly,

Do NOT follow that trail of blood into the woods. Do not help that injured wolf, and for the love of God do not dive in between two fighting wolves! You will get bitten, you will think you have rabies, but what you actually have is so much worse.

You're an idiot.

Sincerely,

Future Averly

P.S. Stay away from Brayden.

That's what bothered me the most in this moment. Brayden had come to the bar, casually asked how my arm was and just let me nearly die in my bed. All the while he was a doctor! What was the Hippocratic Oath? Do no harm? Big fat fail on that one, buddy. Then he spelled my mom's memory and kidnapped me. All of this while giving me minimal information.

What the hell, man!

I rinsed my hair and turned off the tap. Grabbing a towel, I wrapped it around my body and tore out of the bathroom hellbent on revenge.

“Incoming,” Maddy coughed into her hand, and Brayden looked up from where he was rifling through the duffle bag.

“How fucking dare you!” I yelled in a rush.

He steeled himself, standing to his full height and looking down at me. Was he always this tall? Geez, I considered myself tall for a woman but he was like, *really* tall. I lost my train of thought for a moment, but then remembered and all of the anger was back.

“You came into the bar and acted like nothing happened. You could have warned me I’d been bitten by a werewolf!” I yelled. “You totally wolfed me!”

Maddy snort-laughed into her palm and then swallowed it down when we both shot her a glare.

He stepped closer to me. “Wolfed you?” He cocked his head to the side.

“Yeah.” I clutched my towel tighter, wondering why I hadn’t stopped to put clothes on.

“You changed me into a werewolf without my consent *or* telling me what I would become.”

“Consent?” Brayden’s voice was thick with anger. “I saved your life. And warn you? What would you have done? Call the police and get me locked up in a seventy-two-hour hold for being insane? I wasn’t even sure if you’d gotten enough saliva to force the change.”

I scoffed. “If I hadn’t, then like you said I would have died. You could have warned me of that too!”

He crossed his arms, making his biceps pop. “Would you really want to know if you were going to slowly waste away from werewolf poison?”

I squirmed. No one said anything about werewolf poison.

“You...” I fumbled. “You should have told me sooner. What kind of decent person doesn’t tell someone they are about to become a monster?”

He fell silent. The silence stretched as he just stared at me as if he were dealing with a disgruntled employee.

Maddy cleared her throat. “He’s actually a double doctor. Both an MD for humans and a registered veterinarian. He’s saved thousands of lives, and although he can be super annoying, he’s beyond decent.”

The fight left my bones then and my shoulders dropped. Of course he was. Next, she would tell me he also had a Nobel Peace Prize.

“You... my mom...” I said finally, the last shred of evidence I had that this guy was bad news. “You *spelled* her?”

“Your mom would have had a nervous breakdown had she stayed and watched the show. She also would have drawn the eye of the Fae Lords. I did her a favor,” he said flatly.

Fae Lords. He said *Fae Lords*.

I reached up and rubbed my temple with my free hand, holding my towel around my body with the other. Okay, push the news of the fae down and worry about that later.

“My mom is safe?”

He nodded. “Call her if you want.” He pulled my phone out of the duffle bag.

Relief rushed through me that this wasn’t a full-on kidnapping, just a minor one where they let you keep your phone. I reached for my phone and he pulled it back, stopping me.

“*Don’t* tell her about what you are. The Fae Lords take the secrecy of supernaturals *very* seriously,” he said.

These Fae Lords sounded like they were in charge and I didn’t want to piss off anyone.

I squirmed and nodded. Grabbing my phone from him, I walked into the bathroom and turned it on.

Zero missed calls

Three texts.

I pulled up the texts first.

Mom: *Miss you already. Have a great camping trip!*

I sighed in relief. She seemed the opposite of worried sick, and for that I was grateful.

The next text was from Leah.

Leah: Biatch you went camping without me?! Not cool. I'm pissed. Don't ever call me again.

Leah: Fine. You're forgiven, call me ASAP. Did you go with that hot guy from the bar?

I chuckled but the joy was short-lived.

I called my mom and she picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, camper!” She sounded cheery and my throat clogged with emotion.

“Mom...” I tried to keep my feelings in check. She sounded great, totally normal and happy, and I didn’t want to worry her by bursting into tears or anything crazy.

“Did you see any moose?” she asked. “Hopefully, you brought your rifle because I heard the cougars are really prowling this year.”

I sighed in relief that her mind wasn’t messed up or anything. “Yeah I saw a moose,” I lied.

My mom squealed in excitement. “Did it have any babies with it? It’s springtime, so the calves are out.”

We spoke for the next few minutes about my fake camping trip in the Selkirk Mountains and all of the fake animals I was seeing and then she had to go. “See you tomorrow!” she yelled into the phone and hung up.

I ended the call and stared at the phone. The one woman I wanted to share everything with and I couldn’t say anything or some Fae *Lords* would probably come mess me up.

I called Leah next.

“This is Averly’s ex-best friend, Leah, how can I help you?”

I chuckled. “Drama queen.”

She scoffed. “Since when do you just go on a camping trip and not tell me? I thought you were abducted! I went snooping around the hospital thinking you had gone in for a rabies shot and this lady made me leave the premises.”

I swallowed hard. “No rabies. I just... needed to get away. The... ugh, near death wolf thing really freaked me out. I’m camping solo.”

“You’re scared of the dark, you would never camp solo,” Leah pressed.

Dammit, woman, let it go!

“Fine, I came up here with a guy. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. Come over tomorrow and I’ll tell you all about the moose I saw.”

“You’re acting weird.” Leah was a conspiracy theorist and Sasquatch Society tracker. She didn’t just let things go. She dug in her heels until she found the truth. She was relentless. “And I don’t give a crap about a moose! I want to hear about the guy.”

“I’m losing signal. I love you!” I screamed.

“I’m still pissed! You owe me free drinks forever!” she yelled into the phone and I hung up.

I sighed, and after quickly changing into the jeans and t-shirt, I slid my cell into my back pocket. Stepping out of the bathroom, I caught Maddy and Brayden talking. “I know she _____”

They stopped when I neared. “Stop talking about me behind my back,” I said a little more forcefully than I intended.

Maddy gave me a grin, like she liked seeing me be sassy.

“My brother was just saying how he thinks you’re a rare _____”

Brayden cut her off. “Stop. She’s heard enough for one night.”

His sister frowned and crossed her arms.

“I’m a rare what?” I asked.

Brayden swallowed hard. “Do you remember me? Or do I look familiar to you?” he asked.

I screwed up my face in confusion. “Of course I remember you, my memory didn’t go when I got bitten. You came into the bar and nursed one beer the entire night, then I basically woke up in your arms at the hospital.”

His face fell and Maddy gave her brother a sympathetic look. “He means before. Did you remember him from *before*? ”

“Before what? Like the night with the grey and black wolf? I’ve figured out by now that you were the grey wolf.” I kept trying to give them what they wanted, but they both looked so disappointed.

Brayden’s apparent disappointment was hard not to take personally, but when he walked over and opened a to-go bag from the Burger Dock, an animalistic need came over me and all other thoughts left my system. I tore across the room, my mouth salivating and my stomach suddenly feeling like a bottomless pit.

He grinned, pulling five burgers out and placing them on the table. “Go on, we’ve already eaten.”

I sat, not caring about manners, and ripped the wrapper off one of the burgers before shoving it into my mouth. A moan ripped from my throat when the sweet cheese spread across my tongue.

“I hear that first meal is heaven.” Maddy sounded wistful.

“Huh?” I muffled over a full mouth.

“Maddy and I come from a long line of born wolves. We’ve shifted since birth and don’t remember it. But others who are bitten wolves say that their first meal is... indescribable.”

Wolves could be *born*? Interesting. I was halfway hearing him and halfway focused on the fact that there was honey on the burger. It was sweet and sour and *gone*.

I ripped into the next one and groaned loudly. “My fav,” I told them both.

It was the Sticky Burger, which had a thick meat patty, cheese, bacon, and *peanut butter*. Sounded awful but it was amazing. It’s the one I got every time I went to the Burger Dock.

“I love watching this.” Maddy smiled. “It’s like watching a kid open a present on Christmas.”

Brayden said nothing, just watched me quietly as I devoured all five burgers like a starved lunatic.

When I was done, I washed it down with a huckleberry shake and then wiped my mouth daintily. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I swear I have manners, but I was *starving*.”

The corners of Brayden’s lips quirked. “You burn two thousand calories every time you shift. You shifted twice in one day.”

Maddy smiled. “So basically your food bill is about to go up.”

Okay, a slightly higher food bill I could handle. My tips from the bar were pretty decent, and Mom’s job at the grocery store wasn’t exactly six figures but we did okay.

“What else? Full moon? Does it affect us?” I asked.

Brayden nodded. “Makes you extra ragey, which can force a shift. You’ll have to be with us every full moon so we can keep an eye on you.”

Okay, one day a month hanging with these two. That wasn’t so bad.

“Holy water? Garlic? Iron?” I rattled off everything I could think of that pertained to supernaturals.

Maddy burst into laughter and when Brayden cut her a glare she stopped.

“Those are for vampires and fae,” he stated, “you can touch or consume them without issue.”

Vampires!

Okay, breathe. Just breathe.

“Silver weakens us and halts healing. It also leaves scars. I’ve been wounded with a lot of silver in my days,” he said, lifting his shirt.

I was so entranced by his insanely defined abs at first that I didn’t realize he was showing me something else. Dozens of faint white scars dotted his ribcage and abdomen.

“Okay, don’t touch silver.” I reached up and grabbed for my earrings.

“I took them off for you already.” Maddy pointed to the counter.

They were little feather earrings and my favorite. I would be sad to see them go.

I rubbed my face. “Okay, anything else? Do I wolf out if I get mad or what?”

They both shared a look and it seemed like they were trying to keep from smiling.

“You will need to learn to control your emotions, yes, because strong emotions, especially anger, can lead to shifting. If you feel it coming, go into a bathroom or a private area and don’t be seen.”

I swallowed hard. Controlling my emotions wasn’t exactly something I was good at.

“And... what if I am seen?”

They both shot each other a panicked look.

“Don’t be seen shifting. Ever,” Brayden said. “If you get seen in wolf form, you can play it off that you are a wild animal but not while you’re actually shifting from one form to another.”

I nodded. Shouldn’t be too hard, but the way he kept impressing that I shouldn’t be seen shifting kind of scared me.

“But what if I am seen?” I pressed.

Brayden ran his hands through his hair. “Then the Fae Lords rip you apart limb by limb while Maddy and I watch helplessly.”

Okay, well... I hadn’t been expecting that truth bomb. *Moving on.* “So werewolves are real, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Maddy agreed, with an easy smile.

“Fae, vampires and...?” I raised one eyebrow.

“Witches and warlocks,” Maddy added.

Right, the girl who touched my mom with the glowing hand in the hospital. She must have been a witch.

“And under the fae you have a whole multitude of creatures we won’t get into or you won’t sleep tonight,” Brayden said, and I swallowed hard.

“How will I know if I’m in the presence of any of them?” I sat down on the edge of the bed because this was starting to get overwhelming.

“You’ll know. They all have a unique smell,” Maddy said.

I reached out and rubbed my fingers on the blanket in a calming gesture.

“So that wolf I killed... was a human?” It just now hit me. I’d killed a man. Oh my gosh, I’d killed a human!

Brayden shook his head. “You didn’t kill him, thank God. He healed and he’s quite pissed. Now he’s trying to take you from me.”

Chills broke out onto my arms. “Thank God? Why are we thankful that I didn’t kill the big bad scary man who was trying to kill you?”

Brayden and Maddy shared a look. “I’ll handle this,” she told her brother, and then crouched down in front of me.

“His name is Silas Ashwood and he’s the Fae Lords’ enforcer,” she said. “He and my brother have a long history. Silas cannot be killed without the person who killed him dying of a counter curse. It’s a failsafe the Fae Lords put on him to keep him alive.”

My mouth dropped open. “You mean to tell me that if I had shot him in the head or with silver, I would have killed him and then died myself?”

Maddy nodded.

“He stole my pack,” Brayden growled. Pelts of fur rolled down his neck and I shrank into the bed in fear.

Maddy stood and blocked my view of her brother for a moment before sitting next to me on the bed. “Silas tried to injure my brother last night. There’s a Wolf Tournament next month and he wanted to ensure that Brayden would lose. You helped him. So thank you.”

Tournament?

I just nodded, because what else could I do? The information was getting to be too much. But I had to know. “What kind of tournament?”

“Maybe you should get some sleep,” Brayden said with a warning in his voice. “We can bring you back into town tomorrow. You can see your mom and live your life with some ground rules and frequent check-ins.”

“Stop treating me like a fragile baby,” I growled.

Maddy shrugged. “You did just sob your way through your shower.”

“You have no filter!” I yelled at her.

Brayden cut his sister a look and she nodded. “I’m going for a stroll.”

She stepped out and shut the door and now I felt bad for snapping at her. She was just trying to help me understand things. Brayden sat on the bed next to me and the mattress dipped with his weight, throwing me into him.

“Sorry,” I muttered, holding onto his rock-hard arm and pushing off of it before scrambling to the other side of the bed.

Brayden gazed at the wall, a look of melancholy coming over his strong features. “Every year there is a tournament. The Fae Lords make Silas and I compete for sport.”

My stomach tightened; I didn't like where this was going.

"Compete for what?" I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes flashing yellow. "In all my years I've *never* lost a tournament with Silas. I beat him every time, but last year... he cheated." Brayden growled and shook himself as if shaking off bad memories. "Last year I lost my entire pack. My little sister. My best friend, Emmet. Maddy's boyfriend, August. Everyone."

I frowned. "You play for *packs*?"

He nodded.

He gambled his entire pack and lost? He had more sisters? Maddy had a boyfriend? This story was more tragic than I thought.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

He nodded. "This year I'll win. Especially now that I have you."

Wait, what?

FIVE

“Umm no,” I told him for the third time. I was tired and about to slip into a food coma but I needed him to know I wasn’t a piece to gamble in a game. Brayden said that next month at the Wolf Tournament, Brayden would use Maddy and my powers to win. That just freaked me out in more ways than one.

He just shook his head. “You have no choice. I turned you. You are *mine*. All of my wolves compete with me next month.”

Spoiler alert: *all* of his wolves was just Maddy and I.

I scoffed. “I’m *yours*? How very cliché. Well, I don’t need a pack. I’m a lone wolf, baby. Me, myself and I.” I stood and attempted to tower over him, but even sitting he was taller than me.

Dammit!

He stood, and I had to crane my neck to look up at him. “Lone wolves lose their minds without a pack. It’s why I have my sister. The loser of the tournament is allowed to keep one wolf. It’s a mercy the Fae Lords allow to keep me from going insane.”

I recoiled as if I’d been slapped. I’d go crazy without him and Maddy? No. I mean, they weren’t so bad once you got used to her brash sense of humor and his not-so-rosy personality, but... forever?

The realization hit me then: “Wait, am I immortal?”

He nodded. “You can freeze your aging at whatever age you want and then will live forever unless killed.”

That was it. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“I need to be alone,” I whimpered, and then lay flat on the bed, pulling the covers up and over my head. When I was snuggled inside a safe cocoon of blankets, I broke into sobs.

Who was this emotional wreck Averly? I never cried. Okay, that was a lie. Anything having to do with injured or dying animals and I was a complete mess, but people dying, bad grades, fight with Mom, getting dumped... I wasn’t a crier. What was going on?

The door opened as Brayden stepped out and then closed it behind him and an emptiness spread across my chest, leaving me breathless. I grasped my heart in pain at the sudden feeling of loss and then the door opened and the feeling was gone. Footsteps padded the floor, and then the bed dipped with someone’s weight.

Maddy’s voice was like a soothing balm over my loneliness: “I won’t say anything but I’ll stay, because as a new wolf being without one of your packmates nearby is really uncomfortable for the first year.” Holy crap, Brayden was right. I couldn’t be alone! I was a hermit who loved to read all day in my pajamas and neglect brushing my hair and now I needed to be near Maddy or Brayden for the next year or I’d feel like I was having a heart attack?

Freaking awesome. *Not.*

“I’m sorry I told you that you had no filter,” I said from under the blanket.

“It’s okay. I use humor to deflect the fact that I’m really messed-up inside,” she answered seriously.

I pulled the blanket off and looked over at her with surprise. Was she kidding? I couldn’t tell.

She gave me a small smile. “Life is easier if you joke a lot. It makes hard times better.”

She was serious. Her hands wrung together and I swallowed hard. What hard times had she been through? Losing her sister? Her boyfriend August?

I must have said that out loud because she nodded. “My little sister Nora and my fiancé.”

I frowned. “Fiancé? Brayden said he was just your boyfriend. I’m so sorry.”

Maddy smiled a little. “Brayden is still in denial that I’m engaged. August had just popped the question before...” She trailed off and chewed her lip.

I propped up on one elbow. “Have you seen them? Your sister and August?”

She shook her head. “The Fae Lords have endowed Silas with tremendous power. He can control your mind if you are in his pack. I haven’t seen them for the entire year. He doesn’t allow it.”

I sat up fully. “Holy crap, Maddy, I’m so sorry.” She hadn’t spoken to her sister or fiancé for an entire year! That was literal hell. Leah was basically like my sister. I would die if I couldn’t speak to her for a year.

She nodded. “Sometimes I wonder... if he’s moved on.”

I shook my head. “No way. A year isn’t that long of a wait, and you are super gorgeous and funny. Any man would be crazy to move on from that.”

She smiled, but then her smile slipped.

Her sister.

“Are you worried about Nora? How old is she?”

Maddy sighed. “Nora is thirteen. No, fourteen. She just turned fourteen.” Her voice sounded robotic like she couldn’t believe it.

Brayden let a fourteen-year-old go to another pack? I would have kept the kid assuming the Fae Lords let you choose which one you wanted to keep.

“Why didn’t he keep Nora? She’s so young,” I mused aloud.

Maddy looked at the doorway as if sensing her brother just beyond it. “An impossible choice that I don’t know how he lives with.” She sighed. “I’m the strongest of our pack, second to my brother of course. He needs my power to fuel him for the fight against Silas next month. Because Silas will have the strength of our entire pack.”

Oh.

Oh no. I couldn’t imagine having to choose one person I loved to keep with me to stave off insanity. My mom or Leah? Who would I choose? If choosing Leah meant having the power to save my mom in a year, I guess I would do that.

Maddy rubbed her eyes. “I’m tired, let’s get some rest. It’s been a long day with you getting *wolfed* and all.”

Back to joking.

I snort-laughed. “I couldn’t think of another word.”

“I like it. I’m totally using it,” she said as she slipped off her shoes. “I wolfed out. Hey, get wolfed! Go wolf yourself!”

My mood had lightened and I realized that without her filter Maddy had a gift. She made things lighter when all around was darkness and heavy.

When I lay back, I still felt a bit weird and unsettled. Maddy lay next to me, reached out and grabbed my hand. Normally I would yank my hand back because holding hands after twenty-four hours of knowing someone was weird as hell, but a calmness came over me.

“It will be okay, Averly,” she said, and I believed her. I never had a sister and always considered Leah to be like one, but now that I felt this unwavering trust and bond building between Maddy and I, I had to admit she felt like family.

How weird was that?

SIX

I slept next to Maddy the entire night in a peaceful state, and when I woke she was still asleep but Brayden was up, sat at the edge of the other bed, shirtless and staring at the motel room wall.

I debated just staying under the covers until Maddy woke up, but I really had to pee. Slipping out from the blankets, I shuffled past Brayden and he cast me a sleepy glance.

There was so much emotion in his eyes. Pain, loss, hope? After Maddy told me about losing his sister and his entire pack, I couldn't look at him the same. I'd probably never be able to be mean to him again because I felt too bad for him.

"I don't want your pity," he grumbled, and I froze in the bathroom doorway.

I gulped but said nothing. How did he know I was feeling sorry for him? He must have recognized the confusion on my face.

"I'm your alpha. I can read your emotions," he said flatly.

Oh... awesome. Now I wouldn't be able to keep anything private! I stormed off into the bathroom and went pee and brushed my teeth. *He waits until now to tell me he can read my emotions? What a jerk.* So much for never being able to be mean to him. I was ready to give him a piece of my mind.

After tying my long red hair up in a top knot, I stormed out of the bathroom and found Brayden with his hand on the door to exit the hotel room.

“Wanna get breakfast?” he asked.

I glanced at the bed to see Maddy’s chest slowly rising and falling.

“She sleeps like the dead,” he told me.

“Will she be okay alone?” I asked.

When they’d both left me last night, I’d felt destitute until she’d come back in to hold my hand. It was like being a kid again and being left all alone in a big house. You could survive but it wasn’t comfortable.

He nodded. “Maddy’s an old wolf like me. She’ll be fine.”

Old wolf? They were both, like... early twenties. But then I remembered the whole *immortal* talk we’d had. I didn’t even want to know how old he really was.

I shrugged and slipped out the door with him. As we walked down the hallway, I stared at the overly printed carpet and then looked over at Brayden.

“You know, if you can read someone’s thoughts it’s a good idea to tell them that immediately!” I said with more anger in my tone than planned.

He chuckled. “*Emotions*. Not thoughts.”

“Whatever. Step one: You’re a werewolf.” I lowered my voice. “Step two: I can read your emotions.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind the next time a girl randomly stumbles upon me in the woods and gets bitten. I didn’t plan your change, you know. I haven’t had a new wolf in a very long time. My pack is full of born wolves.”

I guess that was sort of an apology.

“Fine. Whatever.” I waved him off. It was hard to stay mad at the dude. He was so pretty and had such a sob story.

I scanned his face for any indication that he might have picked up on that emotion, but he was stone-faced as he opened the door for me and waved me into the breakfast seating area.

Nice guy who opened doors, of course he was. I really wanted to hate him but was finding it hard.

I got in line and piled up my plate with eggs, bacon, and pancakes. He did the same and then we found a table. When we sat, I dug right in and we ate in companionable silence for a few moments.

“So I can go back home today?” I asked. That was really all I cared about right now. Go home and meet up with these guys every full moon. It would be like having your period once a month. It sucks but it’s necessary and you just get through it.

Brayden took a swig of his orange juice and his gaze rested over my face. “Sort of.”

I froze, leaning forward, pressing my elbows to the edge of the table. “You said I could go home.”

He nodded. “You can. But I think you would find it very uncomfortable to live without your pack.”

Live with them? Was he asking me to move in with them?

I swallowed hard, thinking of that feeling in my chest last night when they’d both left the room. Would it be like that all night long?

“A new packmate relies heavily on the emotional support of her pack. Without spending time with us at night, I don’t see how you will get through your day alone at school and work,” he said flatly.

I narrowed my eyes at him. How did he know I went to school?

“I followed you after you got bit,” he added casually, as if that wasn’t creepy. “I had to, per the Amarok’s rule that all bitten wolves be watched to see if they turn.”

Chills ran up my spine.

“Amarok?”

He nodded, looking left and right at all of the sleepy-eyed breakfast goers. “The second Silas bit you and I used my

saliva to change you, there was a dispute. Normally, the one who bites you is your alpha. But it was my saliva that saved you and so I have requested a meeting with the Amarok. We will meet with him this afternoon. I will lay the claim that you are mine.”

You are mine. I hated that possessiveness, and yet something about it felt so right. “If I hadn’t, Silas would have claimed you and probably killed you for embarrassing him in front of his pack like that.”

I winced, remembering shooting Silas five times in the chest.

“Well...” I cleared my throat. “Thanks for that.”

He nodded, watching me with an unreadable expression.

“Who is the Amarok?” I dared to ask. “Like a Fae Lord?”

Brayden shook his head. “He’s half wolf, half fae. A very rare combination not usually possible. He’s the judge, jury, and executioner for our people since we no longer have a king.” A frown pulled at his lips and his eyes looked distant as he no doubt went into his memories. I was realizing there was a lot more to Brayden and his sister than I had originally thought.

My mind was all over the place. I was a freaking werewolf now and vampires were real. There were some big baddies named Fae Lords, and in a month Brayden would fight to get his sister and pack back. And on top of all of that, this dude Silas was after me but we needed to see some wolf-fae judge.

I needed a nap.

“What happens if you lose again?” I said suddenly. “Would I go to Silas’ pack?”

His fist slammed down on the table, making me jump, and every single diner looked our way. “I *won’t* lose.” His eyes flared yellow.

Okay, note to self: talking about the Wolf Tournament was a trigger.

I swallowed hard, staring at him with fear. Talk about emotionally unstable.

He sighed, running his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry, you touched a nerve.”

I just nodded. I was catching on that werewolf personalities were temperamental.

I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “Are you sure there is no way to kill him before the tournament?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen every powerful witch in existence. None of them can shield me from the counter curse that would kill me upon Silas’ death.”

I scoffed. “So you and Maddy have been picked on this entire year but you can’t fight back?”

He gazed at me with an appearance of complete exhaustion, but even with tired eyes and a waning spirit, he looked utterly adorable. “The Fae Lords are as cruel as they are unforgiving.”

I hoped I never met them. Ever.

“What if you refuse to fight, just end this whole nonsense?” I asked.

He looked at me like I was five years old and had just asked a question about Santa Claus.

“I can’t do that,” was all he said.

“So only two packs fight? You and Silas, Silas and you, every year?”

He nodded. “There are hundreds of packs under the Fae Lords’ power, but they like to torture me specifically, and Silas is the only one who can match my power.”

Wow. So all the other packs were off scot-free. Some kind of reward you get for being strong and powerful. “The Fae Lords sound like douchebags,” I said, and he stiffened, looking around the room as if they might materialize and kill me for saying such things.

“This month might be rough on us, but I’ll win my pack back and then you can go on with your life. My goal as alpha is to support whatever dreams you have and make this life more of a blessing than a curse to you,” he said sincerely.

I wasn’t prepared for the kindness of what he’d just said. He wanted me to follow my dreams and not have the fact that I could shift into an animal impact me negatively? It was sweet.

“How will having me and Maddy at the fight help you?” I asked. He’d said he would use our power, but now I wondered *how*. I hope he didn’t think I was fighting. I was decent with a gun, but not some prized boxer or anything.

Brayden nodded. “The Fae Lords have a pair of linked dragon bone rings. The rings have powerful magic in them that the wearer can pull power from their pack or a group of people.”

Whoa. So Brayden would wear a ring and suddenly *pull* Maddy and my power? I probably had the wolf power of a chihuahua, but if it helped I was willing to try.

The door to the breakfast area opened and an odd feeling washed over me, along with a smell. It was like a gamey animal aroma mixed with pine trees and freshly fallen snow.

Brayden froze, not even looking at whoever had just walked into the room. “Go get Maddy and run,” he said softly to me and then stood.

What?

He gave me his back and faced the incoming man.

I stood as well, turning to peer behind Brayden, and then froze, my eyes raking over the dude before me.

Holy steroid monkey.

The guy looked like Vin Diesel with a black mohawk and brown beady eyes. As he moved, his muscles moved with him. He wore a grin that I didn’t like.

“Silas,” Brayden said with a growl, and shock ripped through me.

'Go,' Brayden's voice infiltrated my mind and I gasped.

Step three of changing a person into a werewolf: Tell someone you can speak into their mind!

I backed away from the table, my heart hammering in my throat as I looked for a back exit to the room. Brayden said we couldn't shift in front of humans, so I was pretty sure they weren't going to kill each other right here, but they might go outside or in an empty room and do it.

For a wild second I thought of just getting in a car and going home, leaving this whole crapshow behind. But the thought of leaving Brayden to be hurt by Silas tied my stomach into knots. I needed to get Maddy. Finding a door along the back wall, away from the entrance, I slipped out of it and then took off running.

I'd stepped out into a hallway and ran left, momentarily disoriented. Once I got my bearings I booked it back to the area where Brayden and I had left the hotel room. I didn't glance at the number but I knew the general direction and I'd bang on every door if I had to in order to wake Maddy and get Brayden help.

I knew he said to get Maddy and run, but there was no way in hell I was going to do that now. Silas could injure him before the fight and then he'd never get his little sister and Maddy's fiancé, August, back. I knew Silas couldn't be killed, but Brayden said nothing about having such protection.

I was halfway into my sprint when Maddy appeared before me, farther down the hall. Her hair was a mess and she wasn't wearing shoes.

Maybe Brayden woke her with his mind speak thingy.

I waved her towards the breakfast room behind me.
"Hurry, Silas is here."

Maddy closed the distance between us and shook her head.
"No, my orders are to get you out of here."

I reeled back in shock. "Get me out of here? Your brother is about to be attacked," I growled.

“Brayden can take care of himself. If Silas gets a hold of you, it could ruin everything. I have to follow Brayden’s orders.” She reached out and grasped my upper arm, yanking me away from the breakfast hall and towards the exit. I went maybe two steps before shrugging out of her grasp.

“Ruin everything how?” I snarled, feeling my wolf come to the surface. It was an animalistic and wild feeling, one I couldn’t control.

She chewed on her bottom lip and I crossed my arms in front of my chest, making it clear I wasn’t leaving until I knew what the hell she was talking about.

She stepped closer to me, eyes yellow. “My brother thinks you could be his reincarnated dead mate, Lena. She was a very powerful wolf, which would ensure we win the pack back next month. I must keep you safe at all costs.”

Laughter burst from my throat, I couldn’t help it. It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard. Vampires, sure. Werewolves and fae... I could handle that. Reincarnating mates was where I drew the line.

“Why would he think that?” I was still laughing but the stern look on Maddy’s face cut the laughter from my throat.

She glanced behind me, bopping anxiously on her heels. “For starters, you threw yourself between Brayden and Silas that night you got bit.”

“I like animals!” I argued. “Brayden was injured.”

She nodded. “Secondly, your wolf’s coloring is grey. Like Brayden’s. Lena was a Greywolf too.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure lots of wolves have grey coloring.”

Maddy shook her head. “Some wolves are just grey in coloring. But Brayden and Lena are *Greywolves*, beings with a deep magical power that is unparalleled to even the Fae Lords.”

Whoa. That got me listening. Brayden was more powerful than a fae lord? Why hadn’t he just killed them by now?

“Do you believe him? That I’m her?” I couldn’t even believe I was entertaining this craziness. But now it all made sense. Why he was so protective of me at the bar, why he seemed to go out of his way to be nice to me and buy me a bag of five burgers. He thought I was his dead mate?

She shook her head. “Lena has died and come back eight lifetimes. Each time she finds him before her twentieth birthday and every single time she remembers him. She remembers all of their lives together. You don’t. I think you’re great... but just a run-of-the-mill wolf with a gun,” she deadpanned.

Relief spread through my limbs at her assessment. I didn’t want to be some reincarnating mate wolf. I didn’t want to be special; being a werewolf was special enough. But still, I couldn’t discount the fact that Brayden needed our help right now. He’d looked out for me knowing I would die if he didn’t lick my bite; he held me through my first shift knowing I had a seventy-five percent chance of dying. It was time to repay the favor.

I placed my hands on either side of Maddy’s shoulders. “You’re right, I’m not Lena. And Brayden needs us. Let’s go.”

Dropping her shoulders, I spun and took off running down the hall. I didn’t have my gun, so this was about to get really interesting. The only plus was that if I threw myself between two fighting wolves again and got bitten, I couldn’t be turned into a werewolf twice.

“Wait, you crazy woman!” Maddy ran after me. When I reached the doors to the breakfast hall, I bypassed them and went right, following my intuition that they wouldn’t fight in public. Two double doors led to a banquet hall, and I heard something crash inside. A young bald man stood in front of the doors, arms crossed over his chest like a bouncer.

I inhaled his sharp scent through my nose.

Werewolf. That same snowy pine and gamey scent that Silas had. His packmate.

Without thinking, I made a fist and gave him an uppercut to the jaw just like in the movies. Pain exploded across my knuckles and the guy barely moved.

Crap.

There was a blur of blonde hair beside me and then Maddy was there, cracking the guy over the side of the temple until he fell into a heap at our feet.

She eye rolled me. “That’s not how you punch. You probably broke your thumb.”

“Noted.” I put the throbbing in my thumb to the back of my mind and pushed through the double doors with Maddy at my side.

Lord have mercy.

The two men were in wolf form, going at it like rabid dogs. Brayden’s grey wolf had a limp, and now that I knew Silas was trying to injure him before the fight next month, a protective need surged inside of me. I grabbed a dining chair, stalking across the room like a pro wrestler ready to knock someone out.

The sound of cracking bones sounded behind me and I knew Maddy was shifting. Anger built inside of my chest with each bite Silas took of Brayden. Silas was a bully. He tried to get people while they were down, and something about that made everything inside of me go red.

Lifting the chair above my head, I came down right on Silas’ wolf’s back, relishing in the crack it made.

Take that, you bastard.

Brayden used my distraction to wiggle out from under him. My joy lasted all of two seconds before Silas shook the chair off and lunged for me.

Okay, not smart.

Plan B?

A streak of golden and cinnamon fur sailed over my head and I ducked, protecting my jugular with my hands like I

would if a cougar were attacking. Maddy's wolf flew overhead and crashed into Silas as the two of them snipped at each other madly.

Brayden had rallied and now was lunging in on the fight to back his sister.

Relief settled over me. Two on one were good odds, I liked those odds.

“You bitch!” a male voice sneered behind me, and then something cracked into the back of my head.

Sharp pain laced through my skull and I was thrown forward onto my knees. Dizziness washed over me. I rolled on my back and the dude hovered over me. I recognized him as the one I'd punched by the front door. He held a brick in his hand, and blood dripped from it.

My blood?

Pulling my knees to my chest instinctively, I then kicked out just as the guy tried to pummel me again. My feet connected with his chest and he went flying. Like, he for real picked up into the air and sailed thirty feet across the room before hitting the wall and crashing down in a motionless heap. A giant dent of plaster was left in his wake and I sat up amazed at my super kicking skills.

Okay, if these were my new werewolf powers, I could get used to them.

A grunt sounded behind me and I spun to see a naked Brayden in human form whack Silas' wolf over the head with a chair.

The wolf went down, out cold. That had been my intent the entire time with the chair.

“Let’s go before he wakes up,” Maddy said. She too was human now.

I should get up, I should run out of the room. But I was stuck staring at Brayden’s naked backside.

“Come on, I’m right here,” Maddy growled, and I snapped from my trance and looked at her. She too was naked, not even

bothering to cover herself. Reaching out, she ripped a tablecloth off of a nearby table and wrapped it around her like a toga. Brayden did the same. I got up, moving halfway across the room, when Brayden looked at the dent in the wall from my superhuman kick.

“She’s strong,” Brayden told his sister, as if I wasn’t there.

Maddy nodded. “All newly changed wolves are. Remember Francie?”

His face fell as if he wanted to believe I was more special than I really was. Hell, being his super-powerful reincarnated mate sounded cool. I didn’t even know what it entailed, but who wouldn’t want to be special? I wouldn’t mind being his long-lost mate—he was super hot—but it was apparent to everyone but him that I was just... me: normal Averly.

We exited the room and ran past a few hotel patrons who looked at us with raised eyebrows. Once we reached our hotel room, everyone dressed and packed up quickly. I probed the back of my head with delicate fingers and was surprised to find that it was already healing.

“Let me look at that,” Brayden said quickly. He pressed and prodded, but it barely hurt.

“Rapid regeneration. It’s just a flesh wound, you’ll be fine,” Brayden said, and then we all booked it to the car.

No one said another word until we were back inside Brayden’s brand-new truck. I squished in the cab between Maddy and Brayden while he drove.

“So every day until the tournament he’s just going to keep coming for us?” I asked finally. This was a flawed system. The Fae Lords were really starting to piss me off.

“Neither is allowed to kill the other. We’ll be okay,” Brayden said, as if that would calm me.

I couldn’t mentally survive a month of being attacked. That was the first I’d heard of him not being able to kill Brayden. There was a small comfort in that.

“Then what’s the point!?” I screamed, anger filling me up as he got onto the Interstate.

Brayden cast me a side glance. “To wear us down mentally and physically.”

I groaned. “It’s working.”

Maddy chuckled. “Toughen up, buttercup, you’ve been a wolf one day.”

I was slightly over Maddy’s truth bombs. “What do we do now?”

Brayden shared a look with his sister before staring back out at the open road. “We need to see the Amarok and ask him to officially allow you to be in my pack.”

Maddy shivered beside me. “I’ll stay outside, thank you very much.”

I chuckled.

Maddy cast me a serious side glance. “Laugh now, but when you lay eyes on him you’ll piss yourself.”

That shook the humor from my bones.

“Stop scaring her. He’s not that bad,” Brayden added as he headed north towards Bonner’s Ferry and Canada.

Maddy chuckled. “Maybe not to another alpha and Greywolf, but I can barely make eye contact without an unfounded fear settling over me and making me sick.”

Yikes. I straightened in my seat.

“What happens if the Amarok says I have to join Silas’ pack?” I asked. I needed the worst-case scenario laid out beforehand. It soothed my anxiety.

Brayden was quiet for a whole minute, and in that time I imagined a lot of terrible things.

When he finally spoke, I started a little because the truck had grown so quiet.

“Then you go with my little sister and I’ll win you all back next month,” he said flatly.

“But you said he would kill me for embarrassing him,” I croaked.

Brayden shook his head. “Not now. Not if he thinks you’re... someone important to me.”

My stomach warmed at that comment. Brayden thought I was important to him? Because he thought I was Lena?

Maddy picked at her nails but said nothing. What was there to say? There was a very real possibility that I was about to be given over to a giant douchebag who seemed mildly psychotic.

“What if I just run away?” I blurted.

Maddy’s hand slipped in mine and squeezed. “He would find you and have grounds to kill you for being a pack deserter.”

Pack deserter! That was a thing?

Crap. Crap. Crap.

“Not to mention you would go insane without a pack,” she added.

“Some kind of life this is turning out to be!” I shrugged off Maddy’s hand and crossed my arms over my chest.

Brayden held the steering wheel of the truck tightly, and when he turned to meet my gaze, I frowned at him.

With a sigh, I lay my head back on the glass and closed my eyes.

What a crapshow the past twenty-four hours had been. I just wanted to go home and see my mom and Leah. Fatigue pulled at my consciousness and I drifted off to sleep.

I WAS SHAKEN awake and my eyelids snapped open to see Brayden right in front of my face. I wiped my mouth with my hand, praying there was no drool present.

“We’re here. You have to come in with me,” he said.

I nodded, blinking a few times and trying to wake up. I’d been in a deep dream. Brayden was there and we were kayaking of all things. The mind was so weird. I looked out the front dash of the truck to see that we were facing a really beautiful house. It was one of those ones you looked at online but never had money to buy.

“I’m one hundred percent staying in the car,” Maddy announced.

“Great,” I growled at her. “Leave me alone with supreme scary and Brayden?”

She grinned and nodded.

Brayden pouted and it was so damn hot. “Hey, what’s wrong with being alone with me?” I’m pretty sure he didn’t even know how good looking he was, which was a good thing or his ego would be a lot bigger.

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat. “Just wanted some female support.”

“Oh, you’re pulling the female support card!” Maddy groaned. “Fine, but I’m staying in the back of the room.”

Geez, how scary was this guy? Now I was starting to get really nervous.

Brayden opened the door and I stepped out. Maddy followed us.

Maddy lowered her voice and whispered to me: “Don’t look him in the eye, don’t speak unless spoken to, and don’t touch him for the love of God.”

My eyes felt like they might bug out of my head. “What if he shakes my hand?”

“He won’t,” Brayden and Maddy said at the same time.

Then why the hell would I touch him?! These were some weird rules. My palms were officially sweating.

“Madison Archer, stop it. You’re scaring her,” Brayden snapped at his sister.

When we reached the door, he raised his fist to knock and then turned to me. “I smell Silas. He’s probably already here.”

How the heck could he already be here? We’d just left him unconscious at the motel. I shook my head; I didn’t even want to know.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” Brayden said. I liked that he sounded so confident, but considering he lost his pack in a fight last year, I wasn’t feeling too great about his abilities to keep pack members right now.

Before I could retort, he knocked on the door.

They must have known we were coming, because the door opened seconds after the knock and a petite woman wearing a red silk suit and holding an iPad looked up at Brayden.

“Brayden Greywolf,” Brayden said to the woman. “I have a pack member dispute case with the Amarok.”

She nodded, tapping something on the iPad, and then stepped back so that we could come into the house.

Whoa. We entered the foyer, which opened up to a giant marble staircase and thirty-foot-high ceilings. The walls were plastered with a cool matte black wallpaper, and the marble was white but with black veins running through. It had a very masculine bachelor pad vibe going on.

Brayden cleared his throat and I snapped my gaze in his direction to see all three of them waiting on me to join them down the hallway.

Oops.

Scrambling to catch up, I followed the iPad woman and my fellow packmates—never thought I would say that—down the hall. We reached a set of double doors, and before the woman could knock, a deep rumbling voice came from inside.

“Enter!” the male voice boomed, and I might or might not have peed one drop. There was power in his voice, which was weird to admit or even think about, but the mere act of him giving the command caused me to step forward.

Maddy cast me a worried look, one which I returned, and then the doors opened.

I didn't see anyone at first, which I was kind of glad for. We stepped into a giant room. It was rectangular, about forty feet long by twenty feet wide. The right half was full of empty rows of chairs, and when I stepped deeper in and looked to the left half, my knees weakened.

There at the end of the room was a giant desk on a platform like that of a judge. Sitting behind it was a behemoth of a man. He looked like John Cena and the Hulk had a baby. But it wasn't his size that was scary. It was his eyes. He had a scar running from the tip of his forehead down his eyelid and to his cheek. The eye was completely gone, with a sunken hole left in its place. He wore a menacing scowl with pursed lips, and the tips of his ears were very slightly pointed. He looked about forty, with black hair that had a little grey streaked at the temples.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Amarok." Brayden bowed his head slightly and Maddy yanked my hand, pulling me to the right to occupy the empty chairs with her.

I realized in that moment we were about to hear a court case of sorts and the Amarok was judge, jury, and executioner, like Brayden said.

Why was it so hard to breathe in here? It was like there was power sitting over my chest, pressing it down. Maddy looked to be struggling also, so I didn't feel as worried that I was having some weird Amarok allergic reaction.

Just when I thought this couldn't get any worse, Silas walked into the room. His lip had crusted blood on it and he was walking with a slight limp but otherwise looked okay. His gaze ran from my head, slowly down my body to my feet, and I felt sick.

Brayden gave him a warning growl and Silas turned, looking at the other alpha.

"Good to see you again, Brayden," Silas said cheerily.

His tone was just condescending and annoying.

“Likewise,” Brayden growled.

“Cut the shit. I have an appointment in ten minutes,” the Amarok’s voice boomed from the back of the room, and again his speech had power. It made it even harder to breathe and I started to panic. “Who has claim on the girl?”

Could someone open a window?

“I bit her. She’s mine!” Silas said.

The Amarok looked at Silas. “You bit a human without permission? The Fae Lords will have your head if you go around admitting that.”

Silas swallowed. “No, sir, I bit her out of self-defense. She attacked me.”

The Amarok tipped his head back and laughed, and the tightness in my chest eased a little. “That bitty human attacked you?”

Hey, I’m not bitty.

Silas clenched his jaw. “She shot me five times in the chest.”

The Amarok looked at me then and raised an eyebrow. Was that pride in his gaze? I didn’t want to look him in the eyes—er, eye—so I just focused on his forehead.

Brayden cleared his throat. “Amarok, his bite would have killed her. It was *my* saliva that saved her life and changed her. I should own her.”

Own her? I moved to stand up and dispute that crap right here, but Maddy clamped her hand on my wrist and yanked me back down.

The Amarok looked at Brayden and I saw the muscles in his neck tighten. “You changed a human to a werewolf without the Fae Lords’ *or* my permission.”

Brayden nodded. “To save her life after the bite of another wolf would have killed her, which, correct me if I’m wrong, sir, is allowed without permission.”

The Amarok stared at Brayden so hard that I thought *I* might pass out.

Did Brayden just correct him? Or challenge him or something? Because it sure as hell felt like that.

The Amarok shook his head. “You always were a smart bastard.”

I relaxed a little, and Brayden’s shoulders loosened as well.

“I bit her. So the bitch is mine!” Silas suddenly yelled so loudly that I jumped.

The next thing I knew, an invisible power lashed out from the Amarok. Silas was thrown to his knees as if someone had physically pushed him down. His head lowered, his hands moving behind his back. Brayden froze, unmoving.

“Yell at me again in my house and I will remove the skin from your body, you dirtbag piece of shit.” My skin burned with the power of the Amarok’s voice from all the way back here, so I couldn’t imagine what Brayden was feeling so close to that kind of magic.

“Forgive me, Supreme Alpha. I have a temper that’s hard to control,” Silas sniveled.

The Amarok narrowed his gaze at Silas. “It was Brayden’s saliva that changed the girl and so she is *his* wolf. Hell, I can smell him on her from over here. You have no claim on her and my word is final. I will send this in writing to the Fae Lords tonight.” He slammed his fist on the desk like a gavel and relief spread through my limbs.

Silas stood, teeth clenched so tightly I thought they might snap off. “Thank you, sir,” he ground out, and then stormed from the room.

The Amarok watched him go, and when the door shut he looked at Brayden. “I wish this year was a centennial tournament and you could just kill him and be done with it.”

Brayden chuckled. “You and me both, sir. Next year I have that to look forward to.”

I glanced at Maddy with confusion. “Every one hundred years they remove the stipulation that they can’t kill each other and let them go at it. It brings in big money for the Fae Lords.”

Sick. These Fae Lords charged money for this event? That was wrong on so many levels.

The Amarok nodded. “I look forward to seeing you get your pack back. I know this year hasn’t been easy on you.”

Whoa, did the giant bag of rage and steroids have a heart? It was like he was only acting all powerful and crazy for Silas’ benefit, and now that he’d left the room they’d become old college roommates or something.

“No one looks forward to that more than me, sir. I will see you there.” Brayden held out his hand and the Amarok took it, shaking it firmly.

“It’s crazy how much you look like your father. Do I tell you that enough?” the Amarok said.

Brayden smiled. “Only every time we meet, sir.”

The Amarok gave a small chortle and then waved us out.

Okay, that was the weirdest twenty minutes of my life. Who was Brayden’s dad, I wondered? Maddy and I stood and started to walk out the door when the Amarok spoke again.

“Hang on... bring her to me.” His voice was deep and commanding, and fear rose up inside of me.

No. No. No.

I looked in panic to Maddy, who looked to Brayden.

“Is something wrong, sir?” Brayden’s voice was tense.

“Bring. Her. To. *Me*,” he said again, as if annoyed to have to repeat himself. Gone was the friendly buddy alpha. He was back to business.

I swallowed hard, and Brayden hooked one arm under my armpit and started to gently pull me in his direction.

I took small little shuffle steps, hoping to avoid the inevitable, but Brayden practically dragged me over to the

Amarok behind the desk. I was torn between wanting to keep my head down and wanting to examine this man closer.

My curiosity won.

When I looked up into his eye, it was like being struck by lightning. A bolt of energy shot into my head and crackled down my spine, causing me to gasp.

“Averly!” Brayden shouted and the energy began to dissipate. I didn’t realize it, but I was still staring the Amarok in the eye. He held my gaze as a childlike wonder crept into his features.

‘*Look away*,’ Brayden commanded, his voice filling my head, and I did immediately. I didn’t know if looking at him had caused the bolt of energy, but I didn’t want any more of it.

“She’s incredibly powerful,” the Amarok said, his voice holding a dangerous tone.

“Yes. I sensed it in her even when she was human,” Brayden told him nonchalantly, but I could see every muscle in his body tensed.

He did? He didn’t tell me that. Maybe this was why I could easily kick that dude across the room earlier. Was I going to get super hulky muscles? Because that might freak me out.

I felt the Amarok’s power wash over me again, and the need to suck in a deep breath became overwhelming. I wanted to push back at the power somehow, but I knew that wouldn’t be a good idea.

“Lena?” he asked Brayden, and every single muscle in Brayden’s jaw ticked.

“I don’t know. She doesn’t remember me,” Brayden said honestly, and the heartbreak in his voice was like a punch to my gut.

The back door opened then and it was like the trance that had fallen over us all was broken.

“Sir, your next appointment is here,” the woman in the red silk suit said.

The Amarok nodded and then stood, leaning over the top of the desk to get all up in Brayden's space. "With her power flowing through you in the tournament, you cannot lose."

Relief washed over Brayden's face, and then he bowed deeply. "Thank you, sir."

Brayden's hand hooked under my armpit again and then I was dragged back to the doorway in shock.

What the hell just happened?

When we reached the hallway, Maddy looked over at me. "Admit it, you peed a little."

I wanted to laugh but couldn't bring myself to; the tension from the meeting was still with me. Even so, I was starting to crave Maddy's sense of humor.

I was just glad the meeting was over with, and I wanted to go home.

SEVEN

The ride home was filled with tension. Brayden was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white. Maddy stared ahead unmoving, but I could tell she sat rigid. An anxious feeling filtered through me and I couldn't tell why.

“What’s going on?” I finally blurted.

Maddy looked at her brother, who remained silent. “It’s hard for an alpha to go before the Amarok and—”

“Yes, sir. Please. Thank you,” Brayden growled next to me, and I grinned.

Oh, he was pissed he’d had to bend his will to another? A chuckle left my throat before I could stop it.

Brayden’s head whipped in my direction and he scowled. “It’s *not* funny.” The animalistic tone wiped the smile right off my face and I swallowed hard.

“Be nice to her!” Maddy snapped. “It’s not our fault you aren’t feeling macho now that you had to kiss the Amarok’s ass.”

The steering wheel creaked and groaned as Brayden sped across the Interstate.

“I am very macho,” he said through gritted teeth.

Maddy sighed. “Of course you are. I didn’t mean that.”

“I could wipe the floor with his ass,” Brayden growled. “He used to work for *me*.”

That was interesting, but I knew better than to ask.

Maddy and I stayed silent the rest of the drive while Brayden was lost in his anger bubble. When he finally pulled up to my house I nearly wept with joy.

I looked at Maddy. “Thanks for everything,” I told her, and then urged her to move, but she swallowed hard, looking at Brayden.

I glanced back at the alpha and he was watching me with a stormy expression. “I’m sorry, Averly, but I can’t let you live with your mom now that I know how powerful you are and that Silas will be after you. You would be constantly in danger, and quite frankly probably get your mom killed.”

My mouth popped open. “What?”

How dare he threaten my mother’s safety just because he wanted to keep our little pack together.

“Silas could come back and—”

I cut him off. “And I’ll shoot him again. I’m going inside to see my mother and sleep in my bed and then go to work and that’s that,” I growled, feeling my wolf come to the surface.

Brayden’s jaw clenched. “I forbid it.”

I burst out laughing, and because we were all sitting in a truck cab together I basically laughed right into his face. His eyes went yellow, and grey fur puffed out of his neck.

“Let her go,” Maddy warned and opened the door, stepping out to give me access to the outside.

I shot Brayden a glare and stepped out of the truck.

“Be careful, okay? We just care about your safety,” Maddy told me. “I programmed our numbers in your phone last night while you were sleeping. Call anytime.”

I nodded and then walked into the house, only pausing to take one look over my shoulder to see Brayden’s yellow eyes glaring back at me.

I had no belongings since Brayden kidnapped me from the hospital, but my mom thought I was camping, so hopefully she

didn't notice when I walked in with no backpack or sleeping bag. Using the code, I let myself in.

"Averly, is that you?" my mom called from deep in her bedroom at the back of the house.

"Yeah, let me put my stuff away." I slipped into my room and peeked a look at myself in the mirror.

Not bad. My face didn't scream "I'm a werewolf," so that was good. I also noticed that I only felt a little bit lonely without Brayden and Maddy here. Not nearly as bad as I'd thought compared to what I'd felt in the hotel room. Further proof that I was going to be fine living without them.

I stepped out into the living room and my mom was there with open arms. "I missed my baby!" She tackle-hugged me and I chuckled, squeezing her tightly. As an only child raised by a single mom you couldn't get a much closer bond. My mom was my person and I'd missed her. It killed me that I couldn't tell her what had happened with me. She pulled back and looked me over. "How was the camping trip? Why didn't you invite Leah? She came by and seemed a bit bent out of shape about it."

I winced. "Yeah, I gotta call her. It was a spur of the minute thing with new friends. I'll invite her next time."

My mom nodded, raising an eyebrow. "Is one of these new friends a boy?"

I had to make a decision here... I was going to be spending time with Brayden and Maddy, there was no way around that, so I might as well tell my mom a little bit about them so when I hung out with them it seemed normal.

I nodded. "He's a doctor actually, and has a sister, Maddy, who is around my age."

I technically didn't know their ages, but I also didn't want to know.

My mom's head reeled back a little. "A doctor? Wow, that's like your dream guy. But how old is he?"

I was pretty sure Maddy had alluded to Brayden being over a hundred years old when he said Lena had reincarnated like eight lifetimes, but I wasn't even going to go there because it was creepy.

"Twenty-four," I lied. He looked about twenty-four, so that's all that mattered.

My mom nodded, seeming okay with that answer.

"What did you guys do on the trip?"

I squirmed under her gaze. I hated lying to my mom. "Bonfire, smores, hiking, all that stuff."

She seemed pleased with that answer, and I started to back up into my room before this conversation went deeper. "I gotta call Leah before my shift at the Rusty Spoon. Love you, glad to be home."

My mom smiled. "Love you too," she said, before she disappeared into the kitchen.

Leah picked up on the first ring. "I'm *so* pissed at you."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, get over it, because it was out of my control."

Truth.

"Whatever that means. How's the rabies?" she retorted.

I looked down at my fully healed arm. "Rabies free! Want to come to the bar tonight? I'll slip you a free drink and then you can walk home with me and we can have a sleepover."

She was silent a moment. "Yes to the bar, no to the sleepover."

A frown pulled at my lips. "Okay."

Wow, she really was pissed; she never said no to a sleepover. Even at this age we loved to watch *Friends* reruns and gorge candy until we felt sick.

"Because..." She dragged it out. "Jason asked me to sleep over, so we will all hit up the bar but I'll be going home with him."

I chuckled. She and Jason were on a break last I checked, so apparently my absence made her run back to him.

They were on and off since sophomore year in high school. This latest break had lasted a grueling three months. When he made her happy it was great, and when he didn't she dumped him. It was a juvenile relationship of convenience that I hoped they would outgrow soon.

"He's decent," I told her, which made her laugh. She knew I didn't like him much. I mean, as a person he was okay, but they were just so toxic together. I gave this new round of dating two weeks, max. "He puts up with all your sasquatch conspiracy stuff," I told her. "Good luck finding another man who will do that."

"Hey, it's not a conspiracy if it's proven true," she shot back.

I nodded even though she couldn't see it. "And when you bring me the body of a sasquatch I will no longer call it a conspiracy."

But even as I said it I wondered if maybe it could be true. *Hell, werewolves are.*

"Gotta shower and eat before work. See you later?"

"See you later!" she piped up.

I hung up the phone, glad to have things with my bestie patched up.

AFTER EATING a quick dinner and showering, I put on cut-off jean shorts and a black tube top that was screen printed with a skull. Then I shoved my gun inside of my black leather studded handbag and then slipped out of the house. I got about four feet down the driveway when I saw the red truck parked at the end and groaned. The window was rolled down. Brayden hung a well-toned and tattooed arm outside of it. For the first time, I really zeroed in on the tattoos. The most prominent one was a wolf howling at the moon. Inside of the

body was a list of names. I couldn't help but read them as I approached him.

Lena, Tabitha, Maxine, Veronica, Charlene, Naomi, Skylar, Hannah.

Wow, this dude got around. "How long have you been out here?" I asked, walking up to the window. Now that I'd cooled off, I felt less hostile towards him.

"I never left," he said, and my eyebrows shot up. "I didn't want you to feel... look, it's hard to be a new wolf without a packmate close by."

Aww. Damn, he was sweet. I couldn't stay mad at him.

"Where's Maddy?" I craned my neck to peer inside the truck cab but didn't see her.

"She got a ride home to get some rest."

I shifted on the balls of my feet. "Brayden, you don't have to bodyguard me or whatever this is, okay?" I opened my bag and showed him the gun. "I can take care of myself."

It occurred to me that maybe I felt good inside my house and not lonely because he'd never left and was a mere fifty feet away.

"Want a ride?" He ignored my attempt to shove him off.

I opened my mouth to say no when I realized that I'd chatted with him for so long I probably would be late without a ride.

With a nod, I walked to the front of the truck but watched him. His gaze raked over my bare legs as the truck lights bathed them in their golden glow. My body heated as his gaze trailed up to the two-inch strip of stomach I was showing and I swallowed hard. I had this weird love-hate relationship with Brayden and I barely knew him. One second I was fantasizing about kissing him and the next I wanted to smack him. That felt like the kind of emotions you reserved for someone you'd known longer, but I guess since we had this pack link it made all the feelings more intense.

I slipped inside and buckled in, noticing his gaze flick to my bare legs. Without a word he started the truck and then headed for the bar.

“You know, we could use a vet tech at the animal hospital I work at two nights a week,” he said.

I perked up. “You work at Bonner General and the animal hospital?”

He nodded. “Keeps my skills sharp so that I can take care of the werewolves in this area. So do you want the job?”

Did I want to be a vet tech two nights a week while going to veterinary school? *Hell yes*. But I wasn’t qualified. “That’d be awesome... but I don’t have my vet tech license.”

“You could work the front desk, then, and when you’re ready for residency I could teach you,” he said.

Wow, getting a vet residency was really hard here. You had to usually go down to Coeur d’Alene or Spokane to match with a doctor.

I shrugged. “Sure. I mean, I’d have to check with my bar schedule and see what days I’m not working, but—”

“I was thinking you could quit the bar. I could supplement your monthly income if needed—”

I crossed my arms as he pulled into the space in front of the bar. “So you only asked me to work the front desk because you want me to quit the bar? Do I look like a secretary to you?”

I mean, nothing wrong with secretaries, but I didn’t like what he was playing at. “I want to be a doctor like you, and I make way more money bartending than I ever would making appointments for a flea bath,” I snarled.

Brayden tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “You’re so stubborn!”

“Damn straight. Don’t forget it,” I told him.

He suddenly chuckled, reaching out and stroking a freckle on my wrist. The action sent heat down my chest and it settled

between my legs. “She had a freckle here too,” he said, and I froze.

“Who?”

He swallowed hard, his gaze flicking to his tattoos. “There is something I need to tell you.”

I was already stiffened, but at that my entire body felt like it turned to cement. I was a statue. Unmoving. No one ever said anything good after “there is something I have to tell you.”

“Each one of these names... is the same person,” he said, and I released the breath I’d been holding.

“Lena?” It hit me then. The wolf tattoo. All the names.

He frowned. “Maddy told you?”

I nodded. “But I don’t really know the whole story.”

He sighed. “When the Fae Lords took my throne over two hundred years ago—”

I gasped. Okay, he just admitted he was over two hundred years old *and* that he’d had a throne. He said *throne*!

“When the Fae Lords took my kingdom,” he went on. “They cursed my mate, Lena.” He stroked the very first name tattooed across his arm. “Her curse is that she would die on her twentieth birthday and reincarnate again and again and again.”

Chills rose on my arms as I processed what he’d just said.

“So those names...?” I reached out and touched *Tabitha*.

He nodded. “All her. She finds me in every lifetime, usually when she only has about a year left of life. Her memory comes back to her on her nineteenth birthday. Right around your age...”

It was like he’d sucked all of the oxygen from the truck. My conversation with Maddy at the hotel bloomed in my mind and I swallowed hard. “And you think I’m her? Lena? Your... mate?”

He nodded. “I do.”

I wanted it to be true in that instant, because it was just so romantic, but I knew I wasn't her. "But I'm nineteen and I don't remember you. You said she always remembers you by then?"

He chewed at his lip. "She does, but—"

"Maddy made it seem like you think any girl around my age could be her." Okay, not technically true, but that's what I thought and I was going to throw Maddy under the bus to express my feelings.

His teeth clamped shut. "Maddy has no faith that Lena will come anymore."

"Why not?" I shrugged. "She's come..." I counted the names.

"Eight times. I've married her and loved her eight times in eight different bodies." His voice was filled with so much adoration that it made butterflies take flight in my stomach.

The entirety of that sentence was so swoon-worthy I could barely handle it. But I wasn't someone else reincarnated. I would remember, have flashes or visions or something.

"Why doesn't Maddy believe Lena will come back this time if she always does?"

He played with the steering wheel. "Lena hasn't shown up for forty years, which means in the last life... she didn't find me."

Oh man.

I reached out and took his hand in mine. "I'm so sorry. I am. That's legit the saddest story I've ever heard. But I'm not her. I'm... me. Averly. I don't remember anything but *my* life."

He chewed his lip. "No dreams? Flashbacks?"

I shook my head and pulled my hand back. "I'm sorry."

He nodded. "Okay. You should get to work." His voice sounded hollow.

I stepped out of his truck and then walked into the bar, all the while a pit was in my stomach. The whole Brayden Lena

saga really tugged at my heart. She hadn't shown up for forty years? He'd waited for her the whole time? It was unfathomable to me.

"Hey, Clara." I stepped behind the bar, still reeling from what Brayden had told me. These Fae Lord douchebags really did a number on him with that curse on his mate.

"Hey, Aver—" Her nostrils flared, eyes flashing purple for a split second. "You were bitten."

The shock of her words stopped me in my tracks and I inhaled her scent into my nostrils. Smoke, incense and... earth. "What?" I laughed nervously, covering my arm where the bite used to be.

This was my first time back to work since my change. Clara couldn't tell what I was, right?

Did I imagine the purple eyes? She was talking about the wolf bite from the other night. No big deal.

She looked me up and down, shaking her head. "You smell like a werewolf. Was it that guy from the other night? Brayden?"

My heart hammered in my chest. "A werewolf?" My voice reached an embarrassingly high register.

What the frick? How did she know what they were?

Don't panic. It's a joke. It has to be a joke.

She grinned, pulling her wrist to my nose. "I'm a witch."

I wanted to stagger backward, but instead I inhaled again and this time it was like a fizzy soda hit the back of my throat.

"Now you know what we smell like. Holy crap, Ronan is going to lose his mind." She turned and cupped her hands around her mouth. "RONAN, GET OUT HERE! AVERLY'S A WEREWOLF!"

I smacked her arm but then braced myself. "Is Ronan... a warlock too?"

Clara nodded. "We're in the same coven."

I was going to get whiplash from that. My head swiveled and I reached for a stool. “I need to sit down.” Thank God we hadn’t opened yet. I needed to process this.

Clara grinned. “You’re a newly changed werewolf and you need to sit down because I’m a witch?”

I nodded. “I’ve never met a... magical person before.”

Clara grinned as if she was loving this conversation. Ronan appeared and peeked his big bushy bearded face over the bar, flaring his nostrils. “Well, I’ll be damned, Averly, yer a werewolf!”

I nodded, and then a mild panic consumed me. “Wait. Do werewolves and witches get along? Am I going to get fired for this?”

Ronan and Clara both burst into deep belly laughter at the same time. “No. Heavens no. If anything, I should give you a raise. Now you can help out with some magical aspects of the job.” He winked.

Okay, whatever that meant. But a raise sounded nice.

I sighed in relief. “So werewolves and witches...?”

“Thick as thieves. My coven is friendly with all of the local packs,” Ronan said. “Who bit ya?”

I bristled at his direct question. “Well, technically Silas, but I’m Brayden’s wolf.”

My cheeks warmed even as I said it and they both seemed to grin, casting knowing glances at each other. “He’s a good lad. Felt bad last year when he lost his pack to that lazy hole Silas,” Ronan said.

My eyes widened. “You know about that?”

He nodded. “I’ve been around a long time. Everyone knows about Brayden and Silas’ rivalry.”

I gulped.

“So all of the magical races just get along? That’s a relief. I was worried I’d have to watch my back.” I relaxed and stood.

Ronan and Clara shared a weary look.

“I wouldn’t say we all ‘get along.’” Clara used air quotes. “You should definitely still watch your back.”

I bristled at that and Ronan nodded. “Especially with the fae and vampires. Dirty gobshites they are, though they mainly stick to the Ether Realm. We only have a few fae clans out here in the mountains, and one vampire coven.”

I gulped.

Okay. There was a vampire coven in Sandpoint. Good to know.

“Cool. Cool.” I nodded nervously. “So a vampire coven is like... five people?”

Clara and Ronan laughed again, and then there was a bang on the front door.

Ronan nodded. “It’s opening time! Welcome to the supernatural family, Averly. You know you can’t tell your mother, right?”

I nodded and he winked and then left.

While Clara walked over to unlock the door, I finished wiping down the bar.

Vampires and fae bad. Fae Lords obvi bad. Witches and warlocks good.

Okay, I was getting the hang of this. I started making drinks and easily fell into the routine of bartending. There was something about it that I loved. I liked that I had over one hundred recipes in my memory to pull from at will. I liked that I had new clients every night and a few regulars. I loved being active and on my feet.

The first two hours passed quickly and I’d learned a few things.

1. This town had a ton of witches and warlocks.
2. This town had a decent number of werewolves, all who flicked glances at me, nostrils flaring, but said nothing.

3. Brayden was totally stalking me.

His bright red truck was parked outside all night, and if I walked over and peered through the glass I could see him looking right back at me.

Leah, Jason, and some of his friends finally stopped by.

There were a few rowdy customers, one of whom Clara had to throw out, but all in all a normal night and I made eighty-seven dollars in tips.

Score.

My macho werewolf stalker who wanted me to become a secretary was still in the truck by the time I got out of work, except he was asleep behind the wheel.

I sighed.

Poor guy, why was he just sitting around? Did he not remember that I saved *his* life? I could handle myself.

I contemplated just walking home and letting him sleep the night in the parking lot of the Rusty Spoon but my guilty conscience would eat me alive. He did save my life... and he'd been through a lot since then at my expense. Walking over, I tapped on the window. His eyes sprang open, going golden for a split second as he bolted upright. When he saw me, he turned on the motor and rolled down the window. "Want a ride?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes. "No. I want you to go home with Maddy and get some proper sleep."

His gaze sharpened until I was staring at a very grumpy werewolf.

"Are you seriously going to just follow me everywhere and sleep outside in the truck?" I asked him.

He nodded. "If you don't want to move in with us, then Maddy and I will trade off nights shadowing you."

Shadowing was a fancy word for a *stalking*.

I frowned. “What would it take for you to go home and get a good night’s sleep in your own bed?” I asked him.

I didn’t want the dude sleeping all night in his truck.

“If you came home with me. Averly, we’re pack. You belong with Maddy and I.” His response was instant and my cheeks heated. I know he didn’t mean come home and sleep in his bed but my mind went there.

“Well—”

A bottle crashed behind me and I spun.

Four giant men stepped out of the shadows and my whole body stiffened. The door to Brayden’s truck door popped open so fast it smacked me in the back and I bolted forward a step so he could get out. One of the men shifted instantly into his wolf form, shredding his clothes, and it took my brain too long to realize what was happening.

We were totally about to get jumped! Brayden’s arms came around my waist just as the wolf lunged for me, and he yanked me backward. One second I was reaching for the gun in my purse and the next Brayden was chucking me into the truck and slamming the door behind him.

“Go!” he shouted to me over his back just as the wolf lunged for him.

Go? As in drive off without him? Hell no! Why did he keep thinking I was some girl who ran from trouble?

Two of the wolves attacked him at the same time and I burst from the truck, cocking my gun. One wolf latched on to his arm, but Brayden shook him off quickly.

I couldn’t shoot the wolves without accidentally shooting Brayden, and he was in the middle of shifting anyway, so not even a stable target. When the third wolf lunged for Brayden’s throat, something inside of me snapped. Feeling powerless without the use of my weapon, I acted on instinct.

“Stop!” I commanded and threw out my arm. A shockwave of force flew from my palm and slammed into the mess of wolves.

It was like time stopped. Literally. Everyone froze. The wolf was one inch from Brayden's neck, jaw open and about to bite down, suspended in midair.

What. The. Hell?

Brayden's head swiveled around to look at me, his eyes as wide as saucers. How come he could move? The three wolves were frozen in time but Brayden was looking at me, chest heaving as he tore the wolves away from him and tossed them to the ground. Pressure built in my head and I winced as Brayden reached me.

"You're one of them," he breathed, and then yanked me by the arm and tossed me in the truck. He jumped in and threw the truck into gear. As he peeled out of the parking lot, he stopped at the edge of the sidewalk before pulling out onto the road. His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror and the frozen wolves on the concrete.

"Let them go!" he snapped at me. "Your power will call the Fae Lords."

I realized he was talking to me. That he thought *I* had somehow frozen those wolves.

"I'm not doing anything," I told him as I stared at the frozen wolves on the ground.

His large fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Your head feels tight? Like it's packed with cotton?"

I gulped. It felt like my brain was being squeezed, but I often got headaches after a shift. It was three a.m. and I was exhausted.

He reached out and grabbed the sides of my face. "Averly, I'm safe now. Let. Go."

As he said *Let go*, it was like I melted into the seat; the pressure in my head eased. Brayden glanced in the rearview mirror and I followed his lead, gasping when the wolves stood and shook themselves as if in a daze.

With that, Brayden gunned it and the tires squealed. He plowed through the streets of downtown and then onto the

highway. I didn't even complain when I realized he wasn't taking me home. There was no way I wanted to go in and chat with my mom right now.

"I didn't do that," I told him more forcefully than I intended. "Maybe Clara did. She's a witch I work with and—"

Brayden barked out in laughter. "Witches can't selectively suspend objects in time, Averly. *You* did. I felt the power go out of you and wash over me."

Absolute terror took me in its grip. I mean, it had felt like when I'd screamed *stop* a power had left me but... freezing people midair! That wasn't possible.

"No. I'm... that's not..."

Brayden kept sneaking side glances at me, his jaw clenched as his brain no doubt chewed on something.

"You said *You're one of them*," I finally got the nerve to say as he pulled down a wooded road. "What did that mean?"

He sighed, staying quiet for the entire stretch of thickly treed road. He turned into a private drive with a large modern glass cabin and parked in front of it. It was a beautiful home, but I couldn't appreciate it with my mind on other things.

"A Greywolf," he finally said, and for some reason the words sent a chill up my spine. Hadn't Maddy spoken about Greywolves? She'd mentioned my coloring and that there were grey wolves, and then there were *Greywolves*. It seemed the latter had tremendous power, but I hadn't really been paying attention to all that because she'd just dropped the reincarnation-Lena bomb on me.

I waited for him to say more. He knew I couldn't possibly know what that meant. A series of painful expressions crossed his face as he no doubt relived a raw memory.

"I was the king of the Greywolves, of all the wolves. Or I used to be before the Fae Lords severed my connection to my power."

It was so foreign to my brain to process that there were kings and queens outside of Europe that I just sat there in

shock as he told his story.

“Lena was a Greywolf as well. I have three other brothers who are also Greywolves, and Lena has three sisters who are. Four pairs of soulmates to make up the Greywolf Council.”

And this story just got more romantic. Triple swoon-worthy.

“All of my wolves were driven out of our home when the Fae Lords took over. I haven’t been back in centuries.”

I frowned. “And you think I’m one of these Greywolves?”

“I *know* you are.” He turned to me. “The power you just displayed is a Greywolf power.”

Fear tightened in my gut. “So I’m Lena?” My heart hammered in my chest. I was having an out-of-body experience where I didn’t feel like myself and it was terrifying.

He rapped the steering wheel with his thumbs, looking sideways at me. “I want you to be, but Lena’s connection to her powers were severed by the Fae Lords along with mine.”

I felt like I was on a rollercoaster. Greywolf—Lena—not Lena. What the hell was he getting at?

“How many Greywolves are there in the world?” I asked frustrated.

“Hundreds,” he said, and my confusion deepened. “The others went into hiding when we were driven from our land. But all Greywolves are born wolves, not bitten... unless of course they are reincarnated, which is something only possible for Lena.”

He raised one eyebrow at me.

I squirmed in a mixture of anxiety and excitement. “So that *does* make me Lena?”

This man needed to figure out who I was or someone was getting a throat punch.

Brayden sighed. “I think you could also be one of Lena’s sisters, Wren. She came to me forty years ago, the day before

Lena's twentieth birthday in that incarnation. She was injured but said she'd figured something out. Something to change the cycle."

Could you get chills twenty times in the same night? "What was it? What did she figure out?" I was fully invested in this story now.

Brayden shrugged. "By the morning, Wren and Lena were dead, and I haven't seen either of them since."

A profound sadness settled over me and a frown pulled at my lips; I'd be lying if I said I wasn't still holding out hope that I *was* Lena. This reincarnation curse stuff sounded crazy, but if I was going to be one of the Greywolves I wanted to be her. Brayden wasn't bad to look at, and he came with the package, so why not.

"Were Wren's powers severed?" I asked.

He looked at me and fear flickered over his face, like this answer would explain something he didn't want to be true. "No. She had full power. When the Fae Lords took over my kingdom, they severed Lena and my connection to our powers, and... enslaved my brothers and her sisters."

"They severed it?" I shivered, thinking of it as sort of a magical castration.

"All Greywolves are born with a connection to the Source. How big our connection is determines our ranking and capacity to channel that power. Not only can we shift into wolf form, but as king and queen, Lena and I had the biggest connection. The biggest opening to channel that Source magic."

A muffled sob came from my throat. This story was incredibly sad and it was affecting me more than I thought it would. I was probably going to get my period soon or something because I felt super emotional.

He blew air out through his lips. "The Fae Lords keep my siblings at full power to... feed from them and use their power. But forty years ago Wren somehow broke free."

Anger welled up inside of me at that. “Imprisoned for hundreds of years? Why do the Fae Lords allow you to walk free?”

He glanced over at me and I almost regretted the question. He looked so tired, fatigue pulling lines of worry across his face, but there was also another emotion there. *Agony*. Pure agony danced across his eyes and I wanted to take my question back.

“I was the king of Moon Valley and all of the wolves in it,” he said, and I couldn’t help but think that Moon Valley sounded like a perfect name for a werewolf society. Ronan had mentioned the Ether Realm earlier but I’d been on information overload so I hadn’t asked what it was.

“Therefore, as the Greywolf leader, their magic came from me,” Brayden went on. “If I were to be killed without willingly passing on my power to a successor, all of the Greywolf magic would die too and weaken the entire Greywolf lines of Moon Valley throughout the Ether. Even though they severed my connection to my power, I am still the commander of Greywolf power by birthright.”

Whoa, the way he said that, with such an authoritative tone, it made my spine tingle.

“So the Fae Lords couldn’t kill you or they wouldn’t be able to steal the power from your siblings?” I asked.

He nodded. “And they cursed Lena to die on her twentieth birthday and then come back again in an endless loop of pure hell just to torture me.”

I swallowed hard. Would I rather be a slave to the Fae Lords, pumping them full of power daily, or stripped of power and have the guilt of being free while my siblings were tormented? Both options sounded awful.

“We should break in and free them! Kill those bastard Fae Lords—”

His hand came around my mouth so quickly I yelped in surprise. Eyes wide, he looked into the woods beyond me. “*Don’t* say that. Treason is punishable by death.” Leaning

forward, he peeled his fingers from my lips one by one and then ran his nose along the base of my neck until he reached my ear. A trail of fire ignited at this simple touch and I had to suppress a whimper.

“Years ago, I broke in and tried to save them. But without my power I am no match for the Fae Lords.”

My heart burst in my chest as his breath feathered over my neck. Need pulsed between my legs and I had to bite my cheek to keep from leaning forward and kissing him. I was suddenly and unexplainably infatuated with him. I wanted Brayden to be my soulmate—I wanted whatever meant he wouldn’t pull away from me in the next second.

He seemed to realize he was still lingering at my neck and pulled back, taking the heat and sexual tension with him and leaving me full of disappointment.

“The trees have ears,” he said, looking around again, and coughed before opening the door. “Come on, I’m wrecked. Let’s get some sleep.”

Right. It was nearly four a.m. now and I was exhausted. I was going to push the “trees have ears” comment from my mind because I couldn’t handle it right now. Stepping out into the cool night breeze, I sucked in a few lungfuls of air. It wasn’t until we reached the front doorstep that I realized I was going to sleep over at Brayden’s house. “Uhh, I should probably sleep at my hou—”

“Now that I know what you are, you can’t leave my side,” he declared, and then opened the door as if there was no further room for discussion.

I wanted to argue but I was too tired. I just shuffled after him in a daze as we passed the same cozy modern living room I’d been in before. The one he straddled me in and I’d shifted into my wolf and passed out in. I’d never seen the outside of the home, just his bedroom and this room. I walked away from a grey sectional and then went down a hallway. He opened a door and pointed to an empty twin bed.

“Sleep,” he commanded, and I just nodded.

I could make out Maddy's form curled up on the other twin and kicked off my shoes as I collapsed into the bed across from her.

Brayden stood in the doorway watching me as complete exhaustion pulled at my limbs. The last thing I saw before I fell into sleep were his burning yellow eyes.

EIGHT

I was awoken to the smell of food and my stomach rumbled before my eyes were even open. Rolling over, my eyelids sprang open as a scream tore from my throat. Maddy was five inches from my face.

“Morning.” She grinned and I reached up to grasp my heart.

“You scared the life out of me!” I tried to calm myself down as the adrenaline rushed through my body. “What are you doing? Watching me sleep? That’s creepy as hell, dude.”

Maddy shrugged. “Brayden told me about last night. I’m trying to figure out which one of Lena’s sisters you are.”

Oh. I sat up quickly and whacked my head on the wooden headboard. “Ow.”

Maddy fell into snorts of laughter. “She sure is clumsy like Wren!” she called into the hallway.

Wren. Other than Brayden telling me that name last night, it didn’t ring any bells. Surely I would know if I were reincarnated and someone said my old name?

“Feisty like her too,” Brayden called back.

Maddy leaned forward, narrowing her eyes at me. “But you also remind me a lot of Lena,” she whispered and I went stock still.

“You said I wasn’t her. Brayden said I couldn’t be her either,” I told her, matching her lowered voice.

She shrugged. “That’s until you displayed Greywolf power. Now you could be any of them.”

Any of them? Any of the four sisters? “But Lena didn’t have her power. I do,” I said.

“Maybe it got fixed.”

I chewed on my lip; this entire situation was making me nervous. “Did you know them?”

Maddy chuckled. “Of course! They are my sisters-in-law! Lena was always my favorite but Wren was second. Blake is the funny one and, well, Natalie is cool but kinda bitchy.”

Yikes. I hoped I wasn’t the bitchy sister.

“Come on, let’s eat! I’ve got surgery at the vet hospital in an hour,” Brayden called out.

Surgery! I was instantly jealous and wondered what kind of surgery he would be doing.

“I threw some extra clothes and a clean toothbrush in the bathroom for ya.” Maddy winked and then left.

My mind was still spinning from this entire Greywolf-Lena-Wren thing, so I decided to just put it all from my mind.

I showered quickly and changed, and then met them out in the kitchen. Now that it was light I could see that the cabin was more spacious than I thought, with vaulted ceilings and open windows looking at the woods beyond.

I’d noticed when I’d walked down the hall and peered into all the open bedrooms that they all had twin beds or bunkbeds in them.

“Is this a pack house?” I asked, assuming that was a thing.

Brayden sneered at me but then thought better of it. “This is one of my pack houses. My full land is over a hundred acres with multiple homes, but Silas is the owner of that right now. I was allowed to keep this one.”

Ouch, I’d hit another sore spot, so instead of answering I just nodded and switched gears.

“So you have surgery today?”

Brayden glanced at Maddy, who gave him a curt nod.

“What?” I growled, annoyed that they’d clearly been plotting something behind my back.

Brayden plopped a plate of food in front of me. “I need you to quit the bar and school.”

“Hah!” I barked out and crossed my arms over my chest. “I need *you* to stop telling me what to do.”

Maddy grinned, watching us with fascination.

Brayden stepped closer, towering over me. “Listen to me, Averly. You are a Greywolf with great power. Eventually the Fae Lords will track you down. I need to be there when that happens so that I can protect you.”

His words splashed ice water over my anger. The Fae Lords would track me down?

Maddy stepped forward wearing a compassionate look. “You’re either Wren who escaped the Ether and the Fae Lords want to hunt you down and imprison you again, or you’re Lena—”

“She’s not Lena,” Brayden growled. “She doesn’t remember me.” There was more hurt than anger in his voice and my heart pinched at that.

Maddy reached out and placed a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “She could be Lena, with restored powers, in which case—”

“Restored powers how? I was there when the Fae Lords severed her connection to her power, I held her as she convulsed. They took *everything* from her!” he bellowed, and I lowered my head in an effort to give them privacy.

“I know,” Maddy said, looking up at her brother with compassion. “But what if there was a way to fix Lena’s powers?”

Brayden shook his head. “The last witch I paid to try died in the process.”

That very sobering fact gave me chills.

“You don’t think I want Averly to be her?” Brayden’s voice cracked. “You don’t think I dream about it?”

Heat flushed through my entire body at that and I felt my wolf come to the surface.

Maddy nodded. “Bray, I love you, but you’re pigheaded sometimes. The fact is we don’t know *who* she is. She could be any of Lena’s sisters, but she *could* also be Lena. Either way, none of this changes how we protect her.”

They both looked at me then, Brayden with hope in his gaze that made my stomach do flips and Maddy with a fierce loyalty that I wasn’t sure I was worthy of.

“If I drop out of school, my mother will murder me,” I exclaimed. “I am going to be the first in my family to graduate college and I’m *not* giving that up over a guy.”

“Then don’t tell your mother. We can make a fake diploma when the time comes,” Maddy offered.

Brayden inclined his head in agreement. “I will train you myself. You will be doing procedures in a month’s time and surgery next year.”

I snorted. “Unlicensed! I need a degree to take the state licensing exam.”

“Wow she’s really a rule follower. Very much like Wren,” Maddy commented.

Brayden waved her off. “We have a guy who forges papers. You’ll have your license and top-notch training from me.”

My eyes bugged. “A fake license?”

Maddy nodded. “We live forever unless killed. How do you think we get by without fake IDs and diplomas?”

This situation had officially completely overwhelmed me. The room swam as dizziness washed over me.

“Whoa.” Brayden slipped around the counter and caught me as I stumbled backward.

His arms came around me and I looked up at him, terrified.
“I don’t know that I want to live forever.”

The lopsided grin he gave me was so sexy I nearly died. His eyes roamed over my body and the tiny, short crop top that Maddy had loaned me. “I certainly hope that you will.” His voice was smooth and deep and I was going to pretend to faint every day if it meant he would catch me.

“Oh, I hope she’s Lena.” Maddy cleared her throat and Brayden pushed me away as if I were made of fire. The trance he had over me broke then and I shook myself.

“So she’ll quit school and apprentice with me at the animal hospital.” Brayden started to pace the room, ignoring the fire that had just built between us.

“She’ll move in,” Maddy added, and Brayden pointed to her.

“Oh yes, there’s no getting around that,” he said. “And she’ll need to quit the bar too. That place is crawling with—”

“Stop it!” I screamed. “I’m going to school and I’m *not* quitting the bar!” I shouted and felt power burst out of me. It was like a momentary energy drain, only for a second, and then I felt normal again. The chandelier over the dining table swung and rattled, all the crystals shaking, and we all fell quiet.

“Okay.” Maddy held out her hands to me. “Stay calm or you’ll skin us alive.”

I whimpered at her words and Brayden shot her an angry look. “Don’t scare her like that.”

Did I just make the chandelier move from over here? My breath started to come out in ragged gasps.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Maddy observed.

I needed air. Why was it so hot in here? I stumbled through the living room and to the back wall of windows and threw the door open wide. Gasping for air, I bit back the tears that threatened to spill over. What was happening to me? First I got bitten and turned into a werewolf—not too bad and probably

better than rabies—but now I was immortal and some mysterious Greywolf with powers I couldn’t control. Oh—I forgot the reincarnation part.

I didn’t ask for this! I don’t want this.

Brayden’s face swam into view and he gripped my head in his giant hands. “You’re okay. We’ve got this,” he told me. There was confidence in his voice and that calmed something within me, but I was still reeling. The touch of his warm fingers on the sides of my face, his breath washing over me, it all did something to settle me.

“I’m scared,” I whimpered, holding his gaze.

Compassion crossed his face and his blue eyes flicked to my lips. He cleared his throat and let go of my face, stepping away. Maddy had come outside and was now standing behind Brayden. He flicked his head inside and widened his eyes as she followed him indoors. I was right behind him and closed the door behind me, getting a secret vibe from him. He watched me, and only once the door was fully closed did he speak.

“Maddy, cancel my surgery. We’re going to see the Elder Fae,” he declared.

Maddy’s eyebrows hit her hairline. “I’m sorry, what?”

I remembered about Brayden saying the trees had ears and now wondered if that was why he’d waited until I’d shut the door. I’d hoped he’d been joking last night but clearly not.

“Who is the Elder Fae?” I asked, my panic attack forgotten now that I had new information to chew on.

“I think he can help you,” Brayden said, but Maddy snorted.

“Or kill her! She’s totally untrained,” Maddy interjected, and I froze.

Wait, *kill* me? Why was I involved in this?

“No, he could hide her power so that if the Fae Lords find her they will think she’s Lena whose connection to her power has been severed,” Brayden said.

“This is giving me a headache,” I piped in. “Can we talk to me like I’m actually here?” I growled. “Because I am.”

Brayden turned to face me. “There is an old fae I know of who can help hide your powers so that you don’t accidentally use them in anger and hurt someone you love, and so that you won’t be tracked down by the Fae Lords. It would mean you could remain in school and working at that damn bar.”

Hide this freaky power of moving chandeliers and freezing time? “Hell yeah, I’m in.”

“YOU DIDN’T CANCEL life-saving heart surgery, right?” I asked Brayden as we took the steps up to the porch of a cabin that was nestled deep into the woods. We were so far north in Idaho that my phone was going in and out of roaming and saying *Welcome to Canada*. We’d driven Maddie’s little black RAV-4 and were bouncing all over the uneven backroads to this remote place.

Brayden chuckled. “Life-saving heart surgery is not something I do on animals or humans. I’m a trauma surgeon. This was a neuter procedure on a six-month-old puppy.”

Whew, no animals were going to be harmed in this little adventure. “Is that hard to neuter a dog while you are also a wolf?” I couldn’t imagine cutting the balls off of a little helpless puppy, especially if I had balls myself.

He shrugged. “Gotta pay the bills.”

True that. Which was why I wasn’t quitting the bartending job. Well, that and I didn’t want Maddy and Brayden making choices for my life. I peered over my shoulder and waved at Maddy, who was leaning against the hood of her car. She said that if meeting the Amarok made her want to pee her pants, then the Elder Fae was a crap-your-pants kind of situation and she was going to stay outside. I was not looking forward to this.

We'd reached the rickety porch of the broken-down cabin, and when Brayden reached for the knob of the door without knocking I yanked his arm back and looked at him with wide eyes.

"Don't you knock first?" I asked.

"Trust me," he said, and the effect those two words had on me was mildly embarrassing. I flushed and nodded my head, pulling back my arm.

He turned the knob and threw the door open wide. A plume of dust greeted us as the door banged against the interior wall of the small... home. It was hard to call it that as it looked more like an abandoned crack den, and that was putting it nicely.

"Oh look, no one lives here anymore. Time to go." I spun but Brayden caught me by the arm and pulled me inside.

The stench of damp mildew hit my nostrils and I put my hand over my mouth and nose. We walked into the living room and Brayden sidestepped a sagging old orange sofa and went right for the lamp that sat on the side table.

"You are crazy if you think this place has electricity," I told him as he reached for the cord to turn it on. This place was abandoned so long that rats had moved in. I could tell from the droppings on the carpet.

He reached out to me. "Hold my hand."

Damn, this guy was crazy, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that him demanding I hold his hand in this hellhole was still sexy.

Trust. Okay, trusting... here we go. I let him take my fingers in his, threading mine instantly with his as you would a lover. Our eyes locked, and something quivered in my chest.

I stepped closer to him, bringing my body in line with his as his eyes went yellow. I could get lost in this moment forever. Holding his hand, staring into his wolf eyes, it was like there was something inside of me that was trying to remember him.

Or maybe it was just my wishful thinking.

“I want to be Lena,” I confessed, and then swallowed hard.

His gaze fell to my lips as his thumb stroked the inside of my palm. Was there something familiar about the gesture?

“I want it to be you too.” He pulled on my hand, causing me to stumble forward until my body was flush up against his. My breasts smashed against his rock-hard chest and my hips dug into him. His eyes flashed blue to yellow and back again before he closed them and took in a steady breath. “Hold on to me,” was all he said.

He didn’t need to tell me twice. Hell, at this point I’d have his babies if he commanded it. Just call me Lena for the rest of my life, I wouldn’t care—whatever it took to get his tongue in my mouth.

I wrapped my free arm around his waist, then he yanked the chain on the lampstand. A shriek tore from my lips as everything went black and we were falling. Brayden’s hand clamped down on mine like a vise, and the other went around my waist, digging into my lower back and pressing me harder against him.

We stopped suddenly, my feet slamming onto hard-packed earth; my teeth clamped together. The darkness fled and suddenly I was looking up at the moonlight. I peered around and yelped when I realized we were no longer in the cabin and it was no longer daytime.

Thick trees that looked blackened and half melted surrounded a creepy home. There were flickering lights on in the windows and the entire thing looked to be carved of black stone. To Brayden’s right sat a lampstand with the same lamp on it from the cabin, this one lit and the cord still dancing from his touch.

“Brayden.” I clung to him and he looked down at me.

“It’s okay. This is where the Elder Fae lives.” He moved to walk towards the cabin door, still holding my hand, and I yanked him backward, forcing him to face me.

“*Where. Are. We?*” I demanded. I could only have one nervous breakdown a day and I’d already reached my quota.

Brayden looked at the melting, dripping trees and nodded. “A prison within the Ether Realm.”

My eyebrows shot up and he all but dragged me to the door.

Prison. He said *prison*.

Prison, meaning bad guys were here.

Realm, meaning... I had no idea what that meant. Had we left Earth?

“What was that?” I pointed to the lamp and allowed him to pull me along.

“Bridgeway to the Ether. A portal,” he said casually and knocked on the door.

What the heck, dude? If he and Maddy wanted me to have fewer panic attacks, I was going to need more information from now on.

“This entire place is a prison?” I looked at the trees and swore one had moved closer.

Brayden simply nodded.

I frowned. “And Moon Valley are the wolf lands inside of the Ether?”

“Yes. The Ether is the magical realm where all supernatural creatures come from,” he replied.

“And we are in a prison land inside of the Ether right now?” I asked in a slightly panicked voice.

“Yes, I thought if I told you where we were going you wouldn’t come.”

“You’re damn right I wouldn’t!” I yelled.

The door to the creepy black stone cabin opened then and I yelped, freezing like a deer in headlights as I came face to face with a tall man with a long grey beard standing in the doorway looking down his nose at us with scrutiny. Elongated ears

poked up and out of his hair and I stared at them, dumbfounded. He was like a cross between Gandalf and Voldemort. Scary *and* wise looking.

When his gaze fell to me, he smiled. “Wren!”

Brayden dropped my hand so fast that it smacked against my thigh and I looked up at the fae horrified.

“What?” Brayden and I said at the same time.

The Elder stepped back and waved us into the house, looking at me with excitement. “I can smell your Greywolf power from here.”

Absolute heartbreak crashed into me in that moment. He called me Wren—with certainty he called me *Wren*. Brayden looked crushed as well, staring at his hand like it had cheated on his wife.

“She’s Wren?” Brayden asked the man.

He waved his hands at me. “Has to be. Lena’s connection to her power was severed, Blake and Natalie are still imprisoned with the Fae Lords. Wren got free and still has her power.”

Brayden’s shoulders dropped. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too.”

“But Maddy said I could be Lena with restored powers.” I stepped towards Brayden, hopeful.

“Restored?” the Elder Fae said and chuckled, stroking his beard. “Who would have restored them?”

I shifted on my feet and shot him a glare. “How the hell do I know? I didn’t even know what a freaking portal was two seconds ago.”

“She’s sassy like Lena,” he mused.

People really needed to stop doing this Lena-Wren thing. It was driving me nuts. “I’m Averly. I got bitten a few days ago and now I have freaky powers I can’t control,” I told him.

Brayden nodded. “I was hoping you could hide them? So that if she’s found by the Fae Lords they will think she’s Lena

or a regular wolf?" He sounded hopeful.

The Elder Fae looked me up and down. "The Fae Lords will not think she's a regular wolf, but if she pretends to be Lena that would work."

Brayden nodded, looking relieved. "So I could take her to the fight with me?"

The old fae grinned. "I see where this is going. You want to use her power to beat Silas."

Brayden nodded. "Just a bit, not enough to tip anyone off to the fact that she might be Wren."

"*If I am Wren,*" I corrected.

The Elder Fae stepped inside and waved for us to follow. For the first time I noticed two bracelets on his wrists that glowed a bluish green. Magical handcuffs maybe?

He walked over to a little stove and lit the burner, placing a teakettle over the flames as Brayden and I stepped inside of the small space and shut the door.

"And why would I help you with this? Haven't I done enough for your family?" the Elder Fae asked, his back still turned to us.

Brayden stepped forward, dwarfing the tiny house. "You know why. You would be in a cell in the dungeons of Moon Valley Castle shitting in a bedpan if it weren't for me. I made sure you got your own prison lands, and when I am king of the Greywolves again I will make sure you are freed."

King of the Greywolves again? Did he have plans to one day get his throne back?

Interesting. When I'd suggested we storm in and kill the Fae Lords and rescue his siblings last night, he'd nearly had an aneurism.

The Elder Fae dropped some loose leaves into the boiling water and then turned to face us. His eyes grew violet and it scared the crap out of me. "You say that every time I see you, but I've grown tired of the empty promises over the centuries."

Yikes, these two had some long history.

“I will reclaim my place!” Brayden shouted suddenly and I jumped.

The Elder Fae shrugged, looking unbothered by the alpha’s outburst. “How? You’re stuck in a loop. The Fae Lords have you right where they want you.”

Geez. Truth bomb much? I could tell that one had stung, because Brayden’s face fell.

“Where?” I asked, suddenly interested in his opinion. “Where do they want him?”

“Distracted. Chasing his soulmate into endless reincarnation cycles. This man eats, breathes, and lives all things Lena so he can’t plan a rebellion to take back his throne. And that’s exactly where they want him.”

“Can you help her or not?” Brayden asked.

The Elder Fae looked over at me, his eyes burning into mine as if sizing me up. “You really don’t know who you are?” he asked me. “You don’t remember our conversation the last time we spoke forty years ago?”

Brayden bristled. “What conversation?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never met you before. I’m Averly. That’s all I know to be true.”

The Elder Fae stilled, and then shook his head lightly. “I wonder if she did it.”

“Wonder if who did what?” Brayden stepped closer, towering over the fae.

The teakettle whistled and the fae moved to pull it away from the flame. For a man in prison he sure had a comfy little life. I doubted fae in prison in this other place Brayden spoke of got fresh hot tea daily and their own cottage, even if it was surrounded by creepy trees.

When the Elder turned back around, he looked at the windows and the black curtains pulled shut on their own. I jumped. Even though he was imprisoned, this man clearly still

had some power. The glowing bracelets at his wrists grew brighter.

“Wren came to me right after she escaped the Fae Lords forty years ago.” His voice was barely a whisper. Both Brayden and I had to lean forward to hear him. “She said she thought she knew how to restore Lena and your Greywolf powers, but that doing so would wipe your memories.”

I froze, looking over at Brayden.

He swallowed hard. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner!?”

The Elder Fae threw his arms up. “She was injured, seeing things, sounded drunk to me. I could barely understand her.”

Brayden nodded. “Wren came to us the night before Lena’s twentieth birthday. She was delirious and saying crazy things. She’d been attacked by the Fae Lords and was healing. She’d ingested some kind of hallucinogen or poison, and I took her words with a grain of salt.”

The Elder Fae reached up and pulled on his beard. “She must have gone to see you right after she visited with me. What else happened that night?”

Had these two men not seen each other in forty years? Maybe when you lived forever that was like one year.

Brayden shrugged. “Lena slept by Wren’s bedside all night. They hadn’t seen each other in two centuries, so I patched Wren’s wounds up and let them have alone time. By the time I got there in the morning, Wren was dead and Lena was...” Pure grief washed over his features. “She was gone too.”

Gone...

He meant *dead*. If I were Lena, then it meant there was a ticking time bomb inside of my head. I wasn’t sure I wanted that.

“They both died on Lena’s twentieth birthday?” I asked. “If I’m Wren, then how can Wren reincarnate too? Isn’t that

just a curse that was put on Lena?” This family drama was way too hard to keep up with.

The Elder Fae nodded. “Normally yes, but part of Wren’s delirious plan was that she intended to take the curse on for herself. She said that was the only way to break it, to shift it to another with similar DNA. To trick the curse.”

Brayden went very still then. “How long have you known that?”

The Elder Fae looked at him. “Since she told me, but it sounded insane so I ignored it. Now I wonder...”

I could see Brayden’s mind chewing on this new information. “So you’re saying when Wren broke free from the Fae Lords, she came here and told you the information needed to save Lena?”

The Elder Fae took a sip of his tea and then looked at Brayden. “While she also blabbered on about seeing crying shadows and glitter rainbows, yes.”

Brayden winced. “She fell into a wispy writhe bush in her escape. I had to administer the anti-poison. She sounded insane to me too so I also ignored half of what she said.”

He put his head in his hands.

The Elder Fae’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “That makes more sense.”

Brayden rubbed his temples. “Why did she come see you first?”

The Elder Fae sighed. “She wanted a power amplifier stone that I had. Your father gave it to me when I was in service with him.”

Brayden stilled. “And you gave it to her?”

The Elder Fae sipped his tea. “You hardly deserve me.”

Brayden stepped closer. “Stop playing. Talk straight with me, old man. Do you think Wren broke Lena’s curse and restored her power?”

The Elder Fae took another sip of his tea, leveling Brayden with his gaze. “I think she was capable, especially with the stone, but a lot could have gone wrong.”

“Like what?” I asked, now fully invested in this soap opera.

The Elder Fae cast me a long look before resting his eyes back on Brayden. “Well, you’re saying Wren was badly injured when she saw you last, and it was the night of Lena’s birthday, which means the clock was ticking. Wren might have rushed the process without being fully healed and...” He clicked his tongue.

“And what?” Brayden and I both asked simultaneously.

The Elder Fae shrugged. “Too many options to account for but that’s one of them. I don’t even know what magic she had figured out. I thought it impossible to break Lena’s curse, but clearly she found something out while she was imprisoned.” He pointed to me.

“What does that mean?” I asked, crossing my arms.

He seemed to be enjoying my discomfort. I found myself wondering how he got imprisoned in the first place. Guilty of mind screwing his enemy? Because I was exhausted with this conversation already. We came here to get my powers capped and here we were knee-deep in some heavy topic.

“It means you could be Wren, reincarnated without your memories.”

“Then where’s my Lena! It’s been forty years. She never fails to find me.” Brayden sounded distraught and I felt for him.

The Elder Fae set his tea down and looked me over. “Two options. Either Lena is dead forever—”

The growl that ripped from Brayden’s throat shook the windowpanes of the entire cottage.

“Or...” the Elder Fae said, taking a sip of his tea, and I swear that was enjoyment dancing behind his eyes. “She *is*

Lena, and Wren's spell of unlocking her powers worked but she's lost her memory.”

Brayden looked at me and there was so much desire in his gaze that heat shot down my body and pooled between my legs.

Oh mama, get me out of here before I combust.

“Stop messing with us!” Brayden snapped at the Elder Fae. “You've been alone too long and are reverting to your old ways.”

The old man seemed unbothered by the accusation. “Whether Averly is Wren or Lena, she still needs her powers suppressed or the Fae Lords will kill her.” He stood from the small table he had been sitting on and walked towards me.

I took a step back, my gaze flicking to Brayden. He must have seen the fear on my face because he stepped closer to me.

“Will it hurt her?” he asked.

Now we're asking the important questions.

“Oh yes. Very much,” the Elder Fae replied and I squeaked, backing up fully until my back hit the door.

Brayden's Adam's apple bobbed and he looked down at me, his eyes burning with intensity. “I don't see any other way...”

“Listen, I'm *not* good with pain—my receptors are amplified or something so I apologize if I punch you,” I told the fae.

He gave Brayden a *she-better-be-kidding* look and Brayden stepped up behind me. “I'll hold her arms.”

Panic rose up inside of me and a whimper formed in my throat. “Wait a second. What exactly are we doing here? Will I still be able to shift?” I was going to be hunted down by the Fae Lords, I wanted to be able to defend myself a little.

The Elder Fae drew closer and nodded. “You will smell and act as an ordinary wolf but deep inside of you will be contained one of the greatest powers in the known world. That

of a Greywolf.” There was respect in his tone I wasn’t prepared for. It made me feel like maybe I should be more grateful for being one of these super rare wolves, but I wasn’t. I was just overwhelmed.

“And if I need to release this power?” I mean, freezing those wolves the other night had freaked me out but it also came in handy. What if down the line I needed it?

“You come back and see me,” he said. “The Elder Fae, forever at the service of the Greywolf family,” he said with sarcasm, flicking Brayden a long-suffering look.

Okay, that wasn’t ideal since it sounded like he kind of hated helping us, but I was going to take what I could get.

I braced myself as Brayden slipped behind me and held my wrists behind my back.

I flinched. “Just do it.”

The Elder Fae gave me a curt nod and then rubbed his wrinkly hands together as if trying to warm them.

No pain, no gain, baby. Let’s do this. Everything is fine.

My heart rate reached epic levels when Brayden’s lips skimmed my ear. “You’ll be okay. Whether you’re Lena or Wren, both are two of the strongest women I know.”

His words washed over my body and seeped into my soul, instantly calming my nervous system.

The fae grabbed my face and cradled my entire skull in his hands. His eyes glowed silver with a hint of purple, and a slow vibration pulsed through his palms and into my brain.

“So much power,” the Elder Fae marveled.

“Can you tell if she’s Wren or Lena?” Brayden’s tone was hopeful.

The Elder Fae shook his head. “Just that she is in fact a Greywolf with full use of her power.”

I grinned. “This isn’t so bad actually—” My words cut off into a yelp as the vibrating turned into a searing hot burn.

My brain is on fire.

Brayden's grip tightened when I jerked, intending to run the hell out of this place and never come back.

The Elder Fae's gaze narrowed. "She's fighting me."

Yeah, no shit, Sherlock! You're trying to kill me.

The pain amplified and I was reminded of the discomfort I'd felt that night I was bitten. It was much like that.

"Her power is fighting me. Relax, girl, or I won't be able to contain it," the Elder Fae hissed.

I growled, my wolf rising to the surface; fur broke out onto my arms.

"Averly, stop!" Brayden commanded, and power slapped over my skin, causing me to go stock still. My wolf retreated and the pain went from my head down into my chest.

"No, please... just stop," I whimpered, pressing my back deeper into Brayden's chest.

"Can't you hurry!?" Brayden bellowed at the fae, who glared at him.

"I'm holding a nuclear weapon right now, you don't want me to rush this," the Elder Fae announced.

That one sentence put the fear of God into me. I was a nuke? An untrained nuke? *Great.*

The agony had reached my chest; a crushing weight pushed in on my heart. A howl ripped from my throat and blackness danced at the edges of my vision.

Brayden's lips were back on my earlobe, brushing against it. "I'm so sorry." His breath feathered over my neck and then the searing pain flared like the sun and everything went black.

NINE

I came to with a headache and moaned.

“Averly.” Brayden’s voice was husky and panicked.

“That creepy old bastard almost killed her!” Maddy snapped, and my eyes sprang open.

I was back in Brayden’s room with the black flannel sheets.

“You’ve been out a few hours. Are you okay?” Brayden asked, his face lined with worry.

I nodded, sitting up. The headache was worse now that I’d elevated it, but nothing an ibuprofen or two couldn’t fix.

Maddy held out my phone. “Who is Leah? She keeps calling and texting you asking where you are.”

Damn. “My best friend. I missed class today.”

I peered at my phone that Maddy had thrust into my face and scanned the texts in the notifications bar.

Leah: You’re acting weird!

Leah: You clearly have rabies!

Leah: No class now? Call me or else.

I groaned and shoved the phone under Brayden’s pillow. “Who the hell was that Elder Fae? I mean, how do you know him?” I asked Brayden as Maddy reached to the side table and handed me a glass of water.

“He’s a very old, very powerful fae,” Brayden said from the foot of the bed where he sat. “He used to serve my father and then the Fae Lords, until he betrayed them and was imprisoned.”

“Betrayed them how?” I guess it was good to know he wasn’t in for murder.

“It’s a long story,” he mused.

“I have all the time in the world.” I tapped an imaginary wristwatch and then peered back up at him. This dude’s life was full of drama, but fascinating; I wanted him to spill the tea.

Brayden nodded. “My father ruled Moon Valley for centuries before he passed the honor down to me.”

He looked at Maddy, who gave him a small smile.

“Everything was harmonious until the fae were driven from their lands by the Phantom.”

An ominous feeling permeated the room and Maddy visibly shivered.

“The Phantom?” I asked.

Brayden swallowed hard. “A living fungus type of creature from the deep abyss of the Ether that invaded Fae Hollow and drove them into *our* lands. It’s like a black oily fungus that covers every living thing and devours it.”

I looked around the room. “Is the Ether *here* on Earth somewhere?”

Brayden shook his head immediately. “The Ether is a secret place, another realm with portals into Earth. The Phantom cannot come here.”

Pew, that was a relief. “What happened when the Fae Lords were driven to your lands?”

Maddy and Brayden shared an uneasy look. “The Fae charged into our territory and immediately tried to take over,” Brayden said. “But they were no match for my brothers, and Lena and her sisters.”

Maddy nodded. “Brayden told them they could live as refugees within our lands until they could find a more permanent home.”

I winced, already assuming that didn’t go well.

“They made it seem like they were going to graciously accept that deal and then they turned on us,” Brayden growled.

“How did they take down eight Greywolves? It sounds like at full power you guys are a bunch of badasses.”

“They are,” Maddy agreed. “Or were. Until the Fae Lords invited them to a peace treaty signing and poisoned them all over dinner.”

Holy crap! This was like straight out of a movie or something.

Brayden’s face took on a haunted look as he no doubt found himself thinking about the past. “We lay there, my brothers and their wives, writhing in pain and vomiting, and that’s when the Fae Lords bound their power to them, imprisoning them and feeding off of them.”

My heart pinched at the thought of watching someone I cared about get hurt like that. “And you and Lena?” I asked.

Maddy looked down at the blanket and Brayden just stared at the wall, void of all emotion. “At first they tried to strip her of her power right in front of me. Her skin turned so pink it looked like she’d been burned.”

Maddy wiped a stray tear from her cheek. “I could hear her screams and I was five rooms away in the west wing of the castle.”

I suddenly felt sick hearing them relive this moment.

“Then they realized they couldn’t, so they severed it.”

“And then they took your power?” I asked Brayden.

He looked over at me and his eyes were glowing yellow. “Not at first. At first they made me watch as they imprisoned my brothers and their wives, siphoning their magic like it was food.”

Gross.

“They let me mull over my revenge and stew in my anger, knowing I would retaliate.” The veins in Brayden’s neck bulged.

“Where does the Elder Fae fit in to all of this?” I asked, and he seemed to realize that was the original question.

“Right, so while Lena was weak and still recovering, and I was bound and gagged, the Elder Fae did what he did best. He was able to get the Fae Lords fighting among themselves, which was the distraction I needed to try and kill them.”

I gasped. “He helped you try to overthrow them?”

Brayden nodded. “For nearly all the gold in Moon Valley, yes.”

I sat up straighter. “But it didn’t work?”

“That was the day I realized I wasn’t strong enough to take them on myself. Even at full power. Especially not after they siphoned the power of six Greywolves.”

Maddy reached out to stroke his arm. “But when they cursed Lena to die every twenty years, it left us no time to try and formulate a plan. We are constantly waiting for her.”

“They just let you and Lena go?” I asked.

“With Silas to watch over us and a yearly fight to hang over my head,” Brayden said.

“Bastards!” I growled.

Brayden’s arms went furry and his fingers lengthened to claws. “Yes, they are.”

I threw off the covers and leapt off the bed, starting to pace the room. “Maybe we should go back to the Elder and have him uncap my power. I could break your brothers and Lena’s sisters out and—”

“No,” he said. “I’ve tried, and even Wren tried. She got free and tried to break the others out and barely left with her life. They are too powerful for a single Greywolf.”

I crossed my arms and stuck my bottom lip out, feeling a bit like a toddler having a tantrum.

“What about for two Greywolves with full power?” I asked him.

He frowned. “We don’t have two wolves at full power.”

“But what if—?”

Tires crunching on gravel outside caused all three of us to freeze.

Brayden stood, reached down to grasp the hem of his shirt and pulled it up and over his head, revealing his glorious, tanned abs. I was so stunned by the sudden removal of clothing I had forgotten about the car until I heard banging on the front door.

Maddy flew to the window and peered through the blinds. “Silas,” she growled.

Brayden unbuttoned his jeans next and my throat went bone dry. For a hot second I wondered why he was getting naked. But I didn’t really care, I was just here for it. He tore out of the room in his boxer briefs and the spell his nearly naked body had over me broke. Brayden hunched over in the hallway and the sound of snapping bones brought me back to myself.

He was shifting. *Silas*.

Focus, Averly!

“He’s probably here for you.” Maddy wrung her hands together, a pelt of fur popping out on her neck and then disappearing. “For the attack on his wolves in the parking lot.” She lowered her voice.

“We can’t leave Brayden alone with him. Silas could injure him before the fight,” I told her, and moved to the doorway to follow Brayden.

Maddy looked conflicted, her gaze flicking from me to the doorway. I wasn’t waiting for her permission. Storming out the room, I ran down the hall and stopped at the sight of Brayden’s

wolf. He was crouched in front of the front door, hackles raised as Silas banged on it.

“Open it or I’m kicking it in,” Silas screamed.

Maddy stalked towards the door and yanked it open and Brayden shot forward like a bullet. He was all snarls and snapping teeth and Silas stumbled backward at the sight of him. We all stepped onto the front porch and glared him down. He’d brought four guys with him, the same guys from the bar the other night and the one from the hotel. I looked at the bald dude who I’d sucker punched at the hotel and had hurt my hand on, and he winked at me.

Jerk.

“Get off our land,” Maddy snarled from the porch.

“I’m on official Fae Lord business. Here to see—” I moved behind Brayden and Silas’ dark eyes fell on me. “Averly.” He grinned.

“Get off our land,” I parroted Maddy, and reached out to stroke Brayden’s fur. The gesture worked to calm me but only seemed to irk Silas.

“You aren’t Lena,” Silas said and I froze.

“Of course she is,” Maddy snapped.

Silas shook his head and waved his men forward. “My guys say that she displayed a Greywolf power, which probably makes her Wren. I’m taking her in to the Fae Lords for questioning.”

“The hell you are!” Maddy jumped in front of me, and at the same time Brayden launched himself at Silas.

Everything happened so fast, I could barely track it. Two of his cronies stepped around the melee and wrapped their arms around me. I bucked wildly while the other two went for Maddy and pinned her down.

“No!” I thrashed and my wolf pushed to the surface. I wasn’t sure shifting was a good idea right now. As a wolf I couldn’t blow their brains out, but I also hadn’t thought to bring my gun outside in all the commotion. Silas’ men were

halfway to the car with me when my wolf took over and started to shift. As they sensed my changing form, the men holding me just gripped tighter, making it hard to breathe as one of them wrapped his fingers around my throat.

“Averly!” Maddy yelled, and the terror in her voice made tears prick my eyelids. Brayden’s wolf howled, and just as I turned back to look at him, two gunshots pierced the night air.

The hands holding me went limp and I fell to the ground, booking it to Brayden’s side with my tail tucked behind my legs. The gunshots had come from behind me, near the car, and I didn’t want the next slug to go in my ass.

When I reached Brayden who was mid-fight with Silas’ human form, I finally turned and came face to face with the shooter.

Leah?

My best friend held her 9mm Glock in one hand and her cell phone in the other. “I’m recording all of this, you dipshits, and unless you release my best friend I’ll send it to every news outlet in the world, including the International Society of Werewolves, who will be *thrilled* to know you are real,” she snarled at Brayden and Silas.

She then looked right at my wolf. “Averly, get in the car!”

Holy crap, Leah knew it was me, she’d clearly seen me shift and she wasn’t fazed one bit. I guess when you hunted sasquatches for a living, stumbling upon a few werewolves wasn’t a big deal.

Silas froze, holding his hands up, and Brayden released his jaws from the meat of Silas’ calf.

“Listen, pretty lady,” Silas cooed, “I don’t know what you think you saw, but these wolfdogs are—”

“Shut up!” Leah screamed and shook the gun in his direction and then at Maddy and Brayden.

Maddy put her hands up. “Easy, we’re Averly’s friends. *He*’s the bad guy.” She pointed to Silas.

I started to shift then, because I wanted to confirm to her that Brayden and Maddy were with me before she shot them. My wolf was halfway through the change when I saw one of the men she'd shot had shifted into his wolf form. He was a streak of fur and I tried to scream her name and warn her, but it was just a howl on my lips before he latched on to her back and bit down on her neck.

"Leah!" My bloodcurdling scream finally ripped from my human throat, making all the birds fly from the trees as I stumbled forward, half human, half wolf.

Leah dropped the gun, eyes wide as I ran for her, and she collapsed into me, mouth open in shock. I caught her and we both fell to the ground. The wolf was still attached to her neck and started to shake her like a ragdoll. In a blind panic, I reached out and picked up the gun with one hand and then used my other hand to yank the wolf's neck skin back, pulling him off of her. Leah was limp in my lap as I shoved the tip of the pistol up into the wolf's chin and blew his brains out all over the front yard.

"Come back from that, you asshole!" I screamed, crying.

Leah was lying in my naked lap holding her fingers to her gushing throat. There was so much blood. How had this happened? It all went down so fast I... I couldn't process it. Her hand slipped as she weakened and I pulled my fingers up to cover the puncture marks.

"I think he hit an artery!" I screamed through my sobs. "Brayden!" I craned my neck to see Silas had already run off, and Maddy was watching horrorstruck with her hands over her mouth.

Brayden's wolf padded over to me and looked up into my eyes.

"Do surgery!" I begged him. "You're a doctor."

He shook his wolf's head, '*She's too far gone. She won't make it to the hospital,*' his voice said in my head.

No.

"*Do something.* Save her," I begged him.

Leah twitched in my arms and I looked down at her, recoiling at the paleness in her face. “They’re real.” Leah croaked. “You’re...”

“I’m sorry I lied to you,” I sobbed, stroking her forehead. “I love you so much.”

She nodded. “Sister.” The word was a gurgled croak, and it tore my heart in two.

It’s something we used to say as kids. We both grew up as only children and wanted siblings so bad we decided to start calling each other *sister* in the hopes it would come true.

“Sister,” I said, my tears rolling onto her cheeks.

Brayden’s wolf leaned forward and started to lick her blood off my fingers, which I kept pressed to her wound. “Go away,” I snapped at him, pissed that he wouldn’t save her. He was a freaking trauma surgeon! Who else was more qualified? But even with his qualifications I knew he needed an OR and tools and she wouldn’t make it to the hospital. Even now her eyes were rolling in her head.

God, please don’t take her, I pleaded with the big man upstairs.

“Averly...” Maddy stepped forward. “He’s trying to give her a fighting chance. To change her.”

Oh.

Yes! She was bitten, so if Brayden’s saliva got in her system, then...

“Quickly, Averly, you’re losing her,” Maddy warned.

Leah’s eyes closed and she went limp as I yanked my hands away from her neck. Brayden’s wolf shot forward, lapping at the wound as it bled freely and covered my legs and knees.

This isn’t happening. This can’t be happening.

It felt like my soul left my body then. Everything felt so numb; time moved slow and fast at the same time. I barely remembered full scenes; it was all choppy. I was in shock.

Brayden carried Leah into the house holding pressure to her neck and Maddy walked me to the shower. Maddy scrubbed my legs and fingers of blood as I stood naked and catatonic under the water. She dressed me and I walked out to the living room, stopping in my tracks to stare at Leah's still chest.

Everything felt far away and not real.

"She's dead," I croaked, and then fell into sobs on the floor. Brayden and Maddy surrounded me, one on either side as they held me, and I grieved. I might have completely lost my mind and floated away had they not been there to hold me as I broke apart.

"There's still a chance. It's slight, but..." Brayden told me as I sobbed harder into his chest.

"I've seen a bitten wolf come back from having no pulse before. Only one time, but it *is* possible," Maddy said as she stroked my hair.

No pulse. She said no pulse.

Right then I learned what it meant to be in a pack. It was deeper than family. It was life, it was everything. I couldn't exist without them; they were the only thing tethering me to this world in that moment. We sat there for over an hour. Maddy stroking my hair like a beloved elder sister, Brayden tracing circles at the small of my back in a soothing gesture.

Leah was dead. I'd stared at the frozen unmoving chest of my best friend for a full hour. Now it was time to accept reality.

"I have to call her mother and—"

Leah gasped, which turned into a hacking cough and her eyelids flew open. One second I was in my Maddy and Brayden bundle, and the next I was sitting before Leah, cradling her face in my hands. "You're alive!" I whimpered.

She moaned. "Water."

Maddy bolted into the kitchen and started to fill a glass of water as Leah looked at me with her deep green eyes.

“How?” she said, and then reaching up she slipped her fingers up to feel the scab at her neck and froze.

I swallowed hard, knowing that exact feeling. I quickly untied the knot and took off the wrapped cloth, exposing her blood-crusted but fully healed neck. Leah sat up and looked from me to Brayden to Maddy.

“Am I freaking werewolf?” she said with a mild excitement that I hadn’t expected.

All I could do was nod. “But you still have to shift and it’s really painful and only...” I decided to not talk about the exact odds Brayden had told me. “Not everyone makes it. The shift can kill you.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Well, then let’s delay that as long as we can.”

Her gaze kept flicking to Brayden. “I know you from somewhere.”

“The bar,” I told her. “Leah, I just told you that you were a werewolf. You’re taking this *very* well.”

She kept staring at Brayden, her eyebrows coming together to form a knot in the middle of her forehead. “No... like, I *remember* you.”

The entire room went still then and the breath whooshed out of my lungs. Brayden tore across the room and kneeled at Leah’s feet. “What do you remember?”

Leah shook her head. “It’s gonna sound crazy.”

“Try me.” Brayden grinned and my heart went into cardiac arrest.

He thought she was Lena.

This must be how it happens. He finds a nineteen-year-old girl who somehow becomes a werewolf and she says she remembers him and bam, love at first sight.

Leah smiled. “It was like in older times, like in a movie from the eighteenth century. You were at a table eating, wearing a large gilded crown with red velvet and I was

dancing with my... I think they were my sisters." She sounded confused, as if all the details weren't there.

"It sounds like your coronation party, Brayden. That's the only time you wore that stuffy old crown," Maddy said wistfully from the kitchen.

Leah looked at her, scrunching her eyebrows together. "I know you too!"

I felt like I wanted to vomit. I'd allowed myself to want Brayden and to wish I were Lena, and now my best friend was and I wanted to kill her for it.

Leah frowned. "I'm sorry. I know that sounded crazy, but when I woke up I just had that memory. Maybe it was a dream."

"It wasn't a dream. You have been reincarnating many, many lifetimes with me and you're just now remembering," Brayden told her, and there was a tenderness in his voice that made me want to throat punch him for it. When he'd thought I was Lena he'd been all sweet with me, and now Leah was getting the same treatment.

Their names were even similar. Leah-Lena.

"This is wild." Leah's eyes lit up but she didn't seem half as freaked out as I had been when I found out.

"I think you guys have a lot to catch her up on and I need to check in with my mom. I skipped school today and I have a shift tonight so..." I stood, trying to hold in my tears, and slowly turned away from them, trying to beeline it for the bathroom.

I got exactly two feet away from the couch when a memory slammed into me.

The long mahogany table, young Brayden wearing that silly gigantic red velvet crown. An entire roasted pig sat on the table. I was laughing and swirling around with my sisters. I stared across the room at Brayden and the memory faded away.

“The pig,” I said, “in the middle of the table for your coronation. I remember thinking it was grotesque looking, but it tasted wonderful...”

Brayden’s entire body froze, and he slowly pivoted towards me.

Maddy looked from Brayden to Leah and back to me. “They’re sisters! Wren and Lena. But we don’t know which is which.” She facepalmed herself.

“Is that true?” Brayden looked at me. “You don’t remember which?”

I shook my head and then peered at Leah, who was watching me curiously.

“Sister?” she said with a smile, and my heart softened towards her.

“Sister.” I laughed and ran forward, tackle-hugging her.

This entire time Leah really was my sister?

“How are they both reincarnating?” Maddy asked.

“I don’t know,” Brayden replied.

Brayden sighed, placing his head in his hands. As if the shock of seeing my best friend die wasn’t enough, now I had to process her being my sister in a past life.

“Does that mean we will both die on our twentieth birthday?” I asked.

“Whoa, say what now?” Leah said, and the sound of my phone ringing in Brayden’s room pulled my attention.

“It’s probably my mom. Fill Leah in.” I looked to Maddy and then ran down the hall.

I didn’t make it in time and it went to voicemail, so I texted her back and forth a few times with small talk letting her know I was okay. After that, I texted Ronan, asking to get my shift covered tonight. There was no way I could go into work. I needed to keep an eye on Leah.

“Maddy can take you to see your mom and pack your things,” Brayden said from the doorway to his room as I sat hunched over my phone on his bed.

Oh yeah... I'd sort of agreed to move in, hadn't I?

“And you?” I asked, chewing at my lip.

I couldn't help but notice how his gaze went to my lips.

Brayden sighed. “I might need to take Leah to see the Amarok if Silas contests this.”

Silas' wolf had bitten Leah, but Brayden had inserted his saliva into her wound and saved her, so he'd again have to ask the Amarok if she could be his wolf.

Leah was my best friend and I needed to be thinking about her safety. I wanted to share a thought that had occurred to me.

“Brayden, if Wren did restore Lena's power and take on the curse herself, it could have wiped *both* of their memories. Or most of them. Leah could be Wren... or she could be Lena with restored powers.”

Brayden frowned, reaching up to draw his thumb across his jawline. “If the Amarok or the Fae Lords sense the Greywolf power on her... assuming she has it...”

I nodded. “She could be taken. We have to bring her to the Elder Fae first and have her powers contained before she even has a chance to use them and tip anyone off.”

“And if the Elder Fae doesn't sense her Greywolf power?”
Brayden looked hopeful and a knife twisted in my heart.

“Then she's your Lena,” I confirmed, ignoring the ache in my chest.

Brayden nodded. “Let's do it. But we need to be quick. Silas could come back at any moment.”

If the Elder Fae didn't sense any Greywolf power inside of Leah that needed to be contained, then it proved that Leah was in fact Lena and I was Wren. Maybe I'd tried to take Lena's curse, and as a result we were now both stuck in the reincarnation cycle. It was the only thing that made sense.

Assuming any of this crap made sense.

“Averly?” Leah’s worried voice came from the living room and I suddenly felt guilty for abandoning her in her time of need.

I gave Brayden a small smile and then rushed into the living room, where Leah was sitting up, drinking some water.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her, taking in her slightly horrified look.

“I’m a freaking werewolf!” she said, and then grinned.

I let out a relieved sigh and chuckled. It was finally hitting her. My best friend who believed in every conspiracy known to man was finally finding out that one of them was real.

Supernaturals existed.

“Want to meet a fae?” I asked.

Her eyes lit up. “Hell yes!” She shot up from the couch and handed Maddy her water.

“This is going so much better than your change. That was a train wreck,” Maddy told me.

I nodded, unable to keep from smiling. “Agreed.”

Leah looked at Maddy. “Did she totally freak out? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me! I thought you had rabies.”

Maddy laughed, and Leah looked like she might explode with excitement. “So we’re going to see a fae?”

Brayden stepped into the room to join us, his mere presence making my whole body tingle. “We are. Your Greywolf power, if you have it, needs to be contained or when Silas comes back he’ll think you are Wren and take you to the Fae Lords to imprison you.”

“Yikes. Don’t want that.” She smiled at Brayden playfully.

Was she *flirting* with him? My bestie and I needed to have a little talk later. I had dibs on Brayden.

Unless of course she was Lena, then I’d have to slink away into the shadows and hate my life.

And why was he saying Silas would *think* she was Wren, like she wasn't? Brayden clearly thought Leah was Lena because she had all of these memories. My mood suddenly soured, but I knew I had to be there for my bestie and not let her go alone to meet the Elder Fae.

"Greywolves are—" I started and Leah waved me off.

"Maddy told me everything. This is so awesome," she squealed.

Wow. Leah was everything I wasn't in that department. She was taking this in stride when in the same situation I'd already been trying to flee who I thought were my kidnappers. I guess it helped that I was here, and not to mention she'd seen me shift out front with Silas.

"Hey." I looked at her, remembering how she'd shot one of Silas' cronies to keep me from being abducted.

She looked up at me.

"Thanks for having my back," I told her. "With those other wolves."

She nodded. "Always."

TEN

It was a silent car ride to the broken-down cabin that served as a front to the portal that held the Elder Fae's prison. We took Leah's vehicle, which was a large SUV. Brayden drove with my best friend in shotgun. Leah was all wide-eyed and rosy cheeked when Brayden explained everything to her about the Elder Fae. He hadn't explained crap to me, just threw me into the belly of the wolf, but Leah was getting the five-star treatment. The Amorak had texted Brayden that Leah was his wolf without needing a hearing, so that was the only good thing to come of this.

Awesome. Not jealous at all.

"I'll wait out here," Maddy said, picking up a long stick and leaning against Leah's SUV as she drew in the mud.

Lucky.

I slammed the door a little harder than intended and gained a raised eyebrow from Brayden. Clearing my throat, I whisked past him and linked arms with Leah.

Mine, I thought to him, hoping he got the point. Back off my bestie until we know if she's your mate or your sister-in-law.

After that thought, I stilled. "Can I speak into your mind?" I asked him over my shoulder.

He shook his head. "One way radio. Alphas only."

Phew.

"What do you mean?" Leah asked.

He must have said something into her mind, because her face lit up. “Cool.”

Well, there was solace in the fact that he couldn’t hear my every thought.

Once we got inside, Leah scrunched her nose, lifting her shirt up to cover her mouth.

“That’s the lamp.” I flicked my gaze to the side table and Leah’s eyes widened. Brayden had told her what touching the lamp would do in the car and then she’d proceeded to ask five million questions about it.

I stepped over to it and then looked up as Brayden crossed the room. He was watching me curiously, eyes going from Leah to me and back to her, and my heart ached a little for him. It must be awful not knowing which one of us was his soulmate. I needed to be more compassionate. I’d always been hotheaded and impulsive.

And I saw him first dammit.

Brayden stepped in front of Leah and I, dwarfing us with his large frame, and then reached out, asking for our hands.

With delicate fingers, Leah slid her hand into his and it took every ounce of control I had not to growl and smack it away. I didn’t know what had gotten into me, but ever since Leah showed up, I was feeling all kinds of possessive rage. I cleared my throat and laid my hand on top of theirs as Brayden’s thumb came over the top, pressing into my skin.

His eyes flared yellow for a split second and then he reached out with his free hand and touched the cord hanging from the lamp.

There was a yank at my navel and then my feet slammed onto the damp packed earth.

“Holy crap,” Leah gasped, doing a three-sixty spin.

Brayden had told us all in the car about the fae tree guardians and how they were living beings responsible for keeping the Elder Fae in his prison. Leah stared at them now

in wonder. I couldn't help but smile. This experience was a conspiracy theorist and fantasy lover's dream.

Brayden looked towards the Elder Fae's cottage and froze, his chin lifting into the air as he inhaled sharply through his nose. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck as a cloyingly sweet smell hit my nostrils. My stomach rolled with nausea when I detected an undercurrent of iron.

Blood.

"So, like, what happens if I poke a tree?" Leah started to stomp towards one and I hooked her by the armpit.

Brayden pulled off his shirt and then dropped his pants and I lost all rational thought when I was confronted with his naked butt cheeks.

He wasn't wearing underwear?

"*Okay... naked man.*" Leah cleared her throat and I looked over to see her staring at Brayden's giant muscular back and bare buns.

Bitch, I thought, and then shook my head, trying to dislodge the jealousy that had been implanted there.

She's my best friend, I reminded myself. *My sister.*

"Something's wrong," Brayden said. His back muscles started to distort as the sound of snapping bones rang throughout the forest and fur exploded on the surface of his skin.

"Whoa," Leah said, and then reached for her phone.

"No," I growled, and she winced.

"Sorry, force of habit."

She was going to have to stop trying to document everything. If a video like this got out, the Fae Lords would skin her alive.

Brayden shifting meant he expected trouble, and I wasn't going to let him fight off whatever might be in that cottage alone.

“Still got your Glock?” I asked my bestie, and her eyebrows shot up.

“Oh crap, really?” she asked, and I nodded, pulling off my shirt and then slipping out of my jeans.

Leah reached behind her back and pulled her Glock out of the waistband of her pants as I shed the rest of my clothes and started to shift. Something was seriously wrong in there. The sickeningly sweet smell was worse to my wolf’s nostrils, and now that I was on all fours and bounding for the house I realized it was all underlaid with the smell of death and decay. The front door was cracked open and Brayden had just dipped his nose inside when I came up the steps behind him. He froze, looking back at me and then to Leah, who held her gun out before her, safety off. Leah and I had been shooting together since we were sixteen and trying to impress all the boys at the range. I trusted her to save my life with that hunk of metal if it came down to it.

Brayden seemed pleased to have backup, and then pushed on ahead, nudging the door fully open with his snout. The stench of death and sweetness hit my nose, making my wolf let out a whine. It was sickening, like someone took a rotting corpse and covered it in honey. My heart pounded in my chest as I padded in after Brayden and then I froze. It looked like a bomb had gone off inside of the small home. The walls were scorched black but it didn’t smell of fire, and the blackness had a slick shine to it like oil. Was this magic? I didn’t know enough to say.

“Oh, I’m gonna vom,” Leah said beside me and spun, giving her back to the gruesome scene before us.

The Elder Fae was flat on the ground of his little cottage, the skin on his abdomen peeled open like you would dissect a frog in biology. His organs were all missing, leaving an open cavity there. I loved biology, I wanted to be a vet for crying out loud, but even this was too much for me. Bile rose in my throat as I scanned the entire scene. There was a sticky dark substance that didn’t look like blood matted over the Elder Fae’s hair and extremities.

What the heck was that? Brayden had his nose to the ground, sniffing every inch of the house, going back in the room looking for the killer no doubt. I touched my nose to the fae's leg and my stomach tightened with guilt when I realized his body was still warm. This was recent. Leaning down, I sniffed the sticky stuff and reeled back.

Maple syrup? Did we have a Canadian murderer on our hands?

Brayden came back out to the fae's body and walked right up to the sticky stuff. He bent down and inhaled deeply, his entire body going rigid. I watched as the fur stood up along his entire back and my stomach dropped. He instantly started to shift back into his human form, bones cracking and rearranging. Within seconds, he stood fully naked on two legs and walked over to me, scooping me up into his arms like a puppy dog. His gaze flicked to the table we all had tea on and there was a single white piece of paper with no writing on it. His brow furrowed and he grabbed the paper before walking over to Leah.

"We need to leave. Now," he growled, and she turned, looking at him with a face that was whiter than a sheet. She nodded and Brayden stepped outside, my wolf form still tucked into his body as he crossed the lawn, eyes roaming left and right as if waiting for an enemy to pounce.

Leah held her gun out, arms stiff and ready to fire as Brayden set me down by the pile of my clothes. I was dying to ask him questions, but I couldn't in this form and I sensed we shouldn't talk around the trees.

As Brayden dressed, I started to shift back when Leah said, "So, who killed the old dude?"

Brayden flinched, looking out into the forest as the ground started to move and shake.

"Shit," Brayden growled, running shirtless, wearing only his jeans as he tackled into me, scooping me up once again. I had just shifted back and was only wearing my bra and underwear, holding the rest of my clothes in a pile. Brayden

grabbed Leah as well, sprinting like a football player for the lamp.

Leah grunted, clearly taken off guard by his sudden tackle and grab. I however had been shocked into silence as I watched the hundred-foot trees *come alive*.

I stared at the thick trunk of the one nearest us just as arms sprouted out of it and then legs. The tree ran forward like a warrior, coming right for us, and I yelled as Brayden crashed into the lamp and then we were sucked into the portal.

He'd come through with so much momentum that when we landed in the broken-down cabin, he fell forward, tripping over the coffee table and tossing me on the couch before falling on top of me. Leah slumped to the ground with a groan as Brayden and I realized at the same moment that he was lying on me. Him topless, me almost naked.

Holy hell, I needed to be doused in ice water.

His bare chest against mine caused an inferno to come alive inside of me, and I looked up into his eyes to see that he watched me with a hungry gaze.

“What the hell happened back there?” Leah untangled her feet from the coffee table and stood, snapping Brayden and I from our trance.

Brayden cleared his throat, slowly sliding off my body just as Maddy walked in and took in the whole scene with wide eyes.

“Ohh-kaaay.” She shielded her eyes as I sat up so fast and threw my arms over my chest that I almost cracked heads with Brayden, who was still getting off of me.

“It’s not what you think!” I blurted.

“She shifted,” Brayden stammered.

“The fae dude was dead,” Leah added, and that got Maddy moving.

She pulled her hands from her eyes and stepped towards us. “What? The Elder Fae is dead? That’s not possible, right? Only a handful of people are powerful enough to kill him...”

I pulled my shirt over my head, and then slipped into my jeans in record time.

“It was Novus,” Brayden declared, and for some reason the name felt familiar.

Maddy was standing near an entryway table and had to reach out and grab it. “No.”

A chill formed in the air and I knew that whoever this Novus character was, he was bad news.

“Novus?” Leah asked, for which I was grateful. I hated being the newbie that asked all the questions.

Brayden ran his fingers through his hair and let out a shuddering breath. “The leader of the Wild Hunt. A fae so old and powerful he would wipe the floor with the Fae Lords who now rule my kingdom.”

I swallowed hard. “The Wild Hunt, like the ghostly guy who rides around hunting pretty women from folklore?”

“Pretty women?” Maddy barked out a laugh. “And ghostly? Oh no. Novus’ body is fully corporal. Only his wolves are ghost spirits of the dead Greywolves he’s *consumed*.”

Consumed. She said *consumed*. I gulped.

“He... eats Greywolves?” My voice cracked.

Brayden let a small growl release from his throat. “He killed my grandfather and my grandmother. Both of their wolves’ spirits are now bound to his ruthless pack, forced to do as he says.”

My heart pinched. This Novus guy ate Brayden’s grandparents? Not cool. He needed a throat punch and a bullet to the brain.

“How do you kill him?” I wanted to get right down to the valuable information here in case this guy ever came looking for us. We were Greywolves after all.

Maddy snort-laughed. “We don’t. For every creature he consumes, he gains their power. If he just ate the insides of the

Elder Fae, which is his trademark, along with leaving behind maple syrup, then he's now gained the Elder Fae's power.”

My stomach dropped at that. He eats their insides and gains their power? That was some dark magical crap I wanted *nothing* to do with. Even Leah looked unnerved. We'd finally gotten to a subject that frightened her.

Brayden started to pace the shaggy carpet, flicking nervous glances at Leah.

“Forget about Novus for now. He's in the Ether Realm anyway. We need to focus on hiding Leah's Greywolf power, now more than ever.”

Right, because Novus could sense it and eat her intestines?

“Awesome,” Leah said dryly.

“How often does this Novus guy go on a hunt?” I knew he said to drop the subject but my mind was running wild. What about Brayden and Lena's siblings in the Ether Realm? They'd be at risk if this guy got to them.

Brayden must have known what I was thinking. “The Fae Lords will protect our siblings because that's where they get their power, but even they would only barely be able to hold him off.”

Maddy nodded. “His hunts are random. He did one a thousand years ago, killing off so many magical creatures and ingesting their power that it filled up history books. Then another five hundred years later and another fifty years after that. He hunts at random and then retreats to the Dead Woods to bide his time.”

I gulped, remembering the sticky sweet maple syrup that he'd dripped everywhere. “Maple syrup?”

Brayden shivered a little. “Rumor has it that he ingested a maple tree guardian and now oozes the stuff. It's his calling card.”

Bile rose in my throat at the thought of this dude eating an entire tree warrior like the one we'd seen come attack us. It was at least a hundred feet tall.

“Focus. We have to worry now about Silas and the big fight. Capping Leah’s Greywolf power, if she has it, is our priority,” Brayden echoed and I nodded, trying to push what I’d seen out of my mind.

Would it have been bad timing to mention that without the Elder Fae I also wouldn’t be able to uncap any of my power to help him win his pack back?

Yes, bad timing. Maybe best to mention that later.

“And how do you expect us to do that? The Elder Fae was the only one I know of who can do such a thing,” Maddy asked her brother.

He nodded and pulled out a white sheet of paper. It was the same paper that he’d grabbed from the Elder Fae’s house.

I raised an eyebrow. “A plain piece of paper?”

He gave me a placating look and reached out, placing the page under my nose. “Smell it. It reeks of magic.”

I inhaled, and a smoky yet aromatic scent hit my nostrils. It was like a mixture of campfire and star anise.

Maddy looked intrigued by that. “You think the Elder Fae left a message?”

Brayden nodded.

“It’s blank.” Leah looked down at the paper and Brayden folded it into his pocket.

“Not to a witch it’s not.”

Leah bopped on her heels, clapping. “Please tell me we’re going to see a witch.”

Brayden looked at me with surprise as if asking “Can you believe this girl?” and it caused me to grin. “Leah loves all things supernatural and weird. You won’t catch her off guard with any of this stuff.”

Not like me. You tell me we are going to see witches and I get nauseous.

Leah nodded in confirmation to my statement. “Aliens could land right now and beam me up and I’d welcome it.”

Maddy snort-laughed as Brayden gave Leah a lopsided smirk.

Did he think her quirkiness was cute? Probably.

Bastard.

“Let’s get moving, then.” I broke up their little cutesy stare-fest. “To see a witch you said?”

Brayden nodded. “Not just any witch. If there is a hidden message in this, we’ll have to see the Witch Mother.”

The Witch Mother? What was with all of these special people? The Amarok. The Elder Fae. The Fae Lords. It was like I was making my rounds to the most powerful person of each species.

Maddy shivered. “I’ll be waiting outside again for that one.”

“I might wait with you,” I grumbled. I hadn’t even met the woman and already I didn’t like the idea. I didn’t know much about witches, but from what I’d read it couldn’t be good. Spells, hexes, and curses? No thanks.

“Oh, I’m totally going.” Leah reached down, picked up her gun off of the floor, and stowed it in her waistband.

“I was kidding, I’m going too,” I added, jealousy raging inside of me. No way was I letting Brayden and Leah go to see some witch alone.

“I’ll drive,” Brayden offered, and we all stepped out of the cabin. I followed after them, but my mind was still with the Elder Fae and this Novus creature. Or person. Whatever he was it was terrifying, and sad what he’d done to the man who’d helped hide my powers. No one deserved to die like that.

After sliding into the back of Leah’s car, we set out for downtown Coeur d’Alene, which the locals called CDA for short. It was about an hour’s drive. Brayden said the Witch Mother and her coven had a shop there where they took

clients. I texted my mom on the drive down and told her I was going to sleep at Leah's tonight. Meanwhile, Leah told her roomie she was sleeping at mine. We were going to need to have a talk about all moving in together pretty soon. It was apparent that it was too dangerous to live alone without Brayden or Maddy there. If Silas showed up at my house and hurt my mom, I would lose it.

Leah and Brayden were like two peas in a pod chatting the whole way down to CDA. She wanted to know everything about being a werewolf and all about the supernatural life and he was obliging all of her questions. Maddy looked over at me once, and I must have been making a stank face because she reached out and squeezed my hand. Maddy was tough as nails and loved to wear sarcasm like a shield, but I was learning she also knew when to be sincere and there for you.

By the time we pulled up to the little apothecary shop, I had to pee so bad I was dancing in the seat. The sign *Havenwood Apothecary* hung in black letters on a white background. Non-descript.

“Thank God, I have to pee.” I stepped out of the car and Brayden caught my arm.

He eyed the shop. “Not in there you don’t.”

I frowned. “No bathroom? Lame.”

He shook his head and pointed to the ice cream shop next door. “Go in there. The last thing you want a witch to have is a sample of your urine.”

My blood ran cold and I swallowed hard.

Was he serious?

He looked serious and so I nodded, ducking into the shop next door and asking the nice woman behind the counter wearing a hairnet if I could use the restroom. She looked and smelled human, but I didn't fully trust my nose yet for that. Either way, I had to pee, so after finishing my business, I stepped back outside.

Leah and Brayden were laughing about something. I couldn't help but remark at how well my bestie was taking the

news that she was now a freaking werewolf! Not just any werewolf but a reincarnated one that was really powerful and could possibly die on her twentieth birthday.

I was the only one having a panic attack about the sudden life change.

Maddy walked over to me and handed me a hair tie. “Braid your hair and tie the end. Don’t touch anything, don’t eat anything, don’t sneeze,” she told me and dizziness washed over me.

“Are you for real? I thought we were cool with witches?”

I started to braid my long red hair over one shoulder.

“We are cool,” she said, but then shrugged. “But we watch our backs and we don’t really trust each other.”

My eyes practically fell out of my head. “You let a witch you didn’t really trust put a spell on my mother?” I remembered that night in the ER when the witch had touched my mother’s shoulder and it had lit up with color.

“Selena is cool. Brayden keeps her on retainer, so she’s handsomely rewarded for sitting around and waiting to be of use,” Maddy said, and I calmed a little.

“But the Witch Mother?” I eyed the front of the shop.

Maddy blew air through her teeth. “The Witch Mother does what’s good for the Witch Mother, and she’s richer than the Queen of England, so money doesn’t motivate her.”

That made my stomach sour. “What *does* motivate her?” Everyone had to have something right?

Puppies motivated me.

Maddy looked suddenly nervous. “She’s a collector,” she said, and chills ran down my spine for the fifth time today. I was going to need a stiff drink tonight after seeing the Elder Fae with gutted entrails, and now I was sure this woman was hideous looking with a crooked nose full of warts. She probably had one eye and black stringy hair and ate children for lunch. I didn’t dare ask what she collected. Secrets? Body parts? Souls? My mind was already working on overdrive.

“Let’s go,” Brayden said, and I pulled together my resolve, rolling my neck and stepping up to Brayden and Leah.

Maddy walked over and rested on the hood of Leah’s car. “I’ll be out here. If you don’t come out in ten minutes I’ll send backup.” She was like the getaway driver of our ragtag group.

Brayden gave her a curt nod and then looked over at me. “You don’t need to come. I can try to get Leah’s powers bound and the note deciphered and—”

“I’m going,” I snapped, sharper than I meant to.

He sighed as if he was annoyed with me and I wanted to flip him off. We had this weird angsty thing going on where I was constantly vacillating between ripping his clothes off or punching him in the face. I was mad at him and I didn’t know why.

Brayden stepped up to the door of the shop and slipped his hand into his shirt, using his cloth-covered fingertips to pull it open for us.

What? These witches could lift DNA off of fingerprints or something? Geez.

A waft of incense and herbs greeted Leah and I as we stepped through the open door.

“Hello, wolfie loves,” a young chick with a black pixie cut and smooth dark skin greeted us from where she was stocking herbs into jars.

Wolfie? So she knew what we were, just like that? I inhaled and tried to tell that she was a witch from all the way over here, but it was hard with all the incense. Maybe that was the point.

“Hey,” I responded, hoping no spittle left my mouth. She could probably suck it up off the carpet and do a spell on it or something.

Leah was shocked into silence, which was rare. Instead of speaking, her eyes flitted about the place, looking from the small jar of bones to another that appeared like it held an entire bat.

“I need to see the Witch Mother,” Brayden boomed as he stepped into the room. The girl stopped what she was doing, her head snapping in his direction.

She narrowed her gaze at him and he cleared his throat. “Please.”

Nice touch. That almost took away from the dominating don’t-mess-with-me tone he’d just used.

Her eyes relaxed as she fully looked him over and she stood. “Brayden Greywolf. The Witch Mother will be pleased to know you are in need of a favor.”

Brayden stiffened. “I wouldn’t call it a favor.”

The witch grinned and an uneasy feeling settled over me. She was absolutely beautiful, too beautiful, and she knew it too. She eyed him with a sultry gaze and stalked forward like a cat, hips swishing left and right.

I wanted to throat punch her for looking at Brayden like she was undressing him with her eyes.

“Oh, honey, you haven’t been around in years. Mother deals only in favors now.” She took one step closer to Brayden and I couldn’t help the growl that ripped from my throat.

It startled her at first and then she grinned, looking at me. “Hello, Lena.”

Her absolute certainty of calling me by that name was enough of a shock to my system that I was left speechless.

Leah cleared her throat and the witch smiled, looking Leah over. “Or maybe not Lena.”

Anger flushed through me from head to toe. She was messing with us! Manipulating us.

“I need to see Morgana *now*, Tara,” Brayden said, and Leah moved to his side in a protective gesture.

What the hell, man? Were my bestie and I going after the same guy? That was going to get awkward real fast. I needed to have a talk with her sooner rather than later.

The witch, Tara, walked over to a table and fixed a few jars so that they were in a perfect line and then leisurely made her way to the back of the room, where a single black lacquered door stood. It was like she was taking her sweet time to remind Brayden and all of us that we were guests here.

“What kind of favor?” Leah whispered.

Brayden shushed her. “Not here. Talk in the car.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t know for sure, but I could assume that owing this *Witch Mother* a favor was a very bad place to be in.

When the black door opened, a new witch came out, one even prettier than the previous. She was in her mid-forties, with dark purple dyed hair that fell to her waist in glossy waves. A streak of silver at the front ran all the way down to her navel. She was mesmerizing but also made my skin crawl at the same time.

“Brayden darling, it’s been decades.” She held out her hand and he stepped forward to grasp it. He brought it to his lips but didn’t actually touch it to his skin, making an air kissing noise instead.

“Morgana.” Brayden nodded and released her hand, wiping his casually on his jeans. I eyed Morgana, aka the Witch Mother, and was disappointed there wasn’t a single wart on her perfect face.

I looked over at Leah and her eyes were wide. She looked at me and mouthed *decades?*

Oh yes, someone needed to tell my best friend that she was now immortal unless killed.

Morgana glanced from me to Leah and she smiled. “Which one is Lena?”

Brayden cleared his throat. “Can we go into your office? I need you to look at something in exchange for some very interesting information.”

Morgana watched him carefully with her grey eyes, saying nothing. “I work in favors now. It seems to work best to my

advantage.” She grinned and my stomach rolled. There was something evil about this woman.

“This information could save your life,” Brayden deadpanned, and her spine went rigid.

She stared at him for a long moment and I swear her eyes flashed white for the slightest second before she finally waved him inside and stepped through a dimly lit hallway. We all followed.

Information that could save her life? I wondered what that would be. Leah went first and I followed, lost in my thoughts as we entered a large room covered in floor-to-ceiling purple velvet wallpaper. A black gothic chandelier hung over a giant dark lacquered table that was bare of everything but for a small silver dagger.

The gothic witch stereotype was alive and well here.

I eyed the dagger and she grinned. “One lick of this blade and you’d be telling me all your dirty little secrets,” she said, and then looked to Leah. “But Lena would know that and you both look like this is the first time you’ve ever seen a witch.”

I tried to downplay my emotions, control my face. Clearly I was wide-eyed and investigative right now. I wasn’t sure what Brayden wanted to tell this woman.

Leah was looking at the blade with a frown. “The Elder Fae gave you that.”

Morgana’s face brightened. “Well, hello, Lena.”

Everything in my body rebelled against what had just happened. Leah had another memory? Why wasn’t I getting any more? Even if I were Wren, I would be getting memories too, right?

“She’s not Lena,” I growled, and then my cheeks reddened in embarrassment. *I* wanted to be Lena. I wanted Brayden. And now I wanted to die for having basically said all that out loud with my response.

“Interesting.” Morgana took a seat at the table and looked up at me. “Tell me more.”

“We’re not here to gossip. I have a month until the fight and I need you to decipher this.” Brayden pulled the white paper from his pocket and slammed it on the table.

She looked at it quizzically and then leaned forward, inhaling. “Smells powerful. Where did you get it?”

Brayden swallowed hard and crossed his arms, looking down at the witch. None of us had taken a seat. I didn’t get the impression we would be here long.

“I pulled it off of the dead body of the Elder Fae,” he said.

Morgana gasped, her hand going to her chest. “I... When? How?” she asked.

Brayden tapped the paper. “Reveal the hidden message and I’ll tell you everything as payment for your services.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. “It better be big news, Brayden Greywolf. I have no need for petty gossip as payment.”

Brayden leaned over the table, splaying a hand out and got closer to her. “Morgana, this news involves you and a threat to your life.”

That got her moving. All playfulness drained from her face and she reached out and snatched the letter up.

It hit me then why this would involve her. Novus went after the most powerful people in that generation and consumed them, taking on their power. That meant that not only would he be after Brayden, Leah, and I. He’d be after Morgana and any other powerful supernatural.

Morgana walked over to a table at the back of the room and picked up another dagger, this one smaller than the other and fully solid gold. She came back over to us and laid the paper down before her, picking up the golden dagger. With a sharp slice, she made a small gash on her palm. She then squeezed one drop of blood onto the parchment and set the blade down, plucking the paper up and bringing it to her mouth.

Some kind of whispered incantation left her lips and a breeze blew past us for a second, making my hair move and freaking me out.

Black ink slowly formed on the paper and her gaze flicked down to read it, but Brayden was fast. He yanked the paper from her hand and she snarled at him before regaining composure.

She glared at him. “Tell me about the threat to my life! And if it’s not serious, you owe me a *huge* favor.”

Brayden tucked the note in his pocket and nodded. He gave her a long look and then sighed. “Novus is awake and has started the hunt. He consumed the Elder Fae and he’ll be looking for another powerful meal next.” Brayden had barely gotten the words out before Morgana stood, her chair screeching backward.

“You’re sure it was Novus?” She sounded breathy, panicked.

Brayden nodded. “Seeing a death at his hand is not something one forgets.”

“Thank you,” she said, which I hadn’t expected. Reaching out, she smoothed the ends of her long purple hair and looked down at the floor for a moment.

Brayden nodded and then turned to leave. Then the Witch Mother spoke.

“Brayden.” Morgana’s voice held a slight fragility. “Most supernaturals wouldn’t notice, but the blonde one...” She pointed to Leah. “Smells like a full-blown Greywolf.”

All three of us froze and Brayden looked at the witch with a pinched expression, trying to cover what was definitely shock.

“If you report her to the Fae Lords, I’ll kill you and your entire coven,” he said boldly.

Morgana’s upper lip peeled back. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Everyone calm down.” I stepped forward and held my hands out between them.

If Morgana could smell that Leah was a Greywolf and she hadn't even shifted yet, then the Fae Lords would be able to as well, and the fight was in less than a month. We needed to suppress her powers.

"Can you help us cover her power? Make it so the Fae Lords won't smell her?" I pleaded with Morgana.

I didn't want my best friend and now confirmed sister to die.

Morgana appraised me. "She's one of your sisters?" she asked.

I nodded. Wren or Lena, I didn't know, but if we were both Greywolves with memories of Brayden, then she had to be.

Morgana blew air out through her teeth. "I am not as powerful as the Elder Fae, but I could make a potion. She'd have to drink it monthly to stay hidden."

I gave a nervous laugh. "That's a lot of favors."

She nodded and then looked over at Leah. "Or one really big one."

Leah looked anxious for the first time since hearing about this supernatural life.

"Like what?" my bestie asked.

Morgana slipped out from behind her desk and batted her eyelashes at Leah. "Like a monthly sample of blood or hair. I would even take nail clippings."

"Absolutely not!" Brayden roared.

Morgana shot him an angry look. "To enhance my own spells, *not* to spell her. I would give you my oath."

That seemed to relax Brayden, but Leah looked slightly nervous and I was freaking out for her. "You want her blood? Why?"

Morgana looked at me and frowned. "She is a Greywolf with full power. Every part of her is like a booster to my magic. You would know that if you were Lena, and *she* can't

be Lena because she has her power. So *who* are you?" she asked me.

Screw Lena! I wanted to scream. I was sick of hearing this woman's name, even if it was my own.

"I'm Averly. New to the wolf pack." I went for the truth in case she could tell a lie, and that seemed to satisfy her.

"Give her the potion for this month and I'll give you one of my hairs," Brayden exclaimed.

Morgana raised an eyebrow, looking intrigued. "A hair from the king of the Greywolves?" She grinned and Brayden stepped closer to her.

"*If* you vow, on your magic, to *never* use it against me," he said.

She sighed. "Done. But when she comes back in a month, I want a hair from *her* head. She has more power than you at this moment."

Brayden frowned at that and I wanted to smack this lady. Being a former king of the Greywolves, I couldn't imagine how powerful Brayden used to be. And now that he was basically magically castrated she was rubbing it in his face.

His gaze flicked to Leah and then back to Morgana. "We'll deal with that next month. I need to get through this fight," Brayden told her.

She nodded. It seemed everyone in the magical community knew about Brayden's yearly fight against Silas.

"Very well." She pursed her lips. "It will take me about an hour to brew the potion in my lab. Go get some ice cream and then come back."

Her lab! I immediately envisioned her bent over beakers and vials of colored liquid with chemistry glasses on. Brayden's hand hit the small of my back and he guided us out, but Morgana wouldn't take her eyes off of me.

When we reached the door, I looked over my shoulder at her and she was grinning. "You smell of the Elder Fae.

Whatever he did to you, it left a mark the Fae Lords will pick up on.”

I swallowed hard and peered up at Brayden, who looked nervous.

“Can you hide that too?” he asked her, but she shook her head and then shooed us out.

Lovely.

ELEVEN

We exited the shop quickly, and when we were all back out on the street, Maddy read our downtrodden faces. “Good trip?” she asked dryly.

Leah turned to Brayden. “You didn’t have to offer to pay for me.”

Brayden nodded. “It’s okay.”

Leah smiled at him. “It was really sweet.”

Girl, I will cut you. I needed to call dibs with my bestie ASAP. This was getting awkward.

Brayden looked between Leah and I. “The way I see it, one of you is my wife and the other is my sister-in-law. That makes the both of you family and I’d do anything for family.”

Oh man, could this guy be any more swoon-worthy? My ovaries were aching.

“Ice cream?” I changed the subject and everyone nodded.

Brayden stepped next door to the place I’d used the bathroom at before. After buying us ice cream, Brayden sat down next to Leah at a booth and pulled out the note that Morgana had deciphered.

Brayden set his cup of mango vanilla ice cream down and unfolded the note, reading it quietly. Leah read over his shoulder and when they were done, they both looked at me.

Maddy reached out and snatched it. “Our turn.”

She held the note between the two of us and I glanced at the short few sentences.

Novus has awoken and started the hunt. He's coming for me now but I will be powerless to stop him in this prison. This is your chance, Brayden. Use him to kill the Fae Lords and reclaim your kingdom. When you need to uncap Averly's power, take her to the Briar Woods. My brother, Artemis, will help you.

P.S. Do an old man a favor and have what's left of my remains burned.

The Elder Fae

I looked at Brayden and his mouth was settled into a firm line. I opened my lips to speak and he shook his head. "Let's walk." He flicked his gaze to the adjoining wall that touched the witch's shop and I nodded. They might be listening, especially since they'd told us to go here to kill time.

When we all stepped outside, Brayden took a left and headed for the lake. The entire downtown of CDA was nestled right against the shoreline of lake Coeur d'Alene. When we were a few blocks away from the apothecary shop, I stared from Brayden to Maddy. They were both silent and pensive.

"What did he mean, reclaim your kingdom?" Leah asked.

Brayden looked startled when Leah had spoken, like he'd forgotten she was there, or any of us for that matter. "My brothers, Axel, Castiel and Gabe were the three princes of Moon Valley. I was their king, Lena my queen."

He looked at her and then to me as if trying to figure out for himself which of us was his queen. This was the first time I'd ever heard his brothers' names. That made it real.

Axel, Castiel, Gabe.

A sudden memory hit me and I gasped.

Axel was Brayden's littlest brother and married to my sister, Blake. My sister. I just knew that Blake was my sister. The memory was of their wedding, in some cathedral made of white stone walls with gold veining. Blake had her fair blonde

hair braided over one shoulder and I was peering at her from where I stood as one of her bridesmaids.

Castiel, Gabe, and Brayden were the groomsmen across from us. His brothers were all insanely gorgeous copies of Brayden.

It was wild to be in this memory but also have my thoughts and recollections as Averly.

Just as quickly as the memory was there, it was gone, and when I tried to look around inside of my mind to see what I was wearing or who was next to me, it became fuzzy like trying to remember a dream.

“I was there,” I muttered, and Brayden stopped, looking over at me.

“Where?” he said.

“I... think I just had a memory. Axel and Blake’s wedding in the white marble cathedral.”

Brayden went very still, as did Maddy. Even Leah didn’t move.

“Do you remember who you are?” he asked me with such a yearning in his voice it broke my heart. For a half second I wanted to blurt out Lena and see what he would do. Would he kiss me? But that was a lie and I couldn’t do it.

My gaze flicked to Leah and she glanced expectantly at me, like she too wanted to just figure this out and put an end to it. But she also looked a tinge jealous and I worried for our friendship in that moment. I didn’t want to fight over a guy. This was so stupid. I needed alone time with my bestie so that we could talk it out.

I shook my head. “Just that I was a bridesmaid.”

Brayden released the breath he’d been holding. “You all were. Lena, Wren, and Natalie were all Blake’s bridesmaids.”

Leah frowned and I nodded. “Sorry.”

Brayden grinned. “Don’t be sorry.” He stepped forward and grasped my shoulders and I nearly melted into his touch. It

felt so nice to be touched by him. “You’re getting memories back, that’s great news. Before long we will know who each of you are. I have faith.” He looked back at Leah and she quickly wiped the hurt from her expression.

Maddy raised her hand. “Awesome news that Averly is remembering stuff, but can we focus on the Elder Fae’s letter? What he said is huge.”

Brayden shook himself. “Right.” He dropped my shoulders and I ached at the loss of his touch.

I wondered then if he’d never told me about Lena if I would even like him. Did I gravitate towards him because I wanted to be someone’s missing soulmate? The idea was romantic, but now that I had another memory I was definitely feeling overwhelmed that I was a reincarnated soul in a new body. One that might very well die on her twentieth birthday.

“What’s so huge about what the letter said?” Leah asked as we all started to walk again, finding a spot near the lake with a bench to sit on.

Maddy, Leah, and I sat on the bench and Brayden loomed over us, arms crossed as he looked down at us seriously.

“I could never hope to go up against the four Fae Lords without my power, but if I led Novus to them, let him hunt them...” He let the silence linger and I gasped.

“Then Novus would pluck them off one by one to consume their power,” I finished.

He nodded.

“But...” Maddy added, “what the Elder Fae failed to account for is that my brothers and your sisters are prisoners of the Fae Lords, and if we lead Novus to them we will also lead the Wild Hunt right to our siblings.”

Ouch, that was a bad plan.

“Not to mention the Fae Lords steal the Greywolf power from my brothers and their wives. Who knows what would happen if Novus consumed the Fae Lords while they were still

connected to our siblings. Would their power get consumed too?” Brayden asked.

“What if we could warn them?” I said. “Your siblings.”

Brayden shook his head. “They’re powerless, slaves to the Fae Lords. Warning them does nothing while they are prisoners.”

“So we have to free them first.” Leah spoke so casually, as I first had when I didn’t know that Brayden had tried to free them before.

Brayden looked annoyed with her statement. “We can’t. I’ve tried.”

Maddy rubbed her chin in a dramatic way. “I have an idea.”

Brayden looked over at his sister and I turned to face her.

“After Brayden wins back the pack next month, we get Averly’s power fully uncapped by this Artemis fellow,” Maddy said. “*Then* we don’t have Leah take her next monthly potion, which will give us *two* full-blown powerful Greywolves.”

She looked at her brother encouragingly.

“Two *untrained* Greywolves,” he deadpanned.

Leah crossed her arms, looking offended. “Hey, we’re slowly getting our memories back. Once that fully happens, we would have all of our memories that pertain to battle, which I’m assuming is a lot considering how old you are,” she told Brayden.

Maddy snickered, because Brayden was glowering at her. He clearly didn’t like being called old.

“Even with two trained Greywolves, it’s not enough,” Brayden told her. “Freeing my siblings will mean destroying their prison while holding off the Fae Lords’ wrath. You would need me as well, my entire pack.”

Maddy nodded as if to confirm her brother wasn’t crazy.

I chewed the inside of my lip, trying to figure out a workaround. I was fully invested in helping Brayden get his throne back from the asshat Fae Lords, especially if it meant freeing our helpless siblings in the process. I only had a few tiny memories of them but already I loved them and felt loyal to their care and wellbeing.

“If we can get our memories fully back, Wren will know how to restore Brayden’s power,” I said. “She clearly restored Lena’s before they both died from sharing the curse.”

I mean, that was the elephant in the room we hadn’t really talked about yet. Leah was just confirmed to have Greywolf power and I had Greywolf power. We both remembered being sisters. There was only one logical explanation. Wren had done something to Lena that night of her twentieth birthday. Like the Elder Fae had said, Wren was injured and a lot could have gone wrong. She’d restored Lena’s connection to her power somehow, and then they both died and didn’t reincarnate for forty years. Or they did but were unable to find Brayden in the last life, probably due to not remembering him. Either way, Wren’s memories held the key to this mystery of how to regain Brayden’s connection to his powers as well.

“*If you can get your memories back fully,*” Maddy added. “Not to mention, one of you is Lena, which means you will drop dead on your twentieth birthday, which is when again...?”

Leah and I shared a look and a realization came over the both of us at the exact same moment.

The birthday twins. Leah and I shared the same birthday, which we found out in kindergarten when our moms brought cupcakes the same day. Wren and Lena died the same day and also reincarnated on the same day.

“January twenty-sixth,” we said at the same time, and Maddy looked back and forth between us both.

“Both of you?” she asked.

Brayden rubbed his hands through his hair. “Yes. If Wren restored Lena’s power and tried to take on her curse but

something went wrong... then they both died on the same day and therefore came back on the same day.”

Okay, I didn’t really want to know how all that worked. Both our moms had sex with our dads the night we died? Gross. I shivered thinking about it.

“This is overwhelming.” Leah stood and started to pace. For the first time since all of this started, she was showing signs of stress.

I agreed, nodding my head.

“Okay, step one: get Leah’s potion, hide her Greywolf for thirty days,” Brayden said and Leah nodded, seeming calmed that there was a plan.

“Step two,” Brayden added. “In a few weeks, just before the fight, I’ll take Averly to the Briar Woods to find Artemis and see if he can release a tenth of her power so I can use it to fight Silas back for my pack.”

“A tenth? Is that enough to help you?” I asked.

He looked at me with a smirk. “Whether you are Wren or my Lena, you are a Greywolf, one of the most powerful magical creatures to ever live.”

Chills raced up my arms. I mean, I had frozen time for a split second when Brayden was attacked. Now I wondered what else I was capable of.

Brayden looked at me seriously. “I must warn both of you now to never lie to a Fae Lord if you ever meet them. Evade and dodge questions, fake a heart attack, but *never* lie. They can sense it.”

Leah’s eyes widened; my stomach dropped. “Okay. Noted,” I told him.

“And saving your brothers and our sisters from the Fae Lords’ imprisonment...?” Leah asked.

Brayden sighed, looking out at the lake. “Will have to wait. Everything must line up perfectly for me to take back my kingdom. I’m of no use to my brothers dead.”

Maddy's phone alarm beeped and she looked down at it.
"It's been almost an hour," she said.

A somber mood fell over our little pack. It felt like we had insurmountable odds against us and a laundry list of things to do, but I took comfort in knowing I wasn't alone.

After picking up the potion, Leah chugged it down in front of Morgana and made a retching noise. Morgana grinned. "The stinging nettle can be a bit bitter, but it was probably the powdered bat brains."

Leah dry heaved again and Brayden cut Morgana a glare. "Don't mess with her."

But he looked uncertain if there maybe had been some powdered bat brains in there or not.

Brayden paid her in one strand of hair and then we headed back to Sandpoint in silence. I looked at my best friend in sympathy for a large part of the drive. Leah still hadn't shifted and we were trying to keep it that way. We had no idea if she would survive the shift and that was terrifying. I told myself that she was a Greywolf, so she should be fine, but I just didn't know if that was true.

When we got back to the cabin, I shuffled inside, suddenly exhausted. I needed food and sleep. The dead Elder Fae, my best friend being my reincarnated sister—who was now a wolf—it was all too much.

I told the others I was going to lie down, and two seconds after my head hit the pillow I was out.

I dreamed of Brayden. Kissing him, touching him, losing him. It was vivid and it felt so real that when I woke there was an aching in my chest. This whole situation was starting to mess with my mind and my emotions. If I wasn't Lena, if I was really Wren, that meant that according to Brayden I was married to one of his brothers. How awful was I going to feel if I found out I was Wren and fantasizing about my husband's brother?

Kill me now.

There was a knock on the door and I sat up, getting off my bed.

Leah was there, her hands held nervously before her as her eyes lined with tears.

“Oh no, what happened?” I rushed towards her looking for injuries or some sign of trauma.

Had she shifted?

She shook her head and put her hands out to stop me. “I’m just... it’s all catching up to me now and... I’m scared.”

“Oh, Lee Lee.” I used my rare nickname for her, only to be brought out in the worst of times to give maximum comfort, and pulled her into a hug.

She burst into sobs right there in the doorway and I held her as she cried. I had been worried she’d been taking all of this way too well. Now I felt some relief to know she was processing it.

She sobbed into my neck for a full minute, and when she finally quieted I pulled back, looking at the streaks of mascara down her face and her grimacing cry face.

“You are the ugliest crier,” I said, and she burst into laughter, reaching out to sock me in the arm.

I grinned, glad that she was doing better. Pulling her into the room, I closed the door and patted my twin bed. This house had four bedrooms; Brayden’s was the only one with a single large bed. All of the others had twin beds for pack type sleeping. Maddy had decided to sleep in one of them with Leah last night as a comfort and protection. Leah sat next to me and wiped at the bottom of her eyes.

“This is so messed up. Are we supposed to fight over him? Am I supposed to be with one of his brothers? What if his brother isn’t even cute? And now I might die in like ten months? I don’t want to die and I don’t want you to either.” She rambled and my gut clenched at the mention of fighting over Brayden.

“I don’t want to fight over Brayden,” I told her truthfully. “And all of his brothers are hot,” I added with a wink that made her smile. I’d seen them in my memory visions and they were all impressively good looking.

“*Imprisoned* brothers. My mom would kill me if I brought a felon werewolf home as my husband,” she deadpanned, and we both burst into laughter.

“You like him. Brayden,” she finally said and the big old elephant entered the room.

I nodded.

She let out a long-suffering sigh. “I won’t do anything until we know who he belongs to,” she said finally, and although it was probably meant to bring me comfort, it also said that if Leah realized she was Lena, she would take him from me. It told me she liked him too and I hated that. But we were talking about soulmates here, weren’t we? A couple that defied the odds eight times and found each other in every incarnation.

“The names on his arm—” I said.

“They’re all her,” Leah finished. “I figured that out. It’s incredibly romantic.”

It was. Holy hell it was. I wanted to be a name. I wanted Averly written right there at the bottom. I realized then what Leah had meant.

“He deserves to be with his Lena,” I finally admitted, even if it wasn’t me. The mere thought of that made tears well in my eyes.

This man fought to find her in every life, married her, and then watched her die over and over again. I wouldn’t come between that.

Leah nodded, reaching out to grasp my hand.

“So I’m guessing you and Jason broke up again?” I queried. If she was goo-goo eyed at Brayden, it probably meant she was single.

Leah gave a soft chuckle. “We lasted one night. He got like five texts from all these different girls. I’m over him.”

Yeah. Especially now that she knew she had some soulmate waiting for her.

“But do you know the best part of all of this is?”

I squeezed her hand and looked up at my dearest friend, so grateful for her comfort and presence right now.

“What?”

“You and I are freaking sisters! *Real* sisters,” she shouted, and then tackled me, pushing me backward on the bed and causing a peal of laughter to rip out of me.

There was a knock at the door and then it opened. Maddy popped her head in to see Leah tackle-hugging me. “Feeling a little left out of this love session,” Maddy admitted and I grinned.

“Get over here.” I patted the bed and Maddy chuckled.

“I’m totally kidding, I don’t hug. I came to tell you that Brayden just called you out of work again. I told him not to but—”

I was off the bed and halfway across the room before she finished her sentence. She stumbled backward out of my way as I peeled down the hallway.

“Brayden!” I shouted, entering the living room to find him frozen by the kitchen holding his phone in his hand.

“You possessive alpha bastard!” I roared, feeling the anger of every woman who had ever been controlled by a man welling up inside of me.

Brayden gave me a halfcocked smile. “Are you sure you’re not my Lena?”

That made my heart flutter and my thoughts went fuzzy for a moment.

“She’s called me worse,” he added.

“Don’t call me out of work!” I snapped.

He looked guilty. “You were sleeping. You clearly need more rest. I thought with Leah being newly changed—”

“Oh, cut the crap, you hate my job.” I crossed my arms and pinned him with a glare.

He shrugged. “Nothing against selling beers in tiny shorts, but I can’t be everywhere at once. I can’t be here protecting Leah and across town protecting you.”

The selling beers in tiny shorts comment made me see red. Reaching over, I snatched his cell phone from his hand and dialed the last number he called.

“Rusty Spoon, this is—”

“Clara, I’m feeling better, I’ll be at work,” I told her, looking Brayden in his now glowing yellow eyes.

“Okay, see you soon, babe,” Clara responded, and we both hung up.

“You’re going to get one of us killed,” Brayden said flatly.

My job was my independence. I wasn’t giving that up because I met some guy who might be my thousand-year-old husband.

I put one hand on my hip. “Leah loves coming to the bar. Why don’t you keep us both company and then we will be well protected?”

Brayden shook his head in defeat and threw his hands in the air. “Why don’t you put some pants and a turtleneck on?”

That got a grin out of me. He was jealous, and part of me loved that. I looked at his hands for the first time and gasped. They were full of small cuts and crusted blood and dirt. “What happened?”

He looked at his hands as if the sight was no big deal. “While you were resting I went back and burned the Elder Fae’s body and then buried the ashes so that no witches could keep his soul earthbound.”

What the what? Witches could keep your soul earthbound if they got hold of your body or ashes? I shivered. I *definitely*

didn't like witches.

"Alone!" I growled. The idiot had a death wish.

"It was fine," he said.

Now that I looked closer, I noticed scrapes along his arms and neck. "It wasn't fine, you got your ass kicked by a tree warrior, didn't you?"

He chuckled; it did sound funny coming out like that. I hadn't realized I'd reached out and brushed my fingers along the red spot on his neck until he stilled beneath my fingers.

"Oh, I..." I pulled my hand back, embarrassed. "I should shower before work."

He cleared his throat. "Me too."

Wanna share water? I dared myself to say, and then scolded my inner thoughts. He could be Leah's soulmate. Until one of us remembered whose husband he was, I wasn't touching him anymore.

After showering and getting ready, we all headed into town as a pack. Leah and I were dressed in short skirts and crop tops. Leah had paired hers with knee-high boots, while I wore mine with some sneakers that wouldn't hurt my feet. When we'd walked out of the room, Brayden's eyes had gone to both of our bare legs and he just groaned and said he was waiting in the car. Maddy watched all of it with a childlike satisfaction.

Now I was an hour into my shift and the bar was packed. I'd gotten Brayden, Maddy, and Leah the best table in the house right off the bar and ran some beers and a bowl of bar mix out to them. I kept asking Ronan to get a small kitchen in the back so that we could serve nachos and stuff, but his answer was always, "Who's paying for that?"

"Hey, gorgeous!" a familiar voice called as I was setting down the bowl of pretzel mix at their table.

I spun and grinned when my gaze landed on flirty Nik from McDuff's. "Well, well, look what the cat dragged in," I called, and he rushed forward to give me a hug.

As his arms came around me, they hung low on my back and Brayden growled from the table. Both Nik and I stiffened, freezing at the unnatural sound, and he pulled back, looking down at the floor. “Is there a dog in here?” he asked over the noise.

I turned to look over my shoulder and locked eyes with Brayden. His irises were glowing yellow and he was giving Nik a murderous look.

I reached out and kicked his shin, and his eyes dropped back down to blue.

“What can I make you?” I asked, and started to divert him away from Brayden’s possessive stare.

“Let’s dance!” Leah pulled Maddy by the hand and dragged her out to where a few drunken patrons were dancing in the middle of the makeshift dancefloor. Brayden’s attention now diverted to Leah and Maddy and I was grateful. He could only be possessive over one of us at a time.

“Vodka soda,” Nik said and took a seat.

When Clara noticed Nik, she squealed and ran over. “Hey, cutie.” Clara leaned across the bar top and planted a big kiss on Nik’s cheek.

Clara was about as bad as Nik in the flirting department.

There was a sudden awareness that someone was watching me. I looked in Brayden’s direction to see him staring right at me. It was a quizzical look, like he couldn’t figure something out. I gave him a sheepish smile and then went back to tending the bar. After another hour, my till was overflowing with cash. I needed to make a run back to Ronan as he didn’t like us to keep more than a hundred dollars on hand in case of robbery. Usually people did credit cards, but tonight the cash was flowing.

Grabbing the cash out of the drawer, I shoved it into a money bag and zipped it up. “Heading out back for a minute,” I told Clara, and she gave me a nod, her dark ponytail bobbing.

I popped out from behind the bar and headed down the hallway. As I neared Ronan’s office, I slowed. Loud male

voices could be heard arguing inside.

“The Witch Mother just wants you to keep an eye on the girl. Report anything weird,” a male voice said.

“I’ll do *nothin’* of the sort, you wanker,” Ronan shouted, and I froze.

The Witch Mother? Morgana wanted him to keep an eye on what girl? *Me*?

My heart leapt into my throat. I flattened myself against the wall.

“Remember who you serve!” the voice snarled.

The sound of a chair backing up and hitting the wall rang throughout the hallway. “That sweet lass and ‘er mother are like family to me. She’s an innocent in whatever Morgana thinks she’s guilty of. She was only bitten a few days ago, for Pete’s sake. She can’t ‘ave done anything to sic the Witch Mother on ‘er yet.”

Silence descended on the office and tears filled my eyes. I knew I could always trust Ronan to look out for me.

“That sweet *lass* is a Greywolf,” the man said, and I heard the audible inhale of breath from Ronan.

Welp, the cat was out of the bag on that one.

“So the stories are true about Brayden and his reincarnated soulmate?” Ronan asked.

Ronan was in his forties, assuming that was his real age, which I was pretty sure it was because I’d seen baby pictures of him in an eighties getup. If Lena hadn’t been around for forty years, then the whole rumor about Brayden and her would feel just like that. A rumor.

“Yes. But Morgana isn’t sure which girl is Lena, so keep an eye and report everything back to us if you know what’s good for you.”

I heard footsteps and panicked, backing up. Reaching for the door handle to the storage closet, I thrust it open and threw myself inside. I slipped the door shut behind me and nearly

stepped into a dirty bucket of water as I tried to calm my breathing.

Morgana wanted to know which one of us was Lena. *Why?* Maybe she was working with the Fae Lords? But if she was, she wouldn't have helped Leah, right? Maybe she just wanted the knowledge so that she could use it to bribe Brayden later or something.

The closet door opened and I yelped as Brayden pulled me out. "What are you doing? I've been worried about you. I had to follow your scent to find you." He looked panicked and I felt bad for worrying him.

"Uh." I reached into the closet and grabbed a clean rag. "Getting this."

Brayden's brow furrowed and I gave him a wide-eyed look. "I'll tell you later," I whispered. He looked to Ronan's office and then back at me.

I nodded. Clutching the money bag and the bar rag, and headed back into the bar with Brayden behind me. We stepped back out into the loud room, and before I slipped behind the bar Brayden grasped my arm. "Did he hurt you?" he whispered in my ear.

My brows furrowed as I looked back at him. "Ronan? No." I eyed the bar, unsure how many people in this place had supernatural hearing. "I'll tell you later. It's no biggie." I shrugged out of his light grasp and stepped back behind the bar, putting the money back into the drawer and finishing out my shift.

The head of the witches wanted to keep tabs on me. That wasn't a big deal, right?

"HE SAID WHAT?" Brayden growled on the way home. It was three a.m. and Maddy and Leah were passed out in the back while I sat shotgun and Brayden drove.

“Some dude who I assume was a warlock said that Morgana wanted to keep tabs on me.” I shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “He told Ronan I was a Greywolf but that Morgana wasn’t sure if I was Lena.”

Brayden shook his head in frustration.

“Is that a big deal?” I queried. “Is she working for the Fae Lords?”

“She despises the Fae Lords, but she deals in favors and gossip. Someone else might be paying her for this information.”

“So someone wants to make sure I’m Lena? Who?”

“Silas,” Brayden growled. “Which means the Fae Lords want to know. Probably ever since your display of power in the parking lot. Do you trust Ronan?”

“With my life.” I quickly told him what Ronan had said to the warlock and how he’d basically been around my entire life for my mom and me. “He and my mom grew up in school together.”

“Then next time you go into work, I want you to tell Ronan to report back to Morgana that you *are* Lena,” Brayden said as he exited the Interstate. “That he overheard you telling Clara about some of our past memories together.”

Ask Ronan to lie for me? That didn’t feel right. “I don’t know,” I hedged as he took Leah’s car onto the dirt road that led to his cabin.

“Averly, if the Fae Lords are unsure that you are my Lena, then they might do something drastic to figure it out. I want to head that off.”

My Lena. Every time he said that my thighs clenched and need shot between my legs. He pulled the car up to the house and I just nodded, then looked back at Leah’s sleeping figure.

“So by now you would know who Lena was and be spending your last few months with her as your wife...?” I asked him. He put the car in park and looked over at me.

“By now I would have married her, taken her to Paris and made her breakfast in bed dozens of times. She always remembers us. Always.” His voice broke and I reached out and grasped his hand.

“You’re pretty unforgettable. We will figure it out together,” I told him.

His eyes went from my hand clasped over his to my face, and he nodded. “Wren breaking the curse certainly changes things. Lena might not die at all this time, but she also might never remember our life together. Maybe I need to come to terms with that and just...”

He let himself trail off.

Just what? Pick one of us?

My stomach flopped over at the thought.

Pick me. Pick me.

“We’re home?” Leah’s sleepy voice came from the back seat and I yanked my hand away from Brayden’s as if I’d been burned.

“Yep.” I opened the car door and leapt out of it.

I needed to stop flirting with my sister’s possible husband until we figured this out. No more looking at, touching, or ogling the alpha.

TWELVE

The next afternoon I awoke to a few texts from my mom. Crap. I needed to have a talk with her about moving out. I got up, showered, and brushed my teeth, peering at the hallway clock. It was after one p.m. and I had a two o'clock class. I still wasn't sure if I wanted to take Brayden up on his offer to have me quit school and train me as a vet. He'd probably been to college a dozen times. With his age, I probably would have too if I went in every incarnation.

Stepping out into the living room, the sounds of laughter greeted me. Leah and Brayden were smiling at each other while eating breakfast. I recognized Leah's famous waffles. She put so many chocolate chips and walnuts in them, it spilled over the side of the waffle press.

"What's so funny?" I asked, and they both went still.

Brayden caught my gaze and a guilty look crossed his face. "Leah had another memory, a particularly embarrassing one for me."

Another memory?

My gut tightened. *Is she Lena?* Did they both now know? My gaze flicked to their hands to see if they were intertwined, but they weren't.

Leah looked back at me with a smile. "I didn't remember who I was, but I remembered Brayden daring Axel to a sparring match. Brayden slipped and fell into the muddy lake."

I'd been holding my breath the entire time she spoke, and when she said she didn't remember who she was in the

memory, I released all the air I'd been holding.

I tossed Brayden a joking look. "Sounds like something he would do."

Brayden shook his head and then frowned. "I miss my brothers, and your sisters. We were all so close. Living in the same castle. Each couple had their own wing. Every day was a party." He looked wistfully off into the distance.

"No children between any of them?" If we were, like, hundreds of years old, I wondered why we never had children. Or maybe we did. The thought suddenly struck me and I waited for Brayden's answer.

A haunted look crossed Brayden's face and I immediately regretted asking.

I exchanged a panicked look with Leah. "I'm sorry, that's personal, I—"

He shook his head. "No, it involves both of you. You have a right to know."

He patted the seat next to him at the table and my stomach dropped. He was asking me to sit down for this. That wasn't good.

I pulled the chair out and plopped down, peering nervously at Leah, who looked like she was holding her breath.

Leah served me a waffle and I chewed on it aimlessly, waiting for Brayden to speak.

"My brothers and I were all born sterile," he said, and the chunk of waffle lodged in my throat. I coughed, loosening it, and then grabbed Leah's glass of orange juice to chug it down.

"You can't have children?" Leah asked, frowning.

Brayden sighed. "No... my mother was cursed when she was a child, that she would give birth to sterile men, and that curse fell on us. When my brothers and I finally die, our line will end."

Wow, this guy's story could not be any more tragic.

“Axel, Castiel, Gabe? All of you?” I asked, rattling off his brothers’ names.

He nodded. “It’s a great honor in my realm to birth a Greywolf. It happens at random between two werewolves. They say in my village that when soulmates marry, they give birth to Greywolves.”

Leah and I both smiled at that.

“But Maddy’s not one,” I thought out loud.

He nodded. “My mother remarried after my father died. She and my stepfather had two daughters, Maddy and Nora.”

Nora. The sister who was currently stuck in Silas’ pack with Maddy’s fiancé, August. I’d actually completely forgotten about them.

“Are your mom and stepdad still alive?” Leah asked.

He took a swig of his orange juice. “I hid them in the Glass Mountains with some other prominent members of Moon Valley before the Fae Lords attacked. There is a hidden tunnel system in the mountains there that houses a castle. They had Nora, and sent her to me and Maddy when she was six years old with a letter saying that it was no place to raise a child. My mother will not leave Moon Valley and the people stuck there.” There was some disdain in his voice, like maybe he wanted her to leave and be with him.

“And... our parents?” I wondered. I loved my mother. She was my mom obviously, but Lena and Wren had parents too, and I worried for them if there was some war going on back in Moon Valley.

Brayden reached out and grasped the top of my hand and then did the same to Leah. “They were both great warriors in my army and fell during the Fae Lord takeover.”

Geez, that was sad. I didn’t know them, so I shouldn’t feel so emotional, but tears pricked my eyes at the news of their death.

“No other siblings?” Leah said, her eyes misty as well.

Brayden pulled his hands away. “Just the four most beautiful girls in Moon Valley.”

Leah and I both smiled at that. It would be fun to one day meet Blake and Natalie. As an only child, I’d always wanted a sister. Now to find out I had three others, it felt awesome.

“How did you and Lena meet?” Leah asked, leaning forward to place her chin on her hand.

Brayden’s eyes went half lidded and Leah smiled. “At Greywolf Academy, the only school in Moon Valley that solely teaches those born with Greywolf power.”

Whoa. Greywolf Academy sounded badass. I immediately wanted an invite, and then remembered if I were Lena or Wren, I’d probably already gone.

Lame.

“You start the academy at age twelve and graduate at eighteen. Lena and I were both the eldest of our four siblings, and we bonded over that. By the time we were in our fourth year, I got the courage to ask her to the Moonlight Ball and the rest is history.”

A flash of memory slammed into me then.

Purple flowers. Wisteria draped all along a garden hedge and live music filtering out onto the patio.

Then the memory was gone.

“Wisteria,” I mumbled and Brayden froze. “I remember the wisteria.”

“The Moonlight Ball is always held in the ballroom of the academy which is surrounded by the wisteria gardens. Do you remember anything else?” Brayden said.

I shook my head, feeling defeated.

He nodded. “Wren was there too. She went with Castiel.”

His way of saying I might be remembering a night as Wren with his brother as my date. How freaking depressing.

Maddy shuffled out in her pj's with her hair ratted to one side and I snickered but then balked when I saw the time.

“Hey, I’ve got class in—”

The front door was kicked open then and we all sprang into action. Maddy hit the floor, covering her head since she was closest. Leah ducked under the table and Brayden and I rushed forward, stopping when we saw Silas standing there with a twelve-gauge shotgun pointed at my chest. Three men fanned out behind him.

My heart fluttered against my ribcage and my mouth went dry. My gun was back in the bedroom and I felt completely powerless.

“You like these things huh?” He looked over at the gun. “Thought I might pick one up for you.”

“Get off my land,” Brayden roared, pelts of fur running down his throat.

Silas glanced over at the alpha and grinned, “Your little *bitch* here showed Greywolf power in front of my wolves and she will now answer to the Fae Lords.”

Brayden lunged forward with a growl and Silas cocked the shotgun, causing Brayden to stop dead in his tracks.

The douchebag then looked at me and I saw something gold glint in his free hand.

“Averly Silvers, you have been hereby summoned before the Fae Lords,” Silas said with an official tone to his voice, and my stomach clenched at the mention of my last name.

“No!” Brayden yelled, and then Silas threw a golden egg-shaped metal ball at my feet.

Huh?

I had half a second of confusion before it cracked in half, opening to reveal a glowing green magic.

The sound of cracking bones forced me to snap my head to the right and my eyes widened as I saw Leah’s back hunch forward, breaking in half.

She was shifting. *No.*

Maddy and Brayden both lunged for me at the same time, but it was too late. A portal of some sort had opened in front of me and before I could process it I was sucked inside like a vacuum. The last thing I heard was my name on Brayden's lips and Leah's half human howl.

One second I was standing in Brayden's living room and the next my bare feet slammed onto a cold white marble floor.

My head snapped up and I saw four fae sitting on separate high-backed thrones. They sat rigidly in the ornately carved stone seats and scowled at me as I stumbled forward in confusion.

“Kneel!” the woman on the far left shouted, and I was thrown to my knees as a force pressed on my back.

Holy crap.

This had to be the Fae Lords. There was no denying this power. Two women and two men sat before me and my gaze darted around the space, taking in the regal and opulent room. I was inside of a castle with a domed ceiling all made of white marble. There were circular cutouts for windows, and in the center of each window was a metal howling wolf emblem.

This was the Moon Valley, Brayden's old home, his old castle. It had to be.

A male Fae Lord stood and walked over to me. His pointed ears poked out of the side of his slicked back dark brown hair, streaked through with silver. “Reveal your power.” He flicked his wrist towards me, and again an unseen force pressed in on me. A burning pain started in my stomach but I ignored it, trying to show no reaction. The pain increased and I bit the inside of my cheek.

“You stripped my power!” I snarled, deciding to sell Lena's version of this story.

The man looked at one of the female Fae Lords to his left and her eyes narrowed.

She was the complete opposite of the man; her hair was white as cotton and fell in loose waves all the way to her waist. Two small braids tied off with crystals kept her hair from her face. She walked to the side of the stage and took the steps down the platform two by two. Panic gripped me as she walked closer to me. Her long silvery dress looked fit for a sixteenth-century queen. The hem trailed five feet behind her as she strode forward with a purpose. There was a thick golden bangle bracelet on each of her wrists that I quickly noticed the other fae wore as well. As she neared, I was taken by surprise by her bright purple eyes. They were beautiful and haunting and she wore a scowl of disgust as she looked at me.

“Are you Wren Greywolf?” she asked, and there was power in her voice. My head suddenly felt tight.

Brayden’s words of wisdom about encountering a Fae Lord and not lying to them suddenly came back to me.

“No,” I said boldly. I was Averly Silvers.

The fae’s eyebrows narrowed. “Are you a Greywolf?”

Shit.

I paled and the panic must have been written on my face because the woman grinned and her beauty was so perfect it felt unnatural. Perfect teeth, perfect hair, her skin was without a single wrinkle or visible pore. She looked to be made of porcelain, like a doll.

“Are. You. A. Greywolf?” she growled and stepped closer to me as the pressure on my head intensified.

“Yes!” I blurted, and the pain that was squeezing my brain diminished.

“Imprison her, Lora!” the male on the far right said. He was bald, with intricate swirl tattoos of gold on his head. “She is clearly Wren.”

Lora, the woman before me, shook her head. “She said she wasn’t and it was true. I felt it.” Her brows pulled together in a knot in her forehead. Leaning forward, she inhaled as if smelling me.

“I do not smell the power on her and I did not smell a lie,” she exclaimed.

“You also didn’t smell a lie when Silas brought his men in to testify that she displayed Greywolf power!”

Lora’s head swiveled in the direction of the Fae Lord who had spoken. “Would you like to do my job for me, Mace? Oh, that’s right, you do not have my power, so do not presume to know what I do.”

“Enough!” the other fae woman who had yet to speak screamed and stood. “Do not quarrel before her!” She clapped her hands and a green ball of magic burst at my feet, sucking me inside.

Another portal!

I was thrown backward and fell onto a grey stone floor in a completely different room.

“Lena? Wren?” a female gasped, and I peered up, trying to get my bearings. I felt sick from all the moving around. I took in my surroundings. I was in a small basement dungeon type of... apartment, if it could be called that. There were bars on the small twelve-inch windows and everything was dark and washed in a yellow light. It smelled damp and the furniture was old and well worn. I stood in a makeshift living room, but the far wall was all bars. It was like someone converted a jail to a home?

A young twenty-something woman was staring at me with a shocked open jaw. I knew immediately from her face and my memories that this was Blake. Her long blonde braid fell over one shoulder as she stared at me with deep blue eyes.

“Wren!” A male rushed in from another room and came right at me. He pulled me up and into his arms, but I backed away wide-eyed and in fear.

He shrank back, an apologetic look on his face. Peering at him, the dark hair and blue eyes, strong jaw, it was like a punch to the gut.

He looked so much like Brayden.

Another man rushed into the room and again my heart knocked against my chest. “Wren?” He grinned.

Why did they all think I was Wren?

Everyone was looking at me wide-eyed.

A beautiful woman with long, dirty-blonde hair was the last to join the party.

Natalie.

These were the imprisoned Greywolf siblings.

Blake reached out to one of the guys and he grasped her hand, pulling her into him.

They were waiting for me to speak, I realized.

“Uhh, I’m not Wren,” I told them honestly.

Blake and Natalie both simultaneously burst into tears. “Lena?” They rushed forward and pulled me into their arms and I let them, only because I was too shocked and overwhelmed to do anything else.

The brother who had originally tried to hug me frowned. “What do you mean you’re not Wren? Why would the Fae Lords send you down here if you weren’t Wren?”

I swallowed hard, looking around corners of the room for cameras or anything that told me that the Fae Lords might be listening.

That’s when I noticed the thick golden chain bracelets that they each wore. An exact match to the ones on the Fae Lords’ wrists. Was that how they siphoned their powers?

They seemed to pick up on what I was doing.

“Natalie. Link us,” one of Brayden’s brothers snapped.

Natalie stepped forward and her eyes glowed yellow. She held out her hand and one by one they all reached forward to touch it like a team going in for a huddle.

Everyone looked at me expectantly.

“I don’t remember anything,” I said, and understanding broke out into their faces.

One of the brothers reached out and took my hand softly, laying it on the pile, and instantly I felt a pressure in my mind.

'They can't overhear us now.' The voice of Natalie invaded my mind and my eyes widened. Her lips hadn't moved.

'Tell us everything, Lena. Where is my wife?' Brayden's brother growled next to me.

Oh, that's why he'd tried to hug me in the beginning. He must be Castiel.

'I'm not sure I'm Lena either. I'm... my name is Averly. I've only been a werewolf for a few days but I displayed Greywolf powers and I've had some memories of Brayden and all of you so I'm either Lena... or Wren.' I thought the words and they must have gotten through because they all gasped, looking at me with emotions that ranged from excitement to shock.

Castiel reached out and stroked my cheek but I stiffened, causing his hand to fall away.

'If you displayed Greywolf powers, you are my Wren. Lena's powers were stripped.'

Hearing him call me *his* Wren made my stomach flip over. He seemed like a slightly shorter but still well over six foot, leaner and less grouchy version of Brayden. I couldn't go wrong there, but he wasn't Brayden.

'But Wren doesn't reincarnate into different bodies like Lena!' Natalie said into my mind. By the looks on all of the surrounding faces, they could all hear us no matter who spoke.

'The night Wren broke out of here forty years ago, she met with the Elder Fae,' I told them and they all went rigid. *'She told him she found a way to break Lena's curse. To take it on herself. Then she showed up to Brayden and Lena and... Brayden woke up and they were both gone.'*

Castiel whimpered next to me and his hand went stiff between ours. *'So now she reincarnates as well?'* he asked, his deep blue eyes boring into mine.

I nodded. ‘*And we think she could be my best friend, Leah, that I grew up with who recently got bitten.*’

Natalie shared a look with her sister. ‘*Two bitten wolves in one week by chance? That’s not normal.*’

I wondered if it was fate that changed me into a werewolf or my stupid self for following blood into the forest.

‘*She woke up from healing after her bite and... she remembered Brayden,*’ I told them.

They all went very still.

‘*What did she remember?*’ Blake asked.

‘*Brayden’s coronation, big events like that, but she can’t remember who she is.*’

Natalie nodded. ‘*Doesn’t matter. She remembered Bray, which makes her our sister, and you have Greywolf powers and memories, which makes you our sister too.*’ She reached out with her free hand and squeezed my arm.

‘*It matters to me. I want my wife!*’ Castiel snarled and I went rigid. The way he said it wasn’t in a scary way but in a way that made me think if I were to tell him I was Wren he would take me into the next room and deflower me. Heat flooded my cheeks.

One of the brothers with short-cropped hair shook his head and chuckled. ‘*You guys, she doesn’t remember us. You are totally freaking her out.*’

Blake reached out and smacked him in the chest. ‘*Axel, that’s not helpful.*’

He caught her hand midair and kissed the top of it, winking at her, which caused her to visibly swoon.

Oh boy.

‘*If you have no detectable powers, they will let you go. We don’t have much time,*’ Natalie said.

‘*You don’t remember me?*’ Castiel asked me. He had a dark-brown man bun at the nape of his neck and looked like a Viking warrior.

I shook my head. ‘*Not how you want me to. I’m sorry.*’

‘*What power did you display? Maybe that will give who you are away. We all have a distinct power on top of a normal span of Greywolf powers,*’ Gabe said.

Oh, that was news to me. ‘*I... well, Brayden was about to get jumped by a pack of wolves and I screamed and lashed out and... time stopped, or I guess time didn’t stop but I froze the wolves.*’

Everyone’s shoulders collectively slumped. ‘*You froze matter. It’s something we can all do,*’ Natalie informed me.

‘*But Lena was the most proficient at it,*’ Blake added.

I shrugged, not interested in playing this Wren-Lena game again.

‘*Tell us of my brother. Does he struggle? What are his plans to get us out?*’ Gabe asked, and I swallowed hard. How much did they know about his life in Sandpoint? Anything?

‘*He’s got Maddy but he lost Nora to another pack—*’

‘*Who is Nora?*’ Natalie asked with a frown.

Oh... right. She was fourteen and they hadn’t had any news for... I didn’t know how long.

‘*She’s Brayden’s little sister.*’

Silence descended over the group. They had a range of collective shock run over their features.

‘*And he lost her to another pack?*’ Axel growled, and someone in the hand dogpile squeezed my fingers so badly it hurt. Only when I hissed did they release me.

‘*Silas,*’ Gabe growled. Gabe was the strong and silent one, I was gathering.

I nodded.

‘*The Fae Lords make Brayden fight for his pack every year, and Lena dies every twenty years on her birthday, so he’s always trying to keep his pack and then find her.*’ I didn’t

know how much they knew, and I felt the need to defend why there had been no big escape effort.

'Has he come for us at all? Any attempts?' Gabe sounded disgusted that Brayden wasn't trying daily to get here and break them out.

I nodded. *'He said he had! But—'*

'Don't interrogate her,' Castiel warned his brother with an animalistic growl in his throat.

And I thought Brayden was protective. Wow.

'Brayden's power has been severed,' I rambled, unsure how much of this was new news. *'He can't take on the Fae Lords alone. It would need to be at least three, maybe four of us with fully restored Greywolf power,'* I said.

'And now there are two of you with full power?' Natalie looked hopeful and I nodded.

'And when Wren gets her memories back, she can restore Brayden's power and we can come for you,' I promised, suddenly protective over this little family of mine that I barely knew.

Castiel nodded. *'My Wren is safe. That's all that matters.'* He squeezed my hand as if telling me that I was his Wren.

Axel suddenly pitched forward in our little huddle and the bracelet on his wrist glowed a sickly green. He screamed in pain and Natalie looked at me with panic. *'We love you. We know you guys will figure out a way to get us out of here.'*

I had forgotten the most important thing to tell them.

'Novus is awake. The hunt is back—' I shouted, and their eyes all went wide as saucers.

A green magical flame ignited at my feet and then my hand was ripped from theirs. I was pulled backward into a portal and then my feet landed on the white marble tile. I was staring up at the Fae Lords once more. The fact that they could toss me around with portals against my will was horrifying. I wondered if Axel falling over and screaming as they did it meant that was his power?

“She has no Greywolf power, which makes her Lena. Send her back,” the male Fae Lord declared from the dais.

Lora was standing before me again, head cocked to the side. “Why, Dryden? Why not just imprison her here and replenish her power? She could replace the power drain we sustained from Wren’s loss.” My heart jackknifed in my chest and Lora grinned. “We could even have Silas bring Brayden back. Have them all under one roof and within our reach.”

Chills broke out on my arms at the mere thought of being imprisoned here with Brayden for eternity.

“We cannot let them all get together, you know this,” Dryden said in an exasperated tone. “Besides, keeping Brayden tortured by his lost love brings me *much* joy.”

Lora smirked but it never reached her eyes. If a psychotic murderer smiled, it would look like her. “And it keeps him from trying to find ways of freeing his brothers,” she declared.

Rage built up inside of me and I wanted to spit in her face. My jaw clamped shut and my hands balled into fists.

Lora tipped her head back then and cackled. “You have barely a year left to live, girl! Might as well make the most of it!” She pulled a stone from her pocket. With a flick of her wrist she threw it at my feet and then I was yanked into *another* portal.

Please take me home. Please take me—

“Averly!” Leah shrieked and rushed forward as my feet slammed onto the floor. I was back in Brayden’s cabin, in the living room. Brayden got there first, pulling me into his arms and examining me from head to toe. I’d never seen such a wild look in his eyes.

“Did they hurt you?” he breathed, and my eyes fluttered closed for a moment.

I shook my head. “But I saw your brothers.” I looked at Leah. “And... our sisters.”

That felt *so* weird to say. Thinking of Leah as my sister felt normal. I mean, she was my best friend in the whole world,

but those two blondes I'd just met? They were strangers. And yet... I cared for them. I wanted to save them.

Maddy appeared and shepherded me over to the couch. "Sit down and tell us everything."

I looked around to make sure that Silas was gone and saw that Brayden had already patched up the door. How long was I gone? Then I remembered Leah shifting.

"Leah, your wolf!" I looked to my bestie.

She smiled and shared an intimate and knowing look with Brayden.

"She handled her first shift like a champ," he said.

"She tried to record it," Maddy added and I chuckled.

That was Leah.

"Tell us about our family," Brayden said eagerly.

I nodded, sat down and wiped my hands on my legs nervously, taking in a shaky breath. When I exhaled, I launched into a ten-minute verbal diarrhea about everything I'd seen or heard. Leah, Brayden, and Maddy watched me keenly, their faces changing to fit the story. Shocked, scared, surprised.

When I was done, I looked up at Brayden expectantly.

"Did Castiel try to kiss you thinking you were Wren?" he asked.

I frowned and Maddy snickered but then turned it into a cough when Brayden shot her a look.

"I tell you all of that and that's what you took from it?" I asked him. My gaze flicked to Leah and it killed me to see a slight look of jealousy cross her features.

Brayden shook himself, as if dislodging thoughts and then cleared his throat. "My brothers wondered why I hadn't broken them out yet? Don't they know it's nearly impossible?"

I nodded. "I told them. And I told them you'd tried before. But they seemed to think you would find a way, especially

now that there are two of us with full Greywolf power. I told them when Wren gets her memories back and restores your powers, we can try to free them.”

Brayden nodded. “Especially if we were able to get Novus to take out the Fae Lords. Then we would definitely take back the kingdom.”

Maddy squealed in excitement. “Can we really even dream about going home one day soon?”

Brayden shrugged. “I don’t know. Until Wren gets her memories back and remembers how to restore my powers, we aren’t strong enough. And Lena...” His eyes flicked from me to Leah. “...will die on her twentieth birthday and then we have to start all over.”

Leah looked over at me. “Maybe if you told some stories, it would jog her memories?”

Her memories? So she thought I was Wren too? That hurt the most for some reason.

“Yes! Story time! I’ll order pizza and we can talk over dinner.” Maddy ran to grab her phone on the counter.

AN HOUR LATER, I was swooning hard. Brayden and Maddy told story after story of his love for Lena and I remembered nothing. A few times, Leah got a glimpse of a memory but not enough to determine who she was. This was a shitshow of epic proportions. He even busted out a photo album of him and Lena in all her incarnations. All it did was serve to make me jealous he’d been with all of these women.

“I’ll never forget the gift she gave me on our wedding night.” Brayden stroked his finger over the rim of his glass of water. “It’s something she gives to me every single time we marry now.”

I wanted to know what it was—I *needed* to know—but I also knew he was keeping it to himself so that one of us could reveal it and prove we were her.

“The flowers at your wedding were... purple and yellow,” Leah said with a far-off voice.

Brayden went rigid and then turned towards her. “Yes!”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t sit by and watch him fall in love with my best friend, my sister.

“I need some air.” I cleared my throat and stood, walking as fast as I could out of the kitchen and then into the foyer. I threw the makeshift door wide and burst into a run. My feet pounded the ground until I was leaning against the giant willow tree at the edge of the property, tracing a heart into the bark like a lovesick idiot.

They were beautiful stories, all of them. The way he loved her was a once-in-a-lifetime love. I was jealous of all of it. I was jealous of Lena. *Leah, Lena...* the names floated around in my head until I felt sick.

And why? So what if Leah turned out to be Lena? Then I would be happy for them and being stuck with Castiel wouldn’t be the worst thing ever. He was super hot and seemed really caring.

A twig snapped. I turned towards the direction of the sound. Brayden stood there, eyes glowing yellow as his gaze dragged from my face down to my bare legs.

“I upset you,” he growled as if he was unhappy with himself.

I shook my head, hating how damn perceptive he was. “I just...”

What to say? I just got too jealous over your stories about your wife. About the way you looked at Leah when she remembered the flowers at the wedding.

What brand of crazy was that?

“I needed some air,” I said again, and pushed off the tree.

“You’re lying,” he said with a passionate growl that made my stomach warm.

My heart hammered in my chest. I couldn't meet his gaze. Hearing him talk about his wife made me feel guilty for being so attracted to him. I wanted him to find her. I wanted to *be* her, but Leah was the one getting all of the memories, not me.

"My story of the day I first married Lena affected you?" He stepped closer and ate up the distance between us.

There was no way that he couldn't hear my heart beating frantically against the wall of my chest.

"Averly." His voice was husky; it caused a trail of warmth to flush over me.

I still hadn't looked up at him. I feared if I did I would lose myself in his eyes.

"Did you remember something?" he asked as he reached out and tenderly stroked my jaw. He grasped my chin and tilted it up so that I was forced to meet his gaze.

I wasn't prepared for the passion and desire I found in that look. He looked hungry.

"No. I don't remember anything. That's the problem," I told him honestly, preparing myself to see the disappointment in his face. He'd rushed out here because he thought I'd had some flashback and was Lena. Now confronted with the truth, he nodded, but that hungry gaze didn't go away. Instead, it looked like it had consumed him. His finger dropped from my chin and traced a line down my neck before it swept over my collarbone.

The heady rush of desire that slammed into me then was enough to make me sway on my feet.

"Forgive me, Lena," he muttered to himself and then his lips were on mine. He wrapped his arms around me and it took me so much by surprise that I was limp for a split second before every pent-up feeling I had been harboring for this man exploded out of me. I jumped up and wrapped my legs around his waist as his hands came down from the small of my back and cupped my butt. He walked a few steps and then my back was up against the tree.

A moan ripped from my throat and into his mouth and he swallowed the sound. Our tongues sought each other, softly stroking at first and then searching for the other in a feverish heat. When he took my bottom lip into his mouth, my fingernails dug into his back with need.

I'd never been kissed like this.

Ever.

He didn't kiss, he destroyed, my mouth, my heart, and he destroyed my soul.

I grabbed the back of his neck and pushed his mouth harder against mine as a growl ripped from his throat. Grinding my pelvis into his hips, I was completely intoxicated with him. His smell, his touch, his taste. It was everything.

Reaching down to grasp the hem of my shirt, I pulled my lips away from his and yanked it over my head, giving him a full view of my black lace push-up bra. His chest heaved with heavy breaths as he raked his gaze over my breasts and then he froze, his entire body stiffening. His face fell and he stepped backward, setting me onto the ground as he grabbed the sides of his jaw.

“Oh shit. That was a mistake,” he breathed, and I couldn’t help my reaction. Tears exploded from my eyes. I swallowed my sob and my heart twisted in so much pain that I gasped. Without knowing what else to do, I turned and ran into the woods, needing to get away from him.

“Averly!” he yelled, but didn’t run after me.

I was so mortified, so heartbroken, I didn’t care if I ran into a mountain lion and was eaten. I just wanted to get away from the horrified look on Brayden’s face of me in my bra. My feet pounded the ground as I stumbled through the bramble, my tears quickly drying and turning to anger.

How dare he kiss me like that and then reject me!

It was a slap in the face that I didn’t ask for and I’d never forget. Leah could have him; I didn’t want a man who would treat a woman like this. His precious Lena was gone and he needed to get over it. She hadn’t been back in forty years, and

although it was likely that either Leah or I was her, neither of us remembered being intimate with him. He needed to pick one of us and stop playing with our hearts.

My heart.

“Want some company?” Maddy’s voice scared me and I yelped.

I threw on my shirt, wiped my cheeks, and spun to face her. “Not really,” I deadpanned, still stewing in my anger.

She was panting. Brayden must have sent her after me because he was too much of a coward to come after me himself.

So now Brayden was alone in the house with Leah? *Is he kissing her too?* Maybe he’d just kissed me to see if I was Lena, and when he didn’t feel anything he’d thrown me away like trash. Now he was in there experimenting with Leah.

I hadn’t realized I was shifting until I was thrown forward and my back snapped in half.

“Good idea, let’s go for a run. You’ll feel better, and we can finally put to rest that I’m faster than you,” Maddy said cockily and pulled off her shirt.

“Are not!” I growled as the anger at Brayden fueled my shift and my clothes tore. Fur burst out on my skin and my bones snapped. The pain felt good and I welcomed it. It was a shadow compared to the pain currently burning through my heart.

By the time I was fully shifted, Maddy was only halfway. The itch to run was too great and the anger was still present, like a beating war drum. Brayden should never have kissed me like that. Not if he didn’t mean it. That was majorly messed up and I was—

Maddy took off like a rocket and I growled, charging after her.

Cheater.

My paws hit the cold, packed earth as I tore through the woods, hot on her tail. My emotions flashed from being mad at

Brayden to being competitive over my race with Maddy. She was fast, dammit, faster than me.

As her wolf leapt over a fallen log, she landed and then tipped her head back and howled, running for the creek. My lips parted in a wolfish grin and then my own howl rose up to meet hers.

There was something indescribable about running through the forest in wolf form with one of your packmates. I could sense Maddy's joy, but also her worry over me and her brother. The upcoming fight. All of it. Running like this made us closer than ever. It was a shared experience where for this split second in time Maddy and I felt like one. She was family.

We were having so much fun running that I didn't smell the hunters until it was too late. The telltale smell of leather boots and gun oil hit my nostrils as the retort of a firearm ripped through the air. A slice of pain licked into my side and I was thrown to the ground. Maddy's howl tore through the night and I tried to get up and run away but my back legs weren't working. Looking back at my hindlegs, I whimpered when I saw the crimson blood and a bullet-sized hole in my lower abdomen.

Maddy took off into the woods and I didn't blame her. The hunters were walking right for me, ready to finish me off, and if they saw her they would kill her too. They moved in the shadows, hunting rifles held aloft as they looked down at me panting and unable to move. My back legs were completely numb. I'd gone from running wild and free to paralyzed in a split second.

"Decent sized wolf," one of them said. He wore a yellow hunting vest; night vision goggles were perched on his head.

"Yeah, will look good on my trophy wall." His friend nodded and raised his gun to finish me off and Maddy screamed.

She charged over. "Get the hell away from my dog and off of my property, assholes!"

The men's heads whipped up to see a fully naked Maddy waltz out of the woods with a hand on her hip, breasts out without a care in the world.

The men stood dumbfounded as they stared at the beautiful naked woman yelling at them.

"Uhh, ma'am, I'm sorry—" They lowered their guns. "We thought this was public lands."

"Do you want my coat?" The other guy averted his gaze and started to shrug his jacket off.

Maddy scoffed. "I'm a nudist, you idiot. I don't wear clothes and now you've shot my wolfdog. Get off my property before my husband kills you."

The men looked worried at that and started to back away. Even though I was terrified that I was dying, or at the very least would be paralyzed for life, I couldn't help but let out a wolfy chuckle at Maddy's nudist claim.

"Better run," Brayden's deep voice boomed from the woods, and the men took off at a full sprint.

Now that they'd left, the adrenaline rushed out of me and I craned my head to look at Brayden, who was walking towards me with a painful expression. When his eyes landed on me there was so much emotion in them that I couldn't help but whine. He tossed Maddy his shirt and then fell to his knees before me. His eyes darted wildly around my lower half. "Don't shift. I think the bullet is still in you and you could be paralyzed."

Well, that certainly put the fear of God into me. I wanted to tell him I already was paralyzed and couldn't move, but I suddenly felt too weak. Dropping my head to the ground, I started panting again and Brayden burst into action.

One second I was lying there and the next I was being lifted and a slice of pain ripped through my hindlegs at the sudden movement. I growled and he nodded.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, speed-walking back towards the house. "Maddy, run ahead and call Mary at the hospital. Tell her to send an ambulance and clear the OR for me."

Maddy nodded and took off running, her naked pale legs streaking through the forest.

Brayden was walking fast but not running, and I wondered if it was because he didn't want to jostle me too much.

This was bad. This was so bad. I was really scared. Could I die? Could I die without even knowing if I was Lena? To die with that kiss being our last?

Brayden seemed to be thinking the same thing. "I'm sorry I ran off after I kissed you," he said, holding me firmly to his chest as he navigated the forest. "It's just that I feel so attracted to you and yet I'm loyal to Lena. Since I married Lena in Moon Valley, I've never kissed another woman, so if you're not her and I just cheated..." He released a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry," he said again and my heart broke.

I realized then that if we never found out which one of us was Lena and which was Wren, then he'd be alone forever. That was some stupid loyalty that I couldn't help but admire. I picked up my head as much as I could and nuzzled it into his neck to let him know that I accepted his apology and it was okay.

Before I knew it, we'd reached the house. Leah was standing in the doorway with a panicked look on her face.

"Averly!" she shouted when she saw me.

"Get my med-kit!" he yelled to her, stepping inside.

Maddy was on the phone, and Leah burst into action. She ran to the corner of the room where Brayden kept his old school black bag. He brought it to work with him every time he left.

"Okay, Averly, I'm going to get this bullet out so that you can shift and I can bring you into the OR to fix the damage. Your back legs have been dangling this entire time, which means there's spinal cord damage. Even with your shifter healing, if you heal wrong or something heals out of order, you can be permanently injured."

"Permanently injured" were two words I did not want to hear. I just nodded and he set me on the kitchen table.

It no longer hurt, and the numbness seemed to be rising up to my abdomen, which was scary.

Leah set Brayden's doctor bag down for him and then jumped in front of me, eyes brimming with unshed tears. "I love you, bitch. Don't you dare die on me."

I gave her what I hoped was a wolfish grin and Maddy stepped up beside Brayden.

"Mary sent the ambulance and says your OR is being prepped. I told her spinal damage was in play and she called Dr. Kent from Neuro."

Brayden nodded as he slipped on blue latex gloves. "Kent is good." He went into doctor mode but I could see the panic just below his features. Pulling out a large pair of tweezers and gauze, he looked over at Maddy.

"Get some more clothes on or my paramedics are going to wonder what the hell kind of life we live up here," he snapped at his sister.

She startled, probably completely forgetting she was naked but for Brayden's shirt, and bolted into the bedroom. I had about two seconds to wonder how weird it was to see your sister naked, when he looked at Leah.

"Hold her down," he said, and everything in me panicked.

Leah didn't ask any questions. She just reached out, grasped my lower half with one hand and shoulder with the other, and held me firmly.

Brayden didn't warn me, he just shoved those tweezers inside of the hole in my lower flank. The scariest part was... I didn't feel a thing. I heard it though; the sloshy wetness made my stomach roil.

"I'm going to be sick," Leah said.

"Then stop looking," Brayden counseled her, and she turned her head away.

I wanted to ask for a mirror so that I could see the procedure. How ironic the one time I finally get to see a bullet wound and it was on myself.

There was a clink of metal on metal as Brayden dropped the bullet into a bowl. My legs started to tingle as the feeling began to come back in them.

“Okay, now shift back to human. I can’t bring a wolf into my OR, and you’ll have the best chance if I bring you in with my team at Bonner General.”

Without question, I started to shift back. Brayden held gauze on my wound as I slowly morphed into my human form over the next thirty seconds. I was just getting some feeling back in my toes when dizziness washed over me and blood squirted from Brayden’s hands and sprayed the entire front of his chest.

“Oh shit,” Brayden said as blackness danced at the edges of my vison. Sirens wailed outside and I chanted to myself: *Don’t pass out, don’t pass out...*

But the blackness took me.

THIRTEEN

I cracked open my eyes only to shut them once again as I was blinded by the overhead lights. The slow steady beep of a machine played in the background as I listened to the hushed voices of two women.

“She’s Dr. Greywolf’s girlfriend,” the one woman said.

“He said that? I’ve never seen him with a girl. I thought he might be gay,” another said, and they both snickered.

When I realized they were talking about me, I opened my eyes again and looked over at the two nurses. I was in some kind of intensive care unit. There were three other beds across from me with sleeping patients that I could just see through a sliver in the open curtain. An older woman in her mid-forties with short brown hair walked right up to the end of my bed and looked at the ladies.

“Do rounds,” she snapped, and the two gossiping nurses scurried out of view.

I peered at the newcomer and she smiled, her eyes flashing yellow for a second.

Wolf.

I inhaled and sure enough she smelled familiar, like me, like Brayden.

“Hello, Averly, I’m Nurse Mary. I work *very* closely with Dr. Greywolf.” She stepped closer, looking at my beeping machine.

She'd flashed her eyes yellow to tell me she was a wolf and trusted by Brayden. Message received.

I nodded. Afraid to speak, afraid to move, I still couldn't believe I was alive. I knew enough about medicine to know that when Brayden removed my bullet to save my spine, I'd bled out. I peered up at the IV bag above my bed to see it was full of blood.

"Transfusion?" I croaked, and Nurse Mary grabbed a light pink cup with a white lid and straw and held it to my lips.

I gulped the water down gratefully and she lowered her voice. "You can only have blood from your own kind and I was a match. Happy to help, dear."

I went still, looking up at the woman in gratitude. "Thank you."

She patted my hand, and even though she only appeared to be in her early forties, there was a sweet grandma-ness about her. Who knew any of these wolves' real ages, or witches' for that matter.

"Can you move your toes for me, hun?" She peeled back the end of the sheet and I wiggled my toes, causing her to smile.

"Great." She walked over to a phone on the wall and spoke into it. "Paging Dr. Greywolf to ICU, Dr. Greywolf to ICU." Her voice rang out on the PA intercom, and throughout the entire hospital I presumed, and then she hung it up and stepped over to me, peeling back the sheet. "I'm going to take a look at your wound. Now that you're awake, make sure you don't let any of the other nurses check on you. Only Brayden or myself should be looking at your wound."

I frowned but nodded, and she read the confusion on my face, lowering her voice. "Your rapid healing would invite a lot of questions."

Oh. Right.

She peeled back my gown then and I looked down at the same time she did.

Holy crap. The four-inch gash I should have from surgery was now a thin pink line. The little dots from where I must have had temporary stitches were already healing.

“How long have I been here?” I asked Nurse Mary.

“About twenty-four hours. Your sister is worried sick,” she said.

My sis—? Leah. “Can I see her?”

She nodded. “After Dr. Greywolf discharges you.”

I looked her over, wondering what her story was. How did a wolf come to work in an ER with Brayden? Then it dawned on me.

“You’re in his pack.” I stopped myself. “Or used to be.”

Sadness washed over her face and she nodded. “I was. We are all counting the days until the next big fight.”

That made my heart hurt. “Is Silas a bad alpha?” It was a super direct question that I felt bad asking after this woman just gave me her blood, but I was feeling loose-lipped. Maybe they’d given me pain meds. I did feel slightly loopy.

Her face went void of all emotion and a look of absolute trauma flashed across her features. “The worst.”

The way she said it, the way she avoided eye contact when she said it... it made my skin crawl. “Can we help in any way?” I wondered aloud.

She looked up at me with a sudden desperation. “Don’t let Brayden lose this fight. I can’t stay another year under that sick man’s rule.”

Sick man? My stomach roiled and anger flared up inside of me. I knew that in order to survive, Brayden probably had to put a lot of this out of his head, but I made a promise right then and there never to forget the look on her face. A look that said Silas was a very bad man.

I internally vowed to kill him one day.

“Averly!” Brayden’s worried voice filled the small room.

Nurse Mary patted my hand and then looked over at him. “She’s fine,” she said, and then backed out of the curtained room, pulling the edge of the cloth to close us in and give us privacy.

He looked worse for wear, like he hadn’t slept. There were dark circles under his eyes and his hair was a mess. His white doctor’s coat was wrinkled and there were fine splatters of blood on his blue scrubs.

He grasped the sides of my arms, and then leaned his forehead on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

His voice was thick with regret; it made my throat tighten. My brows drew together in confusion. “It’s not your fault, those idiot hunters—”

He jerked his head up and his eyes were glowing. “If I hadn’t kissed you like that, you never would have run off.”

It was true, but still, he couldn’t be held accountable for my reaction—though I was still slightly pissed at how he’d rejected me.

“Brayden.” I reached out and grasped his hand. “I’m fine. I had a really good doctor. See...”

I looked down at my feet and wiggled my toes. His gaze followed mine and his shoulders sagged with relief. He stood then, going into doctor mode. He checked my reflexes, peeked at my healing wound, and flashed a light in my eyes.

Fatigue pulled at my limbs then and Brayden sighed. “It will take about three weeks for you to fully heal. You suffered a severe spinal cord injury that would have put a human in a wheelchair for months,” he whispered. “I can’t take you to the Briar Woods in this condition. We’ll just have to wait until a few days before the fight when you are strongest.” He looked calm, but I could hear fear in his voice.

If we didn’t find the Elder Fae’s brother, Artemis, and get him to unbind some of my power, it might be impossible for Brayden to win in his fight against Silas.

I nodded. “I’ll heal quickly and be ready to travel in no time.”

He dipped his head. “You just focus on resting. I’ll send Leah and Maddy in.” He turned to leave and I reached out for him, grasping his fingers.

When he looked at me with those seemingly endless blue eyes, my stomach tied into knots. “Thank you for saving me.”

A pained expression washed over his face. “Always,” he muttered, and then slipped his hand from mine, leaving the room.

Always.

Always.

Always.

That one word looped on repeat for the rest of the day, and I found myself wondering if Brayden thought that I might be his Lena.

FOURTEEN

The next few weeks were a struggle. I couldn't work my usual schedule or go to class at first, much to Brayden's delight. I told my mom that I had been hiking and fell on some sharp rebar sticking up out of the ground. That was Brayden's story to the hospital. She'd flipped out at first and then I'd dropped the bomb about moving out with Leah and Maddy and it completely distracted her from the details of my accident. She was sad, but also happy to see me independent and flying the nest. I vowed to visit her three times a week and text daily. She'd already come over yesterday to see Brayden's house under the guise that it was only Maddy, Leah, and my house. She liked the cabin, although she did comment on its remoteness. I didn't have a car but Leah and Maddy let me borrow theirs when needed.

Three days now before Brayden's big fight with Silas, the entire pack was on high alert.

"This is about the time last year that Silas tried to rip Brayden's leg off," Maddy growled, pacing the kitchen.

Today, Brayden and I would go to Briar Woods and look for Artemis. Hopefully, we found him the first try, because we had roughly seventy-two hours to make it back here in time for the fight. I'd already eaten up all of my vacation time from the bar. Brayden kept trying to give me money but I brushed off the offers. It just felt weird. I would make my own way, but I might take him up on the proposition to falsify some veterinary credentials and train me.

If I was going to live forever, I needed to get used to it. School was full of some boring busywork classes anyway. If I cut things down to just working the bar four nights a week for work and training with Brayden at a real-life animal hospital, I could probably become a vet in record time. The prospect was beyond exciting for me.

But then reality hit me like a ton of bricks. I might *not* live forever, not if I had that birthday killing curse attached to me.

“Ready.” Brayden entered the room. He was freshly showered and shaven, just back from a twenty-four-hour shift at the hospital. My gaze raked over him and then quickly flicked to see Leah doing the same.

Ugh. I inwardly groaned at the fact that my bestie and I were low-key falling for the same guy.

“Ready,” I said, and grabbed my backpack.

Maddy looked at her brother with concern. “Are you sure you guys should be going to the Briar Woods alone?”

Brayden had told Leah and I that the Briar Woods was at the border of Moon Valley, in the Ether Realm, and we’d need to take a portal there similar to the one that I’d taken to see the Fae Lords. Brayden was banned from going to the Ether Realm, other than once a year for his fight, so if he was caught this would be beyond bad.

“You have to keep up appearances here, we know Silas is watching,” Brayden said, and Maddy nodded.

Leah pulled me into a hug. Even though things were slightly weird between us with the whole Brayden love-triangle thing, I loved her and she’d been a great friend and sister these past few weeks helping me heal from my surgery. Whatever happened with Brayden, I was confident we could move past it.

“Love you. Be safe,” she told me, and then looked at Brayden. “Both of you.”

Be safe both of us, or she loved both of us? I hated my overthinking mind sometimes.

I peered over at Brayden and he inclined his head to the front door. Without another word, I followed him outside and into his truck. I was off to find a fae named Artemis in a place called the Briar Woods. Totally normal everyday occurrence.

BRAYDEN DROVE us into town to the Organic Juicery, my favorite restaurant and juice bar.

“Ohh, are we getting food before we go, because that’s an awesome idea.” Their veggie scramble was delish.

Brayden just chuckled and shook his head.

Pulling the truck into a parallel spot right out front, he got out and grabbed both of our bags.

When I stepped up to him, he handed me my pack and I slipped it on my back. He did the same and then we walked into the restaurant and right up to the cashier.

“Hmm, for someone not getting food you sure look like you’re ordering,” I jived.

He just gave me a conspiratorial smirk.

“Hey, guys, how can I help you?” the cheery young dude behind the counter said.

He must be new. I didn’t recognize him.

“I’d like a chili lime mango special please,” Brayden said and the young guy froze, his fingers hovering over the tablet. His gaze flicked to Brayden’s and he inhaled.

I did the same, wondering if he was...

Whoa.

He smelled like freshly cut trees and—fae. I noticed the two slightly pointed ears now that I was looking.

An older man I recognized as the owner stepped up behind the younger new kid.

“Hey there, Brayden,” the kind man Hank said, looking us both over. “Averly.” He appeared surprised when he saw me. Last time I saw him I was fully human, so I imagine it was a shock to now smell me as a wolf, as much as it was a shock to me to see two pointed ears on him.

“Hank,” I croaked.

“Veggie scramble?” he asked me.

Brayden shook his head. “Chili lime mango special.”

Hank stilled, looking over his shoulder and then back at us.

He leaned forward. “I could get in a lot of trouble if I gave you one of those.”

Brayden slipped a stack of cash across the table. “You owe me, Hank.”

Hank frowned and then looked at me. “Lena?”

Why was I surprised? Every supernatural in this town seemed to know Brayden and Lena’s history except for me.

We both nodded, figuring it was easier than explaining I could be Wren.

“She’s in trouble. I need this. Fight’s in three days,” Brayden told him.

Hank had owned the juicery since I was like five years old. I’d come here with my mom and Leah a billion times. When you lived in a small town like Sandpoint, you knew everyone and you got attached to people. At least I hoped Hank felt attached to me.

I gave him a pleading look, although I didn’t know why I was pleading for a *chili lime mango special* and he nodded. “Alright,” he said, and took the money from Brayden, slipping into the back.

Brayden stepped away so that the next person could order, and I was just about to ask him why the heck we were paying gobs of money for a smoothie that wasn’t on the menu, when Hank reappeared with a small brown to-go box.

“This never happened. I haven’t seen you in here in weeks,” Hank told Brayden, and the alpha nodded.

Brayden tipped his head to the back where the bathrooms were and I followed him. What the freaking weirdness was in the box? You didn’t box smoothies in a to-go box. My heart hammered in my chest as we walked up to the single unisex bathroom. Brayden opened the door and indicated that I go in with him.

I raised one eyebrow and he gave me a look that said *trust me*.

After all we’d been through, I guess I’d have to.

When he shut the bathroom door behind me, we pressed up against each other in the small space.

“If you wanted to tell me something private, you could have chosen a better spot,” I joked.

He opened the to-go box and revealed a golden egg, much like the one Silas had thrown at my feet when he’d portaled me to the Fae Lords’ castle.

“Ohh, this is how we get to the Briar Woods?” I asked. “I figured we would be tugging a lampshade cord or something.”

Brayden shook his head. “That portal clearly isn’t safe anymore and all of the other ones are monitored. We can’t have anyone knowing where we are going.”

“Hank won’t tell?” I asked.

Brayden shook his head. “His wife is alive because of me,” was all he said.

Fair enough.

“Ready?” He took the egg into his hand.

I nodded, reaching out to grasp his biceps and steady myself. His eyes went hooded for a moment and I wondered if I needed to touch him at all for this portal to work.

Before I could think too much on it, he dropped the egg at our feet. The hinge popped open and a blinding light shot out of it, sucking us inside.

My feet landed on cool damp earth. I was still holding on to Brayden, so we both swayed as we steadied ourselves. I let go of him and looked around, taking in the magnificent sight of trees hundreds of feet tall, purple and pink flowers growing up their mossy trunks. A serene feeling settled over me and I took a deep, cleansing breath. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the thick forest and I couldn't help but feel like I was home.

Brayden stepped up beside me wearing an expression of peace and calmness.

"Feels like home..." I told him.

He smiled at that. "That's because we are home. The Briar Woods are at the edge of Moon Valley. My brothers and your sisters are only two days' walk that way." He pointed to a far-off mountain and frowned.

We were so close and yet so powerless to do anything. Brayden reached down and picked the egg up at his feet, closing it and slipping it back into his pocket.

I changed the subject. "So how does the egg portal thing work?" I didn't want to think about Natalie and Blake trapped in that place.

Brayden started to walk and I matched his pace. "The Ether is a realm that directly overlays Earth. You need to only tweak your sight to be present in one and invisible in another. It's something as a Greywolf we can do at ease without a portal egg when we have our full trained power."

Wow, it sounded like it was a lot like teleporting.

"Can the—?" I almost said *Fae Lords*, but figured he wouldn't appreciate that so close to where they were right now. Who knew if these trees could talk? "—big baddies do that? Just teleport wherever they want on Earth without magical aid?"

He nodded. "They can and they do," was all he said.

Awesome. Something to look forward to in the future, I assumed.

“Do we know where Artemis is?” I asked next.

Brayden shook his head. “He’ll find us.”

I stopped, turning to him. “You don’t have any idea where this dude is?”

Brayden peered over at me, and he looked tired and very much not in the mood for this.

“I do not, but I trust that if the Elder Fae said to look here for his brother, he will find us.”

My eyes bugged. “*He* will find us? These are thick wild woods, he could be anywhere.”

Brayden looked out at the expanse of trees. “I was told as a child that these woods were haunted. It’s the ideal place for someone to hide out. No one comes here unless they have to.”

Haunted? A chill rose up my spine. I did not do ghosts and things that went bump in the night. “Ha-haunted?” I mumbled. “We aren’t staying after dark, right? Beacau—”

Brayden reached out and pressed a finger to my lips. “Just relax, Averly. I will protect you.”

I tried not to visibly swoon and nodded. We set off again. Over the next hour we trampled through the woods talking to each other softly and looking for any sign of life.

When we reached a clearing, Brayden’s head cocked to the side as if he’d heard something, but I hadn’t, probably because I’d been talking so much. Then I heard it: a twig snapped, and leaves crinkled.

Brayden pulled the hood of his sweater up over his head to obscure his face and spun. “Show yourself or I will assume you have ill intent and kill you on the spot,” Brayden yelled, a pelt of fur running over his exposed palms.

“Yeah!” I yelled, “and if this is a ghost, we’ll... we’ll curse you!” I spat, unsure what I could do to something spectral that would scare them.

The edges of Brayden’s lips quirked into a grin. Then a tall, lithe form stepped out from the woods. He wore a grey

cloak that kissed the ground, and even from here I could see his resemblance to the Elder Fae. Blonde

Artemis raised one well-manicured eyebrow. “The banished Greywolf king who is now cut off from his power thinks he can kill me?”

Brayden looked offended. “Your personality is similar to your brother’s,” he retorted, and that got a smile out of the fae.

Artemis leaned on the tree nearest him. “How is my brother? Enjoying his time in that cushy prison no doubt?”

Brayden pulled his hood back and there was such a seriousness about his expression that Artemis gasped.

“By the light, he’s *gone*?” Artemis’ voice sounded hollow and Brayden nodded.

“I didn’t even know he had a brother. I burned him and buried the ashes with respect. He sent us to you because we need your help,” Brayden said, and then pulled out a small teacup. It was one of the Elder Fae’s. I recognized it from the set we drank from. It had a unique, delicate golden pattern along the edge. Brayden must have gotten it when he went back to bury him. It was proof that Brayden had just seen him.

Artemis glanced at the teacup, his chest rising and falling slowly as a pained look marred his face. He swayed for a moment; his chest shook as he tried to contain a sob.

I looked pleadingly at Brayden, wondering if I should go to the man and comfort him. But Artemis straightened himself.

“Follow me,” was all he said before he walked away.

Brayden and I shared a wary glance but stepped after him. As Artemis passed the trees with the purple and pink flowers creeping up the mossy trunks, they wilted, and the sky above us darkened. I swallowed hard, fearful at what might be causing such a reaction from nature.

The ghost?

Brayden seemed to read my face. ‘*Artemis must be a nature fae. He can control the elements, and in turn they are affected by his mood.*’

Oh.

Oh...

How sad. He was mourning his brother and now nature was mourning with him. That made me want to cry. I peered behind my shoulder and the flowers that had been wilted moments before were now perked up and colorful, the sun casting its glow on them.

I watched as the flowers that Artemis passed by wilted and shrank. This felt like an intimate moment between him and nature, and watching him openly grieve like this affected me more than I thought it would.

In that moment, I was slammed with a memory. I gasped, falling to my knees as my vision was temporarily blocked and taken over.

I was standing over a gravestone. It was made of white marble with bright pink and blue flower wreaths decorating it. I peered down at the golden lettering etched into the stone.

Cassia and Hans Burnstone - Cherished Warriors - Beloved Mother and Father

I was sobbing in the memory, my back rattling with uncontrolled grief as I mourned my mother and father. They'd fallen in the great battle with the Fae Lords. I knew this, but when I quickly, almost desperately, tried to search for an inner knowing of who I was, either Wren or Lena, the thoughts felt so far away. Peering to my right, I saw my sisters Blake and Natalie. They stood with their mates, Axel and Gabe. Then I went to turn to my left...

“Averly!” Brayden shook me and my vision cleared. I was now staring at Brayden’s concerned face. Artemis stood just behind him, peering down at me with curiosity.

“I had... a memory. Almost like a vison, it was so real.” A tear slid down my face and Brayden sobered.

“What memory? Do you remember who you are?” he asked. The pleading in his voice sliced right into my already fragile heart.

I shook my head and then released a shaky breath. “My parents’ funeral. It was... so sad. Natalie and Blake were there but I didn’t see anyone else. Everything felt so... dark.”

Artemis sobered, shaking himself a little, and the sun began to shine on me.

“Lena?” he asked for the first time.

Brayden looked over at him and sighed. “We don’t know. She might be Wren.”

“I see.” He nodded. “Come, this calls for tea.” Reaching out, he pulled me up and linked his arm through mine.

Brayden gave a slight growl but Artemis shot him a pointed look.

I swallowed hard, still trying to find my way out of my grief. It felt like it was just yesterday, although I knew it wasn’t. I knew I had a wonderful mother back in Sandpoint waiting for me, but this... this felt so real because it *was* real. My parents were dead.

My past life was with a beautiful set of parents who were now gone. With a shaky breath, I shook off the sadness and followed Artemis into an opening in the trees that led into a meadow. A cute little cottage no more than twenty feet wide with a thatched roof sat directly in the center of the clearing.

“I’ve been here before and I’ve never seen this cottage,” Brayden mused.

Artemis’ lips quirked into a grin. “You see it now because I want you to see it.”

“Are you the reason all of Moon Valley thinks there is a ghost haunting these woods and avoids this place?” Brayden asked, and Artemis’ smile grew wider.

He said nothing and Brayden just scowled. “Why show yourself to me now?”

We reached the door and Artemis dropped my hand, turning to face Brayden with a serious expression. “Because I’ve been here for over five hundred years in secret, and I heard you speaking of my brother when you first stepped into

the woods. I knew my brother would not have given you my location had he not trusted you with his life.”

Brayden nodded.

“So we’re all friends here?” I asked nervously. This guy was cool but I wanted to make sure he didn’t harbor anything against Brayden.

Artemis peered from me to Brayden. “If the exiled king of the wolves risks coming to my woods, it’s worth hearing him out. I was there at my brother’s sentencing. The king pleaded with the Fae Lords for a private prison land for my brother. He was able to live out his sentence with dignity and visitors. It’s more than I could have done for him.” He looked somber now, and I noticed how he kept referring to Brayden as the king of the wolves. Even if exiled, he was showing him respect in the title, and I liked him for that.

“He deserved it,” Brayden said strongly.

Artemis nodded, opening the door to the cottage. “And I trust for my help with your problem you will tell me who killed my dear brother and help me to enact revenge?”

Brayden cleared his throat. “I will tell you, but revenge killing is not possible in this case.”

For the first time the fae’s eyes glowed a sickly green. “You deny me my price for your favor?”

Brayden cleared his throat, looking left and right at the trees. “I would deny you nothing within my ability, but this is *not* in my ability to grant.”

That got a frown out of the fae. He waved us inside and I released the breath I’d been holding. We needed some of my powers unlocked so that Brayden could win this fight with Silas. If Artemis wouldn’t help us, we were in big trouble.

We stepped into an adorably small room filled with handmade, highly-lacquered wood, and the fae pointed to a chair at the small dinette set.

“Who killed my brother?” he asked Brayden, foregoing any small talk.

“You said there would be tea?” I tried to buy time so Brayden could think of how he wanted to break the news that his brother’s insides had been gobbled up by the leader of the Wild Hunt.

Brayden and I took a seat at the table while the fae tinkered with the woodstove, making tea. He was like his brother in that way.

I looked at Brayden and he sighed.

“Novus,” Brayden said, and the fae went completely still, frozen over the kettle like he was made of stone. He turned slowly and peered over his shoulder to look at the both of us, perhaps to see if we were joking.

“The hunt is on?” Artemis said.

Brayden nodded. “And he now has your brother’s power.”

Artemis looked at Brayden quizzically. “No he does not.”

Brayden frowned.

“What do you mean? I thought...” I was a newbie, sure, but Brayden said Novus consumed powers.

Artemis turned to fully face me. “On the next full moon, my brother’s soul will leave the Ether and head for the Heavenly Realm. On that night, his power will return to me, next of kin.”

Brayden looked visibly shook. “What do you mean, his power will return to you?”

The full moon was Brayden’s fight night, in three days.

Artemis had a twinkle in his eye, like he liked the fact that Brayden didn’t know everything. “My brother was the Elder Fae, and now *I* will be the Elder Fae. Even the leader of the Wild Hunt cannot contain my brother’s power, though he no doubt tried. When I die it will move on to my heir, and if one day all of our heirs are gone, it will go back to nature where it belongs.”

Wow, that was kind of beautiful, and also huge news! Novus was powerful yes, but he wasn’t walking around with

the Elder Fae's power and that was a relief.

Brayden reached into his pocket and produced the letter. "Your brother left me this." He handed him the note. Artemis grasped it and read it, his brow creasing before he handed it back to Brayden.

Artemis frowned. "I see."

He went back to making the tea and it was the most awkward two minutes of silence I'd ever endured. Would he still help us? Was he pissed about Novus killing his brother? Too much hung in the air. I needed someone to speak.

"Will you help us? Please?" I pleaded. "Brayden needs to win this fight against Silas. We only need a little bit of my power unbound and it would be enough to guarantee a win."

Brayden nodded. "Five or ten percent, no more or the Fae Lords would sense it."

I looked over at him. "Won't they sense the five or ten percent?" They were the Fae Lords after all.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. They will be connected to my siblings, who will be nearby, and the smells of the other supernaturals will be overwhelming."

We both looked back at Artemis. He took a slow sip of his tea.

"Are you going to do as my brother suggested in the letter and use Novus to end the Fae Lords' rule?"

Brayden shifted uncomfortably. "If I can, yes, but—"

"But nothing," Artemis said, disrespect lacing into his voice for the first time. "My brother was clever, your father's top royal advisor for centuries, and he's given you the best idea possible to regain your kingdom. Do you want it back or not?"

Brayden stood, slammed his fist on the table so hard a crack appeared down the middle. "I want it so bad I can taste it!" he growled.

Artemis' eyes widened as a feral grin graced his face. "Good. Then do as my brother says, and when you have your kingdom and powers back, you and your brothers and their wives will help me avenge my brother. Swear it and I will swear allegiance to you as my brother once did."

Brayden stiffened. I didn't know a lot about the magical world, but a powerful fae swearing their allegiance to you sounded like a big deal.

"Swear to kill Novus with you?" Brayden asked.

The fae nodded. "When the time is right, when you and your siblings have their powers freely restored and your kingship is returned."

Brayden sighed. "And you would do as I commanded in all things? A loyal subject as your brother was?"

Artemis' gaze flicked to the table, where the note and his brother's teacup now lay. His eyes grew misty. "I would serve you, King Greywolf, for the rest of my days, to bring my brother honor and for revenge."

The air charged with some kind of magical power. It was like I was stuck between two magnets as an unseen force built up around me.

Neither Brayden nor Artemis looked worried, so I relaxed a little as I watched the two stare each other down.

It was only when Brayden glanced at me did I realize how worried he was. Was he looking for advice on this Novus thing? Kill the bastard that killed so many others and had a pack of Greywolf ghost slaves? Hell yes.

I nodded once.

"I, Brayden Greywolf, accept your oath of fealty," Brayden said the moment I nodded. "When and *if* my kingdom is restored, and my siblings and their wives' powers are returned fully, we will band together with you and hunt down Novus as he hunted down my very own grandparents."

Brayden stuck his hand out and Artemis smiled. "I, Artemis Merlin Moon Feather, future Elder Fae, pledge my

allegiance and magic to serve Brayden Greywolf in all his needs for as long as I shall live.”

Whoa.

The fae offered his hand, and the moment the two touched a searing blue light shot from their palms and I had to close my eyes for a second as it flashed brightly.

Holy magic bomb.

Artemis was the new Elder Fae and he’d just bound to Brayden. That had to be a big deal. When they broke the handshake, the fae looked at me expectantly.

“Well, well, let’s see what we can do for you now, shall we?”

I stood and walked over to him as he watched me with squinting eyes. “My brother did a fine job, but I can still sense her power. It’s very strong.”

Brayden frowned. “The Fae Lords questioned her and did not sense it.”

Artemis smirked. “Who do you think taught the Fae Lords their magic studies in their school days?”

Brayden looked shocked. “You?”

He nodded, still watching me as I stood there feeling awkward at being examined.

“I knew they were dark-hearted from the beginning. I should have never taught them their master levels.” He tsked.

“Can you fight them? Overpower them?” I wondered aloud.

Artemis looked like he sucked on a lemon. “Before they bound themselves to six of the most powerful Greywolves to ever live, yes. Now? I would not last a minute in battle with them.”

Wow, that was very sobering information.

Brayden nodded. “That’s what I keep telling her.”

“Sorry,” I snipped, and Artemis grinned as if our little tiff brought him some joy.

“But if they were unchained from the Greywolves...” I added.

That brought a huge smile to the fae’s face. “Oh, in that case I would eat them for breakfast.”

I gulped, unsure if that was a literal threat and if he in fact ate flesh.

“Permission to touch you, my dear?” he said, and I nodded, surprised he’d asked.

Reaching out, he grasped my temples and then winced. “Oh dear light, her past life memories are like Swiss cheese.”

“What? What does that mean?” Brayden stepped closer but I already knew. I *felt* like my memories were Swiss cheese. The ones that reminded me of my Greywolf life at least.

He tsked again. “A spell gone wrong. Ripped her past life memories right out.”

“No...” Brayden sounded like he’d just been shot, but I was still processing the words and didn’t really know what they meant.

Brayden looked sick. “Are you telling me I might never know who my wife is?”

Artemis frowned. “I’m telling you that you can choose who you want your wife to be because this girl probably won’t ever be able to tell you who she was.”

Now *I* felt sick. My memories were in that bad of shape? What if Brayden didn’t pick me? What if he picked Leah? The room spun as anxiety slammed into me full bore.

Why the hell was Artemis looking at my memories when he was supposed to be letting some of my power out?

I glared up at him and he seemed to read my thoughts. “Sorry, darling, I can’t help what I see, and I must advise my king in all matters.”

Your king! He's been your king all of five seconds, I wanted to yell.

How about you advise him that I was his wife! What would that hurt?

“Ready?” he asked me.

I didn’t even want to know if it was going to hurt. I just nodded and then tensed all of my muscles. Opening his mouth, he blew over my face, surprising me; my eyelashes shuttered closed. The scent of freshly fallen rain mixed with spring flowers enveloped me and I immediately felt at peace.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in the presence of a Greywolf who still had their power,” Artemis said, causing my eyelids to open.

He looked down at me quizzically, cocking his head to the side. Leaning forward, he inhaled and his eyes glowed violet, much like his brother’s and very unlike the sickly green when he’d been angry at Brayden. Some dawning recognition fell over his face and a warmth spread throughout my chest.

“Did my brother tell you that she is part fae?” he mused.

“What!?” we both yelled at the same time.

He inhaled again. “Nothing too powerful. An everyday healing fae I suspect, but oh yes, her blood smells richly of my people.”

Brayden looked flabbergasted and I was just... stunned into silence. I opened my mouth to speak and then closed it and then opened it again.

What the what? Fae?

“How is that possible?” Brayden finally found his voice and I was grateful he was asking the question I wanted the answer to as well.

“Well, her soul might be that of a Greywolf, which then carries her power into her host body, but this host body was about a quarter fae I presume—before she was bitten of course,” Artemis said coolly.

A quarter fae? *Host body*? I did not like either of those terms one bit. So I was a quarter fae and three-quarters wolf?

“My mom?” I asked suddenly.

Brayden shook his head. “She’s one hundred percent human. It would have to be your father.”

I crossed my arms. “You thought *I* was a hundred percent human too.”

Brayden shook his head. “No I didn’t. I knew there was something special about you that night you jumped in front of Silas to help me, but I thought you were Lena. You didn’t smell fully human, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.”

A quarter fae? “Why didn’t your brother smell this on me?” I leaned in and sniffed my armpit.

Artemis frowned. “You probably walked into his house smelling like a full-blown Greywolf. I can only smell your fae now because the Greywolf power is subdued.”

I chewed my lip. “The Fae Lords. They would have smelled it.”

He nodded. “A lot of ‘humans’ are actually a tenth or a quarter fae. It’s quite common.”

That made me relax a little. Okay, tons of humans walking around with some fae blood in them, no biggie. My mom slept with a half fae and didn’t realize.

All Good. Everything is fine.

“But what happens when you mix a Greywolf soul in a partial fae body?” Brayden sounded alarmed and I suddenly had zero chill.

Everything is not fine! Panic! Panic to the extreme!

Artemis grinned. “I have no idea. Isn’t that exciting? Normally a fae and a Greywolf couldn’t procreate, so this is a real treat.”

“Okay, we need to stop talking about the fae thing, it’s freaking me out,” I snapped, feeling like my chest was tightening and I couldn’t breathe.

Hello, darkness, my old friend.

Artemis frowned. “Fine, hold still and I’ll release your power.”

Finally. I wanted to get on with the show and have him stop commenting on my Swiss cheese memories and partial fae genes.

He touched my temples and there was a little *pop* in my head and a slight fluttering and then it was gone.

“Your power does not like being bound.” He looked at me and I shrugged.

Sounded like my power and personality were similar.

“It’s done?” Brayden asked, smelling the air.

Artemis nodded. “I’ll give her a necklace to wear which will trick Silas or the Fae Lords if they were to examine her closely at the fight.”

Examine me? None of them better freaking *examine* me.

Brayden probably registered the alarm on my face because he placed a hand on my shoulder. “Smell you, try to see if you are Lena or Wren...”

“They’ve already done that,” I told him.

Artemis nodded. “When Brayden starts winning the fight with unprecedented power, they may want to... investigate, is all I’m saying. This necklace will shield the ten percent of power I have unlocked from their view.” He left the room to step into a back bedroom and I shuffled my feet nervously, looking over at Brayden.

“So is this considered cheating? For the fight?” I asked him.

He had said that Silas cheated last year, which was how he’d won. Brayden shook his head. “It’s within the rules for an alpha to be able to draw on the power of his pack using the Ring of Power. I’m allowed to use Greywolf power if there is one in my pack. But all Greywolves with power are supposed to be bound to or sacrificed to the Fae Lords.”

I choked on my spit. “Sacrificed?”

He nodded, a darkness falling over his features. “Greywolf Academy used to be filled with hundreds of fledgling Greywolves. Now its halls are empty. They either fled into hiding or were sacrificed and siphoned.”

“Siphoned?”

Brayden’s jaw clenched. “The Fae Lords are similar to humanity’s story of demons. They can suck the power dry from someone, leaving them empty, but it only lasts for a fleeting power boost.”

“Here we are.” Artemis stepped back into the room carrying a small golden chain, pulling me from my thoughts. There was no stone or locket hanging from it like I expected.

“Looks plain but it carries a lot of power,” he stated as he unclasped it and then fastened it around my neck. The second it settled onto my skin, a buzz vibrated through my body and then it was gone. He inhaled as if smelling me, and then nodded, seemingly pleased with himself.

“Smells like a regular garden variety wolf,” he said.

“Uhh, thank you?” I guess that was a compliment since it was our intended effect.

“My King.” Artemis turned to face Brayden, put his hands at his sides and bowed slightly. “You will not forget our agreement?”

Whoa. *Bowing?* That was pretty legit. It was weird and sexy to think of Brayden as royalty.

Brayden nodded. “Elder Fae Artemis, I will not. We are well met.”

Brayden and I left the cottage and my mind spun with the entire encounter.

I was a smidge fae, but I was going to shove that knowledge deep down inside of myself and forget about it. Brayden just promised to one day kill Novus in honor of the fallen Elder Fae.

“I can’t believe he just pledged a lifetime of service to you,” I said as we walked away from the cottage.

Brayden nodded. “It pays to be kind to others,” was all he said, and I knew then that not only was he hot as hell, but he was also wise.

FIFTEEN

The next few days passed quickly. We used the same golden egg to travel back to Earth or Idaho or whatever realm they called the place where humans lived, but instead of winding up in the bathroom at the Organic Juicery, we ended up at home in Brayden's living room. Brayden told me that once you obtained a portal egg, AKA chili lime with mango, you could control where it took you with your mind. Now it was the day of the fight and I for one was not ready. I was hoping Brayden was since he was the one doing the actual fighting.

"That evil bastard!" I growled over my morning breakfast.

Silas and his wolves had hazed us all night long to keep us from getting a good night's sleep—rocks thrown at windows, cars peeling out on the gravel. I wanted to shoot him again, but Brayden wouldn't let me.

"Are you sure we can't kill him?" Leah snarled into her coffee cup. It was seven a.m. and I maybe got a solid two hours of sleep.

Sleep was my weakness. I needed at least nine hours to be mentally stable, and ten hours to be pleasant.

"Not unless you want to die," Brayden told her, chugging down a cup of black coffee.

"Will you be okay? This big fight on what, two hours of sleep, can't bode well for you," I asked, nervousness creeping into my voice.

Maddy gave her brother a hip bump as she settled next to him in the kitchen and leaned against the counter. "Brayden

will be fine without sleep. He's a doctor. He barely sleeps as it is."

Brayden nodded and then looked at me. "I will be fine. I have you," he told me, and my breath hitched in my throat. Leah's entire body tensed, and for a second it was like only Brayden and I existed in the room. Brayden's cheeks puffed and he cleared his throat. "Your power. Your Greywolf power is what will help me win this fight," he added, and my jubilation deflated like a balloon.

I sank into my chair and gave a nervous laugh before shoving a chunk of Leah's famous waffles into my mouth to keep me from saying anything stupid. Leah gave me a pathetic look of pity and I wanted to disappear.

Was it apparent to the entire room that I was into Brayden? Probably. Especially now.

Awesome.

What Artemis had said about my missing memories and Brayden having to choose a wife came back to me. Fate was nice and romantic, but at the end of the day maybe it was better if we chose who we wanted to be with without all the outside circumstances. Would I never like Brayden if I didn't think I could be his soulmate and wife? Castiel seemed pretty eager for his Wren. Maybe I would just go and be with him versus waiting for eternity for Lena to get her memories. I wanted to be with someone who wanted me for me and how I made them feel, not on some past I didn't remember.

But even as I said it, my entire body rebelled. I *did* remember Brayden, maybe not in flashes of pictures or thoughts, but it felt like my body remembered. Even now I ached to be with him, to hold him, to kiss him. I would kill any woman who touched him. What did that say?

It said a lot to me. It said that I *was* Lena. I had to be. But until I passed all of his little memory tests, he wouldn't accept it.

It made me angry in a stupid way.

“Let’s get going. You know how packed the official portals into the Ether get on fight day,” Maddy said, chugging the rest of her coffee.

Leah and I shared a worried look. This stupid fight was barbaric but I was powerless to stop it. I twirled the small gold chain at my neck and swallowed hard. We just had to hope that I had enough power for Brayden to pull from so that he would win his fight. Getting his little sister, Nora, back was of the upmost importance, and the rest of his pack too. People like Mary deserved to be under the rule of a kind and caring alpha like Brayden. Not this douchebag Silas who couldn’t even be killed.

We left the house, tense and cagey, when we stepped outside to see the rocks and broken glass and tire marks from Silas and his goons taunting us the night before. It was a short drive into town and then another five minutes over to Idaho Country Club. I wore an ankle-length red silk dress with a slit up to the thigh. Brayden had said that it was a formal event and we were required by the Fae Lords to dress as such. The sun was high in the sky, but Brayden assured me it would be nighttime when we got to the Ether Realm. Much like Paris and Los Angeles had a time difference, so did the Ether.

“This is where one of the monitored permanent portals are?” It was a fancy golf course and country club, a place where men bragged about their latest hunting trophy, not exactly where you expected to see a bunch of magical creatures.

“Owned by the Fae Lords,” was all Brayden said.

When we pulled up, the parking lot was packed.

Private Event, a sign read, and there was a parking attendant checking people in. When we pulled up, Brayden rolled down his window and the young guy took one look at him and grinned. “Good luck. I’m putting a hundred bucks on you,” he said.

“Appreciate it.” Brayden’s voice was monotone, fake. I knew him well enough to know that he hated that he was about to fight, but had to go through with it anyway. If he didn’t

entertain the sadistic Fae Lords they would torture his siblings. They might not be living their dream life chained to the Fae Lords, but his brothers and their wives were comfortable, something the Fae Lords could take away any moment.

Throngs of people were walking along the pathways that led to the double doors. We followed them and my nose was assaulted with scents of supernaturals. Damp earth, freshly cut wood, sage, copper, magic.

“This is all for you? For the fight?” Leah whispered to Brayden, but a few people turned their heads in her direction and I gasped.

Two tall women with paper-white skin and red-tinged lips looked at Leah curiously and I just instinctively knew what they were.

Vampires.

I gulped, locking Leah’s arm with mine as we took in our surroundings.

“Yes,” Brayden said. “Everyone loves to see the fallen king fight for his life.” There was disdain in his tone and it resonated with me. Why was such a spectacle made of this fight? It clearly gave the Fae Lords satisfaction to see Brayden have to physically fight for his life year after year.

When we reached the doors, they opened and two men in black suits stood at either side with fake smiles. The points of their ears told me they were fae, and I could tell by the way they inhaled that they were checking our supernatural status.

Please work, I thought as I fingered the necklace.

Brayden reached up and took my hand in his, pulling it away from the necklace and curling his fingers into mine. For half a second I couldn’t breathe; the mere act of holding my hand had stolen my train of thought. Then I remember the talk we’d had last night. Everyone agreed that I should fully pretend to be Lena so that Silas or the Fae Lords wouldn’t be suspicious.

We stepped into the large country club together and I was shocked at the hundreds of people gathered. Everyone wore

their finest clothes and were drinking champagne and eating hors d'oeuvres. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I was at a wedding.

People started to part the crowd as we were seen. The talking quieted and whispers began.

"It's Lena," one said.

"He'll win the pack back this year," another said.

"Silas is stronger," a third voice whispered.

Brayden walked, head held high and hand tightly clasping mine, as we endured the taunts and jeers.

It was in this moment that I truly realized how much Lena and Brayden's love story mattered to me. They thought I was her—hell, I wanted to be her, but I also wanted him to find her. Against all odds they found each other lifetime after lifetime, and if I were being honest it was about the most romantic thing I could ever think of.

Everyone was lining up for something but I couldn't see what until we finally reached a door labeled *coat closet*, and a tall lithe fae who oozed power stood beside it. When his gaze fell on Brayden and then to me and our clasped hands, he grinned.

"Mr. Greywolf," he purred.

"*Dr.* Greywolf," I corrected him.

The man grinned even wider. "Lena, we've missed you these past forty years. Your sideline screams always make for great entertainment on fight night."

My blood ran cold. Sideline screams? As in screaming from the sidelines of the fight? That bastard. I moved to lunge forward without thinking, but Brayden yanked me back and there were some cheers in the crowd.

The man tipped his head back and laughed. "So eager. We should let her fight one year!" he yelled to those gathered and they cheered harder.

Brayden's hand clamped down on mine like a vise and my fingers ached. I got the message.

Stay cool. Calm down, I told myself.

The fae opened the small coat closet door to reveal it was empty and lined with red velvet. The back of the closet held another door handle as if you could walk right through to the other side. The Ether side?

Brayden pulled me inside and the fae peered at us for a long moment. "Enjoy the show," he said, and closed the door as a blacklight flicked on overhead. My chest heaved as I stared at Brayden, glowing in the light, and a desperate feeling came over me. What if this was it? What if he lost again and we were all given to Silas? Or what if Leah had a memory tomorrow that she was in fact Lena and this was my last chance to tell him how I felt?

"I choose you," I blurted, moving forward a foot so that our bodies were flush against each other. "Whether I'm Lena or Wren, I need you to know that I choose you."

His eyes flared yellow and my breath hitched.

"Who do you choose?" I asked boldly.

He reached up, slowly tracing a finger across my lips, and my entire body shuddered. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips to my ear. "I choose Lena. I'm sorry."

My heart plummeted into my chest. The entire closet shook then like it was going through an earthquake, and the back door suddenly opened. There was regret splashed across Brayden's face, like maybe he had wanted to say something more.

"Well hello, dears," a female voice called to my left. A tall fae with long blonde hair wearing an elegant green ballgown stood in the now open doorway. A tear slid down my cheek but I swiped it away quickly.

I choose Lena. The most heartbreakingly words I could ever hear. He truly was loyal and would wait forever on a wife who might never remember him. In that moment, I knew I needed to let him go for my own sanity.

“Lynette,” Brayden growled, and the woman tipped her head back and laughed. It was a grating and evil sound. She stepped aside and Brayden laced his fingers through mine once more and pulled me out into the most elegant ballroom I’d ever seen. The second I spotted the white marble with golden veins running through it, there was a familiarity to it. Yes, it was the same as the castle I’d been portaled to but this... this felt like more familiar than that.

There were already hundreds of people standing around holding drinks and talking. The room was octagonal, with little circular pop-outs that made for almost a floral or sacred geometrical design if you were looking at a bird’s eye view. I looked up and gasped when I saw there was an entirely glass dome ceiling and the moon was full. It was the most beautiful room I’d ever seen, and in that moment something came to me. It wasn’t really a memory as much as a knowing.

“You married Lena in this room,” I said, and Brayden froze, looking over at me with a stillness that made me feel like I couldn’t breathe.

I searched my brain so hard for a memory then. Was it me he married? Or did I attend with Castiel? Brayden seemed to be wondering the same thing. We both just stared into each other’s eyes with anticipation. The harder I looked for the memory, the more it evaded me. I wanted to cry. I’d just told him I chose him and he’d rejected me. Now this fleeting memory that might give us what we both wanted... it was heartbreaking and mortifying all at once.

I shook my head, letting him know I didn’t remember anything more.

“Welcome, welcome!” a familiar voice boomed inside of the large space. We turned to see Lynette standing on a stage at the back of the room. There were four chairs behind her, and in them sat the Fae Lords. She didn’t hold a microphone, yet her voice magically amplified throughout the room.

Bastards.

My gaze went to their wrists, where they wore the bracelets that connected them to Brayden’s brothers and my

sisters. I wanted to march right up there and rip them off.

The gathered crowd quieted as more and more people stepped through the open door we'd come through. Leah and Maddy walked out and spotted us, walking over to join us.

"This is a very special event that we all look forward to each and every year," Lynette said, and the crowd went wild with cheers and shouts.

"Our champion, Silas Ashwood, will fight Brayden Greywolf. Winner takes the pack!" she roared, and everyone went crazy.

"I hate this," I muttered to Brayden, and he squeezed my hand.

"Please visit the betting counter to place your bets on who you think will be this year's champion." Lynette indicated to one of the little dome alcoves where a man stood behind a money counter.

"This year is extra special," Lynette purred, "because our beloved Lena is back to see her man fight for the first time in forty winters!"

The crowd went insane then and I felt sick to my stomach. Every single person turned and looked at me and I wanted to shrink into a ball and disappear. Leah slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it for support.

The crowd parted. Lora stood up from her chair and walked over to Lynette, giving her a nod. "On this day every year..." She spoke and her voice was also amplified without a visible microphone; it had to be magic. "...we see our fallen king fight for the privilege to keep his pack." Everyone clapped and she smiled. "A privilege bestowed to him graciously by me and the other lords."

Yeah, right, she couldn't kill Brayden, and that's why she had to keep up this little arrangement. Keep him under her thumb and in control without killing him and unlinking his magic to his siblings.

Lying hag.

Her eyes zeroed in on me. “What a treat this night will be. He has *a lot* to fight for.” She snapped her fingers and a cage suddenly appeared, suspended over the crowd. It was huge, about a forty-foot rectangle, and it was packed full of people.

What the...?

“Brayden! Maddy!” A young blonde reached through the bars as tears slid down her cheeks and it hit me. They were the prize. Silas’ pack. And that was Brayden’s little sister, Nora.

“Maddy!” a tall handsome man with light brown hair screamed over Nora’s shoulder.

Maddy burst into a sob, “August! Nora!” she screamed, reaching up as they suspended the cage over the crowd like a dangling carrot.

The second I heard tearing fabric I knew Brayden was shifting. Seeing his little sister in a cage was too much. Even Maddy looked ready to wolf out.

Lora blurted into delighted laughter at the sight of Brayden’s wolf ripping his tux.

“No.” Maddy placed a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Keep it together until it’s time,” she said.

He hunched forward, his back snapping as people formed a circle around him, watching the spectacle like hungry vultures.

“Screw off!” I charged at one female vampire who had pulled out her phone to take a picture. In hindsight, it wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but these assholes were pissing me off by watching Brayden’s emotional breakdown and getting pleasure from it in some sick way. The woman backed up a few spaces but then burst into laughter.

Leah hooked me around the waist and dragged me backward before I could reach the vampire. “Okay, let’s not piss off the undead, shall we?” Leah muttered into my ear.

I glared at the astonishingly pale woman with red-tinged lips but allowed Leah to pull me away. Brayden was standing upright now, still in his human form; fur was retreating along

the sides of his neck. His clothes were torn and Maddy was rubbing his back. She'd been able to calm him down.

"We'll get Nora, we'll get them all back this time. You got this, bro," she told him, and it warmed my heart.

"You totally got this," Leah said, reaching out to grasp his bicep.

I wanted to smack her hand away but thought better of it. "Give Silas hell," I agreed, and with our encouragement Brayden stood, facing the cage of his entire pack, and then looked up at the platform that held the Fae Lords.

The crowd had doubled in size since we'd gotten here. There must have been a thousand people now. This was clearly a bigger event than I expected.

"Hey, lass," a familiar Irish accent called from behind me. I spun, grinning ear to ear at the sight of Ronan dressed in a tuxedo. Clara was next to him wearing an elegant black ballgown.

"We came to show support," he said, and I tackle-hugged him, which caused him to laugh and wrap his arms around me. He released me and shook Brayden's hand, wishing him luck as Clara pulled me into a hug.

She squeezed. "Good luck, girl."

It felt so good to have familiar people here that I knew were on my side. But it was gone all too quickly. A small bell chimed. Ronan and Clara gave us a curt nod before disappearing into the crowd.

People pushed to the outer walls as another cage appeared out of nowhere, this one about the same size as the other. Inside of it stood Silas, grinning like a fool. He was shirtless, and I had to admit he was cut, tattooed like a prison drug lord. I'd never seen him like this but it was intimidating.

The crowd went insane at the sight, and Brayden turned to face his sister, whispering something to her.

Brayden shrugged off his suit jacket and then his button-down shirt until he stood in just dress slacks. The room got ten

degrees hotter as I stared at his naked chest. It looked like it was chiseled from freaking stone. The eight names on his arm made my stomach tighten.

“Good luck,” Leah said, leaning forward to give him an impromptu hug.

My nostrils flared as I swallowed a growl. I no longer cared if Leah was Lena, Brayden was *mine*. I found him first, I kissed him first.

He. Was. Mine.

If the crowd thought I was Lena, then what I was about to do next would shock no one.

Stepping forward, I reached out and wrapped my arms around Brayden’s neck, pulling his lips to mine. We crashed together and a moan ripped from his throat. Our lips immediately parted and my tongue sought his with a desperate need.

I’d come to one conclusion about this entire situation.

Screw Lena.

If we were never going to find out who she was, then I was going to live for now, and right now my heart was saying it wanted Brayden. The way his tongue desperately stroked mine, his fingers cutting into my sides, he wanted me too. Forget what I’d said before about needing to let him go, I needed to go after him and claim him.

“This is what he is fighting for, folks!” Lynette’s voice boomed throughout the room and we broke away, panting. “True love!” Lynette said. “If Brayden loses again, like he did last year, his soulmate goes to live with Silas for an entire year. *Her last year alive.*”

A reverence descended over the crowd for a moment, then it erupted into clapping as everyone rushed towards the betting station. We broke away and my gaze flicked to Leah to see hurt splashed across her face. I wanted to feel bad, but I didn’t. I was playing Lena tonight, and I felt like Lena inside.

Leaning into me, Brayden brushed his lips over my ear. “I choose you too,” he whispered, and my knees went weak. Pulling away, he held my gaze and it felt like time stopped. I just stared into his icy blue eyes, confirming that he felt the same way about me as I did about him. Fate be damned, we chose each other, and it was the best feeling in the world.

With a last look, he turned from me and walked towards the cage that Silas was in.

I choose you.

Those words looped in my head until I felt so light I thought I might fly away. He didn’t know if I was Lena or not and he chose me. Somehow that was more satisfying than if he’d blindly chosen me based on a recollection of memories.

“Bring the rings!” Lora shouted from the stage, and two fae butlers came out of nowhere holding fancy silver plates with a golden ring on each.

There was a commotion behind us. I spun just in time to see another, very small, five-foot square cage descending from the ceiling.

“That’s for us,” Maddy said, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

When the metal cage landed on the marble floor with a clink, the door popped open. Two more butler-like fae moved out of the crowd and stepped towards us, and I noticed the long swords hooked to their hips.

Maddy stepped into the cage, and after Leah and I gave each other an uneasy look, we followed. The moment the cage door shut, we were pulled up and suspended ten feet in the air.

I turned to Leah, not wanting anything to fester between us. “Sorry I—”

“You’re Lena tonight,” she said curtly, and gave me a small hurt smile.

Tonight. Just tonight? She clearly hadn’t heard him say he chose me, and now wasn’t the time to talk about it. I nodded and then peered through the bars and watched as Brayden

slipped the ring over his finger. The second he did, the cage we stood inside glowed with an ethereal blue light and there was a sudden pressure on my skin.

“He’s now linked to us, taking our strength and rapid healing,” Maddy said.

I watched as the cage with his sister and Mary and the dozens of other pack members glowed blue as Silas put his ring on.

I frowned. “But Silas gets the power of *all* of them?” I whispered, looking at over sixty pack members.

Maddy nodded. “And he is given power from the Fae Lords. But Brayden still beats him every year.” She grinned.

“Except last year,” Leah confirmed.

Maddy nodded, sighing, and then looked at me. Her eyes went down to my necklace. “*This* year will be different,” she said, her eyes widening a little to let me know what she meant.

Me. I was the difference. Just ten percent of my Greywolf power was going to help him? I sure hoped so. Because I didn’t just find him, choose him, in order to lose him now.

“All betting is now closed. Let the fight begin!” Lynette called, and the two men stepped into their cage. The door was closed and locked behind them.

“Remember, the only way out is by forfeit. One of these strong alphas will need to tap out,” Lynette said.

A large projector magically descended from the ceiling and the image of Brayden and Silas staring each other down was displayed on the giant back wall. I was amazed and horrified by the level of magic these people had to make cages appear out of nowhere and suspend from the ceiling without chains. Likewise I didn’t see any cameras in the corners of Brayden and Silas’ cage and yet I could see them start to circle each other on the projected display over the wall. Pelts of fur ran down Brayden’s neck but he pushed them back and stayed human.

“I look forward to this each and every year.” Silas’ voice was magically projected out to the entire crowd so that the experience was akin to watching a movie.

“As do I,” Brayden replied. “My only regret is that I can’t kill you.”

A large number five appeared over the movie screen and there was a loud beep followed by four and another beep. I steeled myself as the numbers counted down until finally they got to one and the two men rushed at each other like rabid wolves. Silas went right for the throat and the crowd went wild. He wrapped his fingers around Brayden’s neck and I whimpered at the sight.

Brayden snapped his head forward, headbutting Silas in the face and Silas yelped, letting go. Brayden wasted no time. He kicked out, connecting with Silas’ abdomen, and I felt a pull on my power. It was like an energy drain had gone out of me. The second Brayden’s foot hit Silas’ stomach, the alpha went flying across the cage, ten feet in the air, and slammed into the bars behind.

The crowd cheered and Lynette’s voice commentated: “Brayden has three powerful females he is pulling from. Madison was a leader of the Fifth Division in his royal army,” she said, and I looked over at Maddy with a raised eyebrow. She gave me a sheepish smile.

“Of course our lovely Lena Greywolf is wife and ex-queen of *all* the wolves in Ether,” Lynette said, and the crowd raised their drinks to me like I was some conquest. I noticed a few were staying silent and not cheering. Those I assumed were wolves forced to attend.

“Finally a newcomer, Leah. I’m told she is Lena’s best friend and likes to shoot guns,” Lynette announced as if we were in some video game and people were going to be picking us as characters.

“It’s all a big show for them,” Maddy growled to Leah and I as we watched Brayden and Silas pummeling each other. My gaze searched the other cage, the one with the pack in it, and landed on the little fourteen-year-old girl watching the screen

in anticipation. She must have been dying to be with her brother and Maddy again.

I glanced back at the fight just in time to see Brayden shift to his wolf form. The crowd went insane. They were jumping and pushing forward to get a better view, but watching the fight made me sick. I felt so helpless locked in a cage when my wolf wanted to come out and rip Silas' head off.

Silas laughed as Brayden snapped at him.

He threw his hand out and yelled, "Stay!" like you would command a dog, and Brayden froze.

That bastard. The Fae Lords must have given him that power. The crowd erupted into laughter and my legs went weak as Brayden pulled on my power. Out of nowhere, Brayden broke the hold that Silas had over him and lunged for his neck. Silas looked surprised for a moment and threw his arms up to block just as Brayden's jaw clamped over his forearm. The crunch of bone reverberated around the entire room.

"Pssst!" came a voice from below.

I frowned, taking my eyes off the fight to look at the crowd standing beneath the cage. When my gaze landed on Artemis I gasped. He looked around, but everyone's eyes were glued to the fight. Reaching up, he slipped a note through the grid of bars at my feet and I swooped down to pick it up.

When I looked for him again, he was gone.

What the heck just happened?

Leah and Maddy were watching the fight, and so I positioned myself behind them to hide from view and opened the letter.

She won't last another year with him. He will break her. Another can proxy.

I read the thing four times, confused as all hell, and then decided that maybe it was for me to give to Brayden or Maddy? Shaking my head, I slipped the folded note into my

bra. It didn't seem urgent. It needed to wait until after this fight.

Brayden was limping, his paw broken, and I wished so badly that I had my gun. I'd unload the clip into Silas' head, consequences be damned. Silas was now in wolf form and stalking slow circles around Brayden.

"Oh, this fight is proving to be so entertaining!" Lynette told the crowd, and they shouted their agreement.

End it, I wanted to tell Brayden.

As if he heard me, he turned and looked right at me, and that's when Silas' wolf went for the kill.

"Look out!" My bloodcurdling scream ripped through the space as Silas' jaw wrapped around Brayden's neck. A surge of power flushed through me and the necklace at my throat grew hot. Reaching out, I grasped the bars as Brayden tried to shake Silas off.

"Averly, calm down," Maddy said quickly, and I looked at my hands to see that I'd bent the bars.

Crap.

Come on, Brayden, take my power and whoop his sorry little ass.

With a surge of power, Brayden shook his head and dislodged Silas' jaws. Then he reared up on his hindlegs and came down on Silas' wolf, pinning him underneath him. Brayden tore into his gut like a wild animal. It was horrific. Blood and guts flew around the cage, and before I could process it, Silas was shifting.

"Forfeit!" he yelled, barely able to get the word out before he collapsed.

Brayden grinned, a wolfish sight with blood dripping from his mouth.

The crowd went insane.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, you saw it here tonight. Brayden's lucky charm is back, and he is the victor." Lynette

didn't sound too pleased when she announced that.

The fighting cage descended to the ground at the same time ours did. A group of fae in all-white robes rushed forward, bursting in to hover around Silas. They held out their hands and a golden yellow light flooded from their palms, engulfing his unconscious form.

I was filled with so many emotions: jubilation that Brayden had won, and wonderment at the sight of this healing. I'd never seen anything like it and something about it called to me. My hands felt warm and I ached to lay them on Brayden's wounds and take all of his pain away.

Our cage lowered to the ground as well; the door clicked open and I ran out, getting closer to where Silas was being healed and Brayden changed into clothes.

Silas' stomach stitched together like magic as the fae held their hands over him. Leah and I gasped, but no one else seemed shocked.

"What now?" I asked Maddy. I was itching to get to Brayden, get our new pack members, then get the hell out of here.

Maddy looked at Silas. "Loser has to pick one person from his pack to fight with next year. He always picks Evan, his second-in-command and one evil son of a bitch."

My gaze followed where she was pointing to see a familiar man with a bald head and evil black eyes, the same dude I'd punched at the hotel. He saw me looking and blew me a kiss.

I shivered. When Silas' pack's cage hit the ground, the doors opened and then Nora was running.

"Maddy!" She sobbed and my throat tightened with emotion as she ran to her sister. Maddy rushed forward and the two collided. August was right behind her, and the three of them crushed Nora into a sandwich hug.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Brayden and Silas step out of the cage, bloodied and bruised and wearing low-slung sweatpants. Brayden's neck and arm were weeping blood but it looked to already be healing. Silas was already on

the mend, which still shocked the crap out of me. What kind of magic had these healer fae done?

The two butler fae who'd come up to them before removed the rings, and that pressure on my skin ceased.

"I've been here before," Leah suddenly said, looking around the room.

I ignored her and rushed forward, letting Brayden pull me into his arms. His lips brushed over my neck as I clung gently to him.

"Are you okay?" I whimpered.

He nodded, pressing a kiss to my lips. It took everything in me not to burst into tears right here.

"Silas Ashwood, pick your packmate for the next year, the one whom you will draw power from next year," Lynette said.

Silas looked over at Evan and nodded. "Nora Greywolf," he announced, and the entire room exploded into shouts.

"*Not* my little sister!" Brayden yelled, tearing away from me and getting up in Silas' face.

Nora burst into sobs as Maddy stood in shock at her side.

"A rule is a rule," Lora boasted from the stage, looking pleased with Silas' decision.

It was in that moment that I remembered the note Artemis had handed me.

She won't last another year with him. He will break her. Another can proxy.

I took one look at the sweet teenager falling to pieces in her elder sister's arms and the look of absolute horror on Brayden's face and I didn't think, I just reacted.

"I volunteer as proxy for Nora!" I yelled, and complete and utter silence encased the room.

Silas broke into a huge grin as Brayden turned slowly to me. His features were marred in absolute shock.

"No!" Maddy screamed. "I volunteer as proxy."

Silas grinned. “I accept you both.”

“Wait, what? You can’t do that!” Brayden bellowed, and looked up at the stage full of Fae Lords.

Lora was grinning. “A volunteer is a volunteer. They can do as they please.”

“No,” Maddy said. “I volunteer. Averly stays back.”

I opened my mouth to argue but Silas shook his head. “I will accept both of you for Nora, but not just one of you.” He looked at the little sister who now stood all alone, as Maddy had thrown herself in front of her.

“Done! See you all next year. Please enjoy the live music,” Lora boomed and a band started to play.

“What have you done?” August whimpered to Maddy, her eyes lined with tears.

“Come to me,” Silas commanded, and I felt power wrap around me. I unwillingly walked towards him.

Holy crap. This was his power? I had no control over myself and it was terrifying.

“No!” Brayden shouted, and the rest of his now freed pack rallied around him. They fanned out in a small circle around their new alpha and tried to block Silas’ path to Maddy and I. A small contingent of over a dozen fae guards broke away from the edges of the room and walked towards us.

“It’s time to go, Mr. Greywolf,” one of them said to Brayden.

Magic wrapped around us as Maddy and I were sucked towards Silas like fish on a lure. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t scared. But nothing scared me more than the look on Leah’s face when I spun around to glance back at her.

She was staring at Brayden, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Brayden, I remember,” she said, and the way she said it was with such adoration and love it was like I’d been punched in the gut.

Brayden stilled, turning to face her, and she stumbled forward, falling into his arms. “I remember you,” she sobbed, and the shock of seeing the man I had fallen in love with take my best friend into his arms became too much for me. I collapsed before their lips touched. Some things in life were just too much to bear. Brayden Greywolf not being mine was inconceivable. I couldn’t fathom it.

Ever.

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