

RUBY BRINKS



BEWITCHING
THE
FORBIDDEN
ALPHA



A SHIFTER PARANORMAL ROMANCE

Bewitching the Forbidden Alpha



A Shifter Paranormal Romance

Ruby Brinks

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I want to thank my Husband, Andy, for being supportive and helping bring my dreams into reality. He is a true partner.

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You are the BEST!

Kara Lynn McCullough and Nunky

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Prologue



“The Guild’s decree has been made. There will be no harm to befall the Coven of the Sacred Veil. You worry for nothing, sweetheart. Now, go over to the window and open it up. We need to let this soul out before it gets trapped in here with us...”

Meredith, one of the daughters to the High Priestess of the Coven of the Sacred Veil, was found mutilated outside of her home. At first it seemed like an animal attack, the way her body was torn into shredded pieces. However, her husband, Alfred, found her outside marked with a symbol on her head, meaning her soul had been captured. This was a hate crime.

It was meant to be a warning, a calling to Eloise about the rising of her coven. In the hills of Georgia, the Coven of the Sacred Veil was growing stronger and stronger by the day. There were many in the supernatural community who would view this as a threat. The Guild, hearing of their growing power and the surrounding unrest in the communities because of their strength, gathered for a meeting.

Harming anyone in the supernatural community had been outlawed many, many years before. However, it seemed there needed to be another special decree made specifically for the Coven of the Sacred Veil.

Communing with spirits made them dangerous to those who did not know them.

Communing with spirits would allow other people’s secrets to be known, and that simply could not be allowed.

The decree alone would not be enough. The protection of the Coven of the Sacred Veil's ancestors and friends would not be enough.

Ten years before Meredith's death, a prophecy was foretold of the slaughtering of the Coven of the Sacred Veil. Through spirit, they were created. Through spirit, they would be taken. For years, Eloise feared the prophecy, and she grew her coven and their power, in order to protect those she loved most.

She never sought hate or to hurt anyone with the power they wielded. No. They used their power to help other people. They used their power to make sure that those around them were safe.

She'd seen what others would call... signs.

Her great, great, great grandmother's amulet had gone missing. It had the power to keep souls in a state of purgatory, a prison world of sorts, where they would have to be released. And only a member of the Coven of the Sacred Veil could release them.

Every ten years, the amulet is passed down to one of the women in the line to learn the amulet's secrets and, of course, keep it in the family as a family heirloom. It's precious and rare. Meredith inherited the amulet just three short years ago. She was the most advanced in learning who had been inside of the amulet, its secrets, tips and tricks. She kept a very detailed journal on the magic of the mystical amulet, which was said to be forged by her ancestors' spirits. The journal was also

written in a special coded language that only our coven could read, to keep our secrets from falling into the wrong hands.

She held this amulet and her journal close to her. Unfortunately, she trusted the wrong person. In making another friend in the supernatural community, she was betrayed. Her betrayer read her journal, spreading lies and rumors about Meredith and her family.

Alfred, new to the way of magic, was outcast from his family and found love and companionship in the coven. Alfred and Meredith had a fairytale life. They were high school sweethearts, and senior year, before Alfred proposed, she offered him the truth about who she was. Meredith knew he was going to propose and was prepared because of her spirit guides who could not keep their mouths shut.

She told Alfred that she was a witch. A damn powerful one at that.

Alfred's reaction was nothing short of perfect.

That would explain the spell you've put on me...

And rather than ask questions, he proposed. They were married directly after graduation, and shortly after, Meredith became pregnant with their daughter, Wilhemina, Willa for short. That was ten years ago.

Growing up in the coven had its pros and cons. One of the many cons is that Meredith always longed for a sense of normality. It was the reason she fell so naturally for Alfred. He offered balance in a chaotic world. She loved being a witch,

and always would, but there was a huge part of her that was still human. Simply just a human being.

She needed to feed it, just like she fed her magical self.

After years of marriage, Alfred also began showing an affinity for spirit. It could not be explained whether he always had dormant magic or if he just came into it, but no matter his rare case, he wanted to use his new abilities to speak with the spirit realm to heal the curses of his family members.

That did not go over well. Upon finding out about his “gift”, his parents donned it as a curse, and it only made Alfred and Meredith grow closer. When they had Willa, their family felt complete. As a grandmother, Eloise wanted to ensure that Meredith and Alfred raised Willa in coven life, the way she had been.

But, the one thing Meredith wanted for her child, more than anything, was the balance she fought to get growing up. Instead of sending her to the coven school for elementary and middle school like she was, she started her out in regular public school.

Though her school was small, because of their country upbringing, she loved that Willa was able to make friends, keep up in school, and if she so chose, to have a life outside of the coven.

Unfortunately, it was her life outside of the coven that cost her, her life, and it seemed as though the prophecy was coming true.

Meredith was attacked in the middle of the night, leaving a bar with her “friend” that she’d made one day in the supermarket in town. They seemed to be there at the same time every week, both with their children. Meredith attached herself to this woman, who claimed to be a single mother struggling with the stresses of life.

Meredith sought to make her feel better, and when her spirit guides told her there was something off about the woman, Meredith ignored them. She wanted to be “normal” for once. She learned a long time ago how to send her spirit guides away when she wanted her privacy, and unfortunately that alone is what got her killed.

The woman lured her into walking her to her car. Meredith, knowing she had magic, had no reason to be afraid. Not to mention, her friend was a human—what was the worst thing that could happen leaving the bar? A robbery? That was nothing for her to be afraid of, she felt.

But the closer they got to her friend’s car, the more she realized something was off. Before she had enough time to react, she was taken from the back and beaten up, knocked out cold, and thrown into a pickup truck. She’d trusted the wrong person, and it cost her life.

When Meredith awoke, she was asked time and time again about the amulet that they were only in possession of because she wore it around her neck. And her journal, but her captors didn’t know the truths behind the amulet.

She was the only person who could wield the magic inside of it. And only one who was pure of heart could even touch it. It was why every time someone went to touch it near her, their flesh burned.

They'd used Parsley to still her magic, an herb meant to deafen her powers when rubbed against her tied hands. It had indeed stilled her powers, dulled them. During their line of questioning and excessive beating, while they were slapping her silly, she was preparing for the inevitable to happen.

Meredith knew she would not make it out alive and would never see her beautiful daughter, Willa again. Willa, at ten years old, was extremely compassionate and smart, sensible, and kind. She knew she'd never see the love of her life ever again. Her safest bet was if she could get her hands on enough parsley to lick it up, not let it rub against her, so that it would act as an aphrodisiac.

She could channel her love for her family and Alfred and use it to do the one thing she'd been learning how to fight against; lock herself in the amulet until she could be set free.

When it was clear she would give up no answers, her captors killed her by slicing her throat open. She'd been dipping the amulet, daily, in the herbal mixture of parsley, crushed maca root, graveyard dirt, and several other herbs so that she could practice the incantation properly on the amulet. She'd been successful in placing inanimate objects inside. She could only hope now that it would work on a person; herself. Their biggest mistake was letting her fall to the floor before killing

her, and she was able to ingest just enough parsley to draw on her magic and place herself in the amulet.

And when her spirit left her body and she floated into the amulet, her biggest fear was wondering if she'd be reunited with her family, in spirit, one last time.

Her captors threw her body outside of her home, where Alfred found her. He, of course, called his mother-in-law first. When she arrived, Willa had been asleep for hours but would soon awaken, so she asked Alfred to get her ready for the day and take her away from the house so that she could figure out what happened to her daughter. Alfred did just that.

The first thing Eloise noticed was the missing amulet. She reached out deep to the spirit guides, asking, pleading with them, for anyone to answer her darkest questions.

There were no answers because Meredith had sent her spirit guides away. Instead of being told what happened to her daughter, she would have to see it firsthand.

Eloise immediately noticed the bloody mark cut into her daughter's forehead. The mark was a rune and would be just enough for Eloise to draw upon the magic of spirit and, unfortunately, relive her daughter's death.

For what seemed like hours, Eloise witnessed the horror that befell her beautiful daughter. Each and every gruesome detail of them beating her, spitting on her, calling her slurs that would offend even the strongest witch, and ultimately, killing her.

In seeing her daughter's death, she was able to determine the location that she was tortured and ultimately murdered. Eloise, with a fiery rage, went to the warehouse and retrieved the amulet, where her daughter's kind and beautiful spirit was housed. Before setting her daughter free, she called Alfred and Willa back to the house.

Eloise made up her mind then. She would lie to Alfred and to Willa by telling them this was an isolated incident, but deep down, Eloise knew a war was coming.

A war that she would see to it that they would win.

When Alfred brought Willa home, Eloise very calmly sat her granddaughter down and did her very best to explain to her what had occurred. It was with great sorrow in her heart that she had to talk to her granddaughter about the loss of her mother, but she knew that Willa would understand.

As a child of the Coven of the Sacred Veil, Willa knew that loss didn't mean "lost." It meant the exact opposite. She knew that anyone who passed away and whose soul was set free would be welcome amongst their ancestors in the spiritual realm, where they would advise from afar.

This was meant to be comforting, and had it not been for the fact that Willa had lost her mother, perhaps it would have been. It could have been something... calming, but when a child loses a parent, no matter the reason, it leaves a scar on their heart. A mark that will forever be imprinted on them.

"S—so, Mom's gone?" Willa's lips quivered as she asked her question. Eloise smiled, her eyes kind, and she took her

granddaughter's hand in hers and stroked the back of it lovingly.

“Mom is... in a sense, gone. But you know, just like everyone else in the Coven of the Sacred Veil, that death is not the end. I'm going to set your mother free from this amulet. That's why I asked you to open the window, so that her soul will be allowed to roam where it should go.”

Willa understood death.

She understood that souls could get trapped anywhere windows weren't open.

She understood that a soul could get caught between this realm and the next.

Willa didn't understand why it had to be her mother.

Willa looked across the room to her father, who was doing his best to hold himself together. Meredith's body lying across the dining room table was even worse than him finding her that morning. He'd hoped there was something that could be done. That there was a spell strong enough to bring back his beloved.

But he knew that was black magic, and the Coven of the Sacred Veil didn't deal in such manners.

Alfred mustered up all the energy he could to smile, to let Willa know that it was okay, but he too feared what life without his beloved Meredith would look like.

“I'll need a few things to set your mother free. Can you go downstairs to the apothecary and grab a few herbs? I'm going

to go to my house and pick up a few things quickly and we can say goodbye to Meredith.”

Willa nodded, but it was an impulse. She didn't really hear her grandmother, at least not every word. When she began rambling off details and herbs needed, she had missed most of what was asked of her because of the instant pain that settled in.

Before going downstairs, Alfred hugged Willa tightly and said he was going to step outside for a moment. Alfred knew he could not let Willa see him in the state he was in. It would be impossible for her to erase that image from her mind, and he knew that it would stain her. Tainted her in a way. He needed to be strong for her, but he also needed a moment to release. He needed a moment to become undone.

Willa held her father tightly, and he held onto her for as long as he could before something inside of him broke.

Eloise, as promised, went across the road back to her house to gather some of the things she needed, but she, too, needed to cry. She too needed, for just a second, to let down her armor of being the High Priestess of the coven and be just a mother who lost her daughter.

Willa headed downstairs as she was told and stared around the apothecary. She and her mother often went hunting for rare herbs together, to gather things that otherwise would not be found in their coven if they didn't set their sights on it. She'd always enjoyed their afternoon trips into the hills, sometimes out of town just to collect certain herbs, medicines, and items

that could be sold or kept on hand for simple or complex spells.

Willa loved being a witch. She looked forward to coming into her power later on in life. Something her mother assured her would happen by the time she turned 16. She looked most forward to enjoying the ritual with her mother, where they would dance under moonlight, and enjoy a “witch’s brew”, which just happened to be the perfect tea to complement her personality. That’s what her mother told her anyway.

Now, in the apothecary, a place she typically felt warm and excited, she felt cold and lonely. Her heart wrenched in anguish and heartbreak while having her mother as a spirit guide would be nice. She would never feel the love of her mother again in a warm sense. She’d never hug her again. Her lips would never touch her forehead again in a good morning greeting.

The loss of Meredith was already a heavy burden... a heavy burden that was about to become much heavier.

Loud screams began coming from outside. Being in the basement, Willa could somewhat see through the tiny window to view where the sound was coming from. She only saw quickened feet rushing around and the screams that followed. It wasn’t until she saw a body slam to the ground, eyes open directly in front of her, that she realized something terrible was happening.

Exactly what she feared. The prophecy she’d been warned about all her life was truly happening, all within 24 hours of

losing her mother. This was, of course, no coincidence.

Willa raced to the stairs and shoved her shoulder against the door to open it. It often got stuck on the other side. Their home was a bit old and rickety, but she loved it because of that.

That door is what ultimately saved her life. No matter how hard she pressed against it, the door would not open. But the closed door did nothing to shield her from the screams taking place outside.

Willa rushed back to the basement to look out of the window again, and she saw her grandmother, stronger than ever, with her hands raised to the sky.

“One day, you will pay for this. Our ancestors have already made it so,” were the last words Willa ever heard her grandmother say before she slit her own throat. As blood seeped from her open wound, Willa witnessed several souls leaving their bodies and entering the amulet around her grandmother’s neck.

Willa knew then, even at the ripe age of ten years old, that her grandmother sacrificed herself for their coven for a reason. A reason that would take her years and years to understand.

The truth of it was simple. One day, Willa would need the spirit magic in the amulet to defeat those who would come against her. She would be able to set her coven free from purgatory while also using their magic to defeat the foe who didn’t quite finish the job the way they thought they did.

After Eloise and the rest of the coven were slain, Willa waited some time before trying to get back out of the basement apothecary. Strangely enough, this time, the door gave way, and she was allowed entrance into her home.

Willa rushed outside to see if anyone was left alive, and unfortunately, everyone had been taken, including her father, who was sprawled out across the street near Eloise's house. Their necks were deeply... bitten into like ravenous animals had taken chunks out of them.

There was only one thing that Willa could do. She attempted to take the amulet from her grandmother's neck but thought better of it when she heard more noise erupting in the distance. She then went back into the house to retrieve her mother's journal, something she knew was precious, and she packed one backpack with a few clothes, herbs, and pictures of her and her family.

The one and only place she knew she could always go was to her best friend Emre's house. His mother had always been kind to her, loving, and allowed her into their home. Though she didn't know that Willa was a witch, well, almost a witch, and if she did, she never let on to that fact.

Willa kissed her mother's cold cheek before leaving the house and let her two legs carry her as quickly as she could down the hills to the bottom where Emre's house was. On the way down the hill, the scent of sugar seemed to permeate the air. It smelled of... magic. Her grandmother told her magic

always left a distinct scent lingering. Either rotten or sweet, and those with greater power left behind a sweeter scent.

She was out of breath when she reached the door, and her stomach was turned upside down.

Nora opened the door after hearing something that sounded a bit unusual outside on her doorstep. When she opened the door, she was happy to see Willa, but Willa didn't look like her usual self.

Willa's right eye had turned completely white. A symbol to mark her as the last of her coven, yet her left eye remained a perfect sky blue.

Nora fell to her knees and pulled Willa in for a hug. She had no idea what had happened, but from the wild beating of her heart when Nora hugged her, she knew that it must have been something intense.

"Willa, what happened, sweetheart?" Nora stroked the center of Willa's back, hoping it would help her calm down.

"Dead. They're all... dead," Willa sobbed once more, and she threw herself into Nora's loving embrace.

Emre, hearing his mother at the door for some time, went to check on her. His father had instilled in him that when he was gone, he was the man of the house. A role he took very seriously.

But, when he showed up at the front door, there was absolutely nothing to fear or defend. His best friend was here. But her eyes had changed, and her face was tear stricken.

Right away, Emre went to comfort his friend. When Willa saw Emre nearing her, she released Nora and went over to Emre. Their small arms were the perfect place for each of them to be.

Nora brought the children into the house, unaware of what took place. She called the police an hour or so after Willa had the opportunity to calm down. There was something about forcing her to speak to the police so soon that made her feel ill. She wished she could go and find out more about what happened on her own.

Unfortunately, she knew how her husband felt about people meddling in other people's affairs and personal lives. This wouldn't be a good idea.

When the police arrived, the questions began, and it seemed they never stopped coming. And for the next week, Willa stayed at Emre's house. He was her best friend in the entire world. At school, they looked after one another, ate lunch together, and always sat together in class. They were as close as two ten-year-olds could be.

Nora and Arnold had heard the story from Willa a thousand times about what happened to her family. They were questioned many times about it in town, at school, and any other social gathering they attended because everyone was so "worried," which really translated to them being curious.

A week after the tragic loss of the Coven of the Sacred Veil, child services came knocking on the door of Nora and Arnold. Unfortunately, because they had not done the legal work to keep Willa, they would now have to give her up to the system.

“Can’t she just stay here, Mom? Please. I don’t want Willa to leave,” Emre pleaded. He never had siblings, only cousins who he hated and bullied him. Willa was his ally. His confidant. His partner in crime. She stood up for him and supported him. She loved him and he felt that love each and every time they were together. Willa living with them was the most fun that he’d ever had.

“No, sweetheart, we have enough going on here... I’m sorry...”

Nora hated to have to tell Emre no. She knew how much he loved Willa, and she felt the same. But Nora and Arnold had a private life of their own that needed to be shielded, and with all the questions around town, the troubles in their marriage would surely be exposed if they added another factor in their lives.

Nora chose the peace of her son in another way. It wouldn’t be until he became an adult that he would understand Willa leaving was the best thing at that time because if she had stayed, perhaps she would have suffered the same fate as her mother.

With Willa gone to foster care, she bounced around for the remainder of her life. Her deepest regret was that she’d never see Emre again. Had it not been for him, she would not have made it through the first week of losing her coven.

When Willa left the hills of Georgia, she left with a promise to herself and the Coven of the Sacred Veil. She promised that when she came into her power, she would release her family

and set things right. She could only hope this would somehow reset the balance of things.

Carrying her family's memory with her, and only a backpack, Willa traipsed to several different foster families and group homes until the age of 18, where finally... she would be free to fulfill her promise to her family.

Chapter 1



Willa

16 years later...

“Willa, I’m so happy you’re here!”

My gaze is drawn first to the opening door when I hear the bell over it ring. Secondly, my gaze is drawn when I hear the southern drawl of one of my least favorite clients, but she is my most consistent. I’ve never seen someone lose so many items in my life.

“Hi, Ruth. What can I do for you today?”

From behind the counter, I stand to my full height, close my mother’s journal and place it slightly to the side. I know that it isn’t for anyone else to see.

“I’ve been looking for a family heirloom for a while now. I wanted to give it to my daughter on her wedding day. I’d started to give up hope that she might marry, but now, at 38, she’s finally heading down the aisle. I’d like to give her my grandmother’s ring, but I have no idea where it is.”

Right away, I don’t know if I want to help. Finding heirlooms can be a dangerous thing if you’re not careful. I should know I’ve been carrying around the responsibility of saving 100 spirits since I was ten years old. The weight of their unknown secret is heavy.

“I see, and do you know what the ring looks like? The last person to have, had it? Any information would be great,” I inform her and head over to my sitting chair. It’s where I can hear the clearest. There’s something special about the sun that

calms me and puts me in a state of tranquility long enough to commune with my spirit guides.

“Yes, I do! It’s a solitaire pearl ring with diamonds around the band. White gold. I always thought I’d wear it at my own wedding, but my grandmother passed away long before that. A tragic thing really. She was still so young.”

Yep, and her grandmother is still on her shoulder. Looking as gorgeous as ever; Amelia, one of my spirit guides mentions, and I chuckle under my breath. Amelia is always the first to speak, the kindest, and sometimes the funniest.

Hmm... but if I were you, I wouldn't return that ring. It's got some bad mojo on it.

Okay, but this is how we pay our bills, I remind Dora, the more cynical of the two.

Dora and Amelia came to me when I was about 17. That was the first time I interacted with the spirit realm. Amelia and Dora had been waiting for me to come into my power and be my spirit guides. They said they were great allies to the Coven of the Sacred Veil and had done their best from the realm of the ancestors to make sure I was okay throughout my life. I always noticed that when something especially bad should have probably happened to me, it didn't.

I knew it wasn't my coven because I could not access them or their magic. According to Mom's journal, I wasn't strong enough, and had to find the amulet first. I've always regretted not taking the amulet from my grandmother's neck, and I'm still on the hunt for the amulet currently.

Dora and Amelia kept me sane during my last year of foster care. I've never had a home, I've never had a family, and I didn't know from one week to the next where I would be. It was always that way, and I learned to never get comfortable anywhere, except with my spirit guides.

Dora and Amelia saved me after years of torment being alone. There were so many times I wanted to reach out to Emre and let him know I missed him and thought of him, but there was no telling how he'd be able to get a letter back to me since I was always on the move. And a part of me still resented his parents for giving me up.

I'd always thought they'd liked me.

Dora and Amelia assured me I was better off, though I couldn't believe being in foster care would be better for anyone.

“Give me one moment, Ruth. I'll ask around...”

I didn't need to ask; Amelia and Dora were already listening, and I was positive they already had an answer.

I know exactly where the ring is, it's—

But, but, but Amelia. I wouldn't go giving that information away. She might not be able to handle it.

Dora, please. Anyway, it turns out that Ruth's father stole the ring from his mother and took it with him to the grave, so... I'd make sure we get paid extra for this. We're unearthing family secrets...

And you're a little too happy about that! Dora shouts, and it causes a ringing in my head. When I look over at Ruth, she's patiently waiting for an answer. Her hands are crossed over one another over the top of her dress.

I can see her grandmother, standing right beside her, looking on her lovingly. I can feel the love her grandmother has for her, and the news I'm going to have to give her is saddening.

"Well Ruth, due to the nature of this information, I'm going to have to charge you a little extra."

"Totally fine by me. That's the greatest part about having a rich husband. The tab is always on him. How much?" Ruth asks as she opens her cross-body purse and begins digging in it.

"\$500."

When Ruth doesn't bat an eye, I know I should have gone up even higher, but I'm not looking to rob anyone, especially not a loyal client.

Ruth reaches into her purse and hands it to me, and as I take it, I look over at her grandmother, who has a saddened expression. I'm assuming she feels bad that her granddaughter will have to hear the truth.

"Unfortunately, the ring is with your father... in his grave. He stole it from her many years ago, and he kept it with him all the time."

Ruth's face scrunches up. I wonder what she's thinking, but I can tell from the hand that her grandmother places on her

shoulder she believes Ruth needs comforting.

“It’s like I can feel her with me sometimes, you know? There’s no doubt that my dad probably took that ring with the hopes of selling it. He was a drunkard, an asshole, and honestly, not that great of a person. Thanks for all your help, Willa. I’m sure I’ll be back soon, needing something else.”

“Yes, but before you go, Ruth, you should know that the ring has some bad ju-ju mixed up in it. It’s probably for the best that it remains with your father.” I slightly smile and she nods her head in agreement.

Ruth twists on her red bottom heels and tosses her hand over her shoulder as she heads out of the shop. If only all my clients were as easy to please as she is.

Thanks to Amelia and Dora, I’ve been able to run a very lucrative business that allows me to find missing objects for those who seek them. Dora and Amelia are connected with many ancestors, except mine.

The Coven of the Sacred Veil have their own ancestral realm. It has always been this way because of the magic we wield. In a sense, we are superior to other spirits because we wield spirit, and we know how to wield, control, and, unfortunately, manipulate them.

To create balance, our ancestors remain in their own personal space, but over the years, I’ve come to learn the reason I don’t have any of my other ancestors from the past advising me or with me is because they’re all resting.

When my grandmother sacrificed herself, she drew on the magic of the ancestral realm to place their spirits into the amulet. It was an understandable sacrifice for them, according to Dora and Amelia. Spirit news travels just about as quickly as word of mouth.

Which means I have an even bigger duty to find out how to free my family from the amulet. But first, I must figure out how to fulfill my destiny. There are a lot of steps, and I still have a lot to learn. I've read my mother's journal backwards and forwards, and I'm still learning things about it.

With nothing on the books for the day, I decide to close up the shop a little early and head to my humble abode. I've lived in Tennessee for the last few years, and it seemed nice enough to set up shop and start my business.

I used to run it online and then travel to certain towns and set up at vending spots or in the square but that got old fast. It was always very lucrative, so it made sense to put down roots for the first time ever. I've never had anything that belonged to me, and this seemed like the best and smartest thing to do.

I like it there in Joelton. It's a small town, very small town, which reminds me of where I grew up in Georgia. It allows me the affordability to do pretty much whatever I want.

I'd hoped something else would help me to fill my day, since I'll be going home to pack a bag and head back to the very place I left 16 years ago. One of my clients has asked that I find a necklace that his great-grandfather sold a long time ago.

It apparently was very important to his own father, and he'd like to get it back and give it back to him as his dying wish.

I, of course, asked Dora and Amelia what they knew about the necklace and if they could find it. It took six months to commune with the proper spirits, but after doing so, I've located the necklace, and it's an antique shop tucked in the hills of Georgia.

I have no idea how long I'll be gone, and there's no telling what I might run into returning home. I'm nervous, anxious, and curious about what the town I grew up in has become since I've been gone.

My biggest hope is that I'll be able to get this necklace and get out of town.

If the antique shop has what I'm looking for, I'll get it, leave, and then refocus on my own family's dying wish.

Chapter 2



Emre

There's an alcoholic stench in the air that I'm positive belongs to my father. When he enters the antique shop, he reeks of beer and Jack Daniels, and he looks like he hasn't bathed in days. I'm thankful there's no one in the store right now. Otherwise, I'd be embarrassed, though I'm used to being embarrassed by him.

"Emre, I need a couple of dollars. \$100 should be go-od." My father hiccups as he stumbles in. His white tank top is now colored eggshell and as dirty as it's ever been. He's disgusting to me. He's gone downhill over the last decade. I can't stand being near him.

"Dad, I can't give you \$100. I can give you \$35 at best."

"\$35 at best? I guess I should have told you the same thing when you were a kid. I raised you. Took care of you. It's crazy that..."

"Okay, okay, there's no need for the guilt trip. Relax," I state and reach into the register to count out \$100. At this point, it's more about keeping him away than it is enabling him. When Mom died 13 years ago, Dad started to change. He was always a bit distant and cold. It made sense though because he was an alpha of a very demanding pack.

But, the stresses of the pack, being left to raise a growing pup, and digesting the fact that my mother was murdered when our house should have been the safest in the pack, weighed on him. I was left to be raised by an emotionally unavailable wild wolf, and there's tons of resentment there.

Yet, he's my father, and I've done everything I can to do right by him, though there's a part of me that hates him. Resents him. Is disgusted by him.

A few years ago, he was voted out of being alpha by my uncle and my cousin; my dad's betas. But we kept it amongst ourselves, and instantly, I became the alpha. Now, my father, uncle, and cousin serve as "counsel" to me, and they don't mind throwing the word "advisor" around any time it suits them.

"Now, that's more like it." Dad rubs his hands together and shoves the bills into his pocket.

He doesn't mention anything else to me, nor does he thank me. Instead, he stumbles out the same way he came in, and when the door slams behind him, I feel a cold wind blow past me.

"She's coming" is whispered in my ear. That could mean anything. And who is she?

As a spirit wolf, I'm in tune with the spirit realm, though I wish I weren't, and most of the time, I tune them out. But they can still reach me when I'm experiencing an overwhelming emotional state, clearly like now.

I shove the revelation from my mind, along with my father's drop-in visit and return to prepare myself for inventory. Underneath the large oak counter, I remove my notepad and pen and start making a list of all the new items I've retrieved and acquired over the last week. It's Thursday, and I'd like to get a jump on what I haven't cataloged, but before I get the

chance, the door blows open again. The scent that floods the store is pleasing and reminds me of fresh linen.

When I look up, I'm reminded of a familiar face, though I'm not quite sure where I know it from. It's partially hidden behind a head of bouncy brunette curls.

She has two different colored eyes. I've seen that before on one person, but I haven't seen her in sixteen years.

"Hello, can I help you with something?" I momentarily look up from the inventory sheet and place my pen on top of the pad.

The woman laughs, and it feels like sunshine inside of me.

"Is your name Emre?" She chuckles as she asks, and I'm curious to how she knows my name or why she'd ask me so directly.

"It is..."

"I thought so. I guess 16 years is a long time for you not to see your best friend. But, come on. I thought the white eye would be a dead giveaway of who I am."

In the center of my store, Willa Saxton stands before me, giggling her head off. From what I hear of her voice, it hasn't changed much, and her laughter still fills up the room.

I'm easily led from around the counter. I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame as my arms wrap around her, lifting her from the ground.

Hugging her reminds me of all the good things in my life. She reminds me of a simpler time, before she was taken away. I'm so happy to see her, I could explode.

“My best friend returns... Why after so long? I'd hoped I'd hear from you years ago, but I didn't know how to find you. I sometimes feel guilty for not finding you on social media,” I admit and place her back on the ground.

I have always carried a huge amount of guilt for not looking for her, but I wasn't sure if, as an adult, she would even want to see me or care to see me. There were so many things I wanted to ask, to know, but I let fear of what she might say or not say keep me from her.

“Well, I've actually come because I need to know if you have something in store. And don't feel bad. I've thought about you often, and I didn't reach out either. There are no hard feelings here, though. Do you work in this shithole?” She asks and takes a look around.

She's always been extremely curious, and her hands do all the looking.

“This shithole belongs to me,” I laugh and run my fingers through my hair. I'm a bit embarrassed she thinks it's a shithole. I guess it could use a thorough cleaning.

“Ahh... did I say shithole? I meant eclectic... eccentric. Umm... it's an interesting place is all.”

“You were a bad liar as a child and an even worse one now as an adult. It is a little shitty on the inside, but I think that's

what kind of appeals to people. It's a hoarder's heaven, and it's made me a pretty good piece of change. Now, back to you, what drug my favorite cat back to town?"

I've always called Willa a cat because of her wispy eyelashes, small nose and lips. She reminds me of the cutest and smallest cat, but those are always the feistiest, something she most definitely is.

"I just told you, dummy. I need to find something that you're supposed to have."

I guess her reappearance has made me deaf or a little slow. "Okay, tell me what you're looking for and I'll see if I can help you out. Sometimes our information on the website isn't always accurate."

"I see, well, I'm pretty sure this source is pretty reliable. Someone saw it here when they were here. But here's the photo."

Willa reaches down into a large bag strapped to her shoulder and pulls out a printout of an emerald necklace attached to a golden chain with thorns around the outside of the necklace itself.

"I actually just acquired this piece from someone who couldn't pay a debt. What do you want it for? Not that you can't have it," I nervously correct, and there her laugh goes again. She was always a bit giggly.

"I am... someone who finds things for other people. I acquire really nice pieces for clients, or just anything that's

been lost. I've always been really good—“

“At finding things. Yes, I remember. Remember when I lost my backpack and I knew for sure it was gone? My dad was going to slaughter me if I didn't bring it home. You hadn't even been at school for a few days, and yet, you knew exactly where to find it. Intuition?”

“Definitely intuition. Though these days, I'd definitely say I'm more... led by the spirit.”

Willa laughs so hard, she bends over and slaps her hand against her knee. There's nothing funny about being led by spirit, but that's because I know what spirit really means. She clearly has no idea, but I'll let her live in her delusion if it makes her feel better.

“Oh, okay... well, here it is. Let me show you, it's over here.”

I lead us over to one of the show counters and reach behind it to pull the glass back. I've retrieved the necklace and show it to her. She nods her head as her eyes scan it, inspecting it.

“Would you be willing to sell it?”

“Absolutely, for the right price of course.”

“Ahh... a true businessman, I see. Let me reach out to my client, and I'm sure I'll have a price for you in the next couple of days.”

“So that means you plan to stick around?” There's hope in my heart. I'd love to reconnect with her, and this time, we won't go years without talking to one another. To this day, I've

never had a friendship like I've had with Willa. I think she might be the one person on the planet, at least then, who really understood me and knew who I was.

I've missed having her in my life, someone who genuinely never wanted anything from me, and I hope she'll stay a little while this time.

"Ehh... just long enough to purchase the necklace, and then back home to Tennessee it is for me!"

"Tennessee? You'll have to tell me about how you landed there after leaving here. Where are you staying? The Dales' boarding house?"

"You know it! It's the one and only place in town to stay apparently. It doesn't seem that much has changed even in my 16-year absence."

"Oh, don't be silly. We've got a Walmart now, 2 McDonald's. We are on the come up!"

When she laughs again, she tosses her head back, and it's so nice to see her laughing, considering the last time I saw her she wasn't. The last time I saw her, there had been a major change in her. I have no idea why her eye color changed. I thought it might have been because she underwent a very traumatic experience. That's at least what Google suggested when I went looking for answers years ago.

It never bothered me.

I always thought it was pretty cool. It gives her face character, and she's still the coolest girl I know.

“Yes, on the come up. I look forward to experiencing the “come up” while I’m here.”

“Good. Now, cancel your stay at the Dales. There’s no way you’re staying anywhere other than with me.”

“With you? Do you still live—“

“I do still live in the house, and you grew up there. You should be comfortable.”

I see a distant look on her face, and I’m not sure what it means, but I’ll be crushed if she says no. Willa shifts a bit, from left to right, and then she nods her head.

“Okay, but I want to sleep downstairs. That was always my favorite bedroom.”

“It’s a deal. Let me finish up here, and then we’ll head home. I’ll apologize to the Dales for keeping you, but you’re mine.”

“I know. You’ve always had a problem with sharing me, and here we are adults, and you’re still suffering from keeping your territory separate. Sheesh.”

She nudges me against the shoulder, and I laugh, but she’s right. She’s always been the only thing that’s belonged to me, or was mine, and I hold that to a special standard. She’s always been the only friend I’ve ever had, and I don’t see that ever changing... especially not now.

I just need to find a reason to keep her in town. If that’s even possible.

Chapter 3



Willa

I'd hoped I'd see Emre when I came back home... if that's what I can even call it, but I'd also hoped that he might have moved on with his life. I wasn't quite sure what I'd find, but now that I'm here, and I see the town is mostly the same, it's kind of funny to think about how he hasn't gone anywhere.

A small change is still a change, and he hasn't changed much. Except for the fact that he wanted to be a firefighter when he grew up. We always talked about escaping to the city to make tons of money, though I was always unclear about what I would do.

Even as a child, I was good at finding things. A detective position could have been in my future, maybe if I had had another life.

Emre's invitation to stay with him has come as a surprise, but I'm so happy about it. I can't wait for us to spend time together. It's been forever since I've had an opportunity to just be with friends. I don't trust people easily because of all the things I've been through in foster care. I don't let my guard down so easily, even if I want to.

But with Emre, it's just like riding a bike. I have no reason to fear being around him because he's always been solid and genuine. Not to mention the assuredness I feel that Dora and Amelia would tell me if there was something off about him. But he's my oldest and only friend in the world; I know he's a good guy.

On the way to his house, I reach out to my client to tell him that I've found the necklace he's searching for and wait for

him to reach out to me to let me know the price he's willing to pay for it.

It's oddly satisfying to be riding in this truck with my best friend. His large F-150 adorned in camouflage reminds me of his favorite colors, and that hasn't changed either. It seems other than growing and becoming much taller, he genuinely is the same.

When we arrive at his home, my breath catches in my throat. There are a lot of feelings swirling around me at this time, as I'm reminded of the last time I was here. And, of course, of all of the good memories I have with Emre here. He's always been good and kind to me, and this house was always a fun place to be.

Emre places his hand on my thigh and gives it a light squeeze. I look into his eyes, and he stares back into mine. "You okay?"

I nod, not wanting to break down and tell him what I'm feeling. I don't mind sharing my feelings with him, but it's my first day in town. The last thing he wants to hear about is how I'm feeling about the heartbreak I'm experiencing now.

"Okay, good. I'll get your bag and we can go inside. I'll let you get settled."

"Thanks again, Re-Re. I'm so glad I ran into you." I lean over and give him a hug. I genuinely mean every word I've said, especially because the Dales, while they are business owners, were not exactly kind to me or my family when I was a child. Perhaps because of the rumored witchcraft. I'll never

know, but I was going to stay there because if not, there wouldn't have been another place available to me.

“Still calling me Re-Re, huh? Do you remember in fourth grade, on the first day? That kid... what was his name? The one with the missing braces in the front but had them on his back teeth?”

Remembering a better time, my thoughts are immediately jolted back to Emre's question, and the boy in question comes to mind.

“Mitchell Blanket? What about him!”

“He called me retarded because of you. He thought that was what Re-Re stood for. You don't remember?”

I did remember, and the laughter that fills my throat, I can't hide, even though I've tried hiding it by covering my mouth.

“Ahh... there it is. That smile I love so much! It's totally fine if you laugh at the expense of my pain... I guess.”

Emre rolls his eyes and then exits the truck. I push open my door and toss my bag over my lap so that I can hand it to him, but he doesn't show up to receive my bag.

“Oh, so now that I've laughed, you don't want to carry my bag? That's not very gentlemanly of you!”

Emre turns around and has a smirk on his face that rivals the laughter that just seeped out of me.

“I'm sorry, I was unaware that I was a gentleman.”

“You're right. A gentleman wouldn't go back on his word.”

He rolls his eyes again and comes over and grabs my bag from me, and then tugs on my arm so hard to get out of his truck, I almost slide out and into his arms.

“Be careful!”

“Oh, Willa’s so delicate,” he mocks as he steadies me and helps me to the door. Yep, this is the boy I remember. A bit clumsy, rough, and always funny. It’s why we get along so well.

Coming into the house, I instantly feel a presence here that I know Emre is unaware of, but there’s something or someone here. We walk the hall to the bedroom downstairs, and the room smells so nice. There’s a strong sense of sage and nutmeg. Very sweet and welcoming.

“Have you been baking cookies or something?”

“Of course not. I hardly even cook. Every now and then, but I guess since you’re here, I’ll have to change that. You still like pizza?”


“Only if it’s homemade. Duh!”

“Spoiled,” he retorts and places my bag in front of the bed.

“Am not.”

“Yeah, okay brat. Listen, I’m going to get things ready for tomorrow. There’s leftover spaghetti in the fridge. If you need anything, I’m going to be in the other bedroom down the hall. We’ll both stay on the first floor.”

“Like always,” I remind him, and throw my arms around him. For now, it’s nice to be in a place that does somewhat feel like home. Even with a presence hanging around...



Last night, I’ve gotten more rest than I’ve had in a long time. It’s been a while since I’ve felt this comfortable sleeping anywhere else that wasn’t in my own bed, but of course, it does. This place is familiar to me.

The first thing on my mind the next morning is finding the amulet, and now, with Emre’s help, I’m hoping he might know where it is, or have someone who does know.

I open my door, and I’m greeted with the scent of pancakes, bacon, and eggs. My stomach rumbles with eagerness to eat. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. I was way too beat when I came in the house to get back up and make myself some spaghetti, so seeing that there’s breakfast, I’m elated.

I’ve never been much of a morning person, so I have to drag myself into the dining room, even with the wonderful scent permeating the house.

“Good morning, sleepy head.”

Emre, on the other hand, is full of joy and elation, the same way he was when we were children. I’ve always been the one after a sleepover who could really use a shot of adrenaline.

“Morning, where are the plates?” I look around him and rub my belly, hoping to find a plate fast so I can eat.

“Yours is already on the table, and there’s juice on the table.”

“Ap—“

“Yes, apple juice. I still remember,” he mentions, and I wrap my arms around him from behind him. It’s very hard to wrap my arms around his large frame, but he accommodates me by moving a bit to wrap his arm around me as well.

Emre releases me, and I almost run to the breakfast table. It’s been so long since I’ve had a meal that wasn’t cooked by myself or one that didn’t have to be microwaved. I’m happy.

After shoving a few fork fulls of eggs in my mouth and Emre joins me, I place my fork down and jump straight into business.

“Since I’m here, I’d like to see if you can help me get my hands on something. I wasn’t super hopeful before, but now with my best friend in antique dealing, it seems like it might be fate.”

I swipe at my lips with a napkin and remove the falling food from my face and then take a deep sip of my juice before continuing. “I’m looking for a family heirloom that belonged to my family before the... well, you know. It’s white and oval-shaped in a gold setting. I think it might actually be opal. Since it was pretty much lost here, I was hoping maybe we could find it here.”

Emre looks up at me, and he nods his head, food falling from his mouth. He's right; he's no gentleman.

"I'd love to help. Let me see what I can find out. If I can find out anything."

My eyes shift behind him for a second, and this is the first I've seen of the presence I felt when arriving yesterday. At least, I think I saw a spirit moving from behind Emre. Sometimes I think my mind is playing tricks on me.

Until the picture of his mother in the hallway falls down, and the glass over the frame slightly breaks.

"Damn it!" Frustration is oozing from Emre, and I can feel it from here. When he jumps up, I rush over to help him. I lean over him and pick up several pieces of shattered glass and place them in my hand.

"Be careful. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Ahh... still think I'm fragile, huh? I'm fine."

My eyes wander down to the photo in Emre's hands. His face holds a sadness that I'm not used to. I'm extremely confused by it.

"Re-Re, is everything okay?"

I put my hand on his back and stroke it lightly down the center. He cranes his head to look at me, and there are tears in his eyes. For a moment, Emre clears his throat and nods his head, but when he places his hand over his face, I know there's more that he hasn't said.

“Mom passed away. It was pretty gruesome. Someone broke into the house, and when we found her, she had her throat slit. Who would do something like that? She was so... so...’

“Perfect.” He nods in agreement, and I’m instantly flooded with so many memories of his mother. Emre’s mom is the only other mother I know to have been almost as perfect as my own. Kind. Compassionate. Gentle. Always present. I know that loss... it’s one that never truly heals.

Emre picks up the photo and places it back on the table in the hallway and I pick up the rest of the glass and carry it into the kitchen and then grab a broom for a more efficient clean up. The last thing we need is for someone to get hurt. It would, of course, be me because I’m very clumsy.

I guess I’m potentially as fragile as Emre has suggested.

Once I’ve returned with the broom and dustpan, Emre holds the dustpan upright as I sweep, and I’m reminded of a time when we broke a vase just down the hallway.

“Emre, don’t throw the ball at me. I can’t catch it and you know it.”

“Yep, and the reason you can’t is because you won’t even try. Trust me...”

Those words undid me. Trust me. And like an idiot, he threw the ball at my face instead of toward my hands, believing my hand-eye coordination was going to kick in. The ball bounced off of my face, leaving me red all over with indents printed on

my face, and hit the vase. Not just a vase. An urn with his grandmother's ashes in it.

The first thing Emre did was check to see that I was okay.

The next thing we both did was panic.

Emre got the grand idea to try scooping up his grandmother's ashes in his hands. That did not work. We ended up getting them all over the place. Then, I tried to clean up the glass and see if I could put it back together with glue. I was unsuccessful in recovering all the pieces.

When Nora caught us, she did the best thing a mother can do.

Check to make sure we were okay.

And then, she helped us cover up the incident by blaming herself. We were sent to play outside after that, but I heard the arguing from inside when Luther came home and discovered what had happened. It was his mother's ashes that were splayed across the floor; I suppose he had the right to be upset.

“She was perfect. I really miss her... every day. Thirteen years isn't nearly enough time to move forward. I don't know how you've done it. I'm in awe of you, Willa.”

“Ahh... I wouldn't have too much admiration for me. I genuinely have my days where I struggle, and sometimes the days are so long, I wish I would have died right along with them. I was orphaned that day. At least you still had a father. It's no consolation, of course.”

“Definitely not. Luther is hardly a father. He’s an unemployed drunkard who takes too much pride in spending my money. He went crazy after Mom’s murder. He lost himself in it.”

With the pieces swept up, Emre leaves me in the hallway, and for just a second, I feel a cold chill, and I see the presence, briefly, again.

“I just wish I had some closure, you know? For the both of us.”

His eyes are heavy, and I can feel his soul is torn. I wish there was more that I could do to make him feel better. More than just be here for him. I wrap my arms around him once more, hoping that my embrace, for a moment, will still his pain, when Dora starts to chime in.

His mother can't rest...

Shut up, Dora.

He's asking for closure. You can help him get it...

Amelia, you're usually on my side. What the hell?

Not to be difficult, but she's right. We can feel what you're feeling because of what he's feeling. His mother's soul can't rest because he does not rest.

This is emotionally too big for me, ladies. I don't think I'm supposed to be dipping into Emre's business.

Yet, you want him to help you with this...

Dora always the attitudinal one, is right. I'm asking him for help, help that he doesn't have to give. It's not really his job to "find" things, but it is my job to do so. I could figure this out for him, and if it will relieve him of this pain, him and his mother, I suppose I should try.

But not today. I need to get myself together first. Being here has opened up more wounds for me than I ever thought possible.

Emre pulls away from me, and he places two of his hands in my hair, finger combing my curly waves from my face.

"Will you meet me at the shop in a few hours? I'd love your opinion on how to price a few things, since you've gotten into the "hide and go seek" game of antiquities. Plus, I am really behind on things at the shop these days. It would be welcomed help for sure."

"Ooh... antiquities! Such a big word for you."

I slap him on the shoulder and head back into the dining room to clean up my plate and glass from breakfast.

"I'd be happy to come and help you however I can. Whatever you need. It's the least I can do since I am staying with you while I am in town. It'll take me a few hours to get ready anyway—"

"I know. You're still probably always late everywhere. Take your time; I'm not going anywhere, except to the store, of course."

Emre smiles a genuine smile. I can see every tooth in his wide mouth and I love seeing him smile like this. This is the side of him that I fondly remember, and I appreciate his ability to be vulnerable with me. It's nice that after all these years, we're still close, just as close as we always were.

Once I've cleaned up my plate and glass, I head to my room to prepare for a shower, and then start thinking of a plan to help Nora and help Emre accept whatever truth I unearth.

Chapter 4



Emre

My morning has been a little more... vocally tense than I'm used to. It's been years since I've had a breakdown, even a small one. And to think Willa would be the person I'd have one around or with is shocking.

But I'm so glad to have her back in my life... I hope to never lose her again.

Hoping to keep my secret of being a shifter a little longer from her, I get into my truck and drive to the edge of the hills, just across from where my store is. When I'm sure no one is looking, I take a step back outside and go deeper into the hills where I know I won't be seen.

Through the cover of thick green shrubbery and trees, my shift begins, revealing my opal pelt. My paws touch the earth, and I feel grounded. When the wind blows around me, as uncomfortable as it is because of the spirit realm surrounding me, I find a pinch of comfort in the familiar, no matter how much I do or do not trust them.

My paws pound against the ground as I run toward the pack lands that rest comfortably at the top of the mountain. I can be myself there, amongst others who are family. Even around my father, though I abhor him.

The closer I get to our land, I begin to hear the thoughts of the pack, and they are distressed.

I hope Emre's store is a means to get us out of here.

If he's alpha, why is there still a counsel?

Maybe it's time to move on.

It was a family decision to have him “supported” as alpha by forming the counsel of Liam, Ben, and my father. I got named alpha simply to save face. Their uncertainty isn't unwarranted, though it is difficult to hear and process. I almost hate myself for the negligence they've suffered and the terrors they've had to see my father through.

When I reach the pack lands, I'm greeted, though it isn't welcoming. It feels forced, fearful, distant. I'm hoping one day I'll be able to rectify what's taken place between the pack and my family and get down to the bottom of why we haven't been able to unite completely.

An alpha separated from his pack is nothing more than a titled omega.

The home my father, uncle, and cousin share reeks of beer, drugs, and desperation. I'm unnerved by what has become of each of them. Neither of them is worthy of the title shifter, especially not of the Divine Pack.

Our pack has been labeled the first pack, the first pack of wolf shifters to have ever walked earth. Whether or not it's true, I cannot say simply because I wasn't alive, but it has been rumored, and up until fairly recently, we were extremely respected until my father ran the pack into the ground with his “group decisions” that seemed to only satisfy him and his needs. Who the pack traded with, who the pack associated with, where the pack hunted, even on our own land. He burned

bridges our fore-bearers spent decades developing. He acted erratically and crazed most of the time.

Plus, my mother's mysterious death.

Things haven't been peaceful or at rest since then. I enter the home the three stooges share, and my father is sitting in his rocking chair, one eye open, and the other closed. This is the way he's slept my entire life. I'm not sure he ever rests completely. It's possibly the demons he's carrying around with him, calling them spirits.

"Liam, Chess, you called me here?" I look around for a place to sit, and even as a shifter, who turns into a large wolf, there's no way I'd take a seat in this much squaller. I might sit down and catch rabies. There's no telling what the three of them have been doing in here, or haven't, considering the place looks like it hasn't been cleaned in ages.

"Your father has something to say. We're just here to have 'is back," Ben speaks, and I almost snarl in his direction. Even with "having his back," I'm my own man, and whatever support he needs, coming from the three of them, it doesn't matter what they have to say to me.

I spin around back to my father who lets his recliner down and sits straight up. He wipes drool from his mouth, which he completely misses with the back of his hand, and he releases a grunt as if he's tired from doing something laborious, which I know he has not.

"I think it's time you move back to the pack lands, son. The Divine have never needed you more."

My father slaps his hand across his knee as though he's said something absolute. It sounds like a request, but I know it's a subliminal demand.

“They need me? The pack that's in disarray that I've tried to organize in your stepping down needs me? The pack who questions and doubts me? The best thing I can do for the pack is continue to make money through my business to pour into the pack lands. Trading used to be a big thing for us until you outlawed it.”

I fold my arms and lean against the wall. It seems to be the cleanest thing in the house. At least it seems to be, but it's a bit gloomy in here. There's no telling what a light shining around this place would say about the lack of cleanliness in here.

“I banned trade with other packs and the rest of the communities because of The Great Massacre. I'll do anything to protect us, even if it means money is a little slow.” My father grits his teeth in my direction, and my arms unfold, my fists ball up at my sides.

“Anything except for what you should be doing, and protect us from what? What are you so afraid of?”

“Ain't nobody scared of nothin'. You're the one who's bringing a snake into our camp,” Liam remarks and starts walking toward me. I've been waiting my entire life for a shot to show my uncle he isn't as tough as he thinks he is. I guarantee that what I've got waiting for him is much worse than he believes. I'm no longer a little boy trying to find myself in the pack.

I know who I am with and without the pack. And a snake? They're the slimiest guys in the town. But I've brought a snake to the pack?

“What snake? I do business with stand-up people. I'm not doing business with anyone who would bring the pack harm, or who even knows about the pack.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. What's Willa doing back in town?”

The need to protect Willa shoots through me. I don't know why he's asking about her, but her name on his tongue sounds like poison.

“What about her being in town, Dad? If you recall, she was my best friend growing up—“

“And now, she's a grown woman who's been gone since the tragedy of her parents. Why is she returning now?”

My face twists in suspicion. I know why she's returned, but what concern is it of my father's?

“I'm not sure, but I'm happy to see her. I think you need to focus on how you can be a more productive member of the pack. The three of you should.”

“And a part of us being productive is being well-informed. The spirits have been talking, and I know she's looking for something. An amulet of sorts?”

“What about it?”

“She can do us harm with that amulet. You should learn more about the histories and listen to the spirit guides. Then

you'd know the damage your 'friendship' could cause," Liam advises, and it takes everything in me not to take a bite out of his throat.

Willa would never do anything to harm me, and if the spirit guides know so much, they could have warned us about what was going to happen to Mom. I have no faith in them because they abandoned us a long time ago, whether my family wants to realize it or not.

Willa is a beautiful soul inside and out. I can't believe someone so beautiful would bring harm to my family. She doesn't even know we're wolf shifters. Why would an amulet cause us harm?

"I can see you're questioning what your uncle just told you, son, but hear me out. The time is a bit suspicious. She shows back up in town, wanting to find an amulet. She comes to you to find it?"

"I own an antique store. Why wouldn't she come to me to find it?"

"You won't be satisfied until The Divine are no more. You're a moron and undeserving of the title alpha. That amulet is what caused a war all those years ago."

A growl escapes me, and I cannot control my anger, but there's a reason they feel the need to warn me. I'm just not sure why that is. I'm not sure I quite understand why any of them are doing this.

"I'm leaving."

I won't listen to another word of this, and I won't let them down talk Willa. When I leave, they don't stop me, and as I'm heading back into town, the pack's thoughts quiet, and I can hear my own thoughts.

Willa wouldn't lie to me? Would she? She wouldn't deceive me.... or would she?



The first couple of hours of work pass by quickly, but my racing thoughts do not stop. I need to speak with Willa and find out exactly why she feels the need to get this amulet back. What is so special about it and what can it really do?

I've already sent out my feelers to everyone I know to find where it could be. Willa arrives at the store with a smile on her face, and I'm wondering if her bright and appealing smile means she's using me to get what she wants. Even though we were children, she knew her smile could melt me to my knees. I would do anything for her.

And now that she's back in my life, there's nothing I wouldn't do for her. But perhaps that's the problem.

"Re-re, I'm ready to do some pricing. Do you have a pricing gun, or are we going old school? Doing tags?"

She leans to the side of one of the glass cases, and I don't know what to believe. Her light-hearted demeanor confuses me, and the only thing I can do is ask. She's never really been

much of a liar, but that doesn't mean she didn't learn the skill over the years. Willa has lived an entire life that I wasn't a part of. Perhaps our childhood friendship means nothing to her, and she could hurt me, hurt my family. Maybe she knows more than she's willing to let on.

“We're doing this old school, but before we do, I need to ask you a question. And I hope you'll be honest with me.”

The smile she had just moments ago fades away and she stands up straight. Her attention is on me. “I wouldn't lie. You can ask me anything, Emre. Always.”

My heart and instincts say she wouldn't lie, but I've been deceived before.

“This amulet you're looking for... why are you looking for it?”

I observe her, watching her body language. I'm waiting to see if she gives away a separate truth from the one that I've heard from my family.

“It belongs to my family, and I need it back.”

“Need it back, why?”

Willa's head tilts to the side as if she's trying to read me, to assess me, and she comes closer to me. The distance from the showcase she's standing near and the counter I'm standing behind closes.

“Emre, you know I have nothing left of my family. This is the only thing I have left of them, and I'd very much like it

back. I'm sure you can't imagine something like that, but this is for me. Something I need for me."

Willa pats her chest, just over her heart, when she says "for me," and I feel like an idiot for even asking.

"You know, if it's a problem for you to help me, don't worry about it. I'm waiting on the buyer for the item that you have to come back with an offer, and then I'll be out—"

"Don't say that. I'm sorry for even bringing it up," I say, hoping to quickly dismiss it. I'm still not completely certain where things are going with this amulet. Still seeing her get visibly upset, the flush in her cheeks, the sternness of her face, I feel worse for even bringing it up. I'm not completely sure I can trust her, or anyone for that matter.

She's trustworthy, my spirit guides tell me, but I don't know if I can trust them either. I stopped trusting them years ago.

There's an uncomfortable silence between us, and her next words cut me even deeper. "Let's just figure out how to price these items. I'm ready for the day to be over."

She's always had a sharp tongue, and I can see now that everything I said either helps to reveal the truth or has stirred up an anger in her that was brought on by something I didn't need to say to begin with.

Shit...

Chapter 5



Willa

I do what I've promised. I advise Emre on how to price his items, but I'm furious at his line of questioning as though I'm a criminal. Like I've purposely done something to lead him astray or lie about my true intentions in coming into town. I wouldn't have asked for his help if I thought he couldn't help or if my inquiry would hurt him.

Don't be mean. He's had a hard time today, Amelia advocates for Emre. While I hear and respect her, she isn't the one who had to be questioned as though her intentions were false.

There's something stirring inside of him. He's quarreling with his family, Dora chimes in, and I'm shocked to hear her favorable words. She's usually no one's advocate.

Try talking to him. You've been crying over missing him for years. You're friends. You can talk to him.

I wish I could shut them out today, and if I tried hard enough, I suppose I could, but maybe they're right, and I should simply just ask.

After making out a price sheet for the items in the second showcase, I turn around to see Emre staring at me. His face holds a look of inquisitiveness.

"Everything okay?" I ask. It's the first real thing I've said to him all day outside of pricing items.

"Yep."

"Short, I see. Which lets me know everything isn't okay. Just tell me what's bothering you so we can move on, Re-Re. I

don't feel like dragging it out of you.”

He sighs heavily and comes from around the counter to face me. The smell of pine is strong on him. I wonder if he's been out in the hills.

“I'll just come out and ask. I think you're deceiving me into looking for the amulet. I don't know why, but I think there's more to the story than you're telling me.”

“Emre, I've never lied to you, not once. Not ever. What I've said is the truth. Even when I should have lied to you in the past, I didn't.”

“What does that mean? When should you have ever lied to me?”

I scoff, remembering a very special time that a lie would have saved us both from getting our asses kicked.

“I've got two words for you. Samantha Mason.”

He huffs and turns his back to me. “Oh no, you don't get to get off that easy, Emre. You told me you had a crush on her, and do you remember what I said to you?”

“Yeah, you told me not to tell her.”

“Right, and do you remember why I told you not to tell her?”

Silence.

“DO you remember why I told you not to tell her?” I repeat myself, and he nods his head.

“Yeah, because Beux was going to kick my ass.”

“Right! And when you asked if I thought you could beat him, knowing you couldn’t, I said no, that he would pummel you. That fourth grade crush and confidence of yours got our asses kicked. Maybe if I would have said yes, that would have been the ego boost you needed to shut the hell up instead of telling him you’d take his girl in front of a class full of people.”

“I still get teased about that!” he laughs, and the tension in the store suddenly begins to break.

“Serves you right, Emre. Please understand that I would not lie to you then, and I wouldn’t lie to you now. My family got hemmed up in something that had absolutely nothing to do with them. I just want the last remaining piece of them, Emre. That’s it.”

I place my hands on his shoulders, and he places his hands around my waist. His touch brings me comfort and relief, and the frustration I felt before fades away.

“Okay... I’m sorry for questioning you. Listen, how about we close up for the day and go home and watch a movie like we used to when we were little?”

“Absolutely! Our movie nights were epic!”

“Exactly. We can stop at the grocery store and get a few items.”

Emre pulls me close as he finishes his statement. I can feel his breath kissing my face, and it smells like mint. I wonder if he’d been chewing gum before this.

“L-let’s do that,” I stutter, unsure of my own voice, and take a few steps backwards. I think being this close to him is doing something to me.

“Okay, I’ll start wrapping up. Start the truck?”

“Mmm hmm...” Emre reaches into his pocket and hands me the keys, and I can’t hightail it out of the store fast enough.



We chose *Casper*. It was a movie we always loved to watch, and Kat and Casper are the cutest friendship on the planet. We were around their age when we became friends, but nothing romantic ever happened between us. Not that I thought it would, but there were plenty of other people who got it mistaken many times. We’re just... close, not unlike the loving friendship between Kat and Casper.

When the movie ends, I begin picking up our bowl of popcorn to take to the kitchen, and Emre places his hand on my wrist. I look down at him, and he smiles. I can’t help but to return it when I see his. He has a beguiling smile.

“I just want to apologize again. I just have to be careful with people being around the things I sell and acquire. I know that I hurt your feelings. That much I can tell, but I truly am sorry.”

“It’s okay, Re-Re. I get it. I’m sorry that whatever has happened to you in life has left you unable to trust others, even me.”

“I do trust you. That’s just it. I let my own insecurities bother me. I’m sorry. From now on, no more questions, okay?”

I nod my head, and though there won’t be any more questions from him, I have a few. At the very top of that line of questioning is the wonderment of knowing that he has a spirit wandering his house.

Who is the person wandering his house? I question Amelia and Dora, and they both respond the same.

Not yet...

I’ve learned more than once, the hard way, that when I try to rush them, the only person or people who end up hurt are the other people on the end of that question. Instead of asking for more information, I politely excuse myself and go into the kitchen to discard the popcorn.

But, sooner rather than later, I’ll need some answers. I don’t want Emre in danger because of the spirit taking space in his home, especially if I can help release it before it makes a grand and harmful appearance...

Chapter 6



Emre

The next morning, things between Willa and I are settled, and we're back to our normal selves. I'm laughing and joking, yet I can't shake the vision I've been having daily for a year or so. There's something in this house, a spirit of sorts. I see it so often, but so briefly, I'm not sure if I'm losing my mind or not. There are cold spots in the house. I can't miss them. I can't mistake them.

I'm walking down the hallway at the same time as Willa is opening her door. Her hair is tossed around her head, wild like it always is, but I love it. It's chaotic.

“Good afternoon, Sleeping Chaos.”

“Chaos? I'll have you know I'm not being chaotic at all.”

Willa rubs the sleep out of her eyes, and I'm reminded of our many childhood sleepovers. She's adorable.

“Sure you're not. Listen... have you noticed cold spots in the house? It's been a little chillier recently,” I come right out and ask. I don't know how else to say it, except for to just say it.

“Cold spots, yeah I have, but it's fall, so it's to be expected in this old house.” She shrugs her shoulders as though there's nothing else to it, and I decide to leave it alone for now. I have more pressing questions to ask anyway.

“Just let me know if you need another blanket at night or something to keep you warm. Speaking of fall, I was wondering if you'd like to go to the fall festival with me. It's been years since I've been to one, but I figure with you back, we should go... together.”

There's a nervousness in my chest that I can't explain. I'm just asking her to attend with me like we did when we were younger, but I can't help but worry about her possible rejection.

"Ahh, the fall festival. Such fond memories... remember that year I almost drowned bobbing for apples?"

She laughs, but I don't. That was not a good time for me. I remember the panic I felt then, but I don't want to bring it up. It will dampen the mood.

"I do remember..."

My face tightens at the memory, and it's almost as if she can see what I'm experiencing in my head when she completely stops laughing and clears her throat.

"Anyway, I'd love to go. But I won't be dressing up. I know how everyone loves costumes for that thing."

"You might not want to, but you don't need any help in the fashion department. Wear whatever you want. You'll still look good."

Willa's eyes widen, and her cheeks darken. "Well, yeah, I know, b-but you could use a haircut."

There seems to be a bit of deflection in her voice, but it doesn't bother me.

"You want to give me one? I've been pretty much cutting it myself."

“Are you kidding me? After the one I gave you in first grade? I don’t know if I should.”

“I loved it!”

“Yeah, but your mother did not,” she mentions, and I smile, thinking back to how Mom reacted. She yelled, laughed, and then let me go outside and play. Mom was kind of cool like that. “Nonetheless, if you’re okay with looking a little crazy, I’d be happy to do it!”

“Good, I’ll get my scissors.”

I almost race to my room to remove the scissors from my desk drawer. I’ve never been more excited to get a haircut. I don’t care if she ruins every hair on my head. I’d let her.

When I return with the scissors Willa is sitting down on the couch with a comb and a cup of water.

“What are you gonna do with that? Drown me?”

“Of course not, Re-Re. I’m gonna dip the comb in it and comb out your hair. It’s much fuller than it was when we were kids, but I think that might make it a bit easier. It’s also a little whiter than I remember.”

If she only knew the reason for my hair being white. I don’t know how she’d react.

“Am I supposed to sit between your legs? Should I get a chair?”

“Why would you do that, Emre? That’s silly. Sit down.”

I nod my head and take a seat in between her legs. Her scent is intoxicating, and I don't think I've ever noticed it before, but it's taking a toll on me.

When I'm comfortable, Willa proceeds to give me my haircut, starting with the wet comb and detangling my matted tresses. I realize I'm relaxing more than I probably have in a while. Her fingers running through my hair and using the comb gently, scissoring against my ends ever so slightly has put me in a trance, a state of calmness.

I hear spirits whispering, though I can't make out exactly what they're saying. I'm remembering why now I don't let my guard down, so that I don't have to hear them, hear them chattering about.

“I was thinking, since you have a much better fashion sense than I do, would you like to go shopping with me? You can help me pick out something for the festival that won't completely embarrass you for being with me.”

A few seconds go by before she responds, and when she does, a chuckle escapes her lips.

“Please. Embarrassed by you? Emre, I could never be embarrassed by you. You're my best friend, even after all these years. You've welcomed me into your home, and I feel the most comfortable I've been in years when I'm with you.”

My heart starts to race. There's a shift happening between us, though I don't know what it means, and I'm not sure I want to think too much about it. Not for the sake of what it would truly mean or could mean for our friendship.

“Well, in that case when you finish with my hair, we can go. I wanna look at a couple of trinkets since I have a booth this year. I think it’s only right I have some real antiques and some fake, knock-off stuff for the festival. You know? A good mix to show good antiquesmanship and fun budget friendly stuff too.”

“Is that a thing?” She asks as she covers her mouth to keep another laugh from escaping. I twist my head to look over my shoulder and I shrug upward. Willa wraps her arms around my neck and gives me a little squeeze. I like her embrace.

“Well, let’s hurry and finish this cut then. We’ve got places to be and trinkets to see!” Her excitement thrills me, and I’m happy that she feels this way, especially since it’s nothing that’s super exciting.

Yet, I’m happy to have her company, and for the first time in a long time, I’m looking forward to the festival simply because she’s here.

Chapter 7



Willa

“If you hold it far enough away, it looks real, I think.”

Emre and I have spent hours in the neighboring towns picking up things that look like they belong at a fall festival. Some are spooky themed, and others are extremely pumpkin themed. There are trinkets that remind me of relics and some that seem like look alikes from other expensive pieces throughout history.

We’ve honestly had a good time, and now that Emre’s hair is cut, I can genuinely see him for the man he’s become.

He’s always been a bit burly, even as a child he had a stocky frame. His once blonde hair has now gone partially white, as white as my eye, but he’s gorgeous. Wait, I don’t know if I can say gorgeous about a man, but it seems like the right word to use in this scenario.

“I like it. Add it to the list. Let’s try to keep things separate so we don’t have to go back through the whole ‘this is real, this is fake’ bit. No mixing them up, Kitty Cat.”

I can’t help but giggle at the nickname he’s using. It’s been quite a while since I’ve heard anyone use it, but it’s nice to hear that someone hasn’t forgotten who I really am deep down inside.

As I separate the six bags; right hand for real, left hand for fake, I feel my phone vibrating in the pocket of my leather jacket. I have just enough free fingers to answer the call while Emre is haggling with one of the vendors he’s purchasing from.

I remove my phone from my jacket and answer without looking at the caller ID. The bags are weighing me down so much that I won't be able to keep this call for long.

“This is Willa...”

“Hey, Willa. I got your message. I knew hiring you to find our missing heirloom was the right thing. Since it is priceless to my family, I'll pay \$75,000 for it. \$25,000 for you, and \$50,000 for the current owner, with the paperwork of course, to authenticate it as well.”

My lips twist into a smile and suddenly my arms go numb. I can't feel the pain from the heaviness of the bags. All I can think about is the major cash flow I'm about to be in. As a foster kid, I could have never dreamed of having that much money, and now to know it was only an agreement away? I could hardly breathe.

“Wow, that's a very generous offer. I am certain that will not be turned down but let me just clear it first, and then I'll give you a callback, okay?”

“Absolutely, take your time. Just try to not let the person sell it to someone else.”

“With such a big offer, I don't see that happening. Give me a few days, and I'll get back with you.”

The call ends, and my heart is palpitating for more reasons than I'd like to admit. If Emre takes the offer, it'll mean plenty of money for the both of us, but also that technically, my

business in town will have been concluded. Upon first arriving in town, there was a bittersweet taste in my mouth.

I felt like a newbie, but also, it was still a very familiar place to me because not many things have changed. Not to mention Emre still being around and welcoming me with open arms. Talk about satisfying. But with no news on the amulet, I should probably head home and dig deeper into looking elsewhere.

I'll miss Emre, of course, but now we're grown; we can still keep in touch, and this place really does bring up weird feelings for me.

I'm just good at hiding it.

Emre finishes haggling with Ms. Gayle, the owner of *Everything Wicked* and returns to my side with several more bags.

"You know you're carrying those on your own, right?"

"I'll carry these too. I just needed you to hold them for me for a second. Now, tell me which side is which," he requests, and there's a glint of happiness in his eyes. I hadn't noticed it before. Perhaps it wasn't present, considering he seemed naturally mopey before, but now, I can't miss the happy sparkle in his eyes.

I hand over the bags one side at a time and help Emre keep each side straight as we head back to the truck.

"What a good haul today! The town is gonna be blown away with my booth," Emre boasts, and I'm happy that he's so

enthusiastic, especially since it used to be like pulling teeth to get him to go to one of these things when we were growing up.

“Absolutely,” I agree and pull the passenger side of the truck door open. “And it’s about to get a lot better.”

I nod with vigor. I can’t wait to tell him the good news.

“Why’s that?” Emre follows suit and gets in on the driver’s side of his truck and cranks the engine.

“I just got a call from the buyer. He’s willing to pay you \$50,000 and me \$25,000 for finding it. I can’t imagine it’s an offer you’d likely get from anyone else, but it holds a lot of merit with him. He’s looking forward to getting it back.”

“That is quite a bit of money. I could really use it. Does this guy seem legit? Do you think he’ll sell it for more if we take the offer?”

“Absolutely not. He’s been looking for it for a while. I think it’s safe in his hands.”

I believe this to be true. I have no reason to believe otherwise.

“Great, tell him I’ll take the offer. Thanks, Kitty Cat, for everything you’ve done. I’ll have to take you on a vacation for your good deed.”

“I’m glad I could help you out. We should definitely take that vacation soon when the weather warms back up. I’ll be back home by then, but now that we’ve reconnected, there’s no reason we can’t still be close.”

Silence.

Awkwardness.

Tension.

These are all things I'm sensing coming from Emre, and I don't know how to help him or make him shake it off.

"Em?" I call out to him. We've been driving for five minutes, and he hasn't said a word.

Without making eye contact, he responds. "Hmm?" His thick eyebrows rise in inquisition, but his eyes are focused on the road or zoned out. Perhaps a bit of both.

"Well, say something."

"Well, I have a bit of good news for you as well, but now it doesn't feel like it."

"Okay, what's the good news? I could use a bit of it right now..."

"Well, I found the amulet you're looking for. My cousin sent me a text while we were out. He says we can come over and pick it up whenever."

Instantly, there is an eruption of thoughts escaping my mind and sending chills throughout my body. There are so many emotions all happening at once, it's a little overwhelming. This is the moment I've been waiting for far too long for. 15 years is a very long time to be searching for something. With Emre's help, I'm one step closer to setting my family free and ridding my family of the burden of being trapped.

Tears well up in my eyes, though I don't mean for them to. The emotions are so intense that I just can't contain it all. This is one of those times where you can't control your body, no matter how hard you try.

A sobbing cry rips through me, and my heart feels as though it's knitting itself back together.

I toss my arms around Emre's neck as he drives us home, and I tilt my head against his neck. There it is again; the scent of pine. It's comforting.

“Thank you, Emre. Thank you so much!”

I squeeze him as tightly as I can, and I can see the smile beaming from his lips from my peripheral. It looks like we're both getting what we want, but I feel twisted about it. On the one hand, I'm happy that I can lay my family to rest. On the other hand, I feel sick to my stomach that I won't be staying with Emre anymore. My time here with him will come to an end when I have what I was looking for. We just got one another back, and there's no telling what distance will actually do to our relationship, even though I'm hopeful.

For the rest of the trip home, I'm glued to Emre's neck.

He doesn't complain.

He doesn't move.

And neither of us says a word.

We ride in harmonious silence, though I'm not sure if he knows it, but I'm going to miss him.

Chapter 8



Emre

I wish I had never received that message from my cousin Ethan. I should have known if there was anyone who would find it, it would be him. He didn't mention how he came across it, only that he'd had it, and we could come and pick it up any time. The moment I told Willa about getting a hit, my heart broke when I saw a light inside of her light up.

I know she came to town for business.

I know that she's happy to reconnect with me.

I sense she's eager to get back home. Perhaps she has something or *someone* there waiting for her. I can't be sure, and I don't know. I'm not even sure if I can ask or if I should ask.

We drive through town, and I drop off the items we hauled today, just to stall taking her to Ethan's. He's an omega, outcasted from the pack years ago for "being crazy." Ethan is far from crazy. If there's anyone I believe can and does commune with the spirits, who are still of somewhat good nature, it's him.

Ethan is one of the youngest of our bloodline to be able to communicate with spirits and walk on the spirit plane. There aren't many of us in the Divine Pack who can. I've done it once, on accident, when I was trying to find my mother. I had no luck, and by the time I realized what I was even doing, I was awake, in human form, and had little to no memory of my encounter.

I've placed the bags down as slowly as I can, hoping Willa won't mind, but the second I hear the horn honking outside, I know my time is up. I can't slow her down anymore. She's anxious, no matter the fact that my heart feels like it's breaking all over again.

I lost her once. I wasn't prepared to do it again.

Taking my time, I slowly exit the house and hop back into the truck.

“So, are we going to go? It's still kind of early. You said we could...”

I had said we could simply because I'd hoped she'd say we could go tomorrow. But there would be no tomorrow. I understood the hankering in her heart, and the need to see this mission fulfilled, and I'm happy to help her with it. Though it seems it will come at a cost to my own happiness.

Evidently, I'm not supposed to have any of the women I love in my life. Not even the platonic ones.

Back in the truck, Willa's leg is twitching a mile a minute. It's cute but depressing for me.

“So, before we get there, I just wanna let you know we're going to my cousin Ethan's house. You might not remember him, but—“

“Of course I do! He's the one that used to always tell us ghost stories. Do you remember? He told me that one that almost made me pee on myself that time!”

Thinking back, I do remember that. How could I forget? I suppose because I'd let myself. I hadn't allowed myself to remember the good times we shared with others. There were so few back then, and certainly now. I guess I've suppressed them.

"I do remember that, and if I recall properly, you might have actually peed yourself. I don't think there was any 'almost' to it."

Willa punches me in the shoulder as I drive, and I laugh. It's cute that she shoved me with all her might, and it still didn't feel like much. The ride through the hills is a bumpy one. When Ethan was an outcast, he went to live in a tiny cabin east of the pack lands. I don't blame him. There have been many times I wanted to do the same and chose not to simply because of what might happen due to my father's reign of terror. He stepped down by force, not choice. And even still, he has a strong foothold on the pack's neck. Ben and Liam don't help.

Willa is a ball of Anxiety and excitement. I can tell she's amped and ready to get this handled. I've tried convincing myself that it has nothing to do with wanting to leave me, and everything to do with solving a missing piece of the puzzle to her life.

The sun hangs low in the sky, much to the reflection of my feelings. It's been a long time since I've been this down, though I'm trying to hold a strong façade.

We arrive at Ethan's, and it looks like a survivalist bunk. With all the "KEEP OUT," "THIS IS PRIVATE PROPERTY,"

“DO NOT ENTER,” signage hanging on the fence and the outside of his home, you would think he was preparing for an apocalyptic shock and didn’t want anyone coming to steal his items. Which could actually be a thing. Just not today, I hope.

“Is this it?” Willa looks over at me, and her eyes hang low with worry. I place my hand on her thigh and give it a reassuring squeeze.

“It is, and don’t worry, it’s not as bad inside as it looks on the outside.”

“Oh, okay. Well... I mean, these are the steep hills of Georgia. What else should I expect, right?”

Her face is tightened in a nervous tincture. She’s not even sure of the words she’s saying herself, but I’d lay it all on the line for her. She’d never have to worry about getting hurt around me. I wouldn’t and won’t allow it.

We exit the truck, and I reach for Willa’s hand. She looks so timid and fragile walking through the land mine of the yard to get to Ethan’s front door. I know she’s strong, but she seems breakable in this moment.

Willa grabs onto my hand tightly so she doesn’t fall over, but I have her. She can depend on me to make sure she’s safe.

Her hair flaps over her face as a brisk breeze blows in from the fall weather revealing her milky eye. She’d make good money as a fortune teller if she chose to. She definitely has the look to do it, and as pretty as she is, anyone would be happy to come and see her.

We reach the door, and before I can knock, there's a presence behind us. I spin Willa behind me, shielding her from who we might find. But, when I twist around, I come face to face with Ethan. He has a giant smile on his face, and his facial hair is as wild as he is, covering almost everything but his nose and eyes. I can't even see his cheeks anymore.

"Hey, cuz, glad you could make it," Ethan says and then reaches in to clap me on the back. He's a lot friendlier than the last time I saw him. The last time I saw him he was rambling on about a bad omen. I chose not to listen; omens are always coming to fruition whether you hear them or not. I prefer to remain positive these days.

"Thanks for having me. This is—"

"Willa. I could never forget her..."

I don't like the way he says that. It sounds flirtatious coming from his lips, and the way Willa releases my hand and gives Ethan a hug; sparks a jealous flame inside of me.

I know that Ethan is teasing me when he smiles as Willa hugs him, and it allows me to relax. I don't think I've ever experienced jealousy, until now.

"Glad to see the gang is back together. Come on in. I've got the amulet you were askin' about."

Ethan leads us through the back of the house. It makes sense why he came to get us from the front, because, from what I can tell, his front door is no longer a front door on the inside. It's been sanded down and blends in with the wall.

We take a seat in his minimalist living room where there's literally just enough space for the three of us to sit on his couch and love seat. His floorboards are creaky and a bit hollow, which leads me to believe there may be a crawl space underneath or a basement. I don't know what he's preparing for, but it's clear he's preparing for something.

Willa taps her foot against the floor, and I still her movements by placing my hand on her thigh again and giving it a squeeze. It's enough pressure to make her slow down. She places her hand on top of mine, and a warm sensation stings through me.

“So, let me show you what I got. It's been in this satchel for the last 12 years or so.”

Ethan reaches over on the side of his brown leather love seat and pulls out a tiny, scuffed up leather satchel. When he pulls open the ties across the top, I can almost hear the bag sing with magic. I can tell there's something strong inside of it.

Ethan hands it over to Willa, and she reaches inside the bag and pulls it out. While it's in her hand, the amulet glows turquoise, and then lavender, and then stilled to a glossy white.

Willa only held it out long enough for us to see it change colors and then shoves it into her pocket. Before she puts it away, I can hear what I believe to be voices, but spirits are always around us. There's no telling why they'd be speaking right now, unless what my father said was true.

I push that thought from my mind as quickly as it enters.

“How much do you want for this? I can’t imagine how you came across this item. I know it’s been dangerous to keep—”

“It’s in the right hands now, so there’s no reason for you to pay me anything. It’s been with me for a while now. Just stumbled upon it years ago, and I’ve been holding onto it since then.”

“Interesting... well, thank you,” Willa states, and tears fill her eyes. She squeezes my hand, I think unknowingly, and I squeeze hers back, but not for the same reason. My heart tightens; now, with her business concluded and the festival only a few days away, she will most definitely be leaving town.

“Anything for the two of you. I miss you, cuz, you gotta come spend more time with me. I know it’s far out, but you know—”

I hold my hand up to his face. I know what he might say, but he doesn’t need to in front of Willa.

“I’ll be back soon. I promise I’ll start making it out here more often.”

“And I’d love to come see you before I leave town. I’m indebted to you forever.” Willa stands and leans over to hug Ethan. I, for the first time, notice a tattoo on her lower back. It’s large and looks tribal, but I can’t quite see exactly what it is.

Mmm...

Almost as if she can feel the draft on her back, she pulls her jacket down and turns to face me.

“Well, I guess we’re gonna head out. We’ve got some things to figure out for the festival. I’d love to see you there sometime.”

“Can’t believe you’re actually going there, cuz. I won’t be in attendance, but good luck. I heard you got a booth this year.”

“And who’d you hear that from? You’re so secluded in the woods.”

“You know who,” he says, and winks his long lashes at me. I know exactly *who* he’s talking about, but I don’t speak to the spirits, even though it seems they’re always talking about me.

“I do. Come on, Willa. Let’s get home.”

I place my hand on the small of her back and Ethan leads us back through the back of his house and to the front. Willa waves at Ethan as I help her get into the passenger seat, and I wish that this could be forever. I’m starting to realize the reason I don’t want her to leave is because I might be falling for my best friend... a dangerous thing to do.

“Are you happy?” I ask as we weave through the hills, leaving Ethan’s. The peaceful smile on her face tells me she is. Her eyes are cast out the window, and I’m not sure if she’s taking in the scenery or thinking about leaving. Those are intrusive thoughts, but I can’t help but think them.

“I’m very happy, Re-Re. You’ll never understand what this means to me. I feel so... justified. I feel like I’ve been reunited

with an old friend, and that wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for you."

Willa shifts around in her seat, and our eyes meet. She sweetly looks upon me, but my eyes are hungry for her.

Ours...

My wolf speaks to me, and it distracts me, nearly running us off the windy road.

"Emre, are you okay?" Willa doesn't sound panicked, more concerned.

"Yeah, sorry, was just thinking about dinner, and what you said. You're more than welcome. I'm glad I could help you out."

"You seem... distracted. Are you sure everything is okay?"

"Yep. How about we do steak and potatoes for dinner? Something simple and easy. I'm a little beat from today," I lie, but in truth, I just want the opportunity to spend as much time with her as possible, and I don't want to spend all night cooking a meal.

"I love steak. I'm in!"

Her enthusiasm is cute. I love seeing her so happy. Even if it comes at the cost of my own unrest.

To kill the silence in the truck, I turn on the radio to the only station that plays, a country station. It does its job to drown out the noise as we re-enter town and make it home.

Willa is the first to hop out of the truck. I'm moving much slower than she is. I can't help but try to drag this out.

She's also the first in the kitchen.

"I can get dinner ready. I have a special steak seasoning I like to use," I announce, proud of my mixture. Mom taught me a while ago how to prepare steaks and really live on my own. I wonder if she knew one day I'd have to. Or that I'd be on my own since I haven't found a mate yet. I'm not sure if I ever will.

Though everything inside of me is aching for Willa. I can't be sure if that's hormones, a familial bond, or me finding my true mate. It wouldn't be unheard of for a wolf to mate a human, though it would be very rare.

"Well, I won't get in your way, steak master. I'm gonna shower and get into my pajamas. I'll be back and I can set the table."

"Set the table, huh? I think I might like that."

Willa smiles and leaves the kitchen headed for her shower. I want this dinner to be the best one we've ever had, since it will be one of our last ones together.

When Willa returns fresh from the shower, she has a towel on her head, but several stray curls escape it. Her face is clear, but red from the heat of the shower, and her pajamas have little brooms on them. Perfect for fall weather.

"Mmm... smells good in here. My stomach is grumbling."

“I bet it is. Go ahead and set the table. I’ll bring everything out.”

As she’s setting the table, a vision of us doing this regularly crosses my mind. I’d love for her to be the person I come home to every night. Her in her pajamas, setting the table. Us eating and discussing how our respective days went about. But, it would seem I’m destined to spend this life alone. A wandering alpha of an ungrateful pack.

The table setting is complete with plates, silverware and glassware. I made lemonade just the other day, so I decide to bring that to the table for us to have with our meal. I place the pitcher in the center of the table and then head back to the kitchen to bring out the steaks and baked potatoes on my mother’s beautiful wooden cutting board.

This feels like a date, though I know it is not.

“Looks great, Emre. Can’t wait to dig in.”

Willa rubs her hand across her belly, and I wish my hand was there, rubbing against her.

I take my seat and make her plate. She watches me, but a smile crosses her lips.

“What? I can’t make your plate?”

“Of course you can. I just wasn’t expecting it I suppose.”

“Well, I don’t mind making your plate. It’s easier.”

She nods her head and waits for her plate.

She's considerate enough to wait until after I make my own plate, and then we both dig in. Our dinner is full of conversation about where she's been, and how she owns a business back home. Willa tells me that she owns a store of sorts, looking for lost items. It makes sense why she came here for her client.

"Sounds lucrative," I point out as we finish up our meal.

"It can be. It has its slow seasons though."

"I know exactly what you mean. The antique business isn't always booming."

"How did you get into that anyway? I've never known you to be especially interested in old things."

"That's a good question. Honestly, it seemed like something fun to do. I just wanted to pour some money back into our home, and people actually come here for the antique shop. Mr. Woodard used to own it, and right when he was passing away, I'd been given a pretty good amount of money from Mom's life insurance and just from money she put away for me. It seemed like a smart investment, and I haven't exactly been wrong."

"That's great, Emre. I'm so proud of you. Look at the two of us, business owners."

"Business owners who can hopefully do the dishes together," I tease, and she nods her head. I just want her close to me. I don't care if we were vacuuming as long as we were doing it together.

In the kitchen, I handle the washing, and Willa does the drying and putting away, though she struggles to reach the shelf where the plates go.

“Here, let me help you short stuff.”

Willa cuts her eyes at me, but she slightly slides to the side just enough for me to reach over her. Once I’ve placed the plates in their designated spot, there’s a moment between us where we’re still and looking at one another. Our gazes are on each other, and there’s a magnetic field that pulls me to her. She smells like her Lavendar body wash, and it’s as mesmerizing as her natural scent. Perhaps her natural scent is amplifying the scent itself.

Her breath hitches, and I steal her inhale by placing a kiss to her lips. Our tongues slightly dance, briefly. It’s only for a second before she pulls away from me.

Willa’s hand shoots to her mouth, and her eyes shift from side to side. My lips part to explain, to either apologize or tell her my feelings, but my words are halted when she takes flight, rushing away from me, and her door opens and closes behind her.

What did I just do? ...

Chapter 9



Willa

My lips tingle, betraying my thoughts. Or are my thoughts betraying my actual feelings? I'm not sure what's right and what's wrong. Confusion, like a swirling ball of dirt is wrapping itself around my mind.

I liked it.

I loved it.

I want... another one?

No, that can't be right. It's been so long since I've felt close like this to someone. Emre is the only person on the planet who has ever been there for me, outside of Dora and Amelia. I've never had anyone treat me so well, even past relationships, that were forced on my part for not wanting to be alone. I've never been treated better than he treats me.

This kiss, does it sever everything we have? Does it twist it and make it... wrong?

The only thing I know for certain is that I don't want to lose him. I don't want to lose Emre again. We've spent entirely too much time apart, and surely our friendship is strong enough that it can stand a little... mishap like this.

I need to lie down. I don't know if it's all the thinking or the kiss that's suddenly got me feeling lightheaded.

It won't matter soon. I'll be heading out of town, and back to my life, and this kiss will be behind us. Maybe a little distance is what we need. Growing up here, partially, I never thought of Emre that way, although I always thought him to be handsome. His thick sideburns and his hair, which used to be

more of a platinum blonde, have gone pretty much white. It matches my eye. He's always been nice to look at, and burly. He comes from a large stock. He'd be a good protector...

Why am I thinking about that?

I toss myself down onto my bed and cover my face with a pillow. I'm not proud of what I'm feeling or what I'm thinking about. Friends. That's what we've always been, and how we should remain.

I did promise him I would go with him to the fall festival, but maybe this isn't the time to do something like that. Maybe right now, I need to focus on me, and now that I have the amulet, I can focus on freeing my family. There are so many things that need to be taken care of in order to even put the spell together, but I'm almost certain everything else I need, I can get outside of the hills of Georgia.

As the fall festival approaches, I feel uneasy anyway. I thought this year I'd be a little more excited and a little less frustrated and worried. Halloween used to be my favorite time of year. As the seasons change, Halloween couldn't come at a more perfect time. The desserts, pumpkin spices, and leaves visibly changing. The trick or treating. What a time to be alive, but that's just the problem, isn't it? My family was stolen from me the night before Halloween, and since then, I've come to feel lonely around this time of year.

Emre was supposed to help with that, unbeknownst to him, and he has, but I can't depend on him the way I thought. Not with these feelings floating around us.

I'll just leave. First thing in the morning. That'll be my best

Don't leave him...

He needs you...

Dora and Amelia couldn't have come in at a worse time.

Needs me for what?

All will reveal itself in time. Don't rush knowledge. Knowing something too soon can have damaging consequences, Dora warns, and her ominous wording is enough to make me rethink my retreat. Perhaps she's right.

The festival is tomorrow evening, and it's just one more day. One more can't hurt I suppose. I can keep these conflicted feelings inside until the day after tomorrow. Then I'll put as much distance between me and Emre as I can and check in periodically.

But I think, perhaps, we should never physically lay eyes on each other, ever again for the sake of our friendship, of course.

Dora and Amelia say I should not leave Emre. It's not that I "want" to leave him, but I'm not sure how we proceed from here. I'm thankful that he left the house early this morning because facing him is something I've been dreading.

I'm supposed to attend the festival with him tonight, and I wouldn't deny him that. I made a promise, and I always keep my word. Not to mention, I genuinely want to go. I have a

feeling though... something interesting is going to happen tonight. Something... special, but I truly have no idea what it is. Maybe whatever it is will break up the awkwardness I feel.

I've showered, cooked, eaten, cleaned my room, packed my bag and unpacked it a thousand times, and I'm still not sure what I'm doing or where I should be going.

To occupy myself, I pull out the amulet and the journal attached to it. It has years worth of witches' experience, but yet, there's still so much to know and learn. I figure I might as well take care of it today. Since I can't seem to focus on much else but the amulet and Emre.

I plop down on the bed with the journal and the amulet and begin my studies. I've never been able to study it with the actual object, so this is new, exciting, and, in a way, makes me feel complete.

The section that immediately catches my attention is the one that touches on what the amulet can do. For the dead, it holds them in a state of purgatory. A place of stagnancy and unrest. Their souls cannot find peace here.

It could serve as a prison world for the living, wounded or otherwise. They could be trapped inside forever, where they would never age but live alone for the rest of their lives with only their essentials.

It could be used as a storage or sorts for magical objects, to later be used again.

It could be used for a loved one to recover if their wounds are extremely grave. The world itself that is built inside is full of magic that can only be accessed by the person who possesses the amulet. Which is why the spirits cannot release themselves.

That makes sense.

Hours of studying go by, and I don't even realize it until I hear the front door swing open. The heavy footsteps of Emre reverberate in my room, and I'm stilled, wondering if I should approach him. Do I pretend like nothing happened and approach him? Do I mention how I feel and wait for him to respond? I'm not exactly sure what I'm supposed to be saying.

Avoid him for what? You've been waiting your whole life to find someone who cares about you, and he does...

True, but she doesn't want to lose him. I say avoid him until tonight. Dora is... well, you know how she is.

I don't want to avoid him. I think in a movie I would avoid him or tiptoe around him, but he's still my best friend, and I'm not ready to talk about the kiss. I don't think we should, for now anyway. But I don't want to avoid him for the rest of the time. I will be here...however long that's going to be.

I've made my verdict. Sometimes, hearing voices in your head can help you decipher quickly what you need to do. I wonder how other people deal with spirit guides with them. It might not be so easy for someone else.

I place my journal and the amulet underneath my pillow for safekeeping and take a deep breath. I left food in the kitchen for Emre to eat when he made it back home, and from the sound of the microwave, he's ready to eat.

My door closes, and I round the corner toward the kitchen. I made fried tacos, and the way his face is tilted down, and he's devouring every bite I can tell he's enjoying the food.

"Good evening," I interrupt his eating. Unfortunately, I've startled him by the way he jumps slightly, but he doesn't lose his taco.

"Hey... you. How was your day?"

His eyes shift from left to right, as though he's nervous about our encounter. I can somewhat feel the tension between us, and immediately I want to fix it.

"My day was fine," I say quickly and then segway into the real reason I came into the kitchen. "Listen, I'm not going to ignore you or avoid you, and I don't want you to do that with me either. We will eventually get around to talking about what happened, but for now, let's just enjoy the festival tonight, okay?"

Emre takes another bite of his taco and then places it on the plate. He chews and then swallows, and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. This is extremely climactic. I am waiting for his response, and I'm a bit worried about what he might say.

“I’m surprised you even still want to go, but I’m happy you do. Let’s put the kiss on the back burner, but I don’t want to take it off the table. We need to talk about it... and I have a few things I need to say to you. So, when you’re ready, let me know.”

There’s power in his voice, so much authority. I think I’m a little turned on, but I ignore it. This isn’t the time to be thinking about that.

My words seem to evade me, but I manage a head nod. “Good. We’re leaving in about an hour and a half. I wanna get there early to set up. You could always come later—“

“I’m going when you go, Re-Re. All I need to do is change my clothes, and I’ll be ready to join you.”

“Alright. I’m gonna hop in the shower first, and then I’ll meet you by the door. Thanks for the tacos. They were... really good.”

Before leaving, Emre kisses my cheek, and he leaves me standing in the kitchen. This kiss doesn’t feel... the same as the other. Not nearly as awkward, but there’s still a deep mess lingering in it.

Emre leaves his plate on the counter, and I wash it and place it on the drying rack. My next stop is to my room to change my clothes, but before I do, a vision pops into my mind’s view.

Emre is standing behind me. His hands hold and caress my hips. We’re in the kitchen, and he nibbles on my ear as I put the dishes away.

I blink, and the vision disappears.

That has never happened before. Not once, not ever. That didn't feel like a thought. Like something that just happened in my mind. That felt... magically induced. The scent of magic lingers behind it, but I'm not sure where it's coming from.

My nose follows the scent, to the stairs, and then behind them, to Emre's room, where the door is cracked. I don't want to push the cracked door open too far and risk seeing something I have no business seeing, but at this point, I'm curious as to why there would be a magical scent coming from anyone who isn't me.

From behind the door, I hear the master bathroom shower, the water pitter pattering against the shower wall and floor. I assume he must be inside, so I use this time to investigate.

When the door opens, the aroma of magic is even stronger. His clothes are on the floor and I pick them up. The strong stench of pine and... I can't detect what it is, but it's magic in nature, hit me in the face.

Magic leaves a distinct smell behind. It's typically sweet at first and then turns bitter. This one has not gone bitter. It remains sweet, sugary almost.

Before I know it, my face is embedded in his shirt, and I can't get enough of the smell he's left behind. Maybe he's holding onto something that contains actual magic and he doesn't know it.

Or, just hear me out, it's him, Dora points out, and I side eye her, as if she were a physical presence.

That would mean that he's got some sort of magic. That he's magical in a way. I would have known. All these years? I would have known, right?

Normally, I like to encourage you. But I've seen the way things turn out if we push too hard. Dora, why don't you hush up. Don't think too much into it, Willa. All things have a way of working themselves out....

One thing about spirit guides, is they are mysterious as hell and sometimes, most of the time, will go against you. Now, there's another mystery on my plate that I'm eager to solve but will have to put on pause.

I toss Emre's clothes back to the floor, hoping I've put them back the way they were so that he will be none the wiser, and I leave his room, wondering what smells of magic on him, or where the smell is coming from.

In my room, I sift through my clothes. The weather is a bit chilly at night for this time of year, so I don't want to be cold, and I definitely don't want to be uncomfortable walking through the hilly terrain of the festival.

I decide on my orange crotchet scoop neck sweater, a black pair of leggings, and chocolate boots that come up to my knees. They've got a slight block heel on them, but they're extremely comfortable, and I don't think I'll have a problem navigating them tonight.

My leather jacket seems like an overkill and could become too heavy for the night with this sweater, so I opt for a lighter-weight zip-up jacket. I leave my hair down, so that I don't have to wear ear muffs, and a little water and moving my fingers through my hair works perfectly. I kind of prefer a messy look.

Before leaving my room, I look in the mirror, and the thought of people seeing me and my eye crosses my mind. The ridicule and whispers I experienced growing up with it is something I adjusted to early on in life, but I haven't been home in years. I haven't had to actually run into or see anyone since I've been here, and I don't know how they will receive me.

I wonder what my mother would say. My grandmother would have loved my eye. She would have said something funny to make me feel comfortable with it, or made up some old witch's tale to make me feel special.

My father would have pointed out how it made me exquisite. Extremely beautiful and how boys would be drooling over me. Thank God he isn't here to see that they most certainly are not drooling over me. At least, not many have.

But who needs a love life when you've got a ton of other things going on?

My purse is on the bed, so I grab it in case I want to purchase something tonight and head to the door. Seconds later, Emre is coming down the staircase, and he meets me at the door as he said he would.

“You look beautiful as always. Like a gorgeous pumpkin.”

I don't want to smile, but my stupid face betrays me, and my mouth stretches open like the joker.

“Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself.”

It would be impossible not to notice his bulging muscles in his orange and brown flannel shirt, that hug his muscular frame just right. His dark blue jeans that cup his thicker body in all the right places. Oh God, what am I thinking?

That your bestie is an absolute hunk. What else? Dora jokes, and I slightly roll my eyes, but not so much that Emre notices.

“Thanks. Let's get going. I wanna set up in a good spot so that we can get everyone's money early before they start wasting it on the junk.”

“Great idea,” I agree, and as I reach for the door, so does Emre. He pulls at the knob and allows me to go out first.

This feels like a date.

But I know it's not.

I hope it's not.

The ride over to the festival is pleasant enough. Emre turns on the heat for me and makes it the perfect temperature to ride in. I don't feel like I'm going to burn up and I'm not cold. I'm able to remove my jacket and place it across my lap.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Emre looking at me, on and off.

“What is it, Re-Re? Seems like something’s on your mind?” I query, and he smirks as we turn into the parking lot of the festival.

“You may not be ready to talk about the kiss, but I won’t deny that it’s all I’ve thought about all day. I didn’t stay out of the house to avoid you. I genuinely had things to do today, and I’m looking forward to, whenever you’re ready, to talk about the kiss.”

I’m shocked into silence, and I’m not exactly sure where this conversation is leading. Thankfully, I don’t have to figure it out because there’s a knock on the window.

“Get your ass out of the truck, Emre. I’ve got my money ready and I wanna buy before the locals come in and rob me out of somethin’ good. I know you’ve got some good stuff. I can sense it,” a woman with no more than two teeth in her mouth says. I’ve never seen her before, or perhaps I have. It’s been a long time since I’ve been here.

“Hold that thought,” Emre utters, and he hops out of the truck.

I have no idea how this night will be, but I’m enjoying the mystery of it all, and the excitement that Emre has about the festival. Something he’s never wanted to do before. As the door closes, I smell the magic again, and I allow myself to believe that it must be something in some of the items he purchased before. Maybe there really is something in there with some true magical charm to it.

Attending the festival has been a lot of fun. No one is looking at me strangely because of my eye. There are many people who are dressed up, like I knew they would be, and I suppose that has helped to take off some of the edge about my eye.

I've run into a number of people who remember me from childhood, and it's nicer than I thought it would be. I feared what it might be like to see them, or for them to see me, but everyone has actually been really kind. I haven't had much of an opportunity to spend with Emre tonight, but each time I pass his booth, he notices and nods my way. His eyes ask if I'm okay, and I love how concerned he is about me.

He's always been that way.

His table is nearly empty now, though there are several people at his table. Emre is bagging up trinkets, and he has a smile on his face, until... he doesn't. On the right side of him, his father appears, and he has an angry look on his face. I don't know why, but I have a feeling I need to go over there. I sense that he might need comfort for some reason.

There are two other men with Emre's father. He's a lot more beat up than I remember him being growing up. He always seemed so strong. So... confident, and the closer I get, I realize he's drunk on beer and his eyes are bulging out of his head.

He looks, for lack of better words, like a druggie.

When I'm approaching, I overhear my name, and that, of course, is of interest to me.

“Is everything okay?” I ask and place my hand on Emre’s back. He shutters away from me. That’s new and something I’ve never experienced with him.

“How could you?” Emre’s eyes are glued to me, and not in love or admiration, as I’ve seen in the past. His inquisitiveness seems... harsh. His question comes at a surprise.

“How could I what? Emre, please talk to me....”

My gaze shifts between his father and the two men who are with him, who now have deep smirks on their faces, as though they’re all in on a joke that I know nothing about.

“Talk to you? Perhaps you should have been talking to me. A witch, Willa? Of all things. The one thing that could possibly hurt me. You keep a secret like this from me?”

Speechless is what I am. I’m not even sure of what to say. I don’t even know what just took place or where to pick up from.

His father and the two men who are with him walk away, leaving me completely confused and none the wiser about the precursor to this conversation.

Thank goodness the other patrons are gone and there’s no one here to see what might take place between the two of us. I can literally feel the rage coming from Emre’s body.

“Emre, you have to understand—“

“I don’t need to understand anything except for the fact that you were keeping the fact that not only are you a witch, but that necklace of yours can destroy my pack and it killed my

mother? Why did you come back? Use me like my father said? I was so damn stupid! And for what? Because I *love* you?”

He throws the word love at me like an accusation, like it's a crime, and that's what hurts the most. But amongst the word *love, pack* also sounds loud and clear to me.

“Pack? What do you mean by that, Emre? Clearly, you've been keeping a secret of your own!”

I realize that I'm not the only magical creature here, and then it sinks in. That's the smell I've been smelling. The magic of his pack.

“It's my job to protect us, as alpha, and clearly, I had a reason to. Why don't you just go ahead and fess up? Your coven killed my mother,” Emre accuses and begins tossing the trinkets of his booth into boxes, with no organization. He's typically so much more put together than this. I can see this shocking truth, and partial lie, tearing him apart.

“Emre, I promise you, I don't know anything about your mother's murder. What I do know, though, is it has absolutely nothing to do with the Coven of the Sacred Veil. They were all slaughtered the day my eye turned white. I have no family left,” my voice begins to break, and for a moment, there's a pause in his movement.

Emre looks as though he might come to comfort me, but that hope is quickly thwarted when he goes back to throwing things around.

“I don’t understand how your father, whom you’ve pretty much told me you hate, has this much control over you to make you believe a lie, but I’ve been nothing but honest, Re-Re. I would never lie to you. Did I omit the truth? Yes. I am a witch, the last remaining of the Coven of the Sacred Veil. That’s a fact. Did I want the amulet back for personal reasons? Yes, but those personal reasons, I was honest about. I truly wanted it back because it’s an heirloom and it belongs to me by right. I don’t know shit about it potentially hurting you or one of the pack members. I would NEVER do anything to hurt you, Emre. You have to know that.”

“I thought I did know that, Willa. I thought I knew you. You popping back up in my life, I thought, was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I see now that I’m wrong. You were using me, and I can’t trust you. I guess I never really could.”

With so little inventory left, Emre picks up the two boxes from the ground and begins carrying them away from the festival. I want to go after him, to try and work this out some more, but what is there for me to say? He doesn’t believe me and I don’t know what I could do to even make him listen.

From a distance, I see him start his truck up, and a part of me doesn’t believe he’ll just leave me here, but when he busts his tire against the grassy surface and pulls out of the green parking area, I know he’s not coming back.

His taillights are more than just an indication of him not coming back. They make me think I might have lost him. And

to think I was thinking about leaving him, trying to get back home.

My heart hurts, hoping I didn't somehow ruin things, but I recognize right away that it isn't me who ruined things; it's his lying father, and I need to get down to the truth of what his father said. But first, Emre will have to calm down... I can't approach him like this.

He's just as guilty as I am for omitting the truth, but right now, I don't need to invalidate his feelings. When the time is right, I'll speak with him. I just need to wait around for when that time might be.

And a wolf of all things? If he thinks his problem is with witches, he has no idea about my problem with wolves. I've only encountered them on one other occasion...

And then, like a wave washes over the beach, I'm reminded of something.

I was so drawn to the sweet smell of magic before. I thought it was just a coincidence, but now I know it's not.

Wolves killed my family.

The sweet scent of magic lingered that day.

And I remember the blood. The marks... the... gruesome details.

He thinks we had something to do with his mother's death, and now, I'm almost 100 % positive that his pack had everything to do with the end of my coven...

Chapter 10



Emre

The front door rattles on the hinges as it slams behind me. I can't believe this night is turning out like this. I kissed her. I admitted my feelings to her, and then my father comes and completely ruins it by unearthing a truth I wasn't ready to hear. Not only is Willa a witch, but somehow she had something to do with Mom's death?

Why would she lie? Why would she say they didn't if they didn't?

Confusion plagues me as I rip my clothes off. I brace myself against a wall, trying to keep myself from shifting inside the house. I've only lost control in the house once or twice, and the repairs of the house won't be able to take it. But the more I fight against the transformation, the harder it becomes to ignore.

My breathing is irregular. My chest heaves up and down. With each breath, I see Willa's face. Not Willa the traitor, but Willa my friend. Willa, the woman I'm falling in love with.

I'm unable to stop my shift. My claws break free from my shoes instantly, and before I know it, my skin is peeling back, turning into fur. My clothes are ripped into shreds, and I'm in the hallway, now sprawled out on the floor, still trying to calm down. My paws reach over my eyes. I need to quiet my mind. To be still.

But Willa's face surfaces no matter the images I try to replace her with.

The front door fidgets. There's someone on the other side. I might just kill whoever's on the other end if I can't remain calm. The door blows open, and in walks Willa. She must have run home because there's no way she should have made it back here so quickly.

She stares at me when she comes in. Her scent reeks of comfort, not fear, when she sees me. I expect her to back up against the wall. We are mortal enemies after all, but she does the exact opposite.

Willa hunches over, slowly nearing me. I want to move away from her, but my wolf growls in submission.

She's ours... He roars toward the edges of my mind. My paws have a mind of their own, and I'm drawn to her, as if I'm being dragged across the floor to her. Willa presses her hands toward me, palms up. My snout eagerly sniffs her hands, and her scent is even more intoxicating as it was before. I want to be inside of her she smells so good.

I bow in front of her, and Willa rubs the top of my head. She leans in closer as she rubs, until her forehead is pressed against my large skull.

"You're beautiful," she whispers against my platinum white fur. Her fingers stroke the hair atop my head, and as confused as I am, what I feel now is comfort... I feel... complete like this.

But, she has explaining to do, and now in a calmer state, I can hear her out. We have to talk. She owes me some answers, and perhaps I owe her a few myself. I was raised to hate

witches, to believe they were the enemy, especially the Coven of the Sacred Veil, considering they have been marked by spirit also. They are our biggest threat.

Willa claims they were all massacred, but the Coven of the Sacred Veil isn't to be trusted. They never have been trustworthy. The Divine Pack and the Coven of the Sacred Veil came into existence around the same time. We share some of the same ancestors, which is why we both carry the spirit affinity.

A wolf and a witch, at one point, were the best of friends before the witches turned on the wolves and allowed spirit to attack The Divine pack. We were almost unable to recover from such a vicious attack, but my great, great, great, great grandparents survived, and they gave birth to the rest of The Divine pack.

Had it not been for their escape, I wouldn't be here today.

Standing in front of me, I don't know if Willa is a friend or a foe, but my soul tells me she's my mate. My wolf says the same. Why can't I get my father's words out of my head? Why can't I forget what I know about witches and just see Willa for Willa?

When she removes her head from mine, her eyes watch me, study me, even. She observes me to see what I will do. I would never hurt her, and I know she knows this.

Without willing it so, my wolf begins to disappear, slowly, my fur retreating into my skin. My flesh reappears, and I'm naked in front of her. She does not shy away, though her

cheeks turn red. We both rise from the floor together, and I stretch over and into the living room to grab a blanket to wrap around myself.

“I think we need to talk.”

“You first.” I know my tone is patronizing, but she should be the one to go first since she has the most explaining to do. Why would my father say that her coven had something to do with the death of my mother if they didn’t? Yet, why would Willa say they were all slaughtered if they were not?

“I’m not even sure where to begin, Re-Re. You’re the alpha of The Divine Pack? I would have never seen that coming...”

“Really? But you clearly knew wolves existed. And our pack name nonetheless. How?”

“It was in my mom’s journal. A lot of things are in there, including other supernatural communities. Apparently, our communities used to trade things back in the day.”

“According to my father, the Coven of the Sacred Veil used to receive things that could hurt us, including that amulet you call a family heirloom.”

“For someone with so much knowledge, you seem to have it partially wrong. If the amulet can hurt you, I either skipped that part of the journal, or it doesn’t exist. What I do know is this; the Great Massacre... the wolves are at fault. YOUR pack is at fault.”

“How dare you accuse us without proof!”

“The way you’re accusing me without proof! You’re a damn hypocrite, Emre!”

Without originally realizing it, we’ve both closed the gap of space between us, our chests are beating wildly close to one another.

“Explain then, Willa, because right now, everything you’re saying seems extremely suspicious.”

“Fine! I’ve never lied, and you know it!”

I do... did know it to be true, but now I’m not so sure.

“The day of the massacre, my mother was thrown on our doorstep. My grandmother sent me into the basement apothecary to retrieve a list of things so that we could begin the process to set my mother free from the amulet. She was trapped, well... trapped herself inside for safety. It’s more than likely some sort of warning.

“While looking for the list of things, I heard a sudden silence, and then crashing began around me. I saw dead bodies thumping to the ground, one by one. Men’s voices. I witnessed my grandmother free all of our covens’ souls from their bodies and into the amulet, including herself. When I was sure the coast was clear, I escaped, but I remember the marks on their bodies. They were not human-made, and they certainly weren’t the work of bullets or knives.

“The injuries were brutal, and their bodies distorted. There were deep puncture wounds and massive cuts deep in their bodies. The way the clothing and skin was torn couldn’t have

been from a sharp object. And the scent... it's one I'll never forget. They smelled sweet. Almost like sugar. Just. Like. You."

I do smell sweet. Supernatural creatures of greater power smell sweeter than others.

"Mixed with pine," she tosses at me, her face uncertain, as though she should not have said this to me.

I search her eyes for a lie, or any indication that what she says might not be true, but I see none. I feel like a fool. Why would I believe my father? He knew to play on my weak spot; my mother.

It all makes sense. My father warned me only days ago when Willa resurfaced about her trying to find something that could "hurt" us. If it were something out there that existed, why not warn me before then?

What would have made the pack go after the Coven of the Sacred Veil? Was it random? Was it... planned? Why would they do the very thing our ancestors did, only to have to start all over again.

Fear, I hear a whisper in the wind, and I shrug it away. *THEY* are the last people I want to hear from, though they might have a little more insight to this situation than even I can imagine. And then it hits me. I see the faces of Willa's parents in the clearing of my mind. How much they loved her; how much she loved them. My heart saddens... pierced for the love she's missed.

“I thought they got caught up in the chaos. I never thought in a million years they were witches. But we were both children. How could I have known? Willa, I’m... I’m so sorry,” my words give way to water-ridden eyes from Willa.

I don’t know if she’ll reject me, as I did her, but my instincts compel me to comfort her. My arms go around her. They’re exactly where they’re supposed to be. Willa’s face cradles against my chest as her shoulders bounce with years of hidden grief.

My chest is wet with her tears, and I want nothing more than to remove this pain from her, though I know it is a feeling that will not easily be healed. It will take time, peace, and freedom. Three things she deserves most.

I release one arm from around her and swipe her tears away with my thumb. As I do so, she looks up and into my eyes. I feel under a spell, a trance, even as we hold each other’s gazes. Somehow, I know that this isn’t Willa using her magic on me and that I have nothing to fear. This is something that is bigger than either one of us alone.

Willa tilts her head up, and back just a bit. Her fluffy lips are perched out, as though she wants me to take them. It will take nothing for me to give in, to reach out for her gorgeous mouth. I don’t believe she will reject me this time, and if she does, it will still have been worth it.

I press my lips against hers, gently, and she does not go still against me. Instead, she gives in and wraps her arms around my neck. I back her against the couch, to which we topple

over it and off of it. A slight giggle leaves her lips, and a chuckle from mine, but we are mandated back together like magnets who can't deny their pull.

I'm on top of her, my blanket has fallen off of me. Willa's legs reach around me, pressed against my backside. Even through her jeans, I can feel and smell her arousal.

I reach for her sweater, and she helps me to get it off of her. If I had known what she was hiding under her sweater a week ago, I would have been weakened simply by her bountiful mounds.

My hands immediately go to her protruding chest, slipping her bra from around her cups. Large brown erected buttons surprise me, and I drool at the thought of sucking on them. My lips hover over her right breast, and her breath catches as I envelop her erect nipple into my mouth.

Willa begins wiggling out of her pants, and I reach down to help her pull her legs out. Our eyes meet one another; we silently ask the other for permission, and our consent is our lips meeting again.

But my hunger is for her needy chest.

I won't choose between the two. My tongue flicks across both sides of her chest, her circular gum drops hardening even more as my saliva courses over them.

Her legs wrap back around me, and I feel a splash of wetness against my stomach. My dick stands up at full attention. I need to be inside of her.

Willa scoots closer to me, bringing her center toward my stiffness. I feel her lips coasting along the smooth edges of my engorged dick.

I reach between us and guide the head of my rod toward the center of where her wetness leaks. I want to taste her, but will come undone if I don't feel her gripping me soon.

Moving her panties to the side allows me a full view of her plump and swollen lower lips, and a labia that needs to be stroked.

With her legs spread wide, I dig deep into her, slowly giving her an inch at a time until I've reached her limit. My nine-inch limit. Her head tosses back, and Willa's top row of teeth bite down onto her bottom lip.

I groan as I push in and out of her. She feels so good underneath me. I've never felt anything like this before. No other woman has ever satisfied me this way.

As I stroke her center, her labia brushes against my cock, and my fingers begin fondling it. Willa's walls grip against me, and as she releases a moan, her eyes shoot open, and for the first time in my sight, her eyes have both gone completely white.

She presses her hands against the sides of my head, and she looks at me. Her eyes are locked onto me, and mine are on hers.

She smiles, and my dick jerks; a sign that my climax is near. I look away from her momentarily. I want to last for her, and I

won't if she keeps glaring at me.

When I turn to look over my shoulder, I notice my skin is emitting a milky glow. My skin tingles, and I know for certain, if I did not before, that Willa is my mate.

I don't know how.

I don't know why, but she is mine, and I am hers.

For hours, we rumble around. Kissing, fucking, touching. Staring. We do not speak.

We exchange a giggle.

A chuckle.

Another kiss.

We cuddle.

We fondle one another...

And then we make love again.

The sun reaches the sky before we're done, but it sings us a lullaby as we fall asleep in one another's arms. I have no idea what will happen when we wake up, but I know I don't care as long as we figure it out together.

Chapter 11



Willa

Of course, when I genuinely need you, neither of you are there. Hello? Dora... Amelia? Come on ladies... I have questions, and I need answers...

With my eyes closed, I've been calling to them for an hour. I have not had the courage to let Emre know that I'm awake, and his snores are comforting. I'm confused and slightly afraid, but during our love-making, I felt a shift. An energy take over me that I've never felt before in my life.

This is the worst time for Amelia and Dora to have gone quiet. I need them now more than ever.

My first thought tells me to run, but I think better of it when I realize how comfortable I feel, with Emre's arms around me. My head rests against his chest, and my hair is slightly covering his lips.

"I can almost hear your thoughts. Everything okay down there?"

"I thought you were sleeping?"

"I was, but I can... feel your uneasiness. So, I'm asking again is everything okay Kitty Cat?" He groggily asks and begins kissing the top of my forehead. Everything in me but my heart tells me to run. I can't just sprint out of here, and I don't know if it's fight or flight, but I'm conflicted on staying or leaving.

"Everything is okay. I'm just... confused, I guess you can say."

Emre slightly leans up, and my body shifts to the side. He places his back against the living room wall, that we've somehow migrated against throughout the night, and I'm about to turn my body around when he pulls me back against him. Wherever I thought I was going, it's clear I'm not now.

"I think confusion is probably extremely normal. Our relationship seems to be shifting, and—"

"No... not shifting. Something happened between us. My eyes. I saw them in the window. They were both white."

"And they still are. Well, the other one is turning back, but slowly."

My hand shoots up to my eye that usually isn't white. For some reason, I feel bashful about it changing in front of him. That's never happened.

"Don't hide it. I think your eyes are beautiful in any form, Willa. Just as beautiful in my arms," Emre whispers, and there's a huskiness to his voice that stirs my insides again. We can't do this all day. No matter how much I wouldn't mind doing it.

"Emre, we didn't even discuss our first kiss."

"Doesn't seem like that's what we need to discuss. We might want to talk about the fact that we're mates now."

MATES... the word rings in my head with even more confusion than before. I'm a witch; we don't have "mates."

"But, I'm a witch. Shouldn't you be looking for someone else? Someone more like you?" I ask and tilt my head upwards

to look up at him.

He looks down, his smile soft and his eyes kind. “Who’s more like me than you, Willa? I know what I felt. My skin has never ever glowed once. I’m willin’ to bet your eyes have never gone completely white. We mated last night. We need to be talkin’ about what to do next, not worrying about semantics and how we got here.”

I open my mouth to detest his direction, and he places his hand around my head and over my mouth. “If you don’t have anything positive to say, then just listen. I don’t have one thing holding me to this place. I could pack up the pack today and leave. Hell, we could all use a fresh start. They will follow me, I’m sure, with hesitance and reluctance.

My father, uncle, and cousin are on the counsel of The Divine, but they can’t tell me what to do. It’s been easier to just go with the flow, but now, with this... change and new information, there’s no way I could betray you by abiding by anything he says or does.”

Emre removes his hand from around my mouth and then brings it up to my hair. He caresses my scalp as I let his words sink in.

Stubborn is what I am, but I’m done fighting him. I’m done fighting what this is between us. He’s right. Semantics don’t matter. We need to figure out where we go from here. Moving forward.

“You’re right, and I want to support you and the pack however I can. But, it will take some time to adjust Emre. I

don't know how either of us will just jump to be in the other person's life—“

“The same way we did as children. One day at a time. You've always been my best friend. You've understood me when others did not. We'll always be able to rely on that. To rely on each other. We'll figure it out one day at a time, and the way you will support me with the pack, I'll do anything to support you.

“You're my responsibility. You always were. It makes sense now why we were so close as children; I just didn't know about the mating bond, at least not to this degree. I understood as soon as it occurred last night. You were meant for me. Made just for me, Willa.”

Emre places a longing kiss against my forehead, and I press forward toward his lips.

It would be extremely hard to deny him after a proclamation like that.

“Speaking of support, I briefly mentioned my family being inside of the amulet. According to my mother's journal, I need a certain amount of strength to set my family free, and I'm not sure if I'm strong enough. I have found a spell that could help free them, but if I'm not strong enough, it could kill me. I need to figure out a way to gain more power,” I admit, something I wouldn't have freely admitted before. I've been studying this journal for as long as I can remember, and I feel as though I only get a page down a day because there's so much to digest.

“Hm... power is a strange thing. I don't know what I can do to help, but whatever it is, I will. I know the Coven of the Sacred Veil commune with the spirit world. I gave up on them, but perhaps you can ask them for a little guidance. A little information on what you can do to gain more power. Whatever we need to do to get it, I'll make way for it,” he says, and with all of the promises he's making, my soul shudders with completion.

I feel every word he says to me, and I know without a shadow of a doubt, he's being honest, and he's right. If Dora and Amelia resurface, they'll be the first people I ask.

“Thank you, Re-Re. We have a lot to figure out, but I suppose we don't need to figure it out today. Day by day, one step at a time.”

“Yes, and the next step for me is a shower. Join me?”

My lip quivers with want, but I have to decline because I hear chattering amongst Dora and Amelia. Perhaps they've finally decided to show up.

“I'll be up in a minute. Give me a minute.”

“You bet, but don't be long...”

“Yes, alpha,” I seductively quip and then rub my fingers down his belly. His flaccid penis jumps, stiffens, and then slaps against my hand.

“Okay, big boy, I'll meet you in the shower,” I say again. Each time we touch, our bodies command orgasms from the other. This could be extremely dangerous.

Emre kisses me on the forehead once more and then rises and heads for the stairs. The moment I can no longer see him, I hear Dora first.

In order to set your family free, you must first know the truth.

What truth?

Brace yourself. Your mate will need you more now than ever, Amelia chimes in, and as I open myself to listening, tears rush from my eyes like running water.

If what they tell me is the truth... the truth of setting my family free, it will not only affect me, but Emre. He may never be okay again once I tell him the truth, and I can't hide it from him.

He's been lied to enough, and as his mate, best friend, and whatever else I am to him, it's my duty to tell him what he doesn't know.

I would have never thought our destinies would be tied together like this, but it's all for a reason.

One I hope reveals itself soon enough before another truth destroys Emre or myself.

Chapter 12



Emre

After Willa joined me in the shower, I made the decision to give her a rest and close the shop down for the day. There are a lot of things that still need to be taken care of, but if we tried to handle everything today, our heads would break.

Willa is taking a nap in my bed. I don't want to sleep separately anymore. I'm enthused and happier than I've ever been, and Ethan comes to mind. I remember him saying he wanted to spend more time with me, and it would be nice to have someone to share this happiness with.

The way Willa is snoring, I don't think she'll be waking up any time soon, and I won't be gone for long. I jump into a gray thermal shirt and a pair of blue Jean overalls with tan work boots, grab my keys and crank up my F-150.

Before I leave the gravel driveway, my phone starts to vibrate. When I pull it out of my pocket, there's a text from Willa going across the top.

Smash and dash? ☐

Of course not. I was heading to see Ethan because you were sleeping.

I want to go; he seems lonely.

Meet me in the truck, lol...

I can see now that I won't exactly be able to deny Willa. She can have anything from me she wants now. Even when I thought about saying no, it felt... wrong, even through text.

I place my phone in my lap and wait for Willa to come out. Twenty or so minutes later, she still hasn't come out, so I go back inside to see what's taking her so long, and then send a text to Ethan letting him know Willa and I will be on our way shortly.

Don't worry about coming this way 'cuz, I can come see you. Don't much feel comfortable having company here a lot. If it's okay with you...

It is, of course, okay with me, but I wonder why he doesn't feel comfortable... I know that something traumatic happened to Ethan other than him being outcasted. He's a bit... strange, but I don't know what it is.

That's because you won't listen, I hear a spirit speak to me. If you were open to knowing the truth, you'd know it. But you shut us out—we cannot guide you.

Yet, I'm currently hearing you...

Because you recently mated. You're vulnerable.

That's the last thing I need to hear or feel. Being vulnerable is not good for a wolf like me, who struggles to control my temper.

I notice something from the corner of my eye, and I believe it to be Willa. With a smile on my face, I look to the top of the stairs, but unless Willa has become an essence that does not walk but floats, it's definitely not her.

In fear of what could happen to Willa, I rush toward the staircase and up the stairs. The scent is familiar, though I have

not smelled in in years. It smells like tulips and dark chocolate.

Mom?

I have the power to wield spirit; to see it, to commune with it, though I've forced spirit from my mind and my home many times. This level of vulnerability must have opened me up too much if I believe I'm seeing my mother. She's been dead for years. Why would she be here now?

Once at the top of the stairs, I round the corner to find it, but I find Willa tossing on her jacket instead of Mom, or the possible presence.

"What's wrong?" she asks with a smile pressed against her lips.

Looking past Willa slightly, my eyes drift around the hallway, hoping to catch another glimpse, but I see no one. Whatever was here is no longer. The scent doesn't even stick out to me anymore.

"Nothing. You ready to go?" I ask and direct my attention back to her.

"Liar, liar," Willa whispers and then places a kiss on my cheek. She walks past me and takes to the stairs, and like a lost puppy, I follow her directly down. I don't think this is the time for me to mention to her what exactly is taking place, or what I think I saw.

I lock up the house behind Willa, who's the first out the door, and then get into the truck and take the winding road to Ethan's. Willa and I hold hands the entire way there, and I

can't remember the last time I felt this at peace, though I'm positive there's something lurking around the house.

Perhaps when we get home, I'll ask Willa about it, since I know we both have the spirit affinity.

I know Ethan wanted to come see us, but I want him to know that I'll meet him where he is. He doesn't need to leave his home or be ashamed of it, especially since we already saw it.

When we pull up outside, Ethan is already outside.

"Somethin' told me you wasn't gonna listen!"

"Something, or someone?" I tease and kill the engine to my truck. I wait until Willa has her seatbelt off to exit the truck and jog around the other side to receive her as she jumps down.

"Well, look who yah done brought with yah. I would'a thought you'd be headed out of town since you got what you came to get," Ethan calls over to us. Willa, with a bright smile, hugs Ethan and shakes her head.

"I thought I was coming for the amulet, but apparently—"

"She was coming for me," I chime in and grab her hand when she releases Ethan.

"Y'all two coming together is retribution I bet. Since you both hold an affinity for spirit. Settin' what's broken back right. I like it," Ethan utters, and Willa and I both hold inquisitive looks on our faces. I'm not quite sure what to make of his statement, but hopefully, as we spend time with him, we'll find out.

Ethan once again leads us around the back and into the house. Instead of heading straight for the living room, he takes us into the kitchen.

“I made us some sandwiches. Emre, let me get you one...”

“You knew we were coming, but I’m the one who has to wait for a sandwich?”

“Exactly right. Ladies first, even in this shithole. In all fairness, I knew you were coming, not her, too.”

The three of us laugh, and it’s nice to see the smile on Ethan’s face. I haven’t seen it in so long consistently. Perhaps I do need to listen to the spirit guides more and figure out what happened to him. I don’t know if he’d be willing to, but I’d let him rejoin the pack any time.

Not “under” me, but as my beta. As a co-leader. There’s no one who knows more about The Divine Pack than he does, or even the supernatural communities than him. He’d be a valued asset amongst the pack.

“So, how’d this happen?” Ethan asks, and though I’m the first to open my mouth, Willa forms the words the fastest, and she gives a run down, minus the mind-blowing, all night love making session about how this came to be. How we came to be.

By the time she’s finished, Ethan is done making my sandwich and he takes a seat at the table with the two of us.

“I’m surprised you didn’t walk the spirit plane, Cuz. Sounds like something that would’ve been... enlightening,” Ethan

says sarcastically and rolls his eyes. I can't help but laugh at that.

“You know you're the youngest of us to spirit walk. I have only done it once and wasn't successful in finding who I was looking for. I've also abandoned the spirits, so I don't think I'm much meant for that,” I admit.

In the middle of eating her sandwich, Willa places it on the plate and rubs my back. Even though we have not discussed it, I can tell from the look in her eyes she can feel my sadness. This will be just another thing we need to discuss later.

“You might have abandoned them, but they haven't abandoned you. They're always chattering about you, about the pack. Now this. This is the reason I was kicked out the pack, you know?” Ethan leans in to take a bite of his sandwich like he didn't just drop a bomb on us.

“What do you mean, this is the reason? What, exactly, is the reason?”

“Well,” Ethan takes another bite of his sandwich and then continues. “Around the time that I got kicked out the pack, I accidentally spirit walked. I was given a message from our ancestors. The message was loud and clear; do not pursue the Coven of the Sacred Viel. It was clear as day. I came back and told my dad and your father, and because I kept persisting that they should not go after them, I was outcasted.

“To silence me, they created an omega, and at first, I was devastated. I had to learn how to survive on my own, but now, I'm thankful. I realize it was all for the best, and it has clearly

ended up working out for the best. This is good for the two of you. In a way, I feel kind of fulfilled.”

Willa reaches across the table and takes Ethan’s hand. I can’t say I like him touching her, but I don’t mind that we’re all strengthening this bond between us. I think Ethan might be the only one who truly understands what’s going on in the packs, and he might be the only one who can help me.

His father, Liam, and his brother, Ben, have attributed this to the disruption and chaos that has befallen our pack. I wasn’t extremely passionate about fixing things before. I was more focused on pouring money back into the pack, but now I realize that getting away from them has taken me away from my purpose and from doing what I need to do, not only for Willa, but for the pack, and its members who still matter to me.

We spend another hour or so with Ethan, laughing and sharing stories. It doesn’t seem like the time to ask him to tell us more about his story of living alone. We have all the time in the world to still get to know each other. I’m just glad we were able to enjoy one another’s company for now.

“Alright, Cuz, I think we’re gonna head out. If we laugh any harder, my gut is gonna bust.” I rub my hand across my stomach, and Willa reaches out to grab my hand. Her touch is exactly what I’ve always needed.

I love this woman.

“I get yah. Come on, let me walk you out,” Ethan politely says, and he walks us through the back door.

“Next time, you can come to my...”

We’ve made it outside, and I sense something. My arm speedily stretches out across Willa. I don’t want her to take another step.

Ethan looks over at me, and his eyes glow golden and then white. We both shift on cue, preparing ourselves for whatever might be lying in wait for us in the front of Ethan’s cabin.

Chapter 13



Willa

It's been a long time since I had to exercise my magic muscles. I haven't had to summon it in so long, but I feel it humming beneath my skin, just under my fingertips.

Ethan and Emre shift. They're both beautiful; Emre with his white coat like a snow wolf. His eyes are white with a golden ring around them. Ethan's eyes are similar, though his pelt is as gold as the ring around Emre's eyes.

There are five wolves surrounding us. Two of them pace the length of Emre's truck. There would be no way for us to get inside without incurring some type of damage.

There are three others, who are much larger, guarding the fence of Ethan's home, and the only way to bypass them is to fight.

Stay behind me, Willa. We'll take care of this, Emre's voice enters my mind, and there's no way I would ever allow him to fight for me when I'm capable of also joining the fight.

"Perhaps you're the one who should stand behind me." My words reach Emre's pointed ears and he turns his head slightly over his shoulder. I wink at him and maneuver around Emre and Ethan to stand beside them.

The panic in Emre's voice is not lost on me. The wolves growl, thumping their paws against the ground as though they're ready to pounce. From beside me, I hear Emre's growl the loudest—he growls with the power of four wolves on his own.

Ethan and Emre nod their heads at one another, and the two of them run full speed ahead. Ethan bites the neck of the first wolf, adorned in black fur. His fur is so dark, it reminds me of obsidian pearl. Saliva drips from his mouth like a rabid dog as he attempts to give way to Ethan's bite.

Emre handles the other two wolves on his own. He headbutts the auburn-colored wolf, instantly knocking him to the ground. The other, whose pelt is as white as Emre's jumps toward Emre next, and the two collide and knock one another to the ground. Emre shakes his head, gathering his thoughts. My eyes are drawn to the wolves by the truck. They're staring at me, waiting for me to make a move.

They're underestimating me. I can tell by the way they slightly smirk.

I do not know these wolves, Willa. Be careful, Emre's voice reaches me as I call on Dora and Amelia to boost my powers. Not knowing these wolves could mean they're extremely dangerous. Rogues even.

Emre looks over at me, and in the blink of an eye, his pelt turns transparent, and he disappears like camouflage in the wind.

"Sexy," I whisper, and raise my hands toward the incoming wolves. They've taken off running toward me, and as they leap into the air, I use the strength of myself, Amelia, and Dora to halt them in the sky.

"Levō!" I call the Latin word for levitate and hold them midair. The wolves slowly spin on their sides, and I check

behind me to see if I can be of use to Emre and Ethan. I'm the one who's late to the party apparently, because the three wolves behind them are slain. Their eyes are completely closed, and their tongues hang out of their mouths lifelessly.

Ethan and Emre approach me. I hear them shifting behind me. I do my best not to stare and gawk at Emre's hefty package, but even soft... I struggle to not see it.

"Well, who do we have here?" Emre questions, staring at the wolves. "Can they talk like that?" Emre looks directly at me, and I nod.

"Only their bodies are paralyzed. Their thoughts should work just fine if you can still communicate."

"I most certainly can. They completely understand what I'm saying. Now, who sent you?"

Emre folds his arms over his chest and awaits an answer for the wolves. It's been a long time since I've used this spell, and my arms grow tired, but I know I'm strong enough to hold them. I can keep them in place for now.

"Seems like they ain't got nothin' to say, cuz," Ethan murmurs as he steps in front of me and bends underneath the wolves, giving them a once over.

"Oh, they'll talk," I persist and lower one of my hands, but not before whispering, "Manere," the Latin word for stay.

My fingers wiggle, and a transparent essence wriggles out from my fingers. It's Dora. She's the one I call upon because I know how Amelia is about possessing people. The point of

wielding spirit is partially this—to help me when I’m in desperate need.

Dora’s spirit detaches from me and enters the first wolf. His eyes grow wide, and a slight howl releases from him. Must have been painful.

Good, I can’t help but think. I don’t typically condone violence, but these guys have it coming.

“Now, ask this one what you want to know.”

When I look over at Emre to advise him, his mouth hangs open in shock. For someone who also wields the power of spirit, I would think he has a similar power. There would be no reason for his surprise.

“Now, what are you doing here? Who sent you?” Emre questions again, and we patiently wait for an answer.

Against my hold, I feel something pushing my magic.

She wants you to let her shift, Amelia advises, and I replace my hand to the other wolf, and release the hold on the one Dora possesses. In an instant, it’s on the ground, writhing, changing back into human form. It’s a woman with long blonde hair. I would not have thought a woman would be amongst them, amongst a killing party.

The woman stands up, almost robotically. Her body is being controlled completely by Dora, and she begins to speak.

“The alpha ordered us to kill...k—“

One moment, the blond is talking, and the next, her heart is being ripped out from the center of her chest. I'm in such shock that I release the hold on the other wolf, who takes off running toward the woods.

I, of course, cannot see the force that ripped the heart from the woman. Dora finds her way back inside of me, and I feel whole and complete, but slightly more alarmed.

“What was that?” I query, my gaze shifts between Ethan and Emre.

“I saw nothing,” Emre mentions, and Ethan seconds that by shaking his head from side to side.

“Whoever it was got some strong spirit magic. I couldn't even see them myself,” Ethan admits, and this is surprising news. Who could be carrying that kind of spirit magic and where would they have gotten it from.

“I think we need to go. Ethan, why don't you come with us, at least for the night—“

“Cuz, I appreciate that, but I ain't never ran from a fight, and I damn sure ain't gon' do it now. Take Willa home and y'all get settled. Let me know when you're safe. They won't attack twice,” Ethan assures Emre, and I'm not so certain of that. Emre places his hand on my elbow and gently steers me toward the truck. I have no idea what the hell is going on or why this is taking place. What I do know is that it's clear, we've made enemies with someone, and they're after our lives.

With what I've found out about the secret lurking in Emre's home and now this, I don't know how much more I can take.

We've got a growing relationship or mate bond.

A presence I haven't quite brought myself to talk to Emre about and now an attack... The time for secrets is over—Emre and I have to have a talk, and soon.

Chapter 14



Emre

I could take the floors off from all the walking I've been doing. My head is foggier than it's ever been. Willa is much stronger than I thought she would be, which is a blessing because without her, we would have never gotten the first piece of the puzzle—an alpha sent them.

Considering one of their hearts was ripped out by an invisible source, I can only surmise that it must have been someone from The Divine Pack, but why couldn't I see them? There was a heavy sense of spirit, but I assumed that must have been from Willa and her spirit guides. I still have so much to learn about the Coven of the Sacred Veil. I don't know if there's enough time in the world to cover all the things I need to know about her and what her capabilities are.

Not to mention Ethan. I'm worried about him. He's stubborn, and while I appreciate the fact that he believes lightning won't strike twice in the same place, I can't personally believe that. I'm cautious, and maybe if I had been a bit more cautious, who knows what we could have accomplished.

“Re-Re, can we... talk about something? I need to talk to you about something.”

I've almost torn up the tile on the floor in front of the door by the time Willa approaches me. Seeing her face temporarily brings me back to earth. There aren't enough words in the English dictionary to describe the peace she brings me, and I'm thankful for her help today. I'm thankful that she made it through the day.

“Of course, what’s up?”

I place my arm around her neck and pull her in for a kiss. Her lips bring me a calmness I wouldn’t have expected. But she’s everything I need and more.

Willa giggles nervously, and I’m not sure if it’s from the kiss or what she wants to talk to me about, but when I take a seat on the couch, she doesn’t sit down with me. She instead stands in front of me, and the perplexed look on her face worries me.

“Everything okay?” I quiz and lean back into the couch. I don’t want her to know that I’m just as worried about what happened earlier than anyone else. I have a pack to protect, and now a mate, who I would literally kill for.

“Everything is... no, everything is not okay. I think today has something to do with what I found out,” she starts and places her hands in front of her. She twiddles her thumbs around, and her eyes meet the ground.

“Found out when? About what? Willa, you’re gonna have to give me a little more information.”

“Right... okay. This is about the pack. Well... I think it’s about more than the pack...”

“Willa, baby, spit it out. What could you have to tell me about the pack?”

I’m now sitting straight up and forward. My hands are put together, and my patience is wearing thin. There’s a burden on my shoulder concerning the pack, and I need to check in with them, but first, I had to calm down and make sure Willa was

safe and secure. I would not only kill for her; I'm prepared to die for her, and that can be even more dangerous.

“I don't actually know how to say it, so I'll just say what I know. Please know... I do love you, Emre, and you know I can't lie—“

“Willa, out with it!”

‘Your father killed your mother!’”

Willa's words fly from her mouth like vomit, and her hands slap the sides of her face, covering her expression.

The words slam into my chest like a dagger, and there's no way this could be true. Where would she have even heard that?

“How could you know something like that? Who've you been talkin' to? Willa, I'm-I'm gonna need a little more information than that.”

Willa takes a seat on the wooden coffee table in front of me, and she bends over and reaches for my hands. I'm hesitant to give them to her, but I'm not mad at her. I'm just wondering where she heard this... almost preposterous information. I embrace her hands in mine and listen to her explanation.

“The spirit guides told me. I thought I was going crazy when I first got here and sensed a presence. Then I saw her, but I didn't realize it was her. It honestly wasn't until I physically laid eyes on her the other day that I realized it was probably true. Plus, why would they lie to me of all people?”

Her hands drop from mine. I don't personally believe in trusting the spirit guides. They've broken my heart on more than one occasion, and I can't trust that the information they give is at all valid, but why would they lie to Willa about this, and what would be the purpose?

Tears breach the rims of my eyes. I don't want them to fall. I'm not supposed to still be this hurt about the passing of my mother. Although, I always knew there was more to it than I was led to believe. My mother was a tough cookie and hard to take down. She wasn't some delicate flower, so to find out that there was a home invasion that took her from me... it never made any sense.

But my father killing her? Killing his own mate? I don't see how he could do something like that. The thought of something happening to Willa makes my stomach clench. I would gladly throw myself on a knife for her, and I would have done that for her before finding out that she was my mate.

I want to scream, but that would do nothing. I'm tempted to return to the pack and rip out my father's throat. He was probably the alpha who sent those wolves after us, but why? It can't all just be about Willa. Perhaps now it's because of what Willa's telling me. If the spirits told her about what happened, it's plausible the ones attached to him could have told him about her knowing.

"I'm... speechless, Willa. Why would they tell you instead of telling me? I mean, I know—"

Because you shut the spirit world out long ago, Em. I asked them to tell Willa because I figured you'd hear it better from her than the spirits..."

My next sentence is at a standstill when the wind blows slightly and the curtains sway a bit. In the corner of the room, my mother appears. It's been so long since I've seen her. My knees feel like they'll give out if I stand up. She's as beautiful as I remember. Her voice is as gentle as her heart, but still resonates and packs a punch. I guess that's the job of a mother.

"Mother... how... how long have you been here?"

She smiles a crooked smile, something I've always loved about her, and she approaches us. She looks Willa over; a wider smile replaces the crooked one and she comes closer to us.

I've been waiting all this time for her. Had you not shut out the spirits, you would have known this story much sooner. Son, I did not raise you to be this hardened... so.... Tough. You were such a sweet boy—

"Something I was robbed of when you were taken from me."

Something you let yourself be robbed of. You chose to ignore the spirit guides because of the pain you've experienced, but you need them. I know you believe you can't trust all of them, and that's true, but in your heart, you know which ones are good and which ones are not. You have a great sense of judgement, Em. You always have...

I know my mother's words are true, but without knowing what happened to her, the truth, I thought I needed to keep the spirit guides away from me. They betrayed me, I felt. Whether I was wrong or right mattered not to me.

“Mother...” I become choked up, and Willa places her hand on my back and gently strokes it. Her touch is exactly what I need to recalibrate.

“What happened to you?”

Her gaze stretches between her and Willa. When her eyes fall back on me, Willa nods her head, and my mother begins telling her truth.

The reason I waited for Willa is because I knew the truth would have ripped you apart then. That's why when you spirit-walked I did not allow you to see me. I would have ruined everything by telling you the truth. Every step you've taken has led you to right where you're supposed to be.

Your father killed me because I found out the truth about the Coven of the Sacred Veil. That the pack was responsible for The Great Massacre. I always knew that Willa and her family were witches. I did not care about that at all. I had no reason to. Willa's parents were good to us, and Willa was your best friend. I loved her. I still love her.

I found out after overhearing your father and uncle one day discussing their next steps. We are not the only supernatural creatures or even shifters who contain the power to wield spirit. It was your father's hope that he would eliminate everyone he deemed a threat. He betrayed the Coven of the

Sacred Veil's peace treaty that The Guild created by killing them, and he was able to cover it up through a corrupt member. I never found out who it was.

I never believed I had a reason to fear your father, but I should have known. He clearly wasn't himself. I now know that he allowed malevolent spirits to twist him to their will, to drive him crazy, and in doing so, he carried out their rotten will. I'd noticed a change—even in his scent. He smelled... bad. Wrong.

I confronted him, we tussled, and in the blink of an eye, I was gone. I saw the look in his eyes—it was an accident. He did not purposely kill me, but he lost control. He lost his way —

“I'll fucking kill him!” I pull away from Willa's touch and get closer to my mother. I reach out, and for the first time, I'm able to touch her. Her ethereal skin is solid and pink. She's as fleshy as she was when she was alive. I've never been able to touch a spirit before. I suppose being so angry, I'm able to do so.

Son, killing him will not solve the problem. If you kill your father, your soul will never rest.

“My soul has not been able to rest since the day you were taken from me, Mom.”

My voice begins to break as I pull her in for a hug. It's the lightest, most satisfying hug I've ever felt in my life, and it's what I need most in this moment. I can even smell her scent—raspberries and mint.

She rubs my back and squeezes me tighter.

Son, you may think you are at unrest, but taking the life of your father will ruin everything beautiful about you. I've been here all along... always watching. Waiting for the moment, Willa would return. The spirits told me many years ago she would come. I just had to be patient enough. Your father lost the respect of his mate— don't lose the respect of yours. She can be your peace in this storm called life.

And in telling you this, Willa, I have something to tell you as well...

My mother releases me and she goes over to Willa, who is also able to grasp her hands. We both look at one another with shock. This is another magical mystery we'll need to figure out later.

In order to set your family free, you will need to combine your powers of spirit together. I will become one with my son, and he will be able to channel my power, plus his own, with yours and the spirits you carry. That will give you the strength you need to free them. I've been waiting so long for the two of you to unite. I feel a weight has finally lifted, and I can rest within the confines of my son.

Willa looks to me, and from the light in her eyes, I can see this was what she needed to hear, but I'm not sure how to feel. Of course, I trust my mother, but carrying her with me might be worse than not. I'm used to not having her around, though there's so much pain there. I suppose you have to be careful

what you ask. But for Willa and for my mother's peace? There's nothing I wouldn't do.

“You don't know how much this has helped me today. I've been reading the Coven of the Sacred Veil journal looking for clues, and here you come, just dropping clues off like a detective. Thank you so much. I'll never be able to repay you for what you've given me today.”

Tears rush from Willa's eyes as she hugs my mother, whose eyes have drifted to me. I want to tell her I'm afraid. To tell her that I don't want to absorb her essence because I'll never see her again, although she'll become a part of my spiritual guide system, and she'll always be with me. I was only able to dream walk once, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to do it again. There are so many unknowns.

Son, I can see in your eyes that you're confused. Perhaps a little afraid. You have to learn to trust yourself. Trust the spirit guides you've been gifted with. Your intentions are what draws untrustworthy guides to you. Those malevolent spirits. Your father was led astray because of his own intentions. You are not him. You're stronger. Much kinder. And you've always been innately good. Don't ever forget that...

My mother encourages me and then places her hands on my shoulders. She places a kiss on my cheek, and the spot tingles from where her lips have been. I'll never forget this moment. I'll never forget what she's told me.

“I'll be here to support you, Emre. I think it's pretty clear that I'm not going anywhere. How could I?” Willa teases, and

she grabs my hand. These are the only two women in the world I've ever trusted, and they're probably the only two I ever will. I love them both, and without them, who knows where I would be.

Ready? Mom asks, and I know she means to join me. Willa squeezes my hand gently in support, and I'm as ready as I'm going to be. I'm unable to speak, so I gesture yes with a head nod and watch my mother become a part of the celestial plane once more. Her skin has become a whitened hue, and her essence turns into a thin, smoke like substance. Slowly, I feel her essence begin to fill me. She enters through my heart—the place most reserved for her. When she's completely joined me, I don't feel the pain I feared feeling.

I'm no longer confused or afraid. I feel whole. I feel complete.

I love you, son. Her voice echoes in the shadows of my mind.

“I love you too, Mom... Thank you...”

Willa places her arms around me, and she sniffles lightly into my chest. I kiss the top of her head and hold onto her for a few moments. We have a lot to do now that we both know the truth, and there's nothing I won't do to help her free her family from the amulet.

Chapter 15



Willa

After such a strenuous day, the two of us ended up falling asleep on the couch. It's been years since I've had to exert energy like that. I've never been in an actual battle with other supernatural creatures. Everything combative I've ever learned was practiced as an offense, not as a defensive strategy. I've fallen asleep in Emre's arms, the only place I wish to be, and it's clear to me that his arms are the only place I need to be.

I've unlocked a secret to the amulet, well... Emre's mother helped me unlock it. I'll need the strength of both of our powers in order to be strong enough to set them free. There's still so much I need to learn about the amulet, and I'm even more eager now to know what other secrets it holds.

Being a witch is not easy, especially one with the power to wield spirit. It gets tiresome at times, and a nap, even for a few hours, at times, doesn't seem quite long enough.

It's my goal not to wake Emre as I slip from underneath him. I do my best not to have to move him so much to get from underneath his hold. His arm, thankfully, doesn't thud against his body when I maneuver my body like I'm playing the game Twister from him.

On my feet now, I tiptoe toward the hallway, hoping to make it to my room so that I might get the journal out and do some more studying as well as add a few things to it.

Before I'm clear of the living room, Emre's stretched voice reaches me.

“And where are you going?” His groggy tone carries over to me, and I can hear the smirk in his voice.

“I’m going to get my mother’s journal. I need to do some more reading. Now that your mother has given me another clue, another piece to this huge puzzle, I want to write it down and see what else I need to do to release my family.”

Emre rises from the couch and slowly stalks his way toward me. He wraps his strong arms around me and holds me there for a moment.

“I’d heard years ago that your family didn’t quite ascend to the ancestral plane, but I did not know where else they could go. It was another rambling of Ethan, of course. I believed him, but I didn’t have the strength to ask him what the alternative was. Now, I know. Are they all...”

Emre’s words trail off. I know he does not want to offend me. I’d questioned long ago if it was possible for them to be alive. If any of them had lived at all. But after all these years, and now carrying the amulet, I know they no longer live. Their souls, however, have been at unrest because they are not communing with their ancestors, and they’ve been trapped in what I now know to be a prison world of sorts. A purgatory.

“They no longer live... I’d hoped so. Just for one. But no. The amulet only houses their souls.” My tone is solemn, rigid even.

‘I’m sorry. If it’s any consolation, I will do everything I can to help you release them. We are figuring things out as we go, and I know that’s extremely difficult. But I promise I will

support you through it all. I feel it's only right, as my mate, and since it was my father whose fear initiated such a genocide. I'm—“

“Don't you dare apologize,” I pull away from Emre and look deep into his eyes. “You're not the one who did this or caused it. You didn't even know until your mother told you. The sins of the father are not the sins of the son,” I proclaim, thinking back to his father's appearance the day I ran to their home for shelter.

He did seem a bit disheveled, but he always seemed off... a bit distance. I thought nothing of it. I didn't know to think anything of it then. Had I been older, known a little more, I would have known what he was up to. That he was the culprit who hurt my family.

“While the sins of the father may not be my own, it is my responsibility to set things right. You're not the only one who has a family to put back together. The pack has been separated for a while. They were ruled in fear for so long under my father, and now with me as alpha, I've distanced myself simply to stay away from my father, uncle, and cousin. They are a counsel of sorts.

“I've hardly ever followed their advisement, but now I realize I have to give them the boot. They have brought nothing but chaos and destruction. For what he did to my mother, he will have to pay.”

Emre's teeth grind together, and I remember the words of his mother.

“Not with his life, though. We will figure out another way to give him what he deserves, but death is too easy, especially for someone who carries spirits to commune with. He will only continue to do so in death. There’s a punishment worse than death for him—we just have to figure it out.”

Emre’s tense expression is replaced with a grin, and then he presses his lips to my forehead.

“For my father to have gotten rid of your entire family, you are extremely calm about all of this. How are you doing it?”

The truth is, I’ve been without my family for years and years, and no amount of revenge will bring them back. I’ve seen and heard firsthand from other spirits what vengeance can get you, and when you seek vengeance, something that does not belong to you, you become a product of it. Lured into the darkness of it. It’s a cycle I’d prefer to avoid falling into if possible.

“Forgiveness will not be easy. This is something I know, but for so long, my goal has to been to set my family free. I can’t veer away from that path now just because of an uncomfortable truth. You can’t let it steer you wrong either. Remember what your mother said.”

Emre closes his eyes, and I wonder if his mother is speaking to him. When he smiles, it’s confirmation that she’s given him encouraging words, and it’s nice to see him communing with her. It’s nice to share this gift with someone.

In the middle of our conversation, my phone begins ringing. I reach into my pocket and my client’s name flashes across the

caller ID. With so much going on, I'd completely forgotten about him. I slide the answer button across my phone and hold my finger up to Emre, asking him for a second.

"Hello, Willa. I'll be in town in four hours. I'd like to conclude business today if possible?"

"Oh... I had no clue you were coming so soon. Otherwise, I would have already had it wrapped or delivered. I'll make the necessary arrangements and send the information to you."

"Wonderful. See you soon."

"You too..."

The conversation comes to an end quickly, and I place my phone back in my pocket. Concluding this business gives me the emotional closure I think I needed to feel comfortable enough to leave town. With Emre by my side and the information I needed, there's nothing keeping us here.

"That was my client. He'll be here in just a few hours. If you'll still leave with me, now is the time to gather the pack so that we can leave. I'd like to leave sooner rather than later. Especially if we've got trouble on our backs."

Emre arches his brow in confusion.

"Are you afraid?" Emre places his hand underneath my chin, my eyes and his hold one another.

"Afraid? No. Concerned, worried? Yes. Don't forget, just hours ago, your father was trying to kill us."

“Tried, yes, and he didn’t even have the decency to try to do it himself. He’s a coward, and how many people could he have loyal to him? I didn’t sense any wolves with the power to wield spirit, which means they weren’t from the Divine Pack. Of course not. He knows he cannot have a pack member come after me. But, the woman did call him the alpha...”

Wolves and their names and their politics. It would seem simple to just follow the rule of the one who’s taking care of you and making sure you’re okay and that things go properly. I’m not a wolf though, and there are many things I don’t know about wolves and the way their packs are run.

“She did call him the alpha, but that doesn’t mean he’s her alpha, and maybe she doesn’t realize he’s no longer alpha.”

“And that’s my fault,” Emre sulks as he goes to lean against the couch. He runs his fingers through his thick white hair and heavily sighs. “I need to return to the pack, but for now, I just want to make sure you’re okay. We’ve been through a lot today.”

Emre’s protection. His concern. His love for me. There’s nothing sexier. Slowly, I walk up to him and use my knees to separate his legs. He releases a surprised moan from his lips, and I giggle from taking charge.

My arms snake around his neck, and he grips my ass firmly, pulling me closer to him. I don’t wait for him to kiss me—I possess his lips before he can touch mine. I aggressively use my tongue to penetrate his mouth, showing him just how I feel.

Emre hoists me up into his arms, and my legs wrap around him like a spider monkey. I want to be closer to him. Inside of his skin if I can be.

Emre leads us over to the wall. My back slams against it, but I do not feel pain. I thought I'd be able to keep control over Emre, but he knows exactly what buttons of mine to push as he places me on the floor and pulls at my pants. They fall victim to his yanks, and in seconds, his mouth is wrapped around my swollen clit. His wide and thick tongue stretches my labia, and I can feel his tongue like a million tiny sensations prickling me below.

He grips onto my ass once more, rubbing his thumb against the crack of my ass. This only heightens my arousal.

“Mine,” he moans, and I can't help but to shout it back

“YOURS!”

I try to hold it in, but my dam bursts quickly, and his lips are covered with the product of my love. Emre stands to his full height, and I fumble with his pants. He should never wear them. His erection pokes me in the stomach, and that's exactly where I want to feel him. Inside of me.

My leg raises, and Emre glides himself against my slickness. When he slips inside of me, it feels like the first time all over again, and I'm taken by him, quickly but needing. His strokes are tireless, hard, and greedy.

Emre's nails dig into my back as he pulls me closer. My fingers attach themselves to the hairs at the nape of his neck as

I bounce against him, and he pounds into me.

“I love you, Willa.”

“I love you too, Emre. Always!” My screams of pleasure fill the house as we continue making love, and I’ve never been happier that I decided to stay in one place.

As our passions rise, I see Emre’s skin once again turning white... ethereal even. As my climax nears, my eyes turn white again, completely, and I’m almost blind with lust as he continues thrusting inside of me. I wonder if this will happen each time we make love.

We rise to our orgasms and let them wash over us. Emre’s seed spills into me, which triggers my own wetness. Shortly after, we’re both panting heavily like wild dogs. Neither of us move. I don’t think we can. But, the moment we’re done, my mind floods back to the journal. There are things I need to get for the spell, we need to get out of here, and the dawning of the fact that we’re actually running for our lives settles in.

I’m the first to break the unfortunate silence.

“I’m going to head to the back to do some studying. I think that session just gave me the energy I needed to focus.”

“Well, then I didn’t do a good enough job,” Emre chuckles as he removes himself from me. My eyes immediately return to their regular state, and we both begin dressing.

“You did a wonderful job, but I was already headed that way before you distracted me. I want to make sure I have everything I need, and we need to meet the client before we

leave. We both have things to do. Shouldn't you go round up the pack?" I remind him. He wanted to be with me, and we have been together. Now, we need to take care of what needs to be taken care of.

"I do. I suppose you're right, and I'm sure you want the freedom to do some studying. I'll go get Ethan before approaching the pack. My father would never admit to an assassination attempt in front of them, thus he won't be able to detest them leaving, but for just in case..."

Panic settles over me. I hadn't thought about the possibility of danger when he went to get the pack.

"Perhaps I should just go with you," I mention as I pull on my clothes.

"No. I can take care of myself and I'll have Ethan with me. Plus, I'm not leaving without him. For too long, he's been cast aside, and he deserves more. A fresh start. A welcoming back to the pack, and he's going to get it with me."

I can't contain the smile that covers my lips. I can hear the guilt in his voice when he talks about Ethan though he's attempting to rectify the situation. It wasn't his fault to begin with. Again, the sins of the father are not his own. But I'm happy nonetheless. I care for Ethan just as much, and I'd love to bring him along with us.

"Okay, just be careful and stay by your phone so that we can take care of things with the client. Soon, we'll be on our way out of this terrible town and starting our own lives."

Emre kisses my cheek and steps back into his large boots. “You’re exactly right. Don’t worry—soon this will all be over, and we’ll be free to do whatever we want. I’ll go to the shop first to package things up and then go to Ethan’s. One last thing to worry about,” Emre suggests as he heads toward the door.

Once I’m dressed, I strut down the hallway to get my mother’s journal. Before I go into the room, Emre calls my name, catching my attention. I look toward him, only for him to throw a wink my way.

“You’re so silly. Would you go already?” I call to him, and the last I see of him is a smile as he disappears behind the front door

Chapter 16



Emre

I can see myself living the perfect life with Willa for the rest of our lives. We're figuring things out slowly each day. I think that's the best thing we can do. One thing I think we've both had to learn is that life is fleeting, and even though there is life after death, we only have a short amount of time on earth together, and we should use it wisely. I know I most certainly will.

Since my mother merged with me, I've felt stronger. Better. More complete. With Willa and my mother with me, I feel invincible, even though I know I am not. Which makes me think of my father and what he must have been thinking when he killed Mom. Thinking about it now, I realize it clearly drove him crazy, and that must be why he has not been himself. Not just because Mom died, but because she died at his hand.

I can see how killing your mate could drive you insane. The only question I truly have is what drove him to his impure intentions. What caused him to seek the deaths of so many people? Surely it couldn't just be because we wield spirit and they do too. Perhaps it was power—but hopefully he can see how that backfired on him.

He's a drunk and a sack of shit, with absolutely nothing to show for his secret massacre, unless there's more to the story? He did mention how Willa's amulet could hurt us. Perhaps he meant it would hurt us by me uncovering the truth. He went through so much trouble to cover up what he did. It's a wonder

he's still walking around on two feet. I would kill him if it weren't for Willa and my mother.

Always have been a good son. You have, my mother whispers to me, and her voice is the peace I need to refocus my attention. As promised, I've come to the antique shop to box up Willa's client's item. Proceeding with caution, my senses are on high alert as I stick my key in the door. I feel no fear, but I would be stupid to believe I would not be accosted at my business when it was so easy to catch me at Ethan's, which also makes me wonder how they knew I was there.

These spirits who are on my father's side need to be silenced. Perhaps there is a spell for that, to banish them back to the spirit realm. I'll have to ask Willa about that when we're together next, because us simply leaving town won't be enough. If my father is dead set on having me killed, he'll figure out a way to do it no matter where I am.

I won't let him take away my happy ending with Willa. A punishment, a suitable punishment, will have to be carried out. When I enter the antique shop, the coast is clear. I click on the lights and head over to the display case to remove the item. The first thing I need to do is clean it up. I'll box it and make it worth all the money the client is going to drop.

I've used a polish solution to brighten the coat of the amulet, and then place it inside of a microfiber cloth and fold it up. I place it inside of a box and put it into one of the shop's cloth bags and then head back to the truck.

That went by faster than I expected. Heading over to Ethan's again, the sun is getting low. But I don't fear the dark. I'm able to use it as a cover as a wolf. And as a human, it simply signifies the ending of a day.

The closer I get to Ethan's, I scent what smells like metal, iron specifically.

Hurry, son, my mom persists, and I push the pedal down to the floor, bending the curves of the winding back roads.

When I reach Ethan's, the sight before me rattles me. I'm barely able to throw the truck in park before hopping out. I stumble over my own two feet, trying to get to him. Ethan's chest is cut wide open. His skin is ripped into shreds, a wolf's claws marred him.

His legs are partially mangled, and his hands are pressed against his stomach.

"Ethan... w-what happened?" I press harder against his stomach. Blood is seeping out in fast loads.

"M-m-my f-f-father. He-helping you..." His words come out as barely a whisper. Blood stains his teeth, but I'm not ready to let him go, to lose him, especially not because of my own doing. There is only one thing I know to do, and I have to reach deep inside of myself to do it. I have ignored the spirits for so long. I do not know if they will help me. If they will want to.

I shut my eyes and reach deep into myself. I feel the strength of my mother. She's with me, but her power alone won't be

enough to bring Ethan back from the brink of death, and to think his own father did this to him. I should have never left him. I shouldn't have dismissed him so easily, or respected his wishes so quickly.

I know you can hear me... can feel my pain and that of my cousin. If there is anyone willing to help us, I will do whatever I need to in order to save him. Many of you know me as the newest alpha. I may not have made you proud, but that will change. Please, don't let my cousin be a victim of a hate crime. He's one of you... one of the faithful. Please... help me...

I continue to press against his stomach wound, but more blood oozes out of him. His skin turns cold, and he looks up at me. A smile caresses his lips. Peace. But I cannot accept it.

We hear you, alpha Emre. It is not that we will not help you. It's simply that we cannot. The battle was over before it even began. Rest assured in knowing that we have a special place for Ethan amongst us. He truly is the best of us, a spirit responds to me. I can see her on the spirit plane. She's a beautiful white wolf with a black patch in the center of her head. She is the beginning of our line, of the Divine Pack.

But you have the power... can you not—

If we give you the power now, you will not have it when you truly need it. You know goodbye is never truly goodbye. Not for the Divine...

She bows her head to me and exits the corner of my mind.

“Damn spirits,” I say through gritted teeth. I can’t trust them, none of them.

With nothing left to do, I hold onto Ethan’s hands, and with a tiny grip, he holds onto me. I don’t sense any fear coming from him. He’s not worried. I’m the one who seems to be falling apart.

“I’m sorry, Ethan. This is all my fault.”

“S-shh... we-we’ll always be together...” were his last words to me. His eyes turn white, and the life drains from them and then slowly, they shut.

The moment his life ceases to exist, his body begins to glow. His spirit has been released, and as he rises from his corpse, he rises with a smile. His spirit body is free from the damage his physical body suffered.

For a moment, Ethan stares at me, and then he releases a laugh that’s contagious. Through tears, I chuckle, and no sooner than I’ve blinked, Ethan dissipates, and I feel him joining me, just as my mother did.

Forever, cuz, he reminds me, and I’m reminded of what it’s like to have family, to truly be complete. A wave of emotions come over me, and I’m not quite sure how I’m supposed to react or what my next move should be. Out of respect for my mother, I’ve said I would not seek to kill my father, but I did not mention my uncle or cousin.

How am I supposed to deal with this? Combat losing the people I care about? How does he get to strike twice and

receive no consequence? Overcome with emotion, I slump to the ground on my back. All I feel is rage, and I want to squeeze the life from the three stooges. They don't deserve to live. They have not earned it, and I want to see them put away forever.

I attempt to get off the ground, but before I do, I hear Ethan's voice.

Exile. It's even worse than death to those three, cuz.

Determined is what my mother and Ethan are. They refuse to stoop to their level. Yet, I feel that I can find it so easily. I get to my feet, and the moment I'm steady, I hear a nearby tree branch snap. My eyes scan the nearby woods for intruders, and then my head snaps to the left. Another tree branch.

I won't have time to flee. Whatever is approaching is coming my way.

I twist on my heels and come face to face with my father. As he nears me, I scent Liam and Ben nearing me from behind.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could yah? I just knew you'd come back, so I told the boys we'd wait for yah," my father speaks. Blood is smeared across his naked body. I'm disgusted at the view and the scent of his pride is unbelievable. He's proud of what he's done.

"Looks like the three of you don't know when enough is enough. It takes three to attack one? Liam, you should be ashamed of yourself—"

“I did what needed to be done,” he calls from behind me. His hands are just as bloody as my father’s stained chest. Ben looks no different as he sways, as if he’s waiting for something to happen.

“Your son needed to die? For helping me? It can’t be that bad—“

“No! It didn’t have to be, Emre! Now that I know you’re a threat to us, it’s either kill yah or keep you locked up. It’s your choice.”

My father’s eyes narrow in on me, and I don’t even recognize him. This is the man I’m supposed to feel bad for killing? This is the man I should feel guilt for wanting to seek revenge against.

What did you see in him? I seek my mother for answers, and she has only one.

He was my mate, and he wasn’t always this way. You remember...

She’s right; I do remember, which is why it’s so hard for me to accept whatever this is that he has become.

“Take ‘em boys. I don’t want him hurt.”

“Sure you don’t. That’s why you sent wolves after me earlier.”

“No, I sent them after Ethan and that witch bitch of yours.”

My fists ball at my sides. I feel a shift coming on, but Ethan’s voice reaches me, reminding me not to react.

That's what they want. A vengeful mind is no better than their own. Beat them without it. I won't abandon you...

If I go with them willingly, I can perhaps avoid more bloodshed, since it seems he does not want me hurt, but I will have to keep an eye on them and find an opportunity to escape. I have to get back to Willa.

Warn Willa... No, don't warn her. Tell her to go to the store and I'll be home soon. She doesn't need to worry... but she does need to be protected. Ethan—

Don't worry, I'm on it, he responds and disappears from my mental reach.

Liam and Ben advance toward me and grab me by the arms. I've chosen not to struggle, if for nothing else but to simply buy time.

"I say we knock him out. That way he won't know where we're going," Ben suggests, and I look up at my father, expecting him to say no. I should know better by now—he doesn't care about me. He's doing this for his own benefit.

He nods toward Ben, and I make an attempt to get away from them. There's no way I'm going to let them knock me out. But, it's no use. The second I get free, my father grabs ahold of me. For a drunk and an old wolf, he's just as strong as he always was.

Ben and Liam ball their fists and punch me over and over again. Their punches land on my face, my eyes and cheeks.

My body takes multiple hits. I feel my ribs bruise as they continue hitting me.

My bones grow weak, and my knees buckle on me. I hit the ground, and before everything goes black, I see Ben and Liam standing over me with smiles neither of them deserve. If it's the last thing I do, I won't kill them, but I'm going to make them pay.

When I wake, my head feels like the size of a watermelon. I know it's swollen, and I can tell I have a concussion. Wherever I am, I'm tied up to a steel beam above my head, and it reeks of beer and cigarettes. My first thought is I must be inside of my father's home, or what he calls home. But I don't recognize this place, and it seems more industrial.

It's much larger than his home also.

He's sitting across from me in a folded chair. The bastard doesn't even have the energy to stay awake, but he's bullying his own kind. Such a weak piece of shit.

I try to look above me, but each time I do, my head hurts worse, and more blood drains into my mouth. I cough out blood, making sure not to swallow it. This would be a terrible time to choke.

My coughing stirs the bastard, and he wipes saliva from his reddened mouth.

“Good, you're awake. I think it's time me and you had a talk about going forward, what's expected and what you can do.”

“What can I do?” I can’t help but question. He seems to still think he has the upper hand, and of course, from what it looks like currently, he kind of does.

“Yeah. You’re done with Willa. The only way to save her is to cut her loose. She’s holding you back from reaching your potential.”

“She is my potential. She’s my mate, but I guess that isn’t something that matters to you.”

My father twists his head and spits, rising with fury in his eyes. He takes several steps toward me and his eyes are cast upon mine.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means. You killed my mother— your mate. Clearly, the term means nothing to you.”

He slams his fists against my chest, rocking me back and forth. I hear the beam above me creak, and I realize if I can make him angry enough, I’ve found my way out of here. I just have to push his buttons a little more.

“Oh, you don’t like that, huh? What about the fact that you killed an entire society, and you still have nothing to show for it? You’re weak!”

My father packs his punch and knocks me across the face once, and then another time on the other side. He bares his teeth at me, lowly growling.

“I’m not weak. And you don’t know what you’re talking about. Your mother... that was an accident! I never meant... I

didn't—”

“What you meant is of no consequence! You killed her and you've been searching for purpose ever since. Guess what? You peaked the moment you married her! I wish she would have lived, and you'd be the one who died!”

And just like that, my father begins wailing on me. I can literally feel the years of aggression he has built up. His guilt, his shame, his disgust with himself. He's taking it all out on me, and with his final blow, the beam above me breaks, and I drop to the floor.

He's doubled over, breathing harder than an asthmatic. I'm wondering where Ben and Liam are, but it doesn't matter if I can get out of here. “You'll never understand... killing your mother... I just snapped, okay? I've made plenty of bad choices, and that's the worst one of all. I didn't mean to. She found out the truth... that the Coven of the Sacred Veil's ruin was at my hand. She was going to go to The Guild. Your mother was preparing to turn against me.

“We fought. I got angry. As a wolf yourself, you know how that can be son! You must try to understand my side of things! The Coven of the Sacred Veil wields the same power, if not more, than we do. I could not allow them to take over. With their power, they would have surely ruined us.”

“You don't know that! You didn't know it then, and you'll never know! To cover up a poor choice, you made a bad mistake, and now Mom isn't here because of it, and you had

the gall to try to stage it as a home invasion! Do you even care?”

His eyes are trained on me, and slowly I rise from the ground. The knots have gotten loose around the beam since he’s knocked me around a bit. His answer is slow, and any emotion I had for him flees my soul.

“I’ve told you your mother was in the wrong place and made a bad mistake. She didn’t listen. Her not listening is ultimately what got her killed.”

“Is it? All these years... Luther, you said there was a home invasion... I thought—“ Liam says as he enters the room. From here I can sense his pain, feel it as he comes closer.

“It doesn’t matter now, brother! She’s been gone for years, and I didn’t see you trying to find her killer. You accepted what I told you. Don’t go soft on me now.”

My father claps Liam on the shoulder, but from the look in his eyes, I can see the conflict between them. My uncle and my mother had a very close relationship. At one point, I believed him to be in love with her when I was growing up, but I could never prove it.

They spent an unhealthy amount of time together. But now, I realize that was simply an escape from my father. She would have never cheated on him... even though no one would have blamed her for doing so.

Liam shrugs my father off him, and he shakes his head at him.

“All these years, I’ve followed you blindly. I believed that you wanted what was best for us, but how could you when you don’t even know what’s best for yourself? I’ve waited my entire life for a mate, and I’ve surmised now I’m going to die alone. I wonder, though, if I could have met my mate if I hadn’t followed you into all of your bullshit!

“May the ancestors have mercy on me. I killed my son for you! Because I believed in what we were doing, and even then... I’m so weak. I’m the one who’s gullible. I lost my way —“

“Liam, don’t bitch out on me now! We’re almost at the finish line. We can reunite the family, the pack—“

“What family!” Liam shouts in my father’s face, and Ben comes in behind my father from behind a steel door.

“That’s why you sent us on an errand, so we wouldn’t hear whatever you and Emre might talk about. I should have known,” Ben points out, and it’s clear that even though I thought they were all on the same page all these years, perhaps they were just lackies like me. Going along to get along, but everyone has a breaking point, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say they’ve reached theirs.

“What you think is of no consequence. You’re my brother—my little brother. In every area of life, you have to do what I say, Liam, get Emre up from the floor. Ben, help him tie him back up...”

My father throws commands around left and right, and at first, when Liam and Ben come near me, I prepare myself to

fight. If I must break my wrists to do it, I'm going to protect myself. Forget trying to do what my mother asked of me. Exile would be best, but whooping the wolf shit out of the three of them wouldn't hurt.

Yet, when Liam helps me stand up and then unties the knots from my left wrist, I'm just as surprised as my father.

"What are you doing, Liam?" He growls and lowers his gaze upon his brother.

"Help your cousin, Ben. I can't save my own son, but I can and will save yours." Liam maneuvers his gaze to my father, who's standing there looking just as surprised as I currently feel.

His change of heart is baffling to me. Ben unties my right hand, and he helps to take the beam off of me.

Ben and Liam help to take me down, and my legs are a bit weak, but all in all, I'm okay. I'm a bit bruised, but I'm positive I can make it out of here alive.

Wanting to kill my father comes to mind, but my mother's spirit of peace is one I cannot ignore.

You're better than he is. Show him. Prove it to him, she reminds me, and as badly as I want to take him down, I won't, simply because my mother wants me to be better than he is, and if I murder him, despite his wrong doings, I'm just becoming another version of him.

The pack crosses my mind, and then Willa. I'll be no good rounding up the pack if I don't get my own shit together first,

and I had every intention of taking Ethan with me, which isn't going to happen now. I need a new strategy, and moving too hastily could again cost me my life.

I'd tried so hard to be everything the pack needed me to be, but I've thought many times about abandoning them. I know that's wrong, but at times, it felt I was just the face of the pack rather than its leader.

Maybe now that Ben and Liam seem to have gotten some sense about the two of them, maybe things can be turned around. For now, I need to check on Willa, get things together for our departure, and maybe come back for the pack. I doubt my father will let this go so easily. I just need to give it some more time—otherwise, I believe this violent cycle will continue.

Limping my way to the door, I pass my father, who's currently being restrained by Liam and Ben. His eyes bore into me like a hungry predator, ready to snap my neck. I've got one foot over the threshold when Langston calls out to me.

“Emre, I'll never be able to apologize enough for what's been done and for my part in everything. As a start, though, Ben and I are leaving the pack. We'll take your dad with us too. We'll keep our eye on 'em. That's my word as a wolf and as someone who I hope someday, you'll call family again.”

My words are halted in my throat. The last thing I need to do is say anything, because I'm not exactly sure what would come out. I tilt my head, acknowledging his words, and with a

sliver of hope, I leave to return to Willa. I have no idea how long I've been here or what she must be thinking.

Hopefully, she knows that I wouldn't just leave her. I would never do that—I must hurry...

Wandering back to Ethan's, the journey was not an easy one. My legs and abdomen are more busted up than I could have realized, and even for a wolf, with fast healing abilities, it's going to take a while for these to heal.

There's a pain aching at my side. When I look down at it, I notice the blue and purple bruise painted against my rib cage. No wonder it's been so hard for me to breathe. I'm a wolf—I run daily. I should not have been this out of breath, though it makes perfect sense now why I have been.

When I reach my truck, I'm lucky to have found my keys in the driver's seat. That has to be the luck of the ancestors on my side, for once.

Sliding into the driver's seat, I steady myself as to not hurt myself further and then start the engine.

The drive back down is much worse than the drive up. Every time I turn the wheel I take a deep inhale, and my body aches even more from bumping into the door panel and simply turning the wheel.

I've arrived home, and I can barely get out of the truck on my own. I won't call for Willa, though, because she should be at the shop. I hope she's there waiting for me.

The first thing I need to do is change my clothes and then head over there. My sense of time is off, but hopefully, the client hasn't made it just yet.

I haven't sensed Ethan's return just yet... maybe that's a good sign. Though, if today is any indication of signs, I can't trust anything, and I need to move as fast as wolfly possible.

Chapter 17



Willa

This is exactly what I get for using a spell I'm not that familiar with. As a witch, I've had very few opportunities to use my magic, and the few I have had, they have not been without their trials and tribulations.

What the hell was Emre thinking? I'm going to say he wasn't, considering he'd send me Ethan, who's clearly spirit realm walking. That's dangerous, I've heard, if you do it for too long.

I sensed the danger as soon as he entered my mind. There's something that Amelia and Dora are trying to get across. Still, I think Ethan must either be stronger than them to hold my attention, or they're not able to cross his spirit walking power.

The moment he entered my mind and told me that Emre would meet me at home, that seemed suspect. Why would he need Ethan to tell me this? Why wouldn't he just call and tell me himself?

I'm no idiot, and my instincts are usually right. After questioning Ethan to no avail, decided to do a tracking spell on Emre. Luckily, I was able to take care of business and hand off my client's item to him using the key that Emre usually keeps inside of one of the broken bricks outside of the shop.

I was able to use his key to the shop as a catalyst to lead me in his direction, but because it isn't something that is directly marked by ONLY his DNA, I'm getting the run around.

Ethan, I think it would just be best if you told me where he was. I think you let me get lost on purpose.

I don't know what you mean, but perhaps you should head home now, since those were his instructions...

Instructions? Ethan, why are you here anyway? Isn't it dangerous for you to spirit walk for too long? I read up on it a bit a while ago, and those with the ability to spirit walk can either get stuck between planes, or worse, disappear completely. Head back to your body. You've delivered your message.

I'm sorry, Willa. I can't do that.

His voice is filled with sorrow, and panic fills my chest. Something isn't quite right here, and I'm not exactly sure what it is. And, with this failing tracker spell, I do need to get home.

I place the key into my pocket and head back in the direction I came, since I can at least do that much on my own. I've been taken quite a bit of a distance away from the shop, and things haven't changed here, that much, though as the sun grows low, there's more of an urgency to get home.

My feet lead me out of a wooded area, and when I begin to see lights coming from a cluttered area, I know I'm headed back in the direction of the town.

My mind is racing. I know something is off, and I sense it the closer I get to the house, though I'm not sure if it has anything to do with Emre or the fact that I'm a bit nervous coming home with so much money in an envelope. I'm a witch; I have powers, and I can defend myself.

Right.

As I'm walking, I stumbled onto the main road that should lead me straight to the house, but apparently, it won't be without difficulty. With every step, there's a new sound catching up to me. A broken tree branch snaps behind me. Something that sounds like footsteps nearing me.

It isn't until I hear a low growl that I begin to worry, and my senses are validated, when Ethan yells at me.

You need to run!

I don't have to be told twice. My tiny legs get to moving quickly against the pavement. The growls grow louder, and I'm not sure where they're coming from, but I'm not stupid enough to turn around and look.

I have to cross the road in order to make it in the house, and I've run nearly a mile without stopping.

I'm tired. My legs hurt, and my heart is racing so fast. I wish I knew a flying or levitation spell that would support me.

As I make it to the door, I feel a swipe behind me, and I've jumped out of the way in just enough time to miss the paw of a large black and white wolf.

I raise my hand in his direction and freeze him from moving, just long enough to get into the house. I've only been in combat one other time like this—with Emre, and my fear of what could have happened to him has a tight hold onto me. I have to know he's okay.

The door is unlocked, thankfully, and I stumble inside, just barely able to lock the door behind me. A wolf can't come in

here like that, but the shifter behind the wolf can.

I twist on my heels and see Emre limping down the hallway. The look on his face is stern, yet his arched eyebrows tell me he's concerned.

“What's wrong? I could hear your heart beating from outside. What's that...scent?” He questions, and I rush over to him. He's keeping up a brave front, but he's badly hurt, and this couldn't have come at a worse time.

“There's a wolf outside. He chased me home, and—“

I'm interrupted by a loud thud outside.

“Come on out here, Emre. Bring your little witch bitch too. I'd hate to tear up our home.”

Emre's eyes dart to the door, and then back at me.

“You need to hide somewhere. I'll find you when I end this. I tried the civil way, but this guy just won't take defeat,” Emre whispers, and I can tell there's more to this story than I'll be able to get right now.

“I'm not hiding, and I'm not leaving you. We're stronger together, remember?” I reach down and pull his hand into mine. It's so warm, I can only imagine what he's about to do.

“I don't want to lose you... I've lost enough today...” His words trail off and his head falls to the floor, and then like a freight train, I'm hit with an uncomfortable understanding.

“Ethan?” I say aloud. The words are barely audible.

Emre nods his head, and I hold him for a moment. Just a moment. He's lost everyone he loves and cares about, and his father is going to continue to take everything he has from him if he can.

But I won't let him.

I lift Emre's head from the ground. Another bang comes toward the door, and I look him in his eyes.

"This is the only chance we have to rid ourselves of him. We don't have to kill him—we can subdue him and figure out what to do with him later. For now, let's protect your home."

"Our home..." his words instantly hit me, and I've never had a home before. It isn't about this place. It's not about this physical building. My home is Emre. He's my home.

Emre kisses me with all the passion and love in his heart. It flows into me like a battery, charging me up. When I turn to face the door, I'm just as strong as I was before, and I feel no fear. Not with my mate by my side.

With a wave of my hand, the door blows open, and Luther enters the house. He's stark naked, clearly from shifting back into his human form, and I'm repulsed at the vision in front of me. He parades his nakedness with no shame. He's a true villain.

"Good, you've decided to give in. Where's the necklace?"

His question is directed toward me. His eyes are filled with darkness. A darkness that cannot simply be cured by removing

the spirits he listens to. They've taken root in his own desire. Perhaps he is too far gone.

“You'll likely die before I give you the amulet. You'll have to take it,” I sneer, and Emre places his arm around my waist, pulling me out of the way.

“I can't take it. I won't be able to. You'll have to give it to me, and I'd think you'd want to, to protect your useless mate.”

Confusion riddles my face. “Oh yes, of course you wouldn't know. If I try to take it, it will burn me. Unless you give it to me willingly,” he bears down on his teeth, gritting them as he speaks. Spit is flying from his mouth as though he's a rabid... dog.

There are still so many things to learn about the amulet, but there's no way I would give it to him. He would have to kill me, and even then, he would not have what he wanted, because as a spirit, I think I'd be even more dangerous than I am now.

“Well, you can get that idea out of your head. I won't be giving it to you today or any other day. It's been out of my possession for long enough, so it seems we've reached an impasse.”

“Beat you into submission is what I'm hearing. No problem!”

Luther charges our way, and Emre and I separate. He's hurt, but during our kiss, I felt a sort of energy transferal. I think

he's healed up a bit, and he's got pure adrenaline pumping through him now.

Ethan rattles around in my mind, but then I feel him leave. Amelia and Dora are present again.

Missed you girls.

Sorry about your friend, but he's kind of handsome.

Now's not the time for that, Amelia. I need you and Dora to help me.

Amelia slightly giggles, and a loud clash before me brings me back to the oncoming fight. Emre and his father are wrestling one another, and the fight is strenuous. I call Amelia and Dora to my side, and like power cannons, they strengthen the energy in my hands.

I flick my hands in their direction, and rather than stop Luther, I use my energy to focus on Emre, strengthening him and his attack.

Luther gets on top of him and raises his fist to hit him, but Emre stops him with just one hand.

“Mmm... I see your little witch is helping you. I've got help too.” Luther releases himself from Emre's hold and kicks him so hard, Emre flies across the room and into the staircase.

“EMRE!” I rush over to his aide, and Luther is coming right behind me.

I turn around in time to raise my hands and hopefully stop him, but I don't need to. An ethereal glow is released from

Emre and storms into Luther, knocking him backwards. He claws at the ground, twisting uncontrollably. The spirit is trying to gain control.

“No! No, you don’t have my permission. You. Can’t. Do. This!” He screams in agony, and after a few minutes of writhing on the living room floor, he’s out cold.

This gives way to allowing me the opportunity to check on Emre whose eyes are closed, but he has a smile on his face.

“Thanks, Mom,” he whispers before passing out.

After an hour of sleep, for both Luther and Emre, Emre is the first to spring awake. I carted him to the couch from the stairs with the strength of the girls, thank goodness. I’m realizing more and more that I’m not as strong as I should be.

“Where is he?” Emre wakes in a panic, sweat drips from his neck. I’d imagine he probably had a tough time resting.

“He’s over there, where you left him. I don’t think your mother will allow him to wake up until she’s ready, or until you call for him.”

“Mom... Ethan... there’s so much I need to tell you—“

“I think I might know some of it,” I start and place my hand over his lips. “There will be time for explanations. For now, we need to figure out what to do with your father.”

He is currently my number one priority, and enemy number one.

“Yes, and also, I need to speak with the pack. I can hear them. I could hear them in my sleep. They’re in a state of unrest, more so than before. Something has happened there, though I’m unsure of what it is. I... I need to go,” Emre states and swings his legs from the couch, grunting as he attempts to stand up.

“Okay, but you’re not going alone. I’ll go with you.”

“No, you stay here. I can’t risk anything else bad happening to you, and Mom will hold him. She can hold her own. I know you can too, but you’ve been put in enough danger. I can’t lose you.”

Emre places his forehead to mine, and he kisses me gently. His love is like a battery, the positive charge I need to lift my spirits. “First, I’ll get Dad down in the basement and tie him up. I don’t know if he’ll stay unconscious. Mom has him, but she isn’t mean. I don’t want him in the living room. When I return, we can talk about what’s transpired, and then I’ll go, okay?”

I bob my head in agreement and let him take care of his father. He’s so strong, mentally and physically. I don’t know if this is something I could have ever done with my family. Granted, my family is trapped in a purgatory of sorts, something I still need to learn more about. It doesn’t seem like, even with all of my learning, that I’ve learned anything. There are so many pages about the amulet. I need more time, and I need to focus more of my attention to studying.

When Emre returns, he takes a seat on the couch next to me again, places on his boots, ties them, and then begins filling me in on Ethan's ordeal and how he found him. My stomach drops hearing how gruesome things turned out. I knew something was off when he came to me. I should have known it wasn't spirit walking, but I didn't.

All of this is still so new to me, at least this side of things. The side of war.

“And my dad, in revealing his ugly truth about killing Mom, Liam and Ben overheard, and I guess it moved them. Because they freed me and promised to leave the pack. What I don't know, is how my dad got free, when they told me they'd take care of him...”

“He probably overpowered them. Your father is abnormally strong.”

“It's the malevolent spirits I'm sure. Something we have to free him of. Can you look around and see what you can find out about that? If there's something that can be done to return them from where ever the hell they came from?”

“Of course. I'll do some more studying. I was going to look up some things about the amulet anyway.”

“Thank you. I won't be gone long. I need to get the pack out of my head. I'd thought about deserting them earlier. It didn't seem worth it before. But after being knocked out cold, I see things a bit clearer now.”

“I understand. I would never ask you to leave them behind. All things happen for a reason—even when we don’t know it, and even when it seems unfair. I think I’m beginning to realize that,” I confess, and Emre pulls me into him. He wraps his large arms around me, and I settle into them, only for a moment, before releasing him.

“Go... but hurry. We need to be done with all of this, and soon,” I mention for fear of what might happen if I don’t. With Luther coming after us, there’s no telling who might also feel the same. Who might come after us as well.

“I’ll do my best. Keep a lookout for my dad. He’s restrained, but he’s clever. Just... pay attention. I trust Mom, but still...”

I nod my head again and send him on his way.

The door shuts behind Emre and I go straight to the journal and then downstairs to the basement, just to make sure Luther is showing no signs of getting free. Emre has everything on him tied but his mouth. All the way from his shoulder blades to his feet.

“You know, you’re just like your mom. Always in that journal.”

“You didn’t know my mom that well.”

“Oh, on the contrary. I know more than you think I do,” he says sinisterly, a chuckle follows.

Don’t let him bait you, Dora warns.

He wants you to get upset, Amelia chimes in, and I know they’re right, but my blood doesn’t care about that. It’s still

boiling.

“I get it. You want to upset me. Make me miserable. Not gonna work.’

“Oh, it’s already working. Your mother screamed for her life. Begged even. She knew she was going to die, and there was nothing those little witch powers of her could do to protect her —“

“Shut up! Just shut up! You’re so concerned about my mother, when you should be concerned about yourself and the state of the relationship with your son. Do you know he wants to kill you?” I taunt him in return as I leave the staircase of the basement and head over to him.

“The only thing stopping him is your wife. Your dead wife, who’s currently inhabiting your body right now. Keeping you physically docile. If I were you, I wouldn’t throw stones about family.”

My tone is menacing. I’ve never heard it get this deep, but he’s bringing it out of me. I want him to know what I know. To feel pain like I feel it. He can hardly turn his neck, but his eyes tell me everything I need to know.

He’s afraid.

He’s weakened.

He doesn’t know what’s coming for him.

“That’s exactly what I thought,” I tease, and I go back to studying Mom’s journal. There’s nothing inside about how to

release the malevolent spirits, and there's so much about the amulet, but still not enough.

I need to release my family, and I know it will be best if I can do it before we leave. I don't think I can handle carrying them around. And I'm not even sure if I have to do it here or not, but it would be a shame to be gone only to have to return. I need help. And I need it now.

Why aren't the spirits helping me?

Spirit world is up in arms right now. There's talk, but not about the amulet or the spirits. Ethan's arrival has caused quite the stir, not to mention the calamity going on with the Divine Pack. If we knew more, we'd help.

Yeah, normally, I'm the smart one, but Amelia's right. We don't know anything and nobody's talkin'. Sorry, kid.

I sigh heavily in frustration. Something has to give.

Chapter 18



Emre

I haven't even reached the pack lands yet, and their thoughts are killing me. The desperation and despair coming from their thoughts is a heavy burden that I am weighed down from.

Upon approaching, I can't help but notice the ground is stained red. There's been another loss here, perhaps several, considering the amount of blood I'm seeing. Following the crimson trail, I find several of the pack members down on the ground. Several have their throats torn out, and others are still shifted in their wolf form, hurt. Others are running around, trying to help. Something grave has happened here.

"What's going on?" I ask Sam, one of our elder pack members. His family has been with us for quite a while, and the grim look on his face is troublesome.

"Your father came here. Tore up some of the good ones. He's got some bad mojo on him. Considering you're still alive, I guess he hasn't gotten to you yet."

"He tried. Have Liam and Ben been through here?" I look beyond him, hoping they are somewhere present, even though they promised to leave. My father has been busy, and he moves quickly. That's clear.

"Ben tried his best to stand with us. Surprised us all, but your father and his avenging spirits aided in taking him down. Liam is here, helping the others."

Sam points toward the darkened parts of our lands, that are shaded by trees, and I cautiously walk over to them and jump straight into action.

I do my best to help stop some of the bleeding on some of our broken wolves. There are so many. I've come to liberate them, and it seems I'm too late. There's chaos and calamity, and I have to restore order.

That will take time.

An hour or so later, the pack has somewhat calmed down, and the wolves who needed tending have been put back together to the best of our ability. There's no better time than now, I suppose, to try to fix this mess.

I ascend to the pack meeting podium that stands tall in the center of the pack homes. I'm unsure of myself, of what I should say. What can I say to help?

Just be yourself, cuz. They need the truth and someone to help them. Today has taught them a lot they weren't ready to learn, but they need you. They all do.

Ethan's voice is clear as day, and it's just the encouragement I need. I'm not alone, and he's reminded me of this.

I've shut the spirit world out for so long, but I'm done with that. I'm done ignoring my calling and the ancestors. I've seen what disconnecting from them has done, and I can no longer ignore that we need them.

I reach into my spirit, connecting with the part of me that I've cast aside, and I'm instantly filled with the spirits of my forebearers, of those who have been a part of this pack in the past. Our founders. They comfort me, and they stand with me.

“Divine Pack, I come to you as an alpha who has neglected its people. I have no right to ask what I’m about to, but every word I say is true and comes with the intention to help.”

The beginning of my announcement calls the pack’s attention. People begin gathering around the podium. Their eyes are filled with defeat and frustration, and while I can’t fix what’s happened, I can do better going forward.

“For far too long, the Divine has been led in the wrong direction. We’ve been disrupted and our path has been misguided. If you trust me, if you follow me, I will lead us into a new era. One that begins with change.

“I cannot change or alter the actions of my father. I cannot change what has happened here, but I believe that with the help of one another, we can be better. We can do better,” I speak with a voice that even I’m surprised to hear. It does not sound like my own, and I know that our predecessors are speaking through me, with me.

“Why should we trust you? You abandoned us. Didn’t even have the power to stop your father—“ Leo, one of our strongest says, and I have to admit that he is right, but I am no longer that person.

“Trust is something that has to be earned. I know this. I was weighed down by guilt and grief, unable to move forward because I didn’t want to accept what had happened in my own life. I’ve recently discovered the truth that my mother was killed by my father. I know also, that the day of the great massacre, that was due to my father’s fear and several of his...

minions followed him into a war created by his own doing. I have no thoughts of war or malice. I want to fix what my family broke, what we destroyed.”

“He speaks with the backing of our ancestors. Can you not see them!” Sam shouts, and when I look over my shoulder, I’m surrounded by familiar faces. Faces I haven’t seen in decades, and a face, that though new to the ranks, I’m just as delighted to see.

Ethan...

Our ancestors are truly standing with me, and they look at peace and not at all like what I imagine the spirits my father has conjured to look like.

“In reconnecting with our roots, I believe the Divine can be restored to its former glory. We were once a pack of pride, with reverence and courage. We need to leave this land. We need to move on in order to find solace and start anew. I will not force you. I will only ask that you come with me. That you stand with me in moving forward.”

The pack is silent, and I’m not sure what they’re waiting on, but it is Sam who takes the first step.

“My family has been a part of the pack for a long time. The Divine is the only place I can be myself and commune with those we’ve lost. I’d like to help be a part of the solution—not help those in being a part of the problem or become an omega. My family will join.”

Sam wraps his arms around his two sons and his wife joins them. As they step forward, many others stand with him, and it's clear to me who will take the role of beta, should he so choose it after a conversation.

“Thank you. I will aim to be better. There are many things that need to be done moving forward. Gather what you have, the things you would like to take. I believe we will be out of here in less than a week's time if everything goes according to the plan I have in mind. Thank you for your time, cooperation, and most importantly, your belief in me. In the restoration of our pack.”

The pack breaks from the meeting circle, and I converse with several of the members. I ask them to come with me to bury Ethan's body. He does not deserve to be left out in the wilderness, his body a meal for scavengers.

Several of our younger members have agreed, Liam agrees to come also, as he should, and I take them with me in the truck to go to Ethan's place. I won't bury him out, miles away. He deserves to be buried like the member he is. No amount of time of him being distant can make him an omega to me.

He was family, my friend, and I will take care of him as such.

Once that's over, I'll figure out what to do with my dad, and help Willa free her family, and then, I hope, the sky will be the limit for me, my mate, and the pack.

Chapter 19



Willa

My eyes are tired, and there's a stinging pain behind them. I've figured out everything there is to figure out. In order to release them, someone else must go in, and I can't imagine damning someone to that fate. Not even my worst enemy. It would also seem that Halloween is the best time to do it. My power will be the strongest during this time, and at midnight, my power, along with Emre's, must join in order for this to occur.

Luther has been asleep for most of the time that Emre has been gone. I assume evil must take a rest at some point, and since he's not going to get what he came for, he might as well sleep.

The front door creaking open captures my attention, and I leave the basement to meet Emre at the door. When I get to him, he seems worn down, though he does not say it. His eyes are tinged red, as though he's shed some tears. I can tell he isn't feeling like his best self.

My only course of action is to comfort him. My arms twist around his back and I hold him there, in the living room, something that seems to have become our norm. I'm hoping soon it won't be like this. I'm hoping one day, we will hug simply to hug one another and not because we're being weighed down by the shockers of our family drama.

"Is everything okay?" My words muffle against his chest as he cradles me closer.

"It will be very soon. How's our prisoner? You know, before he made it here, he slaughtered some of the pack and left it in

ruins. He's much stronger than I could have imagined," Emre mutters against the top of my head.

How Luther could have had time to do all of that beats me. He must have been planning for something like this. But how could he? Unless he knows someone who can see the future, and even then, I don't know many fortune tellers who are willing to tell the future because of the consequences it can bring.

"I see. Well, we'll have to watch him indeed. I figured a few things out for the amulet release. The best time to do it is on Halloween—"

"That's just tomorrow," Emre points out, and I nod my head in agreement. "I know, and apparently, when the clock strikes midnight, you and I need to be in position to release them. We need a lot of space. The journal specifically said "room for the spell to breathe." I believe I've collected all of the herbs I need for the spell to work."

"Then that's great news. Except, you don't sound so certain... What am I missing?"

Emre releases me and stretches his arms into the air. I can see how worn out he is. I don't know if it's fair of me to ask him to be a part of this. Perhaps I could wait another year. It seems selfish to require this of him, with all of the things that have happened.

"Right, well... about that. In order to release them, I have to put someone else in. It's called a soul exchange. If the amulet is occupied, it must remain occupied."

Emre takes a deep breath and then takes a seat on the bottom stair. He places his hands over his face, and shakes his head. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another, it seems. How do we select someone else to condemn them to that fate? We’re running out of time. We only have a few hours until midnight...”

“I know, I know. I’ll keep reading. Perhaps there’s something else we can do. I’ll do some more reading,” I huff and begin to head back to the basement. Before I can take my leave, Emre reaches for me, pulling me back to him.

“Let’s just... give it a second. I need to rest, and so do you —“

“What about your father?” I hurriedly question. He’s knocked out for now, but there’s no telling how long he will be, and we need to figure out where he needs to go. We can’t keep him as a prisoner forever, and even if we did, we certainly couldn’t do it in a basement. He will eventually have to pee, and eat. Uhh... I’m not cut out for abduction.

“He’s been fine all this time. Let him rot a little longer. An hour nap won’t kill us. Then, we’ll both take a look at the journal and figure this thing out together.”

Emre reaches his hands around my waist and pulls me onto his lap. A small yelp slithers between my lips, and I wrap my arms around him. In his lap, I’m so comfortable, and I could use a second to relax. It does feel nice to let myself just breathe.

We’re so worn out, that when Emre straightens his leg and I slightly descend between his legs, I still find comfort on the

edge of his thigh. Shortly after, we're both headed into a deep slumber. We both need just a little... nap.

And that nap is about to cost me my life. I'm awakened by the back of my stringy hair being pulled. My head has been yanked from Emre's warm body. Instinctively, my hand goes to the place where I'm being gripped, and I try to look over my shoulder to see who has accosted me, but it's no surprise to see Luther standing right behind me.

"Let me go!" I squeal, but my request is followed by a blow to the head. Luther hits me with such force that my vision begins to blur.

Emre jumps to his feet. He's a bit sluggish, but under the current circumstances, I'm just glad he's awake.

"Let her go, now," Emre snarls, his fists ball at his sides.

"I'll let her go when she agrees to hand over the amulet. I'm not sure why you can't tell, son, but this bitch is gonna be the end of us. Of the Divine line. Witches want one thing—to be on top."

"I've never wanted that! Not once! All I've ever wanted was to right a wrong that you created!" I scream, and there's a tingle on my skin that I've never experienced before. My hands heat up, and I'm much stronger than I was before. I'm able to remove Luther's hands from me as easily as I can tie my shoes.

I twist his arm and turn him around, and I notice there's a whiteish glow coming from my fingers that lead up my arms and around the rest of my body.

“Willa, are you okay?” Emre asks and he nears me.

“I don't know. Don't touch me. I'm not sure what's happening...”

I release Luther as my skin begins to tingle. It becomes a burn that I cannot control.

Try to calm down. You've never been this angry... you'll lose control of your spirit magic, but you can use this... Use it to seal Luther in the house.

Dora, how was he able to get free to begin with?

His wife is new to the spirit world, to existing in it. She could only hold on for so long.

Why wasn't I warned? Why didn't anyone tell me?

This is just a thought—not a fact, Willa. The only thing you can do now, is use the power to seal him in the house so that he can't get free. He's clearly stronger than we thought, Amelia suggests, and I think back to what Emre said. His father is much stronger, and it has to be the malevolent spirits he wields. I didn't find anything about releasing the spirits... But, if sealing him in the house will keep him from causing harm to any others, it's a step.

With his arm still twisted, he begs for relief and does his best to maneuver away from me. But he cannot get away. I won't let him.

“I bind you to this place. This time, and this space.”

“I bind you to this place. This time, and this space,” I chant, and a white boundary releases from me and over the entire house. Even if we have to fight to the death, at least it will be in this house.

“You can bind me to this house, but you cannot bind my power. I’ve been charging up for a moment such as this. Simon, Hammond, Remi, come to me,” Luther calls, and faster than I can blink, the light in each light bulb blows out, causing the glass to shatter around us.

The only light in the entire living room is coming from my body and three charcoal spirits surrounding the now shifted Luther. He must have shifted when the light bulbs blew.

I take several steps back, away from the staircase. It looks like we’re going to ruin Emre’s family home, but if the man who bought and paid for the house doesn’t mind it, I suppose it shouldn’t matter. We’re supposed to be leaving this place anyway, if we make it out alive.

With my backwards steps, Emre moves ahead of me, and he too shifts, ready to face off with his father.

Two can play that game, he sends me a telepathic message as he takes on his wolf form, and he too is glowing, with Ethan at his side. I wonder when he started being able to make spirits manifest physically around him.

He and Luther lunge at one another, biting and scratching clawing and gnawing at one another. The battle between father

and son is intense as they tussle around the living room. I'm not sure how to assist other than by trying not to be in the way. But I'm ready to do something if my assistance is indeed needed. I don't want to interfere for fear of what might happen if I do.

I don't have a clear shot at Luther anyway.

Perhaps now that the spirits have manifested, there's something I can do. I can see the three dark spirits clearly around Luther as he wields them and uses them to attack Emre, but he and Ethan are holding their own. Ethan grabs Luther around the neck, choking him to the floor, and Emre fights the spirits with his own spirit magic. He roars, and from his mouth, a tunnel of silver and white magic spews from him, and wraps around two of the three spirits. Even I didn't know he could do that.

This is my chance, I feel, to escape for just a moment. With all the strength in my legs, I carry myself downstairs and retrieve the journal for just a moment to read through it. I remember seeing something about manifested spirits.

I flip through the pages, trying my best to find the section about manifested spirits.

I skim the pages, and the only thing I find is the one thing I cannot do.

“In order to rid a supernatural being of a spirit, permanently, is to trap it. In order to trap it, the person must be sentenced to purgatory inside of the amulet.”

No. No. No. That's not what is supposed to happen.

Do it, Willa. I don't care about my father. Tell me what I have to do.

Emre's voice reaches me down in the basement, when I did not call out to him. How could he hear my voice?

You're in such distress, your thoughts are literally invading my mind. It's almost midnight. I heard the clock in the kitchen tick. We've got five minutes. Get what you need together. This ends tonight!

I couldn't have imagined that something like this would happen. That my family's healing would be the ending of Emre's. I can't—

Willa, we don't have time for this inner monologue crap. I love you. I'm okay. Get up here and do what needs to be done. I'll hold him off until you're ready!

Right, I'm sorry...

With the journal still in my hand, I take flight up the stairs and take the back hall staircase to get upstairs to our bedroom, where I left the amulet. I retrieve it from the satchel it was being kept in and place it around my neck.

The hands on the clock ticking catch my eye, and I now only have two minutes to get this done. Thankfully, I had already prepared the solution I needed to dip the amulet in, days ago. I didn't think I'd need to be prepared for something like this, but I wanted to have fewer steps to take. I wanted it to be quick, to be over when it did occur.

That was step one; dip the amulet in the herbal mixture. That was done. Now, I have to channel the power from Emre, collectively with mine, while chanting. I need to be close enough without being in the way.

In the kitchen, I have a full view of Emre and Luther. The house is practically destroyed. I'm thankful there are no neighbors to speak of, though I'm sure everyone in this forsaken hillside knows about the paranormal.

Lend me your power. All you need to do is think about giving it to me. It will weaken you for just a moment. Dodge the attacks, do not fight if you can help it...

You got it. Sending power your way...

I look on, and a stream of power flows from Emre, through the hallway, finally reaching me in the kitchen. As suggested, I've got my hands around the amulet, and I begin the incantation.

I hope this works...

“Coven of the Sacred Veil, I call upon thee. Be released from your purgatory. In exchange, a soul must come, so that you must leave. I call upon Luther, the wolf spirit shifter. His life, in exchange for yours. Out you go, and in... he... shall... remain!”

The house begins to rattle, and another scream comes from Luther. He realizes something has changed, that there's something different. I see it in his eyes. There's a look of

disbelief. His evil spirits reattach themselves to him, and his feet leave from their spot. He's being dragged toward me.

“No! No! Son, you can't let her do this!” He screams as his physical form takes a spiritual form. Luther attempts to grab onto the end tables, the walls, anything to keep him from being dragged toward the amulet, but his spiritual body cannot touch objects—only people. The spell is so strong, though, it's highly unlikely he'll be able to do even that.

As he enters the kitchen, his spirit becomes swept up in a tunnel of sorts. The amulet is glowing a vibrant violet and it's heated up around my neck. Like a magnet is drawing it from my neck, it begins to float slightly, in midair, but remains close to me.

Moments later, I'm flooded with the faces of my coven. Faces I have not seen in ages. Emre enters the kitchen with amazement on his face. He smiles, and tears cascade down my flustered cheeks as I witness my coven's freedom.

They're smiling, floating, surrounding me. One by one, they're filling the kitchen, and I've never felt so complete, here with them all.

With each person who comes out, I'm filled with more excitement. I could not have fathomed the amount of tears I would cry when I saw my father, my grandmother, and my mother.

Thank goodness they do not look like what they did when they went in. I'd always feared that. That when they were

released, they'd hold their physical body's true form—though I knew they would not. That's just the trauma speaking.

With the release of my parents and grandmother, the amulet is now ready to occupy Luther. He's begging, screaming, pleading, and Emre's eyes are on no one but me. This truly is what he wanted.

Luther's spirit is swept up into the amulet, claiming him as its next inhabitant, and once he's captured, the house stops rattling, the amulet stops floating, and it flaps against my chest with a hard thump.

“You did it, Willa!” Emre races around the counter in the kitchen and wraps me in his arms. I place my head on his chest and hug him back. I'm so fulfilled I can barely contain the shriek that comes out of me.

“Thank you, Emre. Thank you!”

“I didn't do anything. You did everything. I'm so proud of you.”

And so are we... From the right corner of the room, my mother calls out to me. Slowly, I leave Emre, and take my place at my mother's side. She reaches out to touch me, and her body is whole once again.

More tears find their way down my cheeks. I'm unable to contain my emotions.

“Mom...I... I missed you.”

“I've missed you also, we all have,” she says, and my dad steps forward. His body too, becomes whole, along with my

grandmother's.

“You've done so well. You've become a fine witch. Just like I knew you would, and you've done it without our help,” my grandmother boasts, and she comes over and places a gentle kiss against my cheek. I don't think I'll ever wash it again.

“Th-thank you, Grandmother. That means the world coming from you.”

“You deserve it. Alfred, Meredith, say your goodbyes... we don't have long now,” she announces, and as I look to the other side, the other coven members are already ascending to the spiritual plane.

My head turns with haste, and my heartstrings pull. I'm not ready to say goodbye.

“I'm sorry we have to leave like this... leave you again, but you know we'll never be far,” Dad says and places his hand on my cheek. He even smells the same... like oranges.

My mother, grandmother, and father embrace me one last time, and I hold on as long as I can.

“Emre, huh? I should have guessed it,” Mom whispers, and we both giggle. They hold onto me for what seems like just seconds, but I know there were several minutes that went by. It still happened all too quickly.

With one final hug, they began to ascend. Though they would physically be away from me, I knew that they would always be just one spiritual call away. They would be my spirit

guides... there for me until I met them in the spiritual realm
once again...

Chapter 20



Emre

It's been six months since we left the hillside of Georgia. We landed in Tennessee, in Cross Plains. It is still a small town, but more town-like than our original dwellings. We'd been able to make a place for ourselves here. Truly start over.

I sold the antique shop in town and opened another one here, along with an online store that's picking up business daily. Willa is still lending herself out to help people find things they've lost or simply want to acquire. That \$75,000 really helped with our big move, and I'm grateful for it.

The pack is adjusting well, a lot better than I assumed they would. I haven't told them about my father being trapped in the amulet. I'm not quite ready to reveal that little tidbit yet. I haven't even told Liam, who hasn't asked once where my father is. I can't say that I blame him.

Knowing that my dad is lingering around us, at first, made me uncomfortable. I didn't sleep for weeks properly, knowing that he could at some point get out, although Willa assured me that he could not. I knew that, but my father is like a bad headache. It takes time to make him really go away.

In our new home, we've had to adjust a few things. We have a small apothecary in the greenhouse. Several properties that we've built on the back part of our land now belong to the pack. And, we have so much land, it's perfect for the pack to be free. We've, of course, had to build large privacy fences. We've been accused of nefarious acts because people want to be nosy, but for the most part, we're happy in our new lives.

It's the start of a new day, and Willa is the first in the shower. She likes to buy things for the apothecary almost daily now, since she's actively practicing her craft and learning more and more by the day. I'm going to the antique shop in a little while just to kill time. I'd planned something special for tonight, but I don't think I can wait any longer.

Now's the perfect time, son. Surprise her while she's in the shower; Mom coaches, and even though she's only here in spirit, I'm glad that she's here at all.

I've got it, Mom. Thanks for your help, I mention, and slide out of bed. I don't think this will be too special, but it will be from the heart.

I open the bathroom door and look on as Willa washes her gorgeous body. I can't get enough of this woman. I stiffen, even thinking about joining her. She catches me watching her. Willa has soap slipping down her face, and she disappears back underneath the falling water overhead. This gives me the opportunity to reach underneath the mattress and pull out the surprise I can't wait to give her.

When she's removed the soap from her face, she smiles in my direction again, but this time, I'm in the bathroom with her, my hands are placed tightly behind my back.

"What yah got there?" She shouts, glancing past me. I won't let her see what's in my hands, not for now anyway.

Using one hand, I begin removing my clothes. I fully intend to shower with her. It's a bit hard to maneuver my body to get

myself out of my shirt, but my pants are much easier. I should have slept naked.

Shortly after, I'm stark naked, and the ring is in the other hand now, opposite the hand I use to open the glass shower door.

"Mmm.. a quickie for the morning?" Willa teases, and she rubs her backside against me. I place a kiss to her neck and then wrap one arm around her midsection.

"I have something to ask you first..."

"Of course, you can do that thing you like. I told you, you don't have to ask me anymore—"

"Not that..." I cut her off. She's referring to my obsession with thumbing her bum as I stroke her. Something I love to do. It's fun watching her squirm.

"Okay... you're scaring me," she says as she turns around. Her eyes are wide with suspicion, and I can't hold out any longer.

"I'll simply just say it. Willa, you've been my best friend my entire life. Even when you weren't here, I always knew if I ever saw you again, you'd be closer to me than anyone else alive. I thought of you often. Missed you daily, hourly even, and I longed to converse with you. To be close to you.

"You coming back into my life, we now know it was no accident, and I'm honored to have you around. I want you... no, I need you to become my wife. So, what I'm saying is, just as you've joined me in uniting the pack, I want you to join me

in... spiritual matrimony? I don't feel like holy fits our situation so much," I blabber on, and then scratch my head, wondering if any of that was the right thing to say.

There's a slight pause between my question and her answer, but when she places her lips to mine, I know the answer is without a shadow of a doubt, yes.

I reveal the ring from behind my back, and she gasps, wiggling her fingers in front of me.

"Emre, it's... glowing..." she notices, and I laugh a bit.

"It's glowing because it's iridescent, so the stone gives the illusion that it's glowing. Do you like it?"

"Like it? I love it! The ring has a three stone setting, the center being the largest. It fits perfectly, and it matches my eye! I love it, and I love you!" Willa squeals as she does a happy dance in the shower, and we laugh. As it dies down, we're drawn to one another, and like chalk to a chalkboard, we're stuck to one another, kissing.

I've backed her into the wall of the shower. Willa raises her leg, and my hardened shaft bobs between her plentiful thighs. I hoist her up and feel the back of her ring scratch my neck as it adjusts around her finger underneath the waterspout. I could get used to that.

Easily, I line myself up with her honey hole and press against her entrance. Willa looks me in my eyes as she bobs up and down on my cock. She's taking every inch of me with

ease, and the sound of our skin slapping in the shower quickens my orgasm.

“Come in me, Emre. I want to feel you!”

Her scream sends me over the edge, and my hands lower to her ass cheeks. My thumb finds her tight opening, forcing me to press it against her. She takes in a deep inhale, and her eyes close as I work my thumb and my dick in and out of her at the same time.

Willa’s hands go to my head, and she’s gripping onto my white hair so tightly, it’s like she’s trying to climb on top of my head. I won’t let her move, though. She asked for a quickie, and she’s going to take it.

As I thrust inside of her, and she grinds her hips into me, my climax is coerced out of me, and as she commands, I spill my seed inside of her. Yet, I keep going until I see and hear that she’s satisfied.

Still hard inside of my mate, I pleasure her for another ten minutes until she claws at my back, and begs for me to stop. She’s panting and giggling at the same time, and I smile at her. I can’t wait to spend forever with her.

“You go ahead and shower. I’ll hop in after you so I can make us some breakfast before you go.”

“Emre, you don’t have to. I think I’ll skip the apothecary—“

“Nonsense. Handle your business. I just want to have breakfast with you first.”

I kiss Willa on the forehead and exit the shower, put on a pair of gray sweatpants, and head toward the kitchen. On the way to the kitchen, I hear giggling in the corner of my mind.

Mother, what's so funny? Please tell me you weren't just watching us...

Oh, I would never invade your privacy like that. I'm laughing because the two of you have no idea about the little secret you're carrying, but it was just confirmed...

What was confirmed, Mom? I don't understand...

Well, it's unfortunate that I won't be there to see it, but I'm 100% positive that Willa is pregnant.

She chuckles again, and I'm stilled before I reach the kitchen. Pregnant... I mean, it does make—

Before I can even finish my thoughts, I overhear Willa stretching and then giggling. ***She clearly knows already...***

She does. She's just waiting for the right time to tell you. I'm very proud of you, son. I know you're going to have a very happy life.

The best life, cuz. Can't wait to see you become a father, Ethan chimes in.

It's nice having the two of them with me.

I thought after my father got placed in the amulet, that after some time, I would feel guilty, or... sad even. But I quickly realized that I was already an orphan before he was ever even placed inside the amulet. He was always the villain in my

story, and trapping him in there is the only reason I'm allowed to have the life I have now.

I miss Mom physically.

I miss Ethan physically, but I'm never without them. I'm the one who actually ended up winning in the end.

I got the girl.

I'm starting my family.

And I'm becoming the alpha I was always meant to be.

I can't imagine a better ending for myself or for Willa...If this is in fact, the end...

THE END...

About the Author



Thank you and I hope you enjoyed reading my book!

If you loved *Bewitching the Forbidden Alpha* and are left craving more, be sure to join my mailing list and be the first to know about my future book releases!

You get a **free** copy of *Alpha Bound by Fate* for joining!

Preview below!

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Preview of Alpha Bound by Fate:



Reed places his arm around me and pulls me closer to him. He has no idea how much I need the confidence he has dripping from him. The reassurance he provides from his physical touch.

“I’ve always liked your mother. I could tell last night you were freaked out about it. At first, I thought it was because I was naked and you’d seen all my tattoos, but now,” he chuckles, and it’s so sexy and deep, “I see it’s because you worry we might not be a good fit.”

“No, not that we won’t be a good fit. I just worry in general. It’s my nature. Unfortunately, it’s who I am.” I shrug, admitting to one of my deepest flaws. I used to be sure of myself, but that’s just another thing David took from me.

Reed uses his left hand to caress my cheek. He’s staring at me, but it doesn’t make me uncomfortable. It gives me strength, a strength that I need.

“Something we’ll work on.”

Had I known finding my soulmate before would magically make my life come together, I think I would have done it a long time ago.

Reed comes closer, and his lips touch mine. His kiss is needy, greedy, even, and I give in to him easily. I’m falling deeper into the kiss, when I hear something, just above a whisper in my ear, taunting me.

“If you don’t want him to die, you should leave him. I killed our father, and I’ll kill him simply to keep him away from you.

Unless... you help me escape, and I'll let Reed live when the bear shifters come.”

My heart almost stops beating when I hear David's voice penetrate my ears. I've seen Reed's death; I was just missing the “how,” and now that I have it, I'll do whatever it takes to save his life.

This is what reader, Patricia, had to say about Alpha Bound by Fate – 5 Star Review

“Alpha Bound by Fate is a great read! Suspenseful in all the right places. I was on edge from the beginning! A pairing like Reed and Zoe is a great idea. Reed is the Alpha wolf of his pack and Zoe is an eagle shifter. Reed and Zoe are united by the need to stop violence happening in and around their community. Bear shifters, led by Reeds rebellious power-hungry brother are reeking havoc in both human and shifter communities. You must read this book for yourself to see what happens! Thanks for taking the time to write the sexy, suspenseful novella!! I look forward to more of the same.”