

A wolf is shown in profile, howling with its mouth open, looking towards the right. In the upper right, a hand holds a severed, bloody limb. The background is a dark, stormy sky with swirling clouds. The overall mood is dark and ominous.

Cracked Blue Sky

a dark romance

by
Shiloh Gloanne

Cracked Blue Sky

Shiloh Sloane

For the road.

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Foreword

This book has been a long time coming. In the beginning, I was desperate to see my two love interests have their own biological child. Against all odds and anything I'd learned about the Lindals, I wanted that.

And then I saw two lines on a stick. My first ever pregnancy. It came right in the middle of my energy to write this book again, and I was ecstatic.

I miscarried a week later.

Regardless of how short-lived my time as a mother was, I now think a lot about what life will look like if I can't have a child of my own. If I'll feel this crippling anxiety every time I test positive, if that ever happens again.

It was timely for me to experience that sadness and frustration while writing Wright's love story. We know from the first book that he can't have children, that his biological mate has died along with his only son. So many romances get the pretty bow of a successful conception and pregnancy, and I understand the desire for all that because I want it for myself.

This book, however, does not include pregnancy or birth.

For their love to be true, I didn't want to bend the rules I'd built. I did not want to force an inauthentic ending for the sake of a traditional family. Howie's desires lie far from that anyway, as you'll see in her adoration to her father, her stepmother, her partner at the sheriff's department, and her own independence. Their ending is one of the happiest I've ever written.

This book is for the road, sure. It's for the beauty of the Tetons and the Black Hills, two places so sacred that you feel it in your chest the second you breathe their air. But it's also for those who want love without children of their own, and for those who want love with children of their own but can't have them. It's for adoptive parents, foster parents, and aunties and uncles who take on the roles of either. It's for the unconventional and found families that make this world so beautiful. Because nothing screams warmth more than those who choose to love, when the other options are easier.

Playlist

You can find the Spotify playlist for this book [here](#). Think of it as a soundtrack, meant to play over grainy footage of a werewolf and a sheriff's deputy falling for each other against their respective wills.

* * *

Motorcycle - Colter Wall

Hell and You - Amigo the Devil

You Should've Seen The Other Guy
- Nathaniel Rateliff

I Don't Mind - Sturgill Simpson

Heart In A Cage - Chris Thile

Sam - Sturgill Simpson

Satan and St. Paul - John Fullbright

Toxic - AnnenMayKantereit

Creektime - Odette Hartman

Cavalry - Watchhouse

Early Spring Till - Nathaniel Rateliff

Priest - William Crichton

The Rain - The Suitcase Junket

Broken Bones and Pocket Change

-St. Paul & The Broken Bones
When I Fall - Elephant Revival
Curs in the Weeds - Horse Feathers
Blue Healer - Birdtalker
Spotless - Zach Bryan, The Lumineers
Cherry Wine - Hozier
Nighttime Animal - ZG Smith
The Dirt - Tor Miller
Hell or high water - William Elliott Whitmore

Chapter 1

Howl

Wright

There's blood in his mouth.

Flesh in his teeth.

His tongue hangs past his lips as his feet hit the ground in a sprint, leaving the asphalt of the highway far in the distance and barreling through the woods. A successful hunt is like an electric storm, the lightning strikes of a consumed soul pounding alongside his heart, escaping in clouded bursts from his lungs to the chilled autumn air.

The starlit skies go on forever here.

He wants to be closer to them.

So he charges the snow-capped mountains that burst like jagged teeth into the blackened sky, and soon he's breathing harder. He's hurdling over rocks and logs that he senses more than sees.

Everything with a mind knows to escape him. Foxes scatter into their dens and even the owls soaring through the sky take shelter in towering pine branches. Calling out warnings to the elk who shimmer through the barred expanse of trees.

He bursts through the pines and the galaxy explodes above him, opening overhead with the sound of rushing water. This is where the forest surrenders to the falls and a swimming hole down below. This is where he plants his four legs on a rocky

ledge looking out at the endless night sky and craggy expanse that someone named the Tetons.

He grounds down on the rocks and turns inward. Feels his human body once more. It's been twenty years of doing this and it doesn't hurt any less. When he was younger and he first turned, his pa had to bite into the fur at his back and dig in just to remind him that his human form is the skeleton of it all. Now he stretches, and it's both his human body that he's moving and the wolf's bones that he's breaking from within.

He curls his arms inward and feels the ripping of muscle. White hot pain. The tearing of his pelt. He feels air on his skin and he pushes through the agony, makes it brief. First his hands break free and he's sure it's because they're his deadliest weapons. His younger brother would say the weapon is the mind but not his. He's always worked with his hands. Always fought with them, too, and now he fights the curse that let him summit this place in mere minutes.

Now, he stands on two feet, naked and drenched in the blood of his wolf. He smooths his hands over his face. Brushes the sticky mess off his arms and thighs. He hates the way it clings to the hair there, like a heavy reminder of what he is.

Each time he turns, he thinks about how much easier it would be if he hunted as a man. But he needs the distance. He needs to be a wolf when he kills.

That's the only way Wright Lindal can ever get to Heaven.

Wright stands on the rocky ledge looking down at the falls below and he can already feel the cool baptism of the swimming hole on his skin. He needs it. The man he killed today didn't have time to scream. When Wright drew back from his prey's burst neck he saw fear in his eyes. That meant he still wasn't quick enough. He needs to be quicker, or to take a man's skull in his jaws and break the bone of it first.

Too bad he isn't keen on the flavor of brain.

He brushes viscera and sticky membranes from his bare chest before tossing the remnants of the wolf over the falls. The fur and flesh drop thirty feet to the deep water, the night

around them so bright that the white foam of the fall carries moonlight down with the pelt. Then, it disappears. Soon, all traces of the animal will.

He steps up to the edge and closes his eyes.

There's an extra soul in him. He breathes it out in a rich exhale and opens his palms to the pine-fresh wind. There's life in everything here, a spirit and a heart in the untamed wilderness. With his eyes closed, he lets it all take him.

He steps over the edge.

Dives down with the sound of rushing water and feels the wind on his naked skin.

Every part of the earth speaks to him like this. If there were rocks he could hit, he'd move around them. The water is getting closer. Beckoning him in. These seconds in the air fraction and spread wide until he forgets what the ground feels like and thinks that he's floating. Away, into the heavens. Into the galaxy that paints the sky like spilt milk and broken glass.

Then, he crashes through the water's surface. The falls crash back, over him, burying him deep until his hands graze the algae-slicked rocks at the very bottom. He opens his eyes now but moonlight doesn't cut through water like the sun does. So he exists in space, in a pitch black dream, in nothing but the feeling of the earth swallowing him whole.

This is the true church of his kind, beings who were never promised access into the veil of Heaven, hired by the Devil, he's sure, some distant blood relative generations ago. Thirty-six days without a drink and a week longer without the touch of naked flesh, he knows this sin is the greatest one he'll ever kneel to. He must kill to survive, and while he may justify broken bones and torn skin with the way his body changes, each death haunts him.

He couldn't count the ghosts he carries with him now. For so long, when there was only one *her* and he believed there would never be another, her death lodged itself under his sternum. It was a heavy rock at night and too much gravity in the daytime. Jess.

His wife.

The mother of his child.

Their deaths had divided his family for ten years, all until his brother Ridge found a woman who broke her way into his pitch-black heart. Sadie's presence was a warm light in the darkness between the Lindal brothers. Wright loved her too.

Loved her, he tells himself.

Too much.

Wright left their home the morning after Ridge and Sadie married and while he promised them he'd come back, he's not sure he can. He can't see Sadie's belly grow with a child that will never be his. He can't fall any deeper for a woman claimed by his only brother.

When his lungs feel close to bursting, he pushes from those rocks up towards the surface, swimming from the crash of the falls to the calmer shallows. He stills and lets the night crawl into his ears.

The brush of wind can replace the gentle touch he craves.

The sound of lonely cars on a distant highway will substitute her sweet voice.

The crunching of elk hooves as they sneak by leaves marks in the earth that he wishes were his teeth biting into her flesh.

There are wolves in the distance, true wolves who stay wolves and stand about half the size of him when he turns. He listens to their howls as he wades in the cool, brisk water, washing the blood from his goosebumped skin. Cupping his large, veined hands around his mouth, he adds his voice to theirs. Laughs into the night, his breath clouding the stars above his head.

He's free.

Like he's never felt it, *this* is freedom and it sprints through his muscles and up the column of his spine. He's a soldier of the second world war but he's never more patriotic than when he's in the mountains out west. Truth be told, he's

never felt more alive than he does in this exact moment. It's just him and God now.

He's happy.

He's truly fucking happy.

Here out west, with the mountains and the men at the ranch, there's a certain rightness that tells him he made the decision he had to. That staying with Sadie and Ridge would have been the kind of stagnation that eats a man from the inside. The ranch he works on asks for far less than the army and raising Ridge ever did. He can stretch out each of his limbs and feel nothing but water now. He's free.

There's no one for miles to breathe this air.

For years, he went to sleep staring at his cracked ceiling, waiting for the darkness to break through and inhale him.

Now, he tilts his face up to the sky and breathes in the light of a thousand stars. Thinks that maybe joy is like faith. It has no texture to it, and its existence is a promise to himself. But he feels it in his chest all the same.

He draws in another breath and howls once more into the sky.

This time, the wolves join him.

It's odd, though. Those that answer his call sound different.

Chapter 2

Lone Wolf

Howie

Howie wraps her thumb and forefinger as best she can around the gold star on her chest. Like this, she can touch four of the five points; can dig them into her skin a bit as she and Brooks drive down the winding dirt road on the other end of Jackson. This shift is later than what they're usually assigned, but still warm enough that she can keep the window down on the passenger side and feel a cool breeze on her face.

This night feels like one of the last warm ones for a while, and with it comes this energy that feels like the beginning of a lightning storm. Not caring much for her decency in front of her partner and friend, she has her stockinged feet out of her heels and on the dash. Knees towards the opening. Dark hair flowing all around, just like Até would warn her against. If it was his choice, she'd keep her hair in braids like he does, but she likes it down. Likes the freedom of it, even though rebelling against her father in any other way would feel alien to her.

Joseph Black Elk raised his daughter to take after his legacy. The name, Howie, was born of that desire, she's sure. Even if he says it was for his grandmother, Ehawee, short for that, and oh she looked just like her as a baby, all wrinkly, Howie knows she's something of a son to him. That's the case with only children, she figures. They have to be both a mother's daughter and a father's son.

She made good on that last part better than anything. Skinned her knees, grew up knowing how to fight and what to

stand up to. By the time they moved to Jackson, she'd curled her hands into fists so often that when an older boy decided to pull her hair she grabbed the encyclopedia from her desk, spun around, and broke his cocky, pointed nose.

After that particular incident, Até took her to get cheeseburgers and gave her her first beer. He would have raised a spectacularly brutal son. Instead, he raised a daughter who could survive. When she became the only female officer in the Teton County Sheriff's Department, they announced her as Officer Howie Black Elk and joked that on paper, she could have been a man.

With a .38 Special holstered on her hip, she might agree that some parts of her are equal to the men on her force. She can put them all to shame at the shooting range, or at darts in the cop bar off Main, where they'd judge her for drinking not because of her gender but because of her blood. That's it though, isn't it?

Até retired five years after she joined rank but he should have left before, needed to stay and prove the Black Elk name meant something all those white boys could look up to. It *was* that, for him. He'd always have blood under his fingernails from the path he dug for her after Iná died.

If she digs the badge deep enough to her own hands, maybe the office won't be able to pry it from her. Oh, but they want to. For everything she is in Até's wake, for the length of her hair and what's between her legs and how her face lights up when she smiles. For the way her skin makes love to the sun instead of fighting it. Whatever their reasoning, it's why they're driving to the home of Doris Hughes, a war widow who called about a strange figure in her backyard.

Lakota Lane. That's Doris's street name. The way Williams told them to go there was like he was biting something back, a glimmer in his eye like he was keeping a joke to himself.

"Know if you didn't choose me, they'd probably let you take on some big case," Howie says, squeezing the sheriff's star harder in her hand. "Like a bank heist."

Brooks laughs. “Soon as they start robbing banks in Jackson, I’m dropping you.”

“Good thing,” she says. “I’ll lone wolf it then. Or be a ranger. *Only one prize fight.*”

“That’s Texas.”

“I could always go back,” she says. “Maybe they’ll like me more, now I’m so sweet.”

He glances at her. She can’t see much more than the moon on his face, but it’s enough to show his dubious expression.

“*Shit,*” she says. “Gotta just stick with you, then.”

“Well,” he says. “All the good criminals are dead. Would’ve thought about it if we were up against a Barker or a Dillinger, but no one’s theatrical anymore. So if my story can’t be turned into a Hollywood picture, I’ll stick with you too.”

“In it for the fame,” she teases.

“That’s why I live in Wyoming,” he says, and she laughs as they pull up the dirt drive.

Doris’s rented home lies just outside of town and borders thick forested land. Howie’s own trailer lives on the opposite side of the county, shielded from the lights of Jackson proper and bordering the start of the Tetons. But in her own backyard and here, wildlife is a constant. Gotta lock your freezers up, else the bears will get into them. Coyotes in the yard, racoons in the bins, disease-riddled prairie dogs digging near the roadside, all that.

When it isn’t bears, people call the sheriff’s department seeing odd things in the sky. Cows split open like someone took a giant saw and cut them in half. Lights in the forest. The department has a list of excuses they trade like hides. Lightning bugs can get big, or there was a meteor, or some neighborhood kids took a prank too far. There was a cow on a roof once, with no way of it getting up there. That was the talk around the station for a month.

It’s the only place they can speculate. *Maybe it’s aliens,* the men say with laughter in their voices like there’s no way in

hell something so wild could happen. And sometimes they prod Howie, raising their voices just enough that she's sure they're making eyes at each other behind her back. And she'll straighten up, plaster on a smile, and tell them that aliens and strange creatures in the woods, now, that sounds like a white man's tall tale. Some European myth, must be, from their ancestors.

Their smiles fall real quick after that.

When she and Brooks leave the cruiser for the balmy fall night, she wonders if this will be another thing she has to level her voice at. Because tonight the woods have an energy to them, and the second the wind lifts her hair from her neck, she knows it's predatory. There's something out there.

Doris meets them at the steps, swinging the door open wide. With her pale skin and angular face, she looks gaunt in the yellow porch light. The rented homes out here aren't well-maintained. It would just take a strong enough wind to collapse the whole structure, Howie figures, thinking of that story of the pigs and the wolf.

"You must be Deputy Black Elk," she says.

Howie bites her lip. *Oh, I must be*, she'd like to say, but instead she smiles. "This is Deputy Brooks," she offers.

Doris smiles. "Thought it might be..." she starts, as if there's another person she expected here. "Never mind. Do come in."

Brooks enters first and Howie follows, hit with the cat-scent of the home. It's warmer in the kitchen, though she has no idea what the widow could be cooking. Not garlic, not fruit, nothing that her own kitchen smells like even now, with meat hanging to dry for winter stews. This is grainy, rotten.

"Would you like some coffee?" Doris asks.

"Sure," Howie says, just to combat the smell.

But at the same time Brooks says *no*, swaying on his feet and shooting her a look like, *let's get this over with*. She shrugs. Doris watches Brooks, because of course she does, even if Brooks is four years Howie's junior. And he nods.

“Two cups,” he says. “Please.”

“What did you see?” Howie asks.

Doris sets a kettle on the stove. “My husband has been gone for longer than I’ve ever known him,” she says, sighing.

Howie glances at Brooks. So much for making things quick.

“It’s nights like these that I do miss him most,” Doris continues. “Because not only would he be *asking if I was alright...*”

She pauses, her message clear. They’ve failed this test.

“But he’d be watching the backyard, shotgun in hand,” Doris says. “What I saw out there wasn’t godly, deputies. Not of heaven or earth. At first I thought it was a bear.”

Crossing her arms in front of her chest, she glances between them, checking for attention.

“It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” Doris asks.

“Balmy,” Howie offers. “Bears would love it.”

Brooks ducks his head, clears his throat to disguise a laugh. Doris stares at her.

“But it wasn’t a bear, Deputy Black Elk,” she says. “Because when it got closer, it was too long-legged. Almost mangy. Dirty white fur and a long snout.”

“Could it have been a wolf?” Brooks offers.

“Oh, sure,” Doris says. “A massive wolf, bigger than you’ve ever seen. It *could have* been a wolf, Deputy. Until a man came out of it.”

Howie frowns. “What do you mean?”

“In my backyard,” Doris says. “That big body started trembling. Like a dog holding itself back from shaking its water. It got all *tense*.”

She shrinks her fragile shoulders up to her ears, her face contorting.

“And then it stretched its big mouth open,” she says. “Like it was fixing to howl. Except it kept stretching and stretching its jaws, and I swear on all that is holy, a hand came out.”

“What happened next?” Howie asks, rapt at attention.

“Another hand came next,” Doris says. “And two arms. Splitting the face of the beast open enough for a man to come through.”

The kettle boils and Doris jumps, but doesn't turn the stove off.

“What did he look like?” Howie asks.

“Dark,” the woman says. “Or... Dark with... Whatever was in that wolf, I guess. Blood?”

Howie glances at the screaming kettle, tensing.

“He was a white man,” Doris clarifies.

“Anything else you recall?” Brooks asks.

“He looked to be a little taller than average,” Doris continues. “Maybe, he would have been handsome. He was *naked*. His... unit. Flopped when he walked.”

“A naked man crawled out of a wolf?” Brooks asks. It's so clear he's trying not to laugh.

Doris nods. “It's outside.”

Brooks coughs again. Howie wants to hit him

“The wolf?” Howie asks.

“Sure, what's left of it,” Doris clarifies. “Though he ate most.”

The kettle stays screaming as Howie strides through the kitchen to the back of the house, navigating around stacks of newspaper on her way.

“Don't let the cat out!” Doris calls, the whistling steam swallowing some of her voice.

Howie doesn't have to travel far to see what Doris is talking about. The lights of the house illuminate a large oval of

darkened grass, at least six feet in diameter. Tufts of fur and white bone fragments sprinkle the crimson puddle.

She crouches down to a chip of hard white something. A tooth. A canine, but distinctly not a canine. Dogs, she knows, have rounded tips to their teeth. Rimmed in viscera, this tooth is angular and honed to a narrow point, as if some animal could be born with knives in its gums. Not only that, but it's as wide as two fingers pressed together.

"Jesus Christ," Brooks mutters, shining his flashlight over the scene.

Howie closes her hand around the tooth. In her mind, already there are a dozen things she can say to explain this but none of them involve telling Doris Hughes that she believes her. She wouldn't live it down if she did. Already, she can imagine Lieutenant Williams holding the tooth up to the light, saying it's clearly a shark's tooth, has she never been to the ocean? Is she so damn gullible she'd fall for a prank like this?

"Coyotes?" Brooks asks, his voice low.

Howie brings out her flashlight, shining it around the perimeter. Looking for those things she won't be able to speak of, and when she sees them she pretends she doesn't.

Footprints.

A set like a man walking on two legs, headed towards the road.

Howie knows what comes next. Brooks tells Doris, *wow*, they'll look into this. Tells her to lock her doors. He's so believable when he does it, but when they drive away, it's slow.

Their headlights illuminate the footprints until they disappear down the road. And then he stops the cruiser, idles it.

"Not a bank robbery," he says. "But those are footprints, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Howie says.

"Williams isn't going to want to hear that."

“Not from us, at least.”

“So that’s it?” Brooks asks.

Howie doesn’t answer him.

Instead, she focuses on the indentations in the grass in front of them. Leaving the passenger door open, she steps into the night. Out here, this far from town, she can see every star overhead. There’s no impossibilities. Nothing without energy, without power. Just an endless, undefinable expanse.

In the station, there are words and codes for everything. Devastation cut down to numbers. She gets it, even if she doesn’t agree. They are the first on the scene, and people look to them for an explanation, and that explanation needs labels. It needs definitions. It needs unshakeable truths, and nature is fluid.

On the ground, a few yards past where the footsteps end, are tire marks. Like a car or a truck was sitting long enough to earn roots. It drove off with the wolf-man inside. Out of town, from the looks of it. Out of Howie’s *jurisdiction*, another unnatural invention. So when she gets back in the car with Brooks, she does have an answer to his question.

“We’ll keep an eye out,” she says. “This is our bank robbery, yeah?”

“Shit,” he laughs. “Better than traffic duty.”

The air runs electric now, heart-fluttering, because what if they do solve a mystery? What if her job, her life, becomes something exciting now?

“What do you think’s more likely?” she asks. “Man crawling out of a wolf or a coyote walking on two legs?”

Brooks puts the car in drive. “Guess we’re gonna find out.”

Chapter 3

Carolina Stallion

Wright

Ten days before Halloween, the town of Jackson bears fall colors. Wright drives with Dutch Bradley in his passenger seat, glancing past the carved faces of pumpkins as he heads through town. A few paper cutouts of ghosts linger in the now-black windows of storefronts. It's ten at night. Most everything shuts down by nine, but it's Friday so the bars are open. The dive that cowboys and ranch hands drink at is off the state highway towards the same mountains he ran through as a wolf just days earlier.

If he can't resist a drink, he'll let Dutch catch a ride with one of the other men and drive out there. Let the creek water be his sacrament.

This is the first night he's joined the men out.

Every other day at the ranch has been far too draining for anything but sleep. Wright is awake chewing coffee grounds with half a dozen men by the time the sun rises. Wolfing down what food he can before riding out to the pasture. He's not as skilled with cattle as the rest of the men are, considering any livestock he worked with in his life he could simply throw over his shoulder. Not the two-thousand pound creatures who travel in herds and rival his wolf form for size.

He's skilled with horses though. They speak a similar language. A full head taller than most of the other cowboys, and with far less experience under his belt, he still manages to soothe the horses *like no one's ever seen*. That happens to be

useful here. Rob Stoughton owns forty and is looking to build up to twice that over the next year, which is exactly how long Wright plans to stay. He fits. His boss appreciates his skillset. But working the unfamiliar every day from dawn past dusk is enough to make him weary, and if he hadn't just hunted he'd be passed out cold by now.

The men wanted to go out drinking. He promised Sadie he wouldn't drink out west and he's a man of his word. But he'll leave the ranch and make his way to the bar because blending in is a necessary evil.

"Should'a come in the summer," Dutch says, rolling down the window to let the brisk autumn air in.

"Had a busy summer," Wright says.

"What kinda busy?" Dutch asks suggestively.

Wright glances towards the man and laughs. Dutch is odd in his insistent flirtation; shit like that would've given the man black eyes in Orion. But maybe it's Dutch's intimidating size or just living as a cowboy in Wyoming. The men don't care much. Most, including Wright, experienced a bit of queerness overseas.

"Battled the Devil," Wright says.

Dutch laughs. "My lawd," he says, laying on a thick southern accent. "Why ever would ya do such a thing?"

Wright shakes his head, smiling. "Ask my brother, he'd say it weren't the devil at all."

"What, then?"

"The unknown," Wright shrugs.

"Same damn thing," Dutch says dismissively, leaning his head out the passenger window. The moonlight paints his dark skin a cool umber, the reflection of the headlights brightening his sloping cheekbones.

Wright smiles, turning up the radio and letting Mary Ford's crooning voice take him deeper into his mind. With so much time in his wolf form, sounds are sharper. Scents are so strong

he can smell a person's neck and know what they had for breakfast that morning.

Solitude beckons when the world is amplified.

But tonight is different.

Tonight, they're crunching over the gravel drive of a bar made of dark wood and lit red by neon. He's passed it countless times but never once set foot inside. The only reasons he had to go to bars in Orion were to drown his sorrows or to find a woman to take home for the weekend. Now, it's only to play a role. A character with no animal instincts and no trail of bodies in his wake.

He strides across the gravel with Dutch speculating about which women Anderson has pulled for them. Trying to prod at Wright and see if he's interested in taking anyone back to his truck.

Wright pushes open the door and tastes cigarette ash on the handle.

He steps inside.

The smoke in the bar hits him first, as well as the smell of liquor. He scans the crowd, spotting Booker, Reyes, and Anderson sitting at a table with three women crowding them. The jukebox is playing Hank Williams and one of them, a pretty brunette, sings into a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Wright glances towards the bar, and suddenly everything halts.

She sits with a pin-straight back, her elbows on the counter, and there's no noise anymore. No record playing through the din, no sound of conversation, no exhaustion from a hard day's work nor steam to blow off here.

She's a stranger.

But a stranger whose scent is like nothing Wright has ever smelled in his life, and the second he sees her he halts so abruptly that Dutch bumps into his back. Shoves him forward because the man doesn't like to be interrupted from what he's doing. Not that Wright gives a damn now.

The only thing he could imagine caring about is the woman with the dark waves cascading down her back and her elbows set on the bar. He only sees the sliver of her cheek, only the wisps of her dark lashes, the brownish mauve tint of her lips. He'd give his next five paychecks for her to turn even another inch, but she's still. Frozen in time, angled excruciatingly away from him.

Just her scent over the whiskey and spilled beer and worn leather.

Just the outline of her face in profile.

Just those things, and he forgets his own name.

"Move on," Dutch scolds. "Actin' like ya ain't seen a woman in months."

Wright parts his lips to speak, to fire something back, but he can't. His fucking heart stops beating. How can he think when there's silence where there should have been pounding? Her very presence kills him. He's dead. Shocked still and gutted by the mere existence of a stranger.

"Come on," Dutch implores, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him towards their table.

Wright shakes his head, trying to jolt himself back into some form of consciousness, but the world is different now. The further he steps from her, the duller it gets. He slides into the seat at the edge of their table and the cheers of his friends and the three young women barely register. The beer and whiskey barely registers. Wright glances back towards the woman and swears to himself he can see the air around her warp like a magnetic field. He's never felt any draw so strong.

"We've got fine women here," Anderson murmurs. "Less trouble than that one."

Wright blinks himself out of his trance and turns away from the bar.

"This is Judith," Booker says, hooking his arm around a slender blonde woman who can't be older than twenty. "And over here we have Marilyn and Grace. They like cowboys, don't they?"

Wright nods to the two equally young brunettes, but it feels like pulling teeth not to look at the woman at the bar. “Trouble?” he asks.

“For you, sureño,” Reyes says.

“And for all of us,” Anderson adds. “Touch her and that’s the last you’ll see of that horse cock of yours.”

Wright glares at him, though his member is an often talked about subject at the bunkhouse. It shouldn’t embarrass him, but he was raised without that sort of discussion. The men are godless here.

Dutch whistles.

“My brother went to school with her,” the brunette closest to him says. He thinks she is Grace. “She broke a boy’s nose just for looking at her.”

Wright smiles. His chest warms a bit with the thought.

“And,” the blonde, Judith, adds. “I heard she cut her ex husband’s... Manhood... Off.”

“That right?” Wright asks, glancing back.

“*Hell*,” Dutch scoffs. “Now I wish you were drinking. Need to throw this beer on you, cool you off.”

“Do it!” the other brunette, Marilyn, cheers. Dutch laughs.

“Ain’t gonna waste good beer like that,” he says.

“This ain’t good beer,” Anderson chides.

Wright nods to him. “Ain’t missin’ out then.”

“Not on beer,” Marilyn teases flirtatiously. “Maybe on women.”

“Oh, my!” Dutch exclaims. “Don’t be making me jealous, Wright. She’s mine.”

“Go give her a taste of the Carolina Stallion,” Anderson laughs. “She takes your manhood, we have a fine new blonde in the bunkhouse.”

Chapter 4

Butter

Howie

Howie watches the condensation pool on her glass of Wild Turkey.

This night can only end poorly.

Most nights, if the station goes out for drinks, they go to one of the bars in town, the one dedicated to them and the men who rub shoulders the right way, whose donations keep the station stocked with nice cruisers and who, in turn, don't go to jail for disorderly conduct or worse things that Howie and Brooks don't get called in for.

Tonight isn't like that, though. Tonight, they decided to go a little bit out of town, towards one of the dives that the cowboys and their buckle bunnies go to. Meaning, the men at the station are looking to fight strangers or fuck women who don't go to the same church as their wives. Right now, five officers and the lieutenant are engaged in a game of pool and flirting with a gaggle of girls who are barely out of high school. Showing them their badges and hiding their wedding rings. Oh, being terrible at a job, such *wiíchuwa*, how charming.

If that's the kind of trouble they cause, it could be worse. But she still doesn't want a part of it. Thing is, this is her bar, but they don't know it. Only one in the county owned by a native. Lou will give her free drinks and let her know if there's anyone worthy at the bar. There never is. *No one good enough*, he'll say with a smile, and that's alright by her.

Since her divorce, she hasn't wanted to date anyone, even for something as casual as a bar snag. If any part of her is sensitive, it's this one. Loving someone like she did, not having it work out but instead burn up, gave her walls to protect an all-too-tender heart. She doesn't want to go through heartbreak again. Maybe, it's weak of her to not have that part of a social life. But she's never lonely. She has Brooks, she has her family, her community, and, though she could go without them, she has the entire force who are at their best when they believe she is a woman who desires nothing from men other than camaraderie.

If she receives men at a bar with the other deputies, they'll start thinking she's available. Ready to date, or be fucked. She knows what they say about her, feels their eyes on her, and has no intention of making their fantasies a reality.

So instead, she sits. There's a bit of understood loneliness in red neon. In the mahogany counter stained with hundreds of solitary, ringed marks. She's not the first person to sit there alone, contemplating a world she doesn't fit into. Places like this are perfect for that.

"Any mysteries this week?" Lou asks.

"A big one," she says, taking another sip.

"Don't be keeping secrets," he says, wiping off the counter next to her.

"Only if you tell me who's sleeping with whose wife this week."

"Fuckin' cowboys," Lou says, gesturing to the absurdly loud table behind her. "Who else?"

She doesn't bother glancing over.

"Got you in their sights," he says.

"It'll be the last thing they do," she replies, finishing her glass and sliding it towards him.

He laughs before pouring her another. "New fellow's staring at you like a prize buck."

"New," she scoffs. "No such thing with them."

“Too true,” he says, shaking his head. “So, neesoboo, what is it? This mystery.”

“A monster,” Howie says, letting her dramatism take over. She presses herself to her knees in the stool, feeling excitement light her face. “Storming through the backyard of the widow Hughes.”

“Oh, yeah?” Lou asks, wiping his hands.

“A wolf, she says,” Howie continues. “With fur white as winter skies and teeth so sharp they can slice through skin like butter.”

“Seen wolves like that,” Lou says.

“Really?”

“Getting bigger every year.”

“Well,” Howie tells him. “You ever seen one of those wolves stretch its jaws open like it’d howl at the moon, but instead a hand comes out, all five fingers reaching for the sky?”

Lou raises his eyebrows.

“And then another hand,” Howie says. “And two arms, and the head of a grown man bursting through like an infant, all the way formed. Ripping through the flesh of the wolf, and standing on two legs just to walk away. You ever seen that?”

“I have,” a voice says, but it’s not Lou’s.

The low rumble comes from behind her, and when Lou’s eyes flick in his direction, he raises a brow, amused. Howie won’t turn to look at the voice’s owner but she feels his heat already, even without him touching her. And in the dirty mirror of the bar, she sees he is unnaturally tall. Large, as he pulls out the seat next to her and slides in.

She still doesn’t look at him. She looks at Lou, who shakes his head *no* just fractionally.

“Sounds like a werewolf,” Lou says.

“Was it a full moon?” the stranger asks.

He's not bathed for what must be days, and he reeks of cold nature. Dirt. Sweat. Fires. Hay. Cigarette smoke. But something else, too. It lingers beneath those scents and if she's telling the truth, she likes it. Doesn't mind the way his voice slips like silk through her ears, either.

"No," Howie says.

"Then it can't be," the stranger says.

She hears the smile in his voice, hears it like it's against her neck. His *voice*. It's warm and rough like a calloused hand running through her hair and over her throat.

Taking a deep breath, she finally turns to him.

He stops her heart just like this.

He's staring right at her.

He's got a crease between his brows and crinkles at the edges of his eyes, and those wrinkles may be the only indication of his age because everything else about him has a bright glow to it. He's handsome because he looks relentlessly masculine, but she'd prefer to call him beautiful. Not like a woman. Not like a flower. Like the jagged granite face of the highest mountain in the Tetons, like moonlit ice in the winter, like the kiss of death and the air when you turn away from it. His gaze is so vibrant it bolts through her the second she catches it.

Whatever rests inside her seems to hit him all the same. His lips part.

"What was it like?" she asks finally, leaning on the bar just to steady herself.

"Feral," he says. His eyes travel slowly down to her mouth, and just as intentionally back up. "Mine was a werewolf."

His voice adds honey to her whiskey. She smiles. "No such thing as werewolves, cowboy."

"Wright," he says. "That's my name. Though you can call me *cowboy* if you'd like."

“Don’t sound like you’re from around here, Wright,” she says.

“*No*,” he says. The word is stretched on his tongue, almost breathy. “No, I ain’t. What’s your name?”

“Your friends didn’t tell you?” she teases.

“Why would I ask my friends when I could hear you say it?” he asks.

“Oh boy,” she says, shaking her head and turning back to her whiskey. Her body is too warm for eye contact.

“Too strong?” he asks.

She laughs. “Reminded me you’re a cowboy.”

“Hm,” he says. “Ain’t really a cowboy. Been a soldier, a farmer, and now I work with horses. But that ain’t it, either.”

“What are you, then?” she asks.

He shakes his head, a spark in his bright eyes. “I want your name first.”

Rolling her eyes, she extends her hand. “Howie Black Elk.”

When he takes it, his warm, dry palm and long calloused fingers swallow her. She has too easy a time imagining that hand of his on other parts of her body. This touch, so innocent in nature, wakes up something within her that she has long since laid to rest.

“Nice to meet you, Howie Black Elk,” he says with a smile as velvety as his voice. “Wright Lindal, since we’re makin’ it formal.”

“What are you, Wright Lindal?” she asks, not letting him go. Their hands catch like this, his thumb brushing the back of her hand with a confident familiarity that makes her want to laugh, but makes her want to kiss him too, so maybe it’s just working.

That smile of his deepens. It’s crooked, she realizes, which she likes even more, this broken part of an otherwise picturesque face.

“A werewolf,” he tells her.

Chapter 5

Ask so nicely

Howie

Her head is dizzy, and she stopped drinking when she met the werewolf.

It isn't a whiskey buzz anyway.

It's the feeling of a man's strong arm around hers at one of the darkened tables, and the rough denim of his jean-clad thigh against her bare leg, their closeness in the corner bench seat. He's too good at telling stories. About werewolves, about fighting some demon at the beach, about the war. The honey-bourbon tone of his voice paints this world for her in which some boys turn wolf at fifteen, and some of them eat Germans, and some of them eat preachers, and some of them fight a creature that can look like anyone they've ever loved.

She doesn't believe any of it is true, but she won't break that spell.

"It wasn't me who killed it, though," he says.

"Not your brother," she teases. "The half-transformed."

Wright smiles that crooked smile, lifting his Coca Cola to his lips. "Nah. Though, what a sight. Would'a made you go blind with fear."

Howie clicks her tongue. "I don't get scared, cowboy."

Wright opens his body to her, leaning on his knuckles to look at her. Every time he does, because this must be a move he does often, he looks so good when he does it, but every time he lets his eyes glaze her she feels goosebumps follow

that path. Her breath hitches in her chest and she shivers. He looks so hungry.

“I was scared shitless,” he says.

She smiles. “Maybe you’re more cat than wolf.”

His gaze darkens even more at this. “I think I can scare you.”

Howie laughs, this too-loud, booming thing. Wright is strong, large, could close his broad palms around her skull with his long fingers tangled and just squeeze in the right place, *burst* her, but she laughs. Maybe from the nerves that rack her frame, but mostly because desire has beaten out any effort towards survival. He looks hungry because she’s starving with the urge to drag her tongue over his skin.

“Don’t believe me?” he asks, but he’s grinning like this delights him.

Howie shakes her head. “No, but I’d like you to try.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Mean that?”

She nods, leaning back. “Please.”

“Since you ask so nicely,” he says, holding out his hand.

She slips hers into his, thinking they’ll go somewhere, but he shakes his head once, a spark in his eyes.

“Back of your hand, darlin’,” he says.

The hair on her neck pricks up from this challenge, but she obeys, turning her hand over in his. In a way, it’s submission, and in that way it feels like new love.

“Us wolves, we have sharp teeth,” he says.

She thinks instantly of the tooth she found outside of Doris Hughes’s home, how razor sharp the edge of it was.

“Even when we’re just men,” he continues.

She tries to look but he doesn’t keep his mouth open long enough for her to see.

“Can cut through skin like it’s butter,” he says, tracing his fingers down her bare wrist. “Do you trust me?”

“No,” she breathes.

He smiles, meeting her gaze like letting her in on the joke. “Gotta put my mouth on you for it.”

Her heart flutters. She glances towards the pool table.

“They ain’t watchin’,” he murmurs, and he’s right. The men at the station are fixated on his group of cowboys with anger in their eyes, some too-young women caught between the groups.

“They’re starting trouble,” she says.

“Another reason to stay out of it,” he tells her.

“Let me touch them,” she says, referring to his teeth.

“Now, where’s the fun in that?” he asks. He winks at her and she settles in. This is a story. A make-believe.

“Okay,” she tells him.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

Even though it sets her skin on fire, she does what he asks. Now, it’s just the sound of a busy bar and the feeling of him touching her. This kind of storytelling has a magic to it, an agreement to travel to somewhere she has never been, a faith that he will take her somewhere worth traveling to.

His lips brush her wrist where her skin is thinnest and she shivers. So this is where he’s taking her, building the heat between her legs into an ache for him. His warm breath caresses her when he grazes her with his teeth.

They’re sharp just like she’s pretending them to be. His motions are so slow, so deeply measured, that he paints a story with each breath. He drags his teeth in the direction of her veins, dripping fire into her pulse. He doesn’t cut her.

But he could, couldn’t he? So easily, he could slice into her wrist.

His tongue follows where his teeth scraped, and soon he’s kissing over the fabric of her shirtsleeve. That energy, that want, builds breathtakingly strong as he kisses slowly up her arm, to her shoulder, and then...

Then his lips graze her ear. “Your neck is next,” he whispers.

She wants his mouth on her neck, wants him to bite her there, even, just to feel how true this is. There’s something within him that’s more than human, she’s sure, and because she’s a woman who tests the fabric of these things, she wants to feel how much more. What power he’s tapped into, this cowboy storyteller, this lying werewolf. But none of that can happen unless she tilts her face up, eyes closed, and submits her throat.

She reaches for his neck instead.

When she does, his pulse is racing too, and she opens her eyes to meet that realization face to face. It’s brighter in the bar since she had her eyes closed. She can see yearning in the glistening surface of his eyes.

“Fuckin’ Christ,” he breathes. Like it’s her who’s doing this.

Then, she tells the story she wants. She lifts her knee, kneels on the bench with this half of her body, and his knee is between her thighs now and his hand smooths to the curve of her waist in a way that is almost reverent. His heat beckons. Hers welcomes. It’s dark in this corner, too dark for anyone to see how neatly they fold together.

He moves closer to her. His lips brush hers, the sweet mint of his breath laid across her tongue. In her chest, her heart freezes. With her hand draped around his throat, she feels his rhythm

It’s hers too, her heart pounding at the same rate of his.

He lays his hand over her bare thigh, spreads his fingers out wide. Electrifies her. He might be a liar but she has never wanted anyone more.

“Not scared,” she lies.

He growls.

Growls.

She feels it in her marrow. In the bones of her hips.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmurs.

“Don’t stop,” she warns.

And because she doesn’t trust him to listen, she brushes his lips with hers. Up once. Her body so threaded with heat she must be glowing in this bar, *must* be. She brushes down and he catches her with his mouth, at first soft, teasingly lazy.

How can a man so large be *gentle*?

She won’t be.

Tightening her grip on his neck, raking her fingers through his hair, she deepens the kiss. This story is a war now, each second its own battle. Kissing doesn’t feel like this, like silk and honey and warm air, tangling her in its clutches, pulling her in, until she’s nearly gasping and her center throbs with an undying ache, and she’s grinding against his knee. He’s got one hand on her waist and another on her hip, guiding her closer, feeling each wave of the rhythm she’s making on him as she builds. Her breath carries shuddering pleasure and he takes it like a knife wound, and there’s blood in her mouth.

“Your *taste*,” he breathes, before kissing her jaw, drawing his tongue over her skin. Her mouth tingles as she takes in air, the salt of blood still lingering in her throat. “Need to drink from you.”

There’s blood in her mouth. He’s grabbing her hair to kiss her neck and she’s riding his thigh. Moaning as he reaches under her shirt to caress her there, to tease his fingers over the sheer lace of her bra. She feels him through his jeans, stroking him until he pulls her face to his and kisses her fiercely. Pulls her legs around him. Runs his tongue from her neck to her cleavage, pushing her onto the table.

Glass breaks. He fists her shirt in his massive hand and she feels stitches rip. Cool air hits her skin and the lights in the bar get clearer and it’s too much.

She can’t do this. Not here, not with witnesses.

“Stop,” she breathes, and it feels like a curse.

He groans, not like blame but like pain, somehow, pulling her up so that she's sitting on the table. He's still between her legs but his touch is tender. The hunger lives in his eyes. In his chest with his rapid breathing. Her legs tremble. The air trips through her lungs like trying to escape, trying to run because she won't.

When she touches her lips, her fingers come back red, his spit and hers diluting with their seductive innocence.

Those voices raise behind her, but she stares at him. Catching her breath.

"You bit me," she whispers, and thinks of the gun in her purse. But she also thinks about asking him to do it again, and maybe if they were anywhere but here she would. She'd like to keep this story alive with his teeth on her neck as he thrusts inside her, pinning her wrists even. Making her believe that all his evil can be sweet just for one night.

Somehow, he looks just as shaken as she is. His hair is messed by her hungry fingers, its sleek dark blonde in disorderly waves now. Worn flannel shirt undone another button. Eyes dazed like waking from some dream.

They're strangers with each other's tastes in their mouths.

And those men behind her yell, their voices cut through with the sound of fists on skin, and she's sure no one saw, but just as sure she can't stay.

Chapter 6

Don't

Wright

Wolves don't live in cities, nor do they choose to make their homes in populated places. Wright's pa chose Orion, North Carolina because it was a town almost no one knew about, so small he didn't just know the first names of the residents but half their lineage, too. It was the kind of town where, even though Wright was born in the same house he lived for so much of his life, he was an outsider because he was a Lindal, and his family were the only Lindals anyone had ever met.

His pa didn't tell him much about where he'd been before that, though Wright figured they'd been in the country for a while because his pa spoke like everyone else he knew. So he didn't know where his pa came from but he knew wolves didn't live in cities, and after he turned for the first time, and his hearing and smell ran so sharp it was almost nauseating, he knew why.

Too many voices hurt his ears. Cities are screaming things. Not unlike, Wright recognizes as the world returns to him, this small bar outside of town where cowboys can usually count on being unbothered by anyone but pretty women and drunks who nod their hats to them.

Howie took that world away. For the past hour or so, it has only been the sound of her voice and her pulse beating against her skin. There was no liquor smell, just smoky, sweet cedar. And when he had her against his tongue, that praline syrup

mixed with the salt of her sweat, now, a flavor like that could make a wolf forget his own name.

But now she's put some distance between them. She's tall, wearing heels too, but when he stands she has to tilt her chin up to see him. And the wolf in him, the one that doesn't like the sound of the bar or his friends yelling with some men about God knows what, wants to take her in, swallow her up, keep her taste forever.

This stranger, Howie, has shaken his globe from its axis. The only thing he can remember craving like her is fresh air when he was overseas, which is to say he craves her like home, which is to say he is *gone*, gone, gone. Out of his mind for her.

She touches her lips. They're so soft that the first brush was like a flower petal against his own, but she kisses with hunger. With fervor, and with teeth, so when she says he bit her he thinks he might have, sharp as he wants to be now. She's strong, body and mind he can tell, more than any human he knows.

Then he hears a word he shouldn't hear, and he snaps all his focus in the direction of that curse, catching it in the air between some tall white man and Dutch right before the man's fist connects with his friend's face. Dutch isn't small, stands a few inches over six feet, so he doesn't go down but he doesn't hit back at first, just steps away, flexing his jaw. Except it's with this distance, as a different, skinny man grabs Dutch's arm as if to help him get away, that Booker flies into the spot where Dutch stood and throws himself into the mix.

The bar erupts from there. It's not a massive space, so even though Howie and Wright were secluded, he's in it now. In it for the first bottle sent flying, for the crash of a table under a man's weight. This is why wolves stay away from crowds, because the second even a drop of blood hits the air Wright feels a rippling growl up his back. He could wipe out half the men in the fight before anyone gets a hit on him. That's like a gun in a stick fight.

But despite talking openly with Howie about everything he's done, he doesn't tell people who he is and he sure doesn't show them, either. In fact, only reason he told Howie is because he figured she wouldn't believe him, and he lost any intelligent thought in his mind the second he got close to her.

Now, he only thinks about getting between her and chaos.

The man next to him hauls a chair into the air and he catches it, sweeping it out of the man's hands and setting it onto the floor. It's damn foolish, trying to destroy the bar's property like this if they ever want to come back here.

Wright pushes forward, into the meat of it all, into the shouting and fist-throwing until a bottle catches his temple and he bares his teeth, blinking through the booze and glass, feeling the liquid trickle down his cheek. He catches the eye of the tall man, the same one with the foul mouth, right before he launches himself at him, and...

Shit, did he get some kind of brain damage from kissing? The man is strong, even for him, and maybe that's a good thing because Wright can fight back with his full strength this time, throwing a punch at the man's head. Tackling him to the ground.

The man grabs him by the neck, pushes them over. Slams Wright's head back against the ground. That, Howie, and the bottle make his vision blurry for a second before he grabs the man's elbow and slams it hard as he can inward, which lures a near-wolflike howl from his opponent's chest. If he hadn't eaten so recently, Wright's stomach would've growled at the crunching of bone. He thinks, as he pushes the man onto his back and starts punching him, that there's something to his kind that wants to eat his enemies, some kind of second victory.

Then, sharp and clear, he hears Howie's voice over the din, too far off.

"Don't!" she yells.

Wright looks up at the barrel of a gun.

He hears a gunshot almost immediately, and he thinks this is going to mean running to another state, and he's pissed. Doesn't want to leave, was just getting settled, and if that bullet pierces his skull he'll be out for a few hours and wake up in a morgue somewhere, punch his way out of a refrigerator, and hightail it out of town, let someone spread a rumor about the dead body that resurrected itself. A bullet can't kill him, not even silver. Only thing that can keep him dead is his own kind.

It takes this long for him to realize there's no bullet in his head.

Everyone stills as if to check themselves, but for the large, booming voices that tell him and the others to put their hands up. And as he stands, keeping his hands up, open palms towards the man with the gun, he glances down and sees a shock of metal.

A badge.

When he turns, Howie has her smoking gun aimed towards the ceiling, her chest still rising and falling in big, panicked breaths. She meets his gaze, her eyes darkening as her lips move around a silent word.

If he's not mistaken, she just called him an idiot.

Chapter 7

Deputy, not darling

Howie

Howie's lucky Deputy Jones didn't pull that trigger, she knows. Lucky Williams and his khaki posse didn't decide to turn the night at the bar into a slaughter. Lucky she and Brooks could convince them to stay out, taking the cowboys to the station in the bed of Howie's truck even though Wright stared at her the entire time, the heat of betrayal almost as rich as the lust in his gaze.

It was a mistake, kissing him. But her luck's running out because even driving with him in the back, she *felt* him.

She feels him.

She wants him.

And he is no good. Even more *no good* than the way she'd normally concern herself with men, if that was even something she's done very often since Darran. Those massive hands of his, their dry warmth and calloused texture, she's going to dream about them. In the morning when she goes home for a few hours to sleep before her shift starts, she is going to think of him with her hand between her legs. *That* is harmless, healing even. She'll think him out of her system.

But for now, his friends are passed out on the floor of the holding cell, and Brooks is snoring at his desk, and she and Wright are the only people awake at the station except for the operators in their room down the hall.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asks. “Sleep. Sleep this off.”

“Don’t want to sleep you off,” he drawls.

She tenses. “Got none of me on you, cowboy.”

“Didn’t peg you for a liar,” he says.

This makes her turn her chair to him, heat from the anger rushing up her spine. But it’s not a good idea, looking at him. This town is full of too many men she has known most of her life, and he is new, stunning, addictive from just a kiss, from just his body against hers. He looks so warm. He looks like the feeling of his teeth against her skin.

“If I’m still there, brush your teeth,” she says.

He narrows his eyes at her. “That how it is?”

“Yes, that’s how it is,” she tells him.

“Even with how it felt?” he asks.

She purses her lips. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your skin feels like lightnin’ to me,” he says.

“Sounds painful,” she says. “Should wrap your hands then.”

“You asked me to touch you.”

“Why’s that the only time you listened to me?” she challenges, turning back to her desk. She can’t organize it anymore, and she won’t be doing paperwork on these men. They’re recorded by name and print, but it was so late she forgot to write up the report. The silent agreement that this had to end at the bar, that they must do everything they can to *make* it end at the bar, so there’s no more blood spilled.

“Grateful for you and your partner,” Wright says, and this late at night, his voice is low enough to crawl across the floor. She fights a shiver. “Never have felt too fondly about the law. Least where I’m from, they’re all workin’ with their own brand of justice. And it ain’t the Lord’s.”

“Separation of church and state, ennit?” she asks.

“Dutch sleepin’ a few feet away’s what I’m sayin’,” he says, and she can assume who that is.

“S’different here,” she says, which isn’t all the way true.

“That because they’re different?” he asks. “Or because you know how to manage ‘em well enough?”

She sets a pen on her desk, perfectly horizontal to her legal pad. Tries not to meet his eyes again, but she feels them on her. Orion, North Carolina. That’s where he’s from. She could call the sheriff’s department there, see what his past encounters have been like.

To anyone else, any other deputy, she imagines Wright Lindal would be nothing more than an oddity. A too-big man in cowboy boots. That drawl like honey, his blue eyes and blonde hair so reassuring to their vision of non-threatening, right? But hers is different, and maybe that’s why. Or maybe she’s just smart. Yes. Definitely.

It’s because she’s got good instincts, and not because she let him kiss her in a bar and wants to do it again and needs an excuse to call him a villain. Even with her fingers in his hair. Even with grinding herself on his knee. She doesn’t *act* like that; it isn’t *her*.

So it must be him. It must be him, with his scent like a forest and his large body so damn warm she thinks it calls to her through the bars.

“Figured you know how much of a problem those men are, or you and your partner wouldn’t be plannin’ on lettin’ us out before six,” Wright adds, and Howie knows he couldn’t have heard her and Brooks when they spoke. Knows he *shouldn’t*.

“Know so much, and you still start shit with them?” she asks, turning.

“That ain’t what I was doin’,” he says.

“What were you doing then?”

“Finishin’ it.”

She glares at him and he smiles. It's an unnatural look, crooked but charming by how it lights his otherwise clouded face.

"Maybe I should keep you here," she says, pushing herself to stand. "Maybe you're not safe anywhere else."

At his desk, Brooks is passed out, head on his folded arms. The three men behind Wright don't shift from where they lie snoring, but Wright's eyes track her as she walks. This feels like walking towards a loaded gun, and as much as she may hate him for what he made her do, there's something so seductive about that.

When she's just inches from the bars, she stops. She drops her voice so only he can hear.

"You could've killed him, hitting him like that," she says.

"Could've killed me," he says, smiling like it's the funniest joke.

She shakes her head. "There was blood in my mouth when you kissed me."

"Sure that wasn't honey?" he asks. "Tasted like it."

"You have sharp teeth, Wright Lindal," she says.

"You have soft lips," he says. "Softest I've ever kissed."

"Is that why you bit me?"

"Didn't bite you."

He moves his hand as if to touch her and she steps back, just out of reach. The way her heart skips, that's not good. This is a game now. It should be serious, should be buttoned-up and straightened-out like so much of her job has to be, but this is between them.

"I'd like to," he says.

"Hold out your hand," she offers, reaching out.

He cocks his head but obeys, palm open to the ceiling so when she touches him, she's touching the back of his hand from underneath. She should be at a safe distance, but there is

no safe distance. Even like this, it feels like all the gravity in the room is throwing her towards him. Motion sickness. That's what something like this can give her. She traces the veins under his skin and wants to put his fingers in her mouth. Instead, she feels his pulse.

"Think you could break these bars?" she asks. There's a skip that comes with lying. Darran hated when she did this, but he let her, and of course Wright lets her too.

"I'm just a man, darlin," he drawls. *A lie.*

She smiles, playing this off. "Thought you were a werewolf."

Shaking his head gently, he murmurs some kind of acknowledgement before saying, "sure you're a sheriff?"

"Deputy," she says.

"Deputy who believes in, what?" he asks in a low voice. "Think I'm some kind of fable?"

He leans his forehead against the bars but keeps his hand steady.

"I don't haunt these woods, darlin' -" he starts.

"*Shh,*" she soothes. "It's *deputy*, not darling."

The flame of wanting passes between them, and his knuckles graze her skin.

"Christ," he breathes. "Sure you don't want to open this door?"

"I'm sure," she says.

"Maybe just turn around then," he says. "I can make good use of my hands under that skirt. Lick my fingers clean after."

Hoping he doesn't notice, she presses her knees together. Breathes through this.

"You're perverse," she says.

"Only for you," he nearly purrs. "Deputy."

"Listen to me then," she says. "Other hand, keep this one where it is."

He takes a deep breath before sliding his other hand through the bars, palm up. The ink from fingerprinting still stains his fingers dark, and for a second she thinks of paw prints.

“Take my advice after this,” she says, holding both his hands. Too long without sleep, that whiskey still whispering in her blood, she’s bold enough to stroke her thumbs over his palms. “Leave. Don’t look back. Whatever you’re bringing with you, I don’t want it. Go home.”

“Aw, now I feel like I’m in one of those westerns,” he says. “Second I become a cowboy, the sheriff wants to chase me out of town.”

“I’m a deputy,” she says. “And you’re not a cowboy, remember?”

She clips the handcuffs on his wrists. They almost don’t fit, only a notch but she moves them two because he can deal with a little tightness. It’s enough for the purpose of her story. Enough for her to stride back to her desk feeling confident, and angle her chair away from the cell.

“What’re the cuffs for?” he calls out.

She doesn’t answer.

Hours later, when the sun hasn’t even begun to rise and she stands to wake them and send them off to the ranch, or to anywhere but here, the first thing she sees is Wright Lindal’s back. It’s pressed against the bars, turned away from her as he rests on the floor of the cell, snoring lightly.

When she sees it, she’s so tired at first she doesn’t even question how he got that way. But as Brooks escorts them out, Wright sets something on her desk. It’s metal, chrome and dark with compression. Shining in the fluorescent light, it looks like the kind of rock she might find in the woods, chipped jagged off a mountain. But steel, or mica.

The chain gives it away.

It’s the handcuffs she put on him, balled like aluminum foil with the same hands she touched.

Chapter 8

Neighbors

Wright

November rolls through Jackson like a dark cloud, bringing with it a whisper of winter like Wright has never seen. Not even overseas, and he thought it was Arctic-cold there, all gray from dawn 'till dusk, a few breaks for blue skies in the countryside at least. But Wyoming is a different beast. The wind never stops out here, despite the surrounding terrain being a shipwreck of forests and mountains. So damn cold it stings the human layer of his skin, and even with his neck wrapped up and leather gloves on his hands he still feels its icy teeth trying to break through.

It's going to be brutal here around January and February. That's what everyone says. But the cows, then, they'll go to the huge, sweeping barns nearer to the bunkhouse, get fed hay, only come out when the sun's at the highest, so it'll be different work. There'll still be fence work, but it'll be slower, the kind of thing that takes days when it should take hours. He'll have to cut holes in ice for the cattle to drink. The men say it slows down in December, that you can have something of a life for a little while. Picks up again during calving season, but they'll stick to the barns through that, into April most likely.

For now it's just too cold for Wright, not for the cattle. It hasn't hit below zero during the daytime. They're used to it. So while he patrols the fence line on horseback, he thinks about Howie.

Thinks about that silky tongue teasing his, thinks about the flavor of her blood in his mouth, but the worst thing, the thing that'll eat him from the inside, he thinks, is how much he misses talking to her. *God*, he's not sure he's ever met a woman, or any person for that matter, who's as smart on their feet as she is. It thrills him. Makes his head spin.

He's a soldier, as tall as a damn door frame, and has killed more men than he can count. In every relationship or fling he's ever had, the latter of which being a bit excessive, he has been the one in charge. It's easy for him, unquestioned in his mind as the way men and women should get on with each other, but *damn*.

He liked when Howie put him in handcuffs. Liked when she grabbed his neck too, and those challenging eyes of hers... It doesn't change how much he wants to pick up where they left off, to fuck her into oblivion, mark her with his bite on her neck, make her *his*. But there's something different in this need, because he'd like her to leave a mark too. This could be something he'd carve into his chest with a wolf's tooth. Her name. The date they met. He'd let her do anything she wanted, let her *use* him, if it made her breath shudder out like it did when she rode his knee. If it made her squeeze her legs tighter like she did at the station.

By the time he's done thinking of that image, his cock has turned to steel in the way that makes riding a horse almost torturous. Too damn cold out to beat off. He unbuttons his jacket just to remind himself of that, shaking the thought out of his head. Hell, he's turned into a damn teenager with thoughts like this, and there's no privacy outside of his truck out here.

He spends all day on the ranch, which he'd enjoy if he wasn't plagued by this obsession, and he sleeps in the bunkhouse, which reminds him of war. On warm enough nights he'll sleep under the trees, but those nights have been strange since he met her. Like he's been wandering off, waking up in odd places.

She's driving him insane, he thinks.

The sheriff's deputy.

He's gotta train his thoughts to lead with her station, because otherwise this will turn into something very dangerous. The Lindals don't involve themselves with the law. Since he was young, he learned that rule. Passed it onto his brother too, saw it reflected when Elam became his closest friend in town. Hateful words spray-painted on that gas station, a brick run through the window so often he could make his own wall with them. Cops didn't care. Hell, they probably threw some themselves.

One thing did work, though. Wright or Ridge posting up there at night with a rifle in their hands. The people of Orion might not know what the Lindals are, but prey can sense a predator when it sees one. Doesn't need a name for it. Wright may go to church, where grandmas will reach up to pinch his cheeks and ask if he's met any nice women. And he may take home his fair share of nice women, but he imagines it's because he's never killed the finer sex that they feel safe around him.

Men, on the other hand, sense it. A few of those brick-throwers are just bones now, buried deep in the woods and marked to keep any animals from digging. Like coyote piss keeps away deer.

So Wright's not getting involved with any member of law enforcement, no matter how delicious they taste, no matter how much the spark in their eyes makes his heart freeze for a damn moment, no, he is *not* going to be feral for Deputy Black Elk of the Teton County Sheriff's Department, which has his fucking fingerprints like they already know he's a criminal.

That's enough to make his hard-on go away, thank God.

But the handcuffs.

But the way she'd move those lithe hips on him.

"*Jesus Christ,*" he mutters, sliding off the horse. The fence is sturdier when the ground is frozen like this, and he hasn't seen much that needs repairs, so he'll walk before he rides back. Clear his head a little.

He pulls out an apple and cuts off a chunk, feeding it to the horse he named Delta. According to Stoughton, the horse was named Lucky because half the horses they get for work are named something like that. Lucky, Ranger, whatever. So it's their job to rename them, once they form an attachment. Half the horses are attached to Wright, but Delta is his favorite.

"Life's easy for you, I bet," he tells the horse. "Ain't no horse cops out here... Unless that's us, I guess."

He slices some of the apple for himself, taking a bite.

"She's somethin'," he says. "Damn, she's somethin'. Might kill me, surely wants to, but boy, if you'd seen her... Wouldn't be able to think of much else."

"Are you talking to your horse?" a small voice calls out.

Wright frowns, looking to the left of the fence, into the trees.

A young girl sits perched on the tree branch, swinging her legs. She's wearing a blue parka, black pants, brown boots. Can't be more than ten years old, all scrawny and bushy-haired. The sight is so out of place out here that Wright needs to blink a few times just to know she's not some spirit. And that thought echoes to the others, all he saw this summer trampling on his reality just enough to make him question everything now, but she looks just as spooked as he does.

"Guess so," he says, passing Delta the rest of his apple and pocketing his knife. "Say, I didn't know we had neighbors."

He's still testing it. Still unsure.

"You smell like my dad," she says, not answering.

He laughs. No, a creature wouldn't say something like that. "Got that good a sense of smell or do I just reek?"

She shrugs. "Not my real dad, but my home dad, you know?"

"Can't say I do," he says, frowning.

"This is my real dad's place," she says.

"Rob Stoughton?" he asks.

She nods.

“Out pretty far from the house,” he says.

“It’s safer out here,” she says. “You know Daddy’s got dynamite rigged up all over his roads? Buried underground, but not so deep.”

Wright frowns. He’d smelled something, figured the earth in Wyoming had so much gunpowder in it over years of hunting elk and bison that it kept the memory like shrapnel in the skin. But why Rob would have dynamite set up, and why he wouldn’t tell a soul, strikes a chord of distrust deep in his chest that nearly makes him want to walk out and never look back. Then again, it could just be a child’s stories.

“He tell you that?” he asks. “Might just want to keep you out of his hair, then.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “He says no one can ever hurt me here because he’d take them out, everyone. No monsters, no bad guys, no nothing.”

Wright breathes a deeper sigh this time, thinks of the stories parents tell their children. Wolf kids don’t feel that same fear, but he can’t fault a father for wanting to make his daughter believe she’s safe. Still, he’d like to ask Rob about that dynamite, if it’s real. *Who are you plannin’ on takin’ out, Sir?*

“Seems like a far way from the house, still,” he says.

She shrugs again. “I like running.”

“Need a ride back?” he asks.

“No, sir,” she says. “Frankly, I don’t know if my daddy wants you to know I’m here.”

“I understand,” Wright says, figuring there must be some boundaries. Not that he gave those to his brother when he was in charge. Same rules his pa gave him: *if you’re home for dinner and don’t need stitches, you’re alright*. But they were boys. “What if I drop you off before the house?”

“That isn’t necessary,” she says proudly. “I bet I can outrun that horse.”

“Not so sure about that,” he says, amused. “Delta’s fast.”

“I’m *faster*,” she promises.

He raises an eyebrow. “If you say so.”

“Are you from the south?” she asks. “From Carolina?”

“I am,” he says. “What gave it away?”

“My real dad, Mr. Stoughton, says we got another one from the south, who talks funny and is real big,” she says.

“I don’t talk funny,” Wright says with a smile, laying his accent on a bit thicker for her.

“Yes you do,” the girl says, laughing.

“Where I’m from, we’d think y’all’re the ones who talk funny,” Wright says.

She laughs harder at this, like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard. “*Where I’m from*,” she imitates.

“Try this,” Wright says. “*Howdy, darlin’*.”

“*Howdy, darlin’*,” she says, giggling.

“*Been out in them corn fields all day*,” he continues.

“*Out in them corn fields!*” she exclaims.

“It’s like I’m back home,” he says before hoisting himself up onto the saddle. He looks up at her once more before continuing along the fence line. “You’re sure you’ll be okay?”

“Daddy says I’m like Wonder Woman,” she says. “Nothin’ in this world can hurt me.”

He smiles, but there’s an ache in his chest he doesn’t want to think too much about. If he wasn’t what he is, maybe he’d have a daughter. It’d be a riot, having one like that. Stoughton’s a good man, he figures, for making that odd girl feel invincible.

Chapter 9

Something someone can do

Howie

At her desk, Howie touches her lips, wondering.

If Wright Lindal is a werewolf and he bit her, does that mean she'll turn too? She thumbs her medicine pouch. Is it enough? What if she needs something more?

She'll visit Cynthia and Até, talk to Uncle Bodie about it, because he'd help at least and wouldn't laugh, but there's no such thing as werewolves. That's a foreigner's folk story, even, not of this land, so it can't work here. And if it were true, well, Wright Lindal probably kisses women at bars so often there would be dozens of werewolves from here to the ocean, so pissed at him that they hunt him down.

No, she won't turn. He's not a werewolf.

"Do you know any men who can bend steel with their hands?" she asks Brooks.

"Like strongmen?" he asks, a glimmer in his eyes like he's biting back laughter.

"Is that funny?" she asks.

"Why're you asking me?"

"You're a country boy, shit, from Oklahoma," she scoffs. "Probably go to fairs all the damn time."

He smiles. He's a little scruffy, but that smile brightens his entire face.

“Sure. That’s why,” he says before leaning forward and lowering his voice. “Not because I see more men than you do?”

She clicks her tongue, rolling her eyes.

“Not gonna say that,” she says with a laugh. “Mean it, though. That something someone can do, even?”

Brooks shrugs. “Sure, maybe. I think I’ve seen it.”

“Okay, because look,” she says, reaching into the drawer of her desk. “These are the fucking handcuffs, that the cowboy messed with when we had them in holding.”

Brooks takes the balled-up steel, sits back in his chair. “How’d he get handcuffs?”

“Does it matter?” she asks, but he looks at her a bit longer now, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah,” Brooks says. “It might. Were they on his wrists?”

She pulls her lips between her teeth.

“This is the big fellow?” Brooks asks. “The one you kissed?”

“Keep your voice down,” she hushes.

“People saw you go with him,” he hisses. “Know how many times I had to vouch for you?”

“Know how many times I vouch for *you*?” she fires back, cocking an eyebrow.

Brooks firms his mouth for a second, but then it’s to bite back laughter.

“Fair,” he says over a chuckle, passing the balled cuffs back to her. “He’s a strongman. Mighty fine one too.”

“Hush up,” she laughs.

“Planning on seeing him again?” he asks.

“Tasé,” she scoffs. “No, told him to leave town.”

“Shouldn’t’ve,” he scolds.

“We’ll see if he listens, how ‘bout?” she asks, just as Ava passes by her desk.

Ava is one of the operators at the station, which means one of the phone operators for the entire town. For her not to be working means Mabel is also on shift, both of whom Howie is vaguely grateful for. Not for who she is, but what. When they’re in the office they dress nice enough to avert attention from Howie’s mandatory uniform of year-round fitted skirts that cut off above the knee.

“What are you two doing?” Ava asks.

Brooks takes a sip of the coffee in his mug. “Paperwork,” he answers.

Glancing at his empty desk, Howie bites her lip to keep from laughing.

“Got a call from the Hughes woman a couple hours ago,” she says. “Captain said he’d tell you, but he did seem swamped.”

“Another werewolf?” Howie asks.

Ava’s brow knits in confusion. “What?”

“That’s what...” Howie starts. “Nothing. She thinks she saw a wolf.”

“Oh, no,” Ava says.

Howie takes a deep breath before sighing.

“She’s a nervous woman, isn’t she?” Ava asks. “She sounded panicked. Just said to send you two out there.”

“Said to send us?” Howie asks.

“You made a good impression,” Brooks says, his low voice lifting in surprise.

Howie ignores him. “Why didn’t you go to us, then?” she asks Ava.

Ava crosses her arms. “Protocol,” she says, and Howie doesn’t really believe her.

With Howie at the wheel, the drive to the Hughes house doesn't take more than ten minutes. It comes with a curious half-silence, neither she nor Brooks knowing what to expect, and in Howie's heart she's wondering if she'll see the man in the wolf's skin. If she'll see him crawl out, even. And if, when he looks at her, it'll be from a height of six and a half feet, and guarding his sharp teeth will be lips she knows the feel of.

That's what she's half-ready for when she pulls the cruiser up the driveway, except everything is still. She exhales deep. Didn't even know she was holding her breath. Brooks sighs, and the space in the cruiser lightens before they realize they're waiting for Doris to open the door.

On the first night they visited her, Doris opened the door. So that became the protocol, that near-accidental nick in the stone of *how things go*. This is different, and so it's wrong. They have to find out how wrong it is.

Howie's hand brushes her gun before she steps out of the car, just checking to make sure it's there.

"Could be nothing," Brooks says in an attempt to be lighthearted.

She shoots him a look, because she has never been an optimist.

At the porch, she braces herself, but the door looks intact.

"Doris!" she calls, knocking. "Teton County Sheriff's Department. It's Deputy Black Elk and Deputy Brooks!"

There's no movement inside. Nothing other than the wind outside, Howie realizes. No birds, no animals. Wrongness prickles its sharp claws up her spine.

"Doris!" she calls again. "It's the Sheriff's Department! I'm going to open your door!"

Brooks looks at her sharply but if he doesn't sense why now, he will.

Howie pushes open the door, but the house doesn't seem much different. It still holds that rotten scent of keeping too

much for too long. She steps inside and feels the shadow of more than just the roof overhead.

When a ghost is born, there's an energy to it, whether that ghost is a spirit or a memory. The earth holds onto everything, and a house is earth shaped differently.

"Mrs. Hughes!" Brookes calls, walking ahead of Howie.

His gun is in his hand already.

Howie tracks his feet, and the rug in the front room is lopsided, pulled towards the kitchen. The breeze picks up behind her. She doesn't close the door. She knows. She knows she's walking into someone's death.

It stills her tongue in her mouth, keeps her lips pressed together and her breathing short. She can see it, see the way Doris ran from the backyard. Because that's where the creature was, wasn't it?

Bending down, she inspects the rug where the noontime sun hits it brightest. Old stains on the Persian pattern, and then, just a few drops like a child's bloody nose spilled for just a moment before a hand covers it.

When she touches the stain, it isn't wet. But it's damp. Clotted.

Brooks watches her and raises his gun to shoulder height before heading into the kitchen.

"Mrs. Hughes!" he calls.

A shape bolts forward and Howie yelps, reaching for her gun only to see the shape rush past her. Fluffy and small. It's a cat, sprinting for freedom with a yowl.

The appearance and disappearance cuts the tension enough for Howie to breathe again and Brooks to laugh just a little, and for the both of them to pretend that no one could die here even though Howie feels the spirit like a hand on her shoulder, and this is no time for laughter.

She watches the wall on the way to the kitchen, so sure she'll find more blood. But instead, what she sees is spotless.

While it was messy before, it's clean now, in the unused way that makes her think this is recent.

"Mrs. Hughes!" Brooks calls again, lowering his gun. "Think she left? Ava said it could've been hours."

"Her car's in the driveway," Howie reminds him, pushing past him, her eyes tracking for anything. In this home, neatness is just as much of a tell. Doris doesn't clean often. She keeps old newspapers and pots and pans in the sink, or at least she did the first time, which has to be the normal time, doesn't it?

When she turns the knob on the back door, it falls inward, its hinges broken. She steps aside and lets it clatter to the floor. This is urgent.

"Brooks," she hisses, rushing outside. The dead grass of late autumn crunches under her feet, still frozen, the wind picking up as she looks in each direction. But out here, she can smell it. The same scent she knows from hunting with Até. Death lingers in the air with big game, and any deer hunter worth their salt knows it, picks it up before they even register a bullet in flesh. This is the scent of death like pennies and wet earth.

She's not looking for blood anymore. She's looking for a body.

"I smell it," Brooks says.

Howie looks into the woods.

Even with the sun as high in the sky as it is, it's dim there. Unlike Howie's home deep in the mountains, the woods near Doris's house are only as wide as town is. That still means a world between the pines, still means they can't hear the highway on the other side, but it's lighter.

The second she steps past the tree line, she feels eyes on her.

That stillness lingers. No birds. She can't hear anything but the careless wind, the ever-present whisper in this part of town. It's the only whistle she can tolerate, but right now it still sounds like calling spirits.

And then, what must be two-hundred yards into the rows of pines, she sees movement. She sees a dark figure standing with something in its arms. The distance feels like a mile, and as far as her pistol is concerned it is.

“Sheriff’s department,” Brooks yells, raising his gun. “Stay where you are!”

The figure stills for a moment, before turning with its carry and rushing deeper into the woods. It moves like a dancer, because dancers move like deer, jumping through each portion of the forest with ease, faster than any animal should be. It could outrun a deer with ease, Howie thinks.

Could outrun a wolf too.

Still, Brooks gives chase. This is a near-winter forest, broken branches from too many quick frosts and puddles everywhere. While Brooks might give a human a good run in his boots, the department gave Howie heels. She’s barefoot to just her pantyhose in a few steps.

Barefoot in the woods gives her back her awareness, though, and she remembers this thing is human enough to drive, or some part of it is. Its car’ll be on the road, won’t it? Down to the registration? She can find out who he turns into.

Better yet, she realizes, turning and sprinting to the cruiser instead, she knows where the creature is heading. Animals go to their dens, but humans go to their trails. It’s how they navigate, and the one big trail at the end of those woods is the highway.

“Get in the fucking car!” she shrieks so that Brooks can hear, because she’s leaving with or without him.

Of course he doesn’t hear her, is too deep into the woods by now. Chasing something unnaturally fast, running until his legs burn, she’s sure. He won’t catch it. She doesn’t have time to worry if he’ll be okay. Her gut is screaming at her, shrieking for her to be so fast she hardly registers turning on the cruiser before she’s speeding through the neighborhood. Lights flashing. Ignoring how they’ve never once let her work alone.

It can't take more than a few minutes to get to the highway.

That's all she needs.

In her head, she sees the wolf-man bursting from the forest, Doris still alive in his arms. This fast, she can hear the wind battle the glass of the cruiser. She can feel the ground moving underneath her, and each car zooming by blooms the air against the driver's side door. But she's close; she must be.

Not close enough.

She sees the wreck before she even notices what it is, but another car stopped on the highway. A driver stands in the road, flagging for help with waving arms.

Blood on asphalt looks like spilt oil, so she doesn't look for it right away. She knows what this is.

The driver collapses when Howie stops the cruiser. The woman, her car wasn't a part of the wreck, but she looks like she's been through hell in a minute flat. Salt streaks of tears run down her chin.

Howie can't tend to her, though. There's a stillness in the air of this space, impermeable by the cars beginning to rubberneck by.

There's a pickup truck caved in by a tree, and the windshield is a gaping, glassy mouth. No movement from the man who drove that, whose skull is cracked open, blood like paint all over his face, his blue eyes taking on the sky. There's a body behind him. Tracked over, mangled by the tires of his truck.

Out here, there are car accidents all the time. In fall, when deer running from the memory of gunshots means they never stop running, crossing highways a thousand times, plowing through windshields. In winter, the roads are so full of ice they look and feel like glass, the rubber of tires not catching on anything. She knows how to drive every road, where to coast, where the gravel is even in winter. Out here, when everything's bleached white with snow, there's no hills until you feel them. So she has to know what she'll see.

Walking up to a car accident feels like the most final, unstoppable bullet embedded in the trunk of a tree. But this is different. This feels like getting here too late, which she did, though she considers that if she'd been earlier it might be her against that tree, and knows Até must be taking a deep breath somewhere, must've felt that.

Howie knows what she'll see before she finishes her trek. There are remnants of a silk dress just like there are remnants of skin. So much of her is burst-open, Howie's not sure if she died from being run over or from whatever the wolf-man did to her, but he's gone now.

Must have thrown Doris, she realizes, under those speeding tires. And how perfect, that the only witness who could have given a report on that creature is dead on the ground.

Rustling comes from the woods, but it's just Brooks stumbling out. He takes in the scene with wide eyes.

"We need to go back," Howie says, heading for the cruiser. "We need to find the truck, find the registration!"

She feels Brooks at her back and stills just as she begins to take in the crowd.

"Hurry," she tells him.

He grabs her arm.

"Howie," he warns. "We can't leave."

"The hell are you saying?" she asks, glaring at him.

"Two people died," he hisses.

"Someone *killed* them," she challenges.

He doesn't let go. "Gotta radio it in. Send someone else to check for a truck where we saw those tracks. But we're here. We're the only ones here, and we can't leave dead bodies. We just can't."

Howie turns her focus past the road into town. It's going to take too long, she knows. And she won't even know what to tell them.

She already knows what they'll say.

A tragedy.

A suicide.

An accident.

But she knows what they'll never admit: that whatever this creature is, it's more dangerous than anything they've seen before.

Chapter 10

Like you

Wright

The first time Wright goes to church out west, he's already started to forget who he is.

It comes on slowly like the creeping of frost. The first time it happened, he woke up on the road in front of the ranch, gray dawn beginning to break over the jagged horizon. Not knowing how much time had passed or what he had done while it did. It isn't so far into winter that things have slowed down at the ranch, but nights are below freezing. He wasn't wearing enough clothes for a man to survive, the cold so biting that his bare chest looked nearly white, the scar he got over the summer a dark purple.

That was when he stopped sleeping in his drawers.

This un-knowing, he hasn't felt it since the summer. Not since he went to Sadie's home and experienced those vivid... Nightmares? Fantasies? He's not sure, but they make his chest seize up to think about. Hours felt like days, his reality a thin veil that tore easily between his fingers.

He can't go back to it. Not here. Not when he feels more alive than he has in a decade, spending his time breathing mountain air with friends he enjoys and watching a woman he might have some shot at a future with. Things are better now than they ever have been, and forgetting things seems fatal.

A few days later he woke up in the woods. It was still dark then, around three in the morning, and he was covered in the blood and flesh of his wolf as if he'd been hunting. But he felt

hungry. Wickedly hungry, which meant not only that he hadn't eaten but that he'd have to soon. All day on the ranch he stayed close to the horses to keep his mind clear, working the stables to toughen up his hands even knowing he'd shed the skin that night. *That* night, after eating a man who'd been harassing a woman at a bar not far down the highway, Wright did sleep well. Convinced himself it's no different than the sleepwalking Ridge did as a child.

Until it happened during the day.

He was out on Delta in one of the far pastures, the one that borders on the highway and stands a good twelve miles outside of the main house, the kind of day you bring a pack for because you're not sure if you'll be out all night. Suddenly, an awful exhaustion hit him. And he thought he was pushing on, but next thing he knew he was braced with both hands on the other side of the fence, jarred conscious by the sound of tires running over a cattle grate, and Delta was on the side of the pastures staring at him. Sun was setting all around them, and his legs felt like he'd run twenty miles just to get back there.

Thing Wright can't get out of his head, the reason he's at church now for the memorial service of a woman he doesn't know, is that afternoon was the same day she died. Jumped in front of a truck, and the truck went into a tree, a dual tragedy that brings all the town out. Something's off about it, though. No such thing as coincidence.

They, meaning the men of the ranch who chose to go in today, sit in one of the far-back pews, close enough to the doors that every time someone new enters Wright feels the breeze of a dying autumn brush his neck. Rob Stoughton wears a fine black suit but the rest of the ranch hands are dressed in whatever isn't dirty. Wright wears a pair of black slacks and a white button down, forgoing his mud-stained jacket. Reyes has a black checkered shirt paired with his jeans, pearl-buttoned with white detailing, like a cowboy is meant to look, Wright figures. Like they looked in the pictures before coming here. Dutch is dressed the nicest of the hands, was hesitant to come here because this isn't his church, but no one says no to Rob Stoughton. A few other men, the Canadians

and the Midwesterners who brag about how warm a thirty degree day is, are dressed head to toe in denim.

Wright feels a certain kinship for the dead woman. Her husband died in the war, and all this time she's been alone. A bit fucking heartbreaking, knowing she never remarried or had any children to spend time with.

Suicide is a cyclone in the pit of his stomach anyway. Wasn't long ago he wished to die. Wasn't long ago he almost did. And all this wouldn't've been there for him if he'd taken the same route she did. So he can't always focus on what the reverend says, because God hates the erasure of his own creations, he knows. Keeps them from Heaven and all that. Was fine when he considered himself excluded but some poor woman?

No, he doesn't want to think about the kind of cruelty God would give her.

His thoughts drift to the front pew.

That's where Howie sits, her back pin-straight and long, dark hair in a single braid tucked over her shoulder. She's dressed in a black dress like he's seen women in town wear, the type with the puffy skirt that nearly swallows her lean legs, as well as bright beaded earrings and a tan buckskin jacket. He shouldn't be watching her legs, shouldn't be watching *her*, tracking how she doesn't quite follow the hymns and how she looks back all the way in her seat to lock eyes with him twice during the service, jolting each time like she's surprised to see him.

Even from this far, though, he can see the distress in her eyes. He feels each discomfort she suffers, as if they've already mate bonded, as if he even *can* mate bond with anyone else but Jess when he had her.

After the closed casket viewing, where he holds his breath through the formaldehyde, the crowd streams downstairs to the basement for supper. But Howie stays back, glancing at him once before turning and navigating through the pews to make her way through those big oak doors. He tells Dutch he's

going outside for a smoke, but the man's eyebrows raise in a judgmental amusement before he nods to him.

Wright finds Howie against the church's log paneling, her arms crossed, her face tilted towards the sky. He wonders for a moment what a funeral looks like for her people, figures it can't look like this. Her eyes are closed to the sun like she's taking it in with as much of her skin as she can, like she was missing it all this time, and so he does too.

He pulls out his pack of cigarettes. When he looks at her next, she's watching him. There's a weight on her shoulders, in her brow. Her skin, though, is so smooth it looks nearly buttery in the sunlight.

He knocks the pack and offers her one. She takes it, rolling it around between her fingers like inspecting it for something. It softens the space behind her eyes.

"Thanks," she says.

"Welcome," he says, lighting her cigarette. He lights his own and exhales to the side before refocusing on her.

"Ain't been in a church in a while," he says.

She takes a drag. "Me neither."

Still, there's that weight on her shoulders. He's not sure how to ask about it because he's not used to caring, figures people can carry the weight of whatever they're dealing with just as he does. But he doesn't want her to.

Finally, he just says it.

"Somethin' wrong?" he asks her, gaze fixed on those earrings of hers. He likes the patterns on them, the spots of red and blue.

"Other than two people dead?" Howie asks.

That's not all of it, he knows. Can tell this runs a bit deeper. He nods once.

She taps her heel. Her gaze switches from him to over his shoulder.

"First on the scene," she says.

Damn. Of course, he's been seeing bloody deaths since he first turned. But he knows it's not like that for humans. For *her*.

"Sorry to hear that," he says. "Must've been hard to see."

She catches his gaze now, searching. "Hm."

"What?" he asks.

"You say that to soldiers? *Must've been hard to see?*" she asks.

"Didn't have to," he says. "Was there too."

"Was it?" she asks.

"The camps," he says, forgetting he's supposed to nod and say nothing. Forgetting that he's meant to be some man from small-town Carolina who would've never seen anything as awful as war. Her face, her mind, it's all too smart for lies, so being around her lures a rare honesty out of him. Has since the night they met. "Hard to come home and learn we had 'em too."

Her eyebrows lift in surprise.

"It was different, of course," he says. "What we did to the Japanese weren't the same, but--"

"I know," she says. "Heart Mountain."

He nods somberly.

"Most vets don't talk about it," she says.

"Well," he says. "Wasn't in Japan. I hear a German accent, I get a little..."

He flexes his jaw. It's not fair to the Germans, he figures, but he can't stand the fucking sound of their language after this time. Makes him see red a bit. Doesn't get that way about the Japanese or the Italians, but he didn't see their destruction firsthand.

"We didn't send Germans away," he says finally.

She takes a deep drag this time.

“I don’t talk about the war,” he says, wanting to lure something out of her, maybe just the sound of her voice. “Suppose I don’t expect you to discuss what you saw.”

She takes another drag. “Didn’t grow up with this.”

He listens. Waits, in the thicket of her pause.

“Never so silent,” she says. “We listen to every story but here... There’s only one truth with you all. Like someone in charge told you what to think.”

“You sound like my brother,” he says, his mind on the summer.

“Your brother smarter than you?” she asks with a glint in her eye.

He smiles. “Depends.”

“On?”

“If God and all the things He means is real, then I’m the smart one,” Wright says, though he knows full well Ridge is smarter regardless. Likes that about him. “If there’s nothin’ out there, then he is.”

“Maybe neither of you have a clue,” she says.

He takes a drag. Observes her, her dark, clever eyes and bold, unbroken nose. God made her, didn’t He? She’s divinity itself, raising an eyebrow at him.

“There ain’t just one truth,” he says. “If God don’t like me sayin’ that, well... He hasn’t liked me much as of late.”

He nods up to the church, bowing his head for a moment. She exhales something like a laugh.

“Lately, I’ve been doubtin’ if what I know is true,” he says. That honesty again.

“What made you doubt it?” she asks.

It’s harder to meet her eyes like this, almost punishing. He’s thinking of his brother’s wife and the way she felt from the inside, thinking of all the times he’s turned to the bottle because the silence brought him closer to God.

“If followin’ what I have been made me the type of man to do what I’ve done, then I might need a different compass,” he says finally, heat rushing to his cheeks from shame.

Why is he telling Howie this, when he’d like to see her again? This is too damn vulnerable. He crosses his arms in front of his chest, thinks about finding an excuse to walk away before he digs a bigger fucking hole for himself, but her voice cuts through all the noise in his head.

“She didn’t kill herself,” she says, and she’s talking about the widow.

“How do you mean?” he asks.

Howie shakes her head, distress cinching her brow. “My partner and I saw something... Carry her body through the woods.”

Wright pauses, takes this in. It sinks something dreadful in him.

“Thought it was on a highway,” he says.

Doubt is a dust cloud rolling in.

“That’s where she ended up,” Howie says, taking another drag. He watches the panic build on her face, wants to pull her tight to his chest. “It was some creature. Not a bear or anything, but something stronger than all that. Graceful as a deer, fast as a mountain lion. But it walked on two legs, like...”

She gestures to him.

“Like a man,” she says, pausing and really taking him in.

He wonders if she senses what he is, but her cheeks color when she looks at his neck. In this cold, his neck and upper chest sting and go reddish-tan. She seems to like it. If he listens hard enough, he can hear her pulse race faster.

“I’d say it was a werewolf, but it was daytime,” she says almost teasingly, dropping her cigarette and stamping it out with her boot. “So, say you don’t believe me, you think I’m crazy.”

“I think you know what you saw,” he says.

“They don’t,” she tells him. “Even with my partner saying it. Even with... That truck that crashed, you know? It looked like something else hit it first. Worse than the dent a body could make.”

Wright nods, but he doesn’t like the sound of this.

It sounds like it could have been him, in one of his blackouts. Except he’s never killed a woman, and why would he start? Has he wanted to?

He watches Howie’s pulse tick under her jaw and feels his mouth water.

Does he *want* to?

“Don’t listen to me,” Howie says.

He doesn’t want her dead. God, why in the hell would he ever even want her to stop talking?

“How about I listen and don’t repeat anythin’?” he offers.

She steps closer, reaches up to his chest, and he stills. But with nimble fingers, quick as lightning, she takes a cigarette from the pack in his pocket. Lights it herself this time.

“She asked for me,” she says. “Doris called the station and asked for me and Brooks by name. And they didn’t tell us that for another hour.”

Her eyes cloud.

“They sent me the first time,” she breathes. “To make fun of me, or something. That’s what I am to them, but I could have done something if they’d given us that hour. We both could have.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Wright says.

Howie nods at him slowly, but she doesn’t stop searching his face. Like there’s a deeper truth she can read in the lines around his eyes.

“Até... My dad was on the force,” she says. “But he’s a man, so he only got half of this shit. Sometimes, I want to

scream thinking just of that. Of all he put up with to try to do some good, to make a living with what skills he had. He's back now. I think I should go back."

Wright's not sure what she means, but he feels it in the center of his chest, in the palms of his hands.

"Can't, though," she says. "It's not time. I have something here. And I can't be the only one who cares about this."

She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. She's talking about leaving this job when she and her partner are the only two people he's met who deserve the position.

"How can I leave without fixing some part of it?" she asks him.

When she looks up, all the pain in her expression makes him want to burn down the sheriff's department, burn down the whole fucking town if it hurt her like this.

"I hate it," she confesses, a tear dropping down her cheek. "I hate what it's gonna do to me."

"Hey, hey," he soothes, pulling her close to him. He wraps his arms around her, smoothing his hand over her hair. She drops her cigarette and curls herself into his chest, her breath shuddering against him. "Might not know you well, but I can't imagine somethin' stampin' you out, you hear me?"

"She's not gonna get justice from them," Howie murmurs. Her tears dampen the fabric of his shirt but her voice stays steady. "They're all gonna pretend she killed herself, and she didn't."

"Fuck 'em," he says.

She laughs. "Yeah," she sighs.

Stepping away abruptly, she wipes her cheeks with her palms and then breathes into them, closing her eyes, whispering something before smoothing her hands over her hair.

"I don't..." she starts, taking another step back. "No, I don't cry in front of strangers."

“We ain’t strangers,” he objects. *Not when I know how you taste.*

But she stares up at him like there’s something he doesn’t know, and he wonders if this is all misplaced confidence. Maybe for her, closeness happens all the time.

“Thought I might catch you two together,” a man’s voice calls.

Howie steps away and there’s even more space between them now. Wright can only somewhat recognize the man. Something about him makes the hair on the back of Wright’s neck stand on end, though. That predation, that darkness, it’s how he chooses his prey. If circumstances were different, this man might be his next meal.

Still, there’s something off about him. Makes Wright feel his teeth like willing them to sharpen. He’s in uniform, Wright realizes, unlike Howie.

“Not sure I know you,” Wright calls.

“Lieutenant Williams,” the man says. “Surprised you didn’t recognize me. We were so close last time.”

“Lieutenant,” Howie warns. “This is a funeral.”

Wright frowns, focuses on the man’s face as it comes into view. *Shit.* Right.

The man does look different with less blood in his eyes. Wright met him at the bar, if sending his fist into the man’s face counts as meeting. His sharp-toothed grin looks like a threat, so as much as Wright would like to walk away, he doesn’t want to leave Howie alone with the man.

Even if they work together, Wright doesn’t like the way the lieutenant stands in Howie’s space. Almost leering. Itching to touch her.

“You met the lovely deputy at the bar, if I remember,” Williams says.

“If you remember.” Wright repeats, lighting another cigarette.

“Have the two of you... Bonded, since?” Williams asks.

“No,” Howie says firmly. “Just sharing a smoke.”

“Odd to share a smoke with a criminal,” Williams remarks to Howie.

“That what I am?” Wright asks, grinning.

“Assaulting an officer is a crime, Mr. Lindal,” Williams says smartly.

Howie huffs air through her teeth like she’s aiming for patience.

“Really, law man, I recall you swingin’ first,” Wright says. “Guess it don’t matter to you who starts a fight, just who-”

Howie clears her throat so loud it halts his speech. She knows what he’s ready to say, and surely the lieutenant does too.

“Why’d Stoughton bring his boys, anyhow?” Williams asks Howie. “They aren’t a part of this town. Cowboys are vagrants. If I called the Ashe County Sheriff’s Department, sure they’d be familiar with *him*.”

“Doubtful, though I served with a few of ‘em,” Wright says. “The rest are like you.”

Williams nods slowly. “What’s that mean?”

“A woman died,” Howie says, glaring between the two of them. “Who gives a shit what that means?”

Williams exhales, and the look he gives Howie is so blatantly lustful that Wright wants to reach into the man’s skull and pull the eyes from their sockets. Already, he’s protective of her. But she’s right.

“Did you come out here to smoke or to start a fight?” she asks Williams.

“To find you, actually,” he says.

“I’ll wait for the vagrants,” Wright tells Williams pointedly, nodding to Howie.

He'd like to kiss her hand, or her cheek, or her mouth. Feels that is the end of this conversation. But she doesn't look at him twice, just turns on her heels and marches back into the church, leaving him feeling like he did something wrong.

Leaving him with the image of running through the woods, a dying stranger in his arms.

Chapter II

Show me

Howie

“It’s so awful you had to see that,” Marin says. “I can’t imagine. Jack says she jumped right in front of that poor man.”

Howie firms her jaw, tensing her fingers around her grocery basket. The frustration isn’t Marin’s fault. It’s just that weeks of swallowing down someone else’s story still feels like choking.

Doris didn’t have a family. If Howie were to ever pass, there would be a flood of relatives, and it would never be in a place as stifling as that church. She felt it compress her chest there, the violence under that cross, and she knows Lou and some others worship like that but to her, the mouth of that church felt like the open barrel of a Gatling.

When she was younger and Até moved them off the rez, and she had to be the only native in too many classrooms, she’d scream at him and cry and beg to go back. And he told her when he was younger they sent him to a school of all Lakota kids and nuns from France who used to clap his ears and call him stupid, rap at his knuckles with rulers, shove soap in his mouth if he spoke his own language. There was more he wouldn’t say. So young, Howie said he turned out alright, and she’d speak quietly and be good and he said it isn’t like that, because good is what they choose.

“Not a violent man, *čuŋkší*,” he’d say. “But if they hurt you, I’d kill them.”

That was the end of her wanting to leave. The white school had a principal who liked to hit kids with his paddle, and he got her a few times, especially when she fought. But she never said a word, because she didn't want her only parent hauled off by officers who worked with him, the blood of that man on his hands.

Sometimes she'd ask why they didn't just have schools with Lakota teachers and students, and he said they just didn't yet. Not like it seemed so hard to figure out, just that they weren't allowed to. At the public schools in Wyoming, she had to pray but was never made to cut her hair, and she still spoke Lakota with Até, and that was how they survived.

It's the reminder she cycles through her head when she thinks of going back. Cynthia and Até live in Fort Washakie, and there's a weight that leaves her chest even in that town. But it's not time yet.

For whatever reason, she told Wright Lindal the same thing outside of Doris's funeral, and the fact she could be so open with someone who should be worse than a stranger still strikes her. But maybe it was just circumstance. People showed up to the funeral, but it was a shallow kind. As far as Howie could see, there was no one who cried with her, laughed with her, held her hand. Even though Howie lives alone, she can't imagine being so untouched.

No one is going to fight for Doris, she knows.

Howie has felt that weight on her shoulders all this time. She felt it when she urged the station to test the blood they found, even though she was near-sure it had been Doris's, just because she needed them to question something. They won't. On paper, Doris is a sad, lonely woman who had enough and couldn't take her death into her own hands. She walked all the way down to the highway and launched herself in front of a truck.

So fucking dramatic, Lieutenant Williams, who Marin calls *Jack*, had said.

Just like a woman, Captain Ojero had added, and the men had laughed, and Howie had stared at the mug on her desk and

thought about launching it across the room. Telling them, that is what a woman would do if she was dramatic. If she could be even a little dramatic, she would go hoarse from screaming.

To the men at the station, a single woman's death is a matter of course.

Howie saw those wounds, though. She imagines tooth marks in the split-open, mangled body. She and Brooks both know what they saw, just as well as they know it would be impossible to explain.

A creature running through the woods faster than a deer, looking light as air with her body in his arms. Still, it eats at her. She needs to figure out who did this, or *what* did this. Even if she's the only one who knows, she needs an answer. Needs justice for something that seems so intimately connected to her.

Doris requested *her* after all. Her and Brooks. Asked for them by name.

If she hadn't, would she still be alive?

The cover story, if she'd call it that, though no one thinks they're covering anything up, is suicide. And Wyoming has the highest rate of suicide in the country. It makes sense. Werewolves don't.

This is going to haunt Howie until she solves it, she knows. She's never had a murder investigation before, and especially no murder investigation that no one else would believe was a murder.

"It is tragic," Howie says.

"The funeral was lovely, though," Marin offers.

Marin is here so late to order a turkey for *Thanksgiving*, she tells Howie. Says it like this shared thing, and it occurs to Howie that the woman has the wrong idea about the holiday, thinks about it like her teachers did at the white school because they smiled at her the same way.

Marin is married to Lieutenant Williams's brother, the eldest of the ruling family in this town. It's Henry, Jack,

Samuel, and Patrick. Marin's husband, Henry, is the only one Howie can tolerate. He was a soldier, some high-ranking official in the government still, so Marin and her family have enough money to live in one of the nicer houses in Jackson, a short walk from Main Street.

"Where's Jada?" Howie asks.

"Oh," Marin says, waving her hand dismissively. "Off with her father. Hunting, or whatever it is they do together."

Howie smiles. Any thought of father-daughter hunting reminds her of Até. "Season'll end soon," she says.

Marin clicks her tongue. "I'd like that. I don't like thinking of her with a gun."

She pauses, scanning Howie's face.

"I know you can handle one, of course. But..."

"Boys go hunting with their dads all the time," Howie offers.

"And girls should be cooking with their mothers," Marin says wistfully. "If they have them, of course. Isn't that what they offer us when we have little girls?"

"I wouldn't know," Howie says. Iná died before her first cycle, and Cynthia came around long enough after that where she feels somewhere between a mother and an aunt and a sister, for her age. Though she has two teenage daughters, she's only eight years older than Howie.

"I'm sorry," Marin says gently. "Well you will have children one day, won't you?"

Howie cocks an eyebrow. "Aren't I what you'd call a spinster by now?"

"A proud divorcée," she corrects. "And a beautiful one, whom any man would be lucky to have."

"Proud," Howie repeats, turning the word on her tongue.

"Good riddance," Marin shrugs. "Anyone who seeks something outside of you can call himself a fool."

“Keep talking. Might try to steal you from Henry,” Howie teases.

“Oh,” Marin gushes, blushing a fierce color, and for a second Howie wonders if that’s what’s being offered. “You’d have to be just as good as him at hunting.”

“Likely better,” Howie offers. “Got backstrap jerky and elk in the freezer.”

“You’ll have to bring me some,” Marin says. “Say, one of the days when you don’t have anything to do, maybe you’d like to come for coffee?”

Howie raises her eyebrows. “Sure.”

Marin’s face brightens into a broad, wide smile. “*Any time,*” she says delightedly, heading towards the exit. “You know where to find me.”

It’s enough, Howie realizes. Not to think about the murder for a few moments. She will take Marin up on her offer, because the closeness the woman offers is intoxicating in some ways. The rareness of feminine friendships when she was raised to be her father’s son. It’s an escape.

She didn’t expect to run into anyone. Thirty minutes before the store closes, this is when she likes to shop most because it’s when there’s almost no one there to watch her. Here, she can pretend that she exists in her own world. Everyone else is at home eating supper with their families, and so she can roam the store with leisure.

Not tonight, it would seem.

She’s in the deli section when she feels someone else’s presence, but doesn’t yet turn away from the refrigerated dairy.

“Howdy, officer,” a dark voice unfurls behind her, and somehow she knows who she’ll see when she turns around. Maybe it’s the height at which that voice crawls to her, from the sky to settle into her bones, but she knows it’ll be Wright Lindal when she turns to him.

“Deputy,” she corrects, not turning around quite yet.

This makes him pause. “Howie,” he says.

It's good she hasn't turned around, isn't it? When her name on his lips nearly makes her shiver. That *voice*, it's like rich chocolate and smooth whiskey. She's too damn thirsty for it.

"Thought I told you to skip town," she says.

"How can I take you out for dinner if I skip town?" he asks.

She has to laugh at his confidence.

"Cowboys can't afford to take anyone out to dinner," she teases, adding milk to her basket. Her arm sags slightly with the added weight.

"That's 'cause cowboys spend their money on liquor," he says.

"And you don't?"

"No, ma'am," he says. "Fresh air, hard work, and a good woman's all I could dream of. But I don't have the latter, unless you agree to me takin' you out."

"Shame your life'll never be complete."

"Might be for a few minutes if you let me carry your basket," he says.

Reluctantly, she turns to him. But then it all comes crashing down, this weight of wanting him coupled with the heft of what she told him outside of the church. He, with those deep blue eyes and marble-carved form, is like a truth serum for her. Too much time in his warmth and she'll spill all her secrets just to move her lips around something other than his skin.

"Wright," she acknowledges, her heart racing.

He smiles his crooked smile. "Highlight of my day, seein' you."

She rolls her eyes. "Such a sweet talker."

"Those eyes make a man weak at the knees, even when they're teasin' him," he says.

Just because of that, she reaches one hand to cover her own eyes, smiling up at him. “Stronger now?” she asks.

“Mm,” he acknowledges, his voice low.

He’s closer to her.

She feels him grip the basket on her other arm, feels a chill as he pulls it from her slowly.

“Might just be your presence,” he says.

She spreads her fingers, sneaks a peek at him. He could eat her alive, couldn’t he, looking at her like that? She lets her hand back down, crosses her arms in front of her chest. Reminds herself that this man in front of her is a bad choice, is something the entire department would damn her for, and she can’t have that.

“We shouldn’t be seen together, Wright Lindal,” she says.

He frowns. “This somethin’ that broken tool of a lieutenant told you?”

“No,” she insists, biting back a smile at the insult. “You’re a cowboy, though. Not here for long, are you?”

He sighs. “That ain’t necessarily true.”

“Do you have family?” she asks.

“A brother and his wife,” he tells her.

“When do they expect you back?” she asks. “North Carolina, ennit?”

Orion, North Carolina. That’s right. He might be fascinating, and he might be one of the most handsome men she’s ever seen, but that doesn’t change their reality. Maybe, that’s what makes his face fall like it does, realizing that.

“Bit less than a year,” he tells her.

“Yeah,” she says, clicking her tongue to disguise any soreness in her chest from that answer. “Should give me my basket back.”

“Ain’t leavin’ that fast,” he says, holding the basket closer to him.

“Too fast for me, still,” she says. She thinks this will be the last thing she says to him, and she holds out her hand, ready to take back the weight. Ready to turn away so she doesn’t get lost in the landscape of his face, its light stubble and soft-looking lips relentlessly kissable even in yellow grocery light.

“Please,” he says. “Promise I’ll be good. Would just like to carry your groceries for you.”

With a huff, she relents, guiding him towards the bread aisle. And that mourning mouth breaks into a crooked smile.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Less than a year,” she repeats.

In the aisle, surrounded by a plastic and flour smell, she crosses her arms to keep from touching him again.

“Well, sure,” he says. “Got a nice house back east, could make a fine home for you.”

“I have a home,” she says.

“Darlin’,” he starts, before stopping himself. “Deputy. Howie. I might lay down roots if it means they’re with you out here.”

She laughs.

“What’s funny?” he asks.

“You,” she says.

“Me?”

“You’re funny,” she teases, biting the corner of her lip, narrowing her eyes at him. He even *smells* good. “Acting like you want something real from this.”

“I do,” he says.

“What do you imagine happening, if you take me out to dinner?” she asks.

He watches her silently.

“No, because in Carolina you aren’t even allowed to be with someone like me,” she says. “Get all excited, coming out west where there’s fewer laws about who you can love?”

“Hell no,” he growls. “I keep the Lord’s law, not the law of man.”

She laughs. “Oh. No sex, then, Mr. Lindal? You’re a good Christian man, the kind who’d never fall victim to lust?”

He watches her mouth say the last word, his eyes ablaze with hunger.

“Speak,” she encourages.

“Well, I’d treat you to a nice steak dinner,” he says. “You and I share some humor, some good food. I’ll buy you the whiskey ‘cause I don’t drink. And I’ll find more about what makes that pretty head of yours tick.”

“And after that?” she asks, crossing her arms in front of her chest and looking up at him. *Really* looking up at him, through her lashes just to see what it does.

His eyes drop to her lips before meeting her gaze again. She digs her nails into her arms so as not to mimic his behavior. Because he fills out that flannel, and those jeans, so well, his broad hand dwarfing the handle of the basket, and she wants that hand on her body. Between her legs.

“After that,” she repeats. “After dinner.”

His gaze darkens. He lets out a curt exhale before stepping forward. Howie stands her ground.

“After that,” he says. “I’d like to kiss you again, Howie. Ain’t been able to think straight since.”

Heat follows the trail his eyes make down her body.

“You askin’ for honesty?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been dreamin’ every night about tastin’ you,” he says. “About spreadin’ you wide and lickin’ every drop from your cunt. Goin’ wild because of it.”

She firms her jaw to keep from gasping. Never has anyone been so visceral with their desire for her, even her former husband. And *here*, in public? It sickens her, but not the way

she'd like it to. Instead, in the way she feels deep in her center, the way that feels too much like a thrill.

“Such filthy dreams,” she says.

“Ain't even half of it.”

“What else?” she asks.

“I want the taste of your pussy on my tongue for a fuckin' week,” he growls. “I want...”

His gaze flicks past her shoulder and she hears a cart push behind her. She takes a step closer to him, her heat kissing his, wondering if he can hear her heart pounding. Betting he can.

“Go on,” she says simply.

“I...” he starts. The woman, gray-haired and dressed in fur, clears her throat, gesturing to the can of green beans by his head, on the top shelf. Gingerly, he picks it up and hands it to her.

When she takes it, she narrows her eyes between the two of them. Judging something.

“After you taste me,” Howie says, while the older woman is still in earshot.

Wright looks at Howie like he might make good on that promise right now.

“I want to fuck you so hard it breaks both of us,” he says. “Want to die from it, forty years from now when you start gettin' tired of me.”

“Forty years is a lot longer than one,” Howie says, closing her eyes on purpose. Like drinking this in, like the best performance of her life, even though the acting here is her pretending she doesn't feel dizzy with arousal, like she'll fall just to have him catch her. “But I'm already tired of you.”

She reaches for her basket, but he grasps her arm, ducking his head to her. Like she's tipsy again, or like she just wants this somehow, she tilts her face up to his. Lips parted. Feeling a flush creep across her cheeks, her neck, her chest. And a

small voice asking, why can't this happen? Why can't she want him?

"Liar," he says, and it's somewhere between a growl and a purr, is anything but human. He pulls a bag of bread from the shelf and continues towards the checkout, breezing past her with her own groceries, his head held high and shoulders rolled back.

Damn, she wants to feel his body on hers.

She'd tell him she's not done, that she should find Marin before leaving, but when she thinks too much about it she's sure she doesn't want Marin seeing her with him at all. Because... That would mean she'd have to introduce him, and introduce how she knew him, with him beating the blood out of Marin's brother-in-law. The Williams men are all connected, and there's too much iron in that name.

So Wright pays for her groceries, and she follows him out into the chilly autumn night. He knows where her truck is parked by the way he's heading. Did he follow her here?

Why does the thought thrill her?

"I'm a liar for saying I'm tired of you?" she asks, doubling her pace to keep up with his long legs. At this hour, the parking lot is near-empty, and she is on the far end, her truck out of the streetlight's reach, shadowed in darkness.

"That's right, darlin'," he says.

"I told you," she reminds him.

"Deputy," he corrects, reaching for her door handle. "You're a liar."

He opens it for her, offering the bag of groceries. When she reaches for it, though, he leans in.

"I can smell how wet you are," he murmurs.

Her jaw drops. Heat floods to her face and she slaps him before thinking much about it, before even registering how alone they are out here. It's late enough most everyone's eating dinner by now, and the few cars left in the lot are far away.

“Watch your filthy mouth,” she snaps.

“Fine,” he says, flexing his jaw. “I can smell what you ate for breakfast. Coffee and toast on the sugared cedar of your skin. My hands can taste you on the oranges you touched.”

Howie’s gaze drops to the bag of groceries, the one he packed himself.

“If you pulled up that skirt,” he says. “I could taste the last time you felt fear. With my tongue on you, I could drink up every memory of your week. That’s what I want, Howie. I want to learn every fuckin’ part of you. Never felt more starved from not knowin’.”

“You have so many ideas, don’t you, about what you’d do to me,” she says. “Without wondering if I’d like that. So sure, because, what?”

She’s sharp now, getting right in his face, feeling this anger become a fiery thing in her chest. Wright stands stoic, narrow-eyed. He is the bulls-eye to the darts of this. She will skewer him.

“Because you’re handsome,” she says. “Because you’re tall, and strong, and have money outside of this *ranching* thing. Yes, how many notches are on your bedpost, *Mr. Lindal*, that you’re so confident I’ll be one of them?”

His jaw tenses, but that is his only movement. She’s mean because she wants this, wants to see how far she can push him. Wants to lure all that wolfishness out until he can make her forget the last few weeks altogether.

“Speechless,” she says. “What a relief.”

And with that, she pulls the bag of groceries from his arms and pushes it into the bench seat of her truck, sliding in to drive just as well. But when she pulls at the door to close it, she sees he’s got his hand on the open window. He’s watching her with dark, dark eyes.

“I approached you,” he grates out, that jaw so tense she thinks he might crack those sharp teeth of his. “Because I haven’t stopped thinkin’ about you since the night at the bar. Because you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen-”

“Yeah?” she quips. “How many have you seen? Sure it’s a lot, with how bold you are. Maybe a year is asking too much of you.”

He will crack his teeth. His molars will be little more than sand, she’s sure.

“Have a nice night, Miss Black Elk,” he says, releasing the door.

“Say how you really feel,” she snaps, pushing it back towards him. She raises her eyebrow in a challenge.

“How I feel is you’re so damn worried about what other people think, if you let go for an hour we might have some real fun,” he says. “But for you to attack my character, now...”

He sucks in air through his teeth, his eyes feral as he shakes his head. Heat floods her body, swirling in her core. Does she want this? This anger? It feels that way.

“You don’t fuckin’ know me,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” she taunts.

He’s *fuming*. It’s electric, irresistible. And in this exact moment, he catches on.

“Are you a wolf, Wright Lindal?” she asks.

He licks his lips, his breathing measured in fury. No surprise flickers through his gaze, though. Just steady heat.

“Do you howl at the moon?” she teases, raising an eyebrow. But the hunger that has been eating at her since she heard his voice is stronger now, building rapidly under his fiery stare. “Is that why you bit me?”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” he says.

“Bite me again,” she says.

He rips the door open all the way, edging closer. She looks down, kicking her leg gently towards his and then sliding the back of her foot against his thigh. His member is swollen, hard against his denim. Even when his massive palm moves to cup his erection, she’s in awe of his size.

“What’s that?” she breathes.

“This is what just lookin’ at you does to me,” he says, gripping himself. “Every goddamn night, Howie.”

“Every night what?” she asks.

He’s a soldier, even if he’s a cowboy, and that’s the resistance she sees on his face.

“Every night *what* do you do?” she asks.

“I stroke myself to the memory of your lips,” he says.

She shivers at the thought. She should be disgusted, but she *needs* this, needs him. And has spent so many nights touching herself imagining he’s breaking into her home, crawling through the window, taking her before she’s even awake.

“Thinkin’ of your taste,” he continues. “Of your eyes, your goddamned voice.”

The last part.

If he hadn’t said it, if it had only been about her body, she would have shut the door in his face. But she feels his voice between her legs, and this has been an awful week, and she wants him to make her forget it.

“Show me,” she says.

He pauses before stroking himself over the denim.

“Not like that,” she tells him, and pushes the door the rest of the way open.

The next second, his lips are on hers. His hungry mouth crashes in and she claws into him, scraping her fingers through his hair. Pulling at the buttons of his shirt. This is starving, this is fast, their breath fogging in the cold as he pushes her into the truck and crawls in over her, not even shutting the door fully behind him. She doesn’t care. Can’t care, with his lips gliding down her neck and his long, broad body over hers, each graze and touch like lightning from her skin to her sex.

“You’re a monster,” she murmurs, pulling his face up to hers just to bite his lip, to draw blood like he did with her. He

groans into her mouth, ecstasy heady on his rough voice.

And then, he grips her hair.

Her sharp inhale of breath, the tension in her body, must clue him into something because he loosens his grasp, stroking his thumb along the side of her cheek. Watching her. Like this she's caught, wants to be raunchy but instead feels this immense warmth between them.

He keeps his gaze set on her as he reaches between her legs, slipping her panties to the side. Wordlessly, but with an intensity to his eyes that makes her stop breathing completely, he parts her lips. He strokes her clit and she shudders, feeling wetness pool out of her. Feeling her toes curl in her shoes.

"I'll be your monster, Howie," he murmurs as her pleasure builds. "S'long as I'm yours somehow."

With that, he curls two fingers inside her, their girth and length enough to make her feel like this is already more than she can handle. He makes love to her with his hand, stroking her clit with his thumb as she shakes around him. Light as summer breeze, he presses his lips to her chin, the side of her jaw, her ear, drawing back in between to look her in the eyes.

"*Wright,*" she moans. "*Wright, fuck...*"

She wants to ask him why her, why would he look at her like this, like this is making love and not sandwiching themselves in the humid heat of her truck, but her vision blurs from ecstasy. All she can do is throw her head back, arching into the leather seats, coming hard around his perfect touch.

When she peaks, catching her breath, he guides his slickened fingers to her mouth and suddenly, she's flooded with her own taste. Suddenly, he's an animal, grinding against her, grabbing her hips, her waist, her breasts. Teasing her body until she moans again and feels all the memories his body has formed with the other women. He's a player, a scamp, a bastard. But with him, she wants that degradation. She undoes his buckle, clawing at the skin of his abdomen, tight over all that muscle. When she reaches for him underneath the denim, she gasps at the size of what she finds. He pushes up her skirt,

rips her panties open, and suddenly it's bare skin on bare skin, her grasping for him, his cock too enormous in her hand.

"*Fuck,*" he groans, and his hand is on her neck, gripping. His lips on her jaw, on her chin, as she guides him to her entrance.

"I want you," she breathes. "Fast. Before I change my mind."

He grips her hip and pushes inside only gently, but still... Still he fills her and she cries out, her back arching as she pushes the groceries onto the floor. He moans loud and thrusts deeper. It's painful, and raw, and angry, and it's exactly what she wants.

For these moments, she's only here, and there's nothing but sweat and breath between them. He fucks hard, grinding against her mound, and she feels that pleasure not just deep inside her but all over now, and she's digging her nails into his back just to keep this feeling.

"*Yes,*" she moans. "*Don't stop.*"

He groans and grabs her thigh, pressing it up against her side as he drives deeper, deeper, somehow finding so much movement in this small space. He's lifting her hips, stretching her from inside, and *shit* he feels so good. *So* good as she grips his shoulders just for leverage, his breathing rapid against her skin, his length taking up so much of her. She drags her nails down his back before flailing out from the pleasure and dragging her hand down the window, slippery with condensation. She's building, and building, and...

He's bigger. Somehow, he's even bigger at his base than he should be, and the pressure sends her over the edge. Her orgasm hits her so hard she spasms underneath him, screaming out. He shudders, moaning her name, and each movement he makes inside her draws lightning now. This is too good for what it is, because what it is is her in her truck with a stranger in a dark grocery store parking lot, and it shouldn't be good at all.

“Pull out,” she manages as black spots erupt in her vision and she feels wetness spread from her, across his hips and the leather seats of her truck.

He listens to her, and she’s all too empty when he groans, reaching for himself, and now her shirt is warm and damp as he comes on her stomach, bracing his other hand against the passenger window.

“*Oh, Howie,*” he moans. “*Oh, Christ.*”

It’s enough for him that he seizes while milking himself, and when she looks between them there’s a pool of come on her, the plum of his cock still dripping. Nothing exists but the space between them, so she wants to taste him too, but he doesn’t give her the chance.

He pulls her into his arms like she’s weightless, sitting and cradling her, his long legs bent deep, boots on the floor. She feels boneless. Enough to let it happen, to let the warmth of his large body feel so good holding her as he kisses her, and she kisses him, and forgets this isn’t perfect. His mouth has this sweet-mint flavor, and his lips are soft, his tongue languid with hers. It makes her want him again, grind up on him a little. Ignore the mess.

“So pretty,” he murmurs low in her ear, his voice snaking from her hips up her spine. “So fuckin’ pretty when you come.”

She wants more, wants his hand between her legs again, unsure if it’s just the first time in years she has let a man touch her like this or if there really is something about him that can make her feel this unbelievable. Grinding over his still-hard member, she lets the throbbing warmth of him massage her clit. How long can they stay in this truck? Long enough for her breath to shudder as he kisses her neck, as he slips his fingers under her shirt and teases her nipples.

She moans when he takes one and rolls it in his fingers, but through her heavy lids she sees headlights pass her. Not lingering, but their presence snaps her from this fantasy.

And she remembers, this man can ball up steel in his hands.

This man doesn't flinch when a gun is aimed in his direction.

This man isn't human, even if he says he is. The only thing that keeps her from believing he's the one who killed Doris is this feeling deep in her spine. But he's dangerous.

Unmistakably dangerous.

And she let him inside of her.

Chapter 12

Can't

Wright

Wright watches Howie, her face dazed with pleasure, and in this moment, sandwiched in a truck, he thinks if he ever marries again, it'll be her. She's beautiful, stunning, intelligent, perfectly unraveled.

"Need to find a room with you," he says, kissing down her neck, nearly groaning at the taste of her sweat. He cups her breast through the silken fabric of her shirt, letting his tongue tease her hardened nipples as she writhes in his lap. "Need more space than this, Howie."

"I can't bring you home," she whispers, lifting her hips. Threading her fingers in his hair as he spreads her with his fingertips, brushing his thumb over her swollen, glistening clit. "*Mm.*"

"Think you can," he says, teasing her pleasure. "Think you ought to."

"This is just a one-time snag," she breathes.

He pauses, a far less pleasurable heat pulsing through him. "Pardon?"

Righting herself, she blinks like waking from a dream. "We're not doing this again. Not starting anything."

His stomach drops. "Can't be fuckin' serious," he says.

She rolls her eyes, sliding off of him and into the driver's seat. "Sure can. Isn't that just what you wanted?"

He glares at her, tucking himself back into his jeans, pulling them up from where they were pushed around his thighs. His throbbing member reminds him that he *knotted* in her, the first time since his wife, since before the fucking war. Two lifetimes, feels like. He's dizzy from it. Uncoordinated. Feels like his mind is hovering outside his body, like he can hardly hold his hands steady.

Still conscious enough to hate what she's saying.

"The hell's gotten into you?" he asks.

She pulls her skirt down before taking a deep breath, closing her eyes. "You're leaving in a year," she says.

"*Might* be," he reminds her, because the truth sinks like a rock in his stomach.

"Not like you're a man who uses *maybes*," she says. "Not like I'm a woman who'd accept them, so. This was good. You want someone to play house with, find someone else."

But the look of her shirt drenched in his cum, sticking to her stomach, makes him want to fight all she's saying. She felt better in the short time he spent inside her than anyone has in years, maybe ever. Squeezing his own knot, that's still better than coming inside a woman without it. But he'd like to take Howie like that. Like to put this truck in drive and haul her somewhere he can fuck her for an entire day.

That is, after he spanks her into the next county for talking to him like this.

"Un-fuckin'-believable," he grumbles. "You pull me into your truck like we ain't had no talk outside of that church, like you don't feel anythin' between us."

Her face softens and she blinks, pulling her lips between her teeth. She can't be less than thirty but like this, she looks heartbreakingly young.

"Leave," she says. "Please, Wright."

Guilt washes over him. She asked for this. She pulled him into her truck.

Being a regret is a rancid thing.

It pierces through every swollen inch of his heart that he would have promised to her otherwise. This felt like something to him, despite the anger. Because of it, maybe.

“Don’t make this something it can’t be,” she says.

“Christ!” he snaps, his temper flaring enough for him to smack the dashboard. “Give me a goddamn second.”

She stares at him, catching her breath, draping over the steering wheel. Pushing her hands through her hair, she ducks her head. Breathes deep. Damn, but her scent in the truck is heady.

“I don’t want this to be the only time I see you,” he says.

“Why?” she asks.

He stares at her, mouth open, not understanding how she doesn’t feel what he does. This draw is almost like gravity to him, like it’s something he couldn’t resist if he tried. Clearly. He doesn’t fuck women in trucks, well... Not anymore.

“You’re smart,” he says. “You’re interestin’. You’re beautiful.”

He hasn’t had the best track record with women. If Howie were to ask him, which she *has* fucking asked him, he wouldn’t be able to tell her how many women he’s slept with. He’d be able to tell her with confidence that they’d enjoyed their experiences, that they’d never kicked him out or looked at him with regret in their eyes.

Just as well as he’d like to tell her that what he felt for those other women is a whisper of how his heart pounds in her presence. That they were lovely, but she’s *her*, and that’s so much better.

“You feel different,” he says.

She pulls her lips between her teeth again, but she doesn’t argue with him.

“The second I saw you, the air felt different,” he says. “Howie, I meant it when I said I can’t stop thinkin’ about you.”

“Give me your shirt,” she says. Her fingers fly to the buttons of hers, working them open. White silk shines through, glowing against her skin, peaked over her hard nipples.

He obeys, working the flannel off until he’s bare-chested, the air cold now. She balls her own button-down up and tosses it to the floor, only dressed in her camisole for a breathtaking moment before sliding Wright’s flannel onto her own body. She may be tall, but it’s baggy on her. She fastens the buttons. Pulls her sleek hair from the collar and drapes it over her back.

“Alright,” she says. “Go.”

“Pardon?” he asks.

“This can’t happen, Mr. Lindal,” she says. “If you were waiting for this, you had it. Now go.”

He’s pissed now, glaring at her like a now-sworn enemy. She doesn’t look at him, and so he’s treated to her profile, strong and angular except for her soft lips. She is, truly, the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, this refined, nearly harsh beauty. He could get lost tracing each slope and valley of her features. Even in anger.

That pisses him off too, because any other woman would be kind. Not the sheriff’s deputy, though. She’ll send him into the cold without even the shirt on his back, after fucking him. Like she *used* him, and isn’t it like a cop to be so damn icy? Blue or khaki doesn’t matter. A gun and a badge make a man arrogant and cruel, so if he thought Howie was any different as a woman, he was mistaken.

“*Christ*, I was so fuckin’ wrong about you,” he says.

Her knuckles tighten as she grips the steering wheel.

“Your lieutenant’s a fuckin’ bastard,” he spits. “Thought you were different.”

“I’m a bastard?” she asks, her brow cinching.

He stares at her. She looks like she’s trying to fight laughter.

“You serious?” he asks.

She nods, biting her lip. “You have to go-”

“Then yes, you’re a bastard, Howie,” he snaps.

A smile cracks across her lips.

“No one’s ever called me a bastard,” she says, covering her mouth to hide her laughter.

“Laughin’ at me on top of this,” he tells her. He’s pissed, but something about her smile and her laugh starts breaking the toughness in him. “A man can’t recover from that.”

But that pushes her over the edge, and he’s fighting laughter and doesn’t even know why. It’s like being around her lifts every ounce of weight from his chest, and suddenly anger is illogical. It shouldn’t be. She’s cold. She’s hurting him.

“It’s fuckin’ cruel,” he says.

“I’m a cruel bastard,” she breathes, and he does laugh at that.

A beautiful bastard, but certainly.

She settles back, finally breathing steady. Looking him in the eye again.

“I’m not sorry,” she says gently. “You’re leaving anyway.”

This is worse than the rest, because he doesn’t hold laughing with a woman in any recent memory. Everything feels different with Howie, and she wants him gone.

“Would you give me back my shirt, at least?” he asks.

“No,” she says.

He growls.

“I’ll remember you with it,” she offers.

“What about me, then?” he asks, his gaze traveling down her body.

She settles back in the driver’s seat, shimmying her hands underneath her skirt and pulling her torn satin panties off her legs. The scent of her arousal is rich and honeyed. Already, he needs release again.

“Open your mouth,” she says.

Jesus Christ.

There’s something unmistakably demeaning about this. Yet he lusts for it like nothing else, eyeing the balled-up fabric she toys with in her long, elegant fingers. He leans back for this, and she crawls into his lap. Knees on either side of his hips. He can’t touch her, can he? That’s not what this is meant for. It’s to give her power, and hell, it might be the first time he’s willingly surrendered in such a way.

She kisses him, her tongue slipping against his, slower this time. Exploring each space she’ll lay her own taste. He wants her so fucking badly it might be a good thing she’s kicking him out. Lust like this is alien to him, the type of thing that makes him change who he is.

Pulling away, she touches his lips. Pushes her fingers into his mouth and he opens at the pressure on his jaw. All communions he’s taken have been nowhere near as holy as the delicious satin she pushes into his mouth.

Her gaze lifts to his. *Amen*, he’d like to say, to the night sky that lives in her dark eyes. Whatever she sees in him is a comet disappearing.

When he closes his lips, she kisses him again. Sealing the offering. He’d like to curse, to groan, to say he’ll go to her church every Sunday, but this teaches him silence. The taste and smell of her is rich enough he may have it on his tongue for a week, just like he asked.

“Bye, soldier,” she whispers, kissing his cheek. He likes this term more than *cowboy*, even if she doesn’t know how much he gave up for it.

Then she reaches past him, and opens the door for him to leave.

Chapter 13

Not mine

Howie

When Até retired from the force, he moved out with Cynthia to where her family still lives, all except her eldest daughter who goes to school in Laramie. He tried to get Howie to move out there too, go tribal police, forget about the money, but... It's not that Howie wouldn't like that work more. It's just that she can't leave the sheriff's department yet. Something in her gut tells her the work's not done.

So every few weeks, she drives the two hours west of town to Fort Washakie. Brooks goes with her, like some kind of surrogate since she ended things with Darran. More than once, Até has suggested she just marry her partner.

Doesn't matter he's wɪŋkte, he'd say, and Brooks would go red thinking he'd been caught with blood on his hands. *You're close enough, hey, married couples never sleep with each other anyhow.*

That's a bluff, Howie knows. Até was affectionate with Iná and still pinches Cynthia's ass whenever he passes her in the kitchen. Until meeting Wright, she would've said she missed that gene. Has never been the type to want to be touched so often, or to put their hands on someone.

But she shoved her panties in Wright's mouth, and even after telling him to leave town she thinks about him too often. One night she went as far as getting her makeup on to go to the bar, keys in hand, hoping she'd see him, before stopping herself and sharing half a pack of cigarettes with Brooks on his

porch. She can't be with Wright, because as fiery as everything is with just knowing him, losing him is gonna rip something from her if she gets attached. Can't do that again. Won't, not to herself or her job or her family.

A man like Wright's probably fucking around in town anyway, probably going through the rotation of the buckle bunnies and rich girls who like snagging cowboys just to live wildly. Probably got some blonde girlfriend, even.

"Whoa, slow down," Brooks says, shifting in his seat.

Howie takes a breath, looks at the speedometer. Damn.

"Thinking about Doris?" Brooks asks.

"Yeah," Howie lies. "S'fucked up."

Até's house with Cynthia is on a cul-de-sac of single story houses, where in the frequent case of Brooks and Howie spending the night, they stay in the living room, Brooks on the floor even though Howie can sleep just about anywhere, and Howie on the couch. There are some two-bedrooms but the most are the same, and Howie knows not just the people in them but the others who sleep on couches, all family in the way she really misses in her trailer, which is *her* space in a way she never knew before having it.

By the time they walk to the door, the smell of browning meat and onion is strong enough to make Howie's mouth water, and if she thinks too hard about how the last time she felt this light was with Wright Lindal's mouth on her neck, she'll mistake him for a second home. But here, home is the place where her shoulders slide down her back before Até crushes her in a hug, and Cynthia does the same, and her two daughters, Howie's sisters now, follow suit. She swings the youngest, Elia, in her arms, because at twelve she's a good foot shorter than Howie, and she screams with giggles when she does. Dany is older, visiting from her first year of college because of winter break, and Howie's sure to sneak away for a few minutes on a walk with her, ask her what it's like to start to be an adult.

Brooks always brings food. That's how he bought himself a place at the table, she tells him, even though Até's partner had one too and would bring wine even though Até didn't much like drinking. Today, Brooks brings a case of Coca Cola and a bag of groceries from town, a little frosted from sitting in the bed of Howie's truck on the way. Cheese, ground beef, oranges, bananas.

He used to bring potato chips and Twinkies and candy bars, thinking this was a different country, like it would be visiting someone way far out. When his family still talked to him, when he was just a kid, his aunts and uncles on his mom's side brought him candy and chips from England. Nearly all of them died in the war, around the same year that Brooks's dad first caught him with a boy and beat on him so hard he broke his collarbone. But even when his family told him to lose their name and he made it his first, he said he always tasted chocolate mixed with blood.

After Até took to calling him *t̃huṅšká* and he started greeting the ranchers in *Hinóno'eitíit* and the shopkeep at the general store in Shoshoni, he noticed how much more expensive the meat, cheeses, and fruits were so he figured he'd buy more than he needed always, keep it in the freezer for the next visit. And so when Até hugs him, it is the kind of thing that cracks ribs instead of breaking them, and Brooks has a father and an uncle and a friend, just like everyone here.

What would Wright Lindal bring, if he came?

She shakes the thought out of her head as soon as it hits her, violently enough that Dany notices and asks if she's cold. Somehow, the question is funny to both of them, enough that Howie laughs instead of answering and Dany joins, and this is home, isn't it?

The venison stew Cynthia makes sticks to Howie's ribs, the cornbread velvet on her tongue, and not once does she think about what her flesh might taste like. It's enough to get seconds and almost thirds, if her stomach didn't feel like a stretched drum with the meal. They eat the oranges after dinner and then, when the night sky is at its quietest it'll be

Até on the couch and Brooks on the floor later, four women piled into bed.

For now, though, it's the men outside drinking cola and smoking cigarettes, which means she's there too. Até's son in all but gender. The neighbor men, uncles and cousins and nephews, do the same, smoking on chairs even though the temperature's in the tens and windy. There's light until midnight out here, porches and glowing living rooms, smoke fogged from the heat of lungs. Here, with her partner and her former-lieutenant father, she laughs when she sees men watching her, sure they think Brooks is hers from the way they sit leaning against each other.

"Did you ever get a murder case?" Brooks asks, even his voice sounding bleary-eyed.

"Ask him *everything*," Howie teases.

"Of course," Até says. "Hey, worked thirty-five years for the law. Had a few."

Howie takes a drag, not wanting to leave this reality so fast. Here, she can pretend that the rest is fake, or that it is all written in stone with nothing left to change. That it doesn't touch her, even though the bones of Doris's clutching fingers are wrapped around the middle of Howie's spine. She hasn't felt them all night.

"They stick with you?" she asks.

Até nods, tapping his foot on the frozen ground. "First one, well, you know I think of you sometimes, eh?"

"In a murder case?" Howie laughs.

"Was this man who got killed," Até says. "A real... A real bad man. Had intimacies with his wife's young sister, a girl in high school. From how I see it, wasn't something she wanted, but you know them."

Them, meaning the department.

"Didn't even think he did nothing wrong," Até says. "Guess he said she looked older, but eyes don't age fast, so."

Wife blew a hole through him with a shotgun, made the call herself. But never told us where the body was.”

“What?” Brooks asks, nearly laughing, like *how* could this happen?

Howie grins, remembering this story. Feels a little bit of righteousness in her chest. Darran didn’t go that young, but there’s something shared in feminine anger of this kind.

“Listen,” Até says. “We get there, and the dinner table’s set like for a feast. Like everyone’s coming together, except it has to be just her. She’s the only one eating. Still wearing a dress with flecks of blood all over. Says she killed her husband, but we won’t find the body. Because she doesn’t want his spirit resting. Doesn’t want him to be wherever she’s going when she passes.”

Brooks whistles. “You find the body?”

“No,” Até says. “She didn’t go away for too long; they couldn’t be sure even with the blood in that kitchen that he was dead. That hatred. He must’ve done worse.”

Howie nods.

“The others?” Brooks asks.

Até shrugs. “Bar fight gone wrong, or right at the time. Alcohol poisons your mind, know that?”

“Okay,” Howie says, careful not to meet Brooks’s gaze.

Até continues. “That case with the dinner was the only one of a wife killing her husband, but more men kill their women. You’ve seen that.”

“Seen more hurt them,” Howie says.

“Bad men,” Até tells her.

Brooks sucks a breath in through his teeth. Até frowns at him, but Howie answers the question in his gaze.

“The widow who died?” she asks. “Threw herself in front of a truck, killed the driver and herself, least that’s what they say.”

“Yeah, and what happened?” Até asks calmly.

Howie shakes her head. “Something carried her body.”

A flush comes to her cheeks, shame that she spoke to Wright about this before her own father, her own father who understands more than anyone what she’s experiencing.

“Like some animal,” she says, choking for a second on the word because it’s the one she’s trained to use and she doesn’t have to do that here. “A monster, or some creature. Not of this land but of some other, yeah, unless Cynthia knows about a man-looking thing that can run faster than a deer, even carrying a woman’s body.”

“It outran me,” Brooks says. “I lost it in the woods. It knew them like an animal, but there’s no way it’s one I know about. Not a bear. Too human, like a grassman or something.”

“What’s a grassman?” Howie asks.

“Like, something that parents tell their kids, don’t stay out too late or the grassman’ll get you,” Brooks says.

“Ah, for those kids don’t want to come home,” Até remarks with a glint in his eye.

Howie hits his arm lightly, clicking her tongue.

“It’s an urban legend, but that’s what this thing felt like,” Brooks says. “Like watching a story play out.”

“Like interrupting one,” Howie adds, and she wishes the Coke had whisky in it. Doesn’t like talking about this, even if she knows she has to.

Brooks stares at her, and in this moment it’s just the two of them, and these words are a shared world spilling out. All the neighborhood could be listening, *should* be listening.

“If we hadn’t been there, he would’ve eaten her,” she says. “He already started.”

There’s no full way of knowing this. There’s no trace on the ground of the forest where she saw the creature, nothing so clearly fouled. In that way, she knows it wasn’t some animal.

Animals shred their prey. When coyotes kill out here, they leave a thirty foot radius of splayed organ and bone.

There's no way of knowing that the creature would have eaten her, except for the feeling in the pit of Howie's stomach that says so. And it might make her arrogant, but that feeling has never been wrong. The way things are meant to be are carved into the bones inside her, and so she can feel when something changes. This feels like a broken rib.

"Maybe it won't stay," Até offers. "Maybe it travels, and that's why we don't know it."

"She saw it once before," Howie says. "Saw it crawl out of the wolf's skin. Left a huge mess of blood, drove off in a truck. But it came back."

"Will it come back again?" Até asks, his question just for Howie this time.

She feels for a moment, that broken rib. The way the marrow drips down the muscle of her chest, cold where the stew was warm in her stomach and the tobacco is warm in her lungs.

"It's still in Jackson," she says. "Didn't breathe right until we were on the highway."

Chapter 14

Happy

Wright

The tenth night that Wright forgets where he's been, he considers telling Dutch to tie him up. It's too much and too fucking often, once every week or so since he met Howie. When he dreams, she's all he thinks about. Warm images of her fingers tracing his face dance in his mind like childhood fantasies of flying. She smiles and his stomach lifts.

Then she pulls the trigger.

She wasn't holding the gun at the bar but in his dreams, she fires through his sternum and then he's standing on the empty dance floor breathing bright red clouds and she steps closer. Reaches into the open cavity left by the bullet. Plucks his still-beating heart from his chest.

Holding it in her long-fingered hands, she looks up at him.

"It's mine, you know," she whispers.

He feels the life drain out of him, and it hurts, but he'll stay here. For as long as he can, he'll stay here.

"You saved all the wild parts for me," she adds.

There's blood spilling all over his feet. His breathing stifles. He pants, desperate for air, but there's none in his lungs and slowly the edges of his vision darken. If he asks for it back, she'll give it to him. But there's nothing he can imagine that feels worse than taking his heart from her.

He'll wake in his bunk or in the bed of his truck, clutching his chest, drenched in sweat and his own pleasure because it

always ends like that, too. Like he's a fucking teenager. If he didn't wake before the other men, they'd think he was insane.

Maybe he is.

When he doesn't dream, he wakes up in odd places sticky with the blood of his wolf, not knowing where his pelt is or how he got there. He's spent most of his thirty-five years relentlessly in control of his own life. It wasn't a choice for him. He's a dangerous beast, stronger and faster than any man while in human form and any animal while in his wolf state.

That's where he's been.

He is a predator carefully trained by his own control. He turned for the first time with careful guidance and a few months after that, he was tasked with raising his younger brother when their parents abandoned him. He maintained care and delicacy in his relationship with the woman who would be his wife. Then, he was a soldier. Lived with a battalion and fought for his country while constantly looking over his goddamned shoulder because no one can know what he is.

If they find out, they'll lock him away, experiment on him, cut into his body to find what makes him turn. Use him as a weapon. All his life, he's known that and all his life, he's worked hard not to stand out any more than his stature makes him.

He's been in control. Gripping stability with white knuckles at times, balancing precariously until his fucking muscles shake and spasm, but he has owned his composure and cultivated it well. That is the one thing he's proud of, so why is it slipping past his fingers?

Why is he waking up naked in the back alley of Jackson's western store with his own blood on his skin, not remembering a damn thing about the night before? Forgetting is dangerous. Means his brain is hiding something from him.

Maybe he's turning into a monster out there. Killing innocents instead of those he knows will do wrong. He thinks about her *constantly*.

What if he hurts her?

Howie, what if his desire turns into obsession and he hunts her like prey? A week ago he felt the need to run and found himself standing in the woods looking past the tree line to a dimly lit trailer. Hands gripping bark, he knew she'd be there. Maybe he'd been there before. There's something deep in his bones now that screams her name. He can smell her in the air.

That same feeling in his marrow barked at him to claim her.

Mine.

I need her.

Let me take her.

Let me taste her blood.

But he's a good man, he tells himself.

Whenever he's a man, he's good.

His mind spirals as he peels himself off the asphalt, pressing himself to his feet and squinting at the purple dawn. His goosebumped skin is red with clots from blood and viscera. He's naked in freezing weather. Would look a nightmare to anyone passing by. Here he stands, big as a goddamn door frame, his muscular, nude body drenched in the carnage of a burst wolf. A monster. A hellhound.

This didn't happen in France. Not in North Carolina, either.

There is no feral side of him, anywhere but here.

Is it her?

Is it the mountains?

Is it the absence of anyone who truly knows him to rein him in? Wolves are pack animals. Ridge lost himself when Wright left, and what if the inverse will happen now?

He curses, pushing towards the back door and testing the knob. A quick jerk and his strong hand breaks the lock and pushes the door inwards, pausing to adjust to the shadows. There are clothes here of course, and he plucks jeans and a flannel from the racks before heading to the bathroom.

In the mirror, he looks frightful. Blood plastered to his hair and clotted along his face, blood that's gone rusted and brown from too long left to dry. He's careful not to make too big a mess as he scrubs himself clean with the bar of soap. As large as he is, the bathroom isn't meant for someone his size. He's getting water everywhere. Bumping his bare ass into the wall. By the time he's cleaned up enough to cover with clothing and look halfway presentable, the bathroom looks flooded.

And somehow, despite the doubt he has in his own goodness for what he's forgotten, despite his haunted craving for a woman who'd rather have nothing to do with him, he starts to laugh. Leans back against the wall opposite the mirror, puts his face in his hands, and laughs.

He's lost control, the one thing he held so tightly to for three decades. And still, he stands. Still, he breathes. Still, he can fucking laugh if he chooses to. Nothing is as he planned. On good nights, he sleeps in a bunkhouse with a dozen other men who snore like goddamned hound dogs. He works for someone and not for himself, and even if he had a bed all his own there'd be no one to share it with.

But he can laugh.

That part of his chest will always be human.

He takes a deep breath and sighs, stepping out of the bathroom to dress. According to the clock on the wall, it's a few minutes past seven in the morning. Already late for when he should be on the ranch. Thank God they're deep in winter. Things are slower now, which makes lateness more forgivable. He probably won't be the only one, some of the boys choosing other beds for the night in rooms that have more than a wood stove for heat.

He smells cigarettes by the cash register and pockets them. A night or two from now, he'll come by the store and add money to the register for the things he's taken. But now, he notices the phone on the wall.

There's no phone in the bunkhouse. He hasn't called his brother or Sadie since he arrived and if he's already going to be late, he's long overdue for hearing their voices. He dials the

number of the farmhouse, leaning his hips back and breathing deep. It rings twice before he hears the brisk sound of Sadie's voice.

"Lindal farm," she says cheerily, stifling a giggle.

He smiles immediately at the sound of her joy, and the noise in the background indicating Ridge's presence.

"Mornin' darlin'," Wright says.

"*Wright*," she coos. "Oh my, it's been ages."

"Can't have been too long," he says.

"It *is*," she insists. "Last time I spoke to you, all my clothes fit."

Wright hears his brother growl through the phone and can imagine them in the kitchen, her twirling the cord around her short fingers. Ridge's arms holding her tight. It's enough to fill him with warmth.

"Sure they look lovely," he says, smiling.

There's a shuffling sound and he hears Ridge's voice now, low like he's speaking against Sadie's neck. "She's more beautiful every day, brother," he says.

Sadie moans lightly, but it sounds like Ridge keeps the phone.

"How've you been?" Wright asks.

Ridge laughs. "Keeping your code, keeping my woman, *mm...*"

"*Ridge*," Sadie laughs breathily. "*Wait*. Ask him why he's calling so early."

Every moment Wright speaks to his brother and his wife on the phone feels like he's interrupting a sexual encounter and knowing them, he might be. Another shuffle and he hears Sadie sigh into the receiver.

"Was just needin' to hear y'all's voices," Wright tells her.

"I promise he's been good," she says.

"I'm sure he has," Wright says.

“As good as he can be, that is,” she breathes. “How about you? Have you been good?”

Wright tongues his cheek, thinking of an answer. It’s Howie who brings the honesty out of him. He can get away with fibbing to Sadie, doesn’t feel so bad if it makes her sleep easier.

“I’ve been tryin’,” he says.

“You’ve always been good,” Sadie says, not catching anything in the tone of his voice. “I canned a bunch of vegetables and berries and we have fruit and potatoes in the cellar. And Elam gave us jarred peaches.”

“Sounds divine,” Wright tells her.

“There’s more than enough if you’d like to come home soon,” she says. “It’s nearly Christmas. Ridge cut down a huge tree for us, and two for the twins.”

“Twins?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” she says. “But he says he feels it. Of course, who knows Ridge and babies. You were the one who figured I was pregnant.”

He smiles, taking a deep breath before falling silent. There’s a draw, of course, to spending the holiday with his family. Returning east.

But he doesn’t run away from anything, even the eerie unfamiliar. If he’s honest with himself, he’s not sure he could. The draw here is too strong. To the mountains, to Howie, to the calm repetition of the work he does. He’s getting damn smile lines, made bolder with the wind burn that reddens his cheeks out here.

“Thinkin’ I’ll stay a while,” he says.

“Don’t tell me you fell in love out there,” she teases.

He cocks an eyebrow, though she can’t see it through the phone. “Course not.”

“Good,” she quips. “It would be far too soon. You Lindal men fall quick.”

“Too soon, huh?”

She pauses. “I don’t know, Wright. I had a dream the other night that you married Elizabeth Taylor. You were so happy. Smiling ear to ear in your tuxedo.”

He laughs. Sadie mentions the actress so much she’s become a household name, and before he left she dragged him to the drive-in to watch some romance she was in. “Woman, you and Miss Taylor... If I weren’t in my right mind, I’d think you had a crush.”

“I *do*,” she gushes. “I just...”

She pauses.

“I was really happy for you, is all,” she says. “Didn’t know I wanted something like that, but it felt like a missing piece.”

He frowns. “Well if she makes her way to Wyoming, I’ll be sure to tell her how my brother’s wife would like her to marry me.”

Sadie laughs, and for a second it almost lures something out of him. For a second, he thinks about telling her the times he doesn’t remember, or telling her that there is a woman, but he isn’t sure if she’s safe around him. That he fucked her in the bench seat of her truck, his jeans down his thighs and his knees bent to accommodate himself, and still that was the best sex of his life. But she left him without a shirt, kicked him out even, is investigating something so like him that she asked if he was a *wolf*. Maybe, he killed a widow and threw her body on the highway.

Men don’t speak like this, though, he knows. Even halfway across the country, he’s the head of the Lindal household, and maybe the reason he’s so honest with Howie is she doesn’t know that part of him.

“You’d tell me if you weren’t okay, right?” Sadie asks.

“I promise,” he lies.

Chapter 15

The width of the bruises

Howie

Howie stares into the ice blue eyes of a dead woman and hears an officer talk about plans for Christmas. Howie's knees are on frozen ground in the backyard of a rented home. In her ears, a man with no badge sobs on the ground, this same chant of no like if he says it enough he can bring his wife back to life.

Somewhere in the distance, Brooks holds a child who isn't crying anymore, doesn't know what this is. Howie can hear him speak in a higher voice. That child was shoved into her chest almost the second she stepped out of the cruiser and she froze, nearly dropping that thirty pound weight. Shaking at the impact. Wordlessly, Brooks took the kid away from her.

This is like nothing she's ever seen. Nothing *anyone* in Jackson has ever seen. The dead woman, Emmeline Hensley, is naked, her pale skin gone blueish from the arid refrigeration of mid-December. Bruises that could be handprints riddle her bare wrists and ankles. Clearly bound. She fought like hell against whatever restraints they gave her.

But it isn't how she died.

Something ate her.

Her breasts have been gnawed off her body, revealing red viscera and the murky bones of a soaked ribcage underneath. She's lying on her back but Howie can see an empty wound where the woman's rear once was. Whatever ate her took the

meat there and continued forward to her sex. Took bites from her thighs too.

It left her stomach. Her stomach and her neck.

This isn't the work of a starving animal looking for food but rather someone who wanted to take or taste what the world calls feminine. Its violence bleeds into the earth. Sets roots for those like her who see her. Howie feels it in her own chest, in her thighs, in the space she touches at night to try to make her forget about Doris because she can't reach for Wright. *That*, no, she can't think of it. Because *nothing* will make her forget this.

According to the widower, they went to sleep last night and he slept till morning. Never heard any sounds of screaming, never felt her leave the bed. He didn't know she was outside until he left to feed the dog in the morning.

Now, Emmeline's ice blue eyes are so clear and flat that they reflect the sun. The last time he saw them, they were closed.

These are just statements she's heard in passing. Even though she's made her way to the corpse, the other officers don't let her anywhere near the victim's husband. They don't want her here. She knows it. Feels it prickle the back of her neck like they're waiting to rip out her spine themselves.

Brooks kneels down with her and she startles, looking around for the child. The silence of the husband's cries lets her know who she's with.

"The size of the bite," she says. "Looks around the size of a man's bite, don't you think?"

"Our monster."

"Different," she murmurs. "Look at her wrists. Her ankles. They were bound."

"How do you know that?" he asks.

She guides his wrist out so that it matches his view of the corpse. Then, she squeezes. Hard. Makes him feel what she

feels when she sees a body like hers gnawed to bone on the frozen ground.

“The width of the bruises,” she says. “And they circle around. Someone held her wrists. And her ankles, too.”

Brooks glances between her and their lieutenant, who’s speaking to the husband and his daughter. Sucks in his cheeks.

“You heard them talking?” he asks.

Howie shakes her head, kneeling closer. The bite marks on Emmeline’s thighs definitely look human. But there’s no tearing at her skin though, just a neat, clean, half-moon divot. Still, her instinct shows her fervent eyes and wet lips, strong hands wrapping around Emmeline’s waist as she struggles to escape. The vision unfolds itself. The woman struggles against her bound wrists and ankles, grasping and kicking for something, anything. Finding nothing. Screaming until her throat runs raw.

Shuddering, Howie shakes her head no. “He took her here after killing her. The creature. I think he did it somewhere he knows. Didn’t want to get interrupted again.”

“Jesus,” Brooks curses.

Howie eyes the red-painted fingernails, frowning.

The husband’s cries echo clearer now.

Oh, God! Oh, God, don’t take her from me!

“They think he did it?” she asks absentmindedly.

“No,” Brooks says.

“Good.”

“They say it was a bear,” he says.

She stares at him. Fire bleeds through her veins, rushes into her cheeks and her forehead. Anger, shock, and disgust build in her chest.

“No,” she breathes.

Ignoring the voice inside warning her against this, she stands and marches towards where Lieutenant Williams speaks

to the mourning man. Frank Hensley is red-eyed and stone-faced now, shaking like it's freezing outside when it isn't much colder than fifty degrees. His small daughter perches on his lap.

"Mr. Hensley," she says, holding her hand out to shake. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

She can feel her lieutenant's dark gaze glaring at her, and feel the warning in his eyes. Of all people, he wants her here the least. She's not sure what he hates most about her. She just knows it's strong enough to feel like dry ice on tender skin.

Emmeline's husband takes her hand and she clasps his with both of her own, looking at him sympathetically.

"Can't imagine the nightmare you're living in right now," she says softly. "But you have my sympathy."

"Thank you," he says gently.

Sympathy might not be the best word. She feels numb to him, but she feels those bite wounds deep in her flesh.

Could be her.

Will be others.

"Can I ask you something about Emmeline?" she asks.

"Officer Black Elk," Williams warns. "This isn't an investigation."

Frank looks between her and the lieutenant before averting his gaze downwards.

"Let her ask," he murmurs.

"Was she known to walk outside at night?"

Frank shakes his head.

"If it was a bear, it couldn't pull her out of the house," she continues.

"I don't know why she went outside," Frank says. "Maybe... I can't figure it."

"Did she have anyone she might leave the house at night for?" Howie asks.

“What do you mean?” Frank asks.

“This isn’t relevant, Miss Black Elk,” Williams nearly growls.

“Was she seeing anyone who might want her out at that hour-” she starts, before a strong hand clamps around her upper arm and drags her away. Brooks rushes forward as Frank’s voice raises.

“You’re saying someone did this?” Frank yells. “That she was having an affair?”

But the lieutenant is physically pulling her away from him. Instead of stopping when there’s a safe distance, he continues towards her squad car, his breath huffing in his chest.

“Let go of me,” she snaps, hesitant to push at him and cause greater alarm.

“The fuck is going through your mind?” he asks, nearly throwing her towards the cruiser.

She stumbles, wide eyed and shocked, her heart in her throat. Even with all his distaste for who she is, Williams has never laid a hand on her.

“Putting something in a grieving man’s mind like that?” he snaps. He’s angry. Fuming, even. But from his actions, so is she.

“Bears don’t attack people like that,” she hisses. “It ate her breasts. Her rear-”

“Bears aren’t fucking predictable,” he snips. “We see ‘em every year. Don’t tell me they don’t have ‘em in Dakota.”

“Not like this.”

“No, well you’ve been in Wyoming long enough,” he says. “It’s bear country. They’ll be hibernating soon. They get violent. Aggressive-”

“I’ve seen bodies of animals killed by bears,” Howie says firmly. “And I’ve never seen a single one where the stomach was still intact, Lieutenant.”

“You see something out of the ordinary and jump to the thought that, what, a man did this?” he asks. “You sound *insane*. Don’t you dare put such an idea in the mind of a grieving husband.”

“Wouldn’t she have screamed if she was killed here?” she asks. “Wouldn’t he have heard a bear attack? He’s not going to sleep through that. And there’s nowhere near enough blood. It happened somewhere else, Lieutenant.”

Williams scoffs, shaking his head.

“So now it’s not just that a man attacked her,” he challenges. “But that he took her from her bed without her husband noticing, killed her somewhere else, ate her, and brought her here?”

Howie bites her lip. The only thing she disagrees with is that it wasn’t a man. It was a monster, something inhuman, something too strong not to want to devour someone like this.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Williams says.

You shouldn’t be here, Howie thinks.

“First, you and your partner tell the captain you don’t think that the widow killed herself,” he continues. “Then, you say a man ate a woman. You’re losing it, Black Elk. Don’t speak out of turn like that again. Do you understand?”

Howie thinks of the principal at her school and his paddle. She thinks of the nuns who smacked Até’s knuckles so hard he still has scars.

“Speak,” Williams hisses. “Considering you were so bold just moments ago.”

“Yes,” she grits.

“You should have stayed with that fucking child,” he says. “In his state, that man would do anything you asked of him. Comforting him, looking like you do. Jesus Christ, what were you thinking?”

“The *evidence*,” she growls.

“The evidence!” he yells, pointing back at the body. “Is screaming to the contrary. We don’t have fuckin’ cannibals in Wyoming.”

He’s red-faced now, nearly spitting.

“Not since we taught your people otherwise,” he mutters, reaching in his pocket for a cigarette. He lights it, looking away.

Fucking ignorant.

Maybe he knows how degrading his statement was, and that’s why he can’t look at her. But now that she thinks of it, he doesn’t look her in the eyes very often at all. She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes.

“Okay,” she says, settling back against the cruiser door and folding her arms in front of her chest.

“Good,” he says, taking a drag. “Listen to fuckin’ reason.”

She nods. “And the bruised wrists and ankles, we’ll report that a bear bound them.”

He glares at her. “The bruises could be from anything.”

“True,” she says. “Rope. Chains... Cuffs. What tied them? What clasped them, Lieutenant?”

He waves her off.

“Do bears have thumbs in Montana?” she snaps.

“Maybe she likes it rough,” he snarls before lowering his voice. “*You* do, don’t you?”

Howie’s mouth falls open. For once in her life, she’s speechless. Feels nauseous from the accusation directed towards both her and the woman who lies dead in her own backyard.

“Saw you at the bar that night,” he clips. “Letting that cowboy put his filthy hands on you. That’s what you like, huh? Why you won’t let the rest of us touch you?”

He takes another drag, breathing the smoke out through his nostrils. Howie feels her throat run dry.

“Then you see him at the funeral,” he says. “You been fucking him since then? My, I’d love for you to be a mother. Would finally get you off the force.”

Just as the officer who’d shoved a child into her arms did too, she imagines. If she hadn’t known why she started shaking, she’s sure now. They’d claim this part of her too. She can’t have her body and she can’t even talk back to him, can she?

For a moment, as she stares into the lieutenant’s blue eyes and sees no answer to her call of humanity, she truly thinks about quitting. Packing up her trailer, selling her land, and going to live in one of the houses in Até and Cynthia’s neighborhood because there, this would be a murder case, and there, she would be a detective. Someone respected.

“Lieutenant,” a voice says darkly, disdain in each syllable.

It’s Brooks, she recognizes. It’s his presence that steadies her. Williams turns to him with feigned innocence. Brooks straightens, jutting his chin confrontationally.

“Don’t *ever* speak like that to my partner again,” he says.

He pushes past the two of them and opens the driver’s side door, stepping back to let Howie in.

“I know you don’t appreciate her,” he continues. “And I know you’ll probably never move me up in the ranks for not going to your fucking club and for not talking about her like you do, but I can’t stand it. It’s despicable. You alright, Howie?”

She’s not.

She’s fighting back her body’s compulsion to shake with anger, because if she had it her way and never cared to move up like Brooks so easily dismisses, she would hurt Williams for his words. She would color his skin with bruises until it was darker than any he so clearly disdains. Black and blue. *Taught your people otherwise*. If anyone were to consume human flesh, it would be his people. They’re the ones that are so damned hungry for more than they need.

Brooks pleads with her with his eyes to get into the cruiser, to drive, but she can't. She can't put all her anger inside the glass and metal of that car right now.

So she turns and storms away, her mind spiraling with the morning light and rushing with the wind around her. She envisions Williams lying on the ground, his wrists and ankles bound.

Just a bear, she'd say, digging a knife into his flesh. Just a bear to cut your heart out.

Just a fucking bear.

The rented house is too close to the town's center for a bear to wander without neighbors noticing. This is the same creature that took Doris. She's so fucking sure of it that it already exists in her body, and now it's two broken ribs instead of three. They ache as she walks too fast down Main Street, her heels on snow instead of ice, finding comfort with the give, just remembering that she does exist, doesn't she?

She isn't a wisp, and her spirit has a body, one that can throw a mean punch, and she is *done* with Williams and all he represents, and the second she puts this killer to justice she can leave this job and never look back. It'll be over then. She'll have earned it *then*.

She's shaken out of her reverie to the ringing of bells, and turns sharply to see the door of the western store swing open. A broad hand steadies her by the arm and on contact, her skin bolts with electricity. Just as quickly, the hand lets go.

Its owner steps back.

She looks up at the shadow-cast face of a tall, broad man with hair in waves past his ears.

Wright Lindal.

His hair is longer, his jaw sprinkled with stubble. But it's him without a doubt or hesitation because even though he's dressed in clean, new-looking clothes his scent overpowers the biting winter air. And that draw to him, that aura that made her think he was something other than human, still hangs like a magnet around his large, sun-shadowed form.

Itěšniyaŋ. Now, someone really is playing a joke on her. She hasn't seen him since she let him fuck her in her truck, and on some wild whim gave him her panties. And now... Now he's here.

Looking behind her, she checks to see if Brooks or Williams followed her but she's alone. The whole street is empty. She's not sure what time it is but knows it's early, and knows she's walked a lot further than she thought. The desolation, paired with the prominence of Main Street, breeds a thought in her mind that he pulls something like public intimacy with him wherever he goes.

His timing couldn't be worse. Judging by the look on his face, he feels the same about her. He looks disoriented, almost worried, his harsh brow knitted over light eyes and a tense jaw. He's devastatingly handsome like this, his hair in slight disarray, his skin wet...

It's not raining. Why is his skin wet? His hair is too. It'll freeze like this.

"Mornin'," he says, offering a false smile.

He leans back against the now-closed door, letting his gaze heat hers slowly. It would be masochistic to ask him to hold her, and it's not even something she should want, but he seems so warm. Like despite every circumstance, he was built for her. Like she'd fit perfectly with him.

She does fit perfectly with him. That's the raw edge of all of this.

"You alright?" he asks.

She breathes. She can't answer the question truthfully and she can't walk into his arms.

"I'm fine," she says, raising an eyebrow in his direction.

"Don't look fine," he says, pausing. "Mean to say, you look lovely. But, did somethin' happen?"

"Got a cigarette?" she asks him, ignoring his question.

He nods, reaching into his back pocket and procuring a fresh box. She watches him tear the plastic wrapping off and

frowns. With him, newness reminds her of a performance, of the men on the silver screen pretending to be cowboys when they've never done any work that truly got their hands dirty. With him, it's the opposite. She's felt his callused hands on her body.

But she takes the cigarette when he offers her one, and she lights it with her own match.

She closes her eyes as she exhales. Tilts her face to the warmth of the sun and wonders briefly if anywhere in the world would be easier than where she is now.

When she opens her eyes, he's watching her again. Gone is the worry she saw in him just moments before. He looks reverent, almost, like a man standing atop a mountain and looking at the world around him. That's how he looks at her.

Like she's every beauty the world could offer.

"You on duty?" he asks.

"Coming off it," she says. She's been up for twenty-six hours.

"Come to the ranch," he says. "Ride with me."

She frowns at him. "What?"

"Might help you breathe easier."

Watching him, she takes a deep drag of her cigarette before blowing it in his face. As if they're playing their game.

"Alright," he says. "Figured I'd play what cards I have. Got a match?"

He gestures with his cigarette carton to the matchbook she holds in her left hand. His hand, with its broad palms and long, calloused fingers, makes that carton look half its size. Beneath his warm skin is a different beast, someone she imagines very few people have lived to see. But she wants to stroke its armor. She wants to see what he keeps locked away. He is a loaded gun, so why does she want to kiss the muzzle?

She shakes her head.

He nods to himself and slips the carton back in his pocket before settling his gaze on her once more. There's a flicker of amusement at the corner of his lips.

"You been havin' strange dreams?" he asks.

"I don't dream," she lies.

"Must be adjustin' to the mountains," he says.

He hasn't taken his eyes off her. She knows, because she's watching him just the same.

"Thought I told you to leave town," she says.

Compulsively, she blows smoke directly towards his face again. A smile cracks like dawn over his lips.

"Why would I go anywhere I'd risk not seein' that pretty face again?" he asks.

"There are other faces," she says.

He shakes his head slowly, like she has said the most absurd thing he's ever heard. But he doesn't say anything else. Just crosses the street. She doesn't watch him. Waiting in the air they shared together, she lets the heat of him replace the still-dull sun. But when she opens her eyes this time, they settle on the window of the western store and the distinct *closed* sign there. She frowns. Finally turns back to him, but he's gone.

He's a newcomer, isn't he? No connections towards the MacDonalds who own the store, none that she's aware of. Why would he be there?

On the same morning that Emmeline shows up dead in her own backyard...

Howie tests the door to find it open when it should be locked, and she continues into the dimly lit store. There on the counter is a box of cigarettes matching those that he smokes but she can't place anything else. Couldn't match the clothes he wore to those on the racks if she tried because all she saw was him.

His eyes were worried at first. The way he stepped back when he really let himself see her...

What is it about Wright Lindal that she can't get out of her head?

She feels his body on hers, his bare, warm skin, the way his cock filled a part of her she didn't know had been empty. But she doesn't know who he is.

Well, he is the type of man who would break into a store. Not to steal anything of value, unless he neatly stuffed his pockets with dollar bills. What for, then? She strolls towards the back, looking for some explanation. Still, there's nothing.

Nothing, that is, until she reaches the bathroom. In an otherwise pristine shop, water pools in messy puddles underneath the door. She opens it thinking about the droplets on his skin like rain.

Or a recent shower.

Whatever he broke into the store for, this is what he did.

"Damn," she curses under her breath.

The man did nothing more than break in for a rancher's bath in the sink. Stole a pack of cigarettes, sure, but nothing severe. It could have just been a coincidence that he broke into the store the same morning that Emmeline's body appeared. Coincidences, while rare, exist sometimes.

Howie settles her palms on the edge of the sink, hanging her head.

Damn. Damn is right. She's infatuated, damn near hypnotized, with a man who showers in a goddamned sink. Who breaks into a store, no less, to commit petty thefts and shower in the goddamned *sink*. If she ever brought Wright Lindal to her family, Até would ask her if she lost her mind. Maybe she did. Thinking that Emmeline's murder and Wright's appearance must mean something just because they're so close together.

She's not wrong that he's far from human, and he is certainly deadly. But he won't be her missing puzzle piece.

Then, she sees it.

On the glass.

Two fingerprints, smudged with blood.

It's enough to make her jolt back, her back hitting the wall like the prints might reach for her to pull her through the glass. Suddenly, she can't catch her breath. She'd close her eyes just to catch a full inhale but she thinks he could come back, and suddenly it isn't him holding her in his truck, isn't him wrapping his arms around her outside of that church, isn't him kissing her in the bar.

He said he was a werewolf and it didn't feel like the truth.

He bent steel with his hands.

He said he wanted to taste her.

"No," Howie says. "No. No. It's not him."

Outside of that church, when she told him what she thought happened to Doris, had the flicker in his eyes been pity or guilt?

Did he approach her in the store because he ran into her, or did he follow her there?

He washed blood off his body.

She sees it now, in the tile of the floor. In the cracks between the steel of the sink and the porcelain. On the mirror are his prints, she's sure. Stained crimson.

Just like that, it unfolds before her, filling the cracked ribs, re-sealing the marrow. She sees slate blue eyes fixing on her from over Emmeline's straining thigh. Sees his lips press to her skin. Gentle. He'd be gentle at first.

Keeping his eyes on her, he sinks his teeth in. His razor sharp bite slices her flesh like butter and he does not look away. Blood bubbles around his lips. He tears off a bite. Swallows. All that blood drips down the tendons of his neck to his collarbone, to his broad, strong, bare chest.

Down his rippling abdomen as he settles back on his heels before wiping his hand across his torso and holding his

crimson-slicked palm out to her. Howie's breathing runs shallow. In her mind, she's on her hands and knees. There is no body anymore, just him and the mess he runs over his naked skin.

"Drink from me, darlin," he tells her, kneeling closer.

She crawls to him.

Crawls, and feels the air hit her own naked form, until his rough fingertips brush her lips and she puts him in her mouth.

"Good girl," he growls.

Reaching his fingers deeper. Stroking the back of her throat.

Stuck in the trance of him, she dips her fingers into her mouth and sucks the mess on the mirror from them. It tastes sweet. She pushes it all the way back though, as deep as she can, and buckles forward to vomit into the porcelain. It's mostly coffee. It burns her nostrils and clouds her eyes but she needed the sting. Finally, her mind clears.

Panting, she rests her forehead against the mirror and lets the glass cool her throbbing head. She begins to build a castle of an idea in her mind.

It doesn't matter that Lieutenant Williams thinks a bear killed Emmeline or that the department ruled Doris's death a suicide. They don't deserve this victory. She does.

The next time she speaks to Wright, it'll be with that in mind. It'll be to *read* him, not to want him, because in this very moment she's convinced he's a killer and if anyone can bring him to justice, why wouldn't it be her?

The thought runs lightning in her spine,

In her mind,

Between her legs.

She wants him. She'll admit it. That's the fire.

She blinks back the water threatening her eyes.

Destruction is the smoke it breeds.

Chapter 16

Like dogs, those boys

Howie

It's a new year. Emmeline Hensley's body is reduced to ashes now.

All that's left are the photographs Howie took from Evidence and stowed away in a folder that she keeps in her truck. She won't bring them into her house.

If she looks at them too much, she starts to feel herself bleed.

She finds her hands drifting to her chest like she can hold her unmarred flesh together. Sits on her palms and checks the skin of her rear. Puts her hand between her legs...

She puts her hand between her legs and thinks of Wright Lindal.

There's no reason that she should fantasize about binding his wrists to the wrought iron of a bed that isn't even hers anymore but was once, in that house on Moore street. No reason that she should think of him, shirtless beneath her, his warm chest heaving with anger as he watches her until the gray-blue in his eyes drains to a midnight sea of lust.

But still, she sees him there.

It's the draw that makes her run her fingers over her teeth and think of touching his, of cutting her flesh on his razor-sharp bite. Playing with fire or keeping a coyote as a pet, that particular foolishness is what brings her back to the house on Moore Street when she wonders how long he'd wait to kill her

if she stripped naked for him like that. If he'd break the cuffs like he showed her, if he'd even have to.

Any of those reasons should be good enough to avoid him but there are photographs in her truck that make her feel like someone is eating the flesh from her bones.

When the fantasies grow too strong, she looks at the corpse frozen in time and violence and wonders who Emmeline was. Did she smile often? Did she cook well? Did she tell stories about a time growing up when she was wilder than she was when she died? Howie had breakfast with Marin and Jada at their house the morning of New Year's Day, and she couldn't shake the image of the young Hensley girl with her father. At night, if she isn't thinking of Wright, that's what she sees. It keeps her awake. She's got tired eyes now. She sits with her shoulders slumped forward like it would take every muscle in her body to be tall.

Maybe that's why this didn't take much convincing. Brooks wants the case solved but wants her better, she knows. Keeps bringing food over. Called the rez, even, that community phone, to get Até over for supper twice just to feed her. She can think of him fumbling through Shoshoni and Hinóno'eitíít until one of the elders calls a son in because *hello* and *thank you* and *please* can't convey an emergency.

But she'd tell them both she's fine. Not to worry, but then Até says he's a father and he will always worry. That pisses her off a bit because she's thirty, has been through a failed marriage and, apparently, shoves her panties into the mouths of killers when she lets them fuck her in her truck, but all of this makes her realize she's not fine and probably never has been. For Até, she'll eat his food and tell him she gets like this when it's so cold. For Brooks, she'll pinch his ear and make him drive her out to the Stoughton ranch so she can interview Wright Lindal with new eyes.

Rob Stoughton's family took forty thousand acres of fine, mountainous land to claim as their own. You can drive into it because he'd have to if he ever wanted to get to his house, but all this land is fenced in and cattle grates slice up the dirt road.

“We need rules,” Brooks states. With this much ice and snow everywhere, the cruiser doesn’t kick up dust like it would in the summer. But still, she feels the earth underneath all that sparkling white. “No telling them what we’re looking into.”

“Sure,” Howie replies.

He glances at her.

“No...” Brooks starts. “Please. I need you to promise me that.”

“I won’t tell them we’re investigating two homicides.”

Brooks firms his jaw. “We aren’t. We’re just asking questions.”

Every time she agrees with him is a lie, so she just keeps watching the window. Since she has never conducted a murder investigation, there’s an itching feeling in the back of her skull that she shouldn’t be doing this, that she isn’t prepared, and that she’ll lose the job she worked damn hard for since she was a teenager.

It’s the first time she’s done something that could put her accomplishments on the line. They keep her walking on eggshells and until now she has been balanced. She has been careful.

Now, though?

Now, she’s taking the hammer to them herself.

She loses focus on Brooks’s words as they bump over the cattle grates leading up to the paddocks and the ranch house. She forgets much of anything. Wright Lindal is the first thing she sees.

“Stop,” she whispers to Brooks, touching his arm to still him.

Wright is standing far too close to a dark brown horse that rears up on its hind legs, its eyes wild and mane whipping into the sky. That beast is larger than even him. It flails its hooves out menacingly.

Wright stands his ground.

Her heart stills as the creature lands on its feet with a thud so strong she feels it in her bones. It's as if she's there, her body next to Wright's body, and she can feel the wind the creature creates blowing through her hair.

It could kill him, couldn't it? He's got nothing but a rope looped around one shoulder, no whip or crop. His broad, long-fingered hands are empty.

Howie's no stranger to horses, but she's never seen one this wild. Its strength is magnificent, and this close to Wright it's impossible not to see the parallels between the two. How sleek they both are. How her body innately knows just what they could do to her if they lost control. They are chaos, with the strength to back such a thing up.

The horse paws at the ground and for the first time, Wright moves.

Slowly, he crouches low. Sets his elbows on his knees and looks up at the creature.

Howie can see the pulse of the animal racing in its neck. She wonders if it sees him like she does. If it looks into his eyes that are almost clear in the morning light and feels like it's jumping from a cliff.

"That our bear?" Brooks asks.

"Don't talk," Howie breathes.

The horse lowers its head down. A smile lights upon Wright's lips. There's something to the way it breaks into his face, illuminating his eyes and setting an arch to his brow. It's a smile with a sound, even if she can't hear it. It's crooked, and it's almost unattractive, a fact which makes it unnervingly contagious. Like she could be having a shit day and just witnessing it would make her forget about her responsibilities. She does not want to love any single thing about him, but his smile makes that difficult.

He reaches into his pocket slowly and pulls something out, holding it with an outstretched palm. The horse nods its head

to him but suddenly rears back on two legs again, throwing its head back to the sky.

Wright doesn't falter. Doesn't even budge when it lands down a foot away from his fingertips, with so much force that it ripples the hair on his head. It's as if there's not a single thing its thousand-pound body or strong, stone-hard hooves could do to him. That type of assuredness goes beyond confidence into dominion. He is more than this four-legged creature.

He keeps his hand out. The horse pants. Catches its breath, maybe, before pressing its mouth to his palm and eating what's there.

When it's done, Wright pets the animal's forehead, saying something to it. Howie still doesn't know what he is, but watching him like this makes her want to believe he's not a monster. That he's something beautiful instead, something that flows like water in a stream and wind through the trees, perfectly natural and at one with the world.

Then, he turns from the horse to her, catching her gaze immediately through the glass.

Her heart seizes.

A flush runs over her skin.

It only takes a look from him through glass to set her on fire. Only one look for her to fight not to reach her hand out and touch him, even with their distance.

"It's the man we arrested, Howie," Brooks says. "The one who you kissed."

She winces. At least he doesn't know about the parking lot. Or the store, her wiping blood from a mirror and pressing it to her lips. When she raised the idea that this creature could be a cowboy, she conveniently forgot to say it was *this* one.

"The strongman," Brooks says.

"The strongman," she confirms, thankful he doesn't bring anything else up.

"Do you know what a conflict of interest is?" he asks.

“Small town,” she scoffs. “Everything’s a conflict of interest.”

In the corner of her eye, she can feel him staring at her. Even with more than a moment of silence between them, he doesn’t stop.

“You saw him more than the one time,” Brooks says.

“Don’t think so?” Howie says, like asking him to confirm.

“Give me your wrist,” Brooks insists, because she taught him this trick.

“No.”

“You’ve seen him a few times,” Brooks says. “You’re keeping something from me. No secrets, Howie.”

“You’re right,” she confesses, looking at him with as much sweetness as she can muster.

He frowns sorrowfully. “This is wrong, then. I fucking knew this was wrong.”

“I’m here because we’re thinking of getting married,” she says. “We want you to be our maid of honor, whatever the man’s equivalent of that is.”

“*Howie.*”

“*Brooks,*” she says, lifting her voice. “I wanted a second chance to talk to him, because our conversation captivated me. *Oh-*”

“Stop-”

“Think he’ll make an honest woman out of me,” she continues, putting on her best impression of a Hollywood starlet. She casts the back of her hand to her forehead, fainting towards him. “*My,* how I long to be married again.”

Brooks closes his eyes, knocking the heel of his palm on the steering wheel in frustration. “I think there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Howie breathes deep. She watches Wright hop a fence like his hulking, muscular frame is weightless. Despite what she

expected, he doesn't walk towards them but rather away, navigating through other pens towards the stables.

Is he going to run?

Part of her wants him to. It's dangerous, this game of theirs, because it makes her want to chase him down in the cruiser, to level a knife at his neck, to see what he'd let her get away with. These fantasies feel like his breath on her skin. His deep groan of pleasure as he spilled onto her stomach. The way he grinned at her outside the store like he knew what she'd find.

"There is something I'm not telling you, Brooks," she says earnestly. "But I can't tell you. I promise it won't affect the case."

"What type of thing can't you tell me?" he asks, hurt.

She pulls her lips between her teeth, because the pain in his voice is a knife so sharp it brings tears to her eyes that she has to bite back. But if he knows about her and Wright, he'll never let her do this. If he knows about her and Wright, he might genuinely doubt her abilities to read people and to keep others safe. So he can't know. It kills her, but he can't know.

When she opens the door, it's horses and mud in her nose, the smell of sun-heated hay and grass cutting the bite of winter. There's a freshness too, always provided by mountain air, that weaves cleanliness in between the life and the dirt. Wright's broad back disappears through an open barn door into darkness. She wants to rush after him.

But Rob Stoughton waits on his porch, arms crossed like he could smell them in the air. He's an older man a few years younger than Até, handsome but weathered, an inch or two taller than her. The way he stands is somehow warm and inhospitable at the same time. He greets Brooks by name and handshake before nodding briskly to Howie.

"Morning, officers," he says. "Lucky you, coming in without a phone call and missing the APLs."

Brooks blanches. "You have landmines set up on your property?"

“Don’t look so concerned,” Rob laughs. “No, not mines. That’s a joke I make just to see the way y’all squirm. Like any wise man with something valuable, I do have my means of protection. But I’d never risk the horses.”

With her eyes, Howie measures the distance between the horses and the house. It’s decent, almost uncanny, and makes her shift on her feet. When she catches Stoughton’s gaze, he’s observing her with narrowed eyes, head cocked as if he’s reading her mind.

“How may I be of assistance?” he asks.

“Got any new hands this season?” Brooks asks.

Stoughton firms his jaw, regarding Brooks down his nose. The man doesn’t like the sheriff’s department, at least not the officers who keep themselves clean of bribe money. Most ranchers don’t like anyone with a badge.

“They come and go,” Stoughton replies. “You’d know that, Clinton, you spent more time at the club.”

“We do know that,” Howie clips, before taking a breath.

Brooks shoots her a look. This isn’t his first interaction with Stoughton but it is Howie’s. She only knows him from rodeos. He’s displeased with her response, and ignores it.

“Got cops in the club too,” Stoughton says. “They know y’all are here?”

“They do,” Brooks replies, without hesitation.

Howie smiles. If he were a puppy, she’d give him a pat on the head and a biscuit.

“This is private property,” Stoughton says. “Fair I’d like to ask why you’re here, and who of my new hands you’re looking for.”

Wright Lindal.

“Just inquiring,” Brooks says. “About all of them, or at least the new ones.”

Stoughton lights a cigarette, not offering either of them one. He blows the smoke pointedly towards Brooks.

“Inquiring could’ve been a phone call,” the rancher quips.

“Is there a phone in the bunkhouse?” Howie asks, looking off in the direction that her prime suspect disappeared to. He hasn’t re-emerged, which could mean he’s still there or could mean he’s sprinting through the woods. Then, she’ll never catch him.

“No, sweetheart,” Stoughton says. “Most men who come here don’t want to speak to the outside world, outside of the base desires.”

“Which are?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Might offend your senses,” Stoughton replies.

“Oh,” she says, nodding. “Drinking, gambling, and screwing, right?”

Stoughton cracks a bemused smile. “That about covers it.”

“If that offends a woman’s senses, who are you screwing?” she quips.

“Howie-” Brooks warns, but the older man laughs.

“That’s a point for you,” Stoughton says. “But I was raised to keep my manners amongst the finer sex.”

“Mm,” she says, nodding. “Is it well-mannered to deny a woman what she wants?”

His eyes sparkle. She feels warmth in the pit of her stomach. There’s good framework to him still.

“Like access to the new hires,” she says. “What if we wanted to inform them of winning a lottery ticket?”

“Most gambling’s on property,” Stoughton quips, before raising an eyebrow in her direction. “Though maybe you’re the ticket, Miss Black Elk. Heard you were getting cozy with one of my hands at the bar a while back.”

She stiffens. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Brooks staring at her.

“That’s hardly appropriate,” her partner interjects. “Not relevant, either.”

“Maybe it is,” she says, staring right into Stoughton’s warm hazel eyes. “Actually, I think I might be pregnant. He’d be the father, of course. Mind if I ask him what to name the baby?”

The man smiles, a genuine one.

“Would explain some,” he says. “Man disappeared the second he saw your pretty face.”

“Already a good-for-nothing,” she quips.

His smile remains, his eyebrows flaring slightly with intrigue.

“They’re drifters,” Stoughton says. “If y’all know that, you know most of them won’t take too kindly to being questioned. Though they’d like you more than your partner.”

He’s speaking to Howie now.

“Toss your hair, flirt a little. Knee ‘em in the stones if they get too rowdy. Like dogs, those boys,” he says. “If you’d like a man who’d make an honest woman out of you, though...”

His eyes glaze her body.

“Choose someone with a house,” he says.

She looks past him, and past the bunkhouse, to the sprawling stone home that looks like a castle compared to her trailer. “Like you?” she asks.

“Woman with a spark makes for a warm winter,” he tells her, winking.

“Wouldn’t mind raising another man’s child?” she asks.

Another eyebrow raise, and his eyes shift somewhere past her shoulder.

“Be an even change,” he says before turning to Brooks. “Keep back but stay with her. A knee might not work for some.”

“You won’t tell us who’s new?” Brooks asks.

Almost as if confirming it, Stoughton doesn’t reply. He just locks eyes with Howie, nodding once.

“The main house *does* have a phone,” he says. “If you need help with the cold, or providing for another man’s child. Like to have you for dinner some night.”

Howie smiles at him genuinely before climbing over the fence herself and making her way through the maze of pens towards the stables. She hears Brooks hurrying after her. Hears apprehension even in the sound of his breath falling into the chilly autumn air.

He might want to say something but after three years of partnership with her as his senior, he knows when to choose silence. Instead he keeps pace, and follows her as she chases her glimpse of the creature who looks like a man, and a powerful man at that.

She knows she’s close by how her heart hammers in her chest.

Chapter 17

A suspect

Wright

Wright stands with Dutch against the stables as the man soothes himself with a flask. Offers some to Wright, but he denies it.

They don't need to speak to share an understanding. Dutch braces himself the same way Elam did, and maybe he's done something or maybe he hasn't but he's too tired to hide anymore. He'd rather drink and have a friend nearby who can help him win a fight if it comes to that.

And Wright's guilty of a hell of a lot, though he's not sure how much of it Howie sees when she looks at him. She's perceptive; too fucking perceptive. No doubt she knows about the store, and maybe she would feel rotten enough about their past encounters to bring him to the station for a stolen shirt and pants. Then he'd tell her he put the money in the till a few nights after, figured the tax and everything for it. That took some time. He's a good man.

Unless he's not.

Unless, Wright figures with a sickening drop to his stomach, he kills during his blackouts. It makes him want to take Dutch's flask and finish the whole fucking thing. God, liquor would make this better. It'd make him kill himself, but at least when holding that gun he's able to breathe.

He's a fool for thinking that the morning he saw Howie Black Elk in front of that store, it was some sort of sign that she'd change her mind one day.

He'd lost time when the woman got killed by that truck, the one Howie says she saw a man, a *creature* that looked like a man, which Wright himself is, carrying that body. The morning he'd run into her was from another blackout, and she had come from another body. All the papers said it was a bear attack, tragic but a fact of nature, and Wright knows grizzlies are much fiercer than the black bears of Appalachia.

What if it's not a bear, but instead that creature from the woods? And can he really trust that creature in the woods isn't his own self?

Control is sand through his open fingers. Overseas, he saw good men do terrible things. War can do that, he knows. It can take a man's soul right out of his body, make him forget God and his mother. Though he never saw it himself, he heard of American soldiers raping women who didn't even speak their language. It was worse for the Japanese. Women and children. Brutalized like they were never human, and those men would come back and be husbands, be fathers, be good again, wouldn't they?

That's war itself. Not much different than a turn. The only thing that steadies Wright on his feet is the thought that he does know himself, and has come this far with that being the only stability he has. He lost his wife and child when he was fighting a rich man's war, and spent years not knowing if Ridge had been the one to kill them. In the absence of any good ground he only had the legs he stood with. Sure, strong, ready.

He's still a soldier.

He doesn't even know where that widow lived, couldn't tell Howie what house that mother was mauled by a bear at, but he can find his way to Howie's trailer by now and she's still living. It wasn't him.

Wasn't him.

Please, God, let it not be him.

He'd be just like his brother, then. Ridge is a whole lotta evil, tamed by Sadie only possibly, but he's got a graveyard

full of women who'll face him if he ever dies. No way Wright's making it to Heaven, but when he goes to Hell all the men he's eaten will be there with their own torments. Likely will pay him no mind at all.

He'll be alone in those fires, but at this point he's convinced he'll be thinking about Howie for an eternity. When she looked at him through the window of that squad car there was a novel in her gaze. Suspicion. Drive. Heat, like there's always been, like he craves Carolina summers since the snow buried life out here. She looked at him like she could burn him with her gaze alone and it was enough, despite the itching feeling of guilt that crawled its way through his scalp, for him to think about letting her.

The catalyst that made him forget entire nights, is *her*. His bunker has her name on every wall. *Howie*. His filthy prayer.

When she walks through the door, he growls for her. Dutch notices, eyeing him, but he was there at the bar and seems amused by the distraction, taking another sip from his flask.

"Hey Dutch," the male officer says, nodding once.

Dutch glares at him. "Last name's Bradley."

If Wright's not surprised, a flush comes to the officer's cheeks.

"Right, I..." the officer stutters. "I just remembered you from the night we took you in."

"Yeah," Dutch remarks coldly.

Howie stares at her partner with raised brows. "That so?" she asks, leaning in. She whispers low, but Wright can hear. "Anything *you're* not telling me."

The male officer shakes his head.

"Anyway. Morning, gentlemen," he continues. "I'm Deputy Brooks and this is my partner, Deputy Black Elk. We've met, in worse circumstances-"

"Mr. Lindal," Howie interrupts, flashing her badge. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about where you were the night of December 19th."

He stands fully and her lips part. Those legs she strode so confidently on look weak now. Arousal and adrenaline are heady on her skin.

“Mm,” he murmurs.

She’s even more beautiful than he remembered, full cheekbones slicing into a broad face, full lips, eyes rich with darkness that could breathe him in like the night sky. She’s tall with strong, long limbs and a narrow waist he aches to wrap his hands around. Plush hips she’s attempted to conceal beneath a knee-length skirt that makes her sienna skin glow even in the chill. God, he wants to touch her. Wants to lick every drop of sweat from her body. Her salt would taste like salvation on his tongue.

“Thought we were asking who’s new to the ranch,” Brooks reminds her.

The man is around Howie’s height and a bit younger, with stubble and wavy hair that runs a bit past his ears. He’s good, one of those men so innately kind that takes to anyone easily.

“You should ask around,” Howie clips, her words directed towards Brooks.

Those eyes of hers don’t leave Wright’s. Brooks sighs.

“Hey,” he tells Dutch. “Know any new workers?”

His tone is easy, finally. Calm. Dutch appraises him with a singular raised eyebrow before nodding.

“Sure, I guess,” he says. “I’ll take you out.”

And soon, Wright is alone with Howie.

She stares at him.

He stares at her.

The heat between their bodies could melt lake ice in five seconds flat. He *itches* for her, to reach out and touch her. The memory of her underneath him plays in a loop inside his mind, in front of his eyes. That full lower lip bit between her teeth.

Yes, she’d moaned. In her voice, that word was a hallelujah.

“Think they know each other?” Wright asks her.

“Mr. Lindal,” she says pointedly. “Do you remember the last time we met?”

He frowns, thrown off by the formality of this. “You’ve called me Wright before,” he says.

“Before, it was personal. Now it’s business.”

“Business,” he repeats, tonguing his cheek with the heat he’s feeling. It’s not arousal this time. It’s suspicion. “Howie, I know what you taste like. Ain’t no business between us.”

She closes her eyes, takes one of those long sighs that slows her pulse. And he knows this is something she does. He knows *her*, damn it.

When she opens her eyes, he’s looking at the woman he saw in the station that first night. The one who chained his wrists when he tried to touch her. Half caught in the game between them and half with a bit of hatred she might just have for anyone who loosens the buttons on those tight shirts of hers. She ain’t that kind of rebel.

“You hardly know what I taste like,” she says firmly.

He frowns again. He’d asked for more time with her.

“So,” she says quickly. “Last time we met, you remember that?”

“Would be impossible to forget any time I saw you,” he says.

She blushes fervently at the statement, but pairs it with a quick anger.

“I recall you leaving a store you had no business being in,” she quips.

“That why you’re here?” he teases. “Come all this way for petty theft?”

“It’s good that you admit that,” she says, her voice so smoky he wants to inhale her. “Where were you the night before, Mr. Lindal?”

No fuckin' idea, but I'm not admitting that when you're like this.

“What should I call you, if we're bein' all business-like?” he asks.

“Deputy Black Elk, please.”

“If it pleases you,” he says, winking. “Deputy Black Elk.”

She swallows, reaching out to the wall of the stable. The flush to her cheeks glows bright red; her breathing turns shallow. These things, he tracks with wolverine senses.

“Answer the question,” she insists, stiffening.

“Went for a drive,” he tells her. He keeps his voice low.

“Did you come home?” she asks.

He raises an eyebrow.

“To the bunkhouse,” she clarifies.

“No,” he says. “Trying to sleep under the stars whenever I'm able. Winters here are rough. Gotta take those warmer nights when they come.”

“It isn't warm now,” she says.

“Isn't it?” he quips.

She eyes him. “Stop it.”

He cocks his head at her.

“Stop doing what you're doing,” she bites.

“Ain't doing anything,” he tells her, feeling a smile creep to the corner of his mouth.

“Čeží okhížata,” she mutters.

He doesn't know what she's saying, but it sounds like she's calling him a liar. If he's doing anything, she's matching it. Her skin buzzes like static and his mouth waters to feel it on his lips. To bite the electric wire of her perfect flesh. She's a fatal beauty.

“Why go to the store?” she asks.

“Needed new clothes.”

“What happened to the old ones?”

“What, the ones you left me with?” he asks, almost giddy with his quickness. “Threw ‘em in the dumpster out back.”

“Did you?” she asks. “Throw out the clothing I gave you, I mean?”

A growl unfurls from his chest and she glances in its direction, at eye level with her.

“No, Deputy,” he says. “I keep that on me. Smells divine.”

She ignores his statement. “You told me when we first met that you were a werewolf.”

He likes that she remembers, so he smiles even though that might be what damns him. “Right.”

She nods. “Were you telling the truth?”

He laughs before remembering his defenses. “Sure was, Deputy. Come with me next full moon.”

She cocks an eyebrow.

“I remember likin’ the sound of your howl,” he teases.

“If that’s the case, yours is more of a grunt,” she snips. “So, Orion, North Carolina.”

He’s going to get whiplash. “Yes, ma’am. Where I’m from.”

“What did you leave behind?” she asks.

He frowns. “Don’t quite know what you’re asking.”

“Family?” she asks. “Former jobs?”

“We own a farm in Orion, Ridge and Sadie-” he starts. “My brother and his wife and I.”

“You’re unmarried?” she asks.

“Widowed.”

Softness flickers across her face. “Any children?”

“Can’t have ‘em,” he says, which has been true since his mate died. It’s a practiced answer but it stings now, because how fucking magnificent would that be? He’d like children with her, kids who had her smile and her brain and her eyes. Like a fucking litter of them. That more than anything is what makes him want to turn his back on her, because a woman like her should be reflected in a hundred generations and he can’t give her that.

“Oh,” she remarks, looking surprised.

“Do I look virile or somethin’?” he asks.

She bites back a smile before flicking her gaze away. “Heard your friend call you a stallion once.”

He bristles. “Don’t call me a fuckin’ geldin’, Howie. I’ll have your hide for that.”

“Deputy Black Elk,” she says, biting back a smile.

“Don’t call me a geldin’, Deputy Black Elk, or I’ll find a way to prove you wrong,” he teases.

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks flush. “Moving on, Mr. Lindal. Any girlfriends?” she asks.

The question flares something in him. Gets under his skin like the sharp jab of a needle

“You fuckin’ serious?” he asks.

“Asking questions I’d like to know the answers to,” she says, nodding her chin up to him before looking away. “I’m *fuckin’* serious.”

“Actin’ like a stranger,” he says. “Ain’t been with anyone but you here, for Christ’s sake. And I...”

He lowers his voice, glancing behind him in case he’s too distracted to hear anyone coming.

“I think about you all the fuckin’ time, Howie,” he hisses. “Where’s the room for anyone else? You don’t feel that? You don’t think about me?”

She firms her lips together, staring at him like she’s got something to say and won’t relinquish it.

“Your mouth looks pretty like that,” he chides. “But it looks better moanin’ my name.”

She steadies her shoulders, glaring at him. “Your employer asked to make me dinner, Mr. Lindal.”

Gritting his teeth, he feels heat in his chest flare. Nearly lets a growl escape.

“Dinner at a man’s house is so intimate,” she says. “Warm. I’d wear a nice dress...”

He swallows hard at the thought of something fitting her divine form. Of smoothing his hands around her satin-covered waist and pulling her close enough to clog his throat with the fabric.

“You haven’t had a nice meal in a while, have you, Mr. Lindal?” she asks.

“Didn’t let me eat my fill,” he says.

She pushes her dark, silken hair behind her shoulder and tilts her chin up at him.

“I bet you’re damn near starving now,” she taunts.

Christ, he’s hard right now. Throbbing, needing her hand on him. He might snap his own molars from how hard he’s clenching his jaw. The thought of Rob Stoughton taking Howie to bed is enough to turn him. He’ll kill him. He digs his fingers into the wood and she glances at his white knuckles. With his other hand, he adjusts himself in his pants.

“Hm,” she acknowledges. “Are you going to be good, Mr. Lindal? Or are you too much of an animal to control your urges?”

“Gonna need to cut this interview short, you keep talkin’ like that,” he says.

A smile flickers across her lips. “Control yourself. Why come to Wyoming?”

“Never been,” he says.

“Tuwále,” she scoffs. “Most cowboys are running from something.”

“Towards,” he says. “Have a good life back home. But I’ve been livin’ for someone else most of my life-”

“And now you’re working for someone else,” she clips.

He narrows his eyes at her. Feels another bright flare of anger. “Was a soldier overseas. That’s livin’ for someone. This ain’t the same.”

“Where did you serve?” she asks.

“France.”

“And did you kill people in France?”

Her eyes lock on his.

Words escape his mind for a moment. Memory does too. Her cheeks color darker, but she doesn’t look away.

“Yes,” he breathes.

“Men or women?” she asks.

“Men,” he snaps. “I’d never kill a woman.”

“Sometimes we do things we don’t intend to,” she says. “Sometimes we let strangers fuck us in parking lots.”

“You fucked me, Howie,” he says. “You’ll know when I fuck you.”

She sighs a laugh, almost mocking. “Don’t think I’ll find out.”

“Why’re you here, then?” he asks.

She stills, her eyes darkening. “I ask the questions, Mr. Lindal.”

He’d like her to turn around, brace herself against the rough wood of the stable wall so he could show her how he’d leave the mark of each of his fingers on her hips like tiger stripes. How he’d mark her throat with the same banding, how gorgeous that would be, purple and green on her perfect flesh.

“Hate it when you call me that,” he says, low.

The light in her dark eyes dances. “Maybe I’d like you to hate me, Mr. Lindal.”

He growls. She steps closer.

“Maybe that’s why I’m here,” she offers breathily.

Stuck in this fantasy, he reaches his hand out and cuffs her neck gently, his thumb brushing against her pulse. She doesn’t flinch. Glances down, but doesn’t waver.

“Have you ever desired to bruise someone’s skin, Mr. Lindal, when you make love to them?” she asks, and maybe she’s thinking of murder, but maybe she’s thinking of fucking him again. Her pulse races all the same. The heat of her hips grazes the swell of his erection, the denim strained enough he wouldn’t be surprised if it split.

He’d like to tie her wrists above her head. Give her a world of bruises that glisten with shared sweat.

“Yes,” he tells her, caressing her skin.

“Have you ever desired to leave a more permanent mark?”

She takes his wrist in her hand. He imagines her soft inner thigh against the roof of his mouth.

“Believe most men desire to stay in a memory, at least,” he says.

He’s dizzy. She’s gliding his hand from her neck over the soft curve of her breast, and his fingers trace her nipple.

“Do you fantasize about biting me?” she asks.

He closes his eyes so they don’t roll back in his head.

“When you’re on your night drives,” she continues. “Do you think about what my blood tasted like?”

Fuck. Her voice is so silky he feels it in the marrow of his hips. And her blood... When he nicks her lips with his teeth... That’s a taste he’s been fantasizing about since they met. He brushes his thumb over her nipple and she moans, a whisper in the back of her throat.

“Yes,” he admits.

“Are you a violent man, Mr. Lindal?” she asks.

It's too much. He pulls her to him, her back to him, the gentle plushness of her ass just below the hardness of his arousal. "Do you think I'm a violent man?" he growls in her ear.

With his fingers stretched, his hand spans the front of her skirt. He lets his fingers tease at the hem, kissing her neck. But she grasps his wrist, digging her nails into his skin, and he groans. Shifts his hand between her legs while bracing his other against the wall.

"Emmeline Hensley," she manages.

The name is familiar, but sounds don't matter now. He licks the sweat from her skin, nips at her ear.

"Do you know a woman named Emmeline Hensley?" she asks as he shifts up her skirt, pushing his hand underneath her panties.

"Stop asking fuckin' questions," he groans, the curls of her against his palm, his fingers parting her slick sex. Her clit is so swollen he can stroke it, massaging deeper into her sweet form, coaxing pleasure like honey from the comb.

Her breath shudders out of her, catches in a whimper.

"*Wright*," she moans, and those same nails dig into his arm as he props them up, deep enough to draw blood. He feels it in the half-moon divots of her fingertips. She whines with ecstasy.

"Yes," he growls. "Say my fuckin' name."

There's a moment where she rides his hand, where she rests her gorgeous head against his shoulder and he breathes her in, in which everything in the world fades away. Her body quivers at his touch, begs for it, even. They're perfect together.

"Stop," she breathes.

Gritting his teeth, he pulls back. Her taste is still in his mouth but he told her from the first day, if she asked him to stop he would. Now she's panting, her pretty chest heaving, her hair wild from his face. She pulls down her skirt. He can't

help himself. He sticks his fingers in his mouth, sucking her taste from them, closing his eyes to the warm, heady ecstasy.

“She’s dead,” she says between gasps. “You’re a suspect.”

His eyes snap open. Of course, *of course*, he’s a fucking moron, that’s why she’s here. A suspect to a goddamned murder, *Howie’s* suspect. This isn’t part of their game. This is his freedom at stake.

“Why the hell am I a suspect?” he asks. “Don’t even know who that woman is.”

Howie stills. His mind darkens. He plants his hand on the wall next to her head. Her gaze flicks up to his, finally, though he has to fist his other hand by his side not to grab her by the neck again.

“Did someone see me with her?” he asks.

“No.”

“Did someone see me near where she died?” he asks.

“Me,” she breathes. “I saw you. At that store.”

That’s it. That’s what it meant to her, then. Not a chance encounter but finding a killer in the very case she was investigating.

“That’s in the papers as a bear killin’. Why am I a fuckin’ *suspect*, Howie?” he asks, maintaining a level voice through the sheer force of his own will.

“Something ate her,” Howie breathes, reaching forward. She tucks a finger beneath the button of Wright’s shirt. Just the feeling of her knuckle against his bare skin makes his heart race.

The statement, despite her touch, turns his stomach. He’s never killed a woman, not ever in his life. He’s never killed a woman, but he’s never wanted someone as raw and intensely as he wants Howie, and he’s never done the things he’s done to her, and he doesn’t fucking remember some nights.

She smooths her hand up to his neck, right under his jaw. He closes his eyes. Leans into her touch even though it’s

framed with a threat. A light moan escapes her throat, though, and he looks at her again to see a matching battle in her eyes. He braces his other hand against the wall. Caging her in while propping himself up. If he lets go, he'll fall into her midnight gaze.

"You're a murderer," Howie says. "I can feel it. Always felt it."

He loves the pain of those words just as much as he hates them. She knows him well.

"I've only ever killed to survive," he says. "That ain't murder. It's necessity."

"When was the last time?" she asks.

Wright thinks: *a week ago. A man hitchhiking on the 89. He smelled like a woman's tears and had scratch marks on his face and neck that must've been two days old.*

He can't tell her that.

"I told you, I never killed a woman," he says.

She strokes his neck. "But you've killed many others, haven't you?"

Her heat. Her touch. Her stunning voice like dusk on a misty field.

"Just confess," she whispers, leaning forward.

The heat of her face brushes his neck and she presses her lips to the skin there. He nearly groans.

"Your teeth are so sharp," she breathes. "I bet you know what flesh tastes like."

He's rock hard. She must know what she does to him. He hears Dutch and her partner's voices nearby but he wants to push her into the stable and take her in the mud and the hay.

"Come to the station," she whispers against him. "Put it on paper."

She's digging under his skin with her words and her breath, luring the anger out. He grabs her by the neck. Glowers

down at her before backing her into the wall, his body flush against hers. He's still hard. The scent of her is still on his fingers. They're going to kill each other, aren't they?

"Ain't goin' to no goddamned station," he growls.

"Say I'm wrong then," she bites back. She pushes him and he steps away, letting her go. "About the killing. What did she taste like?"

That gets to him. Of all things, the idea that he'd want any woman's flavor but Howie's on his tongue. He slams his fist into the wall by her head, using his full strength this time. It splinters the wood. She doesn't even flinch.

"Get angry," she hisses. "Get violent, Wright. Give me a reason to put you in cuffs."

He glares at her. "You put me in cuffs again, I'll wrap 'em around your neck when I fuck you."

She slaps him.

It's hard enough for the sound of it to echo through the stables.

Unexpected enough to move him.

With his head turned, he sees Dutch and her partner standing in the doorway. Gawking. God knows when the two of them came in.

But she's human and frustrated and not quite aware, so she pushes him again. Her partner shouts.

"Howie!" he yells. "Deputy Black Elk, what in the devil is going on?"

She glances at him, panting. Wright can't take his eyes off of her. She turns her focus back to him and *God*, he wants to fuck that look off her face. He growls at her. Taking him to the fucking station off of some hunch...

Even if she's not wrong about anything but who he killed. He might not remember the night in question but there are many nights he doesn't remember, and not a single one of

them had him waking with the flesh of a kill in his teeth. Evidence doesn't require memory as proof.

He thinks of saying something discrediting. It would be easy enough. He's a man, and if he speaks properly he's the kind of man others aim to be. Handsome, imposing, someone with a presence. Someone other men, like her partner or Rob Stoughton, would listen to.

But for all those reasons, he can imagine it was so much more difficult for her to be in the position she's in. This light makes a story of her harshness. It's armor. Same as his silence.

"It's my fault," he says, looking at her. "Told her she looked beautiful surrounded by horse shit."

Dutch laughs. Howie glares at him.

"Before, *that*," she says pointedly. "I told him I would like a written statement of where he was the night Emmeline Hensley was murdered."

Wright's temper flares. Won't put himself on a record, won't do anything that could link him to murder even if he's confident he didn't kill the victim. He cannot, under any circumstance, be put behind bars.

"Not murdered," Brooks brushes off with a nervous laugh. "Not murdered, *please*. Remember."

Howie shakes her head but the man shoots her a look. So she smooths her pretty, long-fingered hands over her face, knotting them in her hair and sighing. Despite all she's done, Wright wants to tilt his fingers under her chin and make her look up at him again. But he can't. Of course, he can't.

When she looks up at him next, it's with hate in her eyes.

And he's sure that this isn't the last he'll see of this investigation. She's hunting. She's smart. If she looks hard enough, she'll find more than he can allow.

He's going to have to stop her.

Chapter 18

Breaking

Wright

Wright rests his forehead against the door of the trailer, sensing deep within himself that this is something he should not do.

Something he would not do, if it weren't her on the other end. If he didn't hear the sound of the water rushing in that shower and think about soap on her skin. Like a siren's song, the vision of her bare and dripping with warm water dances in his mind. He's got a mission. He'll make his threats.

But he wants her. Always. He fears even if he left Wyoming, he'd walk to her in his sleep, scrape his bare feet over the endless broken bottles that line this country's highways. He will come to her skinless. Crawling. Scratching at her door like a dog.

He tilts his chin up and it's his lips against the door now. Panting, his breath condensing on cold metal. He should turn back. Just turn back, just go to the bunkhouse, just pray that Howie's partner will do enough to deter her.

Except he won't. No one can. Half of what he admires about the woman is how fucking headstrong she is, and if she thinks he killed that woman, it might be enough to convince Wright himself. In the glint of the metal door, he sees the sharp challenge in her gaze when she makes her threats and he feels her breath on his neck.

I can feel it in you, Mr. Lindal.

You're a monster.

He stifles a groan. She'll keep hunting him. She'll discover what he is.

I bet you know what flesh tastes like.

He turns the knob and lets the light hit him only long enough to slip inside. Doesn't want a rush of cold air to hit her in the shower and alert her of his presence. But even with all his preparation, he didn't think of what her scent this strong would do to him.

Leaning with his back to the door, he closes his eyes. Keeps his breaths shallow as he adjusts to it. As his body wakes up, his skin thrums electric and nearly every drop of blood in his body rushes to his groin.

He's gotta think about rot.

Gotta think about maggots.

Gotta think about anything but the way she's whittled the sharp knife of her presence into his mind. She's somewhere between the best song he's ever heard and a deadly parasite. She lives between his ears.

He opens his eyes. Her shower is still running, no scent of adrenaline in the air outside of his own. But *that* is racing. Pumping through him like he's near a battle. He looks around to calm himself.

The false wood paneling is minimal, most of the walls occupied by windows. To his right is a worn, mustard-colored velvet couch with an overflowing laundry hamper lying on top. Immediately, he strides over to it. Dirty clothes. He wonders if she kept his shirt but doubts she'd put it with her clothes, has a vision of her burying it in the woods, even, like it can come alive and run for her. He rummages through her hamper and plucks out a pair of her panties, smoothing the placket under his thumb. Tasting what he can with his fingertips.

This isn't what he's here for, but he slips them into his back pocket anyway. Pushes back the basket to see a weathered blanket, half red and half black with a white stripe

up the middle. Blue beadwork makes shapes against the white. It seems old, older than her, its threads worn and fraying. But she'd keep it here, with her dirty laundry. He trails his fingers over it and sees her sleeping curled under it on days where it's warm enough and she's too tired to walk the short distance to her bed.

Down past the faux-wood, cluttered kitchen is her bedroom. The shower and its steam stand before that. He imagines there are days when this distance feels like a mile.

On the coffee table in front of the couch lies a collection of newspapers, some highlighted and dog eared. Different crimes, different cities. Notebooks with stories in handwriting that looks choppy and frantic, stories dated and assigned to names like her last. He doesn't see a pattern between them, isn't awfully good at reading words anyhow. He sticks with scents. Tastes. Actions. He's right to think she's scholarly, smart enough to tie the loose ends he has together.

There's framed photographs on small bookshelves, angled against well-worn history and crime books. Some photos are older than he is. Black and white images of family members who came before her, standing amongst tipis. Photographs of smallish mountains cut through with pine trees so dark and imposing they look like knights guarding sacred castles. Her with her parents as a child, and with her father and a different woman now. A photograph of a stunning woman who must be her mother from how similar they look. He feels a pang of envy, himself not knowing much of his own heritage past what his pa or his ma told him before they left.

His parents didn't seem to want children, nor anyone but each other. They didn't tell him where they came from. Not much talk of good times, back then. He figures he'll never know much about his lineage. But she does. She's got a whole world in the framed photographs on her shelves.

He takes a deep breath, standing up. She might have a world, but hers is the only scent he smells here. No boyfriends. No men in here at all, not even the father in her photos. She's lonely. Maybe not the right word. Alone, though. She's alone.

Does she get cold on winter nights? He nearly shudders at the thought of tangling his body with hers. Soothing her shivering form with hot breath on her neck. Slipping inside her like that. Making love to her gently for hours, half asleep and riding the high of that ecstasy with her taste in his mouth and her pert breasts cupped in his hands. He wants to feel her come again. Wants to see what she's like when they have space with each other.

The shower handles turn, squeaking through the trailer. He glances down, thinking better of his ability to make a decent threat with his cock straining against his fucking thigh. This isn't who he is. Breaking into a woman's house so he can threaten her. But she needs to know not to follow him, not to investigate him any further. He doesn't need to have fantasies in his mind about sex with the woman who told him she'd put him in a cage for the rest of his life.

She's not fantasizing about him, that's for damn sure.

He sighs, sitting down on the couch.

Then, he hears her voice through the open bathroom door. It comes with a raking sound like brushing hair, this low whisper in a language he doesn't recognize.

No.

It's the words he doesn't recognize, but when she speaks it sounds like prayer. He closes his eyes, settling back. Hands on his knees. Fingers itching to push himself up and either bolt for the door or rush her and bury his face in her rosemary-peppermint hair. He just lets her whisper wrap its way around his spine. There's purity in hearing a language he doesn't know. She could be speaking poetry or pornography and all he'd hear are her lungs and her lips.

He could go anywhere from this couch and he'd still be half a world away from where he was when he met her. She's turned his soul to oil. It's what she's combing through her hair.

Now, he hears her set down her brush. And he opens his eyes, because the pretty things are just in his mind. He's done a bad thing. He shouldn't be here. She'll kill him.

But he won't leave.

Chapter 19

Yours

Howie

Howie wraps a ragged towel around her body just to seal in some of the heat. She shouldn't wash her hair so late at night. If she puts it in braids now, it won't dry. Instead she leaves it brushed and oiled, cooling against her bare shoulders as she turns off the lights in her cramped, linoleum-tiled bathroom.

She holds the towel tighter around her and steps into her kitchen, looking past the counter to the couch with an overflowing load of laundry she'll have to clean soon. She might not have any clean clothes to wear.

"*Háš,*" she mutters, reaching for the cupboard above and grabbing the bottle of Buffalo Trace she keeps stored there. It's too much. These murders. These murders would be too much without her thinking Wright did it, without her half-wanting him to.

She already knows that she let a killer into her body. Claiming such a thing was a puzzle piece finally finding its home. In a way, she knew it from the very fact that he sought her out, meaning she has always known that someone who chose to brush their lips across her skin had a fascination with punishment.

Standing at her own kitchen counter, it's like she can sense him even without his presence. She takes a deep breath and inhales the heady, earthy smell he has. The way it mingles with the cigarettes he smokes and the animals he works with.

She sees him for a moment with that horse. Sees the way his slate blue eyes looked at that beast like he spoke its language, and it soothed itself for him. Pressed its face against his broad, work-worn hand.

She wonders how that hand would feel if she gave him an hour to touch her. Just an hour. Not in her bed, but in an open field, or in the dirt of that paddock. She moans low, leaning over the counter. Feeling the pressure against the low part of her stomach that swirls when he's close. Before that night in the bar, she had laid those thoughts to a deep rest, forgotten her desires. It was easy. No one in town looks like Wright Lindal.

She bets no one in town feels like him, either.

She pours herself a half pint glass of whiskey. Too much, she knows, but she'll need it to fall asleep. Her mind races circles around the trailer and she hangs her head. Shivers lightly. Maybe she should drive down the highway, find a bar, and let a man take her. Maybe if she fixes her desire, she won't want him so badly.

"I favor Basil Hayden," a low voice says behind her.

She yelps, spinning around and bracing herself against the counter. Shifting hard enough to feel the edge of it bruise her hips. A dark figure stands in her hallway, taking up nearly all of the narrow width with his broad shoulders, the top of his head almost reaching the ceiling. She shouldn't know it's Wright this easily, cast in shadow and silhouetted by the warm light coming from her bedroom.

But she does. She can sense him. He steps forward into the light of the kitchen and braces his hand atop the metal stove opposite her. His knuckles are white. His eyes are on fire.

"What the hell..." she breathes. She squints. Is she hallucinating? She was just thinking about him and now he's here, commenting on what she needs to do to stop thinking about him?

"Rough day?" he asks. His voice is low. Thick with gravel.

"You would know what kind of day this was," she mutters.

But she doesn't touch the glass. She stares at him.

He stuns her. That wool shirt shouldn't fit him like it does, should be loose and baggy but instead it fits him like a rubber glove. Clings to his strong, broad chest and overwhelming shoulders. He was dressed differently this morning, which means he changed to get here. Showered. His clean forearms are cut with lines she can see below his pushed-up sleeves.

And those hands... He could fit half her face in just his palm. With the way he grips the stove, she thinks he wants to.

"Do you think that I invited you here?" she asks.

"No."

"Why are you here?" she yells. "Why are you in my home? Ší! Get the fuck out!"

None of this feels real. Did she pass out in the shower? Hit her head? She pinches her wrist.

"It's real," he growls.

She stares up at him. He's here, so it was his true scent she was smelling just moments earlier. His true scent she was *craving*.

"Get out," she breathes. Her pulse is in her throat. Just his presence sparks goosebumps all over her body and his presence without her expecting it...

In her house...

He's going to kill her.

She reaches into the drawer next to her, grabbing her butcher knife and raising it in front of her. Her gun is in her bedroom. But he's in the way.

"Need to talk," he says, unflinching.

"Then talk to me at the station," she tells him, putting every effort into not letting her voice shake. She wants him here. She wants him dead. The muscles of his chest taunt her, his golden skin looking so warm in this light, cut by a horizontal scar that darts upwards towards his neck. She wants *him*.

When she looks back at his face again, his gaze is traveling across her bare arms, her neck. Her legs. The towel does little to protect her tall frame. Her skin prickles for him. He meets her eyes again and steps forward, hungry.

Suddenly, he shakes his head. Steps back. Looks away.

“You can’t threaten to take me to the fuckin’ station for some animal killing,” he says. “You don’t know what you’d be doing with that.”

“Putting you in prison,” she quips. “You’re a killer. I can see it in your eyes-”

He looks back at her and the words freeze in her throat. His jaw tenses; the tendons in his neck strain.

“Is that what you see?” he asks.

Her breath shudders out. It’s not what she sees; what she sees is him and all she wants him to do to her. It’s what she *knows*.

“Killed fuckin’ Germans,” he says, nearly through gritted teeth. “Abroad. While you were here safe and sound in your own home. You want to damn me for that? Bring in half your force.”

“I’ve met soldiers, Mr. Lindal,” she scolds. “They don’t break into my trailer.”

“Don’t put me on a record,” he snaps, fuming. He steps forward again and this time, he doesn’t step back.

“What would it do?” she fires back. “What bodies are you afraid of being dug up?”

“Mine,” he growls, and he’s not four feet away from her now.

Each time she sees him, he feels like a mountain. Unsurmountable. Stunning. Even with the fear she feels, she’s struck by an urge to reach out and stroke the skin of his cheekbone. To trace his jaw. His lips. She wants to put her fingers in his mouth. Cut them on his teeth.

“Yours,” she repeats.

His brows knit together. Somehow, there's rapture in his anger. "*Yours,*" he growls.

She freezes. Blinks up at him. It's not a threat. It's a declaration. If she understands him, he's hers to touch however she wants.

"Do you belong to me, Mr. Lindal?" she whispers.

Like falling into it, he braces his hands on either side of her. She leans back with her upper body, lets her hips press against his.

"Is that what you came here to tell me?" she asks.

"I'm insane for you," he breathes.

"What would they find?" she whispers. Her throat is tight and her towel is loose. "If they dug up our body?"

He came here to threaten her, or to kill her, or to put fear into her heart that she will not let him paint. But she aches for him. Feels like her skin will split itself at the seams just to crawl underneath his hands.

"Can't let them know what I am," he says.

"You won't tell me what you really are," she reminds him, though there's a thrill in his admission that she's *right*.

He ignores her statement, her implied question. He seems distracted by something on her shoulder. "You stay here all alone, no scent or touch of anyone but you-

She flinches from his words.

"Don't anger at me for keepin' something to myself when you keep yourself from everyone," he says, stepping back. He gives her space against the opposite counter of her small kitchen, but it looks like it takes all the restraint he can muster to do so.

"Don't speak to me like that," she breathes.

"No doubt there's a hundred men spread across this state who'd kill for a chance to hold you in their arms at night," he says roughly. "We're locked fuckin' rooms, Howie. The two of us."

“You don’t care much about locks, do you, Mr. Lindal?” she asks.

“Please, for the love of God, call me Wright.”

“Why does it matter what I call you?”

“I need to hear it,” he growls. “My name on your lips.”

She shivers. A growl curls from deep in his chest and rolls over her goosebumped skin. Her entire body is alive for him, the space between her legs so wet it drips down her thighs. Her nipples pebble hard beneath the towel.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she whispers.

He steps forward again and he’s got one hand on the counter next to her. The other fisted at his side. He looks down at her with dark eyes and she feels her hand loosen around the handle of the knife.

“You’re a murderer,” she whispers to remind herself.

“I didn’t kill those women,” he says, stumbling forward. He’s got hands on either side of her now, gating her in.

His heat is so, so close to her. So deliciously, intoxicatingly near. Leaning back against the counter, she lets her legs part ever so slightly. He firms his jaw. His eyes are nearly black. She wants to rip the towel off her body. Looks from it to him, and he holds her gaze. He reaches out and pinches the terrycloth. She levels the knife against his neck.

“You want me locked up,” he says. “So I can’t fuckin’ touch you.”

His words ring true as they spiral down her sternum and skim over her navel. They breathe each other in like this. He’s waiting for her to say yes. She’s got a knife pressed against his skin and he’s asking her if he can see her naked.

“You came here to threaten me, Mr. Lindal,” she breathes. “Threaten me. Tell me what you’ll do to me if I uphold the law with you.”

“Need to see you first,” he murmurs, brushing his thumb across her exposed cleavage. Goosebumps spread under his

warmth. “*Fuck*, I need to see you, Howie. You’re all I fucking think about.”

“So you can picture it?” she asks.

“Yes,” he breathes.

“All the things you want to do to me?”

“Yes,” he groans.

“Close your eyes,” she tells him.

He listens immediately, the crease in his stunning, severe brow deepening with the effort. That jaw of his is so tense and angular that she reaches up to it, traces the softness of his stubble over its ridge. There’s a blush to his lips, to the top of his cheeks, the square of his face golden and angular save for the softness of his mouth and the slight divot in his chin. Even his throat is magnificent.

If she tells him to leave now, he will.

But that’s not what she wants. He’s here, and the fact is almost dreamlike. It takes away her responsibility; he’s *hers* now. To do with as she pleases.

And she wants to feel those hands on her body.

“Do it,” she whispers.

He pulls the towel and she feels it slide off inch by inch. They’re quiet enough that she can hear the sound of the fabric hitting the tile floor. That she can hear his sharp exhale.

“*Christ*,” he breathes. Eyes still closed, just knowing.

Panting and strained, she doesn’t want to talk. Doesn’t want him to. Just wants him as naked as she is, pressing his body against hers.

With her free hand, she takes him by the wrist. Guides his touch to her aching breast. He groans. His rough fingertips circle her nipple. Plucking lightly. She moans.

“Look at me,” she whimpers. “And tell me what you’ll do.”

His eyes, she swears, are darker than their usual slate blue. But he hardly stops to take her in. He grabs her hips, hoisting her up onto the counter and shoving her aggressively to its surface. She keeps the blade against his neck. Her body begs her mind for him. Pleads, with her hardened nipples and slickened entrance, for her to let him inside.

He shoves her onto her back and plants his hand by her head. "I want to sink my fuckin' teeth into you, Howie."

He grinds his hips into hers as his free hand explores her. His rough, calloused palm is warm as he guides it over her breast to her side, to her hips, before grabbing her thigh and shoving her legs further open. She cries out and he leans back to look at her. His lips glisten. Mouth waters. He's going to *destroy* her.

She needs to get her gun in her bedroom but she wants him to tear her apart. She reaches up with a shaking hand to keep her knife against his neck. Whimpers and arches as he parts her folds with two fingers, carefully stroking her sex.

"You're fucking drenched," he murmurs.

"Tell me what you'll do," she moans.

He sinks two fingers into her, curling up. Hard. Deep. His hand's so big that his palm covers the breadth of her sex and then some. Looking down at where they're joined, she watches his fingers slide in and out of her and moans at the sensation. She lifts her knees, planting her feet on the edge of the counter. Riding his fingers while he takes his free hand to her breast, kneading it.

"*Good girl,*" he groans. "Christ, you're so fuckin' beautiful."

He teases her nipple with the flat of his palm. She feels an orgasm building already. It started with just his scent.

"I'll kill you if you make me," he murmurs. "Slow. Fuck you."

He pinches her nipple and pulls at it, lightning shooting from the place of his touch. Making her cry out. His other hand keeps fucking her, slow and deep.

“They won’t keep me behind bars,” he groans. “They’ll fuckin’ eat my mind.”

She’s so close she almost forgets her plan. So close to the edge. She tilts her head back and he falls over her, kissing her neck. His clothed chest presses against her naked form as he fucks her with his hand.

“I’m meat to them,” he growls against her skin, and if she doesn’t do it now she never will.

She drags the knife as deep as she can at the junction of his neck and shoulder.

A man would scream.

Would clutch at the wound.

Would think death imminent.

But Wright Lindal is no man. His skin splits and bleeds but it’s all an illusion. It’s all part of the pretense that he’s human; it’s all a show.

He grabs her by the hair, his other hand still stroking her walls. Narrows his gaze at her angrily. Grits his teeth. He’s dark but he’s so aroused she thinks she could shoot him and he’d still fuck her like this. The thought makes her shudder. His blood trickles in a light waterfall over her bare breasts, her nipples hard peaks from his teasing.

And his fingers. They’re still thrusting inside her. Harder now. He picks up his pace and she’s so close. So close as his blood spills over her bare breasts, over her heaving chest. If anything, he’s more determined. Panting. His ragged breath fighting hers. She pulls him closer with her free hand, keeping the knife level with his skin. Feeling his lips bump against hers. His pace quickens even more and-

She peaks.

Hard.

Electric.

As his blood bathes her skin, she comes hard around his fingers, squeezing him with her thighs and throwing her head

back. Ecstasy. Sheer ecstasy. She lets go and feels herself drench his hand, sprinkling onto him as he keeps that perfect rhythm. His eyes are dark on her. They share the same air. They both lose parts of themselves together, her cum and his blood draining to the counter beneath them.

He pumps into her walls, milking every ounce of pleasure from her depths.

Does he even know she's cut him?

Blood seeps from his wound, dripping onto her in time with the pounding of her heart in her chest. Yet his eyes rush with ecstasy. The winter storm of her mind has heatstroke. She can't want him. She does, and her lust is neon red, but the man coaxing this out of her is a murderer and she needs to remember who she is.

Howie reels the knife back but he slams her fist back against the counter, growling down at her. The impact is enough to nearly break bone. She grimaces. Hisses. She's taken a bullet out of her flesh with nothing but whiskey in her veins and she can handle what he throws at her. Curling her knees to her chest, she pushes him away hard before kicking downward towards his crotch.

Big enough target by now.

He curses, buckling slightly, and she rushes off the countertop. But her legs feel like jelly, drained from the way he made her feel, and she has to brace herself against the faux wood of that narrow hallway as she rushes towards her bedroom.

Behind her, still in the kitchen, he growls. More beast than man. Her nightstand. That's where she's got to go. She has to shoot him.

A sharp pain rips through her scalp and she flies backwards into the warm wall of him. He holds her tightly by the neck as he growls into her ear.

“Can't have a fuckin' record,” he says. “Can't have anyone askin' questions.”

She slices his arm. He hits her into the wall like throwing a bag of flour and she turns, slashing the knife across his chest. Backing up as blood clouds the white fabric of his shirt.

“I’m going to get a warrant on you,” she barks. “I’m going to send you away for life. That’s what you deserve-”

His eyes go dark. He reaches for the buttons of his shirt and pulls it open, tearing the thick wool with ease. Shirtless and bleeding, he stills.

She does too.

She’s never seen anyone who looks like him. Broad enough to nearly fill the hallway, his muscles cut deep into his form. His shoulders and the way his back slopes up to his neck are like a mountain, now sluiced with a river of red blood that is already clotting. Already *healing*. A line of muscle runs from the base of his throat and splits his broad, strong chest, dipping inwards before slicing the harsh center line of his abdomen. She could dig her fingertips into the space between the muscles of his core, all of which guide her gaze towards a harshly defined V that slices into the waistband of his jeans. His blood marks the lines too.

He glances down at her and she sees something like marvel on his face. Not many men get to see her naked, but she wishes everyone who did looked at her like this.

Like she’s a goddess.

The lust on his face feels like its own tide when it pulls her in.

He stumbles forward just a step before bracing his hands against the walls. He looks the way she feels: dizzy and drunk and out of control. But she can’t smell a drop of alcohol on his breath.

“You’re nuclear,” he says in his low, gravelly voice. “Your beauty is *fuckin’* nuclear.”

She’s at the door frame to her bedroom. Her nightstand is mere paces away. With the gun. The thing that will end his electric storm of a life.

But she wants him. She wants him so badly she feels like she might just collapse without his hands on her again.

“Take your boots off,” she breathes.

As if his blood isn't on her kitchen tile, and dripping onto her carpet. He's panting, chest heaving as he kicks them off. When he rises, his hands fall to the buckle of his jeans.

“No,” she whispers.

“Need you,” he growls.

“Let it wither you,” she snaps, though nothing will. Not draining his blood. Not keeping him in chains like he deserves.

Darkness plows through him.

He storms towards her, and she slashes with her knife but she's uncoordinated because she doesn't want to cut him again. She wants to draw blood a different way.

He catches both of her wrists, pinning her to the doorframe. High. Lifting her off her feet so she has to wrap her legs around his waist but the second she does, she wishes she hadn't said no. Denim crowds his heat and she wants to feel him bare against her. She clings to him. He ducks his face to hers. She drops the knife.

Their chests heave, their shared breath boiling in this space.

“What are you?” she whispers.

“*Yours,*” he growls.

She tilts her chin, pressing her lips so gently against his. Nothing they've done is gentle except for this ploy of innocence. His lips are soft, ever so faintly sweet like he's been chewing mint gum. He opens his mouth to her, releasing her wrists to smooth his hands up her bare back and devour her mouth. His fingers fan almost the breadth of it as he pushes them up into her hair, pulling her closer. Teasing her tongue with his. She wraps her arm around him and digs her nails into his skin, into his hair, into all of him. His bare, bleeding chest heats her skin.

Her tongue grazes his razor-sharp teeth and she inhales sharply at the pain. But almost immediately, a warm feeling coats her mouth. Like pop rocks. Soda fizz twirling down her spine to between her hips, she grinds over him. Forgets she should hate him but remembers that need to be destroyed. So she bites his lips too. She draws blood, too.

He's moving with her. Kissing her, except it's not just a kiss. It's a famished devouring. Raw. Visceral. He draws her blood and drinks it from her lips. She claws into him. He lowers her down to the bed and presses his hard body against hers. Suffocating her. She kicks at him. Claws at him.

But she won't stop kissing him. She feels every luxurious flick and harsh lash of his tongue at her center and she wants him there. Wants him everywhere, so badly that she might come from just this, just him grinding into her, rough where she is soft.

She desires, hungers, longs, for him. There has never been anything like him in her life and there never will be. Even his mouth tastes different.

He's in control now, so deftly so. Pinning her with his hips and his massive weapon of a body. He's got to be at least two hundred and fifty pounds, all of it muscle. He draws back only to kiss down to her neck, his lips catching her skin ablaze.

"You're too fucking heavy," she groans.

"Let it wither you," he snaps, sinking his teeth into her shoulder.

She cries out, feeling those sharp points break her skin like knives. He's biting her. And she *wants* it. He swirls his hungry tongue over the wound, pouring champagne deep in her muscles. She moans out. Drags her nails down his back. Digs them in. Tries to break him, before he growls and catches her wrists. Pins them to the mattress at her sides and leans back to look at her.

Catching her breath, she watches him. His steely eyes blacken beneath the shadow of his cinched brow, and up close

his shoulders are an insurmountable range, and he could never have been human.

“Prison bars won’t keep me away from you,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss just above her navel. She feels her body catch fire under his touch.

He kisses just an inch higher. She whimpers.

“Now I know the taste of you, I’ll crawl from the fuckin’ grave for it,” he says.

He drags his tongue in a line between her breasts before tilting his face to the side and kissing the tender flesh there. Sucking at it hard enough to leave a mark before grazing his lips lightly up her skin to her nipple, where he flicks his tongue. She moans. Closes her eyes to the bliss of him as he swirls his tongue over the warm mahogany peak.

She almost wishes he’d bite her there, but she knows the damage it would leave. He’s only rough with his hands, grasping her other breast and twirling at her nipple. Torturing her as he kisses and licks, before switching. Ungodly noises echo from her throat now. Cries. Whimpers. Moans. All as he teases her body while grinding his rigid, denim-clad erection against her bare sex. She’s going to come again. She is hurtling towards release.

“Wright!” she yells, feeling vibrations through her skin at the growl saying his name elicits. There’s something in her blood. It comes from the way his tongue laps at her. “Don’t fucking stop!”

He moans against her before grinding deeper, so much it’s nearly painful. All as he rolls her nipple roughly between his fingers, sucking at the other while flicking the sensitive peak with his tongue.

She climaxes so deep she sees stars, arching her back and pressing her chest harder against him. His breath is hot from his nose but he doesn’t let go or loosen any pressure. He pushes her off the edge with an expert, brutal grip and draws out her pleasure until she’s soaked his jeans. Until she’s nearly sobbing, her vision black and her head light.

Only when she's so spent she forgets her own name does he finally relinquish. She blinks to see her breasts red and glistening from his mouth, her nipples at cruel peaks from his torture. He kisses one gently and she cries out, spasming. There are tears on her cheeks.

He leans forward as she catches her breath.

Ducks his head down.

And draws his tongue up the length of her face like a fucking animal.

Chapter 20

Obliterated

Wright

She's more intoxicating than any liquor he's ever tasted. It's hard not to get obliterated on her already. Harder still as he looks down at her prone beneath him, taking her in. Her face is cast in his shadow but her eyes are dark already, pitch black unless she's standing in direct sunlight. He feels them tug him in. You can fall into eyes like that when they're below you, but they'll inhale you when they look down.

He can't hide from her face. Her strong cheeks and swooping jaw, her full lips, it should all look severe but it doesn't, not on her. Not when she's like this, dark lashes and fluttering breath. She's sharp and soft all at once. Pretending she is at his mercy when it's him at hers since he met her and it always will be. She's got something in her soul that can turn him to dust.

He tastes it on her skin when he kisses her. He'd follow her body into hell. It shouldn't exist outside of fantasy, those pert breasts and dark peaks, the narrow waist with a line of muscle down the center. Her wide hips and strong runner's thighs. She's tall and most of that height looks like her legs, which he's no more than ten seconds away from throwing over his shoulders.

No human can give him a solid fight but he felt it in her. He'd let her get to him just to feel her touch him, doesn't care how.

Now, though.

Now, she's his.

Not for the night. Not for the rest of his life. Just now, and however long this moment lasts. He lets his gaze venture down to the thatch of hair between her thighs. It looks neatly manicured. He spreads her plump lips with his fingers and growls at the sight of her glistening folds. Her swollen clit. He's tasted her with his fingertips but not yet with his mouth, not like this.

He pushes her higher on the bed by her hips and she grips the headboard with one hand, his hair with another. Throwing her legs over his shoulders, he wraps his arms around her thighs. One hand hooked over to spread her wide, he kisses the swollen bud and she shivers, her pleasure slick across his lips.

Then, he runs his tongue flat over her sex.

It's like opening the door to her home and pretending there's a chance he won't go inside. Her taste hits him more concentrated than it's ever been and his eyes roll back.

He

Devours

Her.

Flicking his tongue over her jewel, sucking at it, swirling his tongue over it. Feeling it swell against his mouth. He'll drown himself in her juices. Lapping forever. He takes his free hand and curls two fingers inside her, drinking what spills. He groans. So fucking divine. Irreplaceable. Smoked cedar, praline, salt and *her*, that mark of her soul he can't get enough of, that brine he'd drown himself in. There's life in her, in the flavor of her cunt as it fills his mouth.

"*Oh, yes,*" she moans, arching into the mattress. Shuddering against him. She's riding his face and he can't get enough, smothering himself in her as she drags her heels across his back. "*Wright. God, Wright- oh... Oh!*"

His fucking name.

He growls against her parts, before flicking his tongue even faster.

He feels her contract around him and fucks her harder with his fingers, keeping his pattern at her clit.

“So fuckin’ pretty when you come,” he groans, smoothing his thumb over the swollen bud. Then, nearly vindictive, he slaps her sex with his drenched hand.

She cries out and he watches pleasure spill out of her, soaking the bedspread. Her thighs quiver and he covers her sex with his mouth, fingers slipping back inside her.

“*Wright*,” she moans. She’s still coming, hard, dripping all the way down his wrist. There’s enough of her perfect taste to drink and he swallows from her. So fucking hard against the fabric of his jeans that just grinding against the mattress is getting him off, the dampness of his cum already on his thigh from when he bit her. “Don’t stop, oh yes, don’t stop. Please, *Wright*. Oh-”

She shudders. Spasms. He feels her grip his fingers so tight he moans with her at the thought of her cunt gripping his cock like that, coming inside her. How she’d milk every drop of pleasure out of him.

“Yes!” she cries out. “Oh, you fucking *animal!*”

After another glorious minute, she quiets but he doesn’t care. He’s intent to eat his fill from her pretty cunt for another hour if she’ll let him. Won’t let him fucking take his pants off. Selfish girl, but he’ll take what he can get if it tastes like-

There’s a click right at his skull.

He stops what he’s doing, his tongue still flat against her sex, and glares up at her.

She’s got her gun raised to his head.

Point.

Fucking.

Blank.

And that click? That was the sound of her pulling the trigger.

He growls, suddenly fuming.

She pulls it again and he lurches up. *Jesus Christ*, she really thought she'd kill him with his mouth on her cunt.

He grabs the gun from her and wraps his hand around the barrel, snapping it off. Making sure she's watching and witnessing what his strength can do to such a meager weapon. He whips both pieces into the wall and they embed themselves in the false wood. She yelps.

No apology on her face, not even the slightest hesitance other than rage. She pushes away from him on her hands and knees but he grabs her. Shoves her face in the mattress like rubbing a dog's nose in the rug.

"You'd kill me?" he barks. "You'd fuckin' kill me?"

Her cheeks redden from the pressure. He lifts her hips with his other hand. Kneeling at her side, keeping her face pressed down, he claps his hand down hard on the meat of her perfect, toned ass.

She cries out.

He's not done. This feels good. He spanks her hard, and then harder, watching the dark print of his hand mark her skin. Watching her cheeks bounce with each thud.

"Fuckin' cruel," he scolds. Spanking her again. It's hypnotic, how it moves her. He angles his impact closer to her sex. "You sorry now?"

She moans. "You would've killed me."

"Not a fuckin' chance, and you know that," he snaps, spanking her again. Doesn't matter that he'd say it to get her off; he'd never let her heart stop. He's too infatuated with its rhythm. "Would never fuckin' let you leave this world."

"You're *insane*."

He laughs sharply. "Only for you."

Wrenching her by the hair, he makes her look at him. Her face is red with strain but she looks fucking stunning. She grinds her body against his.

"Say you're sorry," he growls against her ear.

“No,” she hisses. “I’m not sorry for any of this, Mr. Lindal.”

He reaches in his pocket for the bullets he unloaded from the gun right before interrupting her in the kitchen.

“Then use that pretty mouth to hold these for me,” he says, pressing them through her lips. They likely taste awful, bitter and metallic like her fucking betrayal. “Tell me to stop and I’ll stop. I swear.”

He needs to say it, needs to know she’ll wrangle him in because he has never been this wild before. She takes the bullets. It’s not an apology. Not even close. It’s lighter fluid.

Unbuckling his belt, he unzips his pants and pulls out his throbbing member. The second his bare skin touches her, he feels a knot start to form at his base. *Christ*, he’s not even inside her.

He puts her hand on his shaft, squeezes her fist around him with a groan.

“Feel that, Howie?” he growls, his teeth on her neck.

She whimpers.

“That’s my knot,” he groans as she begins to stroke him. “Only get this way with you, even when I’m not fuckin’ inside you. Even when you’re just touchin’ me.”

He takes his belt off and grabs her wrists, cinching them behind her back. He has to wrap it a few times to knot it but it works, and he moves around the rear of her, spreading his hand over one of her ass cheeks. She’s built for him. Smooth skin, a tight hole, and that delicious swollen cunt, still dripping for him like this. He’d like to fuck her ass for what she did but isn’t so keen on penetration as punishment.

Still, how incredible she looks bound for him is nearly enough to make him forget that she thought she was ending his life. He presses his body against hers. Letting his cock trace liquid shapes over her bruised skin. He strokes himself against her, bracing his other hand on her ass. A tremor runs through him at the thought of spurting his seed all over her bare. It feels like he hasn’t come in a fucking year, from how heavy

his balls feel and how even the lightest touch from her pulls at him.

He lets his shaft rest along the divot in her ass. To his surprise, she pushes back against him. Letting her skin feel the heat of his own. Grinding gently, beautifully. Her sex meets him from the spread of her legs. A low whimper of pleasure escapes her throat.

So this is how she wants it?

“Want me to fuck you, Howie?” he asks in a low growl, curling two fingers into her swollen entrance. “Want me to fill you with my cum so you can sleep with it spillin’ outta you?”

She moans, pressing into him. Riding his fingers.

God, he wants to fuck her. But he won’t.

“I’d do it if you begged for it, darlin’,” he says, pulling his fingers out and stroking himself with her slick pleasure. “But it ain’t polite to speak with your mouth full.”

He dips his hips low and wedges his cock between the junction of her thighs so that his shaft grinds against her pussy. He’s not inside her, but her folds grip the length of him. Then, he spanks her again.

Hard.

Again. Again and again like she’s a wild mare that needs breaking but more because it feels so fucking good. To take something out on her. To feel her clench and rock around his cock. Some parts of her are all lean muscle but this part of her is plush. Plush and *aubergine* from his hands, the color of summer nights and bruised peaches...

“Say you’re sorry,” he growls, fucking into the crease of her thighs.

She looks back at him, her eyes dark but pleading. There are bullets in her mouth. Metal on her tongue.

He grabs her by the throat, pulling her flat against him. The skin of her thighs is like a hot flame through her flesh, singeing him as he thrusts against the crease her legs make. He’s shuddering, pressing his gasping mouth against her neck.

She's like warm silk against him. This close, any contact is ecstasy. He'll come on her. Coat her back with his pleasure, and then some.

"Say 'sorry, daddy'," he growls, nipping her neck.

Holding his hand in front of her mouth, he wrenches her by her hair. Digs in at the roots. Makes it hurt.

She spits the bullets into his hand. Metal coated with saliva. Hot with her warmth and the taste of her.

"Fuck yourself, daddy," she moans.

He hardly needs the invitation. One hand wrapped around her neck, he takes his palm full of bullets and her spit and he wraps it around his shaft. Jerks her gaze in his direction. She's angry but she's rapturous, and he pumps himself brutally with his eyes on hers. With her lips bumping his as his breathing grows ragged, and hers stutters, he lets himself fall into those onyx pools that have all the depth of the universe within them.

"*Fuck,*" he breathes. "*Christ, Howie.*"

"So pretty when you come," she taunts.

Touching her but not inside of her. Holding her but not keeping her. Her body against his and also not his, writhing and sweating and whispering his prayer.

He comes like that. Hard. His moan could be her name. His pleasure comes in ropes, heaven and hell in the mess of her sacred skin. Painting her slick and wet. Dousing her with his claim.

Then, completely drained, he lets go of her. She falls forward, panting. Her back and her ass glistening with his seed like spilt candle wax.

This is what happens if he even lets himself near her. Glorious goddamned destruction. He stretches his body over hers. Plants his hand by her face and breathes in the scent of her hair. Part of him is shelled out but another, the dominant part, wants to stay and pretend she'll sleep well against him. Wants to kiss her sweetly, no teeth, no blood.

That part is delusional.

She just tried to kill him.

He can't read in her eyes if she regrets it or not and can't think if she was right to do it or not. Not long ago, he thought the world would be better without him.

But here, with her?

Here is the earth his roots ache for, looking at him with dark eyes that will pierce his skin if he stays too close. She catches her breath sprawled exactly as he threw her, her hands shimmying out of the loose binding. He tucks himself back into his jeans. Zips up with his gaze on the way her back curves towards her rear, the way the flesh of her narrow waist folds a few times at the bend of it. It's like silk on a wedding dress.

She traces her finger over the wet skin. His heart stills as she brings the taste to her lips and closes her eyes. She moans lightly, deep in her throat. Unintentionally. But his lust for her isn't diminished from his orgasm and this fans the flames of it before she shoots him a look.

"You get what you wanted now?" she snaps.

Sharp words on sensitive skin. Still, he lets them only graze him. Stands like a sentry at the foot of her bed, his longing for her so deep that when she presses herself to her knees he feels the viper of her curl in his spine.

She scoops the bullets from the bedsheets and moves towards him.

"Did you?" she repeats, raising her voice.

"No," he growls.

What he wants...

What he wants is forming in his mind like the memory of a childhood dream, but it looks like her with a ring on her finger and this bed every night.

She slams the bullets into his chest with her palm, right above his heart. "What do you want, then?" she asks him, her harsh lips so close to his.

You, he thinks. If you love even a fraction of as much as you hate, it'll keep me warm for the rest of my fucking life and I feel it in you.

“If you want to kill me next, you’ll have to come for me with more than your body,” she says. “You’ll have to bury me deeper than you would yourself, because I’m going to put you away.”

Pushing at him, she moves back. Bullets fall to the carpet.

“If bars won’t keep you, maybe the electric chair,” she snips. “Maybe they’ll let me pull the switch myself.”

He steps back, feeling the crease in his brow deepen. Her words pry him open, and if it’s her belief that any man who kills another deserves to die for that crime, then she’s right about his guilt. But he aches for her, wants to spend the night in her bed, and that illusion feels childish to him now.

He’s losing himself. Ready to crawl to the feet of the woman who would rather see him dead than free.

“You’ve got a lotta family in those photos,” he tells her calmly. “Be a shame if I found them, Howie. Being as evil as I am...”

He grimaces and her eyes flash dark with anger.

“The man you think I am would eat your pa and his wife alive,” he says, striding down the hall. “Your partner too. Could take down the whole fuckin’ force if he wanted to.”

He scoops up his boots, neglecting his torn shirt on the ground and glaring back at her.

“Got blood on the shirt. Dry clean it, won’t you, darlin’?” he asks. “Sew back the buttons and the rip you made-”

“I’m gonna watch you burn!” she yells, storming after him.

He holds his hand out to halt her like he would a wild horse. On instinct, she stills. He smiles.

“*Whoa,*” he soothes, letting his gaze trail down her naked form. “That’ll be your fire, Howie. Like I said.”

He steps closer. Itches to touch her again, to leave the bruises of his fingers all over her just because he's so damn desperate to feel how soft she is.

"You own me," he nearly growls, the declaration foreign to him but still honest. "Be a good girl and I won't bite that gorgeous hand, but *Jesus*."

Goosebumps spring across her skin and he reaches out, draws a line down her neck. Defiantly, she juts her chin out, challenging him. But what he wants isn't to hurt her. It's to feel all of her under his palms again, and she rang the bell on that.

"You moan so pretty when I do," he tells her.

When he leaves, he rips the door off its hinges.

Chapter 21

Wonder about the body

Howie
“Are you remodeling?” a familiar male voice calls, waking Howie out of her slumber. “Thiyopa weǵáhaŋ. What happened?”

She grumbles, feeling a stinging between her eyes. God, she slept well. Better than she has in weeks, it feels. Feels like a whole year has gone by behind her closed eyes.

Then, her night comes flying back towards her. Wright’s lips on hers, his body on hers. All of her. The man must have kissed every inch; her skin is raw from it. She feels small bruises on her breasts and her inner thighs but she sees nothing when she looks at her still-bare chest. Odd.

She’s freezing, her lower half tangled in blankets, and when she tries to unwrap herself from the sheets she finds that they are partially stuck to her skin.

Then she remembers what he felt like, panting against her neck, shuddering as he jacked off with her spit onto her ass. How could she fall asleep with Wright Lindal’s semen on her skin? How degrading... How filthy...

She bites her lip. He looked nearly edible last night. So gorgeous with the warm glow of her lamps casting shadows over his flawless muscles. Jesus, her pussy hurts from how he abused it but she’d like his mouth on her again. Licking her, kissing her. She can think of at least one large body part of his she’d like deep inside her right now, pain be damned.

“Haún,” she groans, disgusted with herself.

“Howie!” Até calls out, approaching her room with what sounds like building panic.

“Ši!” Howie yells, waving her arm. “Get out, Até! I’m indecent.”

Permanently so. Wright fucked her brain last night. She’s broken forever now. Not sure there will be a minute that goes by in the near future in which she doesn’t think about how he felt.

“Just put on a blanket,” he says. “Unless you have a man in there. Then I will ask him why he didn’t fix your door.”

“No man,” Howie groans, ducking under the covers. Her words carry two meanings. There’s no one there, and the thing that was wasn’t a man but a beast. An animal.

She sees ice blue eyes looking up at her as he devoured her pussy like it was coated in sugar crystals. His large hands hooked around her thighs. His back bare and golden in the warm light, those muscles of his rippling as he moved around her.

“Ah!” Até exclaims. “Did you kill someone, čunĵkší? Is there a body in the freezer or is it your moon?”

“Até,” she laughs. “I did not kill someone.”

I tried, but he unloaded my fucking gun.

With that, her eyes truly bolt open. She can’t have her father see the bullets on the ground. And her moon...

Blood.

She remembers slicing Wright’s chest, him tearing open his shirt.

Dry clean it, won’t you, darlin’?

Oh, she is going to end this man.

“No man, eh?” Até asks, opening the door. He holds the torn, bloody shirt in his hands. “Or no man any longer?”

“Give that to me,” she pleads.

He holds it out in front of himself. “Big man. I should be proud you can take him down.”

“You should not,” she says, pulling the sheet around her and standing. “I’ll let you be proud when he’s in the morgue.”

“Shame that he’s a scoundrel too, then,” Até says. “I’d still like you to find a good man. Is this one native?”

“No,” she says.

“Then, that is the problem.”

She laughs. “Not the only problem, Até. Do you want some coffee? Or to give me space so I can change?”

“I will make the coffee and give you space,” he says, heading towards the kitchen.

“Is Cynthia here?” Howie asks. She pulls the quilt with her, her skin goosefleshed. It feels like Até left the door open.

“No, čháňhanpi,” he tells her. “Or she’d scream about how blood carries diseases and we are all doomed to die. She is at the gun range in Dubois.”

“Without you?” Howie asks.

“With the girls,” he says excitedly. “Isn’t that something, eh? Your sisters are just like you.”

“I’m not surprised,” Howie remarks. She pulls on silken pajama pants and a tank top, just looking to wear something, but it hits her how cold it is. The darker flashes of the night return fresh in her mind.

When Wright left with such anger he ripped her door off his hinges and, too tired from more orgasms than she can remember even giving herself, shut the door to her bedroom and hoped that would be enough.

The door to her bedroom opens now, and she half expects it to be Wright coming back, but it’s Até. It’s rare to see her father, with his bright eyes crinkled at the edges, smile lines cut deep into his face, look solemn or serious. Even mourning aunties and uncles, he’s the first to bring up the good times. First to share stories to lighten the air, sitting at the bedsides of

the dying in Wind River like he's just helping an old friend fall asleep. He bears each heavy weight with a warmth that makes all this space up north feel like desert heat in his vicinity.

Now, though, he takes her in with hesitation.

"There's a lot of blood on your kitchen counter, čunĕšší," he says gently. "One might wonder about the body."

"He's alive enough to tear my door off," she quips. She makes a smile spread across her lips, hopes it looks convincing.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No," she says quickly. "It wasn't like that. He..."

He wanted her to cut him, or at least didn't care that she did. But how does she express wanting it too? There's something depraved about their infatuation for each other and it does feel like playing with fire. He's a killer. She's so sure. The fear of being devoured makes her skin so sensitive to his touch.

"He's a suspect," she murmurs.

"In your home," Até says, like lining up a shot. He taught her bow hunting when she was young, and this is that focus. This is more than readying for gunfire. "A suspect."

"It's because I know him that I suspect him," she offers.

Até nods slowly.

"I want you to quit this job," he says, and this is the man who raised her not just as a son but as a fighter, and white flags don't run in their blood. He's standing in her doorway with the curve of good humor still an offering on his lips but worry in his eyes.

With the open door, the trailer can't be very much above freezing if it is at all. There's a snowdrift on the sunlit surfaces of the couch and the living room and suddenly, her trailer she saved up for is the one-room cabin back home when she and Até and Iná share a mattress because nothing but body heat can beat that kind of cold. Like this, she almost cries or she is crying and her face is too numb to understand.

“It’s too much for you,” he says, and he turns away from her. He pulls the door back up, seals them inside. The heater whirrs to life and Howie feels unimaginably empty.

For Wright to leave it like this is too much. That’s the kind of thing someone who killed Doris would do, she figures. Someone who killed Emmeline and left her naked body out in the cold would tear a door off the hinges and leave it there at night. But why didn’t she seal it? What the hell was she doing? Waiting for him to come back?

“This...” Até says, gesturing to the mess of the trailer. “Thought you were dead for a second. How do you sleep in this?”

“It’s not my blood,” she says.

That makes nothing better, because she thinks that’s what upsets him the most. All this spilt blood isn’t even shared, is something rejected every day. She drinks at Lou’s bar because there’s one in town with a sign banning her and dogs. And while she might be pretty enough that no one would enforce the rule, she knows one day those same looks will wear and the bartender will point to the sign, not say a word to her, remind her that this place and even this town never wanted her.

She wonders how often Wright Lindal, with all his pining and pretty words, thinks about that. She knows his wife was white because his state wouldn’t let him marry anyone else.

“You take those women’s deaths too hard,” Até tells her.

“No,” she breathes. “Forgive me for saying this, Até, but no. No one else takes them hard enough.”

He takes a deep breath. “You are worth more than a thousand dead women.”

“Nobody cares about them,” she says.

“That doesn’t make for kinship.”

His gaze settles not on her but on her notebooks, the cases she can’t research, stories as evidence spoken to her in Pine Ridge, in Wind River, in the places in between.

“You were a lieutenant for this same station,” she manages, but she knows it’s weak. What she wants to say is he hadn’t seen Emmeline Hensley, hadn’t an idea of what it would be like to see a body on the ground and feel it was his. Not seeing himself reflected in a body is a man’s privilege, no matter what kind.

“Kept to myself,” he says. “Money makes a good life, Howie, but it’s no use if you’re dead.”

“Good thing I’m not close to dying, then,” she says, forcing a smile. But her breath fogs the air, it’s so cold in here. It’s calling her a liar.

“Is this not close to dying?” he asks. “Why were you indecent, čunĵksí?”

“Was so hot in here, you know,” she says. She brushes snow off the kettle and turns on the sink. It sputters like the stem of it is frozen before letting loose a small trickle. It’ll fill the kettle. It’ll fill the kettle in ten minutes. “Needed to cool off.”

“I’ll tell Ojero to keep an eye on you, make sure you stop this.”

“No,” she says. Barks, really. Surprises herself with the force of her words. “He’ll drop me. Or keep me at my desk.”

“Where you’ll survive.”

“Where I’ll rot,” she counters.

“Let them die,” he says. “If I lose you, I’ll lose myself.”

The truth comes so fast that it pulls a dampness to her eyes that almost buckles her. In the silence, all she hears is the faint trickle of half-frozen water into the kettle. There’s a tickle of something on her cheek that she won’t wipe away. Doesn’t want to attract attention, but it’s only the two of them together. His attention is nowhere else.

She shakes her head. “I won’t forgive you for not trusting me. Can’t have you with them like that.”

“Can’t have you die for them, čunĵksí,” he states, an argument without raising his voice.

“This is the last case, Até. I find what did it and I’m out.”

He straightens, breathing in through his nose so deep it sucks his cheeks in for a moment. It’s clear this surprises him.

“It’s what I have to do,” she says. “Then I can move to you, let go of this. All this.”

“Alright, then,” he says finally, shrugging his wool jacket off.

He holds it out for her, a peace offering for her to walk into, and when she does he smooths her hair from the collar. Lays it flat.

“I do trust you,” he says, his warm hand on her shoulder and eyes honest. “But I will always be the coward for you, when I wish you were. Wish you feared pain.”

“Get my pain tolerance from you, yeah?” she asks, attempting some humor.

He shakes his head slowly. “No, that’s your iná. Always was too good, just like you are.”

It’s an honor to hear such a thing. She closes her eyes to feel her mother with them. That warmth cuts through the chill. Until he asks her, *hé táku* he, lifting the lapel from her shoulder slightly. At first, she doesn’t know what he could be speaking about. She looks down but where his touch is, she can’t see in focus.

Striding towards her bathroom, she turns on the light and looks in the mirror and gasps.

There’s a scar on her shoulder now, the perfect half-moon shape of a bite light against her skin. Somehow it healed overnight but it’s *there*.

In the bar, she learned how sharp his teeth were. In the parking lot, she’d asked him to bite her. But when he made this mark, it seemed so natural. It hadn’t hurt— it had felt beautiful, even. So much so that she forgot just what his teeth could do. This scar is deep. Carved-in.

“Haun,” she whispers, her decision instantaneous. She bursts through the bathroom and pushes her ripped-open trailer

door. Her truck is waiting. Unlocked.

“Don’t leave like this!”

“I’m not, Até!” she calls back before ripping open the door of her truck and reaching under the seat.

The photos of Emmeline’s body spill out onto the floor. She has them memorized but she still needs to see it.

There, above her breast, is the half moon divot of a bite mark.

She bears a matching scar now.

Wright Lindal is the killer, if she had any doubt. She was right. She was *fucking* right, all this time and she should have guessed such a thing. It’s a knowing, what she has. What Até has and what her parents raised her with. From the moment she saw him, she knew.

Suddenly she feels a sob tear through her chest, not quite sure where it comes from. She clasps her hand over her mouth, leaning against the driver’s seat. This shouldn’t be happening. She should be ecstatic. She’s good at her job. She *knew*.

But she believed him.

This breaks a part of her deep inside her chest that she wasn’t aware of until she felt the ruins. Maybe he built it when he kissed her, when he stole the rest of the world away with his warmth and his tongue and his heat. But it feels deeper than that. He laid the foundation when he met her. Added the skeleton when she watched him soothe that horse. If she were truly foolish, she’d say it was something like love.

More likely, she just wanted him to prove her wrong.

And he couldn’t. She was right. Wright Lindal is evil, and he might seem warm to her but it’s all a lie. All manipulation.

With all she’s been through, she’s still more a sucker for a beautiful lie than a fair truth.

She hears Até’s footsteps approaching and wipes her cheeks, blinking to clear her eyes. Closing the folder back, she returns it to its spot underneath her seat and faces her father.

He can't see, or he'll kill Wright himself. Her department can't see the evidence she wears on her shoulder, because she'll lose all credibility before they even listen to her.

"I need to take a drive," she says, steadying her breathing. "If you could fix the door, Até, it would mean so much to me."

"Tóš, of course," he says. But he holds the door open, preventing her from heading elsewhere. "You'll have food to heat up when you get back. You need to eat, or you'll be weak, yeah?"

"I will," Howie promises, clasping his hand before climbing into the truck and scooping the keys from the sun visor.

She's not sure where she's going, just knows she needs to leave.

Chapter 22

Fucking or killing?

Wright

After storming from Howie's home last, Wright couldn't shake the want. Couldn't reconcile it either, not with her trying to kill him. She is wicked. Fatal and nuclear, as he said. All his life in Carolina he's been drawn to sweet women. First Jess, then the others he'd take home for a weekend, and then Sadie. There's something soothing about that kindness mixed with intimacy. It's the gentle acceptance of the harsh, jagged parts of him. There would be no erosion with those women, and as a man who is now somewhat proud of who he is, he likes the idea of keeping his shape.

Howie tried to kill him. He has to keep reminding himself of that every time he remembers how soft her skin feels underneath his palms. And how warm, and how malleable despite her harshness. She would be more than an erosion. She would be an annihilation.

Last night, he slept in the bed of his truck, freezing under the endless Wyoming night sky. So cold it stole his lust. That might be the only way he's able to sleep now. Before sunrise he woke and drove to the ranch, starting breakfast as was his duty this day. Then, he and Dutch rode to fix a fence and round up the eleven head that wandered out.

By the time that's done, the sun is setting and he's grateful for the clear task to soothe his mind. He needs an uneventful day, hell, an uneventful week. It's unseasonably warm, in the fifties, and near everyone is outside trying to take that in.

Reyes and some of the boys headed into town to get an early start on the night.

Outside of the bunkhouse, though, Booker's got a grin plastered on his face. He looks at Wright coyly over the can of beer he's drinking, and Anderson turns around. With them is one of the older hands, a man named Elliot who the rest of them call Hemingway because of how often he writes in his journal. Attempting to turn ranch life into a story, he says. Too immersed in his writing to speak, Hemingway greets Wright with a nod of his head before leaning back and closing his eyes to the waning autumn sun.

"Your woman's waiting for you," Booker calls.

Wright frowns, worried Booker brought one of those young girls from the bar in to shake him out of whatever darkness he's carried with him over the past few days.

"Sheriff biddy," Anderson clarifies.

Immediately, Wright's heart stills. Not just his heart. Jesus. He feels her everywhere. All of him crawls over itself at the thought of facing her after what he's done.

"She bring her partner?" Dutch asks.

"It ain't that kind of visit," Anderson says.

"How'd she seem?" Wright asks.

Booker cackles and the rest of the men disguise sardonic smiles.

"Ever play baseball?" Hemingway asks.

Wright's confusion deepens. "What?"

"Might want to wear a cup," Hemingway clarifies.

"We'll listen out for you," Booker says.

"Fuckin' don't," Wright snips, pushing towards the door.

The men howl, whistling like goddamned schoolboys before he seals himself inside.

And then the rest of the world fades.

She's sitting there at the table, another chair moved close so she can prop her feet up with bent knees. Those full cheekbones are paired with a firm jaw on her unreadable face as she blankly watches something on the wall. Her hair is out of its usual sleek style, instead wild and messy and looking like it did last night after he'd knotted his fingers in it. She's not in uniform, but in black silk pants that mold to her knees like ink.

He is enamored with just that. With just the outline of her knees.

She's otherwise shrouded in a man's jacket. The dim light of the overhead lamp casts her skin in a golden glow but her eyes are pitch black when she looks at him.

He can't breathe anymore. If he does, he'll smell her smoked-out fantasy of a scent, and he thinks that might kill him. He should apologize for breaking into her home, for violating her like he did, for being a fucking animal. But now that she's here, he doesn't think about guilt or shame.

He thinks of nothing other than how much he'd like to do it all again. How he'd like to pull down her silk pants slowly, kissing and licking and nipping at every inch of her long athletic legs. Her thighs are so fucking warm, it's like he can feel them from across the room. When she sweats, there's a warm, sugared hickory to her skin. To her cunt.

She's angry. He can tell from the silence but hell, he can smell it on her too. She's got an open beer can in her hand and a pocket knife on the table, stabbed into the wood. There's a tan folder there too, but the knife is the first thing he notices.

"Don't ask if I have your dry cleaning," she says firmly. "I'm going to burn that shirt. Probably fucking stole it anyway."

"Didn't sleep well, I'll take it," he chides.

"Slept like a baby," she says. "But your friends say you didn't come home last night. What was it, fucking or killing?"

Wright tenses his jaw. She has got a way of drawing as much anger out of him as she does lust, and his desire for her

is an ocean. His anger might be acid rain. But he lets it burn him from the inside as he strides closer to her.

A mistake, he notices, from how his fingers itch to deepen the tangles in her hair. Or from how intense her gaze is this close. He's never met someone who feels things so openly, so raw. Completely unrestrained. Where other women have been tea and honey, she is bourbon and gunpowder.

Intoxicating. She's intoxicating.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Lindal," she says harshly.

His hand snaps towards her jaw, but she's quick and within a second, she pries the pocketknife out of the table and angles the tip towards his wrist.

"Want to explain to your friends how you heal so quickly?" she asks, letting the blade rest against him but not pressing down hard enough to cut. "Do they know what you are?"

"No," he says firmly, withdrawing his hand. He's still close enough to marvel at the plushness of her lower lip, still alive enough to remember how it felt in his mouth.

"Does Rob?" she asks.

He bristles at the mention of his employer's first name. Such a deliberate attempt to irritate him, but it works. He does not want her asking about him, or interested in him, because he's sure if he ever picks up the man's scent on her skin that he'll kill him immediately. With other women, he's not jealous. But with Howie?

She'd better not even look at another man until he leaves this state. That'll make him a monster. That will make him fucking diabolical.

"No," he says again, though the word has teeth this time.

She forces a broad-lipped smile. "No one's special then," she says in a smoky voice.

He stares at her, feeling darkness sink deep into him. Her lips flicker. She knows how strongly she affects him, more than any near-stranger has a right to.

“Not to a locked door,” she states malevolently.

He'd like to inhale her. He shouldn't be getting hard right now but it's her, and the lighting is dim and he's been tasting her cunt on his breath all day. Doesn't change how angry he is. Just adds to it.

“Wouldn't ask, as it's so sweet seein' that gorgeous face of yours,” he says. “But if you're here to arrest me, you ain't dressed for it. So what are you here for?”

She ignores the question. “Stand by that bunk there,” she says.

He complies, more than anything because breathing her in like this is driving him insane. Walking over to the wooden frame, he turns and looks at her. Her bare feet have dirt on them. Somehow, she's less put together than he is after a full day on the ranch.

“Take your shirt off, Mr. Lindal,” she says.

He raises an eyebrow, feeling his cock twitch. If she wants him, he won't deny her for a second. He watches her hands. They grip the arm of the chair with white knuckles. Restraint. She's restraining herself from him.

Keeping his gaze locked on hers, he reaches for the buttons of his shirt. He starts at his collar and undoes them slowly. Watching hunger fill her darkened gaze.

You must be starving.

He is. He's fucking ravenous, can already imagine how she'll feel when he slides his cock inside her. She inhales sharply through parted lips, crossing her legs together. It doesn't do much. As he slides the shirt from his body, he can smell her arousal from across the room.

“No scars,” she remarks. “But your blood is all over my home.”

The corner of his lip curls up in an involuntary smile. For a second, she catches it. Here he was, thinking she might consider bending over the table for him. She plays smarter games than that.

“Stabbed you, didn’t I?” she asks, standing and slipping her woolen jacket from her shoulders.

He nearly groans at the sight of her in a white tank top. It clings to her cruel hourglass form and he can see every outline of her breasts and her dark, pebbled nipples. His mouth waters. He wants to lick them through the cotton. She’s the storm to the ship of his body and no one is steering.

“Here, right?” she asks, brushing her hair away from her neck. She traces the junction of her shoulder.

He grits his teeth.

“And then here?” she asks, tracing two fingers over her forearm.

He’s fucking panting for her. She brings those same fingertips to her right breast and he groans.

“And here,” she says, drawing a line across her nipples slow and hard. They perk even more to her touch.

He can’t help himself. He steps forward.

“Stop,” she snaps, lifting the knife from the table before he even makes two steps.

She doesn’t hold it out in his direction, however. Instead, she brings it to her own wrist. He stills in his tracks. She’s pressing down and he can nearly see her veins throb against the blade. It freezes his blood, his marrow, his entire being, watching her risk harm to herself.

“If you make a step towards me without my saying so, I will drag this knife over my wrist,” she says. “And scream when you’re on your knees to drink from me. They will see you like the animal you are-”

“*Don’t*,” he barks. He doesn’t care about anyone finding him out, not now. He just cares about her, doesn’t want to see her hurt. Pain is commonplace for him but *her*? He doesn’t want to see a scar on her on her skin that he didn’t put there himself.

Like the crescent mark on her left shoulder...

“What are you?” she snaps, pressing down on the knife.

“Get that blade away from your skin,” he growls. “Now, or I will pin you to the fucking floor, Howie.”

“You won’t be fast enough,” she says. “*What* are you?”

He takes another step forward and she digs the tip of the blade into her own flesh, drawing a drop of blood.

“No!” he yells.

His heart is pounding. He hears his rushing pulse in between his own ears. This is panic, that’s what it is. Deep, screaming panic.

“What are you?” she asks again.

He feels his chest heave but he can’t take in the air. “Drop the fucking knife,” he growls, his voice like oil-slicked gravel.

“What are you?” she repeats, digging the knife in deeper. A line of blood trickles from the wound to her open palm.

“Howie!” he yells. “Please!”

He drops to his knees. His weight shakes the old wood of the bunkhouse floor.

“Why are you doing this?” he groans, his vision darkening. He might pass out. Blood doesn’t faze him but *her* blood, drawn by another hand than his own, cuts him at the fucking knees.

“*Why?*” she repeats, her voice shaking with anger or reverence, or maybe both. “You want to know why, Wright?”

He has to blink to see, but she’s closer to him now. She crouches in front of him as he settles back, panting and staring at her. Her face is stern but those deep eyes of hers water with tragedy, and he’s not sure what she’s mourning.

“This is why,” she whispers, slipping the strap of her tank top down.

His focus shifts to the mark he made there.

“Emmeline Hensley had a mark just like this one,” she continues, keeping her voice soft. Still, it’s strained, and he

notices large printed photographs in her hand.

Her blood drips down to their glossy surfaces but he sees the images through it. A woman mauled. Her breasts and her sex devoured. His stomach drops. That's not how he eats people. She would have died slow that way, and he can't imagine putting someone through that. But *something* did.

Something like him.

And he's never met anything like him outside of his own family.

"That's what you did," she says. "That's what you think of doing to me, isn't it?"

"No," he growls, anger returning its heat to him. "You're so fuckin' far off mark, Howie."

"This is the mark," she fires back, grabbing his hand and placing it over her scar. Lightning strikes his palm where he touches her. Her heat against his heat. Building. Each breath they share in this space adds kindling.

"If you thought I'd kill you, you wouldn't fuckin' be here," he growls.

"It's my job to be here," she snaps.

"Not in uniform," he chides, fisting the strap of her tank top and pulling her towards him.

She braces her hand on his shoulder. The photographs drop to the ground. This close, he can taste her fucking air.

"*Wright*," she says, nearly a groan, agony rich in her throat.

He locks eyes with her.

Her breath hitches and her lip quivers, but she's strong.

"Listen to me," she says. "I'm going to find out what you are. If it takes all I have, I am going to find out what you are and I need you to really hear me. Because I'm so fucking close I can smell it on you. And when I do find out..."

She reaches out and braces her bleeding hand against his thigh, pressuring it enough for him to feel it in his throbbing member. For him to remember it, because somehow he managed to forget for a second how strongly he desires her. Her hair falls over his lap as she wipes her blade on the denim.

Noticing this, she leans in towards his ear.

“I’m going to end you, *daddy*,” she whispers, her breath hot on his skin. “Everyone is going to know what you are.”

He groans when her bloody hand finds the straining length of his erection and strokes him there.

“You’re *hard* right now?” she asks, her teeth nicking his neck. She presses her palm down over him and he grits his teeth, desperate to quell the fervent need to slam her onto her back and fuck some respect into her. “You’re fucking *sick*.”

She jerks his hand from her shirt and stands. He keeps his eyes on the ground because he’s not sure he’s ever felt this angry before. Never felt this aroused, nor this *feral*. If she doesn’t leave within the next five seconds, he’s going to lose control.

He listens to her pick up her jacket and slide the chair back into the table. But she pauses there.

No. Fuckin’ leave. Leave now or I will not be able to rein myself in.

“Pathetic, you know?” she asks. “How easy it is to get you on your knees.”

Faster than she can blink, he’s on his feet and then on her, slamming her back against the table. She yelps as her lithe body collides with the solid wood, her chest shuddering underneath his palm. His fingers span nearly shoulder to shoulder on her.

And it’s not enough. She’s so fucking warm, so goddamned soft-skinned, that those lessons he taught himself on holding back slip away with his heaving breaths. He wants to punish her. To bite at her vindictive lips and suck her tongue into his mouth. Gripping her by her thighs, he throws her further onto the table until she’s splayed there.

Then, he climbs over her.

She claws at his face. Gets a good fucking scratch down the side of his cheek that'll heal in an hour, but he catches her wrists. Slams them down onto the wood. Struggling still, she arches up, chest heaving. Her breasts pressed against him.

It's still not fucking enough.

She bucks, those wide hips so powerful until he settles his knee between them and pins her lower half like that, the pressure of his weight on her sensitive parts lacing a moan over her protests.

He doesn't speak. Just glowers down at her. He may be sick but she is too. Even through his denim and her satin he can feel how soaked that divine cunt of hers is. It's nice to see he's not the only one with a traitorous body.

But she hurt herself, and he can't have that. He lifts her wrist to his mouth. With the lightest press of his lips, he kisses the wound. Her growls turn to moans as he swirls his tongue over the cut and grinds his knee into her sex. And then, with a mouth full of his spit and her blood, he pins both her wrists in one hand.

He uses the other to pry her mouth open.

Tastes her blood, that sweet divinity, swirling with the way his mouth waters. It pools between his sharp teeth and hungry tongue and he bends down to her plush lips and spits into her gasping mouth.

Hard.

Brutal.

Just like his desire.

Then he seals her mouth with his palm, knowing she'll try to spit the mess at him. Knowing that fire in her eyes is fueled by both anger and lust and it's bleeding into the air between them. It's in their lungs now, in their veins, in their fucking marrow.

Her eyes widen and she bucks harder against him, but the harder she bucks the more his knee grinds into her and soon

she shudders, her eyelids fluttering. He moves his palm until it's over both her nose and her mouth and he *grinds* into her. Watches her eyes roll back in her head. Watches her face and her gorgeous sloping neck flush. She's coming, but she can't breathe, and he'll let her go because even though he could kill her as easy as making a fist he would never do it. He meant what he said that he'd never let her leave this earth.

She is as brutal and stunning and vibrant as nature, and he'll never let her die.

He rips his hand away and she gasps, her face nearly orgasmic as she catches her breath. Bloodstained teeth and pretty dark lips. This is the only time since she walked in that any tension has shrunk from them, and it unravels with her stunning release. *That's enough*, he thinks. He needs to move away or he will sink into her and never make it out.

Oh, but the way she stares at him, flushed and panting.

He needs to move away, but he needs her more.

Suddenly, she launches herself up and grabs his neck. Sinks her teeth in. Bites *hard*. He groans, the pain elevating the throbbing desire he feels straight down his spine, and he grabs her. Doesn't care what part. Just grabs *her* as she draws fucking blood before pressing her red painted lips to his.

After a second she breaks away, her eyes fuming. His hand is in her hair. His blood is on her lips.

“Shouldn't've fuckin' done that,” he growls.

In an animal moment, he licks across her mouth.

It's filthy. But *God*, his iron on her lips tastes like ambrosia.

They can't look at each other like this.

They do just to damn themselves.

She kisses him so hard he's falling onto her, grinding into her, gripping her soft breast in one hand and bracing himself on his goddamned elbow. He's so hard it hurts, so wild for her that the rules of the world melt away around him.

All that's left is hunger.

She unbuckles his pants and pushes them down his thighs so roughly her nails scrape his skin. He leans back to fling her satin pants to the ground. She's not wearing panties, her bare cunt and thatch of black hair a taunting v between her legs. He moves off the table only long enough to shuck his jeans and boots to the floor and then crawl back over her, shoving her thighs open.

"Hold your fucking knees or I'll tie your wrists to them," he snaps.

Surprisingly she obeys, her gaze frozen on his erection with an odd mixture of disgust and awe. He's big, he knows, and a bit fucking ugly because of it. Veined and indecent even for intimacy. He can't think about that *look* and what he'd do to wipe it off her face, because he's looking at paradise instead. Her soft lips are spread for him, pleasure glistening from her thighs to her ass. She's still swollen from his hands, from his mouth, from his knee. He'd like her to always be swollen.

He takes his thick, veined member in his hand and slaps her sex with it.

"This is fuckin' mine, Howie," he growls, bracing his hand against her inner thigh. He smooths his cock against her swollen clit, massaging her with his rod so she can feel each fucking vein. He slaps her with it again. "Your cunt is *mine*. If another man lays his hand on you, I'll kill him. Then you'll have a case."

"You're *monstrous*," she hisses. "All of you is *monstrous*."

"Yeah?" he growls, notching his head at her entrance. "You're gonna fuckin' take it anyway."

With that, he grabs her hips and presses into her. In the truck, he didn't fit all of himself inside her. He couldn't. She's tight enough for there to be some barrier to him so he thrusts hard and in that single, brutal movement he's impaled to the hilt.

He groans loud from the feeling.

“*Fuck!*” she yells, though there’s a moan in the edge of it and he matches the sound at the next thrust.

Heaven and hell couldn’t feel like this. Like her, *Jesus Christ*, his vision fizzles bright colors when he’s inside her. Her grip runs through every nerve ending. She’s got his fucking soul tied with ribbon around her bones.

“You’re too fucking big,” she moans.

“Too fuckin’ tight, Howie,” he scolds. “Open up.”

He wrenches her thighs apart and drives even deeper.

Her moan is like a scream but he doesn’t care if the world hears. She’s his. The brutal object of every desire he’s felt since he set foot in that bar. Sinking into her fiery heat, watching that firecracker soul of hers come undone, is nirvana. Enough to blind him, enough to give him pleasure like he’s never felt it before. The world and every glory in it shrinks to the space between them.

He grabs her waist and she squeals, enough to tease a smirk on his lips as he grinds himself deep inside her. He can see himself move in the space beneath her navel and he grabs her hand to press against that spot.

“*Wright,*” she moans, her eyes glued to it. “You’re a *monster.*”

“But you take me so good,” he growls, and it’s the goddamned truth.

Such a greedy little thing, she’s building and he can feel it, her snug warmth clinging and pulsing as he thrusts. He can feel every square inch of her, every twitch and every spasm snaking through his length and spiraling around his hips. Inching up the vertebrae of his spine as he breaks her, lured by those sharp sweet cries that echo from her lips. He thinks if he just fucks her hard enough she’ll be soft for him. He grabs her cheek, angling her face towards him just to see it.

Just to see the unraveling for himself.

But she grabs him by the hair and pulls herself up, riding him hard and brutal. In the battle of their lust, she seizes

control. She gasps into his mouth, her hips bucking like a goddamned rodeo queen, and he has to squeeze her thighs not to come from that. From her tight, jerking grip and the way she fucks him like she could grind all her hate into his bloodstream and make a poison of it. She wants to kill him.

Feels goddamned delicious.

He moans her name, feeling his control slipping before burying his panting mouth in her neck.

She wrenches his face away from her, grabbing his jaw.

“You’d better not fucking come,” she snaps.

He growls at her, shoving her back so hard that even the heavy table shakes. It’ll bruise her but pain doesn’t exist to them anymore. He anchors her hips on his, pulling her hard against him and she shrieks. Her back’s against the wood, just her shoulders touching, but she grabs his wrists. Still meets his thrusts like that, like a wildling. Feral as he is. Erotic as hell.

This isn’t sex; this is murder.

“*Fuck, Wright,*” she moans, something sweeter in her now. “Oh, don’t stop. Oh my God, don’t fuckin’ stop-”

She clenches him from within and the residual anger he feels makes him want to stop just to torture her at the edge.

So he does.

He stills his hips, panting through gritted teeth as she cries out.

“Fuck you,” she snarls, pushing herself up.

But he pushes her back down, reaching down to the front of her tank top and twisting it into a makeshift harness.

“Manners,” he growls. “Say ‘please, monster.’”

She cries out again, struggling to move her hips, but he pulls her snug to him with the harness until he’s buried to the hilt. Feels the barrier inside of her and pushes past it, lodging himself there. Her thighs shake. Her eyes water.

He reaches to where they're joined and brushes his thumb in strokes over her swollen clit.

"Please," she cries. "*Please*. Please let me come."

He groans, slowly withdrawing halfway before sliding back in just as luxuriously. All as he keeps his rhythm on her bud, because he doesn't want her to lose her pleasure. He just wants to draw it out.

"Not good enough," he growls.

She's struggling against his bondage. He can see the ache in her eyes. Just a few hard thrusts will throw her off the fucking cliff.

"Come on, darlin'," he groans, thrusting excruciatingly slow and deep. Swirling his thumb over her clit. "Be a good girl for all this evil."

"Please, monster," she begs. "Please fuck me harder, I'll be so good!"

It would be cruel to say no to such a thing.

He grabs her makeshift harness tight and plows into her. Deep and hard like driving a stake into frozen ground. Again, again, again-

Suddenly she erupts around him, so intense with her orgasm that she nearly sucks him along with her. She's shuddering, her body lifted up by just his grip and the crown of her head. Her arms thrown back, hands grasping fruitlessly at the smooth wood of the table. He feels her soak him.

And yet, he's not satiated by her eruption of pleasure. He wants more.

He wants to break her in half.

So he drags it out, fucking her so hard he might shatter her, rutting into her while toying with her sex until tears stream down her face. Her stunning, deadly beauty on full display. Streaked cheeks and swollen lips, eyelids fluttering...

God, he's fucking close. He'll come if he looks at her too long like this. He slows just to edge himself, gritting his teeth,

but she meets him with her hips. He groans. She's going to fucking win. She feels too goddamn good. He grips her hips bruisingly hard, stilling her rhythm to meet his own, but she claws for dominance.

The only grip she can find are his veined, rough forearms but she digs her nails into them.

So he shifts his grip to her neck instead.

Squeezes as he pounds into her. Oh, he wants to draw this out. He should go slow. He fucking *can't*, not when she looks at him like this. Not when she *looks* like this, undone from her pleasure. It's enough to make him question his belief in God because *how* can He be the only deity when her warmth makes a magnet of his knees to the earth?

There's no logic in his draw to her, just desperate need, at once whole and broken. It was born whole when he met her in that bar but she dug her nails into it and pried at it with her words and maybe, fucking *maybe* he's in love with her anyway. Maybe that's what this is and it's impossible not to love her and it'll be the thing that kills him but he's lived a long life.

"*Howie,*" he groans. "*Fuck, you're killing me.*"

His knot grows and she feels it, and her eyes widen so he tightens his grip on her throat. They're the full length of his arm away from each other but he can see every pinprick of flush on her skin. He's in bliss. Utter fucking bliss. Heaven is inside the woman who put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

She reaches her legs to his shoulders and he feels himself start to unravel. He's hitting parts of her so deep he can feel her soul opening to him, and something inside him is healing from that. From being this close to her, to her sweet surrender.

And then he feels pressure on his own throat.

She's brought her legs up to his neck until her crossed ankles lock around it. He's choking her, but she's choking him.

When the thought dawns on him, he locks eyes with her and flickers a smile. She's got a dark, devious gleam and he

doesn't fight for air, just grabs her hips and fucks her deeper. Watches another orgasm build. That cinching of her eyebrows. The parting of her lips.

“Gonna come inside you, Howie,” he growls.

“Yes, Wright!” she moans, her voice hitching in a near-cry.

“Gonna flood you with so much fuckin' evil you taste me in your throat.”

Then she takes her bottom lip in her mouth and rolls her eyes back, and he's gone. Her orgasm is electric, drawing him deeper as he thrusts one final, resonant time before spilling all of himself into her with a shout. He empties like a rocket through the crown of his head, his hips, his balls, his cock and the soul he's shot inside of her until everything is black.

The world disappears. Gravity, texture, anything is gone but their connection. He's floating. She brings him on top of her and he tries to roll off but the world is gone and their bond is locked into place. Consciousness leaves him.

It has never been like this. Never in his fucking life.

Never so desperately, wholly possessed.

Chapter 23

Praying mantis

Howie

Howie jolts upright, the warm mass of a body underneath her. She blinks into the dim, fiery light of this space, the bunkhouse and its scent of men and horses. Her hand isn't on the table. It's on Wright's chest, her fingertips aligned with the divot of the long scar on his chest. Warm liquid seeps from inside her to the polished oak beneath her hips. There's no evil in it, though, not that she can sense. Instead, there's something that feels balanced. Sitting here half-naked, next to his warm body feels meant to be.

Even as sore as she is. What had he called it, his *knot*?

She eyes his member, half-hard and draped across his thigh. Always, to her, circumcised penises look a bit like snakes with their heads. His shaft is veined, his balls too big to be sterile like he told her, must hold a lot of babies, she thinks. There's a hazy warmth around the idea of having his child but she bats it down when it spills into her mind. Still, she brushes her hand over his thigh as she slides off the table. She doesn't want to wake him, but doesn't want him to let her leave, either.

"Howie," he murmurs, grasping her wrist.

The shiver just his touch sends through her, even with his body on hers like it was, even with his pleasure wet between her legs, it's bad, isn't it? He's a killer, and she craves him.

Pushing himself up, his hand falls absentmindedly to his groin.

“Your friends are gonna come in,” she says, pulling up her pants.

“No, they ain’t,” he grumbles.

How long were they out for, that he can sound so rough with sleep? He looks dazed, almost sweet, like this. She fights the urge to straighten his hair. It’s longer now than when she first met him. Too much time has passed.

Counting down from a year, too, she reminds herself.

He has killed people before, she reminds that voice, even.

She grabs her jacket.

“If it’s you, I’m gonna find out,” she says, pulling her hair from the collar.

“Good,” he says. He grabs his jeans and shucks them on.

She scoffs. “*Good,*” she mocks, heading for the door.

“Gonna help you,” he says.

She stills.

“Take me to the first house,” he says. “You said it ran through the woods. Let me see what I can sniff out.”

“You’re the suspect,” she says, turning and crossing her arms in front of her chest. “Why would I believe anything you told me about this?”

Sitting on the table, he brings his elbows to his knees and looks up at her with a glint in his eye. “C’mere,” he says.

“Why?” she snaps.

He smiles his crooked grin. “Wanna find where the switch is, that makes you like this so soon after screamin’ my name.”

Embarrassment flushes bright against Howie’s skin, pulling anger and lust with it too. There’s too much of everything with him, so she turns, pushing open the doors and stepping into the waning dusk.

They were in there a while, weren’t they? There’s almost no light left in the sky.

Movement sets to her right and she sees a handful of the cowboys watching her, beers in hand.

“You kill him after?” Dutch asks.

“Like a praying mantis?” Anderson asks, before the men erupt in laughter.

“Man, he really is the Carolina stallion, ain’t he?” another man, one she hasn’t met, adds. “Howling like an alley cat in there.”

Their mistake.

“Can I have a beer?” she asks.

“Hell yeah,” Anderson says, tossing her a bottle.

The door opens behind her but she doesn’t even turn to see Wright. Instead, she smashes the bottom of the bottle on the wall, hardly pausing before thrusting the jagged upper half in their direction.

“You disrespect me like that again, and I’ll bury this in your manhood,” she snaps.

“Apologize,” Wright’s voice states firmly, just behind her.

She turns around, ready to defend herself, but his eyes are on the men.

“Apologize to ‘er,” he repeats. “She’s a goddamned sheriff, not some buckle bunny. Show her some fuckin’ respect.”

Cocking an eyebrow, she turns her face back to the men expectantly. Her title has been feeling so shallow lately but she likes when he says it.

“I’m sorry, Sheriff,” Anderson says. She doesn’t correct him.

Dutch narrows his eyes at her. “Mine was a genuine question.”

Wright growls.

“Fine,” Dutch says pointedly. “I’m sorry.”

A few others murmur apologies.

“Good,” Wright says. “I’m headin’ out for the night.”

Howie closes her eyes for longer than a blink because she should tell him no, shouldn’t she? But when she looks at him, the golden light of the dying sun is bright on his face, and she struggles with the thought he has ever killed anyone outside of war. That he is something inhuman, because the wear of his face and the way he looks at her stands in such contrast. The look of him is warm in her chest. The anger is too, because it has to be, but she doesn’t object when he slides into her passenger seat.

Any drive from the ranch is a long drive, and she expects there to be silence but after a few minutes Wright speaks.

“Always have been honest with you,” he says.

He lets the statement rest there, an offering that makes her believe there has been some trust developed between the two of them. She thinks about the night they met.

“Werewolves aren’t real,” she says, almost a joke.

“What’s a werewolf?” he asks.

She raises an eyebrow, not wanting to take her focus off the road. If she looks at him, it’ll turn to staring. Always seems to.

“A man who turns into a wolf,” she says. “And terrorizes villages.”

“*Well,*” he drawls, pulling a cigarette out of his pocket and lighting it before offering it to her. She waves him off, and he rolls down the window. It’s warm for January, but Wyoming can be temperamental like that. “Half that’s right, unless all of it is.”

“Which half?” she asks.

“I’m a man who turns into a wolf,” he says.

She laughs to herself, shaking her head.

“Think I ain’t serious?” he asks.

“Think if you told me that two hours ago, we could’ve saved some time,” she says.

In the corner of her eye, she sees him staring at her.

“Gonna turn me in?” he asks.

“You kill those women?” she asks, hoping for full honesty.

“I don’t kill women,” he says. “Said I was honest with you, alright? But...”

In his silence, the tension of guilt fills the cab.

“All my life, I lived by my father’s code,” Wright says. “It kept me from doin’ anythin’ I felt despicable.”

He leaves the words between them, it seems, to gauge her reaction. The truth like this is something fragile, something he can’t take back, so as much as she wants to ask him what he is again, that isn’t offered. This takes its place.

“But this past summer, I got into somethin’ I shouldn’t’ve,” he continues.

When she glances at him, it’s one of the first times he isn’t watching her. His elbows are on his knees in the truck, eyes out the passenger window like he can’t even look at her.

“What happened?” she asks gently.

“I...” he starts, taking a deep breath.

When he doesn’t say anything, she can’t hold back anymore.

“You told me you killed men,” she says. “You whacked off with bullets on me, Wright. Come inside me, too, and now you’re saying you’re a werewolf. So, what’s this? What’s the thing you won’t tell me?”

“I slept with my brother’s wife and sold my soul to what I thought was the devil,” he says, speaking faster than he ever has.

It takes too long for the words to register with how she rearranges them, attempting to make sense.

“Itéšniyaŋ?” she exclaims, nearly slamming on the brakes. “Haúŋ! Worse than I thought!”

She pulls over on the dirt road, putting the truck in park and ripping open the door. Storming along the highway, she can still feel the mess he made inside of her and she needs it gone. He opens the door too, but she doesn't want to be anywhere near him.

"Go home," she says, walking so fast it speeds her breath up. "Can do this without you."

"Look at me," he snarls.

"No," she snaps. "Not when that's what you bring into my body."

"It wasn't the devil," he pleads.

"Course not!" she exclaims, spinning around. "Devil's not real. But *you*."

She jabs her finger in his direction.

"You are *bad*, Wright," she says. "That's bad medicine. Betrayal of your own. That's evil!"

He tenses, anger flashing across his eyes. "Suppose you're perfect, then?"

"I have to be!" she screams, storming towards him. "Don't you see that? Don't you know by now?"

It takes all her focus to keep her lip from quivering, because the anger is gone from his face and all that's left is sorrow.

"Would that I could undo it," he says slowly. "And have been here all this time."

Howie pulls her lips between her teeth. It's the sweetest thing he's ever said to her. What she can't say is *if you'd do that to your family, what would you do to me?* She breathes deep, shifting the pain from her lips to her palms, digging her nails into her balled fists.

"She why you left?" she asks.

He doesn't answer. Howie nods, suddenly seeing all this clearly.

“You love her?” she asks, and it hurts. She hates that it hurts.

“It ain’t about that,” he says, stepping forward.

“You *love* her,” she says.

“Not in that way,” he says.

“No?” Howie breathes. “But she’s who you’re going home to.”

His jaw tenses and his brow furrows, distress plain in his gaze. “Ain’t an easy thing to talk about, Howie. Spent a decade mournin’ my wife, thinkin’ my brother was the one who killed her.”

“So when he found someone-” she starts, but Wright laughs sharply.

“Nah, you and me, *we* found each other,” he says. “Two of them are mates, which for our kind is like a soul bond, and he hunted her to all ends of the damn state to keep her with him-”

He stops himself, uninterrupted.

“So you took her?” she asks.

He shakes his head sharply, eyes dark with focus.

“You’d do that to hurt him?” she asks. “You are a bastard, Wright. You’re *unforgivable*-”

“You don’t know my family!” he snaps, and it might be the first time he’s ever raised his voice at her.

She stands her ground but it shakes her. He’s fuming, and it’s not the anger of their game but a different one, a side of him that reminds her he has killed before. Is this the side of him that his victims see before they die?

“I hate talkin’,” he says firmly. “Rather hear your voice for hours than ever lay mine down, especially like this.”

“Pity,” she says.

He glares at her with a huff before pressing his tongue to his cheek. And for just this moment, she tilts her chin up not in

defiance but in something primal, like making way for his teeth again. He glances down. Takes it in.

“I hate that you can look at me so full of fuckin’ judgment,” he says, softer but untamed. “Like I don’t give enough to myself, like I don’t have my fuckin’ demons. I was drinkin’ all the time then. It don’t change my actions, Howie. But I quit the bottle. Haven’t touched it in half a year. I wouldn’t do any of those things now. How I feel for her’s got nothin’ on...”

He looks off sharply, shakes his head.

“I hated myself,” he says. “My kind, a bullet ain’t gonna keep us down but I figured that would be enough to get him to do the job a weapon can’t. I did it to *kill* myself. So fuck you, for stoppin’ your truck, and sittin’ on your high horse, because guess what? That ain’t the worst thing I ever done, not even close, and I’m so fuckin’ sick of hatin’ you.”

The part of Howie’s heart that still longs for him aches when she hears that. But it’s blocked off by cement by now, right? She built the walls tougher, didn’t she?

“I’ve been forgettin’ things here,” he says after a moment. “Spacin’ out, wakin’ up where I shouldn’t. If you’re sayin’ that whatever killed those women is like me... I need to know it’s not me, Howie. Hate me if you need to. We have to solve this.”

Howie shakes her head, pushing past him on her walk back to the truck. She turns the key in the ignition and briefly considers running him over. It hurts her. She feels stupid, to want anything from him, stupider now that it seems he’s already got someone. If he’d hurt his own flesh and blood, he’d hurt her in a second. Any promise he makes is a lie. And he’s standing there in his foolish Swedish wolf way, watching her through the window like he’s trying to distinguish her taste from sour lemon, and all around him is the white world of half-melted snow.

He gave her permission to hate him, like she ever needed it. And the thought pisses her off, pushes her out of the truck on the passenger side, where when she lands she’s up to her

calves in white. She pushes her hands in the sun-packed powder, so angry she's numb before she ever feels cold.

She balls up the snow and hurls it at him.

He frowns at her, watches her in a way that's almost amused, almost parent-like. So this time, she's sure to get some ice in the ball. Chucks it right at his face. She could've been an American baseballer, a real American, practiced her hand-eye as Até's son with inyan onyeyapi and takapsice and bow hunting, so when this one hits him he gets red. He joins her anger.

"Actin' like a fuckin' child," he snarls out, but in the next ball she gets gravel from the road, her fingers red and stinging-raw now, and before it hits his chest he reaches into the snow and fires back.

He's strong but she dodges at least half his missiles, feeling quick as lightning as a child, and the snow isn't cold anymore. The glimpse she catches of him shows him smiling. Her cheeks hurt. She loves him, she knows, and the feeling is something so nasty and appalling it makes her want to bury herself in the snow just to numb it out, but night begins to fall and she climbs back into her truck. It doesn't matter that she's shivering. She leaves the door open. Where they're going, there will be no laughter.

Chapter 24

Feel them die

Wright

“This is where it happened.”

Howie’s voice floats through the air but the scent of ash is so rich that he could mistake it for the smoke in her voice. He tries not to let it bristle him. Not to think about how much he wants her, how he feels the roots of his desire embed themselves even into the earth where they walk.

Wright has never been particularly interested in books or movies, has a hard time engaging himself in watching real people write or act as fake people, a hard time relating to anything, even war movies not seeming to understand what he saw, like there couldn’t be a single soldier on any Hollywood set, and maybe there wasn’t. Maybe out of the millions of men who served, there was no single one who watched a friend die, maybe that. Now he wonders if it’s something deeper, because two women died and he might have killed them but that feels like a bruise and Howie’s presence is a knife he can’t wrench out. He should take a break from his desire, but it’s difficult when she’s telling him to be like a wolf, to use those senses.

The house has been abandoned for a few months, but it still holds all of Doris’s belongings. In the kitchen, the scent of food gone bad and dried up makes him brace himself against the counter, terror swirling in his mind. This is what his own home felt like when he came back from war, the shell of something.

He doesn't tell Howie why he grips the counter so hard the wood compacts, cracking in a fault line towards the wall. A decade ago, two men came to his home and killed his wife and child with a hammer. A decade ago, his brother turned for the first time and in his hunger ate every piece of them down to the bone. Two years after that, the war was over. He came home to a house with old bloodstains and food still left in the cabinets and no family that he could claim.

“What do you smell?” Howie asks.

He moves on to the next room without answering her.

The more time he spends in this house, the deeper into his memories he falls. It crawls under his skin. All these thoughts of his wife, Jess, on the swinging bench of his porch, suddenly it's Howie there instead and he knows it'll never work between them. Because if he ever came back to her trailer to see her dead, he'd never be human again. He'd do what Ridge did when he saw the woman who'd raised him and his nephew and felt hungry. Go into the woods and forget who he was.

“Wright,” Howie murmurs.

He blinks. Doesn't know where he was for a second, but he's standing in Doris's bedroom staring at a half-empty laundry hamper. He's catching his breath. His hands are shaking. The way Howie's looking at him, he must look seven different kinds of guilty.

“Never been here before,” he murmurs, but even to him that sounds like a lie. Because this isn't Doris's house anymore. It's the only home he's ever had, and his brother has his teeth in Howie's neck, and every fire of life in her eyes has been extinguished.

He reaches out to touch her, wanting to mold his palm around the wound. She steps back swiftly. His fingertips graze the sharp exhale of her breath.

“What's happening to you?” she asks.

“It already happened,” he tells her.

Howie and her partner were in this house before. He can smell that Howie came back, though he could have known

from the way she perched on her toes and scooped the house key out of the porch light. She went to every room. She lied down on this bed. He picks up one of her hairs and holds it out to her and her cheeks flush dark. Everything about her is jarringly alive.

There was a man in here too but he was a lover, Wright tells Howie. The mattress still holds the faint scent of sex.

“No blood, though,” Howie says.

“That doesn’t mean he wasn’t wolf,” Wright says.

“What’s it mean, then?” Howie asks.

Wright puffs out his cheeks. “Only ever bit my wife and you like that.”

“Unless,” Howie says.

Unless I don’t remember?

“I’ve never been to this house before,” he says.

She takes to the woods outside. It’s difficult to bat the scent of her from his head. She still wears those silk pants, their pleasure seeping through. Someone burned this ground, she tells him, so she knows it’s where she saw the body. The snow didn’t build right on it even though it should’ve. There’s a few strands of blonde hair caught in the tree branches, not belonging to Howie or her partner. Howie says Doris was a blonde.

He tells her not to stand so close to him.

“Your scent’s already strong,” he says, but really any distance less than a hundred yards won’t change that for him. When he taps into this side of himself, the hunger for her is almost unbearable. If their hands graze, he’ll take her in the snow without hesitation.

She stands, sighing to voice her displeasure.

“It hunts in human form,” he says. “Not sure how we...”

He pauses. This is a confession, isn’t it?

“Our kind,” he grits out. “I knew a man who hunted only as a man. It’s... He wanted to feel it, I suspect. Wasn’t to avoid pain.”

Ridge, his brother, is who he’s speaking about. But if he doesn’t trust Howie not to turn him in for this, he sure as shit isn’t going to name someone she hasn’t met. If she remembers every story he told her at the bar, it might strike her who he’s talking about. He might really have to kill her if she threatens to come after Ridge or the twins.

It’d be like killing himself, he knows. That’d follow.

For a moment, he looks at her a little longer than he should, watching the way the moonlight kisses her features. She can’t see as well as he can in the dark, even with her flashlight, so her guard is down. The severity that etches her jaw and the set of her thick, dark brows is softened, but still curious. Still sensing with some invisible power only she has, all that happened here.

“Do you feel more as a man?” she asks, her cheeks flushed either from the question or the cooling night.

He nods. “I hunt as a wolf. Don’t want to feel it. That side of me, I ain’t proud of.”

Her cheeks hollow and he suspects she wants to ask him what he’s hunting for. Just as he suspects that will be the one thing he can’t tell her.

“He wanted to,” she says instead. “To feel them die.”

Wright nods.

“The man who wanted to feel it,” he says. “Liked killing pretty women, but would kill anyone who smelled good to him. Almost killed his mate.”

“Do I smell good to you, Mr. Lindal?” she asks, keeping her gaze piercing. “Enough to eat?”

“Would never kill you, Howie,” he says.

She shakes her head. “Would you want to see what my flesh tasted like?”

She crouches down to his level, and even with the distance between them, this is torturous. He'd like to tell her no, but Ridge took bites out of Sadie's thigh before he fell in love with her. And Wright has relished not just in the taste of Howie's cunt but in her blood. The way it pooled in his mouth when he bit her shoulder. He ejaculated when he did.

But when he thinks about biting down all the way, about tearing a piece of flesh from her body, his stomach turns so hard he'd like to question why she thinks so terribly of him.

"It's a fuckin' curse, Howie," he growls out. "I get no joy from it."

"You get something out of biting me," she says.

He glares at her. "Bitin' doesn't hurt you."

"It doesn't," she agrees. "It felt good."

He pauses, his heart skipping at that admission. Lucky it's dark out, the way his cock stiffens just from hearing something he did felt good to her.

"Takin' flesh out," he says, returning himself to the task at hand. "That hurts. Cuts too deep not to."

Her face falls. She presses her knuckles to her lips, looking deep in mourning. "You saw the pictures," she says.

He nods.

"Thought maybe, she didn't feel any pain," Howie says. "If it felt like what you did."

She's tender-hearted. Standing, she kicks the toe of her boot in the snow.

"This is the first of two murders," she says. "Don't think he ate Doris like he did Emmeline. We interrupted him, but there was something different. I don't... They're both pretty. They're both women."

He narrows his eyes. Disgusts him to think that looks might have anything to do with killing. Horrifies him if this fucking monster is looking for beauty, because the moment he sees Howie he'll eviscerate her, then. Wright thinks for a

fleeting moment of the bloody kitchen when he came home from war, shakes the thought out of his head.

“You’d think the one who was alone would’ve had more done to her,” Howie says. “But Emmeline had her wrists and ankles tied. He ate her alive. So what... Maybe she did something to make him angry. Or maybe he knew Doris better.”

“Tied her wrists?” Wright asks.

Howie nods.

“Maybe he knew *the other* better,” Wright offers. “Knew she’d try runnin’. The woman you showed me photos of, she had a husband and a child. Don’t you think that’d make someone more likely to fight?”

“Do you think I wouldn’t fight, Mr. Lindal?” she asks.

He sighs. “Course not. But you’re you. Most people don’t got that kind of fight in ‘em.”

“So sweet,” she chides.

He glances at her wearily.

“What if Doris was the first person he killed?” she offers. “And he’s learning what he likes.”

“He’d be young, then,” Wright says, sucking air through his teeth. He catches another scent, looks off through the forest after it. It’s dark, which for him feels natural, but taking Howie into the woods makes him want to tuck her firmly against his side.

“What?” Howie asks sharply. “What is it?”

“Nothin’,” Wright says.

“Bullshit.”

He sighs a laugh. “Christ, woman, can’t get away with anythin’ around you. It’s fuckin’ dark out, how do you see anythin’ in my face?”

She clicks her flashlight on, aiming it at him, and he has to shield the beam with his hand.

“Whoa,” she breathes, keeping the light there. “Wright, your eyes...”

“Would you turn the damn thing off?” he snarls, blinking fervently.

She aims it towards the ground. “They reflect green. Like an animal.”

“Really?” he asks.

“You didn’t know that? If we have a suspect, that’s how we’d know if they’re like you,” she says, her voice quickening with excitement.

At first, he’s happy she’s open to the thought it could be someone else other than him. But then, a deep dread settles into his chest. He doesn’t want to be identified so easily. Those German doctors and their camps hang in his mind, and all the allowances his country gave to those bastards.

If they can find out what he is, they can experiment on him too. And why wouldn’t they? He was a good soldier, could have been a weapon much more precise than the atom bomb.

“Let’s go,” he says, nodding to the woods. “Keep close. I smell somethin’.”

“What is it?” she asks, springing ahead of him.

He draws her back, his arm tight around her waist.

“Don’t go further’n me,” he warns. “I smell blood. Yours is over there.”

He gestures towards the tree line, closer to the house by about fifty yards. He averts his gaze when she shines her flashlight in that direction. Her eyes widen and she follows the beam with a look of awe, like she’s only now believing it.

“Hers,” he says, nodding deeper into the woods. “Or a human’s, is down there.”

She frowns. “Show me,” she says.

He does, surprised that after this long he can smell anything at all. Back home, a good rain would wash most scents away but here? It’s like the snow preserves it. Enough

so that he can track the smell of blood all the way to a tree so deep in the forest it's probably pitch black around them to Howie. She keeps herself pressed to his side. There would be awkwardness to their difference in heights, him towering over her, if this didn't feel so fucking right it was like a bone setting back into place.

The beam of the flashlight falls onto a darkened bit of tree bark, faint scratches like what a human hand could do embedded in the bark. Howie stares at it, transfixed, instantly knowing what it must mean.

“Fighting,” she breathes. “Don't tell me she didn't.”

He keeps silent.

There's another scent here, one he's surprised to find, because when he wore a wedding ring he'd need to take it off to turn. It'd make the pain worse, even morph his transformation from human to wolf, cut off the circulation in the pad of his paw as his new flesh bloomed around it.

He kneels down.

It's not a wedding ring.

It's a signet. Like something the boys from the wealthy families who fought abroad with him wore, some symbol of belonging he never figured out for himself. He holds it up to her hoping for recognition, because this is her town and not his, but she just tilts her head, frowning. Her dark gaze searching for something she can't distinguish, cataloging all that unmatched nothing for later.

“It's not yours,” is all she says.

This is the first night they spend together.

Chapter 25

Fool's gold

Howie

Wright sleeps on the floor of her trailer now, but they don't touch.

It started the night they went to Doris's house, an invitation half-intended to keep an eye on him if he has one of those blackouts again and half-intended to push him to where she could understand his evil, look straight into its eyes, find the point where he won't listen if she tells him to stop. But now it's something of a habit.

Weeks in, she'd be surprised to pull into her driveway and not see him sitting on her steps with a brown paper bag of groceries in his hands. All he's got to protect him from the cold is a knit scarf and a big shearling jacket and her door is never locked but still he waits for her. Sometimes he brings oranges.

He asks her what she likes. She cooks him the type of food she grew up with, and because she lived in Dakota and Texas, that means wohanpi with Stoughton ranch beef, tamales with shredded elk and chokecherries, the history of her life in the steam of the kitchen.

"What do Swedish people eat?" she asked one day, and he looked at her like he wasn't sure why she was asking.

Wright Lindal isn't American in the way that his blood comes from the land, but in the way that he only sees the years he's been alive. He can't imagine his people coming from somewhere he's never seen. But the next day he brings in a

heftier bag and cooks with a crease in his brow like he's remembering something. He makes meatballs and buttery mashed potatoes and some kind of sauce with the dried chokecherries she has, and he closes his eyes when he eats, and she thinks she's in love with him.

When she was married, she slept so close to Darran that if she had a nose like Wright's she would have tasted the other women he exhaled into her hair. That love left cuts she can't even see in her skin. Cuts that keep her bed empty, because Wright is a man who falls in love often, she bets, and she won't let him cut her in half. She won't let him prove the doubts in her mind that he'll find someone easier on him, or go back to what he already has.

The other day he called home on the phone in the kitchen and his face lit up bright as pure sunlight. Through the receiver she could hear the sound of a baby wailing. His brother's wife had twins. Zion and Ajax, two boys. They'll be wolves one day. His face went soft thinking of them and she knew he'd never stay in Wyoming. February snuck up on them. The end of summer is far away, but she feels it like the muzzle of a rifle aimed in her direction.

They cook side by side. The floor glitters with bottle caps from Coca Cola they drink together. She eats with her feet perched on the bottom rung of his chair, and he watches her with hope in his eyes. They swap theories and he tells her what he knows about wolves, and a few times they've gone into the mountains, pushed through snow wondering if they'll find some clue in the place that calls to Wright's heart. But every night, he's on the couch. She's in her bed alone.

Against all logic, she brought Wright with her and Brooks for supper with Cynthia and Até. He shoveled snow for them and the ten surrounding houses, wearing just the t-shirt he brought under his flannel, his golden skin red and flushed from the wind. He'd shoveled a walkway leading to Até's house and a neighbor had asked where Howie got him, so he said he'd do hers too. Soon enough the circle of small houses had paths cut through the snow and every woman and Brooks pressed their noses to windows or stood outside, poorly bundled with hot

coffee warming their hands. It was a spectacle, this tall man with nice hair doing work no one else wanted to do in just a t-shirt, stuck to his broad back and chiseled abdomen, each muscle of his arm like a gear working smooth and fluid as river water.

That was the last time Howie touched Wright, walking outside with no mittens just to wrap her hands around the cold skin of his bicep, speak to his shoulder and tell him supper was ready, let her breath fog his neck.

“What is it about him?” Até asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked him.

“There’s something not wrong with him, maybe, but not right either” Até said.

“He’s a wolf,” she told him.

He stared at her wearily.

“Fuck, you know cowboys,” he said. “Tell you anything just to seem more interesting.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “He’s a wolf on the inside.”

“Better not be thinking I’ll let him marry you for shoveling all that snow,” he said, relenting, and she laughed. “How I see it is, got to do all the houses on the damn reservation for something like that.”

“He’s no boyfriend, even,” she said, which was true.

“No boyfriend, looking at you like that?” Até asked. “What is he, then?”

“A suspect,” she said.

A suspect rings true more from the fact that the killings stopped when she brought Wright to her trailer than how he is with her. She really doesn’t think he’s evil enough to kill those women. She doesn’t think he’s ever lied to her. But she sleeps in an empty bed now, which hadn’t felt so empty before Wright’s tall, broad body started occupying her living room floor.

At night, she fears she'll walk to him. She has dreams where she walks in her nightgown and perches on his hips, rides him until she comes like warm honey in the marrow of her spine. Fucking him so hard the thump of their bodies on the floor is like a heartbeat, but she wakes up tangled in sheets and her own pulse is what she's hearing, her gasping lungs open to the room. Down the hall, Wright lies still, a dark mass on the ground.

Once or twice when that has happened, she's tried to test his awakensness. She's stripped down to nothing in the moonlight and envisioned him watching her. Sat on the edge of her bed at three in the morning with her legs spread wide, so hot with the idea of him that it makes her the wanton one. When she'd turn him out for masturbation, she slips her fingers to her own sex and touches herself like he'd touch her, peaking in a breathy silence and then freezing to see if she can hear him.

She never hears him but she wants to hear him. She wants to see him more and not at all. Her favorite meals are the ones he cooks for her, yet she needs every meat he serves her to come from a clearly marked package, or else it tastes like flesh. The thought that he would feed her human flesh is arousing in its evil. It feels like it would be getting the trick question right on a quiz, that perfect click of her thoughts with reality.

He'd lay strips of tattooed flesh on the strings she still has on her ceiling. He'd serve her red-painted human lips pinched in the frybread she makes next to him, and she'd open it like a gift. She'd touch the lipstick off on her fingertips and put it on her own mouth. She'd eat the tender flesh while looking in his eyes, and she'd slide a knife in his gut while he fucked her, and they'd both die that way. She builds such a big wall between them with her thoughts that even though she's made love to him before, she thinks doing it ever again will kill her.

Brooks knows about Wright sleeping there, not because she told him or because they went to Até's together but because he's been snagging Dutch Bradley. Dutch wants to know what Wright's doing shackled up so far outside the ranch

he has to rise at five every morning to get there on time. Calving season's in less than a month, and that's when everything will pick back up. *No more sleepovers*, he'd told Brooks, but Howie hasn't heard anything from Wright about that.

Less than a month to figure out who did this, to figure out if it is Wright after all. That gold signet ring wouldn't fit him. His hands are so big she bets when he got his wedding ring he had to get it custom. Maybe the signet was Doris's, which would mean it isn't a clue at all. There are no markings on the flat, gold face of it.

On a hunch, she has it in her shirt pocket. It feels like a dangerous creature next to the clip of her badge, like the two metals will spark a match together that sets her ablaze. She feels it in her throat, this inquisition.

"He knows what we're looking for," she tells Brooks. "Wright, I mean."

"We, huh?" Brooks asks, not disguising his jealousy.

"We," she insists. But in truth, she hasn't seen Brooks as often lately. When she leaves the station, she wants to see the man who waits on her front steps. It's a truth like bitterroot, stinging her cheeks. She won't admit it to Brooks, but she knows she owes him. "He's helping."

"Até told me you bled him in your trailer," he says.

"We were rough with each other."

"I'll say," Brooks hisses. "*Were?*"

"Were," she says. "It's not like that anymore."

"What's it like?"

"Innocent," she lies, thumbing the ring in her pocket. It occurs to her to show Brooks, but that might make his envy worse. "We're just friends, unless he's guilty."

He murmurs an acknowledgement before leaning back in his chair. "Hope he's not. Liked having dinner with him."

“Me too,” she admits. “He wasn’t near as odd as you were first night on the rez.”

“He didn’t bring candy,” Brooks reminds her.

“No,” Howie laughs. “Didn’t need to, got all the aunties hot over him shoveling snow in his t-shirt.”

“Aunties, hey, uncles too,” Brooks says.

“*You’re* not an uncle,” she teases, almost a whisper.

“Hey, neesebi,” Brooks says, inflicting age into his voice enough to make Howie laugh. “You might not know everyone like you think you do.”

“Tuwéħča škhéka,” she says in disbelief. “You don’t know anyone there better than me.”

“Do ‘cause you were looking at him,” Brooks says. “And I was looking at the people looking at him. Think I might go up there alone next time.”

“They’d kick your white ass out,” she laughs.

“Not notonihí wox two houses down across the way,” Brooks says in a hushed tone. Even Howie has to think for a moment; Brooks is learning code for what he can say in a space that doesn’t know all of him. *My bear*, she thinks.

“Romantic,” Howie scoffs.

“Call it that or something else,” he says. “Next time we stay the night, I won’t have to deal with Até and your boyfriend snoring.”

She shoots him a glare as if to say Wright isn’t her boyfriend, but knows regardless of what he is to her, he’s the first man she’s brought home since Darran who she knows the taste of. It’s not worth arguing.

“What do we do?” Brooks asks, leaning forward.

“Meaning?”

“To solve this,” Brooks says. “If we don’t have anything, are we just waiting for the next one? Or maybe there won’t be a next one.”

“Gonna be a next one,” Howie says, taking a deep breath. “Gonna talk to the captain about something.”

“Okay,” Brooks says, standing.

“Gonna talk to the captain alone,” she tells him.

If Ojero doesn't ask her how she found the ring, Brooks will. And it won't be enough to say she went to the site. They've been there twice together. He'll ask questions, and those questions will include how someone like Wright Lindal sniffed out a ring buried by time, snow, and leaves.

She knocks on the door of Ramon Ojero's office, the heat of too many eyes burning into her neck.

He has framed medals from the war on his desk, pictures of his family. He was friends with her father but he's been tense lately, that tension cutting any relation he might have had to Howie. If it has anything to do with the dead women, she figured he'd have pursued murder charges. As it stands, she doesn't know why he'd mope over an injustice he could have done something about.

“Deputy,” he says, his face hesitantly warm. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah,” she says. Her voice is a bit too high. “Just something minor.”

“Come in,” he nods. “How's Joseph?”

“He's good,” she says, sliding into one of the chairs across from him. “He and Cynthia are still over in Wind River, raising two daughters.”

“Three,” he offers.

“Think I'm done getting raised,” she says.

“Never the case,” Ramon says. “Heard you made a stir at the Hensley site.”

It has been that long since they last spoke one-on-one.

“Williams talked to me,” she says. “In his way.”

Ramon nods. "Can't disrespect your commanding officer at the scene of an attack."

"Let's hope there are no more attacks, then," she says firmly.

Ramon stares at her. A heavy silence fills the room. She clears her throat.

"This isn't the best time to ask for something," she says.

"Ask away."

"About this," she tells him, reaching into her pocket and procuring the ring. She shows him what it is in her open palm before sliding it onto his desk, pushing it towards him. A flicker of recognition passes his face, but he tempers it.

It makes her heart jolt.

"A ring," he says. "Thought your father would have spoken with me."

"About what?" she asks.

"The proposal," he teases, smiling genuinely.

"Not a proposal," she says with forced laughter.

"Shame," Ojero says. "I could use a new wife."

"Do you recognize it?" Howie asks.

"Should I?"

"High schools here give them out, don't they?"

"Not like this," he says. "There's no face to it. Just flat gold. It looks as if someone forgot to finish it. But you know, my family moved up here. Williams!"

He calls the lieutenant's name before she can stop him, but she senses Jack Williams was already at the door, and feels his leering presence at her back now. Looking up at him makes her stomach twist and she doesn't want to do it, so she stays looking ahead, back pin-straight, even though she can feel his knuckles against the back of her chair.

She hasn't made an effort to see him since Emmeline Hensley's body was discovered. He was at Marin's house the

morning she came to visit, though, with his brothers. He stared at her over coffee mixed with whiskey and she told herself she wouldn't go to any room there weren't already people in. Being alone with Jack Williams scares her, but she'll sleep in her trailer with Wright Lindal on the floor and dream sweetly most nights.

“Recognize this?” Ramon asks, holding up the ring. “She *found* it.”

The lieutenant laughs, taking it between his thumb and index finger. “Are we a lost-and-found now?”

“I thought it might be valuable,” Howie lies.

“You would think such a thing,” Jack sighs.

“Okay,” Howie scoffs, pushing up only to find a hand planted firmly on her shoulder. It's strong enough not to let her leave her seat.

“I can help,” Jack says, his thumb brushing her shoulder. “Want to know if it's real gold? Want to sell it?”

Ramon chuckles, shuffling his papers, happy to be rid of the conversation.

“Where did you find it?” Jack asks. “If it was at that bar, it might not be worth much, knowing the crowd. Could be fool's gold.”

She feels his fingers push through her hair and it burns her. If Ramon were going to stop him, he would have already, and she can't meet his eyes from the shame of it. Instead she watches the letter opener on his desk, thinks of plunging it into Jack's thigh.

“Where'd you find it?” Jack repeats, stroking her.

“Get your hands off me,” she growls.

“*Oh*,” Jack laughs. He pulls his hand away from her slowly. She can hear him wipe it on his slacks. “Don't like the question, huh? Did you steal it?”

“Is that what this looks like?” she manages through gritted teeth.

“No,” Jack murmurs. “You’re a good girl these days, Howie? Aren’t you?”

Howie stands too fast for him to stop her. “If anyone comes looking for it, let me know,” she says, checking his shoulder on the way out.

“Will do, sweetheart,” Jack offers. “The case of the missing costume jewelry!”

Chapter 26

Wasting water

Wright

Wright killed a man today.

When he went to the grocery store to pick up elk and masa and block cheese, he picked up the scent of predation on a man who probably didn't have much time left anyway, skin yellow from booze and hard living. He'd hesitated on the action, knowing Howie had to be well aware of his schedule by now, thinking she'd either know what he'd done or think he was bedding someone else. But she said she'd seen the creature carry Doris's body on two legs, so he got this awful notion he'd see how killing like that could feel.

Not a woman. God, no. Never. His prey, without the barrier.

The man lived in a house in town. He staggered home without needing to go to the bar, or maybe he had already been there. Like a shadow, Wright slipped in his door before he even had time to close it. The man stepped back and blinked at him. The lights in the house had always been on.

"Anyone here?" Wright asked him. He couldn't smell anyone but he needed to be sure.

The man swayed on his feet, head cocked in confusion.

"Who're you?" he slurred.

"Is anyone here?" Wright asked again, leveling his voice as he had at war and does on the ranch sometimes, in the way

of knowing what he's doing and doing it well, the way men listen to. "In the house with you, damn it."

"No," the man said. "But... but you shouldn't be."

Wright shirked his jacket, hanging it on the hook by the wall. He walked towards the fraying, stained couch and unbuttoned his shirt, folding it neatly on one of the cushions. He thought of what he'd seen of Doris's house, wondered if the figure in the woods had kept his clothes on or been naked aside from the ring.

"You some kinda fag?" the man asked, hiccuping.

Had Wright killed Doris? Had he killed Emmeline? The moment he moved into Howie's trailer, those blackouts stopped. He remembered where he was always because he could cite his proximity to her. Or did she satisfy the part of him that made him kill those women?

He couldn't fathom it being him, not for his violence, but for the reason. He had spent his life distancing himself from his kills and only killing cruel men. He didn't get a lick of hunger around women. Even cruel ones didn't have the right scent. But he thought of Ridge then and pretended to be him before remembering how fucking theatrical his brother liked to be. He'd play with prey like he'd played with Sadie.

No, Wright couldn't do that. He didn't want to be there, in a home that would soon be empty. It made him think of Doris's home, of Howie's trailer before she was in it, of the kitchen where those men had killed his wife.

"Don't do this to me," the man snarled.

Wright kicked off his shoes. The man moved like the walk to the kitchen was the deck of a ship on a storming sea. Wright unbuckled his belt and whisked his pants from his body, folding them on the couch too. Then he heard the cock of the pistol. Thought for a second about giving the gun to Howie as an apology for the one he had broken.

"I'm not that way," the man blurted, his hands steady but arms swaying.

Wright eyed him. This was a nonsexual form of nudity, unaroused and numb. For weeks he'd been changing in the too-small bathroom in Howie's trailer to keep her from seeing him.

"That ain't why I'm here," Wright said.

He'd never been able to ask a victim for their last words. Part of him wanted to, though it felt like an unnecessary flexion of power, like a priest saying he heard the voice of God. Wright hoped God was turning away then. Hoped the Almighty lost his vision, if only for today.

"Why're you here?" the man asked. "Why're you fuckin' naked?"

"You like hurtin' people when you don't have to," Wright said. "And I gotta kill people, but I don't like it."

The man had been dead since he first locked eyes on him, and Howie was at home, wondering where he was.

"Have anythin' you'd like to say?" Wright asked. "Before."

The man took a breath, and Wright thought he might have fired. But then he lowered the gun.

"You're a demon," the man said finally.

Wright cocked an eyebrow.

"You're here because of her, aren't you?" the man asked.

For as long as Wright could pretend they meant the same person, he nodded. He hoped the *her* his meal was referring to would breathe easier sensing her own demon had died. The man was so whiskey-soaked, Wright could taste it in his blood and he realized he was already eating his throat. The man's life was warm in his stomach and he didn't even remember when he bit him.

In that way, Wright figured, his victim could be anyone. It was the choosing he couldn't imagine being absent for. He remembered every choice he'd ever made. Then he played the picture show of it in his eyelids, closed because he wouldn't see what he was doing.

He remembered choosing to wait to make love to Jess because his pa had told him their bodies would freeze, forever aged to just that moment. He remembered joining the army, every single moment of anticipation between boarding that bus and leaving his state for the first time to travel overseas. God, he remembered choosing not to kill Ridge, and choosing to drink, and choosing to keep living, and bedding Sadie, and those were all choices that could have changed everything, and they were all lesser than eating this man when he could still recognize himself in the mirror.

And they were all lesser than Howie's choice to let him into her home.

With hands soaked to stickiness in a dying man's blood, he didn't deserve to touch her. His lips and teeth were strung with sinew, more meant for killing than kissing. He cooked her food from memories he buried with the absence of his parents, but his stomach was light with flesh. He was in love with her but his very existence meant he didn't deserve to love anyone.

Eating a man only weighs heavy on his conscience. The energy of it is like liquor, or like coffee, something that spreads through his veins. He feels it hit his muscles like feeling his tongue after endless thirst and drinking water. It floods the living parts of him. It's not really flesh he's eating, he knows. It's a soul.

He didn't look in the mirror after the short time it took to finish the body. He rolled the rug the man died on up like a tortilla. In the shower, he scrubbed himself clean while battling thoughts of what he must've looked like with his innocence in killing those women because his body twitches like he just did something for the first time he never wants to do again.

The lights were on in Howie's trailer, movement inside, but he waited a good ten minutes in the freezing cold before she finally answered his knocking.

"I was hunting," he told Howie when she opened the door.

She reached out and grabbed his hair, ducked to smell his neck deeply. "You smell like soap," she said.

“Was that or blood,” he told her, reaching out too late to graze her wrist, to touch her cheek, to hold her by the waist and tell her he had wanted to be cooking dinner with her but he needed to kill a man. She was already in the dark of the hallway, but she had left the door open.

When it came to what she'd do with him, she had other plans.

It's late now and he lets the freezing water rush over his back, bracing himself against the wall of the shower. Howie has let him into her home under no false pretense of intimacy, instead over the threat of death, one he may deserve.

But here, in the tin walls of the trailer that whistle with the endless wind, none of that exists. It's only her and her vengeance.

As he lay on the floor earlier, waiting for sleep, he saw Howie undress in clear view of her open doorway. She stood framed by it, the amber light of her gentle bedroom lamp illuminating her frame. There was a chance she thought he was asleep so he stayed immobile. She unbuttoned her blouse slowly, each inch of skin like daybreak, before walking in her brassiere to hang it up in her closet and coming back to that framed space.

She didn't look at him. Instead she turned, unzipping her skirt. It fell from her hips like it missed the floor. He expected it to cling to her. Then she was only wearing her stockings, dark against the copper of her lean-muscled thighs, and the black silk panties riding high on her hips, and his cock was so hard he thought it could break the fabric of his drawers, split through his blanket. Still, he didn't move.

Before she stripped any more, she turned back to the door. Bent and picked up her skirt, folding it in half the long way before draping it over her bed. He thought of the couch in that man's house, thought of the rolled up rug he'd tossed in one of the town's dumpsters. Then, Howie reached behind herself and unfastened her bra. Slid it off her shoulders and stood there, her nipples hard and brick-dark, and the small half moons of her breasts fell forward when she hooked her thumbs around

her panties. Lamplight shone through the space between her legs. He swallowed and he could taste her.

If he'd stroked himself then it would've been over so quickly, gotten everywhere on the blanket she'd provided him even after he tore her door off its hinges all those nights ago. And maybe she knew that, wanted a reason to kick him out, so he stood. Walked stiffly from the day and his hard-on to the shower, hanging his head on the way, not looking at her.

Now, cold water beats against him like a second heart. He braces himself against the shower wall, lets it cool his body, but his hips grind against the still-warm air like they don't know there's nothing gripping him. There's whispers of her skin in the air. He's stood in this cold shower so long he should be numb and instead he aches for her.

This restraint is its own hell, but he'll bear it.

The bathroom door opens, and the shower curtain follows. No steam comes out. He turns and in his nudity sees Howie dressed in a white nightgown, flowy, swallowing her frame. Black lace lines the neck and sleeves, and her hair hangs in two braids down to her waist. He's catching his breath when he sees her, his cock still hard, his hands pressed against the wall which is empty of any spilt seed.

"Don't do that again," he rasps. The memory of her stockinged legs is a hot coal in his mind. "Please."

She leans against the doorframe, her expression blank. He can't touch his cock to shield it from her. Gone too long in its yearning, it's uncomfortably sensitive. Too much blood pooling in his groin, laying stagnant there.

"It's torture," he says, turning. Burning himself with cold water. Wincing to the spray, ducking his face so she doesn't see.

"Where were you tonight?" she asks him.

"Killin' a man," he says.

She doesn't flinch like he thinks she will. "What kind of man?"

“Someone rotten,” he tells her. He can’t look her in the eye.

“Was he white?” she asks, and for some reason that is her most loaded question.

“Yeah,” he answers.

The air is only the sound of cold water slapping his chest for a long minute.

“There are worse men than you here,” she says. “Nearly everyone at the station deserves a good beating.”

He braces himself on the wall because her scent is in his nose and he wants to do what she’s asking him, if she’s asking it. He can sense the weight she carries, sense it building every time they meet at the end of their days.

“Some deserve worse,” she says.

“Who?” he asks gruffly. He’s ready to kill for her. Stares her down to let her know that.

Her eyes flare, intrigue at her own recognized power running lightning through them. She steps forward, onto the tile floor.

“I’ll kill for you,” he promises, knowing he must be some kind of sight, erect and drenched in cold water. “Anyone.”

“How would you kill them?” she asks, stepping between him and the spray. The water seeps into the white linen of her nightgown and he wonders if he’s dreaming. Thinks he might be. It turns to liquid over her perfect form. She wraps her hand around his cock and even her long fingers don’t wrap all the way around, but she strokes him. Her palms are hotter than white coals and he wants to coat them with his seed just to hear it sizzle.

“I’d eat them alive,” he says, nearly groaning at her touch. His base swells in her palm and she squeezes his knot. “*Fuck, Howie. I’d make it hurt.*”

She puts his hand on his cock and makes him stroke himself as she leans back, her legs framing his legs. She peels the wet fabric off of her body. The gooseflesh of cold makes

her skin tight, her nipples hard, fierce points, the water beating down over her, half obscuring her face. With the same hand that stroked him, she parts her folds, rubbing herself. He groans at the sight, his tip wet with precum.

“How?” she gasps. The water half-muffles her voice but still it’s smoky and rich as bourbon. He plants one hand on the wall next to her head and fucks his fist with the other, his hips seizing sharply.

“If a man used his words to hurt you,” he growls, watching water spill down the center divot of her abdomen, smooth skin taut over shuddering breaths. “I’d tear out his tongue and make him eat it. Then, I’d hollow out his throat until he could see his spine in the mirror.”

“Yes,” she moans. She pinches her nipples and he gnashes his teeth, aching for release. “Hurry. You’re wasting water.”

“If he hurt you with his hands,” he says, grabbing her by the wrist and licking her fingers before shoving them back between her legs. “I’d eat them, finger by finger. Palm and then wrist. I’d wake him up between passing out, take the bones of his shoulders, heal him so I could eat his heart as he screamed.”

“Yes,” she gasps. “Yes, Wright!”

She’s writhing. He hears the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

“I’d take down the whole station for you, Howie,” he rasps, raptured by the truth of it. “There’d be nothin’ fuckin’ left of ‘em.”

Howie cries out.

“Come on me,” she moans, slamming off the water as her body quivers like a struck bow. “You’re my monster.”

With the hand not fisting his throbbing member, he grabs her by the throat.

“You’re my god,” he growls. “I’d burn this fuckin’ town and take you in its ashes.”

“Give me everything,” she manages. “I want your curse on me, Wright. Make me filthy with it... I want your cruelty. I want your evil all over me.”

She arches, pressing her gorgeous frame closer to him. The sight of her and the rush of heat pull the release out of him like an eruption. Groaning, he paints her with ropes of his cum, drenching her stomach and even her breasts with the strength of it. She keeps coaxing herself through, a weight lifting between them that he feels as he holds her hips, smoothing his hands over her damp skin.

With hands wet from her own pleasure, she spreads his seed across her torso. Over her dripping breasts and between the crease of her thighs. She watches him like she doesn't know just what he'll do.

Her skin is cold when he presses his lips to it. He heats her with his mouth, his tongue, kissing their shared pleasure off every inch of her skin, feasting between her legs next. With teeth dulled from a kill, he pulls her hips forward until she's riding his face, her hands gripping his hair and the shower head, her heels clawing at his back. She peaks twice like that, spilling into his mouth, her skin furnace-warm now.

Then he carries her to her bed, where a month ago she tried to kill him, and for a second the anger jolts between them like lightning. He jerks her up to her hands and knees, pulling her against him, his hands dwarfing her waist, mapping the ridges of her ribs and the valley of her spine before spanking her hard.

“You want my evil, Howie?” he growls, smoothing his palm over the mark before spanking her other cheek, squeezing both. Her rear entrance is so tempting, open for him, and he growls at the sight of it. “Gonna take this ass one day. God, you're fuckin' perfect.”

He spans her again, watching her flesh move, soft and deliciously plump.

“Fuck me, Wright,” she moans.

Kneading her plush rear, he jerks her towards him before spanking her with both hands. “Beg proper, Howie,” he commands, fingers digging in. Bruising her with prints of possession.

“Fuck me, monster,” she groans, pressing herself against him. “Stretch me out with your blood-filthy cock. I need you.”

“More, darlin’.”

“I want you to come inside me. I need to feel it.”

When a sound unfurls from his throat, it’s the wolf in him growling. She’s all limbs from her pleasure. He smooths the head of his cock over her kiss-swollen sex and thrusts into her with a groan. She nearly collapses, arms wide and hands gripping the quilt on her bed. It hits him that he’s never made love to her in a bed before because his knees are on soft mattress.

He takes everything out on their connection, fucking her for all the time they could have spent like this, for every sore feeling in his back from sleeping on her floor, from every fist-clenched fantasy he has ever had about her, lured by his desperate lust. She’s oil-slicked silk threaded through each vertebrae. She’s everything worth surrendering for. His soul takes refuge in hers, their fires coming together, scorching this room, the bed knocking into the wall with each thrust. He leaves barred bruises down the sides of her waist, slipping on her sweat, just to remind himself she’s alive.

When he knows dead skin still bruises, he pulls her to her knees too and holds her tight to his chest, his hand on her throat. Feeling her breathe. The tears from her pleasure make the space between his palm and her skin wet. She reaches back and catches a fist full of his hair, and she might pull it out at the root, but he’d give her that.

He’s giving her everything. When he comes he’s chasing her orgasm with a howl and his head thrown back.

Feral.

Wolven.

Entirely hers.

Collapsing, panting, knot-drained, he lies down and pulls her on top of his chest. She nestles closer to him, draping her naked thigh over his. Kissing his neck with her eyes closed. They're so warm they don't need blankets. Wright is so happy he doesn't care that everything he said was true, that he would kill for her so brutally it might put even his brother to shame. That he would do it as a human, raw and exposed and carnal.

When she looks up at him with her deep, soulful eyes, he wonders what he wouldn't do for her.

"You know one of us'll have to win," she says.

"Win?" he laughs.

She shakes her head softly. "It's always a battle, this thing between us."

He smiles, feeling wicked in his lust. "I'm a soldier. You're a sheriff. We can keep this fight going. Make it a hundred years' war."

He's sure she can't see in the dark how much doubt is etched into the perfect lines of her face, or how he lacks any of it. How this is a promise just as well as any sworn in a church. He'll spend a lifetime with her, as many as the Lord gives him.

"If I'm wrong about you," she promises. "I'll kill you, Wright."

He watches the quiver of her lip.

"That's alright by me," he tells her. Not because he wants to die, not even close, but because he knows she'd do it quietly now. He knows if it is him, she'll find whatever comes close to justice and do it where no one knows that the Lindal name has teeth, and no one comes for his family, and no one knows what he was but her.

"Not by me," she breathes.

The words catch in her throat, but she gets them out. He pulls her so tight to his chest that he'd have to slice himself open to fit her any closer.

Chapter 27

Caught

Howie

The truck comes to a stop in front of her and she slows, not wanting to see who's inside. The fog of the exhaust in the cold carries dread all around her, into the sky with the rushing clouds. It makes her think of Até's warnings, never to run unless they're on Indian land. That warning was always different than not whistling outside or Cynthia telling her not to put her purse on the ground, because warnings about spirits held a warmth to their presence and warnings about people kept a fatal shallowness.

It's the same she feels in her stomach as a man's booted foot pushes open the door. An elbow follows, leaning on a knee, and she recognizes the sheriff's uniform but it brings her no relief.

"Deputy Black Elk," Lieutenant Jack Williams calls, peering his head towards her. "You might be what I need right now."

Her heart stills in her chest but she crosses her arms in front of her chest, catching her breath.

"Think you mean who," she says curtly. "What for?"

"Got called in," he says. "They found another body."

If that's what she feels dread about, it doesn't lift to know it. "Inviting me, then?" she asks. "Thought you didn't want me at those things."

He smiles, and even through the wind she can hear the throaty grunt of cruel laughter. “I want you,” he says, pausing. “For this one. Think you learned your lesson.”

“I’m not dressed for it,” she says.

He peruses her body, leaning forward with both elbows on his knees.

“You are right about me not being keen on you the last time,” he says. “*This*, though, running into you. I think it’s fate.”

Walking into that car is a prison sentence, she knows. It occurs to her that whatever she says, his goal will be to get her in the passenger seat. His goal will be to let his hand drift from the steering wheel to her bare knee, and up her thigh. He wants her to drive with him because he wants to own some part of her that she’ll never surrender. He’d like to keep her in the metal and glass box with him, driving fast enough that she can’t break away.

“You might deserve a second chance,” he says. “We could use your keen eye.”

She can’t tell him *no*. Her body wants to, and her mind screams at her. In a pair of men’s running shorts and a jumper, she’s unarmed. Not just without her gun and badge, the two things that can put her at a crime scene without making her the victim, but without readiness, which is more dangerous.

“Not in uniform. Think I don’t look the part,” she offers.

Jack Williams cocks an eyebrow like he’s got a round in the chamber just for that, but he holds back.

“Get in the truck, Howie,” he implores. “We’re burning daylight out here.”

An unexpected calm settles into her bones. She relaxes her shoulders down her back and strides toward the passenger door. “Okay, then,” she says.

He peels away, one hand on the wheel and the other on the center of the bench seat. She thinks that if they crash, they’ll both go through the windshield like that trucker who died

killing Doris. She thinks there's no way Jack Williams knows the roads even though he's spent his entire life in Jackson. It's impossible for someone who fits into the world like him to be aware of anything he can't change.

The sun is high and warm today, though. It will win the battle with winter, if only until nightfall.

"Where's the site?" she asks.

"About..." he looks up at the sun. It feels like a mockery. "Five miles, or so. You run?"

"Can run five miles," she says.

He smiles. "Can't outrun a truck, I bet."

"Let me out and we'll see," she offers, and he laughs like a hound coughing up a shard of bone.

"No, you should be excited," he encourages, patting her knee. "You're gonna play with the big dogs, Black Elk."

She bites back the retort that she's been sleeping with a wolf. Really, she thinks she's going to have to fight Jack Williams for always believing there's something about her that shouldn't exist. This will be the fight one of them doesn't walk away from, because she feels the same way about him but her beliefs didn't build this car, or these roads, or the badge he wears so shiny on his shirt pocket. Her beliefs are the ground driven on and built around and pretend-ruled over.

His pistol is holstered to his hip and when she looks at it she feels nauseous because he's aroused and she didn't know it all this time. There's a shotgun at her feet. She makes note of that.

"Who was it?" she asks, after watching the white plains pass by them for a few minutes. They're not headed towards town, she realizes. She doesn't know anyone who lives this far out. They're driving on the way out of her jurisdiction, along some line of Rob Stoughton's property just because he seems to own everything out here.

Months ago, he'd talked about defenses, and ever since then she feels odd coming close to his house. The more she

familiarizes herself with it, the odder it is that his home is distanced from those things he considers valuable. The horses. The cattle. The bunkhouse, even. It's an island in itself. Cynthia's tribe is rich with small ranchers whose cattle pass their windows and whose horses stay close, and it could be the way of a ranching tycoon to keep so much distance but the result is that all his land feels cold. Desolate. Passing by this stretch sinks her stomach, because what if Williams buries her there?

"Whose body are we seeing?" she asks.

Then she sees something entirely different.

For as fleeting a moment as the dark mass in the snow is far away, she thinks there's a buffalo running towards the fence line. Except it's so fast, it's almost flying, the snow a wake behind it, powder where there should be hard slush from the sudden heat.

"Whoa," she says, knowing it'll jump the fence. "Whoa, whoa!"

And then it collides with the side of the truck hard enough for her to feel the dent. She screams when the truck fishtails on the ice, bracing herself against the dashboard as Williams battles for control of the steering wheel. A weight compacts with the truck bed and they spin forward, turning the opposite way down the road as the buffalo plants its heavy hooves into the roof of the truck and then the hood, pushing off of it as they skid to a halt in reverse.

She catches her breath. Her hands are braced so hard against the dash that her fingers cramp and her wrists feel strained. It's some miracle she wasn't thrown into the lieutenant or out of the truck itself. Williams groans and his driver's side window is spiderwebbed from his head. She looks up expecting to see carnage but the animal standing in the road isn't a buffalo.

It's a wolf nearly the size of a buffalo. It snarls in the road, its large paws braced. Teeth razor sharp points. Its sable fur looks beautiful in the wind, she realizes, so beautiful she

thinks nothing could ever kill it. Nothing could hunt this kind of nature. Her heart stills like looking at a lover.

It's growling at her.

Logic would tell her to run but instead she reaches for the ground and draws the shotgun into her hands. Williams frowns, staring like what he sees can't be real, but she's been ready for this.

She steps out of the truck. The wolf sniffs the air, and she levels her shotgun at it. All that exists in the world is the space between them, her boots crunching snow and its paws light as it lowers its head, ready to meet her.

For a long moment, carried in by the wind, she watches her memory of Wright and the horse, of how he made his body smaller, how the wind lifted through his hair like it does this creature's sable coat. If it's him, why would he be here? Why would he have gone wolf just a day after eating someone?

She raises the barrel, has the wolf in her sights. Ignores the sounds coming from her lieutenant. She's staring into the wolf's eyes, ready for this. With each pulse of her heart, her soul battles longing for the beauty of this creature and ending all the killing. Another body, Williams had said. Another death.

Why, then, does pulling the trigger feel like a crime?

"Get in the truck, Deputy!" Williams yells. "Now!"

The wolf growls and it doesn't come from lungs, but from the earth. Her bare knees press into the frozen ground. She's falling. Somehow despite its size, the wolf looks famished. Starving. It will devour her.

Williams fires his pistol and she jolts, looking back towards him for a second. It's long enough to feel hot breath on the skin of her neck and she scrambles backwards, aiming the shotgun and pulling the trigger just as swiftly. The wolf yelps, its body jolting from the impact, as Howie pushes herself up and sprints towards the truck, all the while feeling the echo of its breath on her neck.

When she reaches the passenger door, she scrambles inside, not before the wolf crashes into the driver's side door hard enough to bend it inward. Williams drives forward, pedal to the floor, burning rubber behind them as the wolf sprints alongside. It's fast enough to catch the bed, its paws hooked over the edge, pulling itself up.

Howie pushes open the back window and levels the shotgun once more as it lurches towards them. She fires at the airborne body and it falls back, tumbling to the road from the velocity of the truck as it finally hits eighty.

Gasping for air, she watches the beast right itself and still follow, though the shape of it grows smaller behind them.

“What the fuck?” Williams yells. “What the fuck?”

He slams his hand on the steering wheel and for the first time, they have something in common. Panic pushes through their veins like shared, hot blood.

“It's not a bear, Lieutenant,” she manages, but he doesn't even look at her.

The last she saw it, the wolf was still pursuing them. She feels it in each pounding step of her heart, wondering if it'll burst from the trees. Every flicker of darkness becomes the wolf, even as they make their way closer to town and houses begin to spring from the earth once more. Williams's truck took a beating she's sure would collapse her trailer, any door, anything in its wake.

Wright is indestructible. If that was him, nothing could stop him from killing. As they pull up to flashing lights, silent in the growing chill of the afternoon, she wonders who she'll find at the crime scene. Wonders if the flesh of whoever this is sticks to the teeth of the wolf that attacked them.

Williams parks, catching his breath. She grips the door handle. She's so ready to leave when a quiet thought occurs to her, one that runs ice water down her spine.

“How did we get here?” she whispers.

The lieutenant keeps his hands on the steering wheel. Howie's eyes water as realization shrouds her in its needle-

pricking cover. She's losing her ability to breathe. This is the crime scene, a straight shot from where the lieutenant's truck was facing when the wolf came for her.

But they'd fishtailed. They'd been turned around, heading far past town and nearly out of their jurisdiction.

This is the crime scene.

Before, he'd been taking her somewhere else.

"Call Brooks," she says flatly.

"Deputy Black Elk, there's nothing for you to report," the lieutenant says. "Nothing happened. Just got mistaken about my directions."

She thinks she'll throw up, wants to do it on the lieutenant's interior. "I shouldn't've shot that wolf," she says. "It went for the driver's side."

"What wolf?" he asks, like he already has an explanation for all the damage to his truck.

"Call Brooks!" she yells. "Now!"

"Calm down," he snarls. "Acting hysterical. Do you really want to look so emotional at a goddamned crime scene?"

Panic swirls inside her chest. Her hands won't stop shaking. "Call Brooks," she repeats, her voice lower.

"Good," Williams says. "Good. I'll do that. You should go home."

"Tell him to bring my fucking uniform," she says, shoving out the door.

The third woman found dead in Jackson had her head eaten, along with the parts that were gone from Emmeline. They knew she was a woman because under the blood, her nails were painted red.

At night, Howie sits on the floor of her shower under too-hot spray until her skin burns, and Wright comes into the bathroom.

He doesn't touch her. He sits on the floor with his back to the wall. He sets his elbows on his knees and doesn't even draw back the curtain to see her there. He just sets down an icy Coca Cola on the tile next to her hip, and she grips it tight enough to fight the tears.

Truth is, she'd tell him what happened but she wants to be the one to kill Jack Williams. It's the same reason she hasn't told Brooks yet, and the secret of her violation weighs heavy in the marrow of her hips. She thought she'd want to run away from Wright, to send him out of her home, but the moment she got close to him, her heart calmed for the first time since she got in the lieutenant's truck. Her shoulders fell away from her ears and she breathed.

Even though she headed straight for the shower, she wanted him here.

"You had a blackout today," Howie whispers.

She watches through the crack in the curtain as his wind-tanned face goes pale.

"I did, Howie," he admits mournfully. "That what this is about?"

She shakes her head slightly. "No."

"Think a steak dinner'd make it better?" he asks. "Or should I kill someone?"

She laughs but it sounds like a sob, and she breaks it with the heel of her hand on her teeth. He doesn't look away from her. He just told her he loves her and she's empty-handed. She doesn't know if he killed the woman who didn't have a face, but she's sure he's the reason Lieutenant Williams turned around.

She reaches past the curtain and pulls him into the searing water until she can feel her body again.

Chapter 28

Priest

Wright

Wright's mind is at war, and he knows what war is like. The bombings, and the memories of home. The sun cracking over ruins, warming his soot-stained face. He knows that chaos and he feels it now, balanced on the railing in the paddock like a scarecrow.

He wants to be a scarecrow for Howie. Wants to be a guard dog too, hell, he meant it when he said he'd kill everyone who ever hurt her. He'd do it with a grin on his face because she manages to smile through all the shit that's come her way. She jokes with him every day, but he's ready for her to drop the leash.

Every night he goes to bed kissing her shoulders and praying that she'll let him take the weight off them. This thing they have means more to him than it does to her. In that trailer, he has everything he's ever wanted and she's got a tornado in her mind. If she grants him permission, he'll drag the throats out of the men at the station. He'll eat them all and stack the bones in the shape of a Valentine's heart to give to her. Right now, he thinks he should do it anyway. Something happened the day that the third woman's body was found.

It's been weeks and he sees Howie grit her teeth every time she puts on her uniform. He sees her squeeze that fucking badge so tight between her fingers that she bruises her skin. When a sheriff goes missing, though, people look into it. No one cared for the drunkard he'd eaten as a man, but when he kills the sheriff's department, he'll have to leave town. It'll be

the end of his courtship with Howie, the end of his time on the ranch he loves.

When he kills them, though. It's *when*, not *if*.

He kisses Howie in the amber light of her bedroom, their tongues teasing and tracing each other until she begs for him, and he tells himself he'll wait another day to do it. In the mornings she drinks coffee perched on his lap, reading through the news with Wright's hand between her legs and he says another night. She drags him on runs with her, even though he slows down to keep her pace, and he loves the chill of mountain air only when he can hear her breath. He tells himself he'll wait until spring.

The first calf was born last night. Spring is coming fast. He feels it on his skin in the late afternoon sun, as a horse he spent all day breaking eats oats out of his palm. He smells it in the warm hay and ripeness of fifty-plus pregnant cows, in the mares who stay closer to the stables this time of year. In the sagebrush resurrecting itself from melting snow.

And he hears it in the sound of hooves on spring-softened dirt, mud on everything below hip height.

"Lindal!" a panicked voice calls from afar.

He turns and looks to see Anderson racing his horse in, his face red under a thick dark beard and a windswept mess of curls. He's panting, chest heaving.

There's blood on his shirt.

"Jesus, Jesus, God help us," Anderson pants. "Get on a goddamned horse. Dutch! Hemingway! Reyes!"

"They're out by the south fence," Wright says, frowning. He unlatches the paddock gate and takes the new stallion.

"Get a fucking priest!" Anderson cries out, folding into his horse's mane.

"Jesus," Wright curses.

He grabs a rifle too, slinging it over his shoulder. Throws one to Anderson, who catches it with shaking hands. Nearly drops it.

“Get a grip,” Wright growls, hoisting himself up onto the horse.

Anderson looks at him dizzily but kicks at his horse, and they’re off towards the pasture.

Wright hears the stampede before he sees it.

“Fuckin’ hell!” he yells, bracing himself. Wide eyed, he takes the stallion forward. There’s at least a hundred head storming his way, and he has to get to the side of the herd before they take him down. He’ll come back if they kill him, but Anderson won’t.

“Tree line!” Anderson yells.

“Gotta fuckin’ corral ‘em!” Wright yells.

“They’ll slow!” Anderson says. “Gotta go for what they’re runnin from!”

Wright stares at him before urging his horse towards the pines. The young stallion easily weaves its way through the thickets, though Wright doubts the trees will be a good place to go if a few stray cattle do make their way there.

As the herd rushes closer, rolling like a brown, heavy-hoofed line of surf, Anderson picks up a faster pace. Takes lead through the forest. Wright can smell Anderson’s fear over the pine and juniper but this is good. If he can push through the fear of a stampede, what they’re heading for can’t be that bad, can it?

He doesn’t have any more time to think.

There’s a sound like a freight train. It’s like thunder ripping through the ground, never stopping. Wright can feel it through the horse’s legs while it runs, and it’s more intense than the branches that whip his face and draw blood. It’s strong and quaking like nothing he’s ever felt.

One prey animal on its own, which is what the cattle are, especially steers like the ones running, they’re almost a neutral presence. They could kick and do enough damage, like an elk fending its children off from coyotes or a horse bucking when it’s startled in the stables. Something to be careful of.

But like this, they're a threat. All together. It hits his stomach as the first line of cattle rushes by in the pasture. He looks towards the fences now more than a mile away, hoping the herd stops by then. Hoping they don't launch themselves past the barn to the house. He knows all the damage that would cause, and he picks up the panic from them. The same strings that link him to the horses live inside those cattle, with their rasping lungs and pounding feet.

Then, as soon as it started, it's over. Anderson and Wright burst through the tree line. Down the hill, the cattle spread out to the sides of the fence. No damage to the barn, just a sea of brown and black and white. Calico colors of fatality and destruction, of so much damn money on four legs.

It's when the thunder dies that he starts to hear the screaming.

Chapter 29

Honor

Howie

Howie opens her eyes to the fading light of the afternoon. She takes a deep breath, feeling the fluttering of her heart. Already, she can feel Jack Williams's eyes on her from inside his house, but he's likely asleep after a night shift. If he does see her, he'll see her with Brooks and know just why she's there.

He'll either take this or try to kill them, and with a non-service pistol clipped to her hip, she's ready. Jack lives in a quiet home outside of town, isolated enough for two deputies to drive in during dusk without anyone looking at them twice. Quiet like wherever he'd drive her with the intent to kill.

Brooks turns up the radio and walks towards Williams's truck, smoothing his hand over the freshly painted driver's side door. Through the open windows of their cruiser, she hears Webb Pierce crooning "Back Street Affair" and thinks of swing dancing at the bar with strangers, thinks of him with Dutch and her with Wright in public like they've never been. The part of her that wants all that is the part of her that wants peace, though, and it's not here now.

It can't be.

"Here I was, thinking a deer hit him," Brooks says, knocking on the metal. "Must've been in some rush to hide that."

A flash of the wolf pushes through Howie's mind and her chest warms with the sweet feeling of revenge.

“It was a bear, wasn’t it?” she calls towards the house, raising her voice.

She wants him to come outside brandishing a pistol. She wants to shoot him in the heart and feed the pieces of him by hand to Wright, but she can’t without a reason. The town will never believe it’s self defense unless she has her own bullet wound.

“This must be,” Brooks says, raising his hammer with a flourish.

“Big fucking bear,” Howie agrees. “Two, even.”

“Do the honors?” Brooks asks, gesturing to her.

With her heart in her throat, she reels back her crowbar before smashing it into the windshield of the truck. It webs out like the impact of his head in their wreck. She growls with the heat of it, and Brooks hits the glass with the hammer, piercing through.

For years, this anger has simmered inside her, cooking her organs until she stifled her own fire just to survive it. But now the flames are strong and she feels them powering through her as she shatters the passenger side. Even with Wright’s arms around her, she has fallen into the nightmare of what could have happened. She has tossed and turned with the phantom of Jack Williams’s hands in her hair, dragging her somewhere her screams couldn’t be heard by anyone living. She has wondered if he would have killed her, and wondered for the women who didn’t have a wolf of a lover to hunt down their remains.

Does Jack Williams have the stain of dirt under his nails?

Has he buried someone like her?

“Come out, you fucking coward!” she screams, slamming the crowbar again and again, pounding out the beat of all this pain and anger. She’d like to turn his truck into a steel drum. She caves in every window. She pushes through the windshield to get to the radio, the steering wheel, shattering sprinkles of glass like ices all over the leather interior where she would have met her fate. This will be unrecognizable

when she's done. This will be as defaced as men like him make the world.

When she rips off the passenger sun visor, a flock of photographs sprinkles to the floor. She sees Jada as a child and her heart stills. It's enough to make her open the door just to keep that photograph, the one of Marin smiling, the one that shows evidence of an uncle caring for his niece and sister-in-law.

Underneath it, however, is a photo of men in suits, stone-faced. Howie brushes off the glass to look at it. She recognizes some of them, the four Williams brothers, a few officers at work, and for the pulse of a second she can imagine Jack Williams looking at a memory with some fond notion of brotherhood. It makes her want to find them all and hunt them too. They look so alike. Whenever this photo was taken, it was sunny enough to bleach the pale men's cheekbones white and dance off the gold rings on their fingers.

It's not very detailed, but she stares for a long time at all that gold and wonders why of all the time he had to do so, Jack Williams would choose the day after she brought in the signet ring to try to hurt her.

Because right now, with glass dust glittering like sweat on her skin, slivering into the cracks of her knuckles, she's sure that's what he wanted. He wanted to destroy her for threatening something that was his, something he belonged to, and that is perhaps the only time he has ever felt like her.

"Let's go," Brooks says, looking over her shoulder, seeing what she's seeing. Knowing what she knows instantly. A man like Brooks understands both the need to protect one's own and what it means to care for Howie.

When she buries the picture under glass with the others, she makes it look forgotten. Up until she saw the photo, she'd thought she was getting even for Williams wanting to hurt her. As long as he believes she never saw it, she and Brooks can pretend they know nothing deeper than that.

The evidence lives in her mind, the first real clue that the killer isn't the man she shares her bed with. As she watches

the fields pass by her and she and Brooks continue their shift, she feels as though she has the upper hand for the first time.

Just as well as she knows that the moment a person believes such a thing is often the time when they fall the hardest.

Chapter 30

Rabid

Wright

Battles overseas were different than how Wright thought they would be, with two sides facing each other down across a field, drums pounding in their tinny metal staccato. He figures he had some illusions being raised in Carolina, what with all they talked of the war with the north. Made it seem real ceremonial, something to be proud of, something that made a man's life worthwhile.

They spoke of what was taken from them, cities burned by the boys in blue and those that held strong. Never spoke of what they got back. Freedom, or the promise of it. Men taken out of bondage— that was a holy cause, the greatest cause, as far as Wright saw it, and so he didn't think twice before signing up to save others overseas from their oppressors.

When he saw war, he learned it wasn't like psalms or ballads, though. There was no melody to it at all. The battles he got to know stretched out and stitched up, like a wound that just wouldn't heal, even if they had the salve for it. Wasn't God nor Death that could bring peace out there, and leaving the grounds as wrecked as they were, Wright could imagine the fight it would take the earth to settle where he'd seen it.

It was near-unimaginable, not turning those days, but war taught him how to fight his nature. That's being a soldier. That's being a man, sometimes. Taking the voice a body speaks with and translating it into something different. Gunfire makes him want to turn, just like a cattle stampede, he learns, and just like skies so vast he can see God watching him.

Thing about being a wolf rather than a man or a soldier is, he supposes, how deep it runs. If his being a man could beat the beast inside him, he'd never eat human flesh. So the animal, that's deeper, deeper than marrow.

So he says his prayers, after the ground stops shaking with the thunder of hooves, because Anderson was right that what all those cattle were running from was worse, was Satan, was evil.

His own kind.

Two voices scream, one in pain and one in fear, the latter a bone-chilling, childish sound. Wright feels sick. The body crouched over Booker is too frail, too small, no fur on it, neither, just a mess of curls gone birds-nest with blood. Tiny, thin fingers dig into flesh like they're tipped with knives, oh, this is hell, isn't it?

Through her red-streaked face, through the mouth strung with flesh and sinew, *screaming*, he sees eyes he recognizes from the forest. He should look at them less than his friend, because Booker is dying, but this kind of death is a mirror.

"Help me," a voice bleeds, high pitched and reedy.

It's the girl from the trees.

"Help me!" she screams, blood and spit stringing from her mouth.

Stoughton's daughter bites through flesh with razor sharp teeth. Wright knows from the prickle in the back of his neck, from the way a growl wants to pour from him, from the way his lips pull back to bare his teeth, that she's his kind and he wants her dead because of it.

"Mama!" the girl sobs, digging her hands into Booker's open stomach. "Mama!"

There isn't much of the man's body to call pale, just his face blanched and bleeding from the mouth, just his eyes not focusing, not seeing anything but the shape. Wright knows death by scent and it's ripe in the spilt guts of his friend.

He's back on the battlefield. Bodies blown open by mortar and bullets, and all that fucking cold. A man he doesn't remember the name of gripping his arm so tight, and no, it's Anderson yelling some kind of warning.

Wright blinks, shakes his head, doesn't know when he got off his horse or picked up his gun but he's walking forward. The girl looks up at him with pleading, watery eyes. Stoughton's daughter. He swings the butt of his pistol as hard as he can towards her head but she screams louder, lunging towards him and sinking her teeth into his forearm.

Into his forearm.

He feels her in the flesh.

Wolf's teeth.

The pain's somewhere within him but her tears fall into the blood and her teeth stay latched on, sucking at his blood as they dig deeper. He didn't want to kill her but he has to, he realizes, almost as soon as he understands he can't.

It's the eyes that catch him. He levels his pistol at her temple and despite the pain, he can't pull the trigger. Can't do what would have to come after, either, can't bite into her neck or eat at her chest and swallow her heart. She's just a fucking kid, god damn it.

He wedges the gun between their bodies instead, right against her shoulder, and braces himself before firing.

He curses as she sprawls backwards, not wanting to look at the tear in his own flesh he knows is there. Instead he fires again, clipping her other shoulder, and she bolts towards the woods so fast he'd think her a deer in her lightness.

"Fucking rabid," Anderson cries. "Oh, fuck, Carolina, she got you!"

Wright eyes the man from where he kneels, his hands on Booker's intestines, half-eaten by the girl. Booker's eyelids flutter.

"She ain't rabid," Wright says, firming his hand over his wound before pulling it away. There's no time. He has work to

do. “No, I know what that is.”

“The fuck is it?” Anderson asks.

Booker gasps from the ground. Wright kneels down to him too.

“Last words, brother,” he murmurs, knocking Booker’s shoulder.

The man’s eyes open on his almost gratefully, hazel that was once so bright burning out.

“No,” Anderson groans. “No, no, no.”

“What for?” Booker manages through chattering teeth. “Heaven can’t... be different.”

“Might be warmer,” Wright says, taking his hand.

“We can save him,” Anderson pleads. He pushes himself away. But he could slip on all that blood in the snow, and they can’t get Booker on a horse, much less all the way to the hospital. He’s only got a few minutes left and they’ll either be in agony or he’ll get a quick ride to the afterlife.

“You’re a good man,” Wright says.

Booker nods to him, a stream of blood flowing from his lips to his jaw. Wright levels his pistol at his temple, cocking it.

“You see my wife, don’t fuckin’ touch her. You see my pa, you tell the Devil he put you in the wrong place,” Wright says.

Booker smiles, the glint in his eye bright one last time before Wright pulls the trigger and the shot echoes out. His ears go deaf for a moment, not from the sound but from the weight of it, and when the world comes back, Wright is set back on his heels and each beat of his heart shudders through him. He knows his eyes are wide from how dry they are. Anderson is pushing on his shoulders, and someone is yelling.

“What?” Dutch’s voice yells. Not *what happened*, not *what the hell*, not even the breathy lingering of an unfinished sentence. There’s no placement for this. No space. This can’t be.

Wright stands. Reyes and Dutch are still on their horses, looking shell shocked at the sight. And all Wright's thinking now is he's as angry with Rob Stoughton as he is at himself for letting Ridge kill mercilessly all those years, because his brother has a graveyard filled with people as good as Booker and better, even. At once, he's a criminal and an executioner.

"Take Booker to the main house," Wright snaps. "Want Stoughton to fuckin' see him."

Silence stills the men. Dutch and Reyes fought overseas and would know command if it hit them but Wright's too angry to be giving orders, spitting mad, his lips curled in a snarl that means his eyes must be wild too. He steadies himself now because he has to.

"Hospital," Anderson murmurs. "Could'a made it."

Wright figures the man needs a good smack upside the head but he locks eyes with Dutch instead, steadying his breathing, and of the things that can be spoken without words between men, the recognition of death is one of them.

"Was it an animal?" Dutch asks. "Why ain't it dead too?"

"Taking care of it," Wright says, ripping the sleeve from his shirt to wrap it around his forearm, snug enough to staunch the bleeding. He's not even sure if human first aid can work on a wolf bite, but he doesn't have a choice. He's dripping dark blood onto the snow and the pain is white-hot, burning like a fire underneath his skin.

"A girl," Anderson shudders.

Dutch frowns. "Where?"

It occurs to Wright he's looking for a body, like a corpse to come before this one. Just as it occurs to him that there won't be many ways to avoid the truth coming out about that child. He can keep it in the ranch, though. God willing.

He curses, knowing it's him who's got to contain this.

His flannel is wet with blood already, but other than an unfamiliar pain he's alright. Less shook than the others, at least. So he stands tall and acts as a leader this time.

“Goin’ after her,” he says. “Take the body downhill and stay on guard. A bullet’ll wound her but it won’t kill her. Still, better she’s wounded. Don’t try to fight her.”

Dutch’s dark eyes say he knows there’s something deeper in Wright’s mind. He bends down and starts to hoist Booker up by the arms, but more of the man’s guts spill out and his head falls to the side. Wright steps in, scooping the corpse up. With his strength, it’s no more weight than lifting an infant.

“Trust I know what I’m doin’,” he says, draping the body over Anderson’s horse, back down, open stomach yawning at the sky.

Maybe the other men are speaking but he can’t hear them. Already, he’s fixing to shut off his humanity. He’ll need to turn it down so he doesn’t see Sadie, or Howie, or Jess in those eyes. So he sees through the sweetness to the wolf who’s winning.

“I’ll go with you,” Dutch says, but Wright levels him with a glare.

“You take my fuckin’ horse back,” Wright says flatly. “Don’t let her get to the stables.”

Chapter 31

Hunt

Wright

In the forest that borders the Stoughton ranch, Wright stays human even though his skin itches to be peeled off and devoured. He can feel another wolf's presence even without smelling the fur.

To an outside eye, this place could look eerie. Tall, winter-stripped pines reach like spears for the endless starry sky, the galaxy peering through skeletal fingers to the ghost-white snow beneath.

Nothing in nature is foreign to Wright, though. He can feel the burrowed creatures in the tree root tunnels and he can feel the unrest down in the stables, miles away. Here in the forest, he could close his eyes and find the girl. Doesn't even need to think, just sets his nose towards her. The scent of his own blood is the strongest, and Booker's is underneath, but he smells the cells she left on him. The single strand of hair and her clotted saliva in his wound.

He's got to find her, *know* her, without thinking of her because thoughts are as human as anger. If he does, he'll think of who else she could kill. Dutch, Anderson, Reyes, Elliot. Good men who deserve better than to be dug into. There can't be any less of them.

The girl is his responsibility now, bound by blood and kinship. Bound by him being the only one who can control him, because he doubts Rob Stoughton has any wolf in him. And so Wright's kin is hiding from him, hunting him, wild and

uncontrolled, and he cares about too many damn people out here to let her stay.

“Girl,” he calls out. “Get down here. Need to bring you to your pa, need to sort this out... I swear if you take another one of mine...”

I'll kill you. Are those the words on the tip of his tongue? Has he grown so attached to these men, to this town, that he'd break his code for them? He clenches his fist, feels blood trickling over his knuckles.

“Don't want it comin' to that,” he says. He looks up in the trees. At night like this, everything is shades of gray but he can still see shape and movement. And far off, he notices a silhouette that doesn't belong.

He doesn't walk towards her directly. She could know by taste that he's similar to her but he doubts she has the experience for that. No way that girl is fifteen— looked to be a skinny thing, no more than ten years old. Nowhere near a woman yet.

It doesn't make sense, how someone could turn so young, but he can't think about it yet. Can't think about much, as he listens to the crunch of his own boots in the snow and settles a good ten paces away from the tree where she's perched. She sways and a cascade of snow cuts the night sky, but he pretends not to notice.

“He was a good man,” he says under his breath, setting back against a tree and pulling a cigarette from his pocket. “A good man, girl, the one you killed. Tore him apart like you meant to hurt him. What'd he do to you? Must be somethin' awful for you to kill him like that.”

He lights up, closing his eyes to take a deep drag. It cuts the scent of her but he can hear her still, with his ears perked up to the sound of her shifting her weight. She's panting and sniffing like she hasn't stopped crying. For all of Stoughton's goodness as a man, running the ranch with a fair and generous hand, working hard with the rest of them, he raised a thin-skinned daughter. Raised her to be weak and blind.

Wright might not have been the best guardian for his brother, but when Ridge went bad, he knew the line he was crossing. He was just bullheaded enough not to give a damn about morality over pleasure. What of this girl, then?

“I can still smell his blood on me,” he says. “If I were weaker, I’d think it somethin’ nice. Almost home-cooked, ain’t it?”

He takes another drag, this time looking up at her. She’s already watching him, her eyes wide over her blood-stained cheeks, and he can hear the stickiness of her hands like peeling glue on the tree branch. He vanishes her in the cloud of his exhale.

“Ain’t ever tasted anything as good as blood,” he tells her, thinking of one woman’s blood more than any other. “But I was never weak, honey. No choice in that matter.”

With one last exhale, he drops his cigarette into the snow and listens to the hiss.

“What are you gonna be?” he asks. “Strong enough to face what you’ve done?”

He steps closer, clear of the branches, figuring what’s next. The girl’s anxious enough to tremble, to shake the branch. Cornered animals bite.

“Or too weak to go on?” he offers. He doesn’t want to kill her. He promises himself that he doesn’t want to kill her, but there’s a steadiness to his feet on the ground that makes him feel territorial.

“I didn’t mean to,” she whimpers, her first words in this state that have any kind of logic to them. Maybe it’s from eating her fill.

“That’s good,” he tells her. “Now, get down.”

She stands, her body shaking with the branch, and he steps back. Only time he’s ever faced down a wolf, he was fixing to die and he’s a long way from that now. Wants not just survival but to leave in one piece, so when she jumps towards him, he’s already ready.

He catches her.

Spins her down to the snow while her teeth gnash and snap towards his neck.

The first punch doesn't knock her out, with him holding back for something like the look in her eyes. He'd backhand Ridge for foolishness, and by all means this girl has made one hell of a mistake, but she's not his ward. It feels wrong, and in the hesitation he feels her cut her teeth on the meat of his palm so he pulls away. Hits her hard this time, full strength to the underside of her jaw, and then her eyes go spilt marble and she lies limp in the snow.

Not sure how long she'll be out, he ties a strip of his shirt to gag her and throws her over his shoulder. Bags of grain weigh more than this. He doesn't understand how she fits the ferocity in such a small body, nor what happened to make her this way so young. As he takes off towards the big house, he's wondering if she's the one Howie has been hunting for.

If she is, will he surrender the girl? Will he bring her head in a canvas bag, show Howie how sharp her teeth are?

He can't imagine a girl, a child, doing what he saw in those photographs. But he'd rather say it was her than it was him forgetting.

It doesn't take long to come into the light of Rob Stoughton's home, where a group stands outside. He can smell the liquor and hear the voices of men just learning to speak of war. It's best they don't see him with the girl thrown over his shoulder, her small mouth gagged with flannel. As he meanders around towards a separate entrance, he feels her start to stir and opens the door, entering the dark house. Doesn't look like Stoughton was in for long before this all went to hell.

He puts the girl on a couch, watching her eyes flutter open.

Almost instantly, she starts panting, her eyes going wide and her small chest rising and falling as fast as a clock ticks. She pushes herself up, reaching for the gag, but when she sees the blood on her hands she screams and he closes his hand over her mouth, sealing the air in.

“You make a sound past that one, all those men outside’ll hang you in the goddamned woods,” he snaps. “I’m gettin’ your pa. Understand?”

Tears spill onto his palm as she nods once.

“Go to your room,” he says firmly.

She nods again, and the moment he releases her she scrambles up the stairs, all of the grace she had earlier gone to her fear. With her further from him, he can breathe again and he stands, pushing his hands through his hair. It’s longer than the last time he did it, down to the collar of his jacket, and standing in a rich man’s home with blood across his clothes he feels a foreigner to himself.

Somehow, this feels like homesickness. Not for Carolina, but for the trailer in the woods he fears he won’t make it to tonight, even for an hour to hold his woman to his chest. He smooths his hand over his mouth and then remembers the wound on his palm. When he settles, he lets his own blood drip down to the fine polished wood floor. The stain is the closest thing he can get to retribution.

Chapter 32

Paranoid

Howie

When Howie pulls into her driveway, she sees emptiness.

An empty space on the steps to her trailer that she expects to see Wright's folded-up, too-tall body sitting at, the kind of position she figures he prays in, elbows on his knees and hands clasped. Waiting for something to give her back.

She doesn't know what could keep him so late and if she were someone who could care brutally about Wright Lindal, she'd worry. She'd feel his absence deep in the pit of her stomach and she'd grip her steering wheel too hard. All this time, she'd fought being that person but it hits her now that she is. That she did it by accident.

It's the first time she's come home without him since she can remember and it feels wrong. Like all the darkness around her truck is outer space. Like the home she bought with her own damn money isn't hers anymore. Like the woods around her house where she cuts spring onions and mushrooms and berries now house terrifying beasts.

For now, she hates him a little. He stole things from her, she knows. Worse than any material goods, he took space in her mind that can't belong to anyone else because it wasn't there before him.

When she steps out, the chill of unease creeps between her legs, up towards the nape of her neck. She swears there's a wolf just past the corner of her trailer. That spot is dark even in

the light of her truck, but that's off now. All that illuminates her space is moonlight, some distant reflection of the sun. The other element of missing him kicks in.

She's not afraid of anything. She still has the powder of broken glass in her knuckles and the photograph in her mind. There's nothing in those woods that can scare her, even if she suddenly knows who's watching. Knows that Jack Williams came to her home, that he's waiting in the darkness past her trailer for her to open the door so that he can be in the space between her and her exit.

For a minute, she thinks about pretending she doesn't know he's there. Her mind paints a beautiful picture of her moving slowly at first, and then, when she feels the heat at her back, leveling her pistol with his skin and ripping the brain from his skull with lead. There's always the chance that he's stronger than her, though.

Always the chance that he can win this one.

Grasping her pistol in its holster, she perks her ears towards that spot. Wishes she had some of Wright's wolf hearing, bets she could hear the man *breathing* if it was like that. Instead, she waits as she lifts her pistol and angles it towards where she imagines him to be.

So faint she doesn't know if she's imagining it over the wind, she hears the smallest snap. But then, there's snow all around her. Freezing ground makes the same noise sometimes.

She fires anyway, once to hear the echo and the second to make sure a body would drop.

There's nothing. Not even the sound of feet running away. Not even the sound of paws.

"Fucking paranoid," she mutters, holstering her gun again. She looks towards her door and feels the chill settle back, and decides she'll make a visit to the ranch to see where the hell her wolf man has gone off to.

Chapter 33

Not fair

Wright

“It ain’t my daughter killin’ those women,” Rob Stoughton says, pushing a glass towards Wright.

Wright grits his teeth around both offerings. The first, because he hadn’t thought a damn thing about those dead women since finding Booker the way he was, but also because that means Stoughton harbors some fucking doubt about them being bear killings. And maybe a powerful man with money and fucking influence could help Howie with this thing that’s tearing her up inside more than Wright can by loving her.

The second, the bourbon smells sweet from here and oblivion smells sweeter. Numbing this out would be understandable, hell, he can’t even be held accountable for it. He grips the glass tight, tastes the condensation with his fingertips.

“How do you figure?” Wright asks.

“This has to be her first time,” Rob says. “Else, I would’ve known about it. She talks to me.”

“Mm,” Wright acknowledges, watching the ice swirl in the amber. “Booker’d still be dead.”

“By your hand, if you listen to Anderson speak it,” Rob tells him. “Though I imagine you did what had to be done.”

Wright glares at him. Bites his tongue. *He’s* done what needs to be done, unlike the man who didn’t teach his

daughter who to kill and how to hunt. Damn shame they lost a good man out of it.

Outside, he hears no one, but the lights are bright in the bunkhouse. He doubts those men'll sleep tonight. Bets he won't either. So he's got nothing left but to sit in the largest kitchen he's ever seen, turning a cold glass into rings on the white marble.

The whole situation is lost on him. He doesn't smell predation on Rob Stoughton, nothing more than warmth and a paternal nature. The man clearly cares for his daughter, but if he cared properly she'd never have killed someone like this.

"You ever teach her?" Wright asks.

Rob frowns. "Teach her what? To kill one of my men? Are you serious?"

"Teach her to fuckin' hunt," Wright says.

Leaning back, Rob polishes off his bourbon before pouring himself another. "I'm not a wolf, Lindal."

"Her ma, then?"

"Her ma's not a wolf. She got it from me." Rob eyes the glass in front of Wright. "You don't drink, do you?"

"How'd she get somethin' from you that you don't have?" Wright asks.

"Hell, any man who's got a daughter asks himself that question," Rob says. "Women in my family go wolf, but I thought she'd have years. She knew this could happen to her. Knew it's how it'd turn out."

"A good man dyin' ain't how it's meant to turn out," Wright says, gripping that same counter tight enough to hear the stone creak.

"Neither is her killing before her tenth birthday," Stoughton says, lowering his voice. He's one of those men who gets quieter the more pissed off he gets. "You got kids, Lindal?"

Wright pauses, takes a breath. He doesn't need to share this part of himself with Stoughton when he hasn't spoken much about it with Howie.

"I did," he says, eyeing his wounds. It stings with its unfamiliarity, with how deep she got into the meat of his palm and his forearm. It's open and purple on the inside, blood pooling, and he wonders how to go about this. When the creature in Ocracoke attacked him, he healed in a day. But this is deeper. This is his kind, a bone-deep betrayal.

He tears off his soiled flannel and stands in just his undershirt, ripping one of his sleeves into a bandage for his arm and another strip for his palm.

"Don't have many nice shirts, do you, Lindal?" Rob Stoughton asks.

Wright raises an eyebrow at him. If anyone knows how much money he's got locked up in his truck, it's his employer.

"Can put you on a foreman's salary," the man says. "If you stick around."

"All I need's two good shirts," Wright says.

Stoughton's brow flickers.

"Booker could use somethin' nice to be buried in," Wright continues. He can smell the body, is sure the girl can smell it too. He leans forward on the counter, hanging his head. "You got money to throw it around, put it towards him or the men who know more than me."

"No one knows more than you about this," Rob says firmly.

Wright grits his teeth, looking in the girl's direction. The sound of sobbing echoes through the big house.

"What's her name?" he asks. "The girl."

"Her mother and I debated," Stoughton says. "The woman won, of course."

Wright shrugs it off. He doesn't want some debate cutting into his attention.

“I need to talk to her,” he says.

“Not now,” Stoughton says firmly.

“Like hell, *not now*,” Wright says. “No one knows more than me about this, right? Said that your damn self. Bring her down. Now.”

Stoughton straightens. He’s not particularly arrogant, always seemed fairly amiable, but it’s clear he hasn’t been told what to do before. Not by a younger man, and not by a man with dirt in the cracks of his fingerprints. But he listens, disappearing from the kitchen with his head held high.

Wright feels his own blood from the bite on his forearm that hasn’t healed, from the pad of his hand that bears the half-moon indentation of a child’s mouth. He doesn’t know how she could turn so young, or how she can grow up right without any wolves in her family. Might be a lost cause.

It pisses him off. One of her parents has to be responsible for the fact that a good man died tonight. Wright rips the last sleeve of his flannel off and thinks about how Rob Stoughton probably has an entire closet of his own clothes up there, and this was a shirt Wright liked wearing. He wraps his arm again to try to fight the blood seeping out.

When Stoughton brings his daughter down, she still has every ounce of blood on her. He just threw a nightgown over it. Stifling a sigh of frustration, not wanting to push the man further than he’s already pushing him, Wright strides to the sink and wets a cloth.

“C’mere,” he tells the girl.

She clings to her pa’s leg and Wright shoots him a humorless look. He edges her forward and Wright crouches at eye level with her.

“Quit cryin’,” he says. “Won’t do no good.”

The damn thing’s hyperventilating though, spittle coming out of her mouth, and that’s a sight because he’s sure she has some flesh stuck in her teeth still.

“*Hey*,” he urges, before slapping her on the cheek.

“Don’t touch her-” Stoughton growls, stepping forward, but Wright holds a hand out past the girl’s shoulder to stop him.

In the silence, they both hear her take a deep breath.

Wright tilts her chin and wipes the same cheek he hit, gently though. The girl’s bright blue eyes fix on his. He cleans her forehead and her other cheek silently as her breathing evens out.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers.

“Shh,” Wright hushes her. “Won’t do no good either. You ever turned wolf before?”

“She hasn’t,” Stoughton interrupts.

“Sir, I respect you, but I’m fixin’ to ask you to wait outside,” Wright warns.

“I’m not supposed to talk about it,” the girl whispers.

“What’s that mean?” Wright asks, staring at Stoughton. But the man looks stunned, horrified even.

“Before...” she starts, before her lip starts quivering and he gives her a narrow-eyed warning. She shudders an inhale, looking at his bandaged hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Wolves don’t apologize,” Wright says firmly.

She takes another deep breath. “I can’t tell you. If I tell you, he’ll kill you.”

“Who’s *he*?” Stoughton barks.

The girl sniffles, wiping her face, but she keeps silent.

“Jada, you know what I’d do to anyone who hurts you!” Stoughton yells. “You know I’d kill them. It doesn’t matter how powerful they are. We have a *system*, dear.”

“Daddy, I won’t tell you,” she sobs. “I didn’t hurt anyone else. I promise I didn’t!”

“Sayin’ someone made you go wolf,” Wright confirms, grateful to have a new target for his vitriol. She doesn’t seem in the state to be answering questions like this and he’s not

really sure if that someone's real or imagined. At that age, even Ridge saw monsters under his bed.

"I didn't eat then," she says. "But this time... I was so hungry. He smelled so good, but I knew it was wrong. I knew it. Why did I do it? I wanted to stop. I asked your friend to make me stop!"

"Somethin'd be good for you to learn," Wright says. "If you're what I am, you're not gonna want to talk too much. Simple answers. You turned?"

"Yes," she says. "Twice."

"Twice?" Stoughton exclaims.

"Ever kill before?" Wright asks.

She looks between her pa and him. "Did I kill that man?"

"No," Stoughton says. "A gunshot killed him."

Wright tongs his cheek to keep from flexing his jaw angrily. "Need you to stop talkin'," he growls, because otherwise he really is going to kill him. "Need you to wait outside."

Stoughton stares him down but when he doesn't blink, the man relents, grabbing the bottle from the counter and strolling outside. Wright can see him through the window-threaded doors, sees his crisp white shirt glow like the moon.

"Your pa thinks you're weak," Wright says, washing the cloth before using it on her hands. "Are you?"

"Yes, sir," she says.

He frowns.

"Turned twice before eatin' anyone," Wright says. "That means you're stronger than you think."

"I couldn't stop," she whimpers.

Wright nods. "Once I went two months without huntin'. Went blind with hunger, killed a man without even thinkin' who he was."

"I don't wanna do this ever again," she says.

He stares at her. Never in his life has he pictured having a daughter, thinking all wolves could breed were sons. Beyond that, Wright has always thought of himself as a better man than he was a father.

He's not prepared for this.

"It ain't about want," he says, and the thought echoes in the caverns of his own mind. Seeing newspaper on the breakfast table through the fan of Howie's hair. Knowing every time a woman's turned up dead, he's had a blackout. It clutches at his chest with sharp-taloned hands. "It's about doin' the least harm. You're gonna kill people, honey. All your life."

"That's not fair," she says.

He offers a grim smile. "No, it ain't."

"Do you kill people?" she asks.

He nods.

"Do you eat them?"

"I do," he says. "But there are a lot of bad men in this world. Gotta even the scales a bit. Hope the Lord forgives us for doin' His own job for Him one day."

Pausing, he looks down at her and feels a softness he isn't quite accustomed to. Maybe it's sharing something with this young girl, or maybe it's the knowledge he'll never get to pass on his learning to his own child. But at this small moment in the kitchen, he decides to take her in. Even if it means planting yet another root in this frozen ground.

He'd been lying to himself if he thought there was ever a chance he'd leave, anyway.

He smudges a thumbprint of blood under the girl's nose.

"Smell that?" he asks. "That's me."

She takes a deep breath, frowning in concentration.

"You might not be used to all this," he says. "But in a month, or if you feel like turnin', I need you to find me by

scent. Do it before you turn, and we'll find someone together. No good men, no women, no kids. Especially..."

He thinks of Howie sleeping on his chest, the scent of her hair. He thinks of Joseph and the families at the reservation. When Ridge was young, he'd tell him not to kill anyone black because that was the war he saw. But now he feels like there's been a hundred different wars he hasn't been privy to, and he's had some role to play in the wrongness of each one.

"I'll guide you," he says. "I'll show you who to choose."

The girl nods, sniffing.

"Now quit your cryin'," he says, reaching out to wipe her cheek with the towel. "We all have burdens. Gonna carry them together, got that?"

Like a bullet, arms fly around his neck and with his wounds so fresh from this same child, he tenses. But when she buries her face in his neck, it isn't to bare teeth, and a forgotten warmth falls over him.

He remembers holding his son in the living room of the farmhouse back in Orion. In the girl's blood-matted curls, he catches a whiff of that baby scent, like leaning down and pressing his nose to Harry's head. There's a love like God in fatherhood. He missed it without remembering it for ten long years.

So he sits with her, and time burns away.

Chapter 34

Starting a fire

Howie

Howie walks up the unfamiliar, rocky drive to the ranch wrapping her arms around herself to shelter from the cold. The lights in the bunkhouse are on, out past the main house and the stables, so she starts walking there.

“Deputy,” a voice calls.

She startles, clutching her chest like he’d jumped out at her. But what she sees in the moonlight and through squares of yellow window lamplight is Rob Stoughton, looking a mess. Disheveled with a bottle of bourbon in his hand.

“You going to arrest someone?” Stoughton asks, half-drunkenly.

“It look that way?” she asks.

Instead of her work uniform, she has one of Wright’s jackets on, even though she’s swimming in it. He peruses her.

“That’s a Carhartt,” he acknowledges.

“It is,” she says.

“Here for pleasure then,” he says. “You’re walking in on a dark moment, Miss Black Elk.”

She stills, staring at him to continue.

“Our man Booker has had an accident,” he tells her, taking a swig.

She stares out at the powdered blackness of endless snowy pastures in the night as if she'll see something. She hears no wolves. Wright's truck is in the drive with the others, and she wonders if it could be because of him.

"I'm sorry," she says. Swallowing feels like taking a rock down the throat. "I'm here for Wright Lindal."

"Oh," Stoughton laughs. "Then you'll be sitting with me for now."

For all her hesitance around Williams who may be Rob Stoughton's friend for all she knows, she doesn't feel threatened by the rancher. It's the way he notices her, maybe, in too many passive glances to be seeking something out under her skin. He looks in her eyes when he speaks to her, but he looks like he'd rather be talking to someone else. He's dismissive in the way that feels less disrespectful and more safe. He would never consume her.

"Why?" she asks.

"He's inside for a spell."

"And you're outside?" she teases. "He taking over the ranch, something I don't know?"

"No, no," Stoughton says.

He holds out the bottle and she takes it, sitting one wooden chair down from him. His eyes go to the distance between them but he doesn't object. She looks towards the windows trying to make out what she can from the half-lit interior.

"It'd be impossible, from what I hear," Stoughton says. "For you not to know something."

She narrows her eyes at him. "Who's telling you anything about me?"

He clears his throat and brings a cigarette out of a metal case in his pocket. "How well d'you know Lindal?"

It's not an answer to her question, and that makes her think there's more he's hinting at, more that has nothing to do with Wright. She feels deep in the furrow of her brow.

“What’s he doing?” she asks sharply.

Stoughton laughs. “Acting like he’s in there with some other woman. He’s in there with my daughter, but she’s a child. Don’t think you’ve got to worry. So I’ll ask again, how well do you know the man?”

“Think you’d call it biblically,” she snips, taking a sip from the bottle. It tastes like a charred, sweet forest kissed with oranges. The label reads Pappy Van Winkle. She’d like to steal it from him, make him think it got lost in his big house.

“You the one he spends every night with?” he asks.

She leans back, crossing her legs, and doesn’t answer him. It’s better not to say much when she’s talking to a stranger.

“I like him,” he says. “He’s a good man. Bit of an angry bastard but I figure he found his match in you.”

“Are you calling me an angry bastard?” Howie asks, almost laughing.

“No, of course not,” he says. “Cold, maybe. To those you don’t know, and for good reason.”

“He called me a bastard once,” she says.

Stoughton laughs. “Christ, I should be happy with how he spoke to me, then.”

Howie smiles, taking a sip and glancing inside.

“Do you love him?” Stoughton asks, a question so unexpected she almost says *yes*.

“No,” she tells him, but her stomach drops like going too fast over a bump in the road, because suddenly she’s saying those words to the way he looks at her kissing flour off her fingers. It’s him inside her with his ribs against her ribs and his hands gripping her hips, her sides, her thighs, her neck, his legs hot on hers and her mind sunning itself in the warmth of him. It’s his sweet breath on her shoulder as she reads him the news, smiling before day breaks, and it’s the way his voice sounds like a gravel road in summertime when they’re lying down in bed and he’s telling her what France was like, and suddenly her chest gets tight because she’s *here*, isn’t she, and

it's not because she's afraid of Williams. She's no more afraid of Williams than she's ever been.

It's because her trailer didn't feel like home without Wright there.

And he's leaving.

As if all the weight in her sinks to her feet abruptly, she's standing, bottle in hand, and she thinks about going to the bunkhouse and sleeping with one of Wright's friends, or taking Stoughton into a grand bedroom somewhere in that house. She feels nauseous and wrong, like a frog with a scalpel over its belly.

With this vantage, she can see through to the amber-lit kitchen and she has to blink too much because she can hardly recognize him. He's on the floor, back against the cupboards, his long legs splayed out in front of him. In his strong, bloodstained arms rests a girl, her curls matted and her face pressed to his chest, back rising and falling like sleeping after a good cry, half shuddering. His eyes are closed, his mouth slack with dreaming.

The sight of Wright as a father hits her so strongly that it surpasses the panic of a child covered in blood. Wright has a balled towel in his unfurled fist, and his hand and arm are wrapped with strips of cloth.

"We might be out here all night," Rob Stoughton says. "Was thinking of starting a fire."

Howie pulls her lips between her teeth. The ache is too strong. She wants to fight it with more of the bourbon that might be older than her, that is at least as old as whoever Wright is holding like a daughter in there, but she also needs to run. She needs to remember who she is, how her life before this was good, how she never needed him, and those are the words she says less like a prayer and more like remembering a poem for class as a child.

"What happened to them?" she asks.

"Eh," he sighs. "Torn on telling you much. On one hand, you told me you don't much care for the man and you tried to

arrest him, once.”

“I’m here,” she says.

“You’re here,” he agrees.

“What’s on the other hand?” she asks.

He smiles, reaching for the bottle and sipping when she surrenders it to him. The silence stretches out under his watchful eyes, and she thinks he might be the kind of smart that turns deadly.

“Think I’ll be going,” she says.

“He’s gonna save my girl,” Stoughton says. “That’s why I hired the man from Carolina who didn’t know shit about cattle and had never ridden a horse in his life. I knew what he was and I knew he’d be the right one.”

She wants to walk away, is only half-hearing this.

“I’ll offer him a real job here,” he says, taking a deep sigh. He’s been holding his breath around this. “Make him a foreman, give him the cottage down the way. It’s three bedrooms. Enough space for a family.”

“Why tell me that?” she asks.

“I love an underdog story, Miss Black Elk,” he says. “The honest kind, not the one they put on the silver screens... Wouldn’t it be a sight? You could dress for it. I know just the event.”

She frowns.

“Wouldn’t it be fantastic,” he says. “If those men who wish you dead got an ounce of their own medicine?”

He leans forward, setting the bottle on the table before shifting back in his seat and pulling his hat over his eyes. It’s already dark. The gesture isn’t for comfort. She knows what a dismissal looks like.

She takes the bottle and his words to her truck, but she doesn’t head home.

Chapter 35

Home

Wright

Waking up from a deep, warm nap, Wright puts Jada to bed in the room that smells the most like her. He's not sure what time it is, just that time has passed in the dusky, quiet way it lingers indoors.

In the bunkhouse, he throws on a t-shirt, not wanting to ruin another one of his flannels, but he doesn't stay. The cold keeps him awake as he drives to Howie's trailer so late at night it feels like the sun will rise any moment.

She isn't home.

Hasn't been home, from the scent of it, and that flares like panic, like wondering if something could've happened to her. But when he opens her door and steps into the emptiness, he feels deep in his chest that something has finished between them. It's so cold he can see his breath in the glow of the clock on the wall.

She's with someone else, and it doesn't matter to him if that person is a lover or if she's sleeping at Brooks's because it exists as a glaring reflection of his own raw heart. Wright is the one who will go to her trailer just to see her instead of sleeping, and whatever happened to her today had her reaching for someone else.

It kills him. Guts him. Weakens his knees. His friend died today and he hadn't known how much he'd needed the salve of Howie's presence before showing up and finding her gone. He smooths his hand over the bedding and tastes their shared

sweat, his cock twitching at the flavor. What he thinks is that he's spent so many nights driving into her snug heat that he won't even know what sleep is without feeling her nails on his back. Without tasting her divine, panting breaths.

That's enough to make the animal take over. Smoothing his hand over the growing bulge in his jeans, he pushes off the bed and out the door, driving towards where he remembers Brooks's house to be. The hunt lives in his chest as his headlights swallow snow-white roads, the ice gray in their yellow glare. When they light up the drive, though, he's surprised to see her sitting on the front steps, the cherry of a cigarette hanging from her lips and a nearly untouched bottle between her legs.

Her hair blows in the gentle wind and she pulls her jacket tighter around her body, straightening when she sees him. He's conscious now of the still-open cut on his hand, the one on his forearm, still bleeding through their meager wrappings. But they'll tell the story for him.

Pushing open the door, he steps out into the frosted night, covering the space between them with a few long strides.

"What're you doing here-" she starts, but he jerks her to her feet and swallows those words before they can end in a question. Her lips are so soft, her mouth bittersweet from bourbon and cigarettes when she opens for his tongue.

Then, her fingers find his hair, raking through and sending chills up his spine. He clings to her, presses her against the door, and she opens to him, climbing him just to get pressure from his hips.

"*Wright,*" she breathes into his mouth. The fact it's like a prayer gives some hope to him.

But her scent was on the ranch. The tracks of her tires marked the snow. She came to him and she ran from him. Maybe this is all too much for her. He feels his blood seep hot and warm through the bandages, wanting to be a part of her instead.

"What happened to you?" she asks, breaking away.

He's dizzy with wanting as she pushes past his chest and into the snowy yard, the moonlight catching the rosemary oil in her hair. At a safe distance, she crosses her arms in front of her chest.

"Cut you with a knife and you didn't wrap that wound," she says. "What's on your arm? Smell like blood."

"It'll heal," he says, though he's not sure.

She shakes her head. "It'll heal," she scoffs. "Keeping secrets now?"

"Can't tell you what happened tonight," he says firmly.

"Oh," she states. "Go kiss the other woman, then."

It's not cold anymore. The heat of his anger flares like an explosion. He's shocked he doesn't see her hair blow away from her face, doesn't see the orange glow of it.

"That's a betrayal, you know," he says, forcing himself to steady his voice.

"I know," she snaps.

"An accusation like that, is what I fuckin' mean," he growls. "Throw your fuckin' worst at me, Howie. Think I'm the kind of man who would want anyone but you?"

"Maybe I don't know what kind of man you are," she says. "You're a killer, after all."

"You knew that from the start!" he yells. "What is it? What's gotten into your head like this?"

"Nothing," she says indignantly.

"Don't," he snaps, surging towards her. When she steps away, he stills, feeling the tension at his back go close to turning. "Don't fuckin' lie to me. I'll shove those words back down your throat."

"Fine," she says. "Woke up, is all. Realized I've been in this fantasy, thinking about who I want you to be and not who you are."

He nods, tonguing his cheek before kicking at the snow to staunch his anger.

“Shit, Howie,” he says. “Where’s the fantasy, hm? Ain’t been nothin’ but honest to you, and I do know you. Know exactly who you are. Know whatever this is ain’t fuckin’ it.”

“What if I have to kill you?” she asks suddenly. “What happens after all this? When you leave, go back to your brother’s wife like a rotten fucking dog; what happens when you’re done with this vacation?”

“Vacation,” he repeats, half-laughing. Like he’s been on a vacation since he was a child, like the closest thing to it wasn’t the war.

“*Vacation*,” she mocks. “Year’s halfway up. What’re you bringing back with you, Mr. Lindal?”

Heat flares in his chest but he tempers it, needs to, with her. Or else he’ll push her into the snow and take her hard enough for her to feel how much he wants her. Might break her bones. He bares his teeth with the effort of restraint.

“That why you weren’t home?” he asks.

“Home?” she repeats like a question.

“*Home*, Howie,” he snaps.

“Not your home,” she scoffs. “Home’s back east, ennit?”

“No,” he growls.

“It’s not my trailer,” she says.

He looks at her, looks at the way the snow reflects starlight like crystals all around her. In any image he has of heaven, it’s bright and blinding like his preachers told him. But he’d abandon it for the shadow of her amongst all that light.

“No it ain’t,” he agrees.

“Where is it, then?” she grits out.

He strides towards her and she steps away.

“Stay,” he barks. “Ain’t gonna fuckin’ touch you.”

And so she stills, haloed by the light of her fogged breath, watching him. He gets about five feet away from her and keeps that distance as he walks around her, making his strides shorter so his long legs keep the shape. He lets himself be a wolf, sharp teeth bared and nostrils flared to the scent of her.

When he's done, she's standing in the middle of a shadowed ring, staring at him like he's crazy.

"What's this?" she asks.

"Home," he answers.

Her eyes glisten suddenly. He firms his jaw.

"Tonight was hell," he says. "Didn't call back east. I drove to where I thought you were and I didn't stop until I found you. God damn it!"

Heat shifts within him and he flexes his hands.

"Wright," she whispers. Her cheeks are wet.

"*Howie*," he growls. "I'd say I'd look for you in every other woman I meet, but there'll be none. If you lock me out, I will claw at your doors. If you run, I'll chase you. You'll have to kill me, *Howie*, if you want to leave. *Christ*, I want you to be the death of me."

"Pretty words," she says.

"The *truth*," he snarls.

"You know what I think, Mr. Lindal?" *Howie* asks.

He straightens, bristling. "What's that, Miss Black Elk?"

"I think you've fallen in love with a hundred women. Said you'd die for all of them."

Narrowing his eyes, he bolts closer. She startles but stands her ground, even when he grasps her neck and draws his finger harshly over her pulse. Just to make her shiver. Just to watch how her body stands on end for him. "Not a hundred."

"A dozen," she says, leaning towards him. Trailing her fingers along the cut of his abdomen in his t-shirt, letting her

body fall closer to his grasp. This is softer, disarming, but he is wild for her.

“Sure,” he says, gripping tighter before letting up. “Let’s call it a dozen.”

“What’s the difference then, huh?” she asks, shoving at his chest. “Between me and the other eleven.”

Everything, he wants to say. *Me. You.* How fucking hard this has all been... He laughs like he’s figuring it out just now. Steps away with the realization.

“Darlin’,” he says. “I’ve fallen in love with a dozen women, but I never hated one of ‘em ‘till I met you.”

A smile flickers across her lips, but her eyes are fierce and angry. “You hate me, Wright?”

“With all my fuckin’ heart,” he says, because it means something different.

“I hate you too,” she tells him. “Sometimes it’s all I think about.”

He can smell her arousal seeping between her thighs and he palms his erection through his jeans. But she steps forward, cupping her own hands over the bulge and stroking. He groans.

“I left the ranch because I hate you so fucking much,” she says, unzipping him and pulling him out. He can’t feel the cold. Only her long fingers stroking his throbbing length. He growls low in his throat at the feeling, at her touch like silken thread through each nerve ending. “So much I could kill you.”

“Went to your trailer just to hate you more,” he breathes, catching her by the back of her neck, bringing her closer.

When she looks at him, her eyes are searching his, trying to find something. She squeezes his knot and he fights a shudder, fights a moan that would seem all too vulnerable right here after all this.

“Like I do every night,” he manages, covering her hand with his own to guide her. He’s too fucking close to spilling

over her fist, needs her to let up, needs her not to look at him.
“Like I’ve done since you put me in cuffs.”

She smiles and he tastes smoke in his mouth. It’s the same smoke she disappears with when she turns and bolts through the snow.

Chapter 36

Mine

Howie
Something is off about him tonight.

She likes it.

She likes it enough to spring into the cold instead of going inside, the adrenaline of the day powering her legs faster, kicking up powder behind her as she follows the reflection of the moon towards the fields. She bolts over the fence and doesn't hear him chasing her, but she knows him. She *must* know him to feel as much for him as she does.

As she runs, she tries to force all the desire out through her lungs and the burning of her muscles. She pumps her fists and doesn't let the liquor slow her down like it wants to. Instead, she feels the earth hit the soles of her feet. She feels the blaring plains winds, the harsh bite of a dying winter, the fresh pine of the Tetons, all nipping at her skin like a thousand teeth.

This is what freedom felt like as a child, in Dakota and then in Texas, in all the rest stops in between chasing nothing but the sun. After Iná died, she started chasing her spirit, even knowing she couldn't be far from her.

That closeness had been enough when she married Darran but she wishes she could watch her mother's face around Wright, wishes he could try to win her over like he did Até, wishes she could watch everyone they left behind take all this in for her, but she can't. It was easier not to love anyone but she can't outrun that. Easier to pretend there was no loneliness with so many people around her but there's a hole in her chest

now that the werewolf chasing her has made his home, and she will always hate him just as much as she loves him for that.

So she's back running, but this time she's chasing the moon. This time, she's chasing herself, so she's not really running from anything anymore.

Wright is a man hard-wrought by war and solitary living and she's not sure he ever laughed before meeting her but she knows somewhere in the darkness behind her, he's light on his feet with a glint in his eyes, hunting her down. If he's like the man in the woods, he's faster than she can ever hope to be, so she banks on his hard-on slowing him down but she wants him to catch her, to sink his teeth into her, to use the weapon of his body harshly and erase the softness she feels like rot inside her.

When the moon ducks behind the clouds, the fields are dark and she has to run by memory. Has to sprint remembering each dark spot that could mean a gopher hole or a snowdrift that could swallow her up to her shoulders. She runs so far, she can't even see which lights belong to Brooks's two-bedroom house anymore, but it's when she looks back to check that she loses the ground.

She screams in the arms that spin her twice before pulling her into the shallow snow, rolling with her so she feels the bruises of the earth just as well as he must. For a moment she doesn't know which way is up and claws for survival, catching cotton knit and warm skin and cuts wrapped in torn flannel. Then, it's Wright's teeth on her shoulder, sinking in, the spilt champagne feeling in her veins matching the pain and the thrill and the biting cold.

Gasping, she kicks at him and he grabs her by the waist, spins her onto her stomach and hoists her onto her knees. She feels him growl between her legs, feels his hot breath there, and the next bite lands in the meat of her thigh as his hands tear her panties.

"You run away, I'll catch you," he growls, spanking her hard enough to make her sprawl forward. He drapes himself

over her, gripping her by the back of her neck. “Gotta teach you a lesson, darlin’.”

The chill of frozen earth bites into her cheek as he grinds her face into the ground and she groans, reaching for his forearm. He pushes up her skirt and the wind bites into her skin, but that’s not why she has chills.

“You’re mine, Howie,” he says low, drawing his tongue over her shoulder.

But her fingers find his wound and she digs in, pulling at the gash. Making him groan out from the pain, even as he crests himself against her and plunges inside.

White spots break onto the plane of her eyes as pleasure overwhelms her. His length fills her so expertly she can taste the rush of blood to her head, and now she’s clawing into his arm deep enough to feel his blood spill in rivulets between her fingers.

He growls harshly, and from within she feels him as an animal, as a monster with teeth. He pulls out of her only to spin her onto her back, ripping off her jacket and pinning her arms with it. In the moonlight, she sees him set back, breath white in the snow, eyes dark watching her, hand fisted around his shaft as he looks down at her exposed breasts. She squirms, trying to shimmy out of her sleeves, but he shoves her shoulder down hard into the earth.

The wound on his forearm is bigger now, pried open by her fingers, and he holds it over her. Now, his blood drips like hot candle wax over her naked skin. It’s just small drops but she feels each one hit, feels her body grow sensitive, alive. Her nipples ache for his mouth, for his hands, but his brows are furrowed and his eyes glare with such an intense focus she feels it like fire on her flesh.

“Please,” she begs. “I need you inside of me, Wright.”

He’s making a pattern. When she lifts her head to see, he shoves her down again.

“Bastard,” she breathes.

His focus doesn’t break.

Instead, almost in a trance, he dips two fingers into his wound and traces something across her chest. The blood makes his fingers slick over her breasts. He's writing. She grinds against him, needing him, feeling the ache of emptiness deep inside.

"Say you're mine," he tells her.

"Make me," she hisses.

With a growl, he buries his face in her neck so loud and fast she screams. But she feels his tongue run up her neck, and he takes her lip between his teeth, biting lightly before licking the blood.

"Scared, Howie?" he asks, dragging his teeth back down her neck to her collarbone. She feels him like a knife slicing across her skin.

She is. It's just that she wants to be. He draws his razor sharp teeth over her nipple and she feels her heart slam against her chest.

"I hear your heart racin'," he says, kissing the peak. "Don't make me take a bite out of you."

At the underside of her breast, she feels him pressure his teeth only gently in the soft flesh and she moans.

"Ain't no human ever gonna fuck you like I do," he says, and from the way his tongue moves she imagines she's bleeding. All she feels is lightning like a low fire on every inch of her skin, as he drags his teeth down her ribcage and firms them around the first soft portion of her stomach. "Want me to eat you alive, Howie?"

"No," she whimpers, before yelping at the feel of his large, rough hand gripping her sex. He's intrusive, possessive, so fucking cruel. It makes her back arch into him, her body disobeying her mind for a gasping, aching moment.

"Don't fuckin' lie to me," he commands, gripping her tighter. "I could crush you."

Despite herself, she moans. He's not even inside her but she's never felt so intimate, so exposed. He nips above her

navel and she feels her skin break open, but just as soon, his tongue swirls over the sensitive wound and she bucks against his hand.

“You want that danger, darlin’,” he growls, lashing his tongue against her left nipple before taking her breast in his mouth and biting gently. It’s enough to leave a mark. He’s branding her and she’s seeing stars. “You were meant to wield a weapon no one else can master.”

The moment his mouth leaves her body, she feels like she’s falling from the sky. No parachute, no nothing, just the irreparable desperation to have him on her again.

“Yes, Wright,” she whimpers.

“Say it.”

“I’m no one’s.”

He wrenches her legs open now, inhales deep with his nose to her fur. “Wrong answer,” he growls.

She seals her lips together, grinding against his face, but he withdraws and slaps his hand down hard on her sex. She screams, and the next thing she feels are his teeth scraping against her inner thigh. Even in the cold, she can feel her pleasure running from her entrance down the crease of her ass. She feels herself seeping into the brutal snow. She’s coming, or must be, but this is more than that. She can feel each star piercing her from above like they’re bleeding from his lungs.

“Take me,” she cries. “Fuck, *Wright*, I need you!”

“*Howie*.”

“I’m yours!” she screams, tears brimming in her eyes. She isn’t lying. There will never be anyone who means what Wright Lindal means to her.

But nothing this fiery can last.

“I’m yours, Wright,” she promises, grabbing him by the hair and pulling his face up to hers. She looks in his eyes and prays. “If you’re so desperate to own some part of me, it’s this.”

Gasping, she feels him shift up and sink into her, stealing her vision with the pressure of his body on hers. Her hands are free and she claws into him, biting his lower lip until she tastes the salted sweet of his blood. Somehow he's all around her and everything inside.

"You're mine," he growls into her neck, thrusting hard inside her. "Mine, Howie. *Mine.*"

Sweat falls to the mess between them, the slick against each of their naked chests. All her blood and his, this heady cocktail of pain and lust, and before she loses herself in the galaxy of his warmth, she digs her teeth into his neck and hopes the mark sticks. She knows he's scarred her, *marked* her as his, but doesn't think of anything other than the mounting pleasure inside her.

It's more intense than anything she's ever felt. She thinks his blood is in hers, and for a moment every color in the dark is bright as a sunny day, and the sky is iridescent above, and every sound is like a scream, the taste of him strong and delicious on her tongue. She's desperate for him. Dying for him, or with him.

They're bleeding into each other, two worlds cracking open at the core and resealing in this embrace. She feels him flood her but he's already a part of her. She tells him she loves him in her first language and through panting breaths and black vision he kisses her like he can learn what she means just through taste.

When she opens her eyes the dawn is breaking and all the blue in his gaze is melting like glacier water, that is the translation. Their love isn't ownership. It's an obsession like thirst. She touches his cheek and she can taste with the pads of her fingers.

"You love me," she whispers.

"Forever," he says, threading his fingers through her hair. He ducks down to her neck and breathes deep. "Forever, Howie."

His voice is low and warm. There's no better peace than this seal between them.

"I love you more'n God," he tells her, speaking into her hair.

Chapter 37

Enough

Howie

This morning before work, Howie woke up in Wright Lindal's arms, the heat from him so strong she saves on her gas bill now.

She has for the past month. An entire month with a man who has killed people, torn them limb from limb before swallowing them down, who cradles her in the strong home of his arms, falls asleep with his soft lips against the crown of her head, *that* man.

Hers.

If she wanted to press callouses into her fingers from the points of her badge, she would think what it might mean to love Wright Lindal. To fall so deeply for someone who, regardless of the flesh between his canine teeth, could never take her back to his home state as a wife.

When he leaves, or whenever he leaves, she'll be in Wyoming with only Brooks and Até to keep her from dying of the odd mix of loneliness and boredom that will undoubtedly arrive when this all goes to hell. She'll solve this case. Find who's been killing these women.

And.

And, it'll destroy her.

If what Stoughton said all those weeks ago was true, there are people watching her. If the photograph in Jack Williams's truck means what she thinks it does, he might be one of them.

It could be a different ring, she tells herself, but the words are like cellophane. They trap and tangle her tongue, her breath. True, as far as evidence is concerned, she's further from solving this case than she was a month ago. With no new bodies and no traces amongst those killed, the world grows colder and the cases dull with winter.

The last one had been carefully executed. Even she had the thought it might have been a bear. Except for the head. Bears would mangle a head. Eat the fatness of another's cheeks. But they wouldn't make it disappear.

Sometimes, the head isn't gone. Sometimes, especially on nights when work keeps Wright so late and needs him so early he's only in her bed for an hour or so, that head butts against the door of her trailer until she hears a creaking noise and knows it's rolling silently down the padded carpet of her hallway.

Maybe she's so sure she'll solve this before Wright leaves because she has to, or it'll steal her. Set itself upon her shoulders and take what was once hers.

"If you're fixing to throw up, might want to do that outside," Brooks offers, bringing her back to her body. He lowers his voice to a near whisper. "Are you pregnant?"

Howie glares at him. "Think I've got a tougher stomach than that."

"Than getting pregnant?" he teases, before she moves to kick him. "Hey!"

She smiles. "Hush now. Rub some dirt on it. I'm not pregnant."

"You look like something's haunting you," he says. "Figured it was that giant cowboy's child. Would sit like a damn bowling ball."

"That's enough," she scoffs.

"What is it, then?" he asks.

And of course she can't tell him. Of course, if Brooks learns what Wright really is, he won't repeat it, but then...

Then, he's not safe. Brooks is the not-at-all-biological younger brother she never had, never got to protect. And as much as he deserves the truth, deserves to know what she's been doing with Wright that could result in a conviction, not a conception, she won't tell her partner that. He's strong, but in some ways he's softer than she's ever been able to be. And she doesn't want to extinguish that just yet.

"Morning, officers," a man's voice calls, and it's surprising to hear any niceties in that voice. After what she and Brooks did to his truck.

After what he would have done to her.

When she sees Jack Williams now, she has to strain not to eye his hand for a faceless signet ring. It isn't so hard because he doesn't corner her like he once did, doesn't send her out on meaningless check-ins at native-named streets just to taunt her, doesn't cling to the details that slip past her lips like he's inspecting them under a microscope.

Brooks frowns at her briefly because of course, he's noticed this.

Likely notices the heat of bitterness in the chalk-rough scowl of the lieutenant's voice, too.

Jack settles against Howie's desk and slaps a thick, cream colored paper next to her coffee mug. She frowns up at him. He's got dark stubble and his hair's a bit of a mess today, different from the coiffed appearance he usually maintains.

"Rob Stoughton is hosting a party this Saturday," Jack says.

Howie's stomach constricts. There should be no ties between her and Rob Stoughton, with the girl from the kitchen who Wright won't name. That night haunts her too, though Wright's claiming of her feels like a lifetime apart.

Love you more than God.

"Do you know him?" Jack asks.

"Everyone knows Rob Stoughton," Brooks answers for her.

Jack eyes him, tapping the invitation's corner against her desk.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Howie swallows away the image of an eyeless skull making that same noise against her home. She pinches the envelope between her fingers, feeling the resistance as Jack nearly tries to pull it away.

“He sent an invitation?” she asks. “Apologies, Lieutenant. I’m not interested in being your date.”

The invitation looks embossed, a ridiculous display of wealth.

“Not my date, Officer Black Elk,” Jack says. “You’ve been invited personally. Only officer on the list.”

He pauses. She reads through the four names listed. Captain Marcus Blake, Lieutenant Jack Williams, Sergeant Ramon Ojero, and Officer Howie Black Elk.

“Didn’t think you knew him,” Jack says.

Howie looks to Brooks, who raises his eyebrows.

“But then, maybe that unauthorized visit to his ranch left an impression on him,” Jack adds, clearing his throat with a wolflike smile. The words seem foreign to Howie, a litany of unauthorized visits that ended with Wright’s breath on her neck scrolling through her mind before she even understands what he’s talking about. The first incident. When she’d thought Wright was the killer.

“Sure he’s had parties since then,” she says with a forced smile. “Maybe he’d just like to support the department. How patriotic.”

Jack raises an eyebrow. Brooks stifles a laugh.

“Anyway,” she sighs. “I’m not interested in a party. I have plans this weekend.”

A lie.

“There a pow wow or something?” Jack asks.

“Those are in the summer,” Brooks scoffs, as if such a thing should be obvious, and maybe it should be.

Jack levels him with a cold glance.

“I’ll warm up the cruiser,” Brooks says, leaving with a warning look at the lieutenant, like there’s anything either of them can do to him.

“What plans does a single woman have, then?” Jack asks.

“Your father wanted to take me away for the weekend,” Howie says with a smile.

He scoffs. “He has a wife.”

“Oh, he said your aunt didn’t mind,” she quips. “Decided it would be interesting to fuck outside of the family. First time for-.”

She bites her tongue, realizing those were words she was meant to keep inside her head, not spill into the open like this.

“Finish the sentence, Officer,” Williams demands.

“Everything,” she relinquishes.

“Thin ice,” Williams scolds, darkness burning through his gaze. “You’re coming to the party. Not in the position to deny an event where you’ll be representing the force. And since that’s the case...”

He peruses her form. He’s so close his gaze feels like hard snow on bare skin.

“Wear something tight,” he says. “Hell, I’ll pay for it. Have a tab at the shop on Broadway.”

Of course you do, she wants to say, but she bites her tongue. *Or of course you want me to know that enough women mistake you for a good man to spend time in your sphere.*

“Why does it matter what I wear, Lieutenant?” she asks. “Didn’t see a request in the invitation.”

“If you’re going to show face as the only female officer, we’ll want to emphasize the feminine,” he says.

He reaches out as if to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear but she catches him by the wrist, the vice of her heart squeezing for a too-long pulse. His eyes darken.

“Howie,” he says in a low voice, leaning in. “Aren’t we past this?”

Despite her grip, he’s still pushing his hand closer.

“Don’t touch me,” she hisses.

“You’re not in a position to tell me what to do,” he says. “Know your place, officer.”

“Rob Stoughton seems to think it’s alongside yours,” she snips, though her cheeks burn. With all that fire, she shoves his hand away and he recoils. Only before settling like a snake.

“Maybe he sees something we don’t,” he says wistfully.

“Can’t be hard,” she remarks, settling back.

Jack nods to himself, each thread of his features looped into something quietly menacing. “Would you like me to take you off the force, Howie?”

She steels herself as her stomach twists and drops. “No, Sir.”

“Right,” he says, settling onto her desk. “I think you need an attitude adjustment.”

She closes her eyes.

“You missed the one I tried to give you,” he continues.

She’ll breathe through this.

“But now,” he says, and the beat of silence could be filled with any number of degrading looks, but she can’t see them. “Now we’re at an impasse. Truly, I don’t know what to do with you.”

His fingers tilt her chin up, and she meets his gaze. Wright’s voice in her ear.

If he hurt you with his hands, I’d eat them, finger by finger. Palm and then wrist.

“You don’t know what to do with me,” she repeats. And silently, *but he knows what he’ll do to you.*

She laughs to herself. Pictures, with brilliant hatred and excitement, Jack Williams on the floor of the station, blue blood turned crimson, tears watering everything down.

“What?” Williams snaps.

Howie smiles, looking up at the lieutenant through her lashes.

“That’s so generous of you, Jack,” she says. “I’ll dress to kill. And I’ll keep the tag on, so you can send it as a gift to whatever poor girl you’ve got your sights on next.”

With that she leaves, and she’s not sure who else uses Jack William’s tab at the dress shop. But if his eyes scalding her back are any indication, she might want to start checking local women for burn marks.

Before she meets Brooks in the cruiser, she braces herself on the side of the building and vomits.

When she catches her partner’s gaze, all she mouths is *your fault.*

Chapter 38

Born

Wright

Never in Wright's life had he imagined himself capable of having a daughter, and he knows his new position as a mentor is far from fatherhood. But sometimes, a near-paternal protective instinct flares up in him.

It happens when she whimpers with the pain of fighting a turn. When she sheds her wolf skin and curls up, bloodied and satiated, guilt lining her sleeping face as he wraps her in blankets carries her back to the ranch. Her sympathy makes him wonder if the curse only affecting the men in his family isn't somewhat of a blessing. The only people afflicted are those callous enough not to care too much.

"It'll get better," he finds himself promising, words he never said to Ridge.

They're better off this way.

We need this to survive.

For all the things he tells her, though, all those comforting words, he can sense something off with her. Recovery takes longer for her than it did for him as a teen. She's too young, was forced to turn too quickly, and he sees the way it aches in her.

Her father, or her sire, or whatever Rob would like to call himself, has changed with her. There's a darkness in the man's face now as if he's aged overnight, and it must be his concern for the girl. Wright gets the feeling that he knows who did this

to her and bides his time on revenge. Of all things, he'll let it be Stoughton's job to seek that. The girl is his flesh and blood, after all. But sometimes, when things get too plain in the girl's fatality, he'd like to storm into the master bedroom and beat the truth out of him.

"I wish I was never born," the girl whispered one night, just as he thought she was asleep. He paused in the doorway of her room. A human might not have heard what she said, but neither of them can pretend to be human.

"Mm," he murmured, setting back against the frame. "Wished that once, too."

"Did you grow up?" she asked him.

"Yeah, but that ain't it."

"What is it?"

All he could see was Howie's face. The knit of her brow as she sorted through clues again and again in her mind. The peace that reached his chest the moment he saw her. It would do no good to tell a child that perhaps the entire purpose of his life, the only thing worth living for, had only ever been to fall in love.

But it hadn't only been that. It had been a hundred things. Once, fighting for his country and the good of the world. Another time, family. Another, knowing that goodness could come into the lives of him and his brother. He had found so many reasons to deal with the curse he'd been given, and yet, after all this time, the whip-smart woman with sharp corners and rich angles was the strongest of them all.

"Well, little one," he said. "Can't promise what it'll be for you. But when you find it, you'll want to hold on with white knuckles and sunk-in teeth."

She giggled, and he hoped she trusted how much he meant it.

He does mean it, with every muscle in the barrel of his chest, he wants to keep Howie with him for the rest of his life. Wants to be there for her every moment, wants to see her grow old, wants to be selfish and ignore how being with her will

keep her face from being echoed as he'd like it to, will keep a family he holds to the highest esteem from continuing its line. He does not want Howie Black Elk to be without children, but that battles his own desire to not be without her.

Today, he came to town to load up on feed, which he has stacked in the back of his truck, but he stopped in front of a jeweler without even noticing it. Now, he's standing on the main street of Jackson and thinking about what that small diamond might look like on Howie's finger. It sparkles like mountain snow on the brightest day, which means it's a bit duller than the flame of her eyes.

There's no world in which she'd say *yes*, is there?

When he'd married Jess, it hadn't been with an engagement ring. He was young, somehow poorer than he is now, and he'd known her all his then-short life. She'd already helped him raise Ridge.

He presses his fingers against the cold glass. He stifles the thought of dried blood on kitchen tile. Of Howie in her place, the hair he could bury his face in fanned out like felled pine in the world's last forest. Maybe this moment on this icy sidewalk will be the last light he sees for a while, or the coil of it seems that way. But then.

Then, he catches the scent of the wolf-girl too close to him.

When he turns, he sees her curls, her small hand clasped tightly in the firm grip of an older man. At first, he can't sense any parentage. Thinks she's getting kidnapped. But then, how could anyone steal one of his kind?

Setting back on his heels, he hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and does his best to look casual as he sniffs the air. Not her father, as Rob Stoughton sired her, but there's a familiarity to the man that Wright can't shake.

He should return to his truck. Continue the rest of the busy day, work until even he is bone-tired and crawls home to Howie. But like the wolf-girl is his own daughter, like his own body has claimed her as his kin, he finds his boots crunching

over the dry snow, his breath fogging the clear air in front of him.

He keeps the road between them, walks just far enough back to look inconspicuous but still to hear the sparse moments in which the two of them speak to one another.

“I’m *tired*,” the wolf-girl whines, her voice too young for all her carnage.

“Sleep after.”

“It hurts. I don’t want to!”

Wright hears a crack as she slams her Mary Jane into the ice, stomping her foot down and crossing her arms. But a louder crack follows, the unmistakable sound of the back of a hand connecting with a small cheek, and the girl sprawls to the ground, her bookbag overturned. Gritting his teeth, Wright forces himself to continue walking, but a growl leaves his throat.

A hitch of breath leaves hers.

He can’t look at her, he realizes, though he can feel her eyes on him. Can’t look at the man either, because he’d be known as a ranch hand, because he’d undoubtedly be known as *Rob Stoughton’s* hand, meaning he might have seen her. Had to see her, really, when she killed Booker.

To Wright’s surprise, though, no one calls out to him. A block ahead, he stops to light a cigarette and peers past his cupped hands to see the door to a blue-paneled house close, heat from the warmth of the indoors leaving a ghostly whisper. He hears her voice now, muffled, that same whine.

Kill, he thinks, his stomach growling.

He’d like to kill the man who laid hands on his charge, but if that man is her father in name, would he not be a hypocrite for every time he laid hands on Ridge? He can’t interfere like that, can’t interfere at all, for why would he know her?

Would this man smell his wolf, still lingering on his skin?

It doesn’t stop Wright, still, from crossing the street and circling the house to where their voices are the loudest, around

back to what looks and smells like a kitchen. There, Jada sits at a circular dinner table stacked with papers instead of plates, a band wrapped tightly around her arm. As soon as Wright sees the tears blurring her eyes, he stifles a growl.

Let Rob Stoughton deal with it, he imagines Howie saying. Let him put a bullet in someone's skull. This isn't your dog. Not your fight, cowboy.

His woman will be waiting for him at home, in a warm bed, the flesh of her inner thighs soft and hot and waiting for his tongue. He is not a father. He's not even a husband anymore. How often, when he was Ridge's caretaker, did he storm from the kitchen in a cloud of anger, pissed at his younger brother for existing and being as difficult as a child is wont to be?

The girl backs up, her eyes locked on something out of sight. A too-long trail of ash falls from Wright's cigarette onto the flannel of his shirt. He's breathing smoke like a dragon.

This man, the girl's home-father, sinks a needle into her arm. She looks away, tears trickling down her cheeks. No doubt she knows she'll heal soon. But what Wright doesn't understand is what a father, adoptive or not, would need his daughter's blood for. It wasn't a shot, not a doctor dispensing a vaccine. That syringe is full of deep red blood.

The man unties the band from Jada's arm and shoes her away, where she scampers through a door frame and, from the sound of it, up the stairs. Wright hears the muffled thud of a door slamming, but his eyes are on the man. He has a small glass bottle, now full of crimson. Full of what he took from his daughter.

None of this makes sense.

None of this makes sense, except for the mountain of times Wright has thought about the men his country took from Nuremberg. Those they gave special privilege to. He hadn't known how much experimentation had been done behind the closed doors of those Axis countries, or in his own, the testing of that bomb poisoning water and land forever. The back of his neck pricks up, because how often did he fear being found

out? Hell, when Sadie went to the hospital and healed in mere hours, he and Ridge had threatened to kill the doctor themselves if he made any record of her presence.

And what had healed her?

Wolf blood, wolf spit, the baby inside her womb.

Cut open, Ridge had pressed his wounds to hers and *healed* her, so there must be something in blood that's powerful enough to work a miracle. Wright thinks of how he dripped his blood over Howie's bare skin, over the bite he made in her, and how strong she'd been in that field.

Their blood can change a person, if only for a few hours. But that's all it takes to heal them. What hospital would deny themselves the opportunity to bleed a wolf dry if it meant they could heal all those inside?

And what man wouldn't be made rich by offering such a thing?

"Fuck," Wright curses under his breath.

The man turns around, his eyes locking with Wright's through the window. And Wright could kill him, he's sure, but what would happen after? This isn't the only element at play. This cannot be a man experimenting on his adoptive daughter, telling no one. And even if it was, this is not the type of man who disappears.

He'd be missed, this man with nice clothing and a warm house. He'd be missed, and those new to town might be called in, just like Howie did to him. But with the fervor of wealthy men protecting their own, not those women who they deem less-dead, not the men Wright kills who live on the outskirts with shadowed faces.

Wright keeps himself from launching through the window, but he doesn't break eye contact. He just takes a final drag of his cigarette. He just tastes smoke where he'd like to taste blood.

The man shuts the curtains like wringing a neck.

Chapter 39

Test it

Howie

The day of Rob Stoughton's party is so stunning that Howie's half convinced a man with wealth can offer the skies some dollars to part to the sun. It's a rare spring day in Wyoming where the snow has melted from the ground and all there is is the endless glory of deep blue this part of the country is known for, exactly what Howie imagines is Até's second love.

Texas was broad and open, but too flat to compare to this. It might have had sunsets that painted the skies in beautifully violent gashes of red and pink, where Jackson reigns with yolk-orange sunrises breaking over the Tetons. But on a clear day like this, there can be no debate over which land holds the most beauty. Towards town, the snow-capped mountains rest like lions, and out here it's all pasture, patches of bright green breaking through the brown of a dying winter.

Howie hasn't visited the ranch since the night Wright won't speak of. The men have been busy with calving and surviving an unkind winter, so she doesn't question it. On this one topic, she'll let him rest in his silence.

She promises herself she won't push him.

Not that she has an opportunity to, when the ranch hands are mud-coated, corralling calves as the esteemed guests stream in. It might be the first time Howie has been on this side of the invisible line that divides the wealthy and the poor, and it feels like wearing the wrong-sized shoes. The way those

in suits and fine dresses watch the working men as they wrangle the young cattle, vaccinating and branding them, feels too much like a spectator sport.

This is their job.

When, I wonder, will they start doing this with us? Put us on a stage and watch us arrest someone. Install audience seats at the station.

At least with the cowboys, it seems like they're enjoying themselves. They ignore those who pause at the corrals on their way in and out of the house, laughing with each other and slapping each others backs for a job well done. If she only looks at them, she's watching high school boys on one of the last practices of football season. She's watching men love something enough to be gentle when they hurt it.

She's watching Wright Lindal watch her.

Something has changed about him over the last month, something that makes her hunger for him a bit more publicly than she should. It's clear he's in charge, clear he's learned so much in just the months of working that he can delegate what's to be done. He stands tall, speaks well, and knows what to do. In a near-concerning way, he reminds her of Até, and she wonders what that means.

He'd be a good father.

Quieting the hungry voice in her mind, she leans her forearms on the paddock and tilts her chin up at him. Slowly, he walks her way, the dimple in his cheek revealing a cracking smile. Oh, he's worse at this than she is. Worse at pretending. That adds to it, this longing she has for him. It makes her think he'd never lie to her.

He is a man, though.

Well. Somewhat. Wolves don't cheat, do they?

He's close enough for her to smell the dirt and sweat on his skin. He turns towards the branding scene but leans his back against the fence and she can see the way his skin glistens even in the brisk spring air. She wants to run her fingers through the silky duck tail of hair that peeks out from under

his hat. More than that, even. She'd like to lick the sweat and grime from his ear, make him shudder and pull her against him.

"Why, Miss Black Elk," he says in a low voice. "I can feel you lookin' at me like I'm a piece of meat and you're a starved young thing."

"Not you," she teases. "I just like veal, is all."

He laughs, ducking his head to sneak a glance her way. There's hunger in his eyes too.

"Mm," he murmurs, clearing his throat before looking away.

"What's that?" she asks.

"My woman cleans up nice," he remarks.

"Which one is she?"

"Cruisin' for me to mark your ass, pretendin' you don't know," he reprimands.

"Do you have a brand for that?" she asks.

He growls and goosebumps spring up across her skin. As if he can't resist, he turns fully to her, gripping the wooden railing. She'd like the heat of an iron if it meant the promise of his name, but it would be reckless to tell him such a thing here.

Because he'd do it. He'd mark her forever.

"You wear my brand," he says. "My bite."

His eyes wander and light upon the space above her collarbone where he last left his mark. With him at home, she'll bear everything proudly, but she wore a thick beaded necklace, hoping to distract from it. If she didn't intend to return the dress for cash in a retort to Jack Williams gifting her the overpriced, unwanted, silk, she would have attempted putting makeup over it. But she looks for the scars every time she sees a mirror, lets the sight fill her with warmth. And Wright looks for them too, she knows.

"Show me," he says.

“Mr. Lindal,” she scolds teasingly. “Haven’t you seen them enough?”

That crooked smile breaks across his lips like a sunrise. “Never.”

“You could find them blindfolded.”

“Likely with just my tongue,” he says. “We should slip away somewhere, test it.”

Glancing around at the growing number of guests, she rolls her eyes. “I don’t think this is the type of party anyone can slip away from.”

“Ain’t a soul in that bunkhouse,” Wright clips.

“Your mind’s filthier than your body, even.”

He makes a sound almost like a groan and adjusts himself in his jeans, watching her like blinking is a crime punishable by death. “Gettin’ me hard at a damn calf brandin’. Ought to put you in cuffs for that.”

All Howie wants to do is reach over the paddock and grab his forearm before pulling him in for a kiss. And part of her thinks she might as well, because she can’t feel a single eye on her. They’re watching the men with the calves, or watching each other, or themselves in the too-big windows of the Stoughton house that catch the sun. Instead she winks at him, ready to move away before a young voice calls out to her.

“Auntie Howie!”

At first, Wright’s horror looks like it must be from the shattering of their privacy. As Marin’s daughter Jada rushes up to hug Howie around the hips, Wright looks awe-struck, frozen in time. It’s like he’s never seen a child before.

“Do you like my dress?” Jada asks, spinning in a small circle.

“Of course,” Howie smiles.

“It’s quite nice,” Wright says at the same time.

Jada glances at Wright, her cheeks coloring, and Howie laughs.

“Don’t think she was talking to you, cowboy,” she quips, grinning at him. But the horror hasn’t faded from behind his eyes, even though he forces a smile too straight and small to be authentic. Something’s awry.

She mouths a question to him, her confusion, but he’s in a different world already.

“How do y’all know each other?” he asks.

“What?” Howie fires back. “How do *we*?”

Jada folds her arms in front of her chest. “How do *you* know *her*?”

“I don’t know him,” Howie says firmly.

And at the same time, Wright answers, “we’re dating.”

Jada quirks an eyebrow like she could never believe the statement, but Howie can’t even be concerned about their transparency. She feels like an intruder amongst two people she has never felt like an outsider with.

There’s nothing to worry about. Nothing to see.

Except Jada’s hair matches the curls on the head she barely saw when she visited the ranch that night. When Wright started staying out later.

Why would Jada be at Rob Stoughton’s ranch alone, though?

It couldn’t be her.

No. Jada blushing is as simple as a schoolgirl crush. A handsome cowboy can bring a blush out of anyone, especially the sheltered girls who live in town, but Jada’s too young for that sort of thing to go both ways. And Wright looks damn conspicuous.

They know each other.

“I don’t know him *well*, anyway,” Howie snips.

“*Howie-*” he starts.

“Am I missing something?” she asks. “Like how you’d know my friend’s daughter?”

His lips part, the war in his mind now turned to something that looks caught between confession and secrecy. It's hard not to feel the barely-healed wounds, the distrust and deceit of Howie's past lover. For the first time, she finds herself stepping back from Wright.

We're in public. Don't overreact.

"Don't lie to me," she whispers.

With that he seals his lips together, taking a step back, and maybe he'll leave, each footprint pouring cement over the indent of panic in Howie's chest. She doesn't even know what kind of betrayal this is, only that it's a secret she's been excluded from, but that's enough. Her heart has been an ocean wave, has been summer wind, has been too uncontrollable these days. At once, her lungs mimic the sealing of his lips, tightening, tightening, tightening.

"I'm sorry," Jada says meekly.

"Pipe down," Wright tells her. His voice is steady, low, final.

"*Don't*," Howie snaps. "What happened that night?"

Wright's gaze darkens before he turns to Jada. "Go away, now."

"Maybe I should ask her," Howie clips, and Jada's gaze fixes on her own.

"No, 'cause she's a damn child," Wright snaps, turning to the girl. "*Go*. I ain't askin' again."

Jada hurries away, strikingly fast, but maybe that's just what avoiding an argument can do to a child. Howie wouldn't know. She's never backed away from one.

"More of a reason not to keep a secret with her," Howie snaps.

"What?" Wright asks.

"Because she's a *child*—"

He straightens, his body so broad it could block out the sun. "Need you to trust me, Howie," he says, and it's with the

same resolute firmness she imagines he speaks to the other ranch hands with if they get into trouble. Authoritarian.

Trust is a grander request than someone like that could ever know.

“Why should I trust this?” she asks.

“Because I’ve earned that much from you,” he says.

“Have you?” she asks.

He flinches. She’s not even sure that he knows it.

“*Have you?*” she repeats. “When you don’t trust me enough to tell me what the hell’s going on?”

“It ain’t my secret,” he snips, before casting his gaze over her shoulder. A growl sounds from deep in his throat, strong enough to send shivers up Howie’s spine.

She shakes it off, stepping forward. “You’re half of it, at least.”

“I witnessed her doin’ somethin’ at the ranch she shouldn’t have,” Wright hisses. “It didn’t have nothin’ to do with me, I swear on my life, Howie.”

She firms her lips. “Who else knows about it?”

“Later,” he whispers, glancing behind her again.

“Who?” she asks louder.

“Quiet down,” he hisses.

“*Quiet?*” she repeats, astounded. “Don’t you tell me to *quiet*, ever.”

“Shut those pretty lips before you get the both of us in trouble,” he says, which means the same damn thing.

“Watch your shoes, Deputy,” an unwanted voice warns. “Don’t want the silk I paid for to sink in the mud.”

Perfect. Perfect timing, Lieutenant.

This time, it’s Wright’s turn to glare daggers. Howie’s surprised to see that his glare is leveled at her, his broad jaw tensing like he’s grinding his teeth. No wonder he seduced her

when he broke into her trailer– the look he’s giving her isn’t far from how he looks when she takes her skirts off.

“Linden, isn’t it?” Jack Williams asks Wright, tilting his head.

But Wright doesn’t correct him, and Howie can’t. Of all the men in town who can’t know they’re working together, who can’t know there’s anything more to Wright than meets the eye, it’s the lieutenant with the photograph and Howie’s gut feeling.

“Well clearly, you won’t be attending the party,” Jack says to Wright. “Can’t imagine being a cowboy. The filth would get to me.”

“Not before the hard work,” Wright says, his voice restrained.

“Suppose that’s what education and proper breeding afford the absence of,” Jack says.

Howie feels his breath on her and steps away.

“As well as fine silks,” Jack says, interrupting her escape with an abrupt hand on her arm.

“Don’t touch her,” Wright snaps. He’s white-knuckling the paddock gate.

“Why?” Jack asks.

“Because this is a party, not a dick-measuring contest,” Howie quips, forcibly removing his hand from her arm. “Jeez, I was talking to Mr. *Lindal* about the horses. Joseph, my father, you remember him? He was in the department for fifteen years or so, that man? Looking to buy a thoroughbred.”

Jack settles back, scrutinizing her face.

“Why’s it every damn time I speak to you, I need to remind you that you work with ‘er?” Wright asks. He’s showing too much wolf this time, not letting Jack go.

“Let’s go inside,” Howie tells the lieutenant, striding towards the house. But he moves slower, still watching Wright with predatory eyes.

When Howie looks up at the hill leading to the house, she sees a few men stalling to watch, their wives on their arms. One of them is Rob Stoughton, but there's no wife at the single man's hip. Instead, it's Jada.

She's holding his hand like he has any right to protect her from anything.

And he's holding hers like...

Like a father would.

Jack's voice cracks like a whip. "I was about to ask you, Lindal, why every time I speak to you, I need to remind you of your place."

Howie's stomach turns.

This must be a dream.

A dream turning nightmare, maybe.

"My deputy over here might look like someone your kind would mingle with," Jack continues. "But she's ours. She's educated. She's clean..."

This time, it isn't bile Howie bites back. It's anger. Molten hot and seething. She sees Wright shift as if to spring over the paddock but her gaze stops him. The understanding. This can't be his fight.

Until it is.

"You can't afford even the lowest of us," Jack continues, taunting Wright with a glint in his eye. And it looks like Wright will kill him. Like he'll tear him limb from limb right here, in front of everyone. "Around here, we all know what cowboys are. *Dogs* begging for scraps."

"That's enough, Jack," Stoughton warns. He's closer now, but Howie doesn't look at him. "Don't disparage my men on my property."

Wright's going to kill someone in public. He is going to bury the lieutenant in front of thirty high-ranking men, and there's nothing Howie can do about it but get to his target first.

“Hump her leg all you want but when she wants a family, she’ll remember who she really belongs with,” Jack says finally, taking a step back that puts him too close to Howie.

“I am not yours,” she spits, before reeling back and socking him in the nose.

Chapter 40

Reckless

Wright

There's blood on his woman's knuckles and he tastes it in his mouth. Through the door to the kitchen, he can hear them. Howie and one of Rob Stoughton's waitresses are in the kitchen wrapping her skin and he has his forehead against the outside door like he can press those damn thoughts out of his mind.

I love her more'n God.

Love her like the sun rises and sets with the beatin' of her heart.

But what if that ain't enough?

Howie Black Elk works harder than any man he's ever met, and maybe she's working for justice but if she's working for a better life, he's not sure what he can offer her. He'd like it to be the world, vacations and travel and time with her family, time she won't need to spend working, but that's not something he's ever been able to give someone.

Not like she's chosen him, but she did punch her lieutenant before Wright could tear the man's head off in front of a crowd. She risked her job for him. She got reckless for him. So maybe, buried deep in the evil of the lieutenant's words, there's a truth that he's not as good for her as she is for him.

It doesn't rub Wright wrong to hear he doesn't deserve Howie. That, he agrees with. It's how the man said she was *the*

lowest. How he said she was intelligent and clean like that was a surprise to him.

A small crack breaks the stillness outside and Wright looks down to see the doorknob in his hand, its brass broken into two pieces.

Fuck it.

He turns what's left, the screwy joint still plugged into the door, but when he comes into the kitchen the rest of the knob falls off and Howie and the waitress are staring at him.

"Howdy," he says.

Howie's eyes widen. *What are you doing?* she mouths fiercely.

"Got this from here," he tells the waitress, taking Howie's hand. He's not going to wrap it, not when his spit can heal her scrapes in a half-hour, not when it means he gets to *taste* her.

"No he doesn't," Howie snips, pulling her hand away. And to Wright, "Get out. It'll be no good if they see you in here."

"I'm the foreman; I have home access," Wright murmurs.

The waitress works as a housekeeper most days, which means she knows him well. She has a sparkle in her eye when she looks between the two of them, a pretty blush to her plump cheeks. Once upon a time, before they decided to say he moved away instead of getting his guts ripped out by the wolf girl, Booker would take her out sometimes. She's slept in the bunkhouse after drinking too much, and out of the two of them she'll listen to a cowboy over a cop.

"I've got this, Carla," Wright says again, tipping his hat to her. He watches her leave just to feel Howie's glare scour the back of his neck.

"Not interested in a lecture," Howie quips.

"Not givin' you one," Wright tells her, unwrapping her hand. The blood on her knuckles is a badge of honor, as far as he sees it. "That bastard had it comin'. I'd'a done worse, and you saved me from that."

“Now if you kill him, they’ll look for me first.”

Wright smiles. “Not if we wait a few months.”

He kisses her knuckles. So often in their home, Howie relaxes to the press of his lips on her skin. But not now.

“He’s part of them,” she says. “I’m so sure.”

The vision of the man taking the wolf girl’s blood echoes in Wright’s mind. It wasn’t the lieutenant, but considering the way both men carry themselves, they could know each other.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to tell Howie everything—Wright can trust her with his own secrets, after all. But he swore he’d not speak a word of what’s happening with the girl and he can’t break his word so easily. For too long, his word has been all he’s worth.

“I’m not sure if I’ll have a job when I go in tomorrow,” she whispers.

Wright tips her chin up. “If they take that from you, they’re fuckin’ fools.”

“It’d be fair,” she insists. “I did break his nose.”

Wright smiles. The sight was beautiful.

“Well,” he drawls. “I’m sure we could get you on a better force somewhere the lieutenant don’t eye-fuck you and call me a dog-”

“I worked so hard for this,” she says. Her voice cracks with the tension of it. “*We...*”

He’d blame himself, but in the space between them, there is no accusation. There’s only thought, as she pulls her lips between her teeth and frowns.

“I know you’ve worked hard,” he says. “Wish you didn’t have to. But I hate every day that goes by without them knowin’ what they have with you-”

“You say ‘we’ so easily,” she says finally.

“It ain’t a hard word.”

“You-” she starts, before smiling, sighing a laugh. “If it *is* ‘we’, Wright, then you have to tell me everything about Jada, and how you know her, and why you’re keeping some little girl’s secret from someone who’s known her for years.”

She scans his face, those perfect brown eyes of hers gone molten in the light of the window.

“Is it about the case?” she asks.

His lips part. He can’t tell her. No way can he tell her without her interrogating that girl for what she knows, and he can tell she’s not ready. Taking a deep breath, he steps away to lean against the kitchen island, to cross his arms and wish she’d asked anything but that.

“No,” he says. “But you’ve gotta trust that this one thing ain’t a truth you wanna know.”

Protecting a wolf turned early like that, one who hardly knows her way in the world, why, that might be the most important thing outside of loving Howie that he has. It feels like being a father again, in the most selfish way.

She scoffs, but she won’t get more from him.

He’s furious that one of his kind is out there killing women but there’s a too-long list of things that are more important to Wright Lindal than that. The woman in front of him, first and foremost. His family’s privacy and safety. The wolf girl living a life as close to normal as she can, what with the shit hand she’s been dealt, not knowing anyone but Wright who can help her. Innocent people dying is up there, but it doesn’t beat those things. It can’t.

The war ruined him, maybe. No more than it ruined everyone he knows.

“I’ll tell you soon,” he says. “I promise, just... Let me figure it out. I ain’t the only one who knows, alright? It’s not just me. But I promised her, and them, that I wouldn’t say a thing. And I gotta keep my word.

Closing his eyes, he sighs deep.

“My word’s all I got, Howie.”

She touches his cheek. Takes him into both hands and runs her fingertips over the stubble of his jaw.

“No, it’s not,” she whispers.

When he opens his eyes, she’s his world and he’s in space, looking down at something he thought he’d lose forever. He kisses her and deepens it before he can resist, stroking her tongue with his, leaning in. He runs his hands up her bare thighs just to feel her skin.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Howie whispers against him. “Wright, you should be so far from here you could shoot a gun and we wouldn’t hear a thing.”

He’s not good with words, especially now that he can really look at her, watch the way the emerald silk moves around her bronze shoulders. Christ, she’s stunning.

His gaze falls down the length of her legs. The way she’s sitting on the counter, he’d just have to lift her skirt and peel off her panties, thrust inside her. These thoughts aren’t worth much now, especially with the comments Jack Williams made, but the desire burns through him.

“Wright,” she repeats, snapping her fingers.

“That dress,” he says. “What did that fuckin’ devil say about bein’ able to afford silk?”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

“I’m here now, askin’.”

“It’s not your secret,” Howie snaps.

His cock twitches just as his anger flares. Howie glances down, swallows before meeting his gaze again.

“Be smart about this,” she says. “I know it’s difficult, *darling*.”

“Tell me,” he growls, striding away. “Why you’d let him buy you anythin’.”

“He forced it on me.”

“Held a gun to your head, Howie?”

She scoffs.

He steps forward. “That answer ‘no’? Either way, I’ll kill ‘im. I want to know what made you put another man’s money on your body when it’s mine.”

Her pupils flare. “Possessive, Wright. So possessive. Want me to ask you before I bathe?”

He growls, hungry at the thought.

“Sure would,” he says. “‘Cause I like tastin’ you dirty.”

She yelps as he lunges for her, tugging her hips to his with a swift, unyielding strength.

“We were reckless,” Howie whispers. “We can’t be reckless here.”

“Then be a good girl and bite your lip,” he breathes against her neck, nipping her ear.

Her breath shudders. He can smell her wetness seep into the satin she wears between her legs. Suddenly, he’s famished for it.

She grips his hair, pulls his head back to look him in the eyes.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

“Claimin’ what’s mine,” he says, running his knuckles over her clothed slit.

Her eyes narrow. There’s a fight in them, still.

But they don’t look away from him. Instead, she leans back, bringing up her knees to spread herself for him.

“Just this,” she whispers. “Just looking.”

Her voice, raspy with restraint. It has him by the collar and the belt. He unzips himself and on any other day, especially like this, she’d make him shower first. He’s been working on the ranch since before dawn.

“Bullshit,” he teases, pressing a finger firmly against her chest. “Not just looking, Howie. Don’t wound me like this.”

“You’d like me to,” she breathes, pulling her panties off. She moves to set them down but he pockets them before spreading her with his fingers, watching her honey slicken her entrance. He fights the urge to knot at the sight. They don’t have time for that.

He grips her gently by the neck, guiding her face to his. With parted lips, she holds his gaze and he doesn’t need her promise. He knows. This is love, or something. It’s enough coming from her.

“Someone could come in,” she whispers.

“What would they see?” he asks. He pulls her lower lip between his teeth, tastes lipstick and her. “What would they see this fuckin’ cowboy doin’ to you in this dress?”

“Wasting time,” she hisses, reaching into his zipper and gripping him.

He laughs once, almost like a bark, and she presses her fingers to his lips. She’s right, as always.

He notches himself at her entrance.

Grips her hair tight.

Falls into her midnight eyes and throws himself into her.

Chapter 41

Fight me like a wolf

Howie

Their fucking is desperate, fingers in hair and mouths gasping against necks. He pulls her off the counter only to bend her over, to grip her by the neck and thrust deeper inside of her, drawing pleasure-stricken tears from her eyes as she bites her lip to keep from moaning. But he must feel her clench around him, must feel her quiver desperately as an orgasm tears her apart, wetness splashing on his undone jeans before he slams his hand on the counter next to hers. Pounding deep and slow. Working towards the edge. She shudders in the aftermath and through blurred vision, moves her hand over his. There are secrets, but she knows what matters to him. The way he makes love to her is a promise that his world built itself around her skeleton, that it breathes her soul. She can feel him knot inside of her before burying his face in her neck.

“Gonna come inside you, Howie,” he breathes, excruciatingly slow now. She’s shaking with want.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Gonna let it drip on this man’s silk,” he says. “Gonna ruin all this nice fabric.”

She turns her head to look at him, to see all the anger and love storm through his gaze.

“I’m yours,” she whispers. “Show them that.”

He tilts his head back, muscles in his neck straining as he fights a groan. She nearly purrs to feel the warmth he sends

inside her, loves the feeling to the point of addiction. Needs it, even. Enough to smile. Enough to feel utterly content, despite the party, despite how unlikely it is she'll ever work in this town again, or even solve this case.

In this moment, everything is perfect.

Because everything is him.

When they enter the living room minutes later, brushed and smoothed as much as they can manage, too many heads turn. Howie doesn't give a damn. She slips her hand into Wright's calloused palm and holds her head high as Stoughton nods to her, calling a server over. For all she knows, this could be signing Wright's death sentence in indelible ink. Maybe her own, too. But after their time in the kitchen, she doesn't care.

It wasn't him making love to her, spilling into her with only a thin wall between their desire and public shame. Their sex is often beautiful. It was what he said.

Wright Lindal, talking about *we*.

We'll find a better station for you.

If *we* wait.

The man who came all the way from North Carolina to be by himself on the ranch, the one who strode into her life like he was looking for a conquest, and then for his own redemption after she thought the worst of him, the lone wolf of Jackson, Wyoming... He doesn't think of a future without her anymore, and she knows that.

It makes her wonder if she's really so keen on living alone ever again. He might act like she's easy to love but she can't be, can she?

Fuck it. We're here.

When she sees Jack Williams again she wants to do it holding the hand of the man who she's sure will kill him one day. He might fire her— *should*, what with her knowing what his cartilage can feel under her closed fist.

But he's nowhere to be found.

Rob approaches instead, looking put-together outside of the expression on his face. He looks determined to the state of being flustered, not quite focusing on her but clearly heading for them nonetheless.

“You’re wanted elsewhere,” he tells Wright, grasping the man’s arm and leaning in as if this is some secret.

For Howie, seeing him now is like seeing three different people. The first, being the employer of the man she cares for, and someone respected, someone Wright could learn from if this was something he’d want to pursue. There’s a house he’s fixing up on this property. There’s a place for him.

But there’s also the man who would have worn one of those signet rings, the one who is not so different from Jack Williams, who invites him to his party. He’s not much different from the other wealthy men who she’s trusting less with each passing second.

And then there’s the man she met the night Wright’s friend died. The one who gave her bourbon and the one who just held Jada’s hand like a father would. Who likely knows the secret Wright’s keeping, which means Wright trusts him.

“I need you to drive to Idaho Falls this evening for a horse,” Rob tells Wright. “Get the boys ready– they’re coming too.”

Wright nods, kissing Howie’s knuckles once more before leaving.

“Come with me,” Rob tells her.

He picks up a bottle of bourbon from the bar cart and heads outside, not in the direction of the crowd but towards the woods instead. Already, he’s drinking, his energy erratic but channeled, an electrical storm in the winter. He holds the bottle out to her and she takes a large swig.

“At eight in the evening, you’ll want to leave this place,” he says.

“Not now?” Howie asks sardonically. “They love me here.”

He watches her silently, unwavering. "I'd like you to take Jada to her mother's at seven thirty."

"Oh, *that's* why you invited me," she says. "To be a babysitter, eh?"

Hesitating, he seals his lips together for a long moment. There is something he's biting back, something strong enough to break the structure of this day, of the coming evening, that other people aren't meant to know about.

"I'll do what I should have done before," he says. "Mark my words on that, deputy. It ends tonight."

Wright

Wright will follow orders as soon as he rights the wrong committed by the stables.

If he thinks about how his woman was the one to hit that godawful lieutenant, he'll grind his teeth to the bone, wolfishness be damned. It should have been him. It should have been him, though if he's honest with himself, seeing her bust open a man's nose in that silk dress... If he wasn't already head over heels for her, he would be now. The way the emerald lake of her hips shifted because she was *really* putting her weight into it.

Howie is a hurricane, is otherworldly, more supernatural than any man-wolf hybrid. And she surrendered to him in the kitchen, saying she was his. He hasn't earned her yet, but he will. He's not letting Jack Williams escape without knowing what happens when someone messes with a woman who's been claimed by a Lindal. It'll take a lot not to kill him on the spot.

He's not in the living room with the rest of the partygoers, and he's not outside. As Wright walks around the house, he hears the spring of small feet on the ground and spins to see Jada.

"I saw what you did with Auntie Howie," she says. "Gross."

He only offers her a glance. Of all the days for her to be his ward, this has to be the one he's least responsible for. What with her father and her acting father in the same house like it's some sort of fucked-up family joke.

"I'm not so young I don't know what mating looks like," Jada adds, trailing him.

Despite the tension of the day, Wright snorts out something like laughter, unfamiliar as it is in his throat. "With that Nazi fake father o' yours, I'm surprised you don't know when an adult don't wanna talk."

"Did he tell you he's a Nazi?" she asks.

The way she says that makes him still, quirk an eyebrow in her direction.

"Are you a Nazi?" she asks.

Hard not to growl out of anger at the thought of such an accusation. "Hell no. That's an evil thing, got that?"

She swallows. Looks clueless as a deer watching an incoming semi truck.

Wright clicks his tongue, waving her off. Not wanting to do this now, because it'll only make him dislike her parents more, not telling their daughter what the damn war was about when it took so much from him. Maybe, what with timing and their fancy, warm home, and her real pa's damned ranch, there was enough of a cushion between them and true loss. He can't even comprehend it.

"Are you looking for Uncle Jack?" she asks.

Fuck.

"Is Jack Williams your Uncle Jack?" he asks her.

"Yeah," she says.

"The lieutenant?" he asks, like he can't believe it, because he doesn't want to.

"Yeah."

“*Christ*, girl,” he groans. “You know you got a fucked-up family?”

She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “That’s a bad word.”

“Your aunt Howie’s got a mouth on her, and she’s a damn good woman, got that?” he asks. “Maybe bad words don’t matter as much as the person sayin’ ‘em.”

“I thought she and Uncle Jack were dating,” Jada says.

The thought makes Wright gnash his teeth, knowing that’s not something Howie would ever entertain but clearly something the lieutenant made inappropriately clear to his *niece*.

Man’s got another thing comin’ his way, I’ll make sure o’ that.

“Howie’s my woman,” Wright says firmly. “Ain’t ever too sure, but I think she might like me too. I *know* your Uncle Jack ain’t got a claim on her at all.”

Jada nods pensively.

“You know where he is?” Wright asks. “Because I’d like to let him know.”

Jada nods, blessedly naive to what Wright has in mind. And already, he can feel bones crunching underneath his hands.

Howie, please forgive me. I might kill a man today.

I might do it in front of all these people who think no better of you or me.

With dirt still on his boots, he passes the party in the way the wealthy think those who serve are meant to. Meaning, he keeps his gaze glued to the earth, to the hardwood flooring, to the stairs.

It’s not difficult for him to avoid looking at people. His mind swirls with the image of the lieutenant grinning, of him making it look like he owns Howie when he doesn’t deserve to touch a hair on her head. Which of the bastard’s moves could

make the wolf girl believe they were together? It's enough to make him see black, to put blinders on until he slips through the door of the master bedroom. He has no plan, but he doesn't need one.

Even in his fury, he's a wolf in the forest where his prey can hear a twig snap.

He smells blood and hears whispering.

He *should* smell blood, but this doesn't come from a broken nose. And the voices— there are two.

“You know, they called them savages.”

“*Please*, Jack.”

“Ain't my words,” he continues. “My people stayed in their country until they couldn't, and I do find a certain kinship with her about that. She's just so petulant. She's got those women in her mind, I know.”

“It was a bear, though,” the woman says firmly. “Wasn't it?”

“*Oh*,” he replies, sighing deeply, almost lasciviously.

Wright's skin prickles for a second, the imposition of walking in on something truly intimate crawling up his neck. Not that he doesn't hate the man enough to rip his cock from his body, shove it down his throat, and walk him like a dog to Howie as he suffocates on the very thing he thinks with.

“What does it do?” the woman asks.

“She's got an arm on her, doesn't she?” Jack asks, taking another deep sigh.

I'll kill him. Fuck, I'll kill him.

All it takes is her name in another man's lustful voice to make Wright forget he ever had control over his anger.

“Makes me wonder what would've happened that day I picked her up,” the lieutenant continues, and Wright freezes. “If that animal hadn't come for us.”

Every bit of air in the room sprints from Wright's lungs. Suddenly, he's dizzy. Because he didn't know about the lieutenant giving Howie a ride, and it couldn't have been professional. His stomach turns. If she lied to him, if she chose not to tell him, it's not because she simply forgot. It's because whatever the lieutenant did must've been bad enough for Wright to kill him.

"Die Welt hätte zivilisiert sein können," the lieutenant says with a smile in his voice.

Wright stiffens to hear the language he escaped— *it is German, ain't it?* He hadn't been serious about the Nazi comment.

"But now," Jack says, with a noise in his throat that in any language means *fuck it*.

There's a long sigh next, a hitch. The pause of a too-intimate silence that makes Wright livid at the woman, because whoever she is knows too much about the way the lieutenant treats Howie and still stays by the man's side.

"You wouldn't have... killed her, would you?" the woman asks.

"Of course not."

Maybe it had been professional. Maybe it's not all the awful things Wright imagines with his desire to protect his woman.

But then, with another deep pull of air, the bastard in the bathroom says:

"At least not if she took it quietly."

Anger is white-hot.

Anger is the sun burning through skin.

Anger is the screaming of a man behind his waking gaze as he looks upon a world someone told him he should own.

That door is in splinters and that woman is screaming, so Wright grabs her by the hair and throws her behind him. Into the room. Never mind that he's never hurt a woman. His hands

are on the lieutenant's neck and there's blood, a fractured mirror, dark hair against the glass.

"I could smell you through the door, Johnny Reb," Jack Williams says, laughing.

Wright punches him then, and though Jack sprawls he simply stretches his jaw.

"Don't fight me like a man," he says, and the other blood Wright's smelling is Jada's.

And the other glass is a syringe.

He takes it in because he can't not, because scent and texture is a story and there's a tourniquet on Jack's arm. Wright sees it, but it's a puzzle of things he can't make sense of. At first he just thinks the lieutenant is a vampire— *that* thought makes sense to him. Checks right out.

Don't fight me like a man.

It hits Wright that this is loud, that this isn't about him. As much as Williams deserves to die it's Howie, who thinks so much, who's always careful, who *knows* when to clock someone, all torn up over doing it now. Punching the man at the paddocks was the only time Wright imagines Howie coming undone, and this is more than that.

Don't fight me like a man.

Wright frowns, because suddenly this feels like a dream he's having and nothing real. There's no way Jack Williams could smell him like that, could be standing this straight with glass sticking out of his head and a broken nose.

Don't fight me like a man.

Jada's blood. The tourniquet. Wright's seen this in the darkest places in the country, but there it was heroin. Except...

Hadn't he just kissed Howie's wounds to heal them? Doesn't he know wolverine blood can affect human bodies?

The teeth.

The women.

It was never a bear.

But it was never a wolf either, was it? It was a man, stealing something from their kind to make himself stronger, sharper, a predator turning himself into a blade.

Don't fight me like a man.

“The hell’s that mean?” Wright asks.

The lieutenant rolls his shoulders back, smiling through the blood.

“Fight me like a wolf,” he says.

Chapter 42

Sorry

Howie

“Are you a Christian, Howie?” Rob asks.

Howie snorts. “Against your peoples’ better efforts, I fell through the cracks.”

“Never read the Bible?” he asks.

“No.”

He raises his eyebrows before nodding, pausing to look out over the distant cattle pastures. There’s pride in his expression, and a broadness to his shoulders as he assesses this land. She’s not sure why, but it feels like a goodbye.

“*And I looked, and beheld a pale horse,*” he says, his voice nearly wistful. “*And Hell followed with him.*”

Howie takes another drink. The rancher is drunk, but after his cryptic, apocalyptic words, she’s catching up with him.

“That the kind of horse you’re sending Wright after?” Howie asks.

“No,” he says. “That horse is here already. There’s no wrath like a father’s. It’s as close as a man can get to God.”

She wants to ask if Jada’s his, though she’s never seen Marin speak to him and has no idea what the origin of their courtship could have been. They’re the high society types, and in a small town with a lot of money, they could have rubbed shoulders for a while. But Marin had Jada while she was married. Howie remembers because Henry had named her.

Rob Stoughton had been nowhere to be seen. For a second that almost feels cruel, Howie wonders if their mating had been consensual. While she and Marin weren't inseparable, they were close enough that it could have slipped out if it had been an affair. She'd never seemed attached to monogamy with her husband.

Howie chews it over. She really can't ask.

"Don't worry about the lieutenant," Rob Stoughton says, twirling the bottle in his hand. "After tonight, it won't matter."

The more he speaks like this, the more Howie thinks he won't make it through the night he keeps mentioning. There's something fatal in the way he's coming undone, not without control but without appearances. It's as if he's shed an outer layer or some kind of mask. If it truly is death he's claiming, she won't put it past a man who can buy so much of the state to believe in buying his kind of ending.

Why, though?

She tries to discern it as they continue their stroll, but as they approach the crowd she feels the conversation dwindling. She doesn't want it to, doesn't yet know what made the rancher change his mind or what his exact plan is that involves getting Jada and all of his ranch hands far from his property. It reminds her of what he said to Brooks all those months ago. Not land mines, but something else.

Security.

"Really?" she asks cavalierly, sipping a strong pull. "Seems like they're all the rulers of this town."

"Henry, sure. Everyone likes a military man."

"*Hm.*" Howie makes a sound in her throat because it's never all military men, she knows. Just those who land on their feet.

"Your pa's a military man," Rob remarks, pouring more liquor into her drink.

Howie frowns. "Did you know him?" she asks, surprised.

“Joseph Black Elk, a Sioux living in Wind River, served three years in the second world war while you were here, finishing high school. Making it in the sheriff’s department.”

“That’s not an answer,” Howie says. She won’t bother to correct him, that Sioux is a Frenchman’s word for five separate tribes and her family’s only one of them.

“I know,” he says, swallowing heavily. When he moves to pour her another, he’s surprised to see her glass is full. “Got my hands full with calving season, but they still tell me things, Deputy. And then there’s what they don’t tell me, what I find out on my damn lonesome.”

A bump echoes upstairs and the party goes hushed for a moment, their heads turning to Rob like so many cattle on a field. Howie wonders if they know how similar they are. Chewing cud, staring too long at her, too, in a dress the man she punched bought her, speaking to the head of all this.

“You’re saying *they* know him,” Howie says quietly.

“They might not know the difference between the ranch and the rodeo but they do know insurance.”

Another bump stills the crowd for a moment. Howie thinks of Wright, hopes that he’s out in the stables or in the bunkhouse or anywhere far, far from the action.

“Do you think they look alike?” Rob asks. “The supposed Williams brothers?”

“Why?” she asks.

“I don’t think they do,” he says quickly. They’re close to the crowd now, which means there’s someone in it who the rancher doesn’t want overhearing them.

“What would you do?” she asks.

The older man stares at her over his glass as if to say, *there are things I’m doing now. Why, you naive thing, would you ask me that?*

“I mean if you were me,” she says.

And then it gets to her, really digs beneath her skin, because Rob Stoughton doesn't have family for his enemy to use, and he has far more resources than she could ever dream of, so how could he imagine being her?

He quirks an eyebrow. "If they threatened my flesh and blood? If they hurt her?"

Purposefully, he lets the word linger between them. *Her*. Howie's mind whirs. Rob pulls her in clumsily, her side pressed against his chest, not sexual but overwhelmingly intimate.

"I'll kill them all," he says.

And poised on her lips is another retort, but it comes to nothing when a muffled crash echoes above them, and through a set of bay windows they see two figures fall to the ground like falling from the sky. She thinks it might be that at first, as nearly everyone in Jackson claims to have seen an alien, but she recognizes the shirt of the man outside, the blue-and-tan flannel she's worn over her own naked body.

In the milliseconds it takes to register this, she also recognizes the figure Wright is wrangling. The man he pushed out the second story window.

Lieutenant Jack Williams.

"Fuck!" she yells, and half a dozen people glance at her instead of the fight.

Wright

Last summer in Ocracoke, Wright asked the Lord for his own death. It was nearly a formal request, as he'd gone to see a priest the day prior, not to ask for forgiveness, it turned out, but to ponder if it would do any good. Those times brimmed with more self-pity than a man should indulge himself in, and *Christ*, when he thinks of all the good that came to him in Jackson he's ashamed to have felt that way. God gave him Howie, and if he dies now he'll curse heaven and hell and fight the residents of both places if he has to.

No, he doesn't want to die.

He thinks of death because Jack Williams is stronger than any man he's ever fought, so he isn't fighting a man. Jack took his niece's wolf blood and shot it through his arm. Maybe at the time it was just to heal from his broken nose but it's more than that now because he's fighting like Wright thought Ridge would fight. Maybe less, but not much less.

Only a wolf can kill a wolf, but it would seem a man with wolf's blood might meet that qualification. Jack's teeth gnash and Wright knows deep in the back of his skull that if he loses flesh today, he's not getting it back. The venom will seep through.

He can hardly see through the crimson sheen of blood in his eyes. All that's left is the feeling of being on top of an animal, spitting blood out of his mouth and maybe missing a molar. He should stop punching but Jack will kill him. He should stop punching but every time he thinks of that, he thinks of Jack saying he'd rape Howie. Wright grabs hair still attached to a skull and slams the man's head hard into the ground. Wolf-sharp nails dig into his skin. A howl echoes, clotted with more blood. Everywhere is blood, his own and Jack's, the same color, the same breed. And he thinks of Ocracoke, only to wonder how his brother fought these demons and stopped himself from killing him.

Because it's impossible not to turn. It's impossible when there's a scent of wolf in the blood he's taking. Impossible when he thinks of what this man has done to Howie, and what he would have done to her. And the wolf girl, Jada, which isn't the name Stoughton calls her but the name the man who bleeds her gave her when she was born to his wife. He sees Jack Williams's face, bloody and broken, skin crusted in dirt for the first time in that man's life, and all he wants to do is cave it in.

"No!"

Her voice pierces through to him, a shriek so full of pain he stills instantly, his heart breaking that second. He looks at her. Howie. Stumbling on weak legs, tears on her cheeks.

When he follows her gaze, he sees a pool of blood on his chest.

He didn't feel the first bullet.

But he feels the second one.

It hits him where his kidneys are, where they'd be vulnerable if he wasn't what he is. And he could keep going, could run away from this, because only a wolf can kill a wolf. Because his wounds, upon quick glance, were inflicted by the man who drew blood from Jada's arm, who *knows* this.

He shot Wright to make him choose, between letting everyone know what he is or making him put on a show. No, he shoots Wright three times, meaning another to the top of his spine, and he falls because a human wouldn't stay up.

The pain is nothing. It's not that. It's Howie falling over his body, her hair catching in the blood on the spring earth, that tears him in two. He wants to resurrect himself and sweep it from the ground into his fist— he promises he'll make his hands gentle despite his skin being torn up.

It's only my skin, he wants to tell her. Needs to tell her, *this won't kill me*.

He hasn't thought of Jess much since meeting Howie but he remembers one of her favorite books. She'd say *it's a play*, alright then. *Romeo and Juliet*. One of those lovers, he can't remember who, dies a fake death. It kills the other one. He's not confident with the idea that Howie would love him so much she couldn't live without him, but if the roles were reversed...

Her back racks with sobs so fierce they feel like gunshots. She's keening for him. She doesn't know.

I'm comin' back for you, he wants to say. *Remember*.

Jack Williams is moving and she's screaming at him. Wright feels the tears that fall onto his skin more than he feels any of his wounds.

He can't speak or it'll mean more shots, or it'll mean no option of a miraculous recovery that makes townsfolk believe

in the glory of God and medicine, even for cowboys. If he ever wants a life with his woman, he'll need to stay still. Not to move. Not to invite fate in with open arms, the outing of himself as the man who can't be killed, as not a man at all but some monster.

“Wake up,” she pleads, gripping his hair. Crying into his face, forehead to forehead, her heartbeat racing through silk and through him. He loves her more than he's ever loved another person and all this pain inside her is his own. Is his fault.

Did he tell her this wouldn't kill him?

He smells and hears Stoughton pulling her off of the ground, off of Wright's body, maybe so she won't notice it'll never go cold like this. And Wright hates him for that. The only chance she has of knowing he's alive slips away..

Still, she shrieks. Unconsolable. Fighting. Time vanishes and Wright feels her get back to him once, victorious in her grief. When she does, she's dry of tears and breathes him in, clinging to his shirt, pulling his ring from his finger before getting dragged away. He wants to tell her that in his mind, he was married to her from the moment she threw a snowball in his face. Maybe before that, when she slapped him in the stables, or before that, when she shoved her panties in his mouth.

This love is a violent kind.

Don't let 'em take it from us.

It's dark now. He's in the back of a truck, wind pushing over him in the open air, the pain and his body's healing lulling him nearly to sleep, when he feels heavy metal wrap around his wrists. His eyes shoot open, and he almost relaxes to see the wolf girl's face above him. Her curls pick up in the breeze as the truck maneuvers down the highway, leading somewhere he can't tell. It's almost a comfort, that familiarity.

Before she tells him:

“I'm so sorry.”

Chapter 43

Fault

Howie
I love you.

Such silly words. There are more beautiful, meaningful ways to say the same message and she's said them to Wright's sleeping face. In her heart's language and her spoken tongue, the first with letting him into her home and wanting him next to her at night, like she hasn't wanted anyone. Whispering *čhanťóčhignake*, like it's nothing, just a comment under her breath he probably thought was an insult because so often it was after he did something ridiculous or said something that made her wonder if they'd lived on the same planet their whole lives.

But *I love you*? Those words? No, not at all, not once, and for a long time she wondered if he even needed them from her.

Then her lungs go tight, tight, tight, her throat so small she couldn't breathe even if she wanted to, and the bottle of bourbon she stole when Rob Stoughton had her in the house hours ago is almost empty. It can't put her to sleep like it should. She's crying like it's what her body was built for, not even blinking through it, bleeding salt and liquor from her eyes but his blood is all over her and it's cold on her skin.

I love you.

Lot of good that did him. Henry Williams, protecting his killer brother, protecting that fucking monster, would kill one of the best men she's ever known...

Would kill the only man she's ever loved like this...

Howie grips the edge of her couch and dry heaves, too dehydrated from crying to purge anything else from her body. Her head throbs but any pain feels like it's outside of herself. Like a ghost.

Like the dead.

She groans. Her heart hurts more than anything.

"Hey."

Brooks's voice. A cold, damp towel on her face. She grabs it and presses it into her lips, shrieks against the fabric until her throat goes raw. Later, there's another towel on her legs, stealing Wright's last blood from her.

"Call his brother," she rasps. "Ridge. He should know."

The thought that Ridge's wife might be upset to lose a lover only flits across Howie's mind.

"Okay," Brooks agrees. "Drink this."

He holds out water.

"The number's on the counter," she whispers, taking the glass. She sips once and it burns, and she hurls it into the wall as hard as she can because she'd rather not drink. Not eat. Mourn properly.

"It's late," Brooks says. "Could be a shared line."

Like she's a machine built for this very act, Howie pushes herself up and moves towards the phone. She's drunk enough to walk crooked but nothing more or it wouldn't hurt this badly. She dials the numbers and waits. She's never seen him go through the motions of a shared line and she never will again.

"Lindal Farm."

It's a bright voice. A sweet voice, that woman. There's a baby murmuring somewhere and Howie has to remind herself that it isn't Wright's child. Words catch in her throat.

"Hello?" the voice asks. *Sadie's* voice.

Brooks looks between Howie and the phone, stepping towards Howie. It's enough to remind her where she is, who she is. She's given bad news before. She's *gotten* bad news.

"Sadie?" she whispers.

A pause. "Who, may I ask, is calling?"

The tears well like a tide and Howie whisks a fork from the table, pressing the tines hard into her thigh. She feels them break skin before she can speak again.

"Something bad happened," she says. "Someone..."

His body kneeling, swaying in the air. Blood spreading across his shirt. She can still feel his chest warm under her palms, his neck under her lips. Cursing, she holds the receiver against her chest.

"I can't," she breathes, at Brooks or at the world. Tears flow. "I can't do this, I can't..."

Brooks takes the phone from her gently, pulling her into his chest.

"I can't," she says, but it's a sob into fabric.

"Ma'am," Brooks says, and Howie can hear panic like a storm on the other line. "Ma'am, I apologize. This is Clinton Brooks of the Teton County Sheriff's Department. I'm afraid there's been a shooting."

The script. She doesn't know how he does it, having known Wright well enough. Maybe he's just stronger.

Ain't no one stronger than you, Deputy.

"Yes ma'am, a shooting," he repeats, patting Howie's back. "Yes, that was the deputy on the line."

A long pause this time.

"It's not a good time for that," he says.

Another. She knows what they're asking, because if they're anything like Wright they don't trust the law and sure don't want to hear about Wright from someone who presents themselves with a badge.

“Give me the phone,” she says.

She’s shocked at the coldness of her own voice. At the way, somehow, the well of her sorrow has gone dry.

“What?” she snaps into the phone.

On the receiver, a deep voice, nearly a growl answers. “You know Wright.”

It’s Ridge. His brother. Evil etches the man’s midnight voice.

“Yes.”

“Know what he is?”

She pauses, sighing as she closes her eyes. *A man. A wolf. Something in between. Rob Stoughton’s fucking foreman, come off of no ranching experience at all. The man who kept my bed hot all winter.* “I know.”

“Say it.”

She glances towards Brooks. “Not now.”

“He ever tell you what happens if we get shot?” the man asks. She knows it’s Wright’s brother, Ridge. “Because if he were here, I’m sure he’d be asking why you’re crying like you don’t know.”

“Know what?” she snaps.

A pause on the other line. “Not now. He’s not dead. If he doesn’t get back to you by morning, you’ve gotta go looking for him.”

“Where the fuck would I do that, hm?” she snaps. “The morgue? That’s where they took him, so I don’t know...”

She frowns, pushing her knuckles into her forehead. Because it did feel wrong, deep in her spine, watching them take Wright away. It’s just, she wasn’t focusing so much on that. He was dead, *is* dead. This is false hope.

“You’re some kind of evil,” she grumbles. “You know, he’d say that about you. Not in those words, but-”

“Who’s *they*?” Ridge interrupts. “Got something to do with those women who keep showing up dead?”

Howie doesn’t speak. The words feel drained from her mind, because she can’t figure how that would have anything to do with Wright getting shot.

Then it hits her.

“He’s said that to you?” she asks. “Is he calling you on this line, talking about dead women?”

“That’s not all we talk about,” Ridge says. “It’s been a long time since there was any peace between us. It’s nice to have a brother again. Can’t say I give a damn about some women half a country away dying, but it seemed to bother him quite a bit.”

“The phone operators for this town work out of a building connected to the station,” Howie says.

Calls to North Carolina, where Wright’s record showed he still had family. God, they’d have known the whole time that he was with her.

“Do you talk about what you are?” she asks, her head spinning.

“Woman, do you think I’m stupid?” Ridge asks, pausing for a moment to chuckle. “Nah, I might’ve spoken about it on the phone once or twice. But that was for personal reasons. I have no reason to speak to my brother on the matter.”

“But you talk about dead women.”

“Your investigation,” Ridge says. “How big brother Wright’s become a damn sidekick to a cop.”

“Shut the fuck up...” Howie breathes. “Shut up, shut up... I need to *think*.”

What if the fight between Jack and Wright was about more than just Wright being protective? She’d always figured that, with all his talk. Never thought he’d let Jack live even with the small things she told him, so as much as she hadn’t wanted it to happen then, she didn’t tell Wright to stop hitting him. There’s no veil for her when it comes to her own depravity.

She wanted to see Wright bludgeon Jack to death so badly she forgot anyone would care enough to put him in jail.

Or shoot him.

It doesn't connect. There's a missing piece, but she doesn't have a clue what it is.

"If it doesn't have anything to do with those women, he'll be there tomorrow," Ridge says.

"And if it does, he'll be what? Dead?" Howie asks.

"My guess is wishin' he was," Ridge says. "But I suppose that ain't so different from normal for 'im."

"Fuck you," she snaps.

"Be happy," he says dismissively. "Wright's alive. If no one kills you or yours before I get there, we can get to know each other. For now, do what you can to get my brother. It's your fault he's in this."

Wright

The neon red lights of the bar kiss Howie's face. Her hair clings to her skin, finding itself caught in black waves across her damp forehead. As if any angel would come to him, as if he'd ever deserve that kind of mercy, she straddles his lap. He knows the weight of her well by now but always misses it. When he looks at the point where they're joined, he sees his torso split open. Ribs cracked, lit by the cherry red that coats them both.

His heart is in her hands. The organ doesn't beat, so he figures he's dead, but she brushes her thumbs over it and he wonders if it'll stay that way.

"You need this," she says. God, that voice. How long has it been since they took him here? Since he felt the press of her body on his wounded frame?

I love you. Had he heard that wrong?

She moves to return it but he doesn't want that. Of all the places his heart has been, with himself and with Jess and with

Sadie, it has never held more purpose than in her hands. It strikes him that he'd like to see her devour it. Full, broad lips and angular chin dripping with his blood. His blood looks so damned good on her, always.

"Please, Wright," she says, and he groans. He's inside of her, dead. Consumed by the way she rides him. She falls forward, face hovering over his, damp hair blanketing both of them. Her hips shifting, grinding, writhing over him.

His vision blurs. Knot throbbing, aching for release but not surrender. He gasps at the slick feeling of his heart settling back into his chest like a heavy weight. Almost laughs at the ecstasy of this. She throws her head back, and in that stunning neon light he sees her body move like the sail of a ship...

A door creaks, or will. It's the pressure of cement against metal that gets to him. He blinks against the fluorescent lighting, already feeling sick to his stomach, his hands empty of Howie.

It took three men and the wolf girl to get him in this room after he snapped the handcuffs, but he's been here long enough to drift off. He hasn't been shot in years. Even when he was, it was never three times, never in such vital places. Jada's people are so fucking brutal he bets she would've turned wolf without the gene.

It ain't her fault.

They forced her.

God knows what else they did to set this fear into her heart.

There are men on the other side of the door. The room is sparse cement and a dark pane of glass that makes Wright think it's nighttime, but always. It smells faintly of gasoline. He hates fluorescents, would like to jump and knock them out, but doesn't trust his night vision in pitch blackness. It's light sensitivity his breed has, not the ability to see where no one can. He figures he'd have to be part bat for that, and he missed that gene.

The flickering of intercom static attracts his attention.

“Do you see the window?” a crackling voice asks. So loud because he hasn’t heard anything in hours.

Not blind, am I? He imagines Howie responding and smiles to himself despite the pounding in his chest. Despite the discomfort of aching for her.

“We’ve positioned a video camera behind the glass,” the voice continues.

Wright straightens. His intention had been to kill whoever came through the door, but now he must add smashing the camera to pieces, too. No one can find out what he is, though if the camera was there, it watched him heal.

It’s less incriminating than turning.

“We will run a test,” the voice says. “It hasn’t been as successful on our other subject.”

Wright watches the door, knowing the moment they come through he’ll take them all on, but remembering how it was to fight Jack Williams. If it had only been the man and his humanity, Wright would have slaughtered him. Easily. Without another thought.

But he had wolf’s blood in him.

Wright rolls his shoulders back.

“Subject is on the defensive,” the voice says. “Proceed with caution.”

When the door opens, the scent of gasoline hits nearly as hard as the sight of all that gray. He pushes forward but brightness explodes in his eyes, coupled with excruciating pain. He smells burning. Feels his skin, all of it, as if it’s separate from his body. The animal inside him screams to shift but it’s silenced when he feels his lips melt together. He can’t see. He’s too disoriented to turn.

The ground hits him and he rips through his lips to scream at the pain of it. His mouth fills with blood, but maybe it’s smoke, but maybe the two are the same. He hears the sound of fire and the sizzling of flesh but soon, hearing is stolen from him too.

Darkness vanishes his mind, not before thinking he might never make it out of this room alive.

Chapter 44

Much of him left

Howie

The air in the sheriff's department is off, wiry and frenetic, the second Howie steps through the doors. It's as if she can feel eyes she can't even see tracking her. She knew it might be like this. If they knew what she was planning, they knew they'd have to hit her hard. Pierce the skin and crack some ribs. Killing the man she spends her nights with, that was a more effective way than she could imagine, and maybe for some other woman that would have been enough.

But they don't know who she is. She carries resilience like air in her lungs, and the blood in her throat woke her up before daybreak. All day, she waited for Wright to show. She gave him the chance Ridge told her to give him. But now, at four in the morning, thirty-six hours after they took Wright away from her, she's in the department lobby. Standing on the tiled seal of Teton County.

"Deputy Black Elk," Ms. Crue, one of the secretaries, says in a voice tightened with expectation.

She really won't have much time at all.

"What brings you here? I don't think you're scheduled for the day."

No. Not going to be scheduled for a long time, maybe ever.

She ignores Ms. Crue's pleading voice, striding towards the stairwell. Feeling the heat of tired eyes but not flinching. The lieutenant's desk is empty. The chief's office is too. This

should be nothing, should be easy, because she bets they don't tell just anyone about this.

Taking the stairs down two at a time, she reaches the morgue quickly. She hasn't been here in too long, she realizes, and hasn't checked to make sure that the victims made it in for autopsies. Doris didn't, she knows. Quick burials.

Who are they hiding?

The room is cold. Sterile. Teal tiles line the walls, hundreds of small squares like blue eyes watching her. She looks for any paper, any indication she can find to see which of the freezers he could be in. It's not that she thinks he's here. It's not that she's doubtful of Ridge Lindal and his confident, bloodthirsty voice.

It's just that nothing works out for her like Wright surviving three gunshots would, and no one else working this case has given her the same answers she's uncovered. Now, she's used to distrust.

She needs to know for herself.

She needs to know badly enough that she's here instead of digging through the lieutenant's desk for clues. It's simple. If Wright is dead she's not touching this case again. She will not risk losing anyone else.

The first freezer opens with a loud clunk she's sure they can hear upstairs, but it's empty. The next one stops her heart. It's not a man's feet but a woman's that she sees, a bite taken out of the calf. She opens it the rest of the way. There's a dead woman here, but...

She can't think about it.

Bile brews in her stomach.

No. No. This cannot happen.

There's a dead woman, her breasts and thighs devoured to the bone of her ribs and to her femurs. Howie slams the freezer shut and braces herself. That face is new, not one of the women who had a case on her. No one who's being investigated. She should not be there.

And some of those bites are fresh.

Not all.

Some.

She can't explain beyond a gut feeling how she knows the bites are fresh, but she knows the way skin sinks around a wound and then around raw meat. There's more of a curl to it.

"Howie."

The dread in her veins knows his voice better than she does.

"How did she taste?" she asks.

"Oh," Jack sighs a laugh.

He's closer. She can hear the soft tread of his boots against the tiled floor. Without any windows, the room is dim save for a few lights. The flashlight she has on her belt calls to her; she'd like to show him how his eyes reflect like Wright's do.

The coroner isn't here, will never be here. Maybe he hasn't been here since this woman was brought down, or maybe he's a wolf too, or maybe he's in a freezer. She hopes the other plausible option, that there's a man who gets paid money to look away when humans are turned to meat, is far from the truth.

She understands the need for money as well as anyone who has been poor, but those who do the most wretched things for it always seem to want more than need. They count it into stacks. That, amongst other things, is the type of man Jack Williams is.

"I'd tell you to ask your lover, but he's dead," Jack says. She can feel the words wrap around her spine, tight into the cracks of her vertebrae.

"Prove it," she says.

"You're not going to tell me *he's not my lover?*" he asks. "Or *how would he know?*"

"How did you know?" she asks, turning to him. This turns her back on the dead woman, though, the metal panel digging

into her hips. The promise of what could become of Howie, a cold and constant reminder. “We’re cutting the bullshit, eh? With him being dead and all. No more pretending he isn’t what he is, or that you aren’t what you are.”

Her breath hitches around the accusation, because outside of Jack Williams being an evil man, she’s not sure what she’s saying is true. There’s no way he’s the same creature Wright is, or how would Wright have gotten the upper hand on him? How would she sense none of the power than she does with her man, with the lieutenant?

“You know what I used to like about you, Howie?” Jack asks, his eyes dark. “An unusual intelligence. You were smarter for who you were than any of us expected. It pains me that this year has been so disappointing.”

Howie lifts her eyebrows, cocking her head sarcastically. “You know I’d never want to cause you pain.”

Her hand is on her gun. He smiles. He’s too close to her, not that she’d shoot him here. It would be suicide for her, which any iteration of killing him publicly would be. The town has more than shown her his perceived worth compared to hers, and she knows that the only places in this country where her life might be worth more than his are the ones he can ignore.

“You helped with cases and kept to yourself,” he says. “You were decent. Now, I don’t know, Howie. Maybe you were never meant to go very far here.”

“Don’t be coy like you would’ve let me go far,” she says. It’s the most heartbreaking thing she’s ever spoken out loud but she knows it with him. She’s sure.

“Could’ve married me,” he says.

She laughs, almost a cackle, because she’s sure he’s making a joke. But the darkening of his eyes tells her otherwise.

“What?” she asks, still nearly laughing. Nearly forgetting she’s meant to look for Wright’s body, or that she’s not meant to be here at all, because the only reason she hasn’t been fired

for punching Jack in public is no one has talked to her enough to say the words.

“I could have given you a great life,” he says, but it sounds like *I could’ve let you live*.

She tilts her head. “Oh yeah? I got a great life.”

“With that dead buck over there?” he asks. He nods with his chin to the next steel door.

Without hesitation, Howie rushes for it. She pulls open the door as he stays where he is, a meter between them now. When she opens it, though, her stomach turns.

Feet.

A man’s feet.

They’re large enough to be Wright Lindal’s but she can’t fathom how something so cold could have ever been him. It’s like ice, emanating from the pale skin, darkening the blonde hair of his legs. The tag on the big toe says his name. *Wright Lindal. 35. Time of Death 4:12 PM April 19th, 1952*. That writing looks nearly victorious.

It should be him. She felt the blood seep from his body to the earth but she grips the slab he rests on and peers into the darkened pit they keep him in.

“You’d have had as much with him as you did with that prairie rat you married,” Jack remarks.

“Still might,” she quips. It only takes a peek in dim lighting to know that the body they say is Wright Lindal belongs to someone else. Wright’s ankles are different. The arch of his foot is different. The length of his calf muscle. She’s curled at the foot of her own bed, observing the line of his shin bone as he slept— she knows him. “I’m no dimwit, Jack. You’d never want to marry me.”

“If you were pregnant, it’d get you off the force.”

She glares at him. “And I’d rather die than marry you. At least Darran had a sense of humor and a working dick. Wright, well... He’s bulletproof. That must be so frustrating for you

and your brother. So emasculating. Your money can't buy that."

Jack's got a feral, almost crazed look to him now that makes Howie think she struck bone.

"Don't be so sure," he says.

"Where is he?" she asks.

His grin deepens. "In that freezer, Miss Black Elk."

"Shut up," she snaps, her anger spiking, spiraling around like hurricane winds. It's as if punching him once broke the damn on all the ways she's wanted to hurt him. "You know that's bullshit."

"He's not in your trailer, is he?" Jack asks.

"Fuck you-"

"So he might as well be dead to you," Jack says. "You won't see him again, Howie, so he's as good as dead to you."

Red clouds her vision. Thick, salted crimson. Ridge is on his way, or will head here if she fails. Ridge, who has killed hundreds both innocent and guilty. Ridge, who hunted a woman down across an entire state with only the scent of her to guide him. This does not need to happen here.

"Stop it," she growls. Her hand is on her gun again, begging him not to.

"Even if you did see him, you'd hardly recognize him."

"What do you mean?" she snaps.

"There won't be much of him left," Jack says, still smiling.

It happens quickly now. The dam was already broken.

Howie lunges forward, one forearm on Jack's neck and the other raised, gun in hand, leveled at his temple. She presses the muzzle in hard, finger dancing along the trigger, teeth bared, snarling.

"Where is he?" she bites out.

He stares into her eyes. This is not the closeness she wants from him, or that she wants from anyone but Wright, watching

her, *knowing* her. Seeing every awful fear in her mind on display in the richness of her pine-dark eyes.

“Tell me,” she growls. “Now.”

“You don’t need me to tell you,” he manages, shifting uncomfortably under the pressure of her anger. Of the gun at his temple and the arm at his neck. He is *not* what Wright is. He’s just an imitation. “I’ll show you.”

Wright

When Wright next lifts his head, he sees his own skin pasted to the floor. He can tell he’s healed from the lack of pain, a brief reprieve from all they’ve done. Since they burned him, they set his lungs ablaze with a gas that made him drown above water. They’ve coated him in dry ice and watched it kill his skin.

He’d take all the pain a dozen times over if it meant there would be no proof of his healing. But there is. Through that one way glass is a camera that will assure he’ll never have a life outside of this. They know his name. They know his family. He figures it’s only a matter of time before they find Ridge and test it out on him too.

Except they wouldn’t get Ridge, would they? He’d have no qualms for witnesses, and would have killed everyone at the party except for Howie. In most of Wright’s waking moments, he wishes he’d done the same. He couldn’t have expected the worst out here, though. He couldn’t have prepared himself to find true evil.

How much did the wolf girl tell them?

Did they know before she told them? Did they know what to look for, get some light shed on it after the war?

His past as a soldier, they must know that part. If someone looked, they could find proof of his wolf where he was stationed. The Nazis couldn’t have hidden all of the evidence that someone was eating them. *Something* must have slipped through the cracks in the trials.

They've burned him, gassed his lungs, drenched him in boiling water. And he's left thinking again what would have happened if those *kraut eating bastards* had put one of his kind in their camps. A Jewish, Romani, or Polish wolf? Is that how they would have known?

How often has his kind shown up in history simply for refusing to die?

He knows there aren't many of them. Outside of his own family, he's only met one other. That one other being the reason he's here.

The wolf girl was also the reason he was hired, his job being the reason he stayed in Jackson long enough to meet Howie and fall in love. That might have been a perfect conclusion, but as a man he's left thinking he's had some autonomy taken from him.

How much, then?

Did the wolf girl know that this would be the result, someone to help her save her own hide? He can't blame her, even though he'd like to, even though in his worst times he lets himself believe she wanted him to see her get her blood drawn, wanted him to fight Jack in that bathroom.

His worst nature wants him to hate a child. Spite against innocence. It only breeds destruction.

And this is destruction, without a doubt. He's naked and beaten, the chill prickling goosebumps over his fresh skin. Healing's faster if he turns, but he's still holding onto that with savage stubbornness. He's never turned in front of someone who wasn't kin. He doesn't want a record of his inhumanity. Pride or survival, he's not sure what, but it's kept him strong so far.

But what if they come for Howie next?

If it saves Howie, it'll be worth anything.

He's so hungry he's sure they can hear the echo of his stomach through the walls. It was always worse for Ridge after he got shot, so it follows that recovery makes his kind hungrier. Wright's mouth waters for the memory of blood.

He'd like to eat a guard. Or five. Take the prime pieces from all of them. Then, if fate is kinder than he deserves, he'll take the video camera and all of its tapes and he'll smash them. Burn the film. Destroy any proof that he is what he is.

Now, turnin' would make that easier.

Footsteps echo outside.

He shudders despite himself, knowing what's on the other end of that door comes straight from hell.

Can't break.

Springing into a crouch, he angles himself at the door.

I'll kill him. Tear him limb from limb.

But it's not a *him* who opens it. It's the wolf girl, Jada, small and curly-haired, but... Different.

A shell.

The thought pierces him sharper than fire, because someone has done something to his former ward. All resentment slips from her to the open. She doesn't look like a wolf should, is far too vulnerable for that. From her gaunt face to her blanched skin to the dark, nearly black circles under her eyes, she is wreckage. When she walks, she sways.

"What did they do to you?" he snaps, searching desperately for clothing. He doesn't want a child to see him indecent. It tears at him. He'd like to hold her, to bring some comfort to her, and he can't even think straight.

Then he sees it.

There's a clear tube running from beyond the door to her arm and Wright frowns, not sure what it means beyond knowing that the door is cracked open. He springs up, ready to push past her.

"No!" she screams.

When he looks down at her, she's trembling. Tears in her eyes, brimming to spill down her cheeks. And when he thinks of all this, he'd like to tear through these cement walls and kill everyone he can find.

“He’ll make me change again,” she whimpers. “And I’m hungry.”

The door falls a bit more open. There is a man there, one he doesn’t recognize, poised with a syringe full of something that looks and smells like blood.

“You are too,” Jada whispers.

“Looks like food to me,” Wright snaps, but the man edges his thumb over the suppressor.

“He says he’ll make me eat you,” Jada says. “I don’t wanna eat you, Sir. I just want my mama.”

Wright figures the odds aren’t so bad on lunging for him anyway, but when he thinks to stand, he grows too aware of his nudity. Shame strikes him hard between the eyes, even though he had no choice. Even though his clothes were burned off days or hours or weeks ago. He cups himself with both hands, eyeing the man behind Jada.

“Don’t got a towel to spare?” he snaps.

The man shakes his head once, curtly, and Wright growls at him. This is how they intended it, then, treating this child like she’s grown. Like there’s nothing she hasn’t seen. Wright dreads the thought of what lives in her history. Striding to the wall, not quite away from the man with the syringe, he keeps himself covered while he speaks to her.

“So, he’s got you in here as a threat,” he says.

“Leverage,” another man’s voice replies.

The door opens slowly, and the man who took Jada’s blood, the one who would claim to be her father, pushes through. Not the man who sired her, though Wright wonders if Rob Stoughton has an idea of what’s happening to them. Undoubtedly, he knows that Wright isn’t dead. So what does he think happened? That Wright up and left Jackson, left Howie and the ranch when it all got too complicated?

Maybe that is the image he presented in dirty boots and dark eyes but hell, he wishes it wasn’t.

“Leverage,” Wright repeats. “How’s that? As far as I see it, she turns, it’s two wolves against two men. Not bad odds.”

The man holding the syringe flinches. Wright fights a smile, then figures if there’s any time to be wild, it’s now.

“I injected recently,” Keeper says. “I could fight you off, and if I couldn’t, I’d come back.”

Wright laughs despite himself. “That’s what it is, ain’t it?”

Keeper cocks his head. “I thought you’d know by now.”

“Takin’ our blood to be like us,” Wright says. “That’s what the lieutenant did, right?”

Keeper stays steady, unflinching.

“When two o’ you had to shoot me in daylight to make sure I didn’t kill ‘im?” Wright asks. “Thought you’d know by now it’d be madness to do that again.”

“You can’t die,” Keeper says. “I’d come back.”

Wright grins. This, he figures, is the best situation he’s had in a lifetime.

“Don’t bet on that,” Wright says. He might not be able to outsmart many people but he’s been able to overpower every single one he’s ever come across. Even Jack Williams, with his injections. Damn, he could have put him through the ground if it weren’t for being shot, and *they know that*. They had to know it.

“Then there’s what would happen if you turned on camera,” Keeper continues, as if there’d been no interruption. “What would happen if the world saw Wright Lindal for what he truly was, not some hick soldier from Appalachia... I always wondered about that.”

Wright glares at him. “What it’s like to serve for the good side? *Williams*, that’s a fake name, ain’t it? Fake name for a false wolf.”

Contempt dulls the man’s eyes.

“You feel such pride for your evil,” Keeper says. “Without recognizing that your *authentic* wolf should never exist in a righteous world. We’ve perfected it. We don’t need to kill.”

“What happened to all those women, then?” Wright growls.

“An isolated incident,” Keeper replies.

Wright shakes his head. “A choice, then. It ain’t the same damn thing.”

“You are such an American. To take no responsibility upon yourself. If a man has leprosy, should he put himself amongst others, or leave to the woods to die? And if your existence means the death of others, is your call any different?”

Wright’s blood feels hotter, not unlike the way it did when he was set aflame.

“The difference between you and I is I live by honor and the word of God and you live by a book written by a coward who shot himself in a bunker because he didn’t want to know how badly we’d gutted him,” Wright snaps.

“Bet you wonder if he hadn’t, if that man would have simply become an American,” Keeper says.

Wright hunkers low, but his teeth are sharper now. All his life, he’s managed himself. He’s been contained, tame even, when life called for the need. And now, with a camera aimed at his naked body, he’s beginning to wonder how much longer the dam will hold.

“I wondered why this was all you became,” Keeper says. “You could do more. There are others like you, clearly. What are the chances they’re all shackled up at some woman’s trailer, pinching pennies to buy her groceries?”

Wright tenses his jaw, because he’d like to ask questions. He’d like to know how long they were watching him, how long they knew about him. At least it soothes him that he and Jada might be the only ones the men know about.

And Ridge, and the boys.

And my boy too, once.

“Maybe I’ll try your job,” Wright snips. “Somethin’ you gotta wear a suit and tie too, right? The costume that lets you pretend you’re better than all the men who grow your food and fight this country’s wars?”

Keeper frowns, almost amused. “You don’t know me?”

Wright pictures Howie for a moment. Knows she’d toss that gorgeous hair, tilt her chin up, and tell him *no, but you know me, don’t you?* He smiles to himself just thinking about it.

“Something amusing to you?” Keeper asks.

He tongues his cheek, scanning the man’s face. He has controlled himself for a long time, but it’s too damn long.

“Why are you here?” Wright asks. “Seems like a lot of effort just for conversation. And killin’ me, bringin’ me back...”

“There are parts of you that could improve the species.”

Wright laughs. “Yeah, Doc, I’m sure that could’a been true. Guess no one told you I was sterile. Can’t add to the population, just take it away.”

“Not that.”

“What then?”

“Your blood,” Keeper says. “Perhaps more.”

“You’ve got your own victim for all that, don’t you?” Wright asks, nodding to Jada. The girl looks like she’s a few breaths away from fainting, watery eyes angled down towards the needle in her arm. “That’s true evil.”

“The downside of her turning too soon is the blood,” Keeper says. “It could be stronger. *Yours* could be stronger, and save my daughter the pain of this.”

“That ain’t your fuckin’ daughter,” Wright snaps.

“When Marin birthed the girl, I knew she wasn’t mine. But Jada is my daughter, even if not by blood. I raised her as my own.”

Wright quirks a brow, not liking the taste of that statement. “Your own what? Guinea pig? Runnin’ all these tests on her, I mean, hell, have you killed her like you did me?”

Keeper firms his jaw.

“That ain’t your fuckin’ daughter then,” Wright says.

“She will not be put on display,” Keeper snaps.

“Oh,” Wright nods, realizing the unspoken thing. “You’re ashamed of it.”

At this, Jada lifts her gaze towards Wright. There’s confusion in her face like this is foreign news to her, like this is a language she has never spoken.

“You put her on display like you will me, all your buddies will know you’re a cuckold to the very type of man you despise,” Wright says, leaning back. He laughs, shaking his head.

“We need your blood,” Keeper says.

“Bet you do,” Wright fires back. “Come and get it.”

Keeper reaches for his holster, draws out a gun, and Wright smiles. He’d love to see the man aim it at him, love to watch him waste the single second of deciding to fire before Wright, bullet-shot and hungry, plowed into his throat.

“I don’t want to hurt her as I would you,” Keeper insists. “She knows that.”

“Nah,” Wright says taunting. “I might’a bought a lie like that, but you turned her before her time. Made her kill some people she didn’t want to kill, never taught her much.”

It infuriates him. The more he speaks it aloud, the more he recognizes the evil of Keeper’s actions, taking from a child to feed rich, violent men.

“Knowin’ from birth she wasn’t yours, what, did she look like she might love the wild?” Wright asks. “Look like she might want to spend her life atop a horse, wind blowin’ in her hair, runnin’ free? How long did you try to beat that outta her before you realized you couldn’t?”

“She knows our cause.”

“You stole her childhood!” Wright yells. “Christ, I see no joy in her. You burned it, didn’t you? With the same gas you gave me, with the fire you lit me with?”

“And she knows that’ll be of service to the greater good!” Keeper snaps.

“It ain’t *her* good, is it?” Wright fires back, still not raising his voice.

It’s the first real time Wright has seen Keeper angry, and he’s fascinated that this is what brings it out of him. Maybe the man does care for the girl. But not in any way that matters. Not in any way that can keep her alive or that could have saved Booker.

No. It’s not for her good, never was, and as if admitting that, Keeper does the unthinkable.

He angles the gun towards the wolf girl’s head.

Chapter 45

We share blood

Howie

Howie has played out all too often what would have happened if the wolf had never interrupted Jack from taking her out of town. Out of jurisdiction, out of anywhere they'd be asked to investigate a murder. After the body in the morgue, she's sure there are others in neighboring counties, trips taken over their forty-eight hour breaks that could have put him outside of Wyoming. Hundreds of women. As many as he could hunger for.

What she doesn't understand, though, is what exactly he is.

He looks at once human and like a bad spirit, not human at all. She met a guy who worked for a time at the bar and told her about men who were witches, who killed their families to walk as animals and get a bit of power. How it haunted them, that power, made them kill even when they didn't want to. It's one of those stories that she didn't discount but that she didn't hold too close either, outside of the image of what someone like that would look like. The hollowness in their eyes and cheeks, the thinness of their lips— Howie thinks Jack Williams might have cursed himself long before he ever chose to do any of this. It all makes sense now.

“Do I look like him?” Jack asks as he drives, as Howie keeps her gun leveled at him.

“Who?” Howie asks, thinking he might mean the creature. Then, she'd answer *yes. You look like the ghosts are consuming you.*

“The cowboy,” he tells her.

“Wright?” she asks, almost confused. He looks nothing like Wright, aside from the lightness of their skin, and even that glows more on Wright than him. She doesn’t understand how he keeps a tan when he heals so quickly, but maybe that’s just how much the sun wants to bless him.

Jack sighs as if exasperated. “I regret saying I found you smart.”

“No. You look nothing like him. You *are* nothing like him.”

“We share blood.”

Howie scoffs. “Alright then.”

“Don’t you want to ask what made me like him?” Jack prods.

For that alone, she won’t. Ever. If she dies today, it’ll be without giving him the satisfaction of her own curiosity. Except Jack reaches into his chest pocket and pulls out a small glass vial. It’s filled with crimson, either blood-like or blood itself.

“That’s it,” he says. “All his power is in that blood.”

Anger rushes through Howie, flushing her cheeks as she pockets the vial.

“How dare you take something from him?” she spits.

“So you do care. Delightful.”

“*Bastard,*” she growls, pushing forward to press the gun tighter against him. She wants to kill him, is so sure she can find where they’ve hidden Wright without this detour, and murder might heal the beast inside of her. Because with a gun in her hands, disregarding all safety measures to press the barrel against Jack’s skull, she thinks she’s wanted to do this for a long time. Kill someone, kill *him*. In her chest is a drive long forgotten and she wonders how she’s been stifling it for so long.

“*That’s* not his,” Jack says, gesturing to her pocket now. “If it soothes your righteousness. We haven’t managed to get his yet. Old boy puts up a fight.”

Howie sits back on her side of the bench seat.

She assumed in the few moments of knowing that Jack had gotten Wright’s blood at some other time, perhaps in secret or through Rob Stoughton’s connections with the greedy elements of their town. He had to, because women had been dying since the fall and it was already spring. Who was the other wolf?

Who did they get the blood from?

“If it’s not his, then why wait until he gets here to start killing?” she asks. “What, you need a cover, or something? You need a wolf in the area to bring the other one out?”

“Simpler than that,” Jack says. “Say the person meant to be the wolf has been telling stories their whole life. And say, one day, we get sick of those stories. We say, *you bastard thing, if you truly think you won’t die, then you’ll stop us when we kill you.*”

He laughs as if this is all a fond memory.

“It was long before Wright got here that we learned what we could do with the blood,” Jack continues. “But it wasn’t until he got here *and we knew* that we realized we’d have a scapegoat if anything went wrong. And we got... careless.”

Careless.

How many did being careless kill?

Staring at Jack, she doubts he’ll tell her. She wants so badly to just bite her tongue around the subject and not give him what satisfaction he wants. The hair-quirk of his eyebrow in profile shows he’s waiting in anticipation, but she notices something else about his frame.

He’s relaxed.

Even when she moved closer to him, he didn’t tense. For a moment, she’s brought back to the first time Wright broke into her trailer, the quiet animal spirit of it all, the way he’d broken

her gun in half and thrown it into the wall. It had never been a threat to him.

Eyeing him, she cocks the gun. He does flinch at that. Does he flinch because he didn't believe she would shoot him, and she's broken this false camaraderie? Or does he flinch out of muscle memory, when he doesn't truly care at all?

"We're almost there," he says with more of a teeth-grinding sound to his voice than usual. She itches to shoot him just to see which of her assumptions is correct.

"How long does the blood last?" she asks. "Is it like heroin, where your body fights it?"

Jack smiles. "Smart girl."

He's relishing the intrigue. That makes her *really* want to shoot him. If she shoots him in the left leg, she might hit an artery due to the bullet's trajectory to his inner thigh. But he would be less likely to crash the vehicle than if she shot him in the leg he accelerates and brakes with. It would also still be a better choice than the arm, because he drives with both hands on the steering wheel like he's a daughter with a father watching. Howie might be many things to him, but she knows that's far from the picture.

"It lasts eight hours for me," he says. "More for my brother. You should try it. It might be better for you."

"If it makes self-control harder, you shouldn't ask me to take it," Howie says.

Jack laughs. "I'd like to see you try to kill me."

"What's this, then?"

The country road has been desolate for at least half an hour, winding between expanses of prairie and tall outcroppings of pine. It's what makes it so alarming when the road begins to taper off and a cabin appears, if she can call it that. It looks like a Hollywood image of a cabin, nothing like the space she lived in Dakota or the smaller houses on the edge of Wind River. There are two stories, pristine logs, and golden wood chippings scattered out front. She tells herself to breathe despite the lights glowing from within. Despite the car

parked out front. This is where they're keeping Wright, isn't it?

That's what Jack said. With a gun to his head, he should have no reason to lie.

Yet Howie's stomach sinks as the door opens. Because the person in the doorway isn't someone she wants to kill. Instead, it's someone who shouldn't know a damn thing about this, who shouldn't be greeting a friend with a shotgun in their hands.

Marin Williams strides out to the porch, a darkly empty look in her eyes that makes Howie stutter. She looks like an alien, unrecognizable in whatever state she's found herself in, but now Howie wonders about the afternoons spent over tea and all her questions. The gravel crunches under Marin's feet as she storms towards the truck.

Maybe she's furious with Jack for some reason. Wouldn't that be some perfect dream, for her to kill Jack and for Howie to watch him die, blissfully innocent, *able to wait for the police*, even. Able to say, *no, officers, wasn't me who did a thing to this man. Was that wealthy woman over there, take her away, you should have seen the death in her eyes.*

That optimism disappears when Marin raises the shotgun and aims it right at Howie's chest. And Howie hardly has a second to duck beneath the dashboard before all that glass explodes over her.

Wright

"We're going to take your blood, Wright Lindal."

Years ago, when life had seemed worse than its enemy, Wright tried to go without feeding. It was half a challenge to his pa who'd abandoned him to be the man of the household at fifteen, but another half an invitation for Death to take the reins. He saw the end so keenly then, beckoned for it at night like a lover. And then, without warning or much memory of the process, he turned.

It was two months into starvation. He'd dropped forty pounds on an already grief-diminished frame, looking as if he could prepare for the exact thing he wanted. Really, it just made him weak. He woke up in his wolf form, gnawing at a skeleton stripped clean, not knowing if the man had been evil. Sometimes he has visions of who the man was in those last moments, or what form he was in, that contradict each other. Consciousness is a tricky thing in the mind of an animal.

Point is, he wasn't aware of the change that took place involuntarily. In Jackson, he's had a few of those moments where he's turned without knowing it, waking up naked in his own smeared blood wondering where he could have been. But he was free then, free enough to walk around, to live, and now they've got him locked away.

That's their mistake.

He was savage once, feral once, reckless once, and that was without cause. But now he's facing evil on an empty stomach.

There's a gun aimed at the wolf girl's head, and she doesn't look strong enough to come back from that.

"Daddy!" she screams, sobbing as the other man grabs her by the arms. She shakes him off at first but he gets her, and he must be injected, and she must be weak.

This man is going to kill his daughter.

His daughter.

My ward.

My fuckin' wolf girl.

It flashes into his consciousness like a lightning storm in a dark home, bits and pieces illuminating his soul with a ghostly glow. On his knees, fingertips digging into the cement floor, he shakes with the urge. He's seen this before. Ridge went through this less than a year ago. He must be stronger than his brother.

He has to do this human or they'll have too much time to think.

“Mr. Lindal, are you changing on us?” Keeper asks, taunting. “I’d advise you didn’t, or I swear I’ll-”

Wright lunges forward, ignoring the crack of the gun firing as he slams the man into the wall. A snakelike hiss erupts from the man’s throat as he darts his head forward, rushing to bite Wright’s neck. Knowing his own height, Wright grabs the man’s throat instead, slamming him back into the wall hard enough to hear the cement crack against his skull.

Then Keeper lifts his arm, the gun still smoking, aiming for Wright’s head. Wright grabs his wrist, pinning his shoulder to the wall and yanking as hard as he can. Where he should feel the detachment of flesh, he only hears the ripping of muscle and a howl, so he turns and bites deep into the man’s arm.

He’s never tasted wolf’s blood before, even stolen and diluted. But damn, it’s like a drug.

His vision sharpens.

Colors go brighter.

And through the blood and flesh in his teeth, he howls.

The other man pulls him away, but not before Wright jerks the gun from Keeper’s hand and slams its thin, German barrel into the man’s neck. Blood spurts. He drinks hungrily, biting deeper as he pushes the man backwards onto the ground with a crack.

Taking the man’s skull into his hands, Wright digs his fingers into the sockets of his eyes and pulls his head apart. Here, the jelly of the man’s eyes has none of the strength that Wright’s does. It drips down the guard’s cheeks. It shouldn’t feel so good to see the man’s face split in two, to watch as each fiber and length of bone splinters underneath the tension. His brain stays together. Stronger than the rest, but useless.

Wright spins around, ready to fight, but he hadn’t seen where the gun fired.

He hadn’t seen the wolf girl on the floor, crumpled and bleeding from her head.

Keeper stares at her, unmoving except for the blood streaming from his upper arm down his fingertips.

“We’ll send this footage everywhere,” he says. “It’s clear you made me shoot her. That my finger slipped on the trigger. And she’ll come back.”

The wolf girl looked so frail before, and now she only looks human. Wright fights his mind and the memories this image brings. It’s not just her. It’s his son in the kitchen with his life ahead of him.

“You made her turn too fuckin’ young!” Wright yells. “She won’t come back!”

He’ll take her body from this place. He’ll pray to a God he never earned just to keep her alive— he’ll take her body from underground and bury her on the ranch. Somewhere beautiful. Somewhere his own family never got when they were taken from him. A tear slips from his eye but he lets anger mask it, can’t mourn right now.

So he howls instead.

He howls from a deep wound in his chest that won’t heal, not just for the wolf girl but for all this evil ending too late. For all the times he held back when he could have pulled the world apart for those he loved. For the way that this could all go differently if there weren’t men trying to add to their gold with the torment of others.

Keeper stares at him, backing into the wall. Trembling. A strong man reduced to nothing in his last moments. “I’ll come back.”

“We die,” Wright says. “When a real wolf kills us.”

With that, he lunges forward, driving his fist into the man’s stomach and twisting, digging in with his nails. The skin breaks, blood spilling over him like hot oil, slick and bountiful, broken land.

“You are not a real wolf,” Wright tells the man, before wrapping his hand around his intestine and pulling. “She was.”

The man blanches so he grabs him by the neck and drags him to the window, to the thing that has haunted every one of his waking moments in this cell. They're watching, *but let them. Let them see what I'll do to them now.*

He opens Keeper's neck and lifts him, lets him paint the window in streaks of all the blood he's stolen from the girl. Wright will christen her with it before they leave, give her one final parting gift, but for now he lets it make that damned window opaque crimson. Clotting and dripping and disgustingly fatal.

To him, it smells like flowers.

Finally, with the only sight of him obscured by another man's mortality, he lets himself turn.

Howie

Glass feels like gel, feels heavy and light all at once, sprinkled through her hair as she pushes the door to the truck open and scrambles behind it. It's still running, she realizes frightfully, thinking Jack will run her over, but a brief glance over the bed shows no movement from him. Another bullet fires her way and she drops to her hands and knees, ready to scramble away. Marin stays where she is.

Under the truck, there's less than a foot between the chassis and the ground. It's enough space for Howie to see her former friend's heels but not enough for her to crawl through.

"Wonder when they'll let us fight in boots," Howie calls.

Marin pauses. Howie quietly starts toward the other side of the truck, careful not to make a noise at first. It doesn't feel safe having Jack out of sight like this.

"There's no use fighting," Marin says. Howie wonders if that's a direct response to what she said or if it's something Marin practiced in the mirror, pretty lips framing the words until she felt she looked perfect. Neither would be out of character.

Howie feels her hand slip and Marin fires again at the sound.

“Don’t take this personally, Howie,” Marin implores. “I like you. But they have my daughter. You know how much she means to me.”

Howie pauses, genuinely confused this time. “Why do they have your daughter? Isn’t Henry a part of this?”

“Jada isn’t his,” Marin says, and her voice sounds near the corner. Howie raises her pistol almost blindly, only instinct moving her, and fires.

It glances off the metal but Marin yelps. Howie can see her feet moving back.

Then, the driver’s side door opens. Howie spins around, firing towards it, and it slams shut again.

“Stay in there!” she yells. “I’ll fucking kill you first!”

She’s panting, praying to Creator in her mind just to breathe right, just to give her enough luck that Marin and Jack are both scared enough of her not to team up and kill her right now. They could. They so easily could.

As if to argue her prayer directly, she sees Marin’s feet step towards her and she eyes the house. Only fifteen yards between her and that door. It didn’t take the woman long to walk across and she could run easily. Howie eyes Marin’s feet, makes sure she’s around the back of the truck to obscure her angle.

And then she sprints. Gravel flying behind her. Wind streaming her hair backwards. She hears two large cracks and feels a sting in her thigh but she doesn’t stop, just flings open the door as another shot sprays wood chips over her. The door might be heavy. She can’t even tell, just needs to take cover as soon as she can.

Pain inches into her as she presses the lock, noticing light glowing through the back of the cabin. Light glowing everywhere. There’s an open door and more crunching gravel. For a second, she can see the dust floating in the multitude of

windows lining the first floor. All she has to do is rush at the back door to lock herself inside.

Her angle is better. She doesn't need to travel much. She bursts through the kitchen, feeling dampness down the back of her heel. It doesn't matter that she's been shot. She closes the door and locks it securely, panting against it. Lifting her leg just to feel pain, clenching her jaw. Whatever bullet was fired, if Jack had a gun she didn't see, wasn't enough to go through her leg but she feels it between muscle and bone, each movement a stabbing sensation of being torn apart from within.

She'll need tweezers or a knife to get it out. There's no way she'll be able to go to a hospital in the state without them finding her.

Where she's leaned gives her a vantage point just as the front door knob turns harshly enough to fall out of the door itself. Howie pants, aiming her gun at the front door, thinking of when she'll have to reload. Fifteen shots from now. She can bring them down in fifteen shots, she knows from the most mathematical angle, and right now she can't allow room for anything else.

Is Wright here? Is he hidden beneath the floorboards, or in some underground cellar closer to the woods? Or did she let Jack lead her to her own execution and mock her in his mind the entire time?

Soft footsteps pressure the porch behind her, and she freezes. Ice water in her veins. No one is coming to save her, so she needs to wake up. Get it straight. The sound of metal dragging over unpolished wood echoes from the other side of the door.

"I can smell you in there, Howie," Jack says, and from the sound of it, his face is pressed to the door.

She figures his height. Raises her pistol. She's unsteady on her legs with muscle damage and nothing to lean on but adrenaline is working in her favor now and she fires, right where she thinks she hears him. There's silence and sunlight

through the door for half a second that stretches out in front of her like a broad, eternal lake.

Then the door explodes inward, and she gets another shot out before she finds herself tackled to the ground. Beyond her head, she can hear her gun scattering across the wood floor as Jack grabs her by the hair and slams her back down again. Her brain rattles, ears ringing from the impact, but they're both damp. He's bleeding. Shot, that means.

He wraps his hands around her neck.

As Howie fights for air, her fingers travel along his abdomen, searching for the wound. He doesn't seem like the type of man to handle pain. She feels black spots erupt in her vision but stays focused, not concentrating on the way that Jack looks wolflike, like he could kill her, but is not yet anything but human.

Her fingers slip over a wound on his shoulder, just the top, nothing vital. But with all her strength, she digs her nails in until her fingertips graze muscle and she pushes deep. He yells out. Releases her enough for her to bring her knee as hard as she can between his legs, punting him forward and off of her.

Her elbow grounds her body as she focuses through blurred vision, searching for her gun. But when she finds it, those heeled feet kick it away. She looks up to see Marin level the barrel of her shotgun at her, rolls away just in time for the floor next to her head to smoke and splinter. Some of it catches in her eye but she scrambles away, blindly, back to the kitchen where there must be something she can use. The doorframe explodes from another shot and she dives to the ground, knees against hard linoleum, when it occurs to her that Marin only has two rounds for each reload and has never gone hunting.

She turns.

Runs as hard as she can.

Tackles the woman to the ground.

Compared to Jack, Marin is easy, because all it takes is a knee to her neck and a firm, blood-drawing bite on her wrist to disarm her. It's almost enough for Howie not to want to kill

her, but she takes the shotgun and re-racks it, noting the shells pushed in. The corner of her eye shows movement, shows Jack raising his gun at her, and she turns and fires his way.

Another stabbing pain ripples up Howie's spine and she looks down to see Marin digging a knife into her hip.

Fuck it, then.

Howie turns the shotgun down and fires directly into Marin's skull. The blast, so close, is chilling. Makes an enemy of the heat of blood and brain matter now splattered against Howie's skirt and bare legs. Her former friend's blood.

What's left of her, anyway...

Howie thinks it before feeling the darkness inside her growl like a hungry stomach. There's nothing left of what made Marin human. What gave her a soul. Howie can see bloody floor beneath the woman's skull.

I did this. I did this.

There's no time to think about it, not about knowing the first person she killed, not about the injuries that threaten to take her out even if she survives this. But when she looks up through blurred vision, she sees Jack's boots and then his body, blood staining his crisp uniform as he aims his gun at her head.

"Last words, Deputy," he tells her.

Chapter 46

Show me (II)

Howie

Part of her doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of hearing the last thing she says with intent. She'd give last words on her deathbed, to Até, to Brooks, Cynthia, the girls, to Wright. Until the events leading to her blowing Marin's head up, she might have entrusted her with them. But she will not give that power to the man she's always hated, who is everything she's hated.

But she's on her knees, and he's got a gun leveled point-blank at her forehead, so she doesn't want anything except for getting out of this exact situation.

"Show me," she says.

He frowns. "Show you what?"

"What it looks like when you put their blood with yours," she says. "Show me. Then you can do more than shoot me, right? Wouldn't that be great for you?"

"Not for you."

"I'll take my chances," she says. She won't shake in front of him but her teeth threaten to chatter, and she knows that might be a sign of shock. Death could claim her any moment. She needs this, needs control if these are her last moments.

"Drop the weapon and stand up," Jack says.

The scales in her mind weigh her chances of coming at him with an empty shotgun from kneeling before he can shoot

her in the head. She listens. Sets the shotgun down and stands up.

“Good,” he says, and he lowers the pistol. Or lowers it and stops halfway, until another shot echoes through the room and Howie meets the floor fast. Feels pain scream through her body.

She cries out, can't *not*, can't keep herself from curling into her stomach. Balled up. Bleeding out.

“Hope you'll take it as a compliment that I view you as a threat unless wounded,” Jack says.

She can tell from the length of the pain inside her, the core of it so white-hot and pulsing she doesn't understand how she could still be living, that the bullet exited through. Her side is shot up— what's here, what did Cynthia tell her? Her spleen? She's not sure but whatever it is won't stop screaming.

I'm alive, though.

Alive and can make him regret it.

Alive. Alive. Alive.

“Come here,” Jack says, guiding her up.

Every inch of movement feels like getting shot again. He walks her over to a dining table and sets her in a chair. She groans, pounding her fist on the tabletop. This kind of pain battles consciousness with iron and lead.

“Use this for the pain,” he says, setting down a bottle of bourbon. When she looks at him, she sees her gun and the shotgun in his hands, the one he threatened her with already holstered. “I'll get my supplies upstairs. If you try to flee, or find a weapon, I trust it goes without saying that I'll kill you.”

Bourbon won't do much to numb this, she imagines, though the gesture is tempting. There's only one thing that helped her pain over the last few months, and he's nowhere to be found.

She thinks about Wright biting her only to lick at her blood, how his saliva heals every wound from cuts to bites. In the pocket of her jacket, she still holds the vial Jack tossed her

way, and while she expects he'll want it, she doesn't have time to think. Footsteps echo upstairs as Jack strides confidently towards his target.

Howie quickly unscrews the vial, bracing herself before leaning back and pressing the mouth of it into the wound on her side. She has to bite her lip not to cry out, but when she doesn't feel the sensation his spit gives her, that fizzy feeling like soda, she taps the glass as she would a blocked-up salt shaker and feels a cooling sensation spread.

The pain is still enough to make her eyes water, her vision blur, but it's different. Hopeful.

It's just now, she has another problem. An empty vial. It'll be too obvious and he'll shoot her right away to spare himself the risk. She thinks of the trickling from the wound at her thigh. It's an arterial bleed— that much she knows, which means she will bleed out from it eventually.

But it'll fill that vial quickly.

She presses the glass there, squeezing around the wound to make the blood rush. The pain from that pressure buckles her forward, seizing her stomach.

Instead, rolling her forehead against the cold wood, she listens. His footsteps approach the top of the stairs and she hastily caps the vial, hands shaking as she hears him walking down. With the vial in her other hand, she slams her fist down on the table, face still pressed to the wood, and cries out in pain. She doesn't have to fake it. Even with the tingling at her side, her leg and her hip hurt enough to bleach her vision.

Hopefully, it distracts from the slight movement of her slipping the vial back in her jacket pocket.

"I told you the bourbon would help," Jack says, tracing the muzzle of the gun along her scalp as he comes closer to her.

"Help what?" Howie asks through gritted teeth. "I'm feeling swell."

"I'd like you conscious for this," he says. "Not passed out from pain."

“Should’a thought of that before shooting me,” she clips.

Suddenly, there’s a sharp pain at the back of her head, met with a clap. It’s nothing compared to the bullet wounds so it nearly confuses her, until she looks around to see Jack with a contented smile on his face.

“I’ve wanted to do that for quite some time, Deputy,” he says. “To slap you like an insolent child when you speak back to me. You’ve got to be the most disrespectful officer we’ve ever had at the station. Acting like you know better than the rest of us, and for what? There are other legacy hires. And I can’t imagine those residential schools did much for your education.”

“I didn’t go to a residential school,” she snaps.

Either her anger is stronger than her bleeding, or the wolf’s blood is counteracting her pain. But Joseph’s pride was that his daughter wouldn’t go through what he himself did, years of his life stolen by violent nuns and predatory priests in a prison-like school outside of Pine Ridge. Before she ever would have been of age, he moved her down to Texas. Wyoming was a risk, but she’d been in public schooling long enough to make the government believe she had already lost herself. She’ll be damned if Jack takes that family victory away from her.

“Give me that vial,” Jack says.

Feigning confusion, she tries to make it seem as though she’d forgotten about it. Fumbling in her jacket, she grips it. Prints it with her dried blood so the mess she made seems accidental.

“Fuck you,” she groans, smashing the vial on the table under her flattened palm. She wasn’t sure how much of her blood made it from her thigh to the vial, but she’s happy to see a pool of it there. If there’s a different scent to wolf’s blood, he won’t be able to smell it over how much has already been spilt.

It looks realistic enough for Jack to press his lips into a thin line, disappointment clear on his face.

“Well, that wasn’t very polite, was it?” he asks, striding to a bar cart and grabbing two glasses. He pulls the bottle away from her, pouring the maple-colored liquor for the two of them.

“Not like it was yours,” she says darkly.

He smiles, leaning forward. Her stomach turns when she feels his fingers wrap through her hair, wrenching her head back and pressing his pistol to her exposed neck.

“I could do anything to you,” he says. He brings the butt of his pistol down hard against her closed lips and she gasps, feeling blood pool. There’s something like cracked porcelain inside her mouth and she gasps, trying not to choke on what must be a broken tooth.

But the second she opens her mouth, he presses the barrel of the gun into it.

“Anything!” he yells, shaking her. He doesn’t need to. Her body sets to shivering as she gags on the muzzle, tears streaming down her face, heart pounding. “Keep sweet, Deputy! Or I will take you out of this world right now!”

He withdraws the gun but not his hand from her hair and now, she feels glass against her wounded lips.

“Drink!” he yells, angling the bottle down towards her.

Her throat fights the liquid, but he forces her head to stay back, her face tilted up to the ceiling. When there’s enough liquid to spill past her lips, he clamps his hand over her mouth, pinching her nose. Her body spasms almost enough to push her out of her chair but she chokes it down. Finally, he lets go. Her head feels fuzzy from the struggle and she’s crying. She hates that she’s crying, not with her lungs but with her eyes, as if they couldn’t fight it anymore.

“Be good,” Jack says. “Good girls get to live longer.”

She grits her teeth.

I’m going to kill you if it’s the last thing I do.

I’m going to tear you open and you’ll see your place is in the dirt.

The thought keeps her upright. Without it, the pain would be blinding. That and the whiskey battle each other now, vying for the utmost place in her mind.

But then, she feels nothing for a moment. The intensity of it freezes her in time, in this cabin with the smell of blood and dust and forgotten wood. Jack disappears. She blinks.

In this emptiness, there are fingertips on her cheeks, fingers combing through the strands of her hair when her hair was just black silk, when she was young enough to be invincible. On her lips, her language. Nothing else in her ears. Hummed low as the world turns into only those sensations, turns into the scent of Iná, and she will not die here today. She will not die here, not now, no, she will die when the hair Iná brushed and braided turns gray and curls like lightning.

It echoes, this perfect awareness, deep into her bones, and she doesn't wonder what hand she'll hold when she does die because there are many, and because she knows that even though Wright is a wolf and stronger than a fall storm he will be gone from this earth by then, and he will be waiting for her. Até and Brooks and Cynthia will be waiting for her too, because she will be like those unci at Pine Ridge and neiwoo at Wind River who guide the new generations, and the realization takes her back to her body. Hunched over the table. Panting through the... pain?

Not pain anymore. There's a warmth glowing within her and she feels it like a lantern glowing at the side of a house in a blizzard. Like she's been walking through the prairie and freezing her fingers off and now it's here. That kind of relief, a millionaire couldn't bottle it or sell it because they'd never need enough to know its worth.

The glowing turns to fizzing, moving through her blood. Slowly making her whole again, focusing on the pain first. All at once she feels how tense her shoulders have been. She tastes blood in her mouth and runs her tongue along her now-chipped tooth. The one next to her canine. Damn. *All those years of brushing aren't worth much now, huh?*

The bourbon lingers on her breath, but it makes her think of victory.

Wright

There's an alarm ringing.

Wright's wolf realizes this faintly as he licks and bites at the stomach of a man who he's never met before.

He doesn't need the food, does he?

His full belly would tell him no.

What's that, fifteen men?

Thirty?

It had taken some effort to turn this time, and he realizes that some of his hesitation was not wanting to lose his skin. After the way they burned it and gassed it, after how desperate they'd been to flay him again and again, he felt he'd earned it more this time. His mind became his enemy. That was its own fight, pushing against the walls of his skull, breaking his bones. It had been less painful to change for the first time than it was after their torment.

Oh, these men he killed put up an effort, didn't they? Underestimating the power of a hungry, angry wolf was their only fault. When he ran at the steel door, it held the shape of his body in the metal. If it was only that, it would have held. But that wasn't their goal. They'd wanted to film him. In their hubris, they'd allowed him access to a bulletproof glass window.

First, he'd attempted it when he was still a man. Punched at it until a voice came on the intercom and told him it was bulletproof, but that he was welcome to keep trying. This was before he knew the wolf girl was dying, before he'd decided there would be no normalcy to return to.

When he hit the glass as a wolf, he felt it reverberate, the thick, plastic-like window absorbing his weight. He smelled and heard the sealant start to crack. They wouldn't open either door this time to stun him. His wolf form was too terrifying for

them. But he could hear them on the other end of the glass, could smell their sweat as they anxiously clutched their weapons, praying he wouldn't break through.

Another hit and the corner lifted. And he had to laugh then, thinking of how they'd wish they could shoot him without the bullets firing back at him.

Another hit and a loud crack echoed. Looking up, he got a split-second glance at the ceiling of the neighboring room. He knew he'd crash right down on their precious camera. He could smell their fear so pungent his mouth watered.

He killed them all, butchered them in the halls and in doorways until the bodies held the doors open for him, slaughtered to the point he could slip on the half-inch of blood pooled on every inch of the cement floor.

Now, all he hears are the alarms.

They've been on for a long time.

He hears a noise behind him and looks back to see a small figure walking unsteadily towards him. At first, his wolf eyes don't recognize her. She doesn't have her usual coloring. In the shadowy halls with their flickering lights, the only color on her is red. She's staggering, holding onto the walls, struggling to get to him.

The wolf girl.

She's alive.

Chapter 47

Killer

Howie

Acting like she's dying comes more naturally than she thinks. But who would Jack be to question, anyhow, when he thinks himself so damned successful at everything? Of course he'd kill her— she's just a woman, just native, just a legacy hire. She's not even bleeding much anymore, the trickle of her blood clotting on every wound, and still he'd believe he's moments away from watching her die.

“Why women?” she asks.

“What?” Jack asks, not as if he didn't hear her, but as if he can't believe what she's asking.

“If this is all you wanted, if you don't even *need* it, why women?”

“They're the less-dead,” Jack says. “No one misses those women, lonely and poor as they were. They didn't have much of a life before they died. Not like you.”

Less dead.

Throughout her investigations, she'd operated on the assumption that it was the murders she'd try to solve, nothing more. None of this. How Jack Williams would see it is the opposite. That what she uncovered had been the purpose. Not to her.

“Why be a sheriff, even?” she asks. “You don't give a damn about murder.”

“Same reason you did, I figure,” he retorts. “Power. Christ... Can I be honest with you?”

She grits her teeth.

“There’s something about you that just... Always got under my skin. The first woman, you don’t know of her, *she* was an accident. I was fucking her after an injection and got a little carried away. The others were just drops in the bucket, but you wouldn’t let them go... God, you’re like a bulldog. Won’t know when to leave well enough alone. The women were never the important part! I’d respect it if they were. But you, you acted like it was impossible to believe-”

“Not impossible.”

“So it was partly just to see you hunt,” he says with near-reverence.

Howie’s lips part and when she breathes in sharply, it’s all dried iron like a hand gripping a railing.

“I couldn’t understand,” he says, taking a sip of his bourbon and pushing the other glass towards her. “Why you would care. It’s silly, isn’t it? You didn’t know them any more than the rest of us did.”

“Silly,” she says, turning the word over in her mouth.

The anger is building too much for her to play sick or play weak or anything but infuriated. She doesn’t know how to control it.

“Do you know nothing about my family?” she snaps, forgetting the powers at play, or how she wanted to keep this to herself. Forgetting she’s supposed to be dying, supposed to be scared. “Do you not know, or not remember, yeah, how no one looked for her killer? How even with Até... *Joseph*, being tribal police, she was just another native woman dead, probably from something she did, right? That’s what the local cops said at the bars. Didn’t even know her. Just figured it was something one of us did to another one of us who wasn’t innocent to begin with— and you say it’s silly I care?”

Her vision blurs but she won’t give him tears, even if they’re from anger. She’s fought for so much more than that.

“Maybe you’re right and I do this for power,” she says. “That’s good. We do. I hope we take more. Hope we take it all from her.”

“You sound better,” Jack remarks.

He eyes the blood she messed with her hand as if he can see the difference between her own and what was stolen, but she knows her and Wright’s blood look the same.

“If power was what Joseph wanted, he would have taken our invitations,” Jack says. “He never seemed to want to be a part of the group. Don’t you know, this would have been so much easier for you if he had?”

“He’s a good man,” she snaps. “We don’t want to do what you do. I don’t want to be *like* you.”

“What do you want then?”

A tear falls loose but she’s sitting straight. She’ll kill him anyway.

“What do I want?” she asks, sighing a laugh. “I want to kill you for her. For them. For me.”

“It hurts me to hear that,” he tells her. “When I’ve only ever treated you as you deserved.”

“I’m not finished,” she says. “I want to break every bone in your body, and then pull the veins from your arms and watch you wither. I want to bring you back just to pluck your eyes out and snip your tongue so you can be as blind as you are, and not speak those horrid thoughts you harbor. I want to skin you, to pierce your eardrums, and then I want you put in the electric chair in front of every family of every person you have *ever* called less-dead.”

Her hands shake with admission, with all she wants to do, because she’s almost sure that Até has enough peace in his life not to miss that, and that Wright with his dead wife and child doesn’t feel this way, and this is her own special, desperate anger that will link her to Creator but take her far away from what she knows.

But if he kills her today, those are better last words than any other he'd deserve to hear.

"You know, it's not me who killed your mother," Jack says. "I hear she was a lovely woman."

"Don't ever speak on her again," Howie says, and she's not here. She's in the cabin with Até pretending to sleep but hearing him pace back and forth in their one room, knowing where he is by the creaks in the floorboards.

That birthed this anger. Everything else has come with it. Darran gave her more, with the other women and the betrayal of that, but it poisoned her marriage long before they called it off. The only people she's managed to keep in her life have been those who understand her need to burn with this fury, to claw for some element of release.

She looks at Marin on the floor. She was an angry woman too, wasn't she?

She thinks about Wright in the shower, telling her all he'd do to the man in front of her right now. And Wright might be dead, but he was part of that fantasy. Impossibly tamed power. It would be a lie if she said that wasn't one of the things she loves about him, even if she's not sure that's the proper way to love someone.

But destruction, or the potential for it. She loved that about him before she ever let him in her bed. She loved that about him when she met him in the bar and felt his teeth.

All her life, she's craved the weapon that would give her the feeling of Iná's death finding justice. That would annihilate anyone who ever came for her family again.

She takes a deep breath.

"You know what else, Jack?" she asks.

"What?"

"If you kill me, you're not going to make it very long either," she says. She can smile in the face of violence too. In fact, she feels she was born for it. "There's a whole lot of power coming your way, and I see the way the fear of it carves

into your face. Your people don't give a damn if you're alive or dead-

“Shut your fucking mouth-”

“You've given them all they need!” she yells. “You are so disposable.”

Jack slams his gun down on the counter, leaning the weight of himself on his hands as he presses himself to stand. Glowering over her.

“Dime a fucking dozen, some man who needs to steal power to get any,” she says. “Do it. Use a gun on a woman you know you can't fight. Lock up the men who can take your power away from you. You will die weak, Jack. Your worth is held in metal and paper and none of those things live in you.”

He slides the gun between them on the countertop, keeping his hand placed firmly over it while he watches her.

“If you'd only told me that prison wouldn't be a concern,” he says, slipping his hand away and leaving the weapon. “I would have played this game more fair.”

She looks at the gun, and then at him.

Time stills for a fleeting moment, a nearly romantic thing, where all that exists is the space between them. In that instant, she decides to surge forward, reaching for the weapon, when suddenly she feels a sharp pain and sees a knife's edge digging in.

Not going through.

She grabs the gun and hits him as hard as she can in the temple with it before standing, pushing herself away. Before she can right the pistol in his direction, he lunges at her and tackles her to the floor. This time, she won't lose the gun, even as he grabs her wrist and slams it onto the hard ground. She grits her teeth and kicks as she did but somehow her knees don't find hold.

“Listen to me,” he growls. “If you kill me, they'll come for you. For Joseph and his woman on the reservation, and all their kids.”

Her heart races and she lashes out, willing herself to find her strength. And it looks like she'll win. Regardless of what he's saying, she keeps pushing.

"We'll kill your partner," he adds. "And we'll kill your wolf. You won't have anyone left."

Instead of pushing him away, she pulls him by the neck to her and bites down as hard as she can. She's not sure how sharp her teeth are until her mouth floods with blood. His skin is like butter melting, pooling in her throat.

Hunger overwhelms her.

She swallows.

It's warm like broth on a freezing day and she can't help herself but to want more. So she takes more, bite by bite, until she realizes she didn't notice him screaming but noticed the silence that came after. The stillness as she was able to push his weakened body off of hers and onto the floor beside her.

She's tired. After everything, this feels like too much coffee after too little sleep and she's not sure if she wants to pass out next to him, soothed by the sounds of life leaving his body, or run with what energy she has left. She'll have to, she realizes. She'll have to wash herself off as best she can, burn this place and all the evidence of her crimes down. As always, she'll have to be smarter than him.

But for now, she watches Jack Williams die.

He clutches his throat with both hands as if that will stop the hole she's ripped out, but he's already paler than usual. Without stolen blood, he won't be able to heal himself. Instead, he looks like she betrayed him somehow, like an expected betrayal. She's sure there's things she's confirmed in his mind by doing this, but she's more than happy to let those thoughts bleed out on the floor with his body.

"If you thought I was an animal," she says through the savory taste of his dying blood. "You shouldn't've talked to me."

Chapter 48

Who did this to you?

Wright

In the truck, Wright should be calm. Should be, he figures, heading back to Howie's trailer to sweep her up in his arms, press his nose to her hair, and tell her he'd give anything just to run away with her. Knowing all the damage he did them, they can't take it lying down. They'll be vengeful or they'll take her too, and it occurs to him that they might not see how perfect she is. How for all the times he came back from the edge of death they took him to, she deserves hundreds of the same chances.

She'd know what to do, of course. She'd tell him to get lost, to go on the run and never return, but then she'd meet him on the other end of a bench seat with a devious look in her dark eyes and she'd ask why he hadn't started driving yet. God, how he'd like to be on the run with her. How he'd like to travel to the far reaches of this country as the wind from the passenger window turned her hair into wild tendrils. *How I'd like to get lost with you.*

But this truck isn't his, and in the passenger seat is an eight-year-old wolf girl who might not make it 'til morning.

And maybe she's Wright's responsibility now?

He was never a good father but he didn't have much of a model before he met Joseph. What would he have done, if the wolf girl were Howie at that age?

"We're not going home?" the wolf girl asks.

He shakes his head *no*.

She sighs.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Maybe the ranch,” he says.

“Pa’s prolly blown it up by now,” she tells him.

Wright frowns.

“That’s what he said he’d do,” she adds.

Wright thinks about what fathers say, what he said, that if anyone hurt his child he’d tear up the world for him. Harry’s dead, but the world is still intact. And they’re on roads moving far away from the ranch, blown-up or not.

He hasn’t been on this specific highway since he first came to Jackson, and it’s not necessarily in the direction of town. In fact, he’s not sure what he’s tracking to pull himself in this direction. Just some scent. Eerily familiar, but out of place. He’s confident in it, too, before he realizes what it is.

He’s smelling Howie’s blood.

The thought bottoms out his stomach and suddenly he’s falling through space, nauseous and dazed.

Howie’s blood.

Your blood.

He grips the steering wheel tighter and then releases when he starts to feel the metal shift underneath his palms. It makes a creaking sound, which makes the wolf girl look at him like she’d like to ask a question but has learned not to.

He’s not in the car anymore. He’s in the yellow kitchen back in Orion, and it’s been abandoned for years, and there’s blood on the walls.

Nausea swirls in his stomach.

Not you. Never you.

He’s on his knees. He’s cracking tile. He’s knowing where Jess’s body is, smelling that Ridge ate her, bones and all. This is the wound they’ll never heal from, because he’s never

healed from it. The war put his pieces together wrong. The face in the mirror, some stranger aged ten years from his last warm memories before he came to Wyoming and found himself on a horse for the first time. Before the Tetons, before making Howie laugh, he was back there all the time.

He's seeing his wife and his baby at the bus station with no worry for the next time he'll see them and then he's not seeing them. He's feeling Howie's body drape itself over him and then she's cold.

God help me.

I'll do anything.

I'll cast aside my right hand and pluck out my eye, just to right the sins that could take her away from me.

The truck turns out, runs and bumps in the rocky ridge of the highway. He's not in it. The wolf girl reaches across and rights the wheel. He hasn't slept in a week and he's at war again.

When they stop moving, he pushes himself outside but the air smells stronger of her.

Maybe in all these fields is her body.

No. God, no. Please.

She's the only part of me I can't lose.

He's on his knees, retching but it's dry. He's a soldier, a foreman, a cowboy, a father— he's someone who should move right now and he can't because it feels as though that gas is still burning his eyes. Feels like his skin is disappearing again and again, and he could stand but he's thinking he'd find himself upside down, in the clouds, hanging somewhere.

Rocketing down towards the earth.

The scent of her blood bursts through his nostrils and he groans from the agony of it, feeling it bring his face to the ground. Towards death and hell and all the things he'd take gladly if it meant her survival.

He grits his teeth and pushes himself up blindly, grasping at the air in front of him. Trying to catch her.

Toughen up.

Be a wolf, goddamn it.

The thoughts pulse stronger than his heart. Just this scent takes him out at the knees. If she's dead, there's nothing left for him in this world. Not his brother, not Sadie, as much as they mean to him. Because it's not just his bond with Howie that he'd lose, no, it's the loss of the kind of woman she is. The kind of *person*. The fire and the strength and the righteousness— if God takes her, there's nothing worth fighting for left in this world but the fleeting embers of revenge.

God, I'll give anything.

My life. My body. My hunger.

I'll give it all for her.

All this weak fucking bargain.

Wheels screech across the asphalt, still wet from all this spring. He's got to get to her but suddenly she's closer, closer than all this time. When he looks around him, it's only gray fields and mountains piercing the darkness of the afternoon and an unfamiliar truck, idling on the stretch of highway. He's already dead. They didn't want him in heaven or hell because they couldn't distinguish a soul outside of the scent of Howie's blood, because it smells the same, doesn't it? Isn't it what washed him?

The scent is here.

She's here.

When she steps out, it's with a limp. There's soot darkening her arms from wrist to elbow and torn clothes bathed in her own life. She's no lamb. She's a lion and he's a fool. He couldn't save Jess in time and he couldn't save Howie, either, but Howie is the one who doesn't need saving. Howie is crimson and tan and ink against the gray, endless wind in her hair, walking towards him.

In a second, he's pulling her into his arms.

Who did this to you?

What did they do?

I'll kill them.

She's got her hands on his bare chest and she's telling him the same thing.

Howie

It's not enough that she can feel his pulse. Still, she isn't sure he's alive. The face she's watched sleeping, the one she's looked up at when he was inside her, hips on hips, his palm on her cheek, watching her fall apart, watching and watching, *that* face, she's never seen the life inside it shrink until now.

"Better not be 'cause you didn't get to save me," she blurts as soon as she steps away, still staring deep in those eyes so light she's sure she can see the spring sky through the irises.

He frowns at her, so no, it's not. Maybe. She's not ready to relinquish her first guess. Pulling her lips between her teeth, she moves to walk towards the truck, but he grabs her wrist and tugs her in.

"You're hurt," he growls.

She looks down at herself. "Nah, but you are, ennit?"

Not thinking of it, even, when she reaches out and touches his chest. He flinches. The man who didn't hesitate when she sliced him open in her kitchen, that man, *flinches* at her touch.

Does he know about the wolf blood?

Maybe she should never tell him that she used something from his kind to heal herself. Even though she's in pain, it's no pain she can't handle. In fact, she's feeling pretty good right about now, knowing Jack Williams is dead and there's nothing he can do to her anymore. It would be hard not to smile.

If Wright didn't flinch from her touch, it would be hard not to smile.

"What's got into you, soldier?" she asks.

“Nothin’,” he spits, like this is an argument. “Who did this to you, Howie?”

“Some dead man,” she says, clicking her tongue and gesturing away.

He stares at her, not the least bit comforted.

“He shot you,” he says darkly, reaching for her waist. There’s a scar there, sure, and when he sees it she realizes she could never lie. He frowns up at her. “Why’s there a scar on you I ain’t seen? How long was I...”

He inhales sharply and looks away, the life in his eyes shrinking even more. A shudder runs through him.

“Days,” she says.

He shakes his head, his hand gripping that scar like he could hold the first wound closed by will alone. The look on his face is that of a man who knows he won’t sleep right until the day he dies, and again she wonders what they did to him. They are, or were, evil. They are, or were, willing to do worse.

We’ll kill your partner. Your wolf.

Joseph and his woman on the reservation.

All the kids.

The moment she watched Jack die, she figured those threats were inane. Cries made by a man who knew his time was near. But then, who kept Wright all this time? Who shrunk the spirit inside him down, left the rest of him running like a machine? Who painted him crimson and left him to die?

She’ll kill whoever did.

Man, but she’s cocky and not thinking of the worst of it. Of how she’ll feel when she tries to sleep next, of the fading light in that room even in the afternoon sun, oh, yeah, she’ll be ruined. She thinks. She hopes. Because the alternative, the only other thing, is that she was waiting to take a life all this time. She was holding her breath and hoping above all else that someone would give her a reason to kill.

Now she’ll reap what she sows.

“Are they dead?” she asks, so hopeful he must know exactly who she means.

“Some of ‘em,” Wright says gruffly, staring at her. “You kill the ones who did that to you?”

She shrugs. “Split between us, we probably got a handful.”

The look in his eyes says it’s more. On the tip of her tongue is the question, *how many?* But it doesn’t matter if it isn’t everyone. If there’s even one person left, they’ll know what they did, and all those threats will come to life. A native deputy turned traitor and some blue-collar, man-eating werewolf— how much less dead can they get in the eyes of the law?

“We have to go to Até,” she says, but really, it’s *we have to be there already*. She looks toward the truck he brought in, something nice and expensive and certainly not the beaten-up, rusted truck he’s always driving. “They threatened him. Everyone. We need to go to everyone and we can’t, so we just need to go to him.”

Wright nods. “Sure you’re alright, Howie?”

She moves her hands down across her body to where she knows the wounds should be but they’re not there anymore, nothing but scar tissue now. And she staggers, because the thought occurs to her: *Wright, your blood is useful.*

Not just for you.

She stands up straighter, looking up at him. His gaze hasn’t left her. So watchful, so protective, yet so marred by something she hasn’t learned yet. They hurt him more than they hurt her. Which means, no doubt, they can hurt everyone Jack listed just as well. But it also just means they hurt him, hurt him in the way she’s seen countless people hurt when the world kills a part of them and calls the rest *healed*, or *normal*, or *fine*. She can’t think about it with so many lives on the line.

“I’m fine,” Wright says sharply.

Is how she looks at him so obvious now?

“I’m not,” she quips, folding her arms in front of his chest. To the worry in his eyes, she says: “not like that.”

“I didn’t get to you in time,” Wright snaps. “You know how I’ve lost people? Not bein’ around somewhere? What good is all this, Howie, if I can’t fuckin’ help you?”

“Could you have gotten to me in time?” she asks. “Did you even know where I was? That I was in danger?”

He looks away, his jaw tightening. She’s not sure how it’s possible to be so drawn to him after all this, but even wearing some too-tight outfit he clearly stole from a dead man, he looks so broad, so strong, like a fortress. He’s a stronghold and she wants to scream at him that his walls are impenetrable, that the speed at which he got to her is not what she wants him for.

“I am too capable for you to mourn not being the one to save me,” she says. “But now that you’re here, I’m sure you’ll have your moment, if you’re so damn prideful and stubborn to want it. What do you think comes after this, huh? Think you can leave now?”

“Hell no,” he growls, turning back to her and stepping close. “Never lettin’ you outta my sight again, Howie, I swear that.”

“I liked killing him,” she says, tilting her chin up boldly. “So I’m glad you weren’t there, soldier, because no doubt you’d’ve stopped me. Done it fast instead of slow. And then I wouldn’t’ve gotten to watch the life drain from him, knowing *I* did that.”

He scans her eyes, his own expression darkening in a way that sends a chill up her spine. She has no doubt her words register with him, no doubt he takes her seriously.

“Maybe you’re too good,” she teases, stepping closer until she feels all the power of his restraint radiating around him. “I thought I was, but honey I’m wretched. If you’re staying close, you’ll have to face that, too. Is that something you want, Wright? Did you know it feels good sometimes?”

His hand snaps out to collar her neck and he glowers down at her, thumb on her pulse point.

“Ain’t gonna do it alone, Howie,” he warns, tracing her jaw with his other hand. Finally, there’s the spark in his eyes that she loves, and for just this moment the rest fades away. What they’ve been through, the others they’ll protect. Everything. “But I’ll bring anyone who hurts you like a half-dead animal, drop ‘em at your feet if that’s what you want. If that’s what sets your fire, darlin’, I’ll drown the world in gasoline just to see your power.”

“That’s a better look than self-pity,” she says with a smile.

He narrows his eyes at her, but there’s softness in the storm-wrecked blues. And she thinks she’ll see him smile sometime soon.

Chapter 49

Best done outside

Howie

Rob Stoughton breeds wolves.

Sires is the word Wright uses, but Howie doesn't think of the rancher like that. For all the time she's known him, he's acted like how Wright sees God, which is to say like an angry father. Rob has his hands in all things, though, and for him not to know what they were doing to his daughter, illegitimate or not, strikes a chord in Howie's heart.

He was going to kill everyone at the party. She's sure of it, and just as sure that they all would have deserved just that. It was the perfect plan before Wright took Jack Williams out of the second story window and into the earth.

If only it had been so simple. Howie figures she and Wright are just too inflammatory to let someone else do their job for them. But looking at what Jada looks like now, how weak and tired and worn, she can imagine wanting to kill for her. Wright did.

An entire bunker full of people drawing her blood and using it. A bunker full of men who would have done the same to Wright.

She kneels forward on her knees, hanging her head, sandwiched between the man she'd like to cave into and a girl who feels like an alien to her, who feels both dangerous and endangered, and she doesn't know what to do. Howie killed her mother. All that's left in her family is a father who would blow himself up just to hurt the men who hurt her.

Is she any different? Is Wright?

“You met at the ranch?” she asks an hour into their drive.

Wright grunts, which is his *yes*. Jada says nothing. She’s pale under all that blood, and sometimes her hands shake, which must be fear for all she’s done, right?

Howie’s hands stay strong.

“How did you know about each other?” Howie asks.

Wright’s hand tenses on the wheel and for a long time it seems as though Jada won’t answer, but then in her small voice she says that she ate Wright’s friend.

“It ain’t like that,” Wright scolds.

“He was your friend,” Jada says.

“Let’s not speak much,” Wright says. “As I expect we’ll do nothin’ but that for a good time.”

“Called Ridge a while back,” Howie states.

Wright stares at her for nearly too long, the truck veering slightly. From the near-grimace on his face, she wonders if he’ll be upset with her decision and bristles instantly, ready to defend herself. But then he nods, returning his focus to the road, easing a bit when he does.

“Out here, wolves run in packs,” he says. “Never quite understood it, knowin’ we don’t much like each other.”

Leaning back, he rolls down the window some, letting the crisp spring air draw through.

“But then, it ain’t for the joy of it that wolves stay in packs,” he remarks. “It’s for huntin’.”

She pulls her lips between her teeth and then releases them, feeling how sharp they still are. “Let’s hope he gets here in time, eh?”

It’s almost an attempt at a joke but her voice breaks like a hair pulled too tight, baring her insecurity. She curses loud, pounding her fist on the dashboard. None of them jump when it dents, though Wright’s gaze lingers.

It's the last thing anyone does in the truck until they find a curve of the river off the highway and plunge in.

They can't go to the reservation covered in blood, can't alarm Até so much or he might fucking shoot Wright just for being there. So even though the water is nearly freezing from all the winter runoff, they fight the chill and the yelp that comes with that and baptize themselves there. Swimming as the blood ripples away from them, as the river carries all their evidence downstream.

Howie watches it. Wonders how often Jack Williams did the same after eating a woman. Did it even matter to him enough to wash it off? The thought distracts her from the pain long enough for her to lose her footing, to nearly let herself get carried away with the blood.

But Wright catches her, and he's warm. Large hand spanning her back, pulling her into him. Weightless in the water, she feels for a second like a child, not like someone who has killed before. Then again, she never got to be so innocent. Looking into Wright's eyes, she's sure he never felt that way either. Christened by blood. They know the taste of it, both of them, when it's exactly the thing they're hungry for.

He traces her lips. She feels her hair flow in the water around them, river grass and moon rays and his heart pounding under her palm.

"Marry me," he says.

"Now?" she asks.

He nods.

"Okay," she whispers.

The smile doesn't find his lips, but his eyes. If she had to choose between the two, it would be the better part. And so she leans forward and draws back his shirt to show the part of his neck that mirrors where he bit her. They don't need rings. She sinks her blood-sharpened teeth into his skin enough to feel the light give, and then she licks across it. Tastes him.

When she pulls away, his eyes are hooded with ecstasy.

He kisses her just to taste the damage she wrought. This scar, she knows, Wright will wear with pride. It's more than the one that slices across his chest. It's a claim given back to him, nothing he's ever found for himself.

She holds it in her heart until the truck runs over the dirt-and-gravel roads near Até, until they pull up to his home. And Cynthia is in the door, already moving towards them, like she knows. Calling *Joseph*, calling the girls, at the sight of Howie's face. In their arms, Howie's heart sinks because she knows who's missing. Always with them, but not with them. The reason why she can't let go of anything now.

Iná was there when she was dying, though. It wasn't just the wolf's blood that saved her. It was the woman who gave her life.

As far as Howie knows, she doesn't cry. But it's dark before they go inside, and this is all they do.

Tonight, as if she knew they'd come, Cynthia made enough stew to serve half the neighborhood. And in this, Howie knows why Até fell for her, why he even moved to a reservation after all this time away from Pine Ridge. While nothing and no one can fill in the space that Iná left, they built a home together. The kind of home someone can run to.

"Think it's time to say why you brought in two people who smell like old blood," Até says at the table. Here, Jada eats like a wolf and Wright keeps his eyes downcast. They look at each other like they forgot they were any different than two folks who just came for dinner. "And why you smell like it too, eh?"

Howie looks down at herself. She thought she'd done a decent job at cleaning herself, but her clothes are still torn, the folds in them rust-colored even after so much time in the water.

"I would think it was one of those things you two get into," Até continues, gesturing between Wright and Howie. "But he looks like he just got home from war. And then the girl..."

Wright stares wide-eyed. Jada blushes.

“Maybe,” Até starts. “Maybe because my daughter and her sweetheart are mute, you can tell me what’s happened here.”

“He killed some bad people who were stealing my blood,” Jada says.

Wright drops his utensils to his plate with a clatter, clenching his jaw. “God damn it, girl.”

“What are we supposed to tell him, hm?” Howie snaps. “Até, we killed people today. Bad people, though, yeah? Thing is, we left a few. We don’t know how many. But they might come for you, so we’re here to keep you safe.”

Até nods to himself, as if this is perfectly usual. “Should I worry about the police knocking at our door?”

“It’s not their jurisdiction,” Howie quips.

Até snorts.

“Doubtful,” Wright says, before pausing. “Well, I’d bet some of the ones we took out and definitely one Howie did are on the force, but they ain’t comin’ in any official manner.”

Howie folds her arms tight around herself. “Best case, that’s true.”

“Ain’t nobody comin’ out, sayin’ we owe them our blood for their damned experimentation,” Wright says, the roughness in his voice adding a growl to his words. It strikes her that she’s rarely seen him angry, and never seen him *this* angry.

“What do you mean, owe them blood?” Cynthia asks.

“Because we’re wolves,” Jada says.

“You said that,” Até tells Howie. “That he’s a wolf.”

“Wasn’t lying, hell,” Howie tells him.

“You’re talking crazy,” Cynthia scoffs.

“But he is *off*,” Até tells her.

Howie pauses, narrowing her eyes at him, suddenly defensive. Até shrugs.

“He is,” he says dismissively. “Look at him. He’s a head taller than any man has a right to be and he holds things like

he has to try not to break them.”

“For Christ’s sake,” Wright groans, pushing away from his seat. “Sir, in all respect I had not intended for you to ever find out about this.”

He works the buttons of his shirt off, dropping it to the floor. Howie stands, alarmed.

“What are you doing?” she hisses.

“It’s best to show him, ain’t it?” Wright asks.

“No!” she exclaims, but he’s undoing his trousers now.

Standing in his drawers in the kitchen, Wright holds out his arms as if to steady everyone. He must have gone insane wherever they had him in. The buttoned-up soldier, the one who holds his tongue and uses good manners, has gone full cowboy.

But for a moment, in the cool light of the kitchen, Howie thinks she’d like to see what he can do. She’s never seen him turn, though that night when he chased her through the snow came close. Can she see it and still love him?

Can she ignore it and ever truly call this love?

Settling back, she leans against the wall.

“This is best done outside,” Wright says.

“Good, go,” Até says as if to dismiss him, but he’s interested too. He’s already standing, guiding them towards the back door. Jada takes another bite of food, because of course, she doesn’t need to see it, does she? She’s already seen Wright as a wolf, dozens of times from the sound of it. She’s already killed with him.

An odd, striking moment of jealousy pulses through Howie. Like she wishes she could share that same thing with her lover. *Kill with me*, she’d like to say. *Let me feed them to you.*

Already, there are so many faces she can picture cut up between them. Maybe she should be worried about her bloodthirst, but then she feels empty handed. Like a world has

been stolen from her and she's only now pulling some bits of it back, shoving them in her pockets in desperation. It makes her want to dig her nails into what she does have, hold Wright by the arm and make sure he can't leave her ever again.

Yes, she thinks to herself. Cling to the man stripped down to his skivvies in Até's backyard, smart girl.

Outdoors at night, Wright looks otherworldly. The way the moonlight paints the strong curve of his shoulder, the pane of his broad chest, the sculpted ridges of his abdomen. His long, thick-muscled legs carry him surely in the dark, and when he turns from her she sees the ripple of his back as he glides through the night in front of him. She remembers the way he took her down in the fields and despite everything she's been through, she aches for him.

He must glimpse that desire, because it brightens his cheeks. Or maybe that's the idea of turning in front of people he cares for. They were never meant to see his true self, she knows. She'd have carried that secret for him. Here, in the open, is never something she would have imagined. Nothing but a swath of trees to hide him from the neighbors.

This kind of honesty is a gift, so she'll take it.

She folds her arms in front of her chest, tilting her chin up instead. Egging him on. Noticing this, Até walks in front of her, pushing her back behind him. *If only you knew all I've seen of him*, she thinks, but she's glad he doesn't. She wouldn't want him to know of all the times she spoke of Wright killing while she leaned in to let the words paint her skin. If Wright Lindal is made of evil, he made love to her with all of it. It's part of their bond.

"My kin turns wolf at fifteen," Wright drawls, not looking anyone in the eye. "That's a truth I didn't want to tell you at all, Sir, and somethin' I've only told a handful of people in my life. One of 'em's your daughter, though, so I suppose it's only right for you to know as well."

He pauses, glancing off in the distance at nothing. No sound. No visible interruption. Just the knowledge that once he says this, there's a chance this family will never welcome him.

“I’ve never seen it,” Howie clarifies, half to herself. Then, for the others: “I believe he’d never have told me, even, if he could help it. But I found out. His teeth are sharp too.”

“Explains the muscle,” Até says. “What, you go hunting in the mountains for food like a wolf, too? I’d get strong if I was taking down elk all the time, bare-handed.”

Wright glances at Howie. She’d like not to tell her family that she shares a bed with a man who eats people, but at this point, what do they even have to hide?

“Not elk,” Wright says.

Cynthia inhales sharply, always knowing before anyone what lies unspoken. Até glances at her before pressing on.

“What, then?” he asks.

“People,” Wright says.

“Get outta here,” Até spits, almost laughing. “Sure, what are you, some rougarou? Or a werewolf?”

“I can control it,” he says. “And it ain’t somethin’ reserved for full moons, though that’s when visibility is best.”

“He’s not evil, either,” Howie clarifies. “He only kills bad people.”

“Talking crazy,” Até says, clicking his tongue and waving her off. “Think we’re gonna stand here and watch this man turn into a wolf? Should have brought popcorn, then.”

Wright closes his eyes before turning and shucking his drawers off.

“Don’t bring white boys around,” Até says to Howie. “This is what they do, just tell stories.”

“It’s not a story,” Howie groans.

“Then he’s mocking us,” Até says. “Thinks we’re so superstitious.”

“He’s not,” Howie snaps back, turning to him.

“That man’s not right in the head then, eh?” Até fires back. “Those legends, you know, that’s medicine. That’s what a

person does. No one's born like that, čunġkší."

But their attention snaps towards Wright as Cynthia gasps.

A single droplet of blood has risen to the valley of Wright's upper spine, so suddenly it looks as if it fell like rain from the sky. Another one beads against another vertebrae, and another, enough that they stream down his back and Howie steps toward him as if to comfort him. But then he snaps forward, hunching around himself, and she watches in horror as the skin of his back stretches translucent, and gray, blood-matted fur splits through.

He's on his hands and knees now, growing. His bones break so loud she thinks he could be snapping branches of a hardwood tree. His head lolls and a tremendous crack echoes before a rush of blood pours from his mouth to the ground. More skin falls, slick and wet, to the earth. Everything is wet and cracking. This is a hurricane in a forest.

Até pulls her back, snarling in her ear to get a gun. But she won't.

There's a wolf in front of her and she's seen it before.

She saw it on the highway after it hit Jack Williams's car.

She saw it save her life.

Knowing that, she could never cower from this beast. It's Wright, even if it isn't. It's Wright turning towards her with yellow, glowing eyes and teeth streaked with his own blood. His tongue spills from his mouth, wet with slobber and thirst. *Hunger*, she tells herself.

She kneels down.

He backs away.

"Wright," she breathes, reaching out.

His beauty aches her heart, because he's beautiful in a way that no human can be, beautiful in the way of a force of nature, ready to tear through anything in his path. But she's no obstacle. She is both his path and his destination, and even when he's wolverine she sees it in the way he looks at her.

The love he watches her with remains.

Tail tucked, he moves towards her. And she pulls his soft, thick-furred face into her hands, her fingers wrapping into his soft coat. Even metallic with blood, there's something beautiful and pure in this moment between them. She leans her forehead against his and brushes his cold nose with her lips.

"I see you," she whispers in his big, soft ear.

Behind her, Até faints, thudding heavy on the ground.

"Oh!" Cynthia exclaims.

Howie doesn't turn, can't turn from her monster now. There were other women before her, and it's odd to know how many a lover has loved in his past. But of all those women, she is the only one to see him like this. She's sure of it.

Wright

If he hadn't killed two dozen men, he doesn't know how hungry he'd be. Turning twice in one day is unthinkable. But for now, it's calm.

He's human again. Dawn will break, and finally he's used soap on his skin, and the people around him are safe. Howie sleeps on the bed with her stepmother, her younger sister, and Jada. Howie's curtain of sleek dark hair can't disguise the serenity on her face, lured by sleep and forgetting everything from this too-long day. She'll need all the rest she can get, and he'll keep watch.

He reaches out and touches her cheek, the taste of her seeping through his fingertips. Ridge isn't here yet, by the grace of God. Wright wants what's between him and Howie undisturbed. That amount of selfishness, at least, he'll give into.

For a week, he'd like to only exist with her. To not let another soul touch their space, to not speak to anyone but her. This type of love is a level of intimacy he's never experienced, knowing they've both been wounded by this world. Knowing they've both killed, too. When they marry, there will be no

white dresses, and it will be the second time for both of them. No, their love has no innocence.

He craves no innocence.

There's no one he'd walk into fire with, no one he'd follow into hell and all the darkness of this afterlife, like he would Howie. He'd travel the world with her, run naked through the streets with her, paint her in the blood of any kill she asked him to make or that they did together. So yes, he's loved before, but he'll be damned if he lets Howie feel an ounce of jealousy. This is incomparable.

Right now, he's sure the world could melt away and leave the two of them floating amongst the stars and he'd feel completely at home. In heaven, even.

"I'd do anything for you," he whispers, so low he's sure he's the only one who can hear. "I'd live, I'd die, I'd turn myself in."

She shifts, rolling onto her back, her head lolling away from him, and he smiles. Even in her sleep, she can roll her eyes.

"Deputy, if it could have only been you I'd have let it," he continues. "If I'd known, I'd have taken that truck when it was in better shape, brought it all shiny for you to scoff at, Howie, it's..."

A creak sounds behind him, and he snaps his head to see Joseph watching from the hall. The man hasn't looked at him too kindly since he turned, and Wright doesn't blame him for that. If he had a daughter, he wouldn't want some half-wolf-man loving her. Hell, Wright's not even sure that's what it looks like. More of an abduction than anything.

Even though he wears her bite. It's still there, scarred and perfect, just above his collarbone. There will never be anything he wears more proudly than that.

"Finish what you're praying over her," Joseph says.

"Weren't a prayer, exactly," he says. "Just some different form o' worship."

Joseph nods to the back door and strides towards it as if to say, *follow me*. The same place where Wright turned. The place where Howie looked into his wolverine eyes and saw all he was, then kept holding him. Pressed her forehead to his and brushed her lips across his nose. No, their love might not be innocent, but it's pure.

It's the most honest love he's ever felt.

Outside, it's still nighttime enough that the stars pierce the sky, always reaching. The fresh powder of the galaxy hangs overhead, and for once, Wright doesn't think of God.

"If her iná was still here, you'd be a dead man," Joseph says, leaning against the house. He looks up at the sky, not at Wright, but there's a tension in his shoulders that says he's listening as far as he can in the distance. They won't be sleeping tonight. "Not much makes sense since she died, you know? Outside, they'd want me being the head of the household, not just the provider. But me, eh, it doesn't feel right to shoot you. Not sure what it would do anyway."

Wright nods. "I'd let you, sir, but you should know I'd come back from it."

"So then I think to myself, my daughter is the most stubborn person to ever live," Joseph says.

To his surprise, a laugh erupts from Wright's chest. It's like cracking ice— suddenly, another chuckle breaks through. Joseph smiles, not with his lips but with his eyes, all while grinding his teeth in Wright's direction. *Fair, sir. I'd want to kill me, too.*

"I don't mean to be un-serious," Wright says. "But I love that about her."

"Me too," Joseph says, pausing. "Before you knew her, I loved that about her. And her fierceness. Her brevity. Her humor. Love those things enough to know what you can take from me with all the danger you brought into her life."

Wright searches his eyes, looking for some crack in the armor. But there is none.

“With all due respect, sir,” Wright says. “She’s safer with me than she could be with anyone, includin’ herself.”

“You’re a wolf.”

“I’m *her* wolf,” Wright says.

“You bit her.”

“She bit me.”

Joseph frowns and then Wright pulls down the collar of his shirt to show him.

“She had our blood in her enough to sharpen her teeth,” Wright says warmly. “She marked me, Sir. Because I’m hers, and proud to be.”

“So they could kill you,” Joseph remarks.

Wright nods.

“Good to know,” Joseph says. “And the scar on your chest— is that from a blade?”

“No,” Wright says. “A knife can’t do that kind of damage.”

The fact settles in like a too-high sun, blanching Joseph’s weathered face.

I’ll still try, Howie would say.

“Look, I...” Wright says before trailing off. “I don’t want to be this way. It has only ever been a curse to me, sir, before now.”

“How’s now any different?”

“They had me locked in a damned bunker, killin’ me with fire, with gas that felt the same, not carin’ if I’d come back. And there was a time when I would’a been just as happy to die, no matter how painful. But when I woke up each time, I knew I was another moment closer to gettin’ to her. Not that she needs me to keep safe...”

He sees her now, striding towards him on the barren highway, wind in her hair, her perfect skin painted with the blood of her first kill, and he thinks to get on his knees in reverence of just that image.

“God gave me another chance to protect her, if she ever needs it,” Wright says. “And you, and those gals in there, and her partner. There ain’t a steel wall that can do as much as me. But I think it ain’t a curse to me, not because of all that, but because I get to see her even another second more than I should if I’d died. A second. I’d go through it all again, all the torture, just for another second in her presence sir, and because she’s that kinda woman. And I bet there are a lot less dangerous men than me who’d love her too, but none of those men can take on an army with her, and they’re all too borin’ to keep her interest, so with all due respect I think you’re stuck with me.”

Joseph’s eyes scrunch at the corners, a light flickering in them now. It’s one he fights, sure— Wright can tell that much. He’s not foolish enough to believe the man will admit to liking any part of him.

“What do you think our chances of survival are?” Joseph asks.

That an olive branch?

Wright braces himself. “Depends on who’s left. She got some; I got some.”

“There were a lot.”

“Yeah,” Wright sighs. “Maybe there’s only a handful left, or maybe it’s the whole damned government. I ain’t got a clue.”

Joseph holds the silence that grows between them, something like regret in his eyes.

“I worked that job for money,” he says. “Tribal cop, was that for some time. Better. But down in Texas, they hired me for shit pay. And here, because of Texas. Thing is, all that cattle money in both places weighs more than lives. Not like I didn’t see dead bodies ignored. Bet they didn’t show her, though. If it weren’t for the war they wouldn’t even hire her. But they let me see, and I said it wasn’t my business.”

He clears his throat.

“Her mother died because too many men said it wasn’t their business, but what excuse is that?” he asks. “Didn’t save her. Didn’t give her justice.”

He knocks on his knee. He speaks with a tight throat.

“Howie, well,” he continues. “She’s got more of the old ways in her. So damned brave, so reckless.”

Shaking his head, he looks up at the night sky. There’s moonlight spilling over the cracks of his face.

“What I’d give for my grandchildren to be wolves,” Joseph says. A tear drips down his cheek. “All we’ve seen, all we’ve beaten just to be here... If they kill us, that’s it. She says you got a brother. Two nephews, shit. You could die and your line would still live on without you but her? Nah... She’s all we got left.”

The guilt hits him in the chest like a fencing stake in cold ground, painful every hard knock of the way. Because he can’t give her a child, can he? *Unless everything his family told him has been a lie...* He stops the thought there. If that was true, he’d have too many offspring to count, painted all around the state of North Carolina, and more than a handful of angry women ready to hang him for being a liar.

“I can’t have children,” Wright says.

Joseph stares at him.

“Hell,” he groans. “It never stops with you, yeah?”

Wright frowns.

“Not what I’m saying,” Joseph says, clicking his tongue. “Not saying I need her having kids— hell, don’t think she wants any. Just saying she needs to be treated like she’s got a lineage, and a history, that don’t look like yours. Just saying you’d better honor and protect that, too.”

He hits Wright on the chest with the back of his hand, not hard but in camaraderie.

Wright nods. “Yes, Sir.”

“Quit with the *Sir* shit.”

“Yes.”

“Call me Joseph,” he says. “Clinton Brooks calls me Até, but that’s because I like him. Haven’t figured it with you.”

Wright doesn’t let the words hurt him. He hasn’t spoken to his own father in over two decades, and likely never will again. Even if his future father-in-law can’t stand him, it’s still enjoyable to be in the man’s presence.

“Thought the least of this would mean I get a wolf as a grandchild,” Joseph says after some time. “That I’d get to tell him who to eat.”

“If you’ve got someone, I’ll oblige,” Wright offers.

“No, shit,” Joseph says, waving him off before pausing. “Eh, let’s see in a few months. Might have a few.”

Chapter 50

Family

Howie

She wakes thinking the earth is shaking.

Something is wrong.

It's no earthquake but the body on the couch next to her and the rich iron smell all around. Her face sweats with oil, but when she reaches up to wipe her eyes she sees red. She startles, jumps up, hears the body fall to the ground, and despite all she's seen this is enough to make her scream.

Jada's body goes from seizing to lifeless before her eyes, blood spilling from her nose and her mouth onto the hard floor. From the flood on the couch, it looks like she's been bleeding all night, like she slept through it.

Cynthia pushes herself up immediately, blinking as she takes in the scene. With her nursing background, it doesn't take long for her face to blanch, for her to rush to Jada's side and take the girl's face in her hands.

The door bursts open. Wright and Até rush in, looking like they've just spent the night on their feet in the Wyoming wind, and maybe they have, but Howie has no time to let the thought warm her.

"She just started shaking," Howie says.

Wright marches forward, eyes dark with determination as he crouches on the other side of the girl before bringing his wrist to her teeth. Even though a knife could scarcely cut through him, her teeth slice easily, parting his skin to spill

blood into her mouth. In the lavender light of morning, this looks like motherhood, or an attempt at it. But the blood spills over as if her throat is already closed.

“What happened to her?” Cynthia asks, staring at him.

Wright keeps his head down. “Drink,” he tells Jada, but her eyes are closed. She’s pale as if she’s been bled, and there must be a pint of blood spread around her. It’s enough to glisten even when it’s so dim.

As if he can make her drink, Wright covers her nose and mouth, but his eyes widen when more blood spills out from under his palm. He jerks his hand away, standing.

“No,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “No, no, no.”

“We’ve got to clear her mouth,” Cynthia says, pushing Jada to her side. The blood spills onto the floor and Cynthia pounds her fist into Jada’s chest.

“They turned her too damn young!” Wright yells. “He shot...”

His voice cracks. Now, Howie notices the wound hidden beneath Jada’s tumbling curls. It’s circular and clotted with dark blood. She stares at Wright, sees the places she knows he’s been shot and no scarring, no wounds, nothing. Even her own wounds healed.

Something’s wrong with Jada.

He kneels back at her side so quickly his knees dent the floor.

“My blood’s meant to heal,” he says.

“If she can’t breathe, she can’t drink,” Cynthia says.

“Then make ‘er breathe!” Wright snaps.

Cynthia stares at him. Até steps forward, pushing Howie behind him as if to shield her from the man whose anger could never reach her space without dissolving, but they don’t know that. They know him as a wolf, a shifter, a flesh-eater, and Howie thinks as soon as this is over she’ll let them know she’s done it too.

But in the silence, they see the shine in Wright's eyes. There's no wolf in him now, just a whisper of fatherhood, an attempt at the revival of something stolen from him long ago. His blood may heal, but not all wounds. Not this one.

"Please," he says, softer. "It ain't her time. Please."

A faint gurgle comes from Jada's throat. Then, a light cough..

"Who's her family?" Cynthia asks.

Wright's expression falls. From here, it looks like his world does too. Cynthia shakes her head slowly, somberly. She's seen the wound. She knows what death looks like.

"Get her to her family," she says. "That's where she's got to be now."

Wright

It should be as simple as giving her his blood, but when he presses his wrist to her lips, they feel cold. The rest of her is still warm.

Can't have another child die on me.

It's not his fault, he knows. The wolf girl was never meant to change so early, was never meant to be burned and tortured like he was. Didn't heal right, didn't help getting her blood stolen from her. He figures if that's what heals them, they diluted it. So many of the men he killed underground had the faintest scent of her on them.

Like land overharvested without rest, she lost her vitality. So many people used her blood that she didn't have the quality to help herself heal.

He grinds his teeth at the thought, wishing he could kill them all again. Slower this time. The least they could have done was hurt her, but if they took her blood like it was some damn commodity, he can't be sure they didn't take something else.

She kept their secret from Wright through all their hunts. Through all their time together. Thinking she was protecting him, or Rob, or even the people who operated underground. Fear ruled the wolf girl's life, so she can't die.

She needs relief from all this evil and he can't bear to have her only release be death.

Except he knows, in the nature that lives in him, dying is exactly what's happening now.

Howie's driving, burning across the asphalt, her eyebrows narrowed in focus and anger both. They're close but it took them too long. They're close but they're not going to a hospital, and instead just driving this girl to the place she'll die with her only true father holding her.

Please, God, let it not be her time.

Let her stay just a few more years on this earth.

Let her see that it ain't so cruel as what she's seen.

Let her love like my boy never got to, and find some place for herself where no one wants a damn thing from her but a smile and some peace.

He's worried that because his prayers were answered with Howie's life, asking for the girl's will be too selfish.

"Gonna be fine, got that?" Howie tells him.

It's not just for him that she says it. To bring Jada home meant to leave Joseph and Cynthia without the protection of a wolf. But Joseph said they'd be going to the center, where in his words there were more than enough men who'd jump at the chance to take down some rich white men who had no business on their land. Considering the damage Howie did on her own, Wright isn't worried about them. That family's tougher than his own, it seems.

So it's not his future in-laws who he thinks about when crossing the cattle grate into Stoughton ranch. It's a father seeing his daughter on the edge of death. It's the way the rancher seems to know this is just what's about to happen,

opening the door to his home and stumbling out onto the drive like he hasn't seen the sun in days.

He sees Howie first.

In Wright's lap, the wolf girl is guarded by the dash of the truck but Rob Stoughton, still dressed in a starched shirt and creased jeans like he's going to host a rodeo, falls to his knees on the dirt. Hands that have spent some time resting reach into the earth like healing rope burn, like a human, so mortal it rejects the god a father is when his child is alive.

He turns his face to the sky and curses every fate cruel enough to let him outlive her. Wright knows it, because once in a lavender field in the south of France, he did the same.

Chapter 51

Good girl

Wright

Jada's body won't be cold for a while longer.

Now, it rests on the kitchen island, where once Wright laid Howie out in her emerald dress. Could that truly have been only days ago, or was that a lie to make him feel better about years trapped underground?

Rob Stoughton looks down at his dying girl and on his face lives a theft that ignores every drop of wealth surrounding him. Slowly, though, he nods. He's decisive. He strides to the phone on the wall, lifting the receiver and holding it for a moment before turning to them.

"It'll be over soon," he says.

There's something comforting in the man's presence. Wright doesn't know how Rob came to have a bastard daughter or why her mother never stayed at the ranch house. But he does know that Rob loves his girl. That he'd do anything for her.

He dials a number. It doesn't ring long.

"They're here," he says into the phone. "All of them. Bring everyone to apprehend them; just let me keep my daughter."

With that he hangs up. Wright should be nervous— Howie is. She stares at the rancher with hatred in her eyes, looking like she'll kill him, too.

Rob presses his hands to the countertop and watches Jada, shaking his head.

“She’d have this place at eighteen,” he says. “All of it. Every acre, every head of cattle, every horse.”

He loosens the buttons of his shirt before opening it up. A man’s chest is riddled with history, and his speaks to a past of hard work and a present of comfort. Things have been easy for Rob Stoughton. He made them that way. There’s something to be said for that, but words don’t matter where they are now. The last of his bloodline dying underneath him.

“We have to go,” Howie tells Wright. “Someone forgot what fucking side they’re on, eh? Forgot who did this to their daughter!”

“What was the last thing she said?” Rob asks.

“We don’t have to be here,” Howie says. “We need to not be, even.”

Wright looks to Howie, whose back is close to the door now. How long has she been running that it’s the first thing she thinks of?

“You go,” Wright says. “I’ll say it was me. All of it. Might as well have been-”

“No,” she snaps.

“Ain’t gonna make you run for the rest of your life,” Wright fires back. “Least I can fuckin’ do is keep you free.”

She presses her lips together, eyes welling with tears. “No,” she rasps.

“Both of you are going,” Rob says sharply.

“I ain’t makin’ her run,” Wright says.

“You’re taking my girl,” Rob says. “And you’re going where they can’t find you. You’re top hand. That’s an order.”

Wright watches the weak rise and fall of Jada’s chest. “Sir.”

Not to say, *your daughter is nearly dead*, though that’s what hangs in the silence. That stands with the other condemnations: that he’d let anyone die if it meant Howie could stay free, that he isn’t going to let the woman he cares

for more than anything live stifled and suffering because of him, that he'd go to prison for her even if those in power tortured him every day. But this truth is a tragedy. Jada's dying or dead.

"She won't take my blood," Wright continues.

"No," Rob says.

"She's not likely to make it," Wright says.

"You've trained her," Rob says.

"Sure."

"To eat bad men."

Wright frowns.

"She's a good girl," Rob says. "She learns well."

He turns to a drawer near the sink, pulls out a blade. Damascus steel glints in the light of the kitchen. Howie's hand falls to her gun, but Wright doesn't smell danger. This is different, sacrificial to the point of reverence, the way Rob holds the knife up to his own eyes. It's a hook knife, the same you'd skin a deer with, but sharp in the way that only money and a lazy season allow for. Wright can see the man's heart slamming against his chest.

"You're not a bad man, Carolina," Rob says. "You've never hurt her."

He takes a deep breath.

"I've tried to do right by what happened with Marin," he continues. "But I hurt that woman, and I've hurt many people. It's time for me to right that."

Placing his hand on Jada's forehead, he bows his head to her.

"A captain goes down with his ship," he tells Wright. "But that doesn't mean the passengers have to pay. You've got about twenty, thirty minutes before you don't have a chance at this anymore. Get the boys, have them get all the stock as far away from the house as possible. Forty thousand acres are useless if you can't run through 'em."

This is something, another man's plan, a miracle built from the mates of distrust and protection that run through everyone standing in this kitchen right now. And Wright thinks of what Jada said, how the fields are safer. Dynamite around the house. The knife in the rancher's hand.

Wright nods. "Yes, sir."

"What?" Howie snaps. "No. We're leaving. Wright."

She rushes towards him, grabbing his arm, but then Rob presses the blade under his own collarbone.

"It's all going to be alright for you, Deputy Black Elk," Rob says, and she freezes. "Doesn't matter how much wolf's blood they have when they get here, because we're going to spill it all."

He digs in the blade, cutting his flesh shallowly, sawing back and forth across his pectoral. The blood spills quickly, overflowing, and for a second Wright thinks this is as close as a father can come to motherhood, what this man is doing. He cuts past his nipple and Howie stays frozen, her throat clenching, no doubt nauseous. Shocked. Unknowing. Rob Stoughton groans, the flesh finally separated, his exposed muscle and viscera burning. Wright knows because that's what they did to him with fire, not too long ago.

The room is quiet as Rob slips the meat between his daughter's lips, and everyone can hear the girl swallow.

He cuts another strip, this time from his shoulder. Howie chokes up, turns away, and Wright stands between them. There's some color in Jada's cheeks now.

"I might not be a wolf, but I have it in me," Rob says, tears falling from his eyes. He's speaking to his daughter now, not any of them. He already gave them his last words. "If it's not enough to feed you, I'll meet you on the other side, Adira."

That name.

He'd never called his daughter by the name Howie calls her, preferring instead to use pet names or none at all. If it was the wolf girl's Keeper who gave her the other name, Wright figures *Jada* should never be uttered again. Rob Stoughton is

the father who would die for her, when the one who raised her would level a gun at her head.

Adira.

Rob slices another part of himself away. Wright looks towards the bunkhouse, and out across all the land that won't belong to anyone if Adira doesn't make it. He's worked this land, fenced this land, broken these horses. The man can't parcel it off like he does his own flesh. If he does, it'll end up in some rich man's hands who doesn't respect it like a wolverine would. There's no victory if her birthright goes towards the same type of person they fought against. The same who would have auctioned her off for her blood, too.

It can't fall back to them.

Hunched over in pain, torn up in sacrifice, Rob kisses the top of his daughter's head. For the first time all morning, she opens her eyes and sees it all.

Howie

Through binoculars, she watches for these plans to fall through. It's been endless repetitions of that, hasn't it, all this time?

If she could go back to that day when they sent her to Doris's home on Lakota Lane, would she have spat in the face of the lieutenant and left her job then, instead?

No.

Because failed, falling plans might be all the world has given her, but she's squeezed from them every drop of life she could.

She hadn't wanted to live in Wyoming, but she'd ended up amongst the most beautiful mountains she's ever seen. Even now, here in the hills that remind her of where she grew up, she waits for the downfall of greedy men with *hope* in her heart.

She found Wright and saved herself. She saw him earn a second chance at fatherhood through a girl who calls her

auntie. That's what it is, him on his horse with Jada nestling herself closer to the man who Howie calls her home.

"Don't you want to see it?" she asks him as his horse moves closer to hers. Instead, she feels his large, warm hand on her back as he leans in to press a kiss to her shoulder.

When she looks into his eyes, she's caught in the riptide of the blue pools, the crystalline mountain lakes of his gaze. There's no fear in them. Instead, there's a strength like she's never seen in any human, a fierceness that lives in his wolf.

"I can smell 'em," he says. "All of 'em."

She lifts the binoculars to her eyes and looks out at the house again. The cars are parked thick and shiny, having carried so many men with their guns drawn. Some are in uniform, some in suits. She's sure she sees the police chief at the front, confident from the high of stolen blood. "This was all of ours. I want to see it."

"You pulled more than your weight," he says.

She clicks her tongue.

"You got most of 'em, cowboy," she says.

Letting the binoculars dangle around her neck, she looks back to watch him. The light changes in his face, slowly, almost unnoticeably. And if she didn't know him, maybe she wouldn't see it. There's pride in the crinkle of his eyes, in the dimples of his cheeks that only seem to show up around her.

"First fight I ain't finishin'," he says, and she laughs.

"Feels damn good to start one, eh?" she asks, because it does. This is the first fight she's ever let herself be the one to start, and the first one Wright has surrendered even a part of. So it doesn't matter how it ends.

It's theirs.

"Feels like goin' somewhere foreign," he tells her, and she really focuses on him now.

"With me, though," she says.

"Deputy, I'd go to the ends of the earth with you."

“If this doesn’t work, you might have to,” she quips.

He narrows his eyes at her, his lips parting as if to say something. But he doesn’t. He just watches her, nodding slightly. After a long moment, he draws in a breath.

“If this doesn’t work,” he repeats, his voice peaceful.

He can read the future just by scent, can’t he?

The boom is louder than expected, and a few seconds after the bright, distant flash, Howie can feel the ground quake with the hit. Without seeing it, she can envision the way the earth caved in and took back its own, ashes to ashes, molten gold around the head of the thief. She feels the truth of their burial like it’s her own mouth swallowing them. It would have domed out, all the power of that explosion. When she lifts the binoculars to her eyes, she sees thick black smoke and nothing else living.

No fancy cars, no fancy home, no mourning father. Nothing, anymore. Howie could tell herself it’s because money doesn’t conquer fire, or that those gluttoned by power will be demolished by it, but she knows that it isn’t so simple. Money has conquered everything at least once, and while the Williams family might be a salted field now, no offspring and no legacy left, there will always be more.

The false wolves are dead, though, and that is a victory. Because of Wright, and Jada, and Stoughton, and Brooks, and Até, because of everyone she knows who would give their last breath in the fight for true justice.

There will never be a newspaper that will publish the wrongs committed by the dead, and never a politician to condemn them. There will never be a great mourning for their victims, as there was none for Iná and so many women.

But in the land beyond this one, they may see the smoke and celebrate. They may feel the lightness of the earth cleansed of so much evil.

She breathes in sharply at the absence, like the air, too, was stolen, but it’s more open now. The horses calm from being startled, their hooves settling to know they’ll be alright. Jada

shifts against Wright and he brushes over her hair with his hand, calming her back to sleep.

Undoubtedly, she'll live.

Jada, or Adira, will wake up to know her parents and her uncle have died. But she'll have everyone in the bunkhouse, and Até and Cynthia, and even Wright and Howie. The way Wright holds her, Howie figures she might not be without a father for long. There will be peace between them.

She can only hope Brooks is okay. Dutch wasn't in the bunkhouse when they brought everyone out, so there are two of their own that are unaccounted for.

"It'll be fine," she whispers to herself. "It'll be just fine."

As if in answer, small droplets of water sprinkle overhead. Through her binoculars, the fire left from the explosion begins to shrink and steam. When she tilts her face to the sky, though, it's bright and warm still.

A sun shower.

It breaks over them, and while the others push towards the trees to cover, she and Wright stay out. This feels cleansing, feels like the old ways of renewal and destruction, of new growth, of life. She tilts her face up to take it all in, cups her hands around her mouth and calls out. There are no words but victory.

And then a truck pulls up the drive.

Brooks's truck.

She kicks her horse into a gallop, not caring about the safety of going this fast through land she's never ridden on before. The mare has, at least. She grips the reins and digs her heels into the stirrups, leaning forward to feel like she's flying. Behind her, she can see Wright moving fast, following her, having given Jada to someone else. It doesn't take long for him to pass her, even the heft of him so graceful as he takes a protective lead.

By the time they get down, there are two men standing together, the rain and the smoke obscuring their forms.

“Hey,” a familiar voice says, sounding pained. At this point, it could be a hallucination or a dream, but it’s Brooks stumbling out of his truck, bleeding and bruised and looking half-alive. Dutch Bradley steps from the driver’s side, looking better than him but still banged up. He braces Brooks, hooking an arm tight around his waist to keep him upright. “Is that them?”

He vaguely gestures to the wreckage, the pit where a mansion once stood. In the rubble are so many riches, shattered glass sprinkled like diamonds to brag of wealth. So many ivory bones against rich, dark earth. The horses and cattle avoid it, but they’re free to roam there now, the gates and fencing blown-out all around.

Howie nods, her breath stuttering.

Brooks grins. He’s missing teeth, looks like some Halloween Jack-O-Lantern. At what must be a look of horror on her face, he tells her:

“I’d say you should see the other guys, but it looks like y’all burned them.”

And he laughs. It’s loud, like reclaiming life. Like knowing there’s nothing at all to be laughing about, but there’s nothing to stop him, either.

Epilogue: Five Years Later

“It’s gettin’ dark.”

Soon, likely, he’ll have his hands on her hips. His lips on her neck. No doubt they’ll finish this sunset like they have a thousand others since taking over the ranch.

“Is it, now?” she asks him.

They’ve seen the sun rise and fall either here or traveling every day for the last five years. Wright’s got deeper wrinkles on the corners of his eyes now, deeper smile lines too. Gone is the crease between his brows, unless he’s looking down at her at his own edge, hands shaking in reverence. He’s beautiful like this, earthen and fated and mortal. Howie wouldn’t trade anything for getting to grow old with him.

While he says she hasn’t aged a day, she sees it in herself sometimes, not so much in her face but in the way she walks. In the reflections of shop windows in town, she has seen the way she holds herself so tall and mighty. Howie Lindal has a presence only blood on hands and the recognition of victory can give.

They’ve earned this.

After the explosion all those years ago, it took quite some time for them to learn to trust their own safety. The volunteer fire department never showed, but a man in a sleek black Cadillac did, serving papers that granted Wright Lindal guardianship over Jada and her ranch. Not long after that, in their own leisurely time, Ridge and Sadie arrived with their brood of children.

Wright's wolverine brother took one look at the cratered earth that was once the Stoughton home and said sarcastically:

"Look, Deputy! You *could* do it alone."

It's been five years and Howie still can't stand him. Her feelings for Ridge Lindal are not born of a deep hatred— she thinks that would make Wright jealous. They're instead wrought from sharing a bunkhouse with him as they worked to rebuild. She and Wright might be unable to keep their hands off each other, but they're nothing compared to his brother's lack of shame. Wyoming, with its constant wind and chills, is not the place where a person can merely sleep outside to avoid their brother-in-law thrusting inside his constantly pregnant wife. So Howie will always blame Ridge for too many sleepless nights and a penchant for dirty talk that makes her nauseous.

She likes Sadie, though. The woman made her coffee at five a.m., and she can fix a delicious breakfast. Howie can see what Wright saw in her. She's a caretaker, someone beautiful both inside and out, and soft in all the right places. But she's not Howie, and he doesn't look at her like she is.

There's never been jealousy between them. In fact, the only imbalance of affection is on Sadie's end, towards Howie. If she's not mistaken, the freckle-faced girl might have a schoolyard crush on her.

Outside of those things, she'd say that they have as familial and normal a relationship as possible. She likes Ridge and Sadie even better now that they've gone back to running the farm in North Carolina. A few summers ago, she traveled with Adira and Wright out to the place they saw the devil. That creature is too afraid to come around them anymore. With three wolves and a former deputy, she figures it's no surprise.

Their family might not be traditional, but it's everything Howie could want. She even has a daughter now. Adira Lindal, formerly named Jada Williams, was adopted into their family two years ago. They'd asked if she wanted to take the

Stoughton name instead, being that she'll take over the ranch of the same name, but she didn't want it.

It's not because he wasn't perfect. No one is, right? But I want to share a name. I want to be your daughter.

Adira still mourns for her family, though she doesn't show it often. Sometimes, she rides out into the woods for a few days, talking to the father who died for her or her mother who was led astray. She never asks for protection, never needs it either. She's thirteen now, already a rodeo queen, someone who can give even the adult men a run for their money. Maybe one day she'll be the first bearer of the Lindal name to go to college, paid for by her own brevity and success.

Howie dismounts her horse and lands in the tall grass. Her birthday's in a few days, right before the cold weather will hit them the hardest. Winter's when they fell in love, though, so she's not afraid of the snow. She's not afraid of anything anymore.

The sun is vanishing behind distant mountains, but for now the sky is sugary with light pinks and purples, burning into orange on the horizon.

"Just wish we could have found a place with a view, eh?" she teases to where she knows Wright is. He's silent as any predator should be, but she knows the warmth of him well. She feels him behind her.

"Not sure, deputy," he says. "Long as you ain't left yet, I got the best view in this country."

She laughs. "Where am I gonna go that we haven't gone together, huh? Would be terrible to leave you. Would just see your face on all the street corners. That crooked smile would haunt me, Wright."

"That was my plan, all this time," he says, letting that same smile shine just for her.

The light falls golden on his face. He's been alive for four decades now, and by the looks of it he'll live forever. Gone are the days when he looked like he was readying himself for a funeral. He even has more than two shirts now.

“Think Ridge and the kids will like Christmas here?” he asks.

“Fuck no,” Howie says. “We’re not letting them back.”

He laughs a deep belly laugh.

“I’m serious,” Howie says. “I had to live a year within hearing distance of those two. I’m not doing that again.”

“Aw, was thinkin’ we’d have ‘em for Christmas,” he teases.

“Okay, they can go way over there,” she says, pointing off in the distance. “We’ll build them a bunker on the edge of our land, make sure they’re underground where we can’t *hear* them.”

“Woman,” Wright starts, lifting his finger, a devious glint in his eye. “You’re gettin’ smarter every day, I swear.”

“Thanks, darling,” she nods, narrowing her eyes at him in defiance.

“No need to say it to me,” he says.

“Wasn’t going to,” she teases.

He laughs, pulling her close. “You know what I love about you, after all these years?”

“What’s that?” she asks, tilting her head.

There’s a joke on the tip of his tongue. She hears it in the slight inhale he takes, in the flush of his cheeks gone tan in the light and the twinkle that lives in his baby blues. If she were to tell him all she loved about him when they first started all this, she’d joke too. His size would be one of the first on the list, and even living in a trailer she loved that. Then his character, the way he only says what he means and seems to think about it, the unbreakable dedication he has to those he’s close with. The soldier, the cowboy, the lover, the father.

But now, it’s so much more. It’s his endurance, his resilience, his ability to find light when it doesn’t come naturally to him. It’s the way he grips the steering wheel so casually even after eight hours of driving, the way he looks

over a campfire, the way the morning dew catches in his hair when he holds her in his arms and they sleep on a blanket in the grass on a warm night. They still have others, still have family, but in the beauty of their life together she knows he's all she needs.

In the space where there could have been humor, she sees those things pass through his eyes and she kisses him. She could find his lips blindfolded. He trails his hand up her side, over her arm, up her shoulder, resting on her neck. The collar he claims her with, just like he claimed her with his bite. Just like she claimed him with hers.

“Everything,” he says.

But he doesn't need to say it.

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“About time the white guy’s the werewolf.”

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About the Author

Shiloh Sloane is an emerging author of sci-fi memoirs. This is Shiloh's seventeenth book.

Also by Shiloh Sloane

Then, Earth Swallowed Ocean

(notes of werewolves, Southern Gothic, brotherhood, corrupted innocence, and the Devil)

Like Neon Mornings

(notes of Vegas, starting over, borrowed time, and falling in love at 3 a.m.)

Coming 2024:

Ready and Willing

(notes of rage, obsession, Cartier bracelets, and hidden evidence)

The Lakeview Series

(notes of mountain air, Bible pages, fire, and juniper trees)

Different Worship

(notes of endless prairie, dirt roads, and righteous murder in the American west)

Cold Red Clay

(notes of incense, church pews, Oklahoma summers, and cherry sno-cones)