

FOREVER MATE SERIES



HER REBORN MATE

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Her Reborn Mate

Rejected Mate Second Chance Paranormal
Werewolf Vampire Romance

Forever Mate Series

(Book 2)

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Chapter 1: Alexis

The three architects of my demise stared from the shattered window, their wicked faces contorted in sick glee as they watched me fall, eager to see me become one with the pavement.

But little did they know, it was a pleasure to fall.

Suddenly, all my problems ceased to bear their crushing weight on me.

Fiddler's Green had never looked so beautiful. The sun coming out from behind the cascading waves of the sea seemed to beam at me, telling me that I shouldn't worry, that it would keep a watchful eye on everything on my behalf—the gentle trees swayed in the wind, disaffected by the politics of power. The blue sky, ever so vast in its unendingness, tilted in the opposite direction, making me think as a raindrop completing my trajectory from the sky to the ground.

And then this euphoric moment ended, leading me to the horrific realization that my wounded and bleeding body was in free fall. As my body achieved terminal velocity, I, through much pain, morphed myself into my wolf self. If it would not save me from the fall, at least it would allow me the honor of dying with my dignity within my true form.

But something happened then that my enemies nor I expected.

My wolf body broke the fall. Whatever bones were bruised and shattered in

the great fall gradually healed themselves as I limped away from that hellish tower and sought to escape from the rapidly appearing army of mercenaries. I watched from behind shadows as they scoured the area with their guns held up and their laser sights aiming every which way. Of all the injuries that had been inflicted on my body, the only one refusing to heal itself was the bullet wound.

This much was clear to me: With Will dead, there was no future for me in Fiddler's Green. Our tragedies have a way of moving us, sometimes through spectrums of hitherto uncharted emotions, sometimes literally from one secluded town tucked away in Northeast America to the state capital.

I did not make that journey alone.

While the mercenaries under contract by Blair ceased their chase within the town's limits, the vampires, instigated by their leader's victory, raced after me under the watchful shade of Fiddler's Forest. But they could only keep up with me while the sun was rising. Once it had completely dawned, even the vampires fled to their lair. It made perfect sense from their perspective, or so it appeared to me. Here was a werewolf, shot with a silver bullet, bleeding across the trail in the forest. The vampires might have thought that I'd die within the hour from blood loss.

What they hadn't accounted for was my resolve. More than the desire to take revenge for what they had done to me, even more than the pain of my mate's parting that kept me alive, the reason I kept inching towards the end of the forest was pure survival. Before I had become fated mates with Will, I had wanted to leave Fiddler's Green. If it took the death of my mate, a silver bullet to the chest, a broken heart, and some broken bones to accomplish that goal, then so be it.

Fiddler's Green extracted a huge toll on those who tried to leave it. Why should I have been the exception? Akin to an evil entity, it took everything from me. My parents, my mate, and all the opportunities I could have availed in my youth had I been a resident of Bangor, New York City, or San Francisco. Those old timers who sat at the marina would say something banal along the lines of, "You've still got the rest of your life ahead of you," but they'd be wrong, wouldn't they? I'll never have my twenties back. I'll never have my parents back. Will won't ever come back to me.

"Christ, you look like you've seen better days." The bartender was a thin figure, both arms covered in tattoos, and her head shaved from one side in a funky hairdo. She was wearing a black wifebeater that was completely soaked in the front. As she stood across from me, I could see that her expressions were reflecting the same feminine worry that crossed every woman's mind when she saw another one of her kind looking beaten up. The same question lingering unsaid: *Was it a man who did this to you?*

"You would think that, but you know what, barkeep? I ain't ever seen better days," I said.

"Well, this one's on the house," the bartender said, sliding across a shot of whiskey. "You need it."

I lifted the shot glass and raised it to her, then downed it in a single gulp, letting that fiery fluid scorch a trail down my throat, warming up my insides.

Behind the bartender, the wall lined with liquor bottles was entirely made of glass, offering me glimpses of my battered self. The bandages only served to

hide the really terrible bruises; as far as any onlooker was concerned, the aftermath of the battle I'd been in was as apparent as day.

"You ran away, didn't you?" the bartender, ever so persistent in trying to get me to engage in a conversation with her, prodded.

"Excuse me?" I slid the empty shot glass back to her and rapped the counter. She poured me another.

"Fella who did this to you. I've seen countless women come through these doors, never seen 'em in Bangor before, women looking like their good-for-nothing boyfriends or husbands beat 'em up. I don't mean to assume...."

"Well, that's a huge assumption. No fella did this to me."

"Right. You *fell*. That's what they always say," the bartender said, shaking her head morosely.

"I didn't fall, and my boyfriend didn't beat me up. That's not what happened," I said, a bit vexed now. It didn't help that the bullet wound that I had self-sutured was throbbing painfully, that the bruises on the rest of my body were, for some reason taking their sweet time recovering, and that I was alone in a big city with not a dollar to my name, and that this nagging bartender was creating a pathetic sob-story that she was imposing on me.

"All I'm saying is, it's a Tuesday morning, and the bar's empty save for one weary soul, and that's you, sister. As I said, I ain't ever seen you before, and you've got small town written all over you. So, if it isn't some hick boyfriend who's done this to you, I marvel at the premise that caused someone so young like you to get so beaten up like this. When the dust settles, when all's well and done, it's only women who ever stand up for women. I didn't mean

to pry, but I'm being sympathetic." She extended her hand and squeezed mine, giving me a small smile.

"My world ended in a single night," I said, downing the second shot. "Does that make sense? The man I loved...dead. And before he was about to die, he said something that made me question whether he had loved me at all. This state that I'm in, it's nothing. I'll heal in time. Those responsible for it will pay for it. I'll recover. But there's no recovery from heartbreak, is there?"

The bartender poured me another shot, then settled down on the barstool. "The moment a woman gives birth, people start that godawful jest, telling her that she's never gonna be tight down there the same again. People are stupid. Within the first forty days or so, the woman's body recovers from the pregnancy and the childbirth, and all her 'loose' muscles go back to being tight the same way as they were. Now think of your heart. You may think it's shattered or broken beyond repair, but the heart's not made of glass. It's a muscle. It might feel all messed up, loose, displaced, or whatever else you're feeling right now, but remember this: It's a muscle. And it will recover. And you'll be back to normal," she said.

"How maudlin of me to be oversharing in a Bangor lobster-themed bar with a stranger on a Tuesday morning," I said as the bartender poured me yet another drink.

"We ain't strangers. We're two sisters on different paths, is all. You can call me Izzie, and I'll call you..."

"Lexi," I said.

"All right, then, see. We ain't strangers. You're Lexi, the mysterious girl from out of town. I'm Izzie, the bartender of Mulligan's Watering Hole."

“I’m from Fiddler’s Green,” I said, shaking her hand.

“Well, girl, that ain’t too far. Just an hour’s drive away. I’m from Bangor, born and raised.”

As Izzie poured me another shot of whiskey, I tried to rationalize the events that had taken place within the last few hours. They came back in snippets of sharp, overly-contrasting images.

Will was dead in my arms.

Will was saying Ariana’s name.

A bullet flying through the air.

The glass window shattering and throwing me out of it.

It was as if I had been immersed in some deranged VR simulation.

“Whoa. You need to go easy on yourself,” Izzie said, pushing away the shot of whiskey away from me. “You look parched and starved. Whiskey’s not gonna do you much good. You need food and water. Do you have money? There’s a diner around the corner that serves a mean breakfast platter.”

“These are the last dollars to my name,” I said, handing her two bills. “And I think they’re enough to cover the tab for the drinks.”

“Jesus, girl. Something terrible must have happened to you that you’re drinking this much,” Izzie said, quietly taking the bills. “Tell you what. My belief system does not allow me to let a woman go without offering her help, and you look like you need all the help in the world.”

“What’s your belief system?” I asked, sneakily taking the whiskey shot back

from her and drinking it.

“Uh, it’s called being a decent human being. We’re a small movement, but we’re gaining traction as the world goes more and more to shit.”

I chuckled dryly and raised my shot to her one more time.

“What do I have to do? There’s always a catch.” I said.

“How good are you with the dishwasher? We got an industrial one in the back for the weekends when this bar gets really rowdy. On the weekends, we’re short on staff. Maine lobstermen, guys from the smaller cities, business people home from a trip overseas—this place sees it all. Might be handy to have a fry-cook in the house. If you can handle the kitchen, I can give you lodgings and some money to make it worth your while,” Izzie said.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I was like you once,” Izzie said.

“I seriously doubt that,” I began, but Izzie held up her hand.

“I used to be like you. Not so long ago, I was a bartender here. Back then, I was a real meek sort of character who’d let pretty much anyone bully her. Made sense for me to keep my head down back then, now, didn’t it? I was young, didn’t have two pennies to my name, and there weren’t lots of places in Bangor hiring someone with zero experience and nonexistent social skills. Maggie, the previous owner of the bar, took me under her wing. Nurtured me like a mother hen does to her little chicks. Taught me the ropes. Taught me how to stand up for myself. Sooner or later, we gotta take a stand for ourselves. And somewhere along the line, we have to offer a helping hand to those in need. Take my help. Please,” Izzie said.

Why had it been this bar that I had randomly chosen in my delirious state? Did I somehow know that I'd find warmth and compassion within, or was it something more preternatural? Possibly fate?

The minute I had seen the milestone marker for Bangor, I knew that I had to stitch myself up, or else I'd die of blood loss. For some reason, my healing faculties were not working the way they had done before. Behind me, the wilderness gave way to the outskirts of Bangor, which only meant one thing. Even the hardest of the vampires had stopped chasing me.

A hitchhike from a tow truck, and yet another hitchhike from an overly religious truck driver later, I was deep within Bangor's downtown, looking like I had walked out of the set of some macabre slasher flick.

Going to a hospital was out of the question.

The second closest thing nearby was a vet's clinic across the street. Putting aside the moral dilemma of breaking and entering into a clinic for the time being, I snuck inside and sutured myself up while trying not to breathe in the awful smell coming from the operation theater. I patched myself up with bandages meant for dogs and cats and only got out in time before the cops showed up.

From there on, I was lost in a maze of streets and back alleys until my path cleared up in front of Mulligan's. This strange, beat-up building looked like a seaside shack from the 18th century, with an oddly placed neon sign proclaiming that they served fresh Maine lobster there. The aroma of the food and the wafts of smoke coming out of the chimney were all the invitations I needed to step inside, despite looking as haggard as I did.

And here I sat now, contemplating this offer that Izzie had made.

“Listen, kid, I’m not pitying you. I’m offering you a job. That’s how America works, as far as you and I are concerned. You wanna take my offer or not?” Izzie asked a bit impatiently as customers started coming into the bar.

“I’m gonna take a walk,” I said.

“If you come back in, I’ll take it as a yes. If you don’t, well, don’t be a stranger anyways,” Izzie said.

I had lost count of the shots I had consumed, but at least they had taken me where I needed to go. All I could feel was numb, warm, and disconcerted. Add to that the fact that my head was spinning and my insides felt like they were being gouged out, and I considered it a decent enough barter to forget the atrocities I had gone through.

Being drunk did not help me find a path that led out of this dense network of alleyways. Above, the buildings, their awnings, fire exits, metal stairs, and wires made such a mishmash that they blocked all sunlight from coming down into the alleys, making it feel like I was still trapped in some dark dystopia.

I snuck around and peeked from behind a wall to see if the cops had left the vet’s clinic. There was still a cop car with its lights blaring red and blue, which meant that my exit from the alley would be impossible until they left.

Thinking as rationally as my current state of inebriation would allow me, I made the choice to go back to Mulligan’s and take up Izzie’s offer. The big thing was that I was finally out of Fiddler’s Green. So what if I had to clean plates and wait tables? I would have been doing that in Fiddler’s Green anyway for lower pay and shittier customers. At least here, I had a whole metropolis rich with opportunities at my disposal.

At least I had no ghosts haunting me in Bangor.

While walking back to the bar, still feeling as lost as ever in this bizarre tapestry of ever-shifting streets, I heard a clattering sound come from behind me. Probably some cat going through the trash.

Izzie's offer was the best and the only offer I had right now. Other than her, I had nowhere to go. Now, if only I could find my way back to the bar through these godforsaken alleys. For all its faults, at least Fiddler's Green had some decent city planning.

I shot a look behind me, checking to see where the constant noise was coming from. Once was a coincidence, twice was a cause for concern, but the same sound three times meant that something was not right.

There was no one in the alley, which only made me feel more uneasy.

Once I crossed into the next street, the bar came into view once again, putting me at ease. Seeing Mulligan's Watering Hole for the second time put things in perspective. Here was a place I could call home. Above the bar, there was the room that Izzie spoke of. It had a small terrace with potted plants lining the circumference and a big window giving the view of the alleys from above. There was a staircase from the side leading up to it.

I could see myself living there.

There it was again, that creeping sound coming from behind. As much as I tried to tap into my wolf self's powers, I failed. I hadn't shifted ever since I had gotten out of the woods, and it seemed that my powers had become dormant all of a sudden. I couldn't see as well, nor could I sense the things happening in my surroundings. My getting lost in this not-so-complicated

maze of alleys was proof of that.

A gruff hand fell on my shoulder and yanked me back. I wheeled around before I could fall and came face to face with a pale vampire with its fangs out. He hissed at me as I swerved to save myself from his bite. Even that little activity took a lot out of me, making me strain as I moved back to avoid him.

“You think running from Fiddler’s Green will solve your troubles?” the vampire scoffed. “You killed so many of us. We’ve got your scent, and we’re not going to stop coming.”

I grabbed the only thing in sight—a crowbar tilted next to a trash can—and threw it at the vampire, who deftly dodged it and grabbed it in the middle of its trajectory.

As he came up to me, cornering me, I did the only thing that made sense. I tried to shift. But exactly at that moment, the bar’s door opened, and Izzie came out holding a baseball bat. What good was a baseball bat going to be against a vampire?

Disconcerted by her sudden appearance, I was overcome by the vampire as he grabbed me by my throat and pinned me to the wall, choking the life out of me.

I was fading fast. All of my injuries kicked into pain hyperdrive as the vampire lifted me above the ground and continued to crush my neck.

My only recourse was to shift and level the playing field.

Why did Izzie have to be there?

Chapter 2: Will

An ancient German folk saying went something along the lines of: “We are all blessed with the ignorance that comes with death. For no one, not even the dead, know what happens inside the lifelessness of the grave.”

This suffocating dark could mean one of two things. If this was the afterlife, then it was the bleakest afterlife I could have ever imagined, and whoever was the architect of the transitory location between life and death had done a piss poor job of acclimatizing the recently departed to the next realm. However, if this was not the afterlife, then it meant that I was in a coffin within my grave.

Alive.

It could not possibly be.

I was injected with the Wolf’s Bane. It was pain beyond what I could have ever imagined. All that torture that Edward Beckett had done to me for all those years paled in comparison to the excruciating agony that I felt when that liquid entered my veins. I had felt my life force leave my body. My soul had transcended from beyond the mortal plane and somewhere where there were familiar faces all around me. I could remember it so clearly.

I had met so many people in that purgatorial place.

Ariana.

Ah, yes.

I had called out her name, and she had sought me out from a sea of souls. Behind her, my parents, whom I had not seen for almost a century, stood happily, smiling wordlessly. My kin and kith from Germany, were all there. All the old members of my pack. These were white plains as far as the eye could see, shining overwhelmingly bright.

“Wilhelm. You’re at the precipice of the spirit realm,” Ariana had said, beaming ever so affectionately at me. “You only need to cross over. Your life will seem like a distant dream. All your sorrows will be over. Your pain will be a faint memory, nothing more. Come, join your ancestors, your clan, your friends.” She had then extended her hand to me, beckoning me to take it.

“And leave those I am in charge of? Take the shortcut, as it were?” That had been my response, stern, prompt.

“You are dying, Will. There remains no point in struggling. It’s a futile gesture. Look at all your family coming here to welcome you to the ancestral planes. Here, there is no pain. Here, there is only contentment. Come. Your time is here.”

“For a long time, I thought you were the woman I loved. Now that I have found the woman I truly love—she’s your granddaughter, by the way—I cannot just leave her to fend herself against all the forces that are conspiring against her. My pack needs me. More than that, Alexis needs me. And I need to fulfill my fate as her mate. There is so much I have yet to do,” I’d said.

Ariana’s face bore no smiling countenance after I said this. Instead, a different emotion, one that I could not fathom, overtook her, and she said, “Go then, Wilhelm. If this is indeed not your time, and if it is indeed that you

have unfinished business back on earth, then go with the blessing of your ancestors.”

And then I was thrown into the darkness of the cosmos, where each moment stretched itself into an eon, and I did not know for how long I fell. All I knew was that my soul was descending from some holy echelon back into the chaotic reality of earth.

Now that it had all come back to me, it made sense that I was in a grave. My grave. What baffled me was how I was here in the first place. While I was having my spiritual epiphanies in the afterlife, those left in charge of my body had taken to it to bury me urgently. It must have been Maurice, of course, who else? Had there been a funeral? Had Alexis made it out alive? If so, was she there at my funeral?

These were the questions that I could not find the answers to if I stayed within my grave any longer. I would get out even if I had to claw my way out of here.

The troubling part about being in this dark confinement was I did not know what was up and what was down. What was even worse was the pain that was still coursing through my body. I might be alive, but the chemicals that had seen me to my apparent death were still running in my body, trying to finish the job.

Despite all that anguish, I regained control of my limbs and began battering against the lid of the coffin. First, I did it with my legs, hoping to create some wiggle room for my arms. Once I had loosened myself within the coffin and was no longer lying, I pushed against the coffin lid, expecting dirt to slide down and fill my coffin.

As I had anticipated the dirt, I was able to hold my breath and keep the existential dread of being buried alive at bay while I shoveled with my hands and climbed up from the coffin, and broke through the ground.

The dirt had been recently dumped on the grave, making it loose and easy for me to climb out. I grabbed fistfuls of dirt and threw them aside as I clawed my way out of the grave.

When my dirt-covered body finally came above ground, I saw that I was buried in Eternal Abode, and it was nighttime. The moon hung low in the blue sky with just a faint smattering of stars on the endless horizon. The gentle waves of the sea troughed near the beach as a weak wind blew, causing the trees to whisper and shiver.

They had given me a proper burial, complete with a wreath and a headstone. I wondered as I crawled out of my grave what they had said about me at the funeral and if the pack members had wondered why there had been a funeral on such short notice. What had become of Maurice, I thought? Had he positioned himself back at the pack as the Alpha? It drove me into a rage, thinking about the lies he must have told the pack to regain their trust. Surely, a man of his level of deceit will have had no trouble charming the pack members.

By the time I dragged my battered and aching body out of the cemetery, some coherence came to my thoughts, allowing me to think of my next move. I had to find Alexis. This much was certain. But besides that, there was the matter of Blair, Maurice, and Ralph. For all they knew, I was dead. This was true for everyone else as well, including my mate. I could use this to my advantage with my enemies. But as far as my mate was concerned, I had to put her emotional anguish to ease and let her know that I was alive.

In the aftermath of the battle that had taken place in the Beckett Pharma tower, the town looked unnaturally calm, as if someone had showered the whole place from above with some placating agent like the numbing gas that the Nazis used to use back in the Second World War.

My body felt drained, making it impossible for me to shift into my werewolf form. At least they had buried me in a proper suit. It was covered in dirt and grave grime, but after brushing myself off a lot at the cemetery's entrance, I saw my reflection in a parked hearse, and, to my surprise, I did not look half bad. My hair was matted with grave dirt, and all the veins in my neck, hands, and forehead were blue and protruding, but other than that, I was pleased to see that no one could quite put together that merely moments ago, I was a man buried alive.

My vision came and went in flashes, and as my feet quivered to find their footholds, the journey back to Grimm Abode felt impossible. It was at this moment that I told myself a message that I desperately needed to hear: I had not come back from the dead to give up now.

My path, no matter how arduous, was yet ahead of me, as daunting as that was.

The air was that of mourning in the commune. All lanterns and lamplights were doused at night, a recognizable mark of bereavement. Black velvet cloths hung from the doors of all the houses, and silence prevailed as shadows crept ever so darker. Not a single soul was in sight, leading me to question whether I had come back from the dead at all.

Once I was inside the commune, I headed straight to the only person's house that I could trust. As I passed through the darkness, I saw that there were no lights inside Alexis's house, nor were there in mine, for that matter.

I snuck around the back of the houses and knocked on the backdoor of Vincent's house. At first, there was no response, but upon further rapping, there came a sound from inside.

"Hold your horses, I'm coming," Vincent's familiar voice finally broke through the silence.

When he opened the door, I saw that his eyes were bleary red, and his face bore the mark of grief. But it took less than a moment for all that to change as he saw me standing in his doorway.

The man was about to faint, his mouth hanging wordlessly open. I quickly grabbed him, even though I was in no better condition myself, and stepped in through the door, closing it shut behind me.

"But...I buried you myself...How?!" Vincent inquired, his voice breaking. Then, without delay, he threw himself on me and hugged me fiercely. "When I learned that you had died, oh Christ!"

"Pull yourself together, man," I said, holding him by his shoulders. "As you can clearly see, something has gone colossally right for me and just as monumentally wrong for my foes. I still draw breath. Although, how I still draw breath is still a mystery to me."

"Dad...I mean, Maurice, he came in at dawn, holding your lifeless body, telling us a completely bullshit story about your death. No one bought it, but what could we do? You were dead, completely unbreathing, unmoving. There

was a funeral at daybreak, followed by a burial in the early hours of the morning,” Vincent said, wiping his eyes. “And there’s no sign of Alexis anywhere.”

“Before anything else, you must swear to secrecy that you are not to tell a single soul that I am alive. Do you swear?” I whispered.

“I do not know what you’re planning, nor do I completely fathom how you’re still alive, but I swear. On my life and the life of my mother, may God rest her soul, I’m not telling anyone,” Vincent said. He held me and stared at me in disbelief for a complete minute before saying, “I wonder if....”

“I am wondering the same thing,” I said.

“You know, whatever experimentations that Edward fellow did upon you, they must have built some sort of long-term tolerance. Or maybe the potion that I gave you had some effects that we were unaware of back then,” he whispered.

“Or perhaps, just perhaps, the Wolf’s Bane was not as powerful as Blair had intended,” I said.

“You must tell me what happened. I...there’s no sign of Lexie anywhere. Do you know what happened to her?” Vincent asked.

“How would I know, Vince? Not more than an hour ago, I regained consciousness and clawed out of my grave.”

‘Right. Sorry. It’s just, it’s never happened to me before, having someone close to me come back from the dead.’

“I’ll remind myself not to make a habit of resurrecting myself now and then,”

I said, trying to smile but finding it impossible to do so. Now that Vincent had told me that there was no sign of Alexis anywhere, my heart tremored at the possibilities. Was she safe at all?

Before we could talk about anything else, there was a loud knock on the front door.

“Vince! What did I tell you about locking the door? I hear noises. Who the hell are you talking to at this time of the night?”

That voice made my blood boil. My first impulse was to go to the front door, drag Maurice inside, and beat the living hell out of him, and right before I killed him, I’d find out what he had done to Alexis.

But my depleted level of energy and the resolution I had come to earlier about me keeping my resurrection secret stayed me from acting too rashly.

“You gotta get out of here, Will,” Vincent whispered frantically as the knocking on the front door became more forceful. “He can’t ever know.”

Vincent pushed me out the backdoor just as Maurice brute-forced his way through the front door. I crouched behind the wall and tucked myself right under the window where I could hear what was happening inside.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop moping around? What’s all this? Have you taken up talking to yourself? Like I needed to add yet another fucking concern in my life?”

“Don’t worry, dad. I haven’t gone psycho or anything. I was just saying a prayer for the fallen,” Vincent said.

I heard Maurice scoff loudly.

“So it’s even worse than I thought. You’ve gone religious. And what’s that shitty smell?”

“He became my best friend, dad. I get that the concept’s hard for you to understand, but he was like a brother to me. I was by his grave, trying to make sense of it all. I’m tired of burying people I love. First mom, then him.”

“Now is not the time to become sentimental. Whatever happened to Will was a travesty, I am sure, but we must look to the future instead of sulking about the past. You can be the alpha of this pack one day. You will soon know what it means to make hard choices,” Maurice said.

Vincent sneered derisively, then said, “He was twice the man you are. Don’t think me and the rest of the pack don’t have our suspicions about how you came walking through the commune with his corpse in your arms. Lexis’s missing too, which makes it all even more doubtful.”

“I would flay you alive were you not my son for this insolence,” Maurice said.

Not wanting to take any more of Maurice’s vitriol, I crouched back and disappeared into the trees. The backdoor opened just as I had hidden myself, and out stepped Maurice with two of his men. They scoured the surroundings, looking for someone, something, but when they were unable to find anything damning, they went back inside.

The night was not so silent and dark anymore. Ever since Maurice’s arrival, his men—men that I had not seen before, no doubt under his and Blair’s joint payroll—had started combing through the commune in an attempt to tie any loose ends. How ironic was it for Maurice that his biggest potential undoing was his own son?

I could trust Vincent with my life, but to be near him right now was extremely risky. Besides, there was someone whom I needed more than anyone else. Even though I could not morph myself into my wolf form, I discovered that I could still use my bond with Alexis.

It was faint, distant, and hurting. Wherever she was, she was in pain. I could sense the heartbreak, the sorrow, and the wounds that she was trying to recover from. I wondered momentarily if she had tried to tap into her bond with me, but then it occurred to me why would she? She had seen me die. There was no cause for her to use her bond anymore.

But of all the scattered and fragmented information that my bond was giving me, two things were clear. She was not in Fiddler's Green anymore, and she was in mortal danger.

While still tucked away behind the tree line, I tore off my coat's sleeve and wrapped it around my face. Stealth was my only ally now.

Although the pain in my body had subsided, the effects of Wolf's Bane still debilitated me from moving too swiftly or traveling for long distances. I was already exhausted as it was. I needed food, a good night's sleep, a bath, and new clothes.

Now, whom did I know who could provide me with all of that while remaining discreet?

Chapter 3: Alexis

Whatever fumes I was running on were already exhausted when I reached Bangor. There was no more fight left in me. Although I had never been a quitter, in my mind, the most convenient solution to all my woes right now was to just let go and let the vampire kill me. At least then, I would be able to locate Will's spirit in the afterlife, give him a good ethereal beating for dying on me, and then ask him what he'd meant when he had said Ariana's name. There was a one-way ticket to all of that happening, and it was wrapped around my throat, drawing out my life force.

It would have all happened exactly like that had Izzie not been standing there in the back, her hands grasping the baseball bat as if she was some sort of hero in a dystopian video game.

"Your flesh crawls with fear," the vampire said, his face next to mine. It took me a second to realize what he was doing. He wasn't just choking me; his claws were digging into the skin of my neck, drawing blood, undoubtedly attracting the vampires that had come along with him.

And that was when it ended, my passive acceptance of death. A cluster of vampires in this back alley would mean havoc for Izzie and everyone in the bar. A bunch of feral vampires loose in the streets of Bangor, driven into a frenzy by blood...who knew what hell would break loose if that'd happened?

Izzie's bat collided with the back of the vampire's head, breaking his

crushing hold on my neck. I slid down the floor as fresh air burst through me, granting me back my sight and eliminating my passive acceptance of fate. I struggled to my feet, trying to understand what had just happened. Izzie still held the baseball bat in her hands, with one of its ends steeped in blood. The vampire was reeling, holding his bloodied head with both hands.

As he staggered about the alley, he eventually passed through a spot where sunlight had managed to shine despite all the wires, rooftops, and awnings. The moment he came into the sunlight, his skin started sizzling. The vampire yelled and made a run for the darker part of the alley.

Izzie stood by me, one hand clinging to the bat, the other wrapped around my shoulder. Ever since the death of my parents, I had never felt such a feeling of familial protection. It was not the same with Will. He had been my lover. Half the time, I had to help him adjust to the ways of the new world. Vince and Maliha, while close friends and all, were within my age bracket, and although they had helped me out a lot, it had never been like this. Never the comforting arm on my shoulder.

Only mom used to do that.

“Fucking meth heads,” Izzie spat. “We’re in the middle of one of the worst drug epidemics in the country. The streets are filled with junkies shooting scag in their system, smoking meth, and doing all those new sorts of designer drugs that have a fifty-fifty chance of getting you high or killing you. Best buy yourself a handgun and stand your ground when you get jumped like this.”

Neither did I have the heart to tell her that I knew exactly where the meth had been coming from, nor did I have it in me to inform her that the thing she had

driven away was not some drug addict but a scorned vampire. All I knew was I had to stick around, if not just for my sake, then for Izzie's.

"That bed still up for grabs?" I asked.

"For sure. Just...be extra cautious of these folk in the alleys. Half of them are stoned out of their gourds and don't know what they're doing. The other half is just in pursuit of chaos. You best avoid both."

"This isn't the first time you've had to defend your property I'm assuming," I said.

"Honey, I've lost count."

"I never understood why there'd be a full-fledged bar in the middle of the back alleys. Why not a main road or avenue?" I asked. It was only a deflective question meant to slow Izzie down. What I was really looking out for was the vampire. Had his friends arrived? The rooftops and alleys were clear so far, but that could mean anything. Maybe they were ganging up around the corner.

"This bar was part of the old town. Everything around it was built within the last five to fifteen years. Mulligan's has been around for a hundred years. At this point, only those who know of its existence come to visit it. It's a sanctuary if you think about it like that. Just every so often, we pick up a stray."

"Hey, don't expect me to meow."

"I don't expect none of that. Although, do take the First Aid kit to your room, patch up your neck, and come back down for lunch. I will show you the ropes on running the place, and then we can get you started in the kitchen or behind

the bar.”

“Thank you.” I was mostly just grateful that I didn’t have to shift into my wolf form in front of Izzie. More grateful that the sun had been where it had been and had scared the vampire away. I could not help but think how docile I had been when the vampire was choking me. How could I have let myself accept death in such a lackluster way?

“Don’t mention it,” Izzie said, sliding behind the bar lithely. “Just find your room, and see if it’s to your liking. Don’t go expecting the Ritz or anything. The last person who stayed there was a bit of a hoarder and a kleptomaniac. That’s why we had to fire him.”

I picked up the First Aid kit and climbed up the dingy staircase. It smelled like the inside of Will’s ship on the staircase. All this wood, some of it wet, some gone soft from mold. There was a big window on the top of the staircase from where I could see beyond the alleys. In the distance, the murky waters of the Penobscot river flowed in a zig-zag. Beyond that was the lush green forest that I had come from.

There was only one door on the first floor. It was black, like most of the bar’s interior. I gently pushed it open, preparing myself for whatever awaited me in there. As Izzie had instructed, I was not expecting the Ritz.

But to my surprise, it was not bad at all. Keeping in theme with the bar, the floor and the walls were made of black wood. There was a giant window on one side of the room from where I could see the Penobscot even clearer. The alleys spread below me like a series of webs. From here, I could see into most of them, just as I could see past them onto the main road, on the rooftops of all the buildings around me, and at the wilderness in back of Bangor.

I had the urge to open the window and let the fresh air come in. The room was not shabby by any means. The only thing wrong with it was the stuffy smell. I slid open the windows and greeted the cold air inside, now turning my attention to the rest of the room.

There was a shabby bed in one corner, stripped of its bedsheet and pillow covers. The mattress atop it was stained yellow in numerous places. I was no one to complain. For me, all of this stuff came for free. I could fix this fixer-upper of a place in no time. But with what money?

I opened the cabinet, only now realizing what Izzie meant when she said that the previous tenant had been a kleptomaniac. Given all the stuff in the cabinets, I wouldn't have to go on a shopping spree to fix this place. Most everything that I needed was already in there. Linen, pillow covers, candelabras, rugs, crockery, utensils...the cupboard had it all. There was even a designated section for stolen clothes. I yanked some of them out and sniffed them. Other than the scent of the cupboard, these clothes didn't have any odor and didn't look dirty. I chose a plaid shirt and black jeans from this pile, fished out a towel from the cupboard, and then headed into the bathroom.

After a hot shower, I put on my clothes, bandaged my neck, refreshed my old bandages, and then headed down. I had exhausted my limit of spending time all by myself. The more I stayed by myself, the more the horrors of my previous life came to haunt me. It was a lingering sadness that saw loneliness as an opportunity to attack when all my defenses were down. It all revolved around my dead mate and the last word he had said.

I was not gripped by the fact that I had moved away from Fiddler's Green. That had always been the plan, even after Will became my mate. I had

foreseen that he and I would move somewhere like San Francisco or Los Angeles, far away from the madness prevailing in that vampire-infested port city. I did not miss the people there. Well, apart from Vince and Maliha. The real sorrow infused down to my marrow was the loss of my mate. Had he been my mate at all, though? I couldn't help but think that in his mind, I was always Ariana and that when he was dating me, feigning to be my mate, he must have been thinking that he was having a romantic affair with the woman of his dreams, the woman whose name he uttered before dying. What a fucking travesty.

Thoughts like these perfused the air around me whenever I was alone, making it impossible to stay in seclusion.

I raced downstairs, eager to join the chatter and the bustle of the bar and leave the maddening din of my mind behind me.

“Don't you look a million bucks?” Izzie asked from behind the counter. The place was far more populated than it was when I left. More people were sitting in the booths and around the tables, many of them with drinks and food in front of them. “I bet you feel better too.”

“Tons. There was hot water in the bathroom. And a couple of painkillers in the First Aid kit. I'm much better,” I said.

“Good. Then go in the back. Emilia, our cook, is making some lunch. You can eat in the back while she tells you what your responsibilities will be,” Izzie said.

“Or I can just take the bar,” I said. “I was a bartender for a long stretch back in my old town.”

“Initiative. I like that. All right, then, kiddo. I hope you don’t mind if I go out in the back and have a smoke break, do you? Also, I’m taking a long lunch. So, yeah. The bar’s all yours,” Izzie said and then disappeared in the back.

I went behind the bar, assessing the number of people in there. There must have been no more than thirty patrons in the bar. Most of them were already drinking. Only one fellow was sitting at the bar itself, a man wearing a crisp suit, his blonde hair parted down the side. He was chewing on a toothpick, scrolling through his phone.

“What’ll you be having?” I asked as I flung the washcloth over my shoulder and donned the apron. It was always good to be wearing an apron while behind the bar. Many of the drinks made quite a bit of a splash when I made them.

“Well, I seem to have a cause for celebration,” the man said, smiling warmly at me. From his face, I could see that he was not much older than me. Thirty, at the most. He had a clean-shaved and angular face with a slim nose and sharp chin. “See, I got promoted at work today. They put me in charge of acquisitions. It’s kind of a big leap from my previous job. I was just a truck driver when I joined the company. But now, look at me.”

“I’m looking at you,” I said, realizing I was headed into flirting territory. I passed him a smile. “Back from where I came, real men celebrated with whiskey. Are you a real man?”

As reckless as it was, being behind the bar and wooing the customer brought back some shred of sanity to my warbled mind. It helped that the man was easy on the eyes. It wasn’t like I was engaged or in a relationship. I was in mourning, but there was no written law in the Millennial’s Guide To

Mourning that said that I couldn't do what I was doing. In fact, there was an entire chapter called Rebounds especially written for people going through terrible breakups. Wasn't I broken up and terribly so? Hadn't my mate rejected me by saying another woman's name before he died? Didn't he reject me by dying on me?

"A real man, jeez. That's a term you don't hear much, what with gender being a spectrum thing these days," he said.

"A real man's a real man on any spectrum," I said, pouring him a shot of whiskey and sliding it across the bar. He deftly caught it and lifted it to his face.

"I'll drink to that," he said.

"I'll join you," I said.

I filled my shot glass with whiskey and clinked my glass with his.

"To real men," he said.

"And to your promotion," I chimed in.

"Another one, miss...."

"Richards. Alexis Richards."

"Another one, Miss Richards. And make it a double, please."

"And you are?"

"They call me Lawrence Fischer. But my mom calls me Fishy on account of my not being up to a lot of good."

I chuckled. The man was amusing. He was serving his purpose just as I was serving his. For me, Lawrence was a mild distraction from the abysmal darkness all around me. I couldn't help but feel that I had deserved some distraction.

"Your accent's not from here," Lawrence said, downing two more shots.

"Neither's yours," I said.

"You caught me. I'm a Yankee."

"And I'm a Fiddler's Green hick," I said.

"Looks like it's just us two outsiders in a place filled with born and bred Bangorians."

"You got that right," I said, pouring him his fourth drink. "And I just moved into town."

"Pardon me, and I'm sorry if it's not my place to ask, but what's with the bandages?" Lawrence asked.

"You're right. It's not your place to ask," I said, reverting back to my rigid, defensive self.

"My apologies," Lawrence said, lifting his hands in an apology.

"I'll tell you this much. If I were your man, I'd treat you like divinity. You'd never have so much as a strain on your face, let alone all those injuries."

"You're coming on too strong there, Lawrence. I'm guessing you're not used to drinking all that much," I said.

“Well, it is called liquid courage, and without those four shots in me, I wouldn’t have the courage to ask you out,” he said.

“Why are you asking me out? Look at me. I’m a hideous mess of bruises and bandages,” I said.

“I figured, what with you and me being new to this town and all, we could go see the sights together on a date. Talk about things. I’d tell you about how my dad was a shoemaker in the Bronx. You can tell me how you got those bruises. We can eat some lasagna.”

“That’s an odd first date. You often take ladies to first dates and feed them lasagna?” I laughed. This was good. He had taken it to rocky territory, but he had then swiftly adjusted course. We were okay again. Smooth sailing as it went.

“Well, I am Italian. And there’s nothing wrong with a big bowl of lasagna. It goes super well with most aged wines,” Lawrence said, gleaming.

“Sob stories, sightseeing, lasagna, and wine. Anything else?”

“Well, we can go see a movie. Eat some shrimp or split a lobster. Anything you like, really,” he said.

His proposition was quite intriguing and tempting. I’d have something to do in my off-time. Lawrence could serve as a nice rebound for me. Though, I wouldn’t let him touch me.

“As long as we’re on the same page about me using you,” I said. “I don’t want to get into it, but I’ve been through some horrible shit. I’m only saying yes so I can use you as a distraction from all the fuckery going on in my head. Is that a problem?”

“On the contrary, I am pleased to see someone being so upfront and honest for a change. I’d love to be your distraction.”

“And no touching.”

“No touching.”

“Are you going to just talk about it, or are you going to take me on a date?” I asked wryly, raising my eyebrow.

“All right. Be here, six in the evening. I’ll pick you up,” Lawrence said. He slid me a hundred-dollar bill. “For your troubles. Keep the change.”

I watched him leave the bar, then tucked the hundred-dollar bill in the cash register.

“Holy shit, girl, that was some hustle,” Izzie said, watching me from the back. “A hundred dollars for four drinks of Jack Daniels? You might run this bar in the black yet.”

“Does it need to be any blacker than it already is?” I asked, then we both burst into laughter.

“I had a really lovely time, Alexis,” Lawrence said as we walked back to the bar.

“It wasn’t half bad for me either,” I said.

“Did I serve my purpose as your distraction?” he asked.

“You were quite entertaining,” I said.

“Thank you for this evening. May I see you again?” he asked.

“That depends on whether you come back or not.” I took off his jacket and handed it to him. Bangor was chilly in the evening, but now I was home and didn’t need any more of his chivalry.

“I’ll stop by on the weekend,” he said. “You take care now.”

“You too,” I said, waving at him as he left.

Since I was not on shift, I used the fire exit to get to my apartment. The date was nice. It was just as he had advertised. We went to this strange Italian restaurant where we each had shrimp lasagna paired with red wine. Then we walked along the river and talked as we drank our peach smoothies. Nothing else happened except talking. I refrained from telling him my story. He resorted to making me laugh by telling me odd tales from his life as a poor kid in New York.

I opened the window and stepped inside my dark apartment, feeling tired, feeling a bit relieved at the start of this bizarre new chapter in my life. I could see myself enjoying this life in the long run and even getting over the losses of my past. Today had been a good example of that. What had started as a chaotic day ended on a nice note. Bangor wasn’t all that bad, either.

My hands struggled to find the switchboard. The light was dim in the room, what with the walls being black and it being nighttime, but it was enough for me to make out the outline of the bed, the cabinet, the bathroom door, and a silhouette standing in the corner of the room.

Before I could scream for help, and before I could so much as scamper back through the window, the silhouette walked toward me, stepping into the meek

light of the overhead lamp.

I tried to tell myself that this was just my sorrow-addled brain undergoing psychosis. That this could not be real. I was asleep, and this was a nightmare. That could be the only explanation for what I was seeing.

Who I was seeing.

It was Will, standing in front of me, looking as pale as a ghost.

Chapter 4: Will

With my hand wrapped around her mouth and my arm holding her lest she fell, I moved Alexis away from the window and into the darker corner of the room, where her whimpering sounds would be muted.

“I have crawled through hell and beyond to find you,” I said. “And I am relieved to see that you are not dead. Please don’t scream when I remove my hand. It is me. This is not a dream or some hallucination.”

Alexis nodded. I slowly removed my hand from her mouth, then stepped back so that she would register what was happening. It had not been easy for me to track her down and far harder for me to make my way from Fiddler’s Green to this urban hellscape known as Bangor. I had tried time and again to shift, failing each time worse than the last. The only thing that had worked for me when everything else had failed was my bond with her. I could sense she was alive, but that was all I could do then. It wasn’t until I was certain she was alive and somewhere nearby that my bond strengthened and allowed me to find her. It was as if the bond itself was testing me.

“I saw your mouth froth and your skin turn blue. You had no heartbeat. Before I ran for my life, I checked your vitals. You were dead. How the fuck are you still alive then?” Alexis whispered, holding her shocked face with both hands.

“For the longest time, I was dead, or so I thought. It would surprise you to

learn that I woke up in my grave. That part about crawling through hell, wasn't an understatement. I had to dig myself out and witness my defeat from the perspective of a ghost. I saw that Maurice had taken control of the pack again. I visited Vince, who is the only other person who knows that I am alive. Contacting Maliha failed, as she was not in her apartment. Yes. I went there, thinking you were staying with her after I could not find you in the commune."

"Do you really think that spouting all that shit is going to change what happened?" Alexis asked, now not so much shocked as she was gripped with rage. Her eyes were seething, and her cheeks had flushed red.

"What are you talking about? I'm not dead, and you're not dead. Somehow we're both miraculously in one piece. Does that not make you feel a little bit relieved? I would only imagine that you must have felt some loss or sorrow when I presumably died!" I snapped.

"You do not get to raise your voice at me. Not now, not ever!" Alexis yelled. "Not after what you did. Or perhaps conveniently enough, you don't remember?"

"What did I do that warrants such hostile treatment?" I asked, utterly confused as to why she was giving me the mother of all cold shoulders. I had been dreading for her life ever since I had woken up, and here she was, out with some strange man, living comfortably in this place, not even a full day after the fiasco that had taken place at Beckett Tower.

"You said her name!" Alexis said, her voice still loud but not as much as before. "You were dying, I was holding you, and you said 'Ariana!'" Not Alexis. Not that you loved me. Not anything else. All you ever fucking

uttered was her name. Did you even love me at any point? Or was I just a proxy surrogate knockoff of my grandmother for you all this time? Is that all this was?”

“I can see that you are rattled. Believe me I am just as shaken. But the thing is, I didn’t call out her name in the way you think. You’re wrong about all of that. You didn’t die. I died at least for a short while. You don’t know what happened to me. I was in the afterlife, in the realm of souls. That’s when I said her name. she beckoned me to join her and my forefathers on the plain of spirits. I refused. I told her I could not, not while I had unfinished business back on earth. Not while I still loved Alexis. I came back for you!” I said, hoping beyond hope that she would sense the truth and earnestness in my voice and believe me, for every word I uttered was completely honest and exactly what had happened.

“I don’t buy it,” Alexis said. She was not holding her face any longer. Her arms were crossed defensively in front of her, and she was glaring at me. There was not a shred of mercy in her eyes nor a gleam of relief on her face. My bond had led me to her, but now, my bond was just as cold as the stare she was giving me. I did not expect such cruelty.

“You must be under duress. You have been through much. I can see that. You’re hurt. But please, don’t be this way,” I pleaded, hoping that she would understand.

“Did you know what happened when I came here? A kind woman gave me living quarters for free. Well, I am going to work as a bartender for her, but still, no one did anything like that for me in Fiddler’s Green. A handsome guy behaved with me nicely. Took me out and treated me to dinner, laughter, and a good time. Nothing like that happened in Fiddler’s Green. I was

walking with him in the street, and someone gave me a rose, saying I looked lovely. The only shit that has happened to me so far in Bangor has been the shit that I dragged in through my heels when I came here. Vampires. But I was protected by people I barely know. Can you recall how many times that has happened to me in Fiddler's Green? Zero. I feel like I deserve this after my fucked-up existence in Fiddler's Green. It only took me all my life to realize that. I deserve love, kindness, respect, and gentleness.”

“I love you,” I said bleakly.

“Your love is dangerous, Will. You shattered me by dying on me, and what was left of the shards of my heart, you stomped on them by saying her name instead of mine, leading me to doubt if you'd ever loved me to begin with. Your love came with the baggage of dealing with your past, your revenge on your enemies, and your grandiose scheme to rid Fiddler's Green of all evil. It can't happen, Will. Sometimes you just gotta eliminate yourself from the equation if the odds are not in your favor. You never understood that. Instead, you dragged me with you, made me witness your death, and then...ugh!” she said.

I couldn't fathom that this was coming from her. Just two or three days ago, we had been fishing on my boat, telling each other that we loved each other and how we'd live a long and happy life together once everything would be fine. Had I known then that the consequences of my actions would be this extreme, I would never have attacked Blair and Maurice, and Ralph.

“Are you rejecting me?” I asked fearfully, not wanting her to answer or wanting to remain suspended in this emotional limbo.

“You died, Will! How was I to reject you when you rejected me first by

saying her name and then dying on me? I mourned. I cried and wept and dragged my dying body to another city. I vowed to myself that I'd somehow take revenge for your death. When you died, I felt like I was responsible for it. It was twenty-four hours of going through the emotional wringer for me. And when I return to some semblance of normalcy, you're asking me if I rejected you?" she said. "I am heartbroken and wounded. For what it's worth, I think that you're bullshitting me into thinking that you were on that afterlife plain or whatever it was you said. I think you're just coming up with excuses."

"In that case," I said, taking a deep breath. "I will take my leave. I hope that one day you'll understand that I was not lying. And when that day comes, I hope that you'll find your way back to me."

Alexis scoffed and turned her back to me.

Defense mechanisms came in various shapes and forms. Some lizards spouted an acidic bloodlike liquid from their eyes at their predators in self-defense. Rodents posed dead when an attacker was nearby. A snake would hiss and secrete venom when faced with danger. Wolves became aggressive. I could not blame her for behaving this way. Had I been through a similar situation, I would have done the same. She was hurt. Her brain was not able to compute the events that had happened. I had made the fatal flaw of uttering Ariana's name. I was to blame for that.

Mostly, I was just glad to see that she was alive and not too physically wounded. She had found a new life less than a day after I had presumably died. A new job, a new place to live, a new person to spend time with. That last made my heart singe with jealousy, but it was not something on the forefront of my mind.

I was the alpha, and it did not suit my stature to grovel and plead.

“Goodbye, Alexis,” I said.

When she did not respond, I took it as my signal to leave. I exited from the window, but before taking one last look at her, thinking that I’d do anything to get her back, to make her see things from my perspective.

Anything.

Where was I supposed to go now that I had been rejected by my mate? Which hearth could I call home in this strange new town where I knew nobody and had no penny to my name?

It wasn’t that I was hungry and tired. It was that I was heartbroken, and my current emotional state made it impossible for me to think clearly or to chart a course of action. The woman I needed had told me to leave. And for good reason. For once, I was not going to aggressively defend my stance and lash out in response. I should not have said Ariana’s name.

Though, something stung me deep in my heart as I recalled that Alexis had barely shown any happiness or relief upon seeing me alive and hardly asked any questions as to how I might have been alive.

She had mentioned vampires. Something about dragging them to Bangor with her. If she was in danger, it was my responsibility to make sure that she was well out of danger. At least for now, Maurice was serving as a shoddy Alpha to the pack. As much as this made my blood boil, there was this bittersweet relief in knowing that, as the Alpha, he wouldn’t at least do something

outright terrible to the pack members.

Alexis was my only concern for now—her safety and somehow making sure she'd see things from my perspective.

“I thought I heard yelling coming from upstairs,” some woman said, coming up behind me. “Are you the asshole who is responsible for the injuries on that poor girl? If so, I have half a mind to beat the crap out of you.”

“I never hurt a hair on her body,” I said, turning around to see who dared to speak to me this way. It was a woman, heavily tattooed, holding a shotgun in her hands, smoking a cigarette.

“Good. Then you can at least tell me what hell she went through and if she's the real deal or not. I never saw such a tortured soul in my life. Couldn't help but offer her a place to live and a job.”

“Then you are a much kinder soul than I ever was,” I said, feeling remorseful for all the times I had been bad to Alexis. I missed her, even though she was just inches away. There was nothing I could say right now that would change her mind about me. Such a combination of words did not exist in the infinite permutations of language. At least not for now. Later, maybe she would understand, and maybe she would soften, but nothing was going to happen right now.

“Who are you, and what business do you have with that girl?” she asked.

“I could ask the same of you,” I replied sternly.

“They call me Izzie. This is my bar. And if you wanna stand here without getting shot, you better explain who you are,” she said, trying to scare me by putting her finger on the trigger. “She already had a hell of a scare from a

meth head today.”

“I’m Will. I was...engaged to her before my accident. And what meth head?” I knew even before she said anything else that it wasn’t a meth head she was talking about.

“Some guy who grabbed her throat. I hit him with a crowbar. He was screaming when he ran. His skin was all torn up,” she said.

“Thank you for protecting her,” I said.

“We women look after our own, especially after folk have been bad to ‘em,” Izzie said. “And from the way I see it, she doesn’t want you here. So next time you come here, remember, I have a shotgun, and I love using it.”

I was not concerned with her anymore. As far as I was concerned, she was taking care of Alexis, and I trusted her to continue doing it. She seemed like a responsible woman. What worried me was the vampires. I needed to scout this area and make sure that there were no lurkers here.

“I’m not going to bother you again,” I said. “You take care now.”

“Mmhmm,” Izzie said, still holding her shotgun.

When I was well out of sight of the bar, I turned into an alley, climbed atop a building using the fire exit, and began looking around the immediate vicinity to see if there were any signs of vampires. Or any hostile being, for that matter.

The fact remained that Ralph, Blair, and Maurice knew that Alexis was alive, and they would do anything in their power to kill her to silence her. What they did not know was that she wasn’t entirely defenseless and that I was still

alive.

While there was still breath in my body, I would defend that woman.

I perched myself on one of the cozier roofs, trying to figure out why I couldn't shift into a wolf even when I tried. This had also robbed me of my other abilities to move swiftly, hear intently, and see far away.

Right now, I was as defenseless as an ordinary man.

But even in this state, I could see something moving in the dark. Five figures, all of them traipsing around the roofs. It did not take me long to realize from how they moved that those were not humans. Their shapes, their gait, and their propensity for leaping across long distances only confirmed my suspicions.

The vampires had followed Alexis to Bangor.

And without my abilities, I stood little chance against all of them.

As soon as I realized I needed a weapon, providence provided one for me in the form of a guy standing behind me, holding a handgun to my head.

"You best tell me what the fuck you're doing on the roof of my building, buster, or I'm going to pop a cap in your skull," this man said.

Vampires were one thing, but I could take this man on, even with his added advantage of catching me by surprise.

I lunged to the side before he could shoot and grabbed his gun in my hand, yanking it free from his grip.

"What is it with this town and people pointing guns in my face?" I asked,

throwing the gun on the floor.

“What do you want?” the man asked, raising his hands above his head. “Money? I don’t have any money.”

“I don’t want your money, my friend. I just need your permission to use your roof. I’m in no mood to fight, as I have had the worst past hours. So, don’t raise the alarm, and don’t reach for your gun. Just understand that I mean you no harm, but there’s someone out there I love very much, and she is in the way of harm. I intend to save her. In order to do that, I need access to this roof. Do you have a family?”

The man nodded.

“Do you love them?”

He nodded again.

“Then you must understand, as a family man, that I would do anything to protect mine. Right now, this means using your roof. I am not going to hurt you,” I said, passing the gun back to the man.

“You could have knocked on the door. I’d have let you in. Don’t go scaring people like that. This ain’t Gotham, and you ain’t Batman,” he said, stowing the gun back in his pants.

“Are we okay?” I asked, now taking notice of the man’s features. He was white-haired, wrinkled, and quite frail.

“Son, I don’t presume things, and I don’t mean to ask, but you look as bad as those junkies down in the streets. Are you okay?”

“Nothing some food and sleep won’t fix,” I said.

The man nodded solemnly, then retraced his steps back to the rooftop entrance. I turned my attention back to the silhouette of the vampires. They were still there, acting maniacally as ever.

When the man returned, he came back with a tray of food, water, and a blanket.

“Best leave before the morning,” the man said.

“Thank you for this,” I said. “There’s something different about your town. Folks are kinder here. Except for shaking guns in my face, that is.”

“Aye, that’s true,” the man said. “You better not be here when I come in the morning.”

I nodded as the man left, holding myself off as best as I could. The minute the door closed, I fell upon the food on the tray like a starving dog, eating every bite without even chewing.

It was only after I’d drunk all the water that I realized how famished and parched I had been. After finishing my food, I diverted my attention back to the vampires on the roof.

They weren’t there anymore.

Chapter 5: Alexis

How?!

How was he still alive?

I had not been prepared. Never in my life would I have imagined that he'd come back from the dead. I guess, for a man who had outlived all his pack members, somehow survived more than seventy years in prison, and beaten the poison wreaking havoc in his body, coming back from the dead was not an impossible feat. But it defied all explanation—all except one.

I had gone insane.

The nervous breakdown from watching my mate die and the subsequent chase that my enemies had given me from one town to another had finally cracked my sanity and let madness seep in.

At first, I couldn't compute that he was alive. When he emerged from the shadow and came face to face with me, his face gaunt, his color pallid, his eyes wide, it was akin to witnessing a haunting.

But then he had spoken. He had told me his version. At least, that's what I thought he'd done. I was so overwhelmed by his presence that my brain had asked all the wrong questions, said all the wrong things, and destroyed what could have otherwise been a very cheerful reconciliation.

I had let my emotions take control of my faculties. When I should have been

asking him how he had managed to avoid death, how he was still alive, I cast blame on him for calling out Ariana's name. I shunned him, revoked him, rejected him, and sent him away.

How was it that I was capable of such ugliness?

Now that was the right question, and I asked myself this question many times as I stared at my messy self in the bathroom mirror. The tears streaming down my face were not those of sadness or emotional anguish as much as they were tears of relief.

Yes, relief. I was relieved to see him alive. In fact, it was only after I had ascertained that it was Will and he was alive and well that I had burst out at him.

The question remained—how was he still alive?

Had he been telling the truth about saying Ariana's name because he had come across her soul on some immortal plain of existence? As badly as I wanted to believe him, I couldn't help but think that there was something quite off about him. That he was lying profusely just so he could get back with me.

Some things I had said to him were true, others not so much. I did love him. Even when I was falling from that building with a bullet lodged in me, I knew that I loved him.

I loved him even now, but it hurt to love him.

Could I be blamed for feeling this pain? After I had thought that I had lost him, could I be held accountable for the way that I had reacted when he emerged from the shadows?

Of course, and of course, not.

Perhaps, my cruel behavior was my way of getting back at him for saying Ariana's name, for dying on me. I didn't exactly have control over my state at that time. Most of me was in disbelief that he was still alive, and what was left was computing how he was alive.

But during all that, I had said some things I had been thinking in my subconscious but hadn't the courage to say. And some of the things I said had given me a new direction in life.

Such as the fact that I was done being a werewolf. I could do without shifting into my wolf form again. I could do without being part of a pack. Now that I thought about it, I could do without adhering to some archaic norm that dictated that I was to be bonded with another wolf as their fated mate.

Yes, all of that was behind me.

This was the start of my new life.

Fuck all that. I needed a drink.

There was great furor coming from below. I tried to make sense of all the voices, but they were all saying things in that Bangor accent, things that were alien to my ears.

I went down the stairs, still somewhat in disbelief that Will's visit to me was real.

The bar was packed from door to counter. All the people gathered were wearing red clothes.

"What's all this?" I asked Izzie, who herself was wearing a red sweater.

“Our busiest night of the week. The Boston Red Sox versus the Chicago Cubs.”

“Baseball. Yikes,” I said.

“Speaking of yikes, I saw that fella that visited you,” Izzie said now that they were both behind the counter, pouring pints of beer to the customers whose eyes were glued to the LCD screen in the corner.

“Lawrence? He was all right. He took me out, we had a little bit of fun. What, do you think he’s raising some red flags?”

“Not that guy. That guy was all right. The other guy,” Izzie said. “The one you were having a shouting match with.”

It sank in my heart, this realization that I hadn’t had a hallucination; if Izzie had met with him, then he must have been alive and must have come into my room for real.

“The haggard-looking guy?” I asked fearfully.

“Is that the same guy who gave you all these bruises?” Izzie asked. “I had a shotgun cocked at him.”

“No, he never beat me or anything like that. The scars that he gave me are all emotional,” I said.

“Those still count as scars, honey. Abuse doesn’t have to be just physical to count as abuse. Most men run the world through emotional and verbal abuse,” Izzie said.

There were so many customers that it was hard to understand what Izzie was saying. It was just as hard for her to understand what I was saying. We both

had to speak louder than usual and strain to hear what the other person was saying. The game, in full swing, did not help. Every five seconds or so, the crowd yelled when the players got a strike or hit a home run. It was chaos inside the bar, but it was the good kind of chaos, the kind that made you forget that the world outside was a fucked up place with bloodthirsty monsters lurking around the corners and ex-mates coming back from the dead.

“I just want to forget about him,” I said. “You know, I thought he had died. Then he turns up and tries to undo all the mourning I did for him.”

“Typical men. They gaslight you into thinking that the world revolves around them. And when you finally escape their mental prison, they go and pull shit like this,” Izzie said. “I bet he was really scared to see that you were doing so well all on your own.”

“He’s not that bad. He’s just old-fashioned,” I said.

“Old-fashioned is what whipped women call their husbands who still resort to treating their wives like fuckable dishwashers and house slaves. You don’t want to call him old-fashioned. If anything, we need more woke men than before,” she said.

“Woke like Lawrence, you mean?” I asked, chuckling. I’d just handed two chubby young adults six glasses of beer. They had been all too eager to receive their imbibements. In their happiness, they had tipped me fifty dollars.

“Lawrence is a slick big-city man from what I can tell. You better be careful around him. Chances are he’s not who he says he is. Guys like him think that the world is their playground. All women are toys in that big sandbox,” Izzie

said.

“Jesus, Izzie, you hate men,” I said.

“I’ve got my reasons, girl,” Izzie said.

It was much better in the bar than it was in my room. I spent the entire night serving drinks to the old-timers and the watchers of the game, most of whom left very dejected after the Red Sox lost to the Cubs. Some of them even broke a couple of glasses, in response to which Izzie took out her baseball bat and suggested that she’d break their heads if they didn’t pay for all the broken glasses.

It was good entertainment. Good enough to keep me distracted from what had just happened.

I only went up at the break of dawn, and when I crashed on my bed, I immediately fell asleep, not minding that the window was still open and the bed smelled like beer and piss.

I just wanted to sleep.

“You look rested,” Lawrence said, holding a rose in his hand. “Quite rested. You are radiant.”

I had slept the entire morning and had promised Izzie that I’d take the night shift.

“Thanks,” I said, blushing a bit. I had put some good effort into getting ready for this second date. Izzie had lent me some of her makeup supplies and had

given me a pair of her dresses to wear other than the stolen stuff in the cabinet. I did look nice. During my sleep, my healing had kicked into overdrive. By the time evening rolled in, all of my wounds except for the bullet wound had healed. “Is that rose a callback to our first date?”

“You mean when that boy pestered us to buy a rose, and when we didn’t, he gave up and just gave it to us for free?” Lawrence laughed.

“Yeah,” I said, grinning. “Didn’t you say you’d come by on the weekend?”

“I tried to go the macho route, not call and only come on the weekend. But I was up all night thinking about you, and I couldn’t stop even when I was at work. So...I got off work early, called you, and here we are. I don’t want to be the typical alpha male.”

“Ugh, please never use that word again.”

“Alpha male?”

“Yeah. I have a lifelong aversion to that term. My ex...he was really into that stuff,” I said.

“Ouch. Okay, we’re not getting into that stuff. As long as you promise me you’re not wild about crocheting. My ex loved to crochet,” Lawrence said, giving me his arm. I took it after some thought and let him escort me out of the alley and onto the street.

“I hate crocheting. It’s like the perpetual habit of all single old women who keep a lot of cats in the house and eat only Spam and hotdogs for dinner. No crocheting, no cats, no Spam, and hotdogs,” I said. When I used to be with Will, I never got a lot of chances to speak my heart out about my observations about society because I knew that he’d be a complete alien to

these remarks. Being with Lawrence was good like that.

He laughed at my remark and then opened the door of his Lexus for me.

“My, my, they must be paying you in six figures at your job,” I said. I had never been in a Lexus before. The inside was all leather and smelled of expensive cigar smoke.

“Hey, don’t knock the corporate ladder until you try it,” he said.

“Oh, I have done that. I worked at Beckett Pharma for a while,” I lied, wanting to impress him by showing him that I wasn’t a complete hick.

“Holy shit, really?”

Then I spun a yarn about how I had applied there and had worked there as an intern and felt terrible when I saw that he was listening intently and accepting everything that I was saying word for word. What a gullible guy, I thought.

“Man, that sounds like a wild ride. Compared to my boring old desk job, yours sounds like a hoot and a half,” Lawrence said.

“No more shop talk. We’re out to have fun. Take me someplace where I can feel like a little girl again,” I said.

“So, Emerson Elementary School, is it?”

I threw my head back and laughed. He chuckled mirthfully in response.

We ended up going roller skating. Lawrence was a perfect gentleman through and through, holding me whenever I was about to fall, asking the DJ to change the tracks to the ones I liked, and buying me snacks from the Tuck Shop in the rink every few minutes.

I was stuffed and tired by the time our date ended.

“I had fun, didn’t you?” I asked, feeling the flush on my cheeks return.

“I felt like a little girl,” Lawrence said. “Especially when we danced to Madonna’s ‘Like a Virgin.’”

“You’re silly,” I said, slapping him on the shoulder after we got out of the car.

“Well, I had a lovely time, and I’d like to do it again if you want,” he said.

“Okay, but space it out. Come to me the day after tomorrow,” I said.

“Or tomorrow?” he asked.

“Someone’s a little eager,” I said.

“I just feel like we have this connection. I don’t want to spend time away from you. It’s clingy, I know, but still...”

“Okay, you can come tomorrow.”

Lawrence came forward, leaning close to my face.

I put my hand on his chest and pushed him back.

“I’m sorry. I am still mourning my ex-boyfriend. He sort of died, and then...I don’t want to get into it. It’s just, it’s all too raw. I hope you understand,” I said.

He lifted his hands and stepped back. “I completely get it. I’m sorry. Handshake?”

I smiled through pressed lips and shook his hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“Hey, don’t apologize to me. I get it. I’m sorry for advancing without consent. That was wrong. I misread the situation,” Lawrence said.

“You’re okay. We’re fine. But you owe me another flower tomorrow,” I said. “A dahlia, this time. Not a rose.”

“Dahlia. Got it. All right, then, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, shaking my hand once again.

I smiled at him and watched him leave the alley. If I could make my way to my room, I’d be able to see him leave in his car. With that in mind, I ran up the stairs and went to my room. Lawrence was magnetic and charming. He was funny without trying to be funny. He knew the right thing to say and what not to say. I could see this going somewhere. I really did. Maybe Lawrence was the first chapter in my new life as a free woman in Bangor.

Or maybe he was a walking talking blood-bag.

It didn’t take me long to recognize the vampires stalking him on the road. They were all wearing matching trench coats with the collars turned up. The pale, bald vampires ganged up on Lawrence from all sides.

Was I destined to fall for men who’d die brutally?

They were talking to him, getting in his face, and putting their hands on him. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Lawrence took out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and gave a bunch of them to the vampires. They lit their cigarettes with his lighter, then talked some more to him. Then

Lawrence got in his car and left.

I slid to the floor in relief. They weren't about to kill him. They didn't even know he was related to me in any way. They were just asking him for cigarettes, as folk often do. It was all good.

When I got up again to see if the vampires were there or not, I only saw a small shadow in the alley across the road. None of the vampires were there. As I stared, the shadow receded into the alley, disappearing in the darkness.

Where were the vampires?

Chapter 6: Will

I had taken the man's words to heart and not overstayed my welcome. The second the sun came up, I descended from his rooftop. I completely forgot about the gun. I had intended to use it on the vampires, but such an opportunity never presented itself to me in the night anyway.

No big loss there.

All night, the vampires had jumped from one roof to the other, trying to find out where Alexis was staying. I didn't understand how it did not occur to them where she was staying. It didn't make sense that Ralph would send the thickest of his bunch to finish the job of killing Alexis.

Whenever I thought about her, her stinging words came to mind. It happened so much throughout the night that by the time it was morning, I had half a mind to just leave. If she wanted to be on her own, then she could have Bangor all to herself. I could go back to Fiddler's Green, find the men responsible for my demise, and kill them one by one. After that, who knew? Maybe I'd end up roaming the rest of the country. When I was imprisoned, I regretted not having visited more of the country. Now that I was a free man, I could do that. Hitchhike my way across the States, see the sights, meet new people, and reinvent myself into a new man. A man that would be fitting for Alexis.

As I had given the man my word, I did not use his rooftop again. There were

other rooftops that I had scouted throughout the night, rooftops that belonged to no one in particular. I should have chosen them instead.

Since there was no cause for hunger or thirst, as I had been fed quite heartily by that kind old man, I decided to stay around the alleys and keep an eye on the bar. Even though most of my supernatural faculties were not working, I couldn't help but feel my bond with Alexis tell me that something bad was about to happen.

I had to take care of her.

When evening fell, I saw a man come to the bar and take Alexis away in his car. My heart became a cocoon of jealousy, and my mind exploded with a million questions. Who was this new man? How long had Alexis been seeing him? How long did she mourn for me before she found some other suitable man to call her beau?

Who was this guy, anyway? Dressed in a suit, suave as hell, slick hair, and an expensive car—what a fucking douche. What did she see in him that I didn't have?

I underwent pangs of jealousy as I scouted for another location to hide. I couldn't go to the roofs. Somehow, the vampires had lounged nearer to the bar, and if I went to the roofs now, they'd see me and report back to Ralph that I was alive. That would open a whole new Pandora's Box.

The alley across the road was deserted. As it happened, it was pretty dark as well. I could see the bar from here and keep an eye on the roofs as well. While I waited, I told myself to be patient and give Alexis the benefit of the doubt. She was going through a lot of emotional turmoil. It did not befit me to ceaselessly pester her and plead my way back into her life. But this display

of going out with another man was humiliating for me.

Some dark part of me thought that Alexis was perhaps just waiting for me to die so she could resume her plan of moving away from Fiddler's Green and start her new life in a new town with a new man. Oh, how that dark part of me came alive with its disgusting imagination as I sat in the alley, waiting and waiting. I imagined the man kissing her, touching her body, being intimate with her, and it made me see red. The rage that I had so diligently aspired to bury deep down within me was unearthing itself the same way I had unearthed myself when I had crawled out of my cave.

I wanted to kill that man.

And any man who'd come close to her.

But this was just my deranged thinking fueled by jealousy. Nothing more. There would be no killing of mortal men. Not now. Not while they were innocent.

The vampires, on the other hand, would die.

I didn't have access to a gun, but what I did have were my wits and a lot of time on my hands. Sitting in that dirty alley, I spotted tons of empty bottles, many of which were shattered. I assembled the ones that were still half intact from the topside. These would function quite well as shanks if the need ever came to use them.

When night fell, I tried to shift in the alley, but all my efforts were in vain. My attempts made me feel weak and unhinged. At one point, I even questioned my sanity, wondering if I had ever been a werewolf to begin with. The reflection on the mirrored window showed a haggard man with a patchy

beard and unkempt hair. Maybe I was just a hobo, a bum who lived in these streets and had perhaps just imagined that I was a werewolf from Germany in one of my meth-induced highs.

But then I saw the car stop in front of the alley and Alexis step out of it. Seeing her made sanity prevail in my mind. I was not crazy. I had most definitely not invented some fable about me being a werewolf. All that time I spent with her as her mate was proof that I was a wolf.

There was no time to linger in this alley. The minute Alexis appeared, so did the vampires. Their silhouettes stood jaggedly atop the roof, watching her get out of the car. If they didn't know where she lived before, they knew now. I had to kill them before they'd get a chance to call for reinforcements.

Once the man and Alexis had gone into the back alley behind the bar, I came out of my hiding spot and assessed the situation. The vampires were not on the roof any longer. But where were they? I craned my head around the corner to see Alexis talking to him.

When the man tried to kiss her, she pushed him back. I heard each word of what she said, and it brought my heart great comfort. She had not allowed him to touch her. Alexis was still mourning for me. There was hope yet.

Before the man could come out of the alley, I immediately hid in my hiding spot and waited for him to leave, all the while keeping an eye on the vampires.

As the man was getting into his car, the vampires appeared from the other end of the street and came up to him. They were talking in whispers that I could not decipher. By the end, the man gave them cigarettes and got into his car. Were they just asking to bum cigarettes from him? That was very unlike

them. This situation was all kinds of fishy, and I intended to do something about it.

As the car drove away, the vampires, still smoking their cigarettes, headed into my alley, not knowing that I was waiting for them with two shanks in my hands. There were five of them. I let them pass by me while I tucked myself away behind an industrial air conditioner unit. They didn't even hear me as they walked past me, talking about how cold it was and how they wished to be back in the cove.

They'd never get to the cove.

I jumped out of the shadows and crept behind the two vampires falling behind. I stuck both shanks into their necks. Before they could fall to the ground, I retrieved the shanks and flung them at the two vampires. The only remaining vampire turned around and hissed at me, baring his fangs. I was ready for that. I picked up the two shanks from the dead vampires' bodies and slashed at the remaining vampire as he ran toward me. I slit his neck and his torso, drawing an immense amount of blood.

Here they lay, the five conspirators who had sought violence on my mate. And as I stood over them, towering, I could not help but feel my strength return to me. The realization that I was still a force to be reckoned with, even without my werewolf abilities, was an encouraging one.

Knowing that I could not linger in this alley, I cast one look at Alexis's window and saw her staring. She couldn't possibly see into the dark alley. It was pitch black here. I leaped back into the darkness and took care of the bodies by dumping them in the trash disposal. There was still a lot of blood in the alley. I could not do anything about that. When the police or whoever was

unlucky enough to open the trash disposal would come across the bodies, they'd try to understand what happened here. They'd chalk it up to gang warfare. Hopefully, this would be the end of the matter.

In killing the vampires, I had exhausted my option of hiding in the alley, but now that they were not a threat, I could go back to the roofs.

I stayed up all night, keeping a watchful eye on the bar and the alleys to see if any more vampires would turn up. When they didn't, I slept at dawn.

The other good thing to come out of killing those vampires was the money I robbed from their bodies before I dumped them in the trash. I had more than five hundred dollars in my pockets and the whole city to myself. While making sure that Alexis was safe was my prime designation, I had to sustain myself too.

So, not knowing where any of the best restaurants were, I just took to the streets and walked wherever the roads took me till I came to a diner that looked just like the ones that I had seen in Fiddler's Green.

Half an hour later, a quarter of the staff at the diner was staring at me from behind the counter with wide eyes. I was ravenous and thus had ordered half a dozen eggs, ten slices of bacon, a whole jug of water, three burgers, and a cup of coffee. I was ravaging all of it quite ravenously until I realized that a lot of people were staring at me. I slowed my roll, ordered a cup of tea and a slice of pie, then just sat there idly as if I had done nothing wrong and drank my tea while I ate my pie.

Now that food and water were in my body, I could think more clearly. The delusions and fears started fading away, and sleep took hold of my body once more. I didn't know how long I sat there and when I fell asleep, but by the time I woke up, a waitress was loitering around me, poking me with a rolled-up newspaper.

“What is it?”

“You can't just sit here and fall asleep. This place is for paying customers only.”

“I paid, didn't I?”

“Yeah, but you were asleep for three hours, mister. We didn't bother you for the first two. Now you gotta leave.”

“Well, in any case, here's some more money for your troubles,” I said, tossing her fifty dollars. “Cheers.”

“Do you want some coffee to go?”

“That'd be lovely.”

With my coffee in hand, I went back to the alley and saw that there were police at the sight where I had murdered the vampires. Upon nonchalantly joining the crowd that had gathered there, I asked what had happened.

“Some gang war, most probably. It's the same shit all over this town. People from rival squads killing each other over drugs. These guys were peaking, the police say. Their pockets were filled with meth,” someone standing next to me said.

Well, that was the end of that. I stayed there long enough to see the crime

scene being evacuated, the bodies being dragged off in body bags, and the sanitation department cleaning away the blood.

By that time, it was evening, and I was hungering yet again.

But I did not leave. I couldn't leave Alexis alone in the evening.

I needed a place where I could keep an eye on her and somehow hear whatever was happening in her room. Then it occurred to me how stupidly simple the solution to my problem was.

No one would suspect a thing if I perched on the bar's roof. Alexis's room would be just beneath me, allowing me to see what was happening. I'd also be able to hear her. My vicinity to her would allow me to intervene if anything happened.

When the police had cleared the area, and when many customers had started going into the bar, I snuck behind into the alley and climbed up the roofs till I was on the rooftop of the bar.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief as I saw that there was a skylight fixed on the rooftop of the bar, granting me a sight of Alexis's room. She was in there, talking to someone on the phone.

I pressed my ear close to the skylight and heard her talking.

"I'm not going to go out tonight, Lawrence. I'm sorry. I'm just so shaken right now. Someone murdered five people in the alley in front of the bar. The police were here all morning, interviewing the bartender. They even asked me some questions. I'm just too disturbed to go out tonight. I saw the police drag five body bags out of that alley," she said.

Then the man on the line said something, in response to which she said, “You can come over if you want. I have a laptop. We can watch some random shit and distract ourselves from the frailty of life.”

The man said something more.

“Perfect. I’ll have the cook make you something nice. Do you like tacos?”

Well, this was not good news. She was already inviting this man into her home. This was reckless behavior. What did she even know about this man?

I tested my patience as I stayed on the roof and watched the man park his car across the street and come around the back of the alley. He climbed up the stairs and knocked on her sliding window.

Now I could see them both in the room.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” the man said, hugging Alexis.

“I’m not easily scared, but five bodies are a bit much, even for me,” she said.

“Why don’t you pour us a drink, and we can talk about it?” the man said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Alexis said. She was now pouring wine into the two glasses with her back turned to the man.

“You mean you don’t know why five men—if that’s what they were—were found dead across your bar?” he asked.

“What’s with this interrogative line of questioning?” she laughed. “Are you being funny? It’s too soon to be funny. They were five men. They must have had lives. Families. Goals.”

“Nope,” the man said.

I was shocked to hear that word come from him. Even more shocked to see what he was doing. His hand was in his pocket, stroking something. Could this sick fuck be masturbating to the sight of my mate? I was pressed so firmly against the skylight that I feared cracking it.

“What do you mean by no?”

“They weren’t men,” the man said. “They were vampires.”

The two glasses fell from Alexis’s hands. She gasped. “How do you know?”

“It’s 'cause I was in charge of them, sweetie. Blair and Ralph paid me half a million to hunt you down and kill you. I knew the vampires couldn’t do it. I told Ralph that they wouldn’t be able to. I was right. You’re one tough cookie.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Alexis asked.

“I’m the guy the boogeyman hires when he’s fucked up. Sadly, for you, I’m the last person you see before you die. My, my, you caused such a fucking mess, didn’t you? Killing all those guys in Fiddler’s Green. Your mate dead. Your life uprooted. I almost think that killing you is a mercy. But the bosses disagree with me, baby. I’m going to have to end your life. It’s better if you scream. I always like it when they scream.”

Then he took his hand out of his pocket, revealing an army knife.

Alexis was backed up against the wall when the man lunged at her from across the room.

Chapter 7: Alexis

It was not humanly possible for me to react to the revelation that Lawrence was not who he said he was in the few seconds after he stated that he was working for my two worst enemies. How naïve was I to have fallen for the first charming man to come my way without questioning his intent? In a way, my death at his hands was a well-deserved punishment for my stupidity.

As he leaped across the room, his army knife extended in front of him, time stood still, which I recognized as the classic marker for one's end-of-life moments. My life was flashing before my eyes. My parents. Fiddler's Green. Will. Will dying—all of my life—a reel of pain and agony.

At that immediate moment, the skylight shattered, and Will crashed through it. He fell straight on top of Lawrence, confusing him. Will kicked away the knife and grabbed Lawrence by the neck, delivering a series of punches to his face.

“Are you okay?” Will asked as he threw Lawrence against the wall.

“What are you even doing here?” I asked as I picked up Lawrence's knife and held it up.

“I had to make sure you were okay,” Will said, returning back to his fight with Lawrence.

What did that even mean? Hadn't he gone back to Fiddler's Green? Did this

mean that he'd been lingering around like a stalker, ensuring that nothing would happen to me? As endearing as that was, it was equally creepy. Had he killed the five vampires? Was he the silhouette I had seen in the alley last night? So many questions—but why the fuck was I asking questions about Will when the real question I should have been asking myself was how gullible could I have been to let a psychopathic gun-for-hire sweet talk me into thinking that he was a well-wishing and compassionate man? And why on earth had I invited him to my apartment today?

Will was overpowering Lawrence by a mile, not even letting Lawrence take a breath as Will administered blow after lethal blow to his face, torso, and neck, bloodying him within seconds.

Then Lawrence quickly regained composure and threw Will out the window. Will crashed through the open window and hit the railing. I immediately went to him to help him up, but Lawrence blocked my path.

“I always do what I've been paid to do, sweetheart. You're not coming out of this alive.” He wrapped his hands around me and began choking me. I plunged my knife into his chest, but to my surprise, the knife twisted upon coming into contact with him.

“You think I'm stupid enough to come to kill you without wearing Kevlar?” Lawrence spat, revealing black armor under his torn shirt.

Will re-emerged from the window and tackled Lawrence. The two men fell to the floor as I caught my breath. They grappled with each other, punching and wrestling on the floor, and all I could at that moment was how no one below had heard the commotion. Then it occurred to me that the bar was packed with Red Sox fans celebrating their team's victory last night. They were all

watching the highlights of the game presumably, and so busy creating their own ruckus that they weren't hearing what was happening in my room.

Lawrence threw Will back yet again.

That's when it happened.

The pain in my body. I could feel Will's pain in my body. The bond hadn't broken. We were still mates. How else was I able to feel him? How else could I hear him in my mind?

I cannot shift, he said.

What happened to you?

As the two men fought around the room, Will landing some blows and dodging others, Lawrence constantly overpowering Will, I continued my telepathic conversation with Will as I joined the fight to help him.

You never told me how you're still alive, I said as I grabbed Lawrence from the back and held him steady to let Will punch him.

I didn't die. Or maybe I died and came back. It's unclear. I woke up in my grave. I had to crawl out of it. I think the mutations from Edward's experimentations somehow made me immune to Wolf's Bane. It was either that or the potion that Vince got me packed more punch than any of us had expected, Will said.

Lawrence reached around and pulled me. I still held the knife in my hand. I slashed at his hand and cut a deep gash in it. Will made use of this distraction to fling Lawrence out of the window. Lawrence crashed through the glass and toppled over the railing, falling down into the alley.

“Did you really mean it?” I asked.

“Mean what?” Will panted.

“That thing about you saying her name. Did you see her in some afterlife? Did you tell her that you had to come back for me?”

“I swear. I do not love that woman. I never loved her. It is you who is my heart’s desire. It is you whom I am mates with. My being here is proof of that. Saying that name meant nothing to me. It was a farewell to an old friend, if anything,” he said.

“I thought you had fucking died,” I said, reaching him and holding him by the shoulders.

“So you went ahead and decided to date some random man who turned out to be an assassin?”

“Date him? We hardly went out twice. I didn’t even touch him or kiss him or anything like that. If anything, he was just a distraction.”

“Next time, pick a benign distraction, like knitting or adopting a kitten. Don’t start with assassins,” he said.

“Are you one to lecture me? Really? Are you in that position? I thought you were dead. I was mourning. I needed some respite. Understand that I went through hell,” I said.

“Now’s not the time for this,” Will said, leaving the room through the window. “He’s gone!”

“No one really dies from a first-floor fall,” I said.

As we headed down the stairs, we looked around for signs of Lawrence. When we couldn't find him, I said, "Let's flatten the tires of his car so he can't leave."

We were just about to head out of the alley when Lawrence jumped from the roof and landed straight on top of Will.

"That's how that feels," Lawrence said as he knocked Will out. Then he took hold of Will's neck and started wringing it.

"Will, wake up!" I yelled.

"Oh, he's not going to wake up, sweetheart, but don't worry. You two can have a nice reunion in heaven," Lawrence said, staring at me while he choked the life out of Will.

"You think a bad girl like me can get into heaven?" I asked, flinging his knife at him.

Lawrence caught the knife in mid-air, but at least in doing so, he released Will's neck.

"If you're bad, then I'm the king of hell itself," Lawrence said. "You're just a countryside hillbilly who's gone and stuck her nose in business that she didn't have anything to do with in the first place."

I could shift and end this within a minute.

"Go ahead," Lawrence said. "Try it. Kill me. Morph into your wolf form. Everyone's going to see you for the beast you are. Hell, with the bar being so packed and all and Bangor folk being so fond of their guns, how long do you think it's going to take before they look at you and riddle your body with

bullets?”

“What do you want?” I asked, raising my hands. “You want half a million dollars? Is that price for you to let us go?”

“I’m not doing it for the money. Well, the money helps a bit. I believe in the cause that Ralph and Blair are all about. But mostly, I like killing sexy young girls. I find their screams of pain very arousing. There’s something else I do right after I kill them. I....”

Before he could finish his thought, Will had gotten up. That’s what I had been counting on. Will kicked him in the balls and made him collapse on his knees.

“Finish your sentence,” Will said, holding Lawrence by his hair. “I dare you to finish that sentence you perverted son of a bitch.”

Lawrence swiped his knife back, slashing Will across his chest. It was not a deep gash, but it was still hurtful enough that Will recoiled and grabbed his torso, his face contorted in pain.

Are you all right? I asked as I saw Lawrence get up off the floor.

He just caught me by surprise, Will said.

What’s happened to us that just a few days ago, we were taking on hordes of men and vampires, and now we can’t even kill this one piece of shit? I asked.

I told you, I have seemingly lost my powers, Will said. *What’s your excuse?*

Overwhelmed. That’s my excuse. I was not mentally prepared. I thought he was just a man. An ordinary man. And not this deranged assassin. Also, I was not expecting you to show up. So that’s two counts of me being overwhelmed

and surprised.

Lawrence stood in the middle, with Will on one side and me on the other.

“I have taken on worst odds than this. I fought in Afghanistan, you know. Come on. I can take you both. I guess that’s going to be a full million for me. They’re going to be surprised when they see that I’ve brought in the great Will Grimm. You know, they think that you’re still dead,” Lawrence said, holding up his knife.

“You know me?” Will asked.

“Of course. Ralph and Blair told me all about the havoc you wreaked and who you were. It’s going to be a privilege to kill you and bring your head to my masters,” Lawrence said. “I’ll start with you. Break your missus’s heart while I’m at it. She can see you die a second time, but this time, you’re going to die for real. No resurrections for you.”

Lawrence advanced swiftly, kicking Will in the chest and knocking him against the wall. He had his knife pressed against Will’s neck. Will was pushing back as hard as he could, but even I could see and sense that his strength had waned. Any longer, and Lawrence would indeed behead my mate.

In one quick step, I covered the distance between Lawrence and me, and before he could press the knife further against Will’s neck, I kicked Lawrence’s leg from behind, making him lose his balance and stagger backward.

As he fell, I grabbed him from the back, yanked his knife out of his hands, pressed it against his neck, and whispered, “This one’s for all the girls you

murdered and for thinking that I'd be one of them."

I slit Lawrence's neck and watched as blood gushed down his white shirt. He writhed as his life escaped him, thrashing his arms and flailing his legs. I felt no mercy for him.

When he went limp, I let go of him and watched his lifeless body collapse on the ground in a pool of his blood.

Will was panting loudly, making me notice the gash on his chest. It wasn't as light as I had expected. Blood was spouting out of it, and the wound was not healing itself.

"You need to come upstairs so I can stitch you up," I said, holding Will by his arm and helping him climb the stairs.

"Thanks for saving my life," Will said.

"Well, thanks for saving mine. I'd have been dead if you hadn't dropped from the skylight," I said.

"All I ever wanted to do was protect you," he said. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Thank you," I said, not knowing what to say and how to go about pretending that things were normal between us. All I knew was Will's chest hurt, and by extension, so did mine. The only way I could rid myself of this pain was by patching up my mate.

Chapter 8: Will

My wound not healing itself was humiliating but not as humiliating as the beating I had taken in front of Alexis. But those were not the wounds that were the cause of my pain at this moment.

It was seeing her like this, intently staring at my naked torso with no interest in my physicality except for the mechanical impulse to sew up my wound. It seemed to me that to her, I did not exist as her mate any longer. What worsened this emotional injury was the knowledge that she had sought another man. As opposed to before, when I felt wrong for having said Ariana's name in my death throes, now I felt wronged. But I did not know how to broach this subject, at least not without causing another fight. A fight that I didn't want to have.

"You know I can hear your thoughts, right?" she asked, putting the final sutures on my chest.

"Then you should know that I'm hurting," I said.

"It's not even that bad of a scratch. It's going to heal in a few hours," she said, now putting the needles and stitches back in the kit.

"If you can truly hear my thoughts, you know that's not the pain I'm talking about," I said.

"I was hoping you'd not put me on the spot about this." There was an aching

in her eyes. She looked at me like she was a helpless, injured bird fallen out of its nest. This was not a façade that she was putting up. It was genuine agony.

“I was hoping that you’d mourn me a little longer before going out with some guy,” I said, my eyes reflecting the same pain. There it was, that unsaid thing that had been lying heavy in the air like some pungent smell, making it impossible for us to look each other in the eyes. But not anymore. Now we were looking into the abyss of each other’s creation, unflinching.

“The reason I went out with him was because I was mourning you,” she said. “You think I am like this? Drunk? Reckless? A mess? I have always toed the line, even when it felt like the world around me was going to hell. I abided by the rules. I never did anything with him. We just talked. Now I realize how foolish that was. He was just trying to get me to lower my defenses.”

This time around, I said nothing in response. I was searching myself for the rage that had possessed my body ever since I had escaped from Edward’s prison. It was simply not there. This was a different emotion. This was some distant relative of betrayal and pain.

“Jealousy,” Alexis said.

“Huh?”

“That emotion that you’re thinking of...it’s jealousy. It’s what I have been feeling ever since you died in front of me, taking her name. Now you know how that feels. And that’s when I didn’t even do anything with him. Imagine how I must have felt,” she said.

“And what do you think I did with Ariana? I never so much as touched her

either,” I said calmly. “Nothing happened with her, either. Do you at least understand that now, having had your own similar experience?”

“I guess I do,” Alexis said, her face deep in thought. “For all it’s worth, I’m telling the truth. Lawrence, the drinking, moving to Bangor—I was mourning you, Will. All of that was my way of processing the pain.”

“I don’t want to hurt you anymore,” I said. “Not with any thoughts of retroactive jealousy, not with any jealousy of my own, and most of all, not with any of my issues. Just as you can read my thoughts, I can read yours. I can see the traumatic footprint of my behavior etched on your psyche.”

“Being with you was like being underwater,” Alexis said. She was not looking at me. Her attention was on all the mess created by the fight between Lawrence and me. The room was in shambles. Broken glass lay scattered everywhere. The cabinet and the bed were broken, with splintered wood jutting out of them. The dressing table mirror bore massive cracks. “When I felt like I couldn’t breathe, I didn’t have any surface to escape to. But there were things that you made me see, beautiful things like coral reefs and underwater cities like Atlantis, that made me treasure our relationship. And then a storm would arrive without warning, and I’d find myself in the middle of a maelstrom, drowning. And right when I felt like I was drowning, you’d serenade me with the cold blueness that’s so characteristic of the sea. I’d feel like I was floating, with not a single worry in my mind. It was the wildest thing but also the most viscerally wonderful experience. You never stopped giving me that strange combination of emotions, even when you were dying.”

“What are you trying to say, Alexis?” I was not one for long-winded metaphors, and the one that she used was so ambiguous to my already tired mind that I felt like I was grasping at straws.

“I’m saying, you being alive and you saving me from Lawrence doesn’t change things. At least not for now. I’m still hurt, and I’m still mourning. The trauma needs processing. I need to know who I am, which direction my life is headed, and what values I embody. All these things are very crucial to my existence right now. Most of all, I just want to feel safe. That cannot happen when I am with you. There’s always danger wherever you are,” she said quite calmly.

“You’re right,” I replied in kind. “For what it’s worth, I agree with you. I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you. The worst thing we can do is be careless with each other. Let’s not do that. Let’s give each other space and remove the obligation from the equation.”

She gave me a reproachful look, then said, “You’re just being fake-nice.”

I shook my head. “That’s just the thing. I’m not. I, too, am processing things in my way. If you think you’ve had a rough go of it, try being injected with a serum that momentarily kills you and sends you into the afterlife, then try regaining consciousness in your grave. And to top it all off, try clawing out of that grave. When you have done that, try finding the person you love, only to discover that the person you hate is now in charge of your pack. So...yeah, I’m not being fake-nice. I’m being empathetic. But it’s not a competition of who is suffering the most. I understand we’re both suffering. The least I can do is give you your space to process things on your own. I should leave you to it and get out of your hair.”

“Wait!”

“What is it?”

“How am I going to clean this mess and the dead body outside all by myself?”

Any moment, someone's going to come out of the backdoor of the bar and see Lawrence's corpse. Before you go, can't you help me sort this mess?"

I nodded. "Of course."

There were no more words. Silently, I followed her down the stairs to where Lawrence's body lay. I hoisted it on my shoulder, thankful that the blood in his body had congealed and wasn't dripping on my clothes. Where was I going to get new clothes at this time of the night? Dumping Lawrence's body was not a problem. As it happened, he had given us the very means to dispose of his body without anyone finding out where he was.

I took his car keys and flung them to Alexis. She nodded, then disappeared around the alley's bend, reappearing minutes later behind the driver's seat. She reversed the car into the alley and opened the trunk. I threw Lawrence's body in there, then shut the trunk. A second later, I opened the trunk again, not being able to believe what I had just skipped seeing.

There was a false compartment in the back. When I opened it, I saw an array of firearms of all kinds hanging in there, ranging from concealable pistols to semi-automatic rifles. This changed my mind about what I was going to do with Lawrence's car. Initially, I had just intended on dumping it with Lawrence's body still in it. But this made me reconsider. I could use this car. The weapons would come in handy. For what, I didn't know. But a man with firearms was better equipped to deal with the dangers of the world than an unarmed man. Especially now, now that I couldn't shift into my true form.

I closed the trunk again and saw that Alexis had disappeared. I traced my way back to her apartment and found her sifting through the pile of clothes that had fallen from the cabinet. She threw me a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt

from them.

“Have you taken a shower?”

I shook my head.

“There’s hot water in the bathroom. Go clean yourself, and I’ll clean the room while you’re in there. Let me know if you’re hungry. There’s a stocked kitchen below. I can get you something to eat.”

“That would be lovely,” I said, not wanting to overstay my welcome. We had defaulted to being polite strangers, so full of etiquette, and formality. It was nothing short of bizarre and hurtful, but I was careful enough not to even think it lest she read my mind again and broached that subject.

I took a towel with me and headed into the shower. The floor was slippery with grime, and the walls had fungus growing on them, but at least the water was boiling. It felt welcoming against the cold outside. Refreshing against my dirty body. I cleaned grave dirt and dried blood clots from my body and lathered my hair in shampoo, finally ridding myself of that horrendous concoction of stench I was wafting everywhere.

I did not know how long I was in the shower, just that it was probably one of the most comforting ones that I had taken, right up there with the first shower I had taken when I had emerged from Edward’s prison. How long ago that seemed and how distant, almost as if that hadn’t happened to me.

All of a sudden, the hot water stopped pouring out of the shower, leaving murky cold water in its wake. I hurried out of the steaming bathroom, barely dry, half-clothed, and saw that within the time I was in the bathroom, Alexis had done an admirable job on the room. It was spotless except for the broken

wood and the broken window.

“I have been thinking,” she said. “They’re sending assassins and vampires after me. It’s never going to stop, is it? This only stops if I die or if they die. There’s no third option.”

“You can run. Run as far away as you can. These three people might have a large circle of influence and power, but even their circle has limits. They can’t find you someplace like the West Coast. Or even Europe,” I said.

“Is that what you want me to do? Flee to another country like a fugitive?” Alexis glared at me. “Where is the Will who used to tell me to stand my ground in the face of horrors?”

“I left some parts of me buried in the dirt. It seems I came out of the ground a mortal man, no longer a werewolf. Perhaps that Will who used to bolster you lies still in the grave,” I said solemnly.

It was a tense silence that followed, where neither of us hazarded a look at each other, not knowing what to say further, not knowing where to go from here.

“And where are you going to go?” she asked.

“I just think that with no future in Fiddler’s Green and no prospects with my mate, I need to go on a journey—a long voyage across the continents. Maybe I can go back to Germany and see what became of my old village if any descendants survived. Most importantly, though, I need to find purpose. Revenge is a purpose, I agree. But as you can see, I have no fight left in me, not at this moment. How can I be expected to fight the powers that be if I can’t even take down one assassin without getting beaten up to a pulp?”

Alexis walked across the room, staring intently at my face. There was an intensity of emotions rising in her eyes, and I felt like maybe she would cry. But she did not cry. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, “This is not you speaking. I never knew the Alpha wolf to be a coward. The words you are saying are riddled with fear. Do you not want revenge? First, you’re telling me to flee, and then you’re talking about fleeing yourself? What utter nonsense is this, Will?”

“It’s not nonsense but the ramblings of a man who has grown weary of fighting. At some point, one must stop fighting everything. He must let his love go, let his enemies live, and loosen his grip on what he had previously thought was his purpose. It is not just you who desperately require a new lease on life through a new purpose. I need it too. You’ve made it clear that this reunion of ours hasn’t changed a thing between us. It’s time I stop fighting that, too,” I said, gently taking her hand and pulling it off my body.

“Goodbye,” I said.

“...goodbye, Will,” she said.

While I was preparing to leave, a phone rang out of nowhere. I cast a look confusedly at the clothes that I’d thrown off. Rushing to that pile of dirt coat, pants, and shirt, I fished out a rather bricky old phone. On the minute screen, it said, “Vincent.”

“I didn’t know you got a phone,” Alexis said.

“Neither did I. It’s Vince. He must have slipped it into my coat when I went to meet him. That’s quite sneaky of him,” I said. “How does one answer a call?”

Alexis took the phone from me, hurriedly pressed a couple of buttons, then handed it to me.

“Vincent?” I asked. When Vince responded, his voice came out quite loud from the phone.

“Will. Thank God you picked up the phone. I thought you wouldn’t notice. I put it in your coat pocket when you came by my home. I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it, but the thing is, it’s extremely urgent,” Vince panted. There was panic in his voice, and all of his syllables were jumbled up as if he was trying to speak too fast in too little time.

“What is it, man?” I asked. “Where are you? Are you safe?”

“I’m safe, but the pack isn’t. It’s Maurice. He’s doing something drastic. I fear that he’s going to kill all the pack members. I spied on him after you left. He was talking about taking the entire pack somewhere. The culling fields, he called it,” Vince whispered.

“Do you know who he was talking to?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

“No. He was on the phone, Will. I don’t know who was on the other end,” Vince said.

At that moment, Alexis started waving at me, signaling to her phone that she was holding in her hand. She mouthed Maurice’s name and then signaled to her phone again. I didn’t understand what she was saying.

“What do you think that means, Vincent?” I asked confusedly.

“What else do you think it means? With you gone and Alexis nowhere to be

found, he's in charge with no one to stand up to him. He's just said to the entire pack at this hour of the night that he wants to take us somewhere in the woods where he's going to have an initiation ceremony to usher in the new days of the pack. A dawn of a new era, he said. I call bullshit. There's something rotten going on here, Will. If you're nearby, you should come. Please. Save us..."

With that, Vince hung up the call.

"What were you saying, Alexis?" I asked distractedly as I wondered what fresh hell Maurice was going to unleash.

"This is the phone that Maliha cloned Maurice's phone on. I still have it. It was on me when we were about to attack Beckett Pharma. I never turned it on afterward. I can find out what Maurice has been doing," she said.

"I don't even need to find out what he's doing. His intentions are clear as day to me. He means to end the Grimm pack and then hand the commune to the vampires. With no more werewolves and with that much land available to them, the vampires will move inland and start their operation anew on our land with Maurice's blessing. He's been planning this for a long time. This time, he means to follow through. I can feel it in my bones," I said.

"The pack's not blind. They're not going to just follow him to their deaths," Alexis said. Sometimes, she let her naiveté get the better of her. This was one of those times. Of course, she hadn't been an Alpha in her life and thus was unaware of the unsaid rules that came with alpha-hood.

"You can't just disobey your Alpha. If you do, it can have negative physical and psychological consequences. The wolves know it. There's a reason the Alpha wolf has so much power, to begin with. His word is the law. Knowing

that, I can't have my pack members follow him into the culling fields," I said.

I took one last look at Alexis, not knowing whether I'd see her again, and waited for a brief moment for her to say something or for the courage to say something to her, but when neither thing transpired, I left abruptly, realizing that time was not my side.

Chapter 9: Alexis

How incandescent were the lies that men told, so full of light from afar yet hollow when I saw them from up close?

The lies that Lawrence had told me to gain my confidence...

The lies that Maurice was telling the pack to lead them to their doom...

Were the things that Will said to me lies?

I hadn't decided upon that.

All I knew was I needed to see for myself what Maurice was doing. I turned on the phone that had Maurice's phone emulated inside it, hoping to God that it would still be working.

When the phone came to life, I breathed a sigh of relief and quickly accessed the recorded call sessions on Maurice's phone. Maliha was an excellent hacker and ensured that her scripts were foolproof. Even after my immense failure at Beckett Pharma, the phone worked, and it seemed that Maurice was none the wiser. Or perhaps he had forgotten that his phone was tapped. In either case, I could use this to my advantage.

I played the latest recording.

"That Lawrence is no good," Maurice said.

“Calm down. The biggest thing was whether he could find her or not. He found her, didn’t he? He’s one of the best hitmen in the country. I should think he’s equipped to handle our runaway wolf,” Blair said.

“Still, I can’t help but wonder…” Maurice said.

“Will you just do as you’re told, please?” Ralph chimed in. I didn’t realize this was a conference call.

“I’m taking them to the culling fields, as we agreed. Ralph’s men will take it from there. With no more wolves, the town’s going to be all yours. Hopefully, that’s going to help you two gentlemen expand your operations. Grimm Abode has acres of land. All of that can go toward expansion. The vampires won’t have to use the cove now that they’ll have all that land available,” Maurice said.

“And as for me, let’s just say that I’m all too happy with Will’s death that I’m not going to pester either of you while you work your criminal empire of drugs, blood, and smuggling,” Blair said.

Maurice and Ralph laughed loudly in unison.

“My vampires are craving wolf blood after the events at Blair’s building. They feel some revenge is in order,” Ralph said. “The culling fields are going to be like Christmas Eve for the guys.”

“I’m worried still,” Maurice said. “Alexis ran off. That bitch is fucking crafty. Who knows what she’s capable of?”

“We drove her out of town without so much as a single backpack on her. She couldn’t have gone far. Without phone, money, and clothes, even the most resilient survivors succumb to their surroundings,” Blair said. “Besides, isn’t

it like some werewolf law that a wolf can't survive without her mate? Will's dead. Alexis might as well be dead without her mate."

"Well. I can't help but think that something's off," Maurice said.

"That's just your paranoia," Ralph replied.

"I'll rest easy after tonight. Just remember, Ralph. I'll be on that field too. Don't order your men to take me down. This only works if I am the sole survivor," Maurice said.

"Of course, Mr. Mayor. How can we function in a town where the mayor is dead? You're vital to our cause," Blair said. "Trust me. It's just the wolves."

I couldn't hear any more of it. They were talking so callously about fates that were not theirs to control. I wasn't a big fan of the pack, not after how they had treated me for years, but I did not want any of them to die. They were the closest thing I had to a family. They did not deserve the same fate as my parents. It made things worse that Will was headed down there. Wherever things were between us, I did not have the heart to lose him a second time.

It had all to do with me, somehow. These were my issues. My incapability to deal with the neurological mess going on in my brain. If only I could resolve it through the flick of some magic wand or the click of a button, I'd know what I had to do.

Weakened from my battle with Lawrence and from the fight that I had in Beckett Tower, I knew that I was in no position to go back to Fiddler's Green and aid Will. Such a feat of uncanny strength was out of the question. It required courage that I did not possess.

Going back to the horrors of the town that I had just escaped for the first time

in my life—fuck!

I needed a drink in me.

Or four.

“Aren’t you going to cover the night shift for me?” Izzie asked.

It felt terrible lying to her after all that she had done to me. But given the compromised position I was in, lying was my only recourse.

“I’m going to take the entire night shift and then the next morning’s shift too. Do you mind if I get an advance on this month’s payment?” I asked meekly, averting my gaze.

“Ain’t no shame in asking for an advance. You’re supposed to look after yourself. It makes sense. I can give you fifteen hundred now and then fifteen hundred at the end of the month. Whatever tips you generate can be yours tonight and for every day that you work here. Does that sound fair?” Izzie asked.

It broke my heart even more in the face of this new kindness.

“That sounds fair,” I said, downing my whiskey, letting it wash away my conscience. “I’m going to do exactly that.”

Izzie fished out her wallet from her jacket and took out a roll of bills. She counted the money, then slid it across the bar. “That’s it for now. Hope that’s enough.”

“No waitressing job ever paid me this much money back where I came from,” I said.

“Well, this is Bangor, and here we have to abide by the minimum wage law,” Izzie said.

I thanked her and took the money from her hand. As I poured myself another shot, the bar began buzzing with a new kind of life. I had gotten used to this liveliness in just two to three days of staying here. I would miss it terribly if I decided to leave.

Here was the first crossroad.

I could take the money, hold true to my word, stay here, and forget that anything was happening in Fiddler’s Green. On the other hand, I could use the money to travel back to Fiddler’s Green and fight by Will’s side. Doing the latter would result in me getting stuck in that town again.

Could I afford that?

Right here was cozy, comfortable, and had all the luxuries I had ever imagined. A new life, a new place to call home, and a new job that paid well over three thousand dollars a month. Wasn’t that worth fighting for?

“I can see you’re awfully troubled. What’s on your mind?” Izzie asked. “I don’t ask this as an employer but as a friend. You can tell me.”

“Shit’s been happening back in town. Shit that I tried so hard to run away from. It feels like it’s my obligation to go back there and sort out all that trouble,” I said, drinking my third shot.

“See, that’s always the trouble with leaving your past behind. It catches up

with you. What you've got to decide is, are you going to let that past drag you down, or are you going to stop looking into the rearview mirror and start moving forward in your life? That's the only thing that you have to think about. If you go back, they're going to find a way to keep you back. I don't think a girl like you is going to like that. I think that you're a fighter. It's about time to start fighting for the right cause. The right cause being your right to your entire existence. You don't owe anybody anything. Why run back to the same people who made you run away in the first place?" Izzie said, taking the bottle of whiskey away from me. "And you're cut off. No more drinks for you the rest of the night."

All I knew was I had to do something quickly. I had already wasted half an hour here, trying to drown the screaming sounds coming from my mind. In that while, what might have happened?

"Do you think I can leave just for tonight?" I asked.

Izzie pursed her lips and scowled at me. "You've already stretched the very limits of my hospitality. You've stayed in my apartment. You're working at my bar. You've taken half your first month's pay from me. I can't be more lenient. If you go away tonight, don't think of coming back."

"Why are you saying it like that?" I asked, shocked.

"Because this ain't a fucking halfway house for runaway women. I ain't running a charity here. You shouldn't have made all those promises if you didn't intend on staying here," Izzie said sternly.

I briefly nodded, then left the bar and headed upstairs. At the very least, this could be considered a small win. I had come to this bar empty-handed. I was leaving with more than a thousand dollars. This was not an intended hustle,

but it was good that it happened.

Besides, I had bigger fish to fry than worry about my allegiance to Izzie.

I packed some spare clothes in a bag, took an extra pair of sneakers from the kleptomaniac's collection, and packed everything else that I had come to own in the last few days.

Once that was done, I decided to give Izzie the Irish goodbye and leave without saying anything. It was better this way. Whenever I had a spare thousand and five hundred dollars, I'd wire them to her with a little on the top for her troubles.

Now that I was out in Bangor, standing near the turn signal with Uber opened on my phone, I had to answer the question: Would I go to Fiddler's Green, or would I leave Bangor so that more assassins and vampires won't come my way?

"Where to?" The driver in the minivan pulled up to me and asked.

"I haven't decided yet," I said. "You came earlier than I anticipated."

"Well, then. Let's cruise while we decide where we have to go, shall we?" the driver asked.

This was it, the second crossroad.

Was my journey going to take me out of Bangor and further West, far away from Fiddler's Green? Or was I finally going to give in and go back to Fiddler's Green and face the hell that I had so desperately escaped?

It all depended on Will.

What was my dilemma with Will? Did I not love him? Of course, over the past few months, I had fallen in love with him. I had sought a life with him, a life which we would spend together, far from the maddening crowd.

If we had succeeded that day in killing Ralph, Maurice, and Blair, we could have left Fiddler's Green to Vincent's care and journeyed somewhere where we could have started our new lives.

But we failed, and in doing so, we faced the worst parts of each other. I saw Will die and take Ariana's name. He...well, he saw me in this defensive mode, rejecting him, becoming so uncharacteristically cold towards him.

Could I come to forgive him? Believe his version of things and accept that he did love me?

It was hard. And harder was the thought of going back to the graveyard of all my worst memories.

There was a great hidden joy in the prospect of running away. I could pay the driver a bit more to drop me off at the bus station, take a Greyhound to Colorado, stay there for a while, and maybe do some part-time gig for a month before moving westward. I could see Ohio, Chicago, Boulder, San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Change my name, reinvent myself, kill Alexis Richards, and leave the werewolf life behind.

Oh, what sweet promise, what redemptive freedom therein lies in the promise of escape.

"So...have we decided where we want to go?"

"Yes," I said, having made up my mind. "The bus station, please."

Chapter 10: Will

If I could shift into a wolf, I would have been able to travel from Bangor to Fiddler's Green within half an hour. But that was an impossibility and a rather scary one. I was headed into dangerous territory. It wasn't just vampires and Maurice that I had to worry about; I was concerned with the safety of all the pack members who had been dragged to the culling fields.

But thankfully, Lawrence's Lexus proved to be a worthy ride. Having no regard for his car, I drove it like a maniac, occasionally fighting the impulse to crash it so that even in death, Lawrence's soul would feel the humiliation of my wrecking his precious car. Oh, how I hated the man. What gall he possessed, wooing my mate like that under false pretenses, then attempting to assassinate her when her guards were down. Poetic justice, irony, the turning of the tables—whatever it was, having Lawrence's rotting corpse in the trunk of the car made me feel satiated. Unlike the perverted satiations that I used to feel, this was a very rational satisfaction brought along by my psyche's realization that I had killed the person who had dared approach my mate.

And now I was driving his car at 120 miles per hour. The road, thankfully, was smooth and straight, and at this dark hour of the night, there were no patrol cars to hinder me as I raced along the Penobscot river and headed into Fiddler's Forest. I drove as if the devil was on my back.

I only hoped that the pack would delay their journey to the culling fields as much as they could. Once they'd reach the fields, wherever they were, they'd

be faced with vampires ambushing them from every side. I had taught the pack as well as I could and was confident that they'd be able to hold their own for a while, but only for a while. What Ralph's vampires lacked in skill, they made up for in sheer numbers. How long would the pack hold off the onslaught of the unending vampires?

I dared not ponder these dark thoughts as I steered the car at breakneck speed along the curvy road heading deeper into Fiddler's Forest. I had come so far, but there was just as much further to go.

My mind strayed to thoughts of Alexis and what she might be doing and if she might be coming to Fiddler's Green at all. Part of me thought that she'd make use of this opportunity to run away and hide. The other part, the one that had learned how to hope, was wishing she'd come back and somehow fight by my side.

But these were not my prime concerns. The shadow over my mind was regarding my inability to shift into a wolf. Was it a temporary hurdle, or was it something permanent rendered by the Wolf's Bane potion that Blair had used? It drove a wedge of fear into my heart, thinking I'd never be able to shift into a wolf again.

Even this thought identified itself as a very selfish one, and my brain implored me to explore other avenues of reflection. So I turned my attention to the winding road once more, hopeful that I'd at least catch some glimpse of a familiar face or two heading in a somewhat familiar direction. This would guide me to the location of the culling fields. The Fiddler's Forest was vast and stretched well into Maine. There was no way of ascertaining where such mythical fields existed in that deep expanse of trees and greenery.

But in this darkness, I saw no face nor shadow of any living creature. There was just the road stretching through the endless forest.

Now I was at the point of no return. The milestone marker for Fiddler's Green had just appeared on the left. It was just a few miles away. It then occurred to me that I could make use of technology. Ah, yes, the phone that Vincent had slipped into my coat. I still had it. I pulled it out of my pocket, and after much fiddling, I was able to dial the only number saved on it.

"Vince!" I exclaimed. "Where are the culling fields? On that matter, where are you?"

"Will, it's bad. It's extremely bad. Maurice has gone into a religious trance, spouting nonsense about salvation and the evergreen pastures of eternity. The pack members are scared. We're east of Fiddler's Cove and are heading deeper into the forest. Maurice keeps saying that he's going to take us to some promised land, to some revelation that he's going to share in light of all the uncertainties that we have faced. At this point, everyone knows he's spewing bullshit, but what other choice do we have? We can't just disobey him," Vince whispered.

"But someone can challenge him. That much is written in the bylaws that dictate the lives of werewolves. If someone can challenge the Alpha to a battle, then the challenger can be the new Alpha if he wins the fight!"

"Will, who do you think is strong enough to challenge Maurice at his prime?" Vince hissed.

"Every single one of you is strong! I trained you all to be that way. End this madness and stop him before you reach the fields. You do know that there's an ambush lying in wait, don't you?" I stated. Now I was driving past the

Grimm Abode. Here, the asphalt road ended, and the dirt road began. The Lexus was not suited to running on dirt roads, and it was already showing signs of slowing down under the added strain of the uneven terrain.

I still maintained my course on the dirt road until I came to the end of the path. From here, the car could go further no more. Before I ditched the car, I opened the trunk and slipped a pistol into my belt. Then I locked the trunk and headed into the northern part of the forest. The air here smelled of stale blood. This was vampire territory, close to the cove.

Even in the dark, the faint moonlight lent me enough sight to make out the footsteps in the dirt. There were hundreds of them, all of them heading deeper into the forest. This was my trail to follow.

With bated breath, I waded deeper into the forest till there wasn't any moonlight left at all, but here, my hearing came to my aid, as I could hear the sounds of my pack members coming from far up ahead.

If I were to reveal my identity, it would have to be at the most opportune moment. Right now, secrecy and stealth are my biggest allies. I knew not how many vampires were lurking around the forest. My wolf senses were robbed of me. All that mattered was that I didn't lose the sounds that were coming from ahead.

As I advanced further, I could make out the lights coming from lanterns, mobile phones, and flashlights. These were my pack members, all of them uncertain about what was going to happen yet resiliently following their Alpha into the unknown.

I flanked the procession so there would be no chance of my getting caught. Once I was on the right, I saw the big field ahead of me. It was not an old

field. I had been to this part of the forest before, once or twice in my wanderings with Ariana and then with my walks with Alexis. This was a new field created just south of the cove. All the trees had been rooted out unnaturally, leaving a mulched ground in their wake. It was horrendous to look at as if the entire field had been turned into a makeshift grave for all the people assembled there.

He had led them to their deaths.

I could not stand idly in the corner as the last of the pack members assembled in the field. They were all huddled around each other, holding their torches aloft. Maurice stood atop a tree stump, elevated from the rest of the crowd. Wherever I looked, I could not see Fred. Of course, with his being in the wheelchair, it must have been impossible to drag him here.

“My dear brethren, family, friends. There is a reason I have gathered you all here in this field,” Maurice spoke. I could not bear to look at his loathsome face. His visage resembled melting wax, and each word that came out of his mouth sounded like the hiss of a slithering snake. “We are here to mourn those who have passed. And to discuss how we can shape our future.”

Now that every eye in the field was fixated on him, I came out of hiding and joined the crowd from behind. No one noticed me as I walked through the crowd, parting through it. They were too focused on what Maurice had to say, asking themselves why he had dragged them all out here instead of just assembling them in the commune.

“You must all be wondering why we are here, out in the middle of nowhere,” Maurice said. He was holding his hands and rubbing them impatiently. His eyes were wandering from left to right, undoubtedly looking for the

ambushers.

It was at this moment that I came out of the crowd, facing Maurice directly. “I was just wondering, Maurice, what lie did you tell these folk about my passing?”

Sudden gasps emitted from the crowd, and people began talking in hushed murmurs that suddenly grew into a loud collective sound embodying the rage and confusion that the pack members were experiencing.

“You told us he died!” someone screamed from the pack.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” I called out, relishing the look on Maurice’s face. He had gone as pallid as the moonlight above, his lips quivering wordlessly and his arms trembling in shock. “This man is nothing but a sleazy liar! He shot me in cold blood and laid me there to die. He is nothing but a conspirator, working with a vampire and a madman in an attempt to bring down the Grimm pack and sell this town to the bloodsucking smugglers who have been wreaking havoc on the innocents who live in this otherwise peaceful place!” My voice was charged, each word clear, the delivery robust. The crowd gathered behind me was utterly silent, paying heed to each word.

Maurice stood there with a deranged look on his face, whispering something.

“Speak up, you fucking coward!” I yelled.

“You were supposed to be dead,” he finally managed to say.

“Ah, alas, how splendidly that would have worked out for you. But sadly for you, while I still draw breath, I will defend this pack with every inch of my life. So what’s the plan, Maurice? Where are your reinforcements?”

He didn't even bother replying. Maurice immediately jumped off the stump and headed in the opposite direction, running haphazardly with his legs and arms flailing comically.

I turned my attention to the pack, now occupying the place where Maurice had been standing just a few seconds ago. "He invited you all here to kill you. He has been working with the vampires all along. He intends to destroy the Grimm lineage and hand over our sacred commune to the vampires. There has been a massive conspiracy underway."

"How are you still alive?" a voice rose from the crowd.

"As much as they tried to kill me, fate had other plans for me. I arrive at the turn of the tide to aid you in this fight. Stand with me, fight by my side, defend this town. The vampires are coming!" I said.

Just as I had uttered these words, a horde of vampires broke through the tree line behind me, rushing towards the werewolves. Their numbers were far more than ours. As I braced myself for the charge, Vince came up by my side and shifted into his wolf form. Behind me, all the pack members shifted and howled furiously, planting their paws deep within the ground, preparing for war.

At this exact moment, three more flanks of vampires appeared from all sides, completely surrounding us. The werewolves, who had just established their position, were attacked from every direction. Maurice had pulled all the stops in planning this attack. He had meant to kill every last one of us.

And it seemed, at this particular moment, that this was exactly what would happen. There were five vampires for each werewolf present, and they were fighting dirty, attacking the werewolves with knives, and machetes, shooting

at them with guns and digging their teeth into their skins.

I saw Vince being dominated by ten vampires, all of them prodding their makeshift spears at him, piercing his skin. Hurriedly, I took out my pistol, aimed it at the vampires, and unloaded the magazine on them. But this served no purpose, as the ten who had fallen were replaced by ten more.

Before me unfolded a sight of utter despair. All the wolves being subdued by the frenzied vampires. I had never felt so helpless in my entire life. When it had just been me whose life had been in danger, I had persevered through the worst of tragedies knowing that no matter how terrible it got, it would just be confined to me. But this concerned my entire pack, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Such helplessness overcame me as a swarm of vampires broke upon me, grabbing me by my limbs and my head and wedging their nails and teeth into my torso. Overwhelmed, outnumbered, and outmaneuvered, I fell to the ground, experiencing what I thought were my final moments on earth.

Something happened to me as I fell, covered by aggressive vampires striking me from head to toe. My body contorted painfully as if every bone in it was breaking. The blood in my veins began seething till it was boiling, and I felt like I was burning alive. I could feel the tears in my muscles as each fiber was being impaled, rent, and stretched.

The sound of the howling wolves rang in my ears till it was the only sound I could hear. When I opened my eyes, I did not see the vampires but a total redness, as if blood had been dumped on my face.

And then I howled. A bloodcurdling howl came from deep within me as my body rose, throwing aside every single vampire who had been clinging to me.

My nails grew into claws, but these were not anything like the claws I used to have before. These new claws were the size of small daggers. I kept growing and growing in size till I was taller than every single wolf on the battlefield, and even then, I did not stop growing. By the time my transformation into my feral form finished, I was left feeling like I was born anew with the strength of all the old gods flowing through me.

There was no more weakness in my system, far from it. I could feel the strength of the moon surging through my veins. Before tonight, I had only heard legends of this transformation. The old wolves used to call it “the wolf within.” Witnessing the agony of my pack members had somehow unlocked the wolf within me, allowing me to shift into the most powerful version of myself I had ever been.

All the vampires cowered below me, my shadow covering them from head to toe. When I opened my maw, I didn’t just howl; I roared fiercely. The vampires fled as my wolves came to my side. Here we stood, all the wolves behind their new Alpha and all the vampires on the other side.

Then he appeared. He was wearing a cloak and wielding a spear drenched in blood. Ralph looked formidable as he parted the horde of vampires and stepped into the clearing between the two clans.

“Resurrection suits you, Wilhelm,” Ralph said, aiming his spear at me. “But this is the end of the line. I have endless men. You have but a hundred-something wolves. Come now. Surrender. Let this end with some dignity.”

My forearm stretched past the clearing and swiped at the vampires standing in the front, tearing open their bodies, and sending them flinging in the back. I could see them writhing painfully as death embraced them. This angered the

formation of the vampires who had gathered behind Ralph, but Ralph held up his hand, prohibiting them from fighting.

“No, no. Will and I have some unfinished business, have we not? What say you we fight each other one on one?”

I drew my breath in, then howled so loud that I could feel the air around me resonating with raw power. It was a howl so fright-inducing that half the vampires standing behind Ralph turned on their heels and ran for their lives. My wolves, emboldened by my battle cry, charged without warning, turning the tide of the battle in their favor, rending apart the flesh of the remaining vampires, attacking them mercilessly. I advanced on Ralph, who was no match for me, even with his tall spear.

I grabbed his spear between my teeth and pulled it off him. Then I bit on his neck and flung him as far back as I could. He hit the trees and collapsed limply on the soft ground. While he was busy getting up, I swiped and slashed at the remaining vampires, and, aided by my wolves, I killed dozens upon dozens of vampires, all thanks to my new, terrifying, feral form. With each slash, I was killing six or seven vampires. Those who were foolish enough to engage me in combat got their heads bit off, the flesh ripped off their bones, and their bodies dismembered brutally.

This would be a night every vampire, every werewolf, and even the moon would remember as the night Will Grimm attained his true form and stood up for his pack. I would make sure of it.

The vampires' horde was thinning till only a few handfuls of them remained. They were retreating behind Ralph, who was slowly advancing toward me.

But now, the battle was ceasing in favor of this new proceeding. The

vampires were behind their leader, and my pack was behind me. A circle began forming around Ralph and me.

I stared fiercely at my foe, remembering the events that had taken place in Beckett Tower. He, Maurice, and Blair were responsible for the rift between Alexis and me. It was his conspiracy that had prevailed chaos over this town for so long.

Not anymore.

There was no match. This was a one-sided fight. Whenever Ralph attacked me, I simply pawed him away. He had no strength compared to my new form. At times, he flew to slash at me with his knives, but even then, none of his blows hit me, and the few that hit me didn't even pierce my skin. It felt like he was tickling me.

When I grew tired of his flimsy attempts at fighting, I howled at his face and watched the life leave him as he realized that this was his end and that he'd die a horrible death. My wolves howled in unison with me, our sound an ethereal wolf song reaching into the cosmos, rousing the moon to shine its resplendent beams upon us, nurturing us with strength.

Ralph and I raced toward each other one last time. Before he could pull the spear off the ground to impale me, I leaped into the air, opened my mouth, and collided with the vampire in mid-air, tearing away his head from his body and feeling his cold blood gush through my mouth. When I landed, I was holding Ralph's head in my mouth. I spat it out and stomped on it, howling one more time to announce my victory.

Upon seeing this, the wolves leaped onto the remaining vampires and tore them to shreds.

The culling field, it turned out, would be used as a graveyard after all, just not for the werewolves.

I shifted back to my human self and felt the surge of strength rush through my body as I realized that not only had I managed to attain my wolf form again, but I had also unlocked the latent wolf within to my advantage. I had used this newfound ability to turn the tide on an otherwise doomed night.

I watched as the stray vampires tried to flee the field but were stopped dead in their tracks by the werewolves. Vincent was at the forefront of this last leg of battle, pinning down the vampires one by one, usurping their lives from them, tearing their limbs apart.

I looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of Alexis in the crowd, but she was not there. I did not let this thought bitter my mind right now. This was a victorious night. It had started in the most uncertain way, but by the end, I had managed to get revenge on one of the three culprits of my calamity. Now only Maurice and Blair remained.

I would see to them in my own time.

As the last of the vampires were dealt with, the wolves gathered around me, shifting into their human forms. They cheered loudly as they lifted me on their shoulders and began chanting my name as they whistled, howled, laughed, and celebrated.

“Quiet now,” I said once I had gotten off their shoulders. I stood facing them all, staring into their eyes as they stared back into mine. “This has been a hard-earned victory. But we must not rest now. The vampires, though leaderless, are still out there, and we may have to face their retaliation. Now is the time to strengthen our defenses and brace for any attack that might

come our way!”

“Will, where were you?” a pack member asked. “We all saw your body at the burial. Tell us what happened!”

“Aye! Tell us!” More voices like this rose from the crowd.

“I can tell you this. This town has been used and abused by powerful people for the longest time. Maurice was one of them. Ralph was too. And now, Blair Beckett, the son of the madman who imprisoned me, remains. They tried to kill Alexis and me, but clearly, they failed in doing so. All I can say to all of you is that I am back, and this time, I am not leaving your side. Your Alpha has resurrected and returned!”

Upon hearing this, the crowd broke into hurrahs and cheers again, and this time, I did not stop them. They had earned this. As had I. I threw my head back and let loose a loud howl that rang through the clearing. It felt good to win for a change.

But it felt best to be back in control once again.

The only thing that stung was the absence of Alexis. The question remained. Where was she? I wanted to tap into our bond and find out where she was or how she was faring, but I drove off this temptation in the face of the victory I had just achieved. If Alexis had indeed chosen to run away, then that was her choice, and the least I could do was respect it and let her be.

Chapter 11: Alexis

I made sure to tell myself that it wasn't my allegiance to Will that was driving me back to Fiddler's Green. I repeated it like a mantra inside my head throughout the rickety bus ride. Deep down, though, where all the secret truths dwelled, I knew that no matter how many times I'd tell myself that it wasn't related to Will, I was lying. It was about him as much as it was about Fiddler's Green.

It came down to roots and their inescapability. Wherever I'd go, my roots would follow. Someone would ask me somewhere where I'd come from, and my instinct would be to say Fiddler's Green. I could live in Boston or New York, or San Francisco all I wanted, but the answer to the question "where did you come from" would always be the same.

My town was in peril. As shitty as it had been to me, it needed me right now. That's why, when the ticket lady asked me if I'd made up my mind between the ticket to San Francisco and the ticket to Fiddler's Green, I finally asked for a ticket for the latter.

I hated myself for it, realizing in between bouts of responsibility and shame that this was some metastasized form of Stockholm Syndrome. But then, the rational thought would follow, suggesting to me that since I'd already escaped Fiddler's Green once, I could do it again whenever I willed and that going back to save my pack was not an obligation but a choice.

When the bus finally dropped me off at Fiddler's Port, I knew immediately where I had to go. It was more than just instinct; my bond with Will tugged at me. As much as I had tried to bury it deep somewhere within me, break it into a million pieces, or pretend that it didn't exist altogether, the bond prevailed. At this point, the bond felt less like some fated connection between two mates and more like the voice of my conscience guilting me into getting back with Will, coaxing me into following him, worrying for him.

As if the bond knew more than I did. If it was so much a part of me, then why didn't the bond register the terrible pain I had felt when Will had apparently died on me? Why hadn't it acknowledged the betrayal I felt when Will said Ariana's name? Did the bond simply not care?

"You can't just stand there," a voice growled from behind. "Piss or get off the pot!"

It then occurred to me that I was musing over all these thoughts while standing at the exit of Fiddler's Green bus station, completely blocking the entrance.

I stepped to the side, allowing the old man to pass. He grumbled rudely as he walked past me, shooting me a hostile look. There it was, that good old Fiddler's Green hospitality that I was so used to. I chose to ignore the man and focused on what was happening around me.

The night bore several ill omens. I shot a look up and saw that the stars were completely smitten by the dark red haze tinting the sky. Crows who had no business being out of their nests at this hour were cawing and flying chaotically as if rendered restless by something maddening beyond their understanding. The very air was still and heavy with anticipation of some

terrible horror that had yet to come to pass.

The Grimm Abode was at an elevated plateau north of where I stood. I could see that all the lights at the commune were switched off. But there was a strange luminescence coming from the woods to the northwest. I had never seen something like that before. No matter how hard I tried to heighten my senses and perceive what was happening that far away, the thicket of trees blocked the trajectory of my vision, hindering me from seeing what was really happening. I did spot Lawrence's car stranded at the precipice of the forest, which was all the sign I needed to know that Will was in there with his pack members.

Will might have been having trouble with shifting, but I was not deterred by such limitations. Seeking the cover of shadows ahead of me, I shifted into my wolf form and headed towards the wavering lights coming from the forest. Begrudgingly, I used my bond with Will as a compass to ascertain that I was headed in the right direction.

Once I was clear of Fiddler's Green and was prowling in front of the Grimm Abode, the abandonment that I laid my eyes on was troubling enough to make me quicken my pace and head into the forest. How had all the pack members just blindly followed Maurice into the forest? It was as if they had bartered common sense for blind obedience. Fear could make many men do foolish things. I understood that with Will's apparent death, the pack was thrown into a pit of tumultuousness and uncertainty, and naturally, in this ambiguous time, they looked to Maurice's leadership.

As I passed Lawrence's car, I caught a whiff of his decomposing body and couldn't help but feel glad that he was dead after what he had tried to do to me. And not that I would admit it out in the open anytime soon, but I was

happy that Will had been there to save me. But even that happiness had a bitter aftertaste. Whatever had transpired between us was still too convoluted for me to think about Will in anything other than a very confused and frustrated way.

But now was not the time to waylay my mind with these thoughts. With each step I took deeper into the forest, my ears picked up more sounds of cacophony coming from ahead. It wasn't until I had reached the field that I saw what was happening and reeled in fear and shock.

Vampires were attacking the werewolves from all directions. My pack members were struggling to hold their own in battle. But what was even worse to behold was the sight of the women and the kids. While the men had shifted and were fending off the vampires, the women and children of the pack stood not too far behind. I could see that some of the women had shifted to protect their children, but this was not going to be enough, at least not with the way the battle was going.

I could not spot Will anywhere in the battle ahead. My bond told me that he was still there somewhere and that he was alive, but other than that, I could not sense him fighting or shifting. Maybe the bond had realized the rift between us and was slowly dissolving itself.

Knowing that the women and children stood no chance in this one-sided battle, I quickly broke through the tree line and headed to where the women and children were stranded. The vampires outnumbered the men of the pack, and some of the stray vampires were headed straight toward the women and children.

There was only one thing I could do: Make the women and children follow

me out of the clearing and back to the Grimm Abode.

But before that, I had to take care of the vampires.

As I quickly grouped with the women, those of them who had shifted in their wolf forms joined me, and together we advanced on the vampires coming toward us. Just as we clashed, I noticed a loud commotion coming from the main fight, and it was here that I saw Will emerging from underneath a horde of vampires in a form I had never seen before.

Taller, broader, fiercer, he had shifted into the legendary wolf within, a form that was revered by all and was considered to be Fenrir's living avatar. Very few werewolves had ever unlocked this form, and seeing Will take this form emboldened the rest of the wolves beside me and me to fight more bravely.

Now we knew that the vampires were not going to stand much of a chance against us, even with Ralph on their side. It was as if the vampires had sensed the same thing because the moment we clashed, there was fear in their attacks, and their strategies seemed to be all over the place.

Still, they outnumbered us, and there would be no recourse for the rest of the women and children if our current line of defense were breached. With this realization, I finally let go of all the frustration, anger, fear, confusion, and depression I had been feeling and poured all my emotions into the fight. The more I channelized these emotions, the more berserk I felt myself going till a point came that I was singlehandedly taking on all the stray vampires, driving away most of them.

Some of them stayed, undeterred by their scrambling comrades. I recognized these vampires. They were the ones that I had fought at Beckett Tower. No doubt, they were looking for some retribution for their murdered brethren. At

any other time, I would have given these vampires a run for their money, but right now, I was tasked with protecting the women and children. This put me on the defensive.

I looked at the pack behind me, saw the troubled faces of the kids and their moms, noticed the panic on the older women, the ones who couldn't shift anymore, and understood right away that their place was not on this battlefield. They belonged back home. It was my job to escort them back, but not while the vampires still loomed so near.

The three female wolves beside me nodded in acknowledgment, letting me know they had my back on the field.

With this bolstering, I attacked the vampires ferociously, clawing at their faces, necks and chests. Perhaps it was that I was unfettered from all emotion, or maybe it was that I was feeling particularly vengeful because my attacks landed on their bodies so forcefully and tore them apart so easily that it felt like I was fighting paper-mâché dolls.

They crawled away from me, screaming for mercy, their hands held high. They would get no quarter. My fellow wolves and I ensured their swift deaths, and only after all the vampires in our vicinity were taken care of did we turn our attention back to the pack.

Behind me, the battle was waging hard than ever. With Will's feral form dominating the battlefield, it was apparent that the fight was going in our favor. The fact remained, however, that this was a fight and, therefore, an unsafe place for the women and children.

I shifted back to my human form and went to the pack.

“Lexie! You’re alive?” an old woman called from the pack.

“Yes. I...it’s a little complicated,” I said. “But please understand that we have to leave. We can’t stay here in this ambush.”

“Maurice betrayed us all,” another woman spoke sadly. “Why must those whom we look up to take advantage of our allegiance in such a manner?”

“That’s a long story, Cindy,” I said. “Right now, we all have to get back to the commune.”

“But don’t you see? Will’s alive? He’s over there, fighting the vampires,” Cindy said.

“As admirable as that is, this is a dangerous place. Think of the children, the pregnant women, and those of you who are too old to fight or shift. We have to get back to safety,” I said, hoping they’d understand that this was not a place to spectate from but to run away from.

At last, they finally gave in and followed me out of the clearing into the forest. Before we left, though, I had to look back one more time and see the ensuing fight between Ralph and Will. Will was fighting so devotedly, with such finesse and power, that I could not help but feel drawn toward him. The only thing stopping me in my tracks was the pain that his death had given me and the sorrow that his last word had sown in my heart.

“Come, all of you,” I said loudly, addressing all the women and children as I headed deeper into the forest. I could not resist getting one last glance. After all, Will was fighting Ralph.

As the kids and the girls passed by me, I peeked around the thicket of trees one last time, just in time to see Will killing Ralph. Such satisfaction coursed

through my veins upon seeing Ralph die that I had no way of putting it into words. A vile vampire, an evil conspirator, and a most malicious and cunning man was finally dead at the hands of my mate. The man responsible for killing my parents, for pitching this town into total darkness, and for terrorizing the people of Grimm Abode and Fiddler's Green had finally fallen.

I wanted to go to Will and congratulate him for vanquishing one of his three foes, but I barely held myself back. I did not want him to know that I had been there. That I had seen him fight and considered him very brave and admirable on the battlefield. Sharing those thoughts with him would only make him think that I'd forgiven him, accepted him, and wanted him back as my mate. If anything, I wanted more distance between us—but why did that last feel like a lie I kept telling myself?

“Where were you, child?” Cindy asked again. “When Maurice came with Will's body, we thought you'd be with him too. But when we didn't see you, we assumed the worst. That you were dead.”

“Oh. It's not so easy to kill me, Cindy,” I said, taking the lead once again and leading the pack back to the commune. “But you must know that Maurice was conspiring with the vampires and some other terrible people all this time, using his powers as the mayor to bend the town to his will. Tonight, he meant to wipe out all the wolves. He wanted to give the Grimm Abode to the vampires so that they'd use our home as their new headquarters.”

“Headquarters?” a little girl from the crowd asked.

“Yes, dear. They wanted to smuggle blood and drugs from the Grimm Abode all over America. The vampires have been running a smuggling ring from

this very town for the longest time.”

As we came to the precipice of the forest, I filled the women of the pack on the events that had taken place in Beckett Tower, not mentioning the part where Will said Ariana’s name. I did tell them that I escaped to Bangor for a little while and what I did there. The women of the pack patted me on the shoulder and thanked me for helping them come out of the culling fields.

“I must go back and see if anyone needs my help,” I said once we had left the forest. “I trust you all can head back safely to the commune on your own now.”

The older women nodded, the children grinned at me, and the girls waved their hands at me as I headed back into the forest one more time. This time around, I reached the culling fields quite quickly, as I already knew the way and was certain that there was no more danger lurking around.

I hadn’t exactly gone there to see if anyone needed my help, as I had said to the women and children. The truth was, I wanted to see Will again. Seeing him in battle and watching him take that feral form had stirred something in me. Something that I was too afraid to admit.

It was love. Despite the pain and tragedy that I experienced, I could feel my love for him resurfacing. I didn’t want to fight it anymore. I wanted to go to him, embrace him, greet him, and share the joy of killing Ralph. Most importantly, I just wanted to see his face.

The face of a man who would do anything to protect his pack.

If he’d apologize to me again, I would accept it. If he’d told me that he never meant to call out Ariana’s name and that he was not in love with her, I would

believe him. Eventually, I would let my love for him conquer any other conflicting feelings and forgive him for everything.

The bond within me throbbed ecstatically as if realizing that I had finally given in to my feelings of affection for my mate. I let it have its moment, not fighting the urge to calm it down.

But the real reason I wanted to go back to the field was to show Will that I had not abandoned him or the pack. I needed to tell him that I had come back, even when my feelings were on the line. That I deeply cared for the pack and this town despite all the things that had happened to me in the past.

I wanted this reconciliation to be a public matter so that everyone would know that we were still mates.

Once I had reached the clearing, I tried to take a step forward, to go into the moonlight and meet Will, but I found myself unable to move. This was not some paralysis brought on by the sting of some venomous snake or a scorpion. It was an emotional paralysis caused by sheer conflict.

Upon seeing Will standing there with the men of the pack, talking and laughing and patting them on the shoulder, I felt like an outsider. Even though I had joined in the fight and had rescued the women and children, I couldn't help but feel that I had been selfish when I'd run away to Bangor. If I had been here, Maurice would never have had the gall to take anyone to the culling fields. I could have alerted everyone to what Maurice had been doing. This entire thing could have been averted.

With all these negative feelings resurging, I could not gather the courage to go to Will.

Did he even want to meet me? With his strength returned tenfold and with such a victory under his belt, would he want to apologize and make things right with me?

My heart sank as I realized he would not care to see me anymore.

Chapter 12: Will

“Where are all the women and children?” I asked, casting a glance around the clearing in the forest and seeing no signs of them. The men, who were all helping me in the field, turned their heads and shook them.

“It seems that they’ve gone back to the commune,” Vincent said.

“Hurry up, men. The sooner we flatten this field, the better,” I said. It wasn’t that we had an obligation to bury all the bodies, even though the bodies belonged to our enemies; it was that if any unsuspecting passer-by would come through the forest, they’d see an unnatural clearing with dozens of dead vampires strewn about. They’d alert the cops, the cops would come snooping by, and before anything else, there’d be a whole investigation that would eventually unravel the truth to the masses—that werewolves and vampires were real and walked amongst them.

Besides, vampire bodies made a hell of a stink if left unburied.

It wasn’t much work. The ground was already quite soft and only had to be tilled a couple of times after burying the vampires to ensure that no one would accidentally unearth them.

During this, the men talked amongst themselves and helped each other. It was grueling work, having to grab the entrails and ripped off body parts of the vampires and bury them deep into the ground, but they did it with pride and heart.

Vincent stood by me as we watched the men clear the field. I could see from the corner of my eyes that he was studying me quite intently.

“You know, no one has been able to shift into the wolf within for almost a hundred years,” he said. He spoke in a very devoted manner, as if he was talking to some celebrity. Every word he uttered had awe attached to it.

“Vince, you tell me if any other wolf has been through so much toil as I have been in the past hundred years,” I said. I didn’t say that to show off or boast; I just wanted to emphasize that it took a lot of sacrifices to be able to shift into this form.

“You’re right, but you have to understand what I’m saying. The wolf within is such a rare form that most werewolves think that it’s just a story people have been telling each other for thousands of years. No one actually expects to see a wolf within with their own eyes. We’ve only ever heard that this wolf or that wolf managed to attain the wolf within. Who knows if that’s true, even? But tonight, all the pack members witnessed a miracle when you took that form. I could see no other way that we would have won tonight if you hadn’t taken that form,” he said, still in awe, still mesmerized.

“That’s simply not true,” I said. “I trained every single werewolf of my pack well enough. I knew that even if I were not here, they’d somehow win. I trust this pack. More importantly, I trust you.”

“You’re being so modest right now,” Vince said, grinning widely. “Come on. You can take the credit for it. You know that was pure fucking awesome, right? The way you just came up from the crowd and made Maurice piss his pants. He couldn’t even believe his eyes. And then the vampires attacked! I bet even you didn’t know that you’d be turning into the wolf within, did you?”

How did that even happen?”

I put my hand on Vincent’s shoulder as we walked toward the path heading out of the clearing. The rest of the men, now finished with their work, followed us. “What do you think of all this?” I asked.

“You want my in-depth nerd version of things, or do you just want me to give you a one-liner?” Vince asked.

As the torches lit up once more in the hands of the men behind us, a new life was breathed into the dark forest all around us, animating each shadow with light and creating a warm orange glow around the band of men making their way through the trees.

“I want you to tell me what you, as my right-hand man, think,” I asked.

“Okay, then you want the whole nerd version. Well, the way I see it, when Edward trapped you and did all those sick experiments on you, a meter started building up in your body. We can say that it was a meter of perseverance and tolerance, tolerating everything that was happening to you until it reached a tipping point. But that meter didn’t fill itself. You escaped, and so the meter just paused there. Later, though, when you fought Blair and Maurice, and Ralph, the meter started building up again, and eventually, when you were injected with that chemical, the meter started to overflow. But you didn’t know that because you were sort of dead. Tonight, however, when you saw that your pack members were in mortal danger, the meter broke, and you attained this new form. Everything terrible that has happened to you in your life contributed to your unlocking this form. I don’t believe it when people say that just about anyone can unlock this form. I think that the wolf within is a fated form, only given to those who have been destined to do great

things or have already done immense things in their life. Such as you,” Vince said and then took a long break to catch his breath.

I patted him on the back as we came out of the forest. “That was one astute analysis, Vince.”

“Thanks. I just...I think a lot sometimes, you know? Sometimes I’m overwhelmed by all the thoughts that come into my head. It’s like...some of these things I can’t even say to anyone. So, it’s good to finally have a listening ear who can take all my bullshit and just accept it as part of me,” Vince said, his voice breaking a little.

“Is there a particular issue you’re talking about, Vince?”

“Of course, there’s the matter of my father being this villainous personality, but that’s not exactly what I’m talking about. On that particular matter, I’m very polarized. He’s on the bad side, as we’ve seen time and again. I have no sympathy for his actions. I couldn’t be more different than him. It shames me to call him my father. I hope that he gets what’s coming for him,” Vince said, breathing heavily. I could see that he was having quite an emotional moment and that it was not easy for him to talk about what was bothering him.

“You can talk to me,” I said. “I am your friend.”

“You’re more than that, Will. I consider you my brother.”

I stopped walking and turned Vince around so that he’d face me. Then I hugged him tightly. “You are my brother as well. And from this day forth, you are my permanent second in command.”

Vincent’s face lit up, and any signs of stress and worry that were lingering on the corners disappeared as he smiled at me.

“Your second in command? Are you for real right now?”

“I believe I’m being totally real with you,” I said, inflecting jokingly on that slang. “Now, would you like to talk to me about what’s bothering you?”

“I can’t really get into it, what with the whole thing being wrapped in layers of secrecy, but I’ll tell you this much. There’s this girl whom I’m in love with. And she’s...well, she’s having a hard time with things. Her family has kicked her out and banished her. They’ve also prohibited people from meeting with her. You know, they’re treating her like a pariah. And, well, she’s trapped, sort of. That’s as much as I can say without divulging more details. I can’t seem to help her break free from the curse of her family,” Vince said. I watched him closely. It was as if the weight was being lifted from his shoulders as he shared this dilemma with me. I wondered for how long he had been keeping this to himself.

“Is this a literal curse or something metaphoric?”

“It’s a little bit of both.”

“In that case,” I said, trying to dispense my best wisdom to my friend. “If you truly love her, you must believe that your love will be able to conquer any hurdles in its path. She will see that in time. Whatever is straining your relationship, whether it’s her family or the banishment, it’s not stronger than your feelings for her. Love is very much a tangible thing, capable of moving mountains. Let it guide you. There are few things as strong as love. Fate is one. Death is another. But wherever there is true love, you will see that it can conquer fate and death.”

I spoke from experience. I held strongly to the belief deep in my heart that the real reason I hadn’t died wasn’t because of some built-up immunity or

luck; it was because I was in love with Alexis. It was why I fought so hard in that afterlife to come back, conquering fate and death in one move and coming back. Somehow, I had to trust my love for her to guide me in doing the right thing to make her see that I was sincere and that I hadn't lied to her. It ached me to be away from her, both physically and emotionally. Instead of taking it as a brutal rejection, I reframed it as a challenge to my faith and love. This was merely a hurdle, and sooner or later, my love would have to overcome it.

"Your words console me," Vincent said. "And I thank you for your discretion. Especially that you didn't prod deeper into the matter."

"I do well to stay out of other people's business, especially when it's a matter of love. However, if someone such as yourself asks me for counsel or advice, I give them the truth. When you look at me, you might see a warrior, a werewolf, a captain of the sea, but what you don't know, what many people don't notice at first, is that I'm at my heart a fierce lover," I said.

"Speaking of which, I didn't see Alexis. I thought you were going to find her. What happened?" Vince asked.

What happened, indeed? I had been so immersed in the battle that I had failed to consider the worst possibility. Alexis had been on the fence about returning when I left her in Bangor. Could it possibly be that she had not shown up to save the pack? I hadn't seen her during the battle. It was possible that she might have been there, but I must have missed her due to being flanked from all sides by vampires.

"If you truly love someone, Vincent, you have to let them go. If they come back, they were yours all along. If they don't come back, they were never

yours, to begin with,” I said with a heavy heart.

“Tonight was a very important night for the pack, Will. You’re just overthinking it. Of course, she had to be there. I just know it. You wait and see. We’ll come across her at the commune with the rest of the women and children,” Vince said.

That tethered some hope to my heart. I did not want to appear overexcited or overzealous at the possibility that she might be there, so I remained quiet on the matter. By now, we had walked out of the forest and were heading toward the commune. On the way, I prodded Vince on the small of his back and aimed my finger at the car stranded outside of the forest.

“I need you to take care of this car for me, please,” I said. “You’ll find that there’s a dead body of an assassin in the trunk. Be discrete with it. You may bury it in the clearing, or you can throw it in the sea. Wipe the car of all fingerprints and everything. Change the plates. If possible, give it a paint job.”

“Umm, okay,” Vince said. “Is there something I should know?”

I briefly told him about Lawrence and how he had tried to kill Alexis. I told him just enough to give him the context without oversharing any details about how Lawrence had met Alexis.

“So this is like a revenge token,” Vince said, nodding slowly.

“Revenge token? I don’t understand,” I said.

“It’s like when you take revenge from someone, and you want to prolong the revenge-taking part of the process, you take something belonging to your enemy, and you make it your own. That’s what a revenge token is. In wars,

soldiers sometimes take their opponents' guns as revenge tokens. Sometimes, a person will wear his enemy's clothes as a token of revenge. And in your particular case, you've decided to make Lawrence's car your own," Vince said, grinning at me.

"Well, it would be a damn shame to let this excellent automobile go to waste," I said, putting an end to the matter.

When we had traveled through the forest after the battle, there had been no signs of any vampires in the vicinity, making it seem that they had momentarily fled their nearby home in the cove. It made sense that they'd leave, given how brutally they had been thwarted and how mercilessly their leader had been killed in battle. But something was not right. Even with the vampires gone, it was quiet all around. Too quiet. As if there was something heavy in the air weighing down the sounds. Like some evil presence still lingered nearby.

"Vince, where do you think Maurice has gone?" I asked after a long pause.

"There's no way of knowing for sure. The last we saw of him was him running out of the forest. My two cents? He's run away somewhere far off so we can't catch him. But that would be giving him too much credit. He's got ties in the town. So, if he hasn't run away, he's bound to be bunkering somewhere close by."

This did not appease me as I had expected. Maurice was a man of methodological evil. He calculated everything precisely. He must have calculated this outcome as well. As such, he would have a contingency for this possibility. The question remained—where was he?

But it was not the right time to worry about this. We had just entered through

the commune gates. The men rushed to their women and children, hugging their kids, kissing their wives, and holding their loved ones close. The air in Grimm Abode was one of relief, celebration, and joy.

As I was left alone at the gate, I scanned the crowd hoping to see Alexis somewhere. With my powers back, I could feel my senses heightening. I could see and hear better, but neither of those faculties was of any avail to me right now. Alexis simply wasn't here.

I tried to get her out of my mind, but the lingering sensation of some oncoming danger never left my thoughts. Something was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. To distract myself, I walked around the commune, greeting the women, playing with the children, and giving words of encouragement to the men who had been with me in battle. Even still, my eyes strayed here and there, hoping that Alexis would appear out of some corner and confront me, talk to me, have a verbal spat with me, and then finally utter the words I was dying to hear. That she had forgiven me and that she believed me. That she knew that I loved her.

I even passed her house, hoping to see a light or two coming from the window. But her home was, unlike all the other houses in the commune, covered in darkness with not a single ray of light coming from inside.

“Will!” Vince came running up to me, his face red. “The women and children are telling me they were escorted here by Alexis. She had come here after all.”

I could not contain my glee upon learning this. I immediately grabbed Vincent by his shoulders and squeezed him. “Well, where is she?”

“See, that's the thing. The women said that she guided them back to the

commune and then went back into the forest to help with the fight. But I've been asking around, and no one has seen her since," he said.

Worry replaced my newfound glee in a manner of seconds as I joined Vincent in search of Alexis. At first, we scoured through the entire commune, but upon finding no signs of her there, we headed back outside to the forest.

It was only after we had combed through the entire trail and clearing that both of us gave up in defeat and came to the unanimous conclusion that Alexis had only come here temporarily.

"She must have seen that we won the battle, and then she must have left," Vincent said.

I said nothing. Sitting on the trunk of Lawrence's car, I closed my eyes and tried to tug at my bond with her, hoping to get some reply in return, some semblance of communication.

It broke my heart when all I heard back was pure silence.

Chapter 13: Alexis

I stood by the water, my feet submerged in the sand, my eyes on the blue horizon where the moon touched the dark wavering sea. I told myself that I could not go back. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of the men talking loudly and boastfully as they left the clearing and exited through the forest. I could have joined them. Will was in that crowd, along with Vince. This could have been a better reunion than the one I already had with Will. This time around, I'd have said nicer things and would have been softer to him.

I had eventually, after a long walk that started from the commune and ended on the beach, decided not to rejoin the pack. Admittedly, I was a mess of emotions, all over the place and with zero coherence. Yet, this time around, there was good reason for my choice not to rejoin the pack.

It was a simple realization that I had rejected Will when he was down. He had just re-emerged from his grave with no shifting abilities. He saw that the world around him had fallen. Maurice had regained control of the pack, and I was nowhere to be found. When he somehow found me, I was beyond coarse with him.

Now, when he had regained power when the pack had emerged victorious against the vampires, and when Ralph had been killed, and Maurice had been made to run off, Will was in a very powerful position. It would make me appear as nothing more than an opportunistic bitch if I went back to him and accepted him.

Besides, there was the entire element of me not believing him. I still thought that he had said Ariana's name for a reason, and it wasn't the reason that he had given me.

So here I stood, on the beach, thinking of my recourse. I still had most of the money that Izzie had given me. I could go back to her and beg for my job and apartment back. But if there was one thing I wasn't, it was a beggar. I would rather eat dirt and live under a bridge than go back and grovel for something. The irony of both situations—Will's and Izzie's—being so similar was not lost on me.

Yet there was another reason I was out here, on the other side of the forest. I wanted to see what had become of the vampires. The ones who had survived must have escaped, but they would have been foolish to run back to the cove. Now that they knew that Will was back and had killed their leader, the vampires must have had no recourse other than to leave the cove. Could it possibly be that after all this time, the reign of the bloodsuckers was finally over?

I was still in disbelief. There was nothing more that I badly wanted to see other than the cove, completely stripped down from the inside. Once I had gotten enough of the view of the moonlight and the beach, I put on my shoes and headed to the cove. Maybe if I'd report back to the commune with news that all the vampires had fled the cove, they would receive me with some warmth.

"Don't run in circles around the same thing over and over, Lexie," I said out loud, frustrated at my inability to come to terms with the fact that I was not going to go back. "Home is where the heart is, and it seems your heart's not in Fiddler's Green."

I made a valid point now that I thought about it. My heart wasn't in Fiddler's Green. My heart had been ripped out of my body and squished down to a pulp in Beckett Tower when Will had died in front of me. Somehow, miraculously, Will had resuscitated himself. But I had not been able to resuscitate my heart. As of right now, any emotions that I felt were very muddled and distant, as if they were the ghosts of the emotions that I had once felt back when my heart was still alive.

So, the question remained—if my heart was not in Fiddler's Green, where was it?

Rather than grapple with philosophical concepts bigger than me, I jogged toward the cove, hoping to catch some action. Having missed most of the fight in the clearing, my body craved some good old-fashioned combat, especially with some fleeting vampires. Will might have gotten his fair share of closure after killing Ralph, but what about me?

Once I reached the cove, I quickly peeked around the corner to see if there was anyone left. All I saw was a mess of broken crates, clothes, and bottles smashed on the ground. My ears picked up no sounds coming from inside the cove. When I walked around the entrance and stared inside, I gasped loudly at the sight I was beholding.

It was deceptively huge from the inside, with tiny structures running along the length of the walls, giving the inside of the cove the look of a small city. Wooden and metallic rooms hung suspended from the walls, lit by orange lamps that hung from the roof of the cove. They were so dangerously packed together that I feared going inside. When I finally gathered the courage to step into the cove, I was overwhelmed by the disgusting smell of stale blood that lingered inside. It raised the hair on my body, this macabre smell in this

foul place.

Once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw the cove for what it really was—a smuggling hub. Just ahead of all the construction, there was a harbor with half a dozen ships still tied to it. Here, crates were piled along the cove walls in all directions.

I kept looking around to pick up some hints of where the vampires had gone off to. After half an hour of combing through the entire place and finding no clue, I gave up and exited the cove.

At least, this was good news. With no more vampires in the vicinity of Fiddler's Green, I could rest easy in the knowledge that my departure this time around would not result in any immediate danger to the townsfolk and my pack members. It made sense that with Ralph dead and Maurice on the run, Blair would sooner or later disappear, as his crimes would come into the light now that Will had reappeared and had so publicly regained control of his pack. Removing me from this equation meant that the town was in safe hands and all imminent danger was over.

As I stood by the entrance of the cove, I tried to convince my deadened heart to feel something other than shame, remorse, sadness, and misery. All the thoughts that came to me wore a dark cover, suggesting that no one missed me back at the commune, that Will never really loved me to begin with, and that it was better for everyone if I just left.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” A cruel voice growled from behind, and before I even had a chance to register that someone was standing behind me, I was hit on the back of my head with such force that I fell on all fours. Within a second, I was hit a second time, this time on my back. I collapsed,

having been caught off guard, and it wasn't until a heavy foot rested on the nape of my neck that I realized that the voice and the foot belonged to Maurice. As much as I struggled, Maurice's weight on my body was heavier, preventing me from moving.

"I thought you ran away with your vampire buddies," I muttered.

"What vampire buddies? Don't you see the cove is empty? You have been the cause of pain in my ass ever since you dragged Will back with you in that commune. You should have died the same night as your parents, and that would have saved me a ton of trouble, you fucking bitch," Maurice spat, pushing his weight on me.

But here is where he made an error. He made mention of my parents in such a condescending way that it awoke all the rage I had kept buried in me. I immediately shifted, throwing Maurice off me, and pounced on him, trapping him under my body. This could be my shot at closure. Will had killed Ralph; I could end Maurice's life. If I returned to the commune with Maurice's lifeless body, they'd hail me as a hero, and all would be forgotten.

"Fucking cunt, you forget that I already defeated you once. Didn't I throw you off a building? How many times do I have to teach you the same lesson over and over?" Maurice growled, then dug his nails into my skin. He pushed me back, tearing slashes under my fur, and then shifted in front of my eyes.

It would have hardly been a fair fight if he hadn't shifted. Now, I could finally get my revenge and not feel bad for beating up a defenseless old man.

Maurice launched himself in the air with his claws out. As I swerved, I discovered that he had pinned me strategically against the cove wall, leaving no place for me to escape. He landed beside me, then slashed at my face with

his extended claws. I held up my limbs in front of me in defense, barely able to fend off his attack.

His neck was undefended, as he had just landed on all fours and was about to recoil. I shot my jaw at the underside of his neck and bit down on his skin. It didn't matter to me if I killed him. With this in mind, I held nothing back. My teeth tore through the skin of his neck and drew blood.

Maurice whimpered loudly and tried to retreat. But I dug in even harder, hoping to find the jugular and end his life here and now. In his blind retaliation, he flailed his paws in the air, catching me in the face by surprise. I stepped back and registered the damage to my face. It was a light gash, nothing that wouldn't heal itself within a few minutes. It wouldn't leave a mark, that was for certain. But my stepping back had finally freed Maurice's neck from my death grip, and now he was nowhere to be seen.

I looked around, trying to find out where he had disappeared within seconds. Then, a howl erupted from right above me, and I saw Maurice perched atop the cove's entrance, ready to pounce. Even as I retreated, he managed to jump and land right on top of me, hitting my body with the full force of a projectile werewolf hitting terminal velocity.

I felt a few ribs crack as he crashed into me. The air blew out of my lungs, making everything seem dark all around me. I tried to move, but my legs felt like they had crumbled.

Maurice got up from me, then shifted back into his human form.

“You know, I didn't expect to find you here. I just came around to mourn my friend, Ralph. But you can serve as quite the consolation prize for me. I can kill you. Or, even better, I can trap you and torture you for the longest time.

Wouldn't it be a very fitting end to your story? Your mate spent his life imprisoned and tortured, and you get to end your life imprisoned and tortured. Ah, Will's going to lose his shit when he finds out that even in defeat, I managed to get the better of him," he said.

I could still feel the throbbing bruises from Maurice's collision with my body. They had rendered my body painfully numb, limiting my ability to move. Each muscle ached terribly when I tried to crawl.

"Just think how your precious Alpha will feel when I deliver your corpse to him. An eye for an eye. Kind of fair, isn't it?" Maurice growled.

Before I could do anything else, he brought down his boot on my face, knocking me out.

It was a strange, dark, smelly, and wet place that I woke up in. I could hear water splashing somewhere in the back. When I opened my eyes, I couldn't see anything around me except for some sheen coming off the metal bars that had trapped me inside. When my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw grotesque cave walls around me. They were wet and slippery with seawater.

I was hogtied and thrown on the ground. During my unconsciousness, I must have shifted back to my human form. There was tape over my mouth and rope on my arms and legs. Maurice had tied me very sadistically. The more I struggled, the tighter the ropes got until a point came that my bounds were painful enough to draw tears.

I knew that screaming or struggling would be a futile gesture. So I did the

only thing that I could do in my position. I looked around. There was a distant light coming from the other end of the cave. At first, I thought it was the end of the tunnel. But when the light grew nearer, I saw that it was Maurice holding a flashlight in his hands. He approached the bars and kicked them, creating a loud rattle.

“Now, isn’t this perfect?” Maurice spat. “Face it, there’s no way you’re ever going to escape from here. We’re so far away from Fiddler’s Green that even your mate can’t come to save you. You thought that you and your pack’s little display of courage would put a dent in our plans? Sure, Ralph’s dead, and that’s terrible and all, but the operation is bigger than any of us. It continues, little girl. And you’re going to watch it all till the day you die. I intend to starve you, torture the life out of you slowly until all that’s left is a little husk of the wolf that you were, and then I’ll deliver your rotting, decaying dead body to your mate.”

I attempted to shift and show him that all his words were just hollow banter coming from a man who had lost everything. But Maurice had bound me so tightly that every attempt to shift failed. I was choking on my ropes at this point, struggling even to breathe.

Maurice opened the cage door and came inside, holding a taser. Without even a warning, he rammed the taser into me and pulled the trigger, sending jolts of electricity running through my body. All my screams were muffled by the tape covering my mouth. As I convulsed under shock, my bounds became even tighter, cutting off the blood supply to my arms and legs.

Maurice stared into my eyes as he tased me again, this time for a longer period. I had made up my mind that I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of writhing and screaming in pain. So, even as he continued to send raw

electrical voltage through my body, I stayed still and stared menacingly back at him without so much as a scream. It was pure agony, all that current racing through my body, but I was not about to make him feel like a big man for torturing me.

“Fine. Don’t scream. What do I care?” Maurice said, getting back up and kicking me in the chest as he left. “Rot here all you want.”

Just as he left, I fainted out of sheer pain, and this time, I did not know for how long I was unconscious. When I woke up, it was dark, and not even my wolf vision could help me see where I was. All I could hear were the sounds coming from the far end of the cave. It seemed like Maurice was talking to some people out there. I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds till I could decipher the murmurs and whispers.

“Yes, the crates are all accounted for,” someone hissed. “We made sure to empty the cove before we left.”

“Good, then we must continue our shipping from here. No one’s going to suspect we’re here,” Maurice said.

“But what about the wolf you’ve got in there,” another voice spoke.

“Oh, she’s just my little pet. It gets boring in there, you know. Especially now that I can’t go out in the open, thanks to that whole fiasco, so, yeah, I’m going to entertain myself with her, and when I’m done, we’ll send a little message to Wilhelm Grimm. Show him that he’s not all that powerful,” Maurice said.

Even though I could see nothing, the accents of the people speaking to Maurice were distinct enough to make me realize they were vampires. The

context I gathered from their conversation was quite clear. They were using this second location as their smuggling hub now that the cove was deserted.

He had underestimated me. In his pride and anger, Maurice had unwittingly led me to the one place he shouldn't have. If only I could get out of these shackles, I could put an end to this operation.

While there was nothing else to do, I lay on the floor, my eyes closed in concentration, and tried to get in touch with Will. What people like Maurice did not understand was that bonds between fated mates did not rely upon factors like distance and time to work. Bonds like ours transcended all such limitations.

At least, I hoped that was true.

Will. Are you there? I'm stuck somewhere terrible, I called out with all the strength left in me.

Chapter 14: Will

It felt like a gunshot ringing in my ears. I woke up with a start, tugging at my chest, expecting to see blood. There was so much pain emanating from my ribs that I felt like screaming. It had been a dreamless sleep, but at the last moment, I woke up to the sound of Alexis taking my name.

My body was sweating, and I was panting to catch my breath. My first instinct was to use my bond with her to see if she was all right. However, when I had earlier tried to use my bond, all I had gotten in return was just darkness. How would this time be any different?

Outside, the pack members had gone back to their homes and were sleeping off the events of the previous night. Today had been a very lazy day, at least for me. I just watched as most of the members of the pack helped put the commune back together, reinforced the boundaries, and made communal meals for everyone who had taken part in the battle. Most people were just happy to be alive and to have survived that ambush by the vampires. Some of them were feeling particularly brave after having beaten all of those vampires with a wolf within their midst.

The way they looked at me had changed considerably. There was more respect in their gaze, more reverence in their words, and whenever they approached me, they did so with a politeness that I felt was entirely involuntary on their part. Their behavior toward me was that of a deity. I figured that having seen me come back from the dead and then just within a

short time after that, witnessing my transformation must have reinforced the impression that I was some form of a supernatural creature of myth rather than just an ordinary werewolf like them.

While I wandered around the commune during the day, the people kept discussing over and over again the events of last night. The women talked of Alexis and how she had taken down several vampires to get the women and children back to safety.

Knowing that Alexis had come to my aid and had assisted the pack made me feel happy. But it was a bittersweet happiness, given that Alexis had shortly disappeared after her feat of bravery. The question remained, where had she disappeared? Ever since she had rescued the kids and the women, no one had seen her anywhere near the commune or even in the city.

When I tried to use my bond throughout the day, all I got was radio silence. Had she done something to sever our bond? Did such a spell exist that revoked one's matehood? I feared for the worst yet kept hope alive in my heart that the worst had not yet transpired. There was only one possibility other than the severing of our bond that would result in such silence from her end.

Her death.

If Alexis were dead, then it would break me beyond repair. I toiled with that thought all afternoon, and when I was unable to come to terms with it, I fell asleep, only to wake up to the sound of her ringing in my ears and my body aching as if it had been shot with a shotgun at point-blank range.

I raced out of my home and stepped out into the clear night. Unlike the ill-omen night of yesterday, tonight, the sky was clear, giving plenty of stars a

chance to shine their light and the moon to suspend majestically in the cloudless blue horizon.

There was no one outside except for me. On second thought, I should have worn something warm. I shivered on my way to Vincent's home, where I could see that the lights were turned on inside. I knocked just loud enough that he would hear me if he were already awake, not if he was fast asleep.

Upon my third knock, Vince opened the door. I could see from his face that he had not been sleeping. The odor coming from him told a story involving many strong alcoholic drinks and some tobacco.

"I never knew you to be a smoker," I said.

"I'm not. It's just...a very hard time for me right now," Vince said, slurring his words as drunks often do.

"Why are you so inebriated?" I asked, feeling a bit angry at his compromised disposition. The Vincent I knew was a man of strong character and never let anything get him down. I pushed my way into his home and closed the door behind me, secretly thankful that Vince had the central heating on in his home. "What's gotten into you?"

"Trust me, I'm fine. I was just taking all of dad's old things and throwing them out of my home. I don't want anything of that sick old freak in my home. When I was done throwing everything out, the only two things that remained were a pack of Virginia Slims and a bottle of whiskey that he had tied a bow on top. I'm guessing it was for some special occasion. Anyway, I decided that it'd be a better use for both things that I smoked the cigs and drank the whisky rather than throw them out. One thing led to the other, and here I am. Although, I will admit I am feeling a bit gloomy," Vince said.

“Cut that out,” I said sternly, heading into Vincent’s kitchen to prepare some coffee. I needed him sober right now, not in this drunken state. Vince sat down behind me on the kitchen counter, rubbing his head.

“I might be drunk, but I’m aware enough to hear your troubles and help you with anything. I am the second in command, after all. So, what is it?” he asked.

I passed him a cup of black coffee and waited for him to take a few sips before unburdening myself on him.

Vincent drank the steaming cup of coffee, then shook his head vigorously. “Goddamn, that’s strong.”

“Listen to me,” I said, seating myself beside him. “Something is going on, and I am not entirely certain what it is. It’s about Alexis.”

Upon hearing her name, all traces of drunkenness were dispelled from Vincent’s face. He took another sip of coffee, then stared at me intently, hanging on to my every word.

“She’s not here. People have looked for her all around the commune and even in the city, but there isn’t a single sign of her anywhere. I have tried to use my bond with her, but all I’m getting back is pure darkness. I could do with your assistance,” I said, taking a sip from my coffee.

“She can’t be dead,” Vincent said. “Last I checked, you were still her mate. A mate feels the death of his woman so terribly that the pain becomes more than just emotional agony. It transforms into physical anguish that grips your entire body. At least, that’s what the elders used to say. Or the romantic wolves who used to write poetry after their mates had died. In any case, you

haven't had any such pains, have you?"

It made me suddenly very afraid to mention the pain I had experienced when I woke up, but in the face of the greater issue, I chose not to hide things and told Vincent what I had felt and how I had heard her voice.

"That's not bad news, then!" Vince said with fervor, getting up from his stool all of a sudden. "Have you tried tapping into the bond right now?"

"I'm trying, but it's all silent. That's why I am so afraid," I said.

"But she contacted you. So she's alive. Now that that's out of the way let's ascertain in which condition she's alive. For someone to be so untethered, they'd have to be quite weak and injured. Do you think something bad has happened to her? Is that why maybe the bond isn't working as it is supposed to?" Vincent asked.

I didn't respond right away. Instead, I focused on our bond and closed my eyes, hoping to contact her. All I could see was pure darkness.

Alexis? I called out, praying to all the gods that she'd respond.

It was then that I heard her voice, so faint, so weak, but unmistakably hers: *I'm stuck somewhere terrible.*

I gasped in pain as the bond intensified, allowing me to feel what she was feeling. She was experiencing crippling pain all over her body. Alexis was tied, and her mouth had been taped. But I still could not see where she was.

"She's alive," I whispered, my body covered in sweat for the second time since I woke up. I struggled to stand up, holding Vincent for support. "But she's been beaten up, tied down, and weakened. That's why the bond isn't

working as I want it to.”

I looked into Vincent’s eyes and saw that he was completely sober and just as worried as I was.

“There’s no time to waste. I have to go find her,” Vincent said.

“Why you? Why not me?” I asked, feeling my temperature rise.

“Because you’ve just been the Alpha for less than a day. The pack needs you for guidance. You can’t just go on your solitary quests like before. You’re accountable to the people. They need you more than ever. Let’s face it; you don’t know the lay of the land as well as I do. Logistically speaking, Alexis couldn’t have gone far in a single day. At least not that far. We can assume that wherever she is, she’s close by. Don’t forget that Blair and my dad are still out there, and if either of them came across her last night, they might have kidnapped her as retribution,” he said.

“I will not sit idly by while her life is in danger,” I growled.

“Then do the wise thing. Delegate the task to your pack members. Have half of them go look in town and see if Blair has had anything to do with it, and have the other half go see if this is Maurice’s doing. I’ll go and scout the entire area and see if the surviving vampires have taken her. It’s a lot of work to do, and it needs a lot of people. You can’t go on spreading yourself too thin. For fuck’s sake, you’re the alpha. So many lives depend on you. Not just Alexis’s!”

I grabbed Vincent by his shoulders and shook him. “Don’t you see how hard it is for me to just wait and do nothing?”

“You’re not doing nothing!” Vincent spoke loudly. “You’re our leader, our

captain, our alpha. While you're here in the pack, no one can attack us, knowing that you are alive and have returned and are ready to defend your people and your land from any threat that comes your way. You need to start trusting other people, especially those in your pack. Look. I'm not even going to wait for the morning. I'm going to scout for Alexis right now."

With that, he started putting on his shoes and his jacket.

"If you come across danger, you call me," I said, handing him his phone.

"Ah, the student has become the master," Vincent said whimsically. "I remember a day when you didn't trust these phones."

"Well, needs must when the devil drives," I said bitterly. "I still don't trust these phones, but I have got to admit that they're convenient."

"Protect the pack. Their very lives depend on you. Imagine what would have happened if you hadn't shown up last night. We would have all been dead," Vincent said.

"You have my word," I said, waving at him as he left his home.

In the silence of his home, I tried to use my bond again, but this time, just as before, all I got back was darkness. Pain, silence, and darkness.

It was the break of dawn when I rang the bell at the commune center, assembling all the men in the square. They were still rubbing their eyes, yawning, and stretching their limbs as they gathered around me.

"We are not out of danger," I began. "Two threats still exist out there. I do

not ask a lot of you, just that you go in groups and see what Blair and Maurice are doing. I must implore you not to go alone. These are cunning men who possess more than just weapons and wits. They have trickery up their sleeves and many devious resources at their disposal, making them a force to reckon with. Today, none of us shall rest until we can ascertain that both those parties are no longer an immediate threat to us. Go where you have to, whether it's in the town or the areas around it. Scour every last bit. Report back to me if something dubious is happening. If there's a reason to attack, we attack as one. A pack's strength is in its unity. Whatever we have to do, we'll do it together."

"What if we come across Maurice? Last time I checked, he was still the mayor," a man asked from the pack.

His question roused the rest of the crowd, all of whom started sharing their suggestions of what they'd do to him if they found him.

"No. There will be none of that. He's a werewolf. Even though he has betrayed us time and again, he must pay for his crimes. Justice should prevail over revenge. If he's found, he must be brought here to answer for all his wrongdoings. There will be a fair trial," I said. "Of course, all the evidence against him will eventually prove him guilty. Of that, there's no doubt. But regardless, he will get his trial. You cannot kill him if you find him. Only the alpha holds such authority. However, I do permit you to kill any vampires that you come across. They didn't mean to spare us, so why should we?"

The crowd became rejuvenated at the prospect of hunting vampires. Many men started chanting, shouting, and cheering amongst themselves. I wasn't done yet. I held up my hand and silenced them all.

“Half of you will go into the town today. You will see what Blair is doing if he’s there at all. Chances are that he’s gone into hiding after yesterday’s events. You will carry out a search nonetheless. The other half will check Fiddler’s Cove and all the adjoining areas. You will also check to see if Maurice is lurking around. Keep in mind that most of his resources are tied up in the town, giving him little reason to escape. Should either group come across Blair or Maurice, I ask that you bring them alive back to the commune to face justice for their crimes.”

I had to give the men some specific instructions on how to carry out the scouting mission. When all was done, and both groups of men were sent out to their respective missions, I wasted no second and assembled all the women and children in the same square.

“Last night was a challenge for all of you. Many of you have not fought at all, what with so many of you being children and young girls. Some of you fought valiantly, I have heard. I intend for all of you to equip yourselves with the tools and techniques that allow you to fend for yourselves whenever something like this happens again. As far as I am concerned, every one of you is a werewolf. A werewolf should strike fear into the heart of their enemies. We should all be strong enough to hold our own. Those who seek to cause us harm should cower from us, not the other way around. Let last night be a reminder that danger is always lurking nearby and that every single one of us should be ready at all times. Now, I don’t expect everyone to become a skilled warrior within a day or two, but what we can do is start learning. Is that something that all of you can agree upon?”

The women and children were silent at first but slowly began nodding and voicing their acknowledgment.

“Then we shall start a separate training session for the kids and the women so that we’re all ready for anything that comes our way,” I said, passing a smile at the crowd gathered before me. “Know this: You are all Grimms, and the Grimms are a strong creed. We have weathered the worst of storms and have seen empires rise and fall. We will persevere.”

After the children and women were dismissed, I tried to do everything within my power to hold myself back from going out. Vincent was right. This was a leap of faith, a trust fall. As hard as it was for me to stay behind, it was essential that I did. It was the only way I could bring myself to trust my pack and believe in them.

Otherwise, I was bound to make the same mistake as I did last time. Had I attacked Beckett Tower that night with the entire pack with me, Alexis and I would have been spared that humiliating defeat.

While the men were off on their missions and the women and children were busy with their chores and schoolwork, I walked around the outer boundary wall of the Grimm Abode, checking to see if the fortifications were intact. It was tiring work, as the boundary extended several miles, but by the end, I had exhausted myself enough to put my mind off Alexis.

It was late in the afternoon that I came back home quite weary from my inspection. Rather than eat or drink, I sought the comfort of my bed.

Sleep would do me good, considering that I’d had several sleepless nights in a row.

Or so I thought.

It wasn’t very deep into my sleep that I was greeted by the most visceral and

horrible nightmare I had ever seen in my life.

It was Alexis, covered in blood, her face lifeless and frozen in an expression of pure fear. She lay sprawled all over the floor. I tried as hard to avert my gaze from her face, but my own fear prevented me from looking anywhere else.

Her eyes had been torn out, leaving two hollow and bloodied sockets.

I woke up screaming, and it wasn't until I had made my throat hoarse that I realized from the alarm clock on my bedside table that I'd only been asleep for half an hour. The sun was still out, and people were gathered outside in the commune.

To hell with waiting and watching.

I shot out of my bed, got hurriedly dressed, and exited my home, adamant that I'd return only when I'd found Alexis.

In all my years of witnessing horror and experiencing torture, I had never come across something so mortifying as that nightmare. Even now, when I was completely awake, that sinister vision danced before my eyes menacingly.

Chapter 15: Alexis

Maurice did not have the heart to keep torturing me. That much was clear after the first few hours. He tried, I'd give him credit for that, but he was not built for it. He was pretty resourceless in this cave, with nothing but a taser at his disposal. There were only so many times he could zap me before it got tediously boring. What was worse for him was my resolve not to show him any emotion while I was being tortured. Sometimes, the pain drew a tear or two, but in that depressingly dark place, those tears might as well be invisible to him. Besides, he had forgotten the prime rule in deriving pleasure from torturing someone: He had forgotten to remove the tape from my mouth, making it easy for me to hide my screams.

“I’ll just leave you to starve, then,” he said tiredly. The battery on his taser had died. From the commotion coming from the other end of the cave, it seemed that he had some visitors. “Maybe when I come back, we’ll try cleaving your skin and seeing if that puts some pep in you. Sooner or later, you’re going to give me what I want.”

It seemed that Maurice’s thinking faculties had taken quite a steep fall. His thoughts were scattered all over the place. His actions seemed to lack conviction. Even as he had tortured me, it felt like he was doing a half-hearted job. His spirit was broken. Even if he didn’t say it out loud, every single action of his spoke of a very tired man on the brink of giving up. In one day, he had lost so much—his pack, his vampire co-conspirator, and his standing as the mayor of the town.

I used this to my advantage, naturally. Whenever he was not in the room, I tugged at my ropes to loosen them. It wasn't until I had loosened them quite a bit that I realized that I could simply shift my hands into their wolf form and tear away at the ropes. It was a novel idea, but one that I had never tried before.

Given my current state, there was no better opportunity to try this semi-shift than right now. I focused my shifting intent on just my hands. There was some strain tugging at my wrists, but I persevered as slowly, my hands turned into paws, and then claws came out from where my nails used to be.

With a single slash, I tore the ropes binding my arms. Then, I quickly tore the ones that were holding my feet. I shifted myself back, taking off the tape from my mouth.

It felt so comforting just to be able to stand. I hid myself behind one of the cave walls and stretched my limbs till I could move without any pain. I could hear the sounds coming from above me now. This cave had several floors, and Maurice was using many of these floors to carry out his smuggling operations with the vampires. What else could he be doing shackled up in this dump?

Once the pain of being bound in ropes had left my body, I did the next logical thing—plotting my escape. Behind me, there was just a big black cave wall. After touching its surface all over in the dark, I discovered that it was impenetrable and inescapable. I could not risk shifting into a wolf and breaking free from the metal bars that were holding me prisoner here. That would only attract Maurice's attention, and he'd come back with vampire reinforcements. Free though I was, I was not strong enough to fend myself against Maurice and his bloodsucking cronies.

It wasn't long after that Maurice's voice rang through the cave. He was coming back, and apparently, he was not alone.

"Some of you are as old as Ralph, and I reckon you're even stronger. Now is not the time to give up, men. I don't know how you elect your leader, but this would be the ripe time to do it. Together, we can still get ahead of this situation. Think of it this way; the wolves are not expecting any retaliation right now, are they? They're comfortable in the knowledge that they've won and driven us out," Maurice said.

I squinted against the metal bars and saw three silhouettes standing in the distance. Two of them were unmistakably wearing the long coats characteristic of vampires. The third stout silhouette undoubtedly belonged to Maurice.

"How can we ever trust you again? It was you who suggested that we ambush the wolves in the first place. I think that you're working with them, playing the role of a double agent. Who gained from that ambush? Our leader died, and so many of us were killed in that battle. On top of that, our reduced numbers meant that we had to leave the cove. So, Maurice, let there be no misunderstanding. We do not trust you," the vampire snarled.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Maurice yelled. "Ralph was a friend of mine for the longest time. It was with him that I killed Wilhelm Grimm. Admit it, none of us knew that he was going to come back. How can you even suggest that I was with the wolves? Don't forget that the business was as much mine as it was yours. Half-half, those were the terms. I'm hit just as much as you are. Why else do you think we're operating from this fucking shithole?"

"Prove it," the second vampire said.

“Prove it how?” Maurice slapped his forehead.

“The bitch in there. She’s a werewolf, isn’t she? Go bring her out. Kill her in front of us. That’s the only way we’re going to believe that you’re telling us the truth,” the vampire said.

“Fine. Although I was saving her for some personal vengeance of mine, I can do this much for you out of respect for what we’ve all been through. If that’s what it takes to get your trust back, then very well. Come with me, and I’ll maybe even let you have the honor of ending her life in the way you see fit,” Maurice said.

“Heh, maybe you’re not a bad egg after all,” the vampire chuckled.

I could make a run for it. The entrance to the cave wasn’t that far off by the looks of the light coming from the end of the tunnel. All I had to do was run past Maurice and the two vampires. I could even do that without shifting.

To err on the side of caution, I shifted into my wolf form, acknowledging that due to my weakness and being trapped for so long, my form wasn’t at full strength. It was probably because of this compromised state that I wasn’t able to contact Will with my bond. That would come later.

In all the time that I’d spent in Maurice’s prison, I had made up my mind that if and when I got out, I’d go back to Will and talk things over. I’d hear the truth from his mouth and forgive him. I yearned for his earnest embrace and the sensation of his lips touching mine. What the fuck did it matter if he had taken Ariana’s name or not. He was alive, and last I checked, he had claimed that he loved me. It wasn’t like Will to lie.

As Maurice and the vampires neared the metal bars, I readied myself to

pounce and tucked myself behind the wall.

“What the fuck?” Maurice gasped. “I swear she was here!”

“Is this one of your tricks, Maurice? See, I knew we couldn’t trust you. You let that bitch free!” the vampire yelled.

“I swear she was just here. It’s not possible,” Maurice said. I could hear him jangling the keys in his hands. He swung open the metal door and came inside the cell.

At that exact moment, I lunged forward from behind the wall and collided with Maurice, pushing him aside. As I ran past the metal door, I saw from the corner of my eyes that the vampires were chasing me viciously. But it did not matter. The entrance was so near. I could see the light coming closer and closer.

I pushed myself to run harder, even when doing so meant straining all my muscles. But when I reached the so-called entrance, I realized that what I had been mistaking for the light of the sun was, in fact, light coming from overhead lamps.

This was not outside, far from it. I was still inside the cave. It was a vast network of sprawling caves in every direction, all of them lit by lamps and lanterns. Which way led out?

I couldn’t just stand there and calculate the odds of which exit led outside. The vampires and Maurice were on my tail. Instead, I just ran down the slope into the next cavern and came across several crates of blood packed in there. From cavern to cavern I ran, noting everything that was stacked in those caves while trying to find out which way led out of this abysmal maze of

caves. There was no air nor light to guide me.

Will! I called out. *If you're there, please come quickly. Find me. I'm outnumbered.*

I hoped that this message would reach my mate before it'd be too late. Behind me, the two vampires and Maurice had caught up to me finally. What with so many cave entrances, there was no way for me to go without knowing for certain which way led out.

As I turned around, the two vampires flanked me from each side, and Maurice ran at me from the front. Knowing this was my only chance to save myself, I did not back down from this fight. Instead of tackling Maurice head-on, I attacked the vampire from the right.

Perhaps I had already defeated so many vampires and had gotten used to fighting them, or perhaps this particular vampire was still weary from his battle in the field. It only took one slash on my part to bring him down on his knees, holding his slit neck in his hands, bleeding out and looking at me with shock and horror.

The second one gave me a bit of a challenge, as rather than come at me directly, he took out a pistol and began shooting at me.

“Don't shoot at the goods!” Maurice yelled at him. I looked around and saw that blood was leaking out of several of the crates. The sight and smell of blood momentarily distracted the second vampire, allowing me to attack him and yank the gun out of his hand.

Without his weapon, he was just as helpless as his friend. I bit down on his head and pulled it, tearing it off his shoulders.

Now, it was just Maurice and me.

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag, or rather, the wolf’s out of the cage,” Maurice said. “Seeing as how you’ve seen the inside of my backup layer, you have to understand that I can’t let you out of here alive. That is, you can try to escape, but where exactly will you run off to? It’s not like there are directions written on the cave walls. I’m giving you this one chance to give up and go back to your cell. Otherwise, I’m going to have to kill you right here and now.”

I howled at broke into a run toward him. I would rather die than go back to that cell. As I lunged at him, Maurice shifted and caught me in mid-air, then pinned me to the ground.

He put his claw right over my face and pressed deeper. As he growled loudly, digging his claws deep into my face, a crashing sound came from up above, catching him off guard. I took my shot and threw him off, then raced off in the direction of the sound.

I had learned the hard way that even though he was not much of a werewolf, Maurice was too strong for me to take him on by myself.

As I ran for my life, he chased me, crashing into the crates, toppling them over, causing cascades of blood to fall onto the cavern floor, creating an utterly macabre sight. The entire network of caves stank with the smell of stale blood.

Even though I was being chased, I still registered all the caves where the crates were kept. Before I’d get out, I would somehow find a way to destroy this entire network of caves so that Maurice wouldn’t ever be able to smuggle even a drop of blood from Fiddler’s Green ever again.

After going through cave after cave, I became completely lost, not knowing where I was headed. Maurice gained on me from behind, leaving me no other choice but to enter the only cave that was ahead of me. As I ran through the darkness, I crashed into a solid wall, and to my horror, when I turned around, I saw that I was back in the cell again.

Before I could run back through the open metal door, Maurice shifted just in time and clanged the door shut.

“I’m going to give you a second to cool down,” he said fiercely. “Then I’m coming back with blowtorches and pliers. First, I’m going to rip your fingers apart, and then I’m going to set fire to all that fur.”

Exhausted, I let out one last weak signal to Will, *Please, wherever you are, come find me.*

Chapter 16: Will

The bond had never been this precarious and unpredictable before. Even when I was on the verge of death, it had directed me to Alexis with certainty. At times, the bond had deliberately debilitated me from doing anything else other than pursuit Alexis, and this was at a time when I had rejected her as my mate. Had the bond not done that, I wouldn't have rescued her from Blair's the first time around. Had the bond not so obstinately guided me, I wouldn't have tracked her down to Bangor. But as adamantly helpful as the bond had been in those times, it had suddenly chosen to be vague and furtive.

I could not admit to myself this terrifying truth, that the reason why the bond had suddenly gone silent was not because it had suddenly devolved into a demonic tether that joyed itself by playing mental tricks on me, such as conjuring up visions of my dead mate but because Alexis was dead for real. Maybe that's why when I tugged at the bond, it did not tug back in response. Perhaps it knew better that it was over. Or maybe this was its way of punishment.

In all the time that I had spent studying werewolves and their mystery, I had never come across any text stating that bonds were capable of being aware enough to dole out judgment.

"What's the word, Vince?" I asked a very dejected-looking Vincent standing in front of me, his eyes down, his hands crossed solemnly. Throughout the evening, the men that I had sent out had been coming back to me in groups of

twos and threes, telling me that they found no signs of Alexis and Maurice anywhere. When I inquired about Blair and his goings-on at the Beckett Pharma tower, they told me that the tower was closed with an “Under Construction” sign hung up at the doors and that there was no one inside. This created more questions than it answered, leading me to worry about one more thing—the whereabouts of Blair.

Knowing Blair, I knew he had unfinished business with me and would want to avenge his father’s death now that he knew I was still alive. His mobilization had made it trickier for me to anticipate his next attack. Now that he knew I was alive and well, it would only be a matter of time before he did something.

“Vince? Would you please say something? Don’t get me started on how this was your idea all along. You said that an Alpha delegates. Well, I delegated, and so far, no one has come back with any news at all. I don’t think they’re being diligent enough, and this state of not knowing has vexed me!” I said, my voice raising beyond my control. “What good am I as an Alpha if I sit idly? On that note, what good are my pack members to me if they’re not even trying?!”

“It’s not that they’re not trying, Will,” Vince said in a placating tone. I could not help but feel that he was trying to patronize me right now. I did not need to be calmed; I needed results. “It’s just that there’s nothing to report. I personally went over every single place, every nook, and cranny, and even I could not find anything. Face it, our foes have fled, and so has Alexis. If there’s nothing to find, not even the best detective in the world can find it. You’re letting your emotions get the better of you. We’re all on your side here, and we’re all doing everything that we can to help you.”

“It’s not much,” I said gruffly, grabbing my jacket and heading out the door. I was within my rights to be infuriated. I had overestimated the pack and had considered them competent enough to carry out my command. A dark part of me wondered what would have happened if I hadn’t jumped in to save the day. Would they all have perished in the culling fields?

I shook my head, trying to get that negative thought out of my head. It wasn’t until I had walked out of the commune and was heading down the sloped road leading to Fiddler’s Green that the epiphany came to me. These pack members were not sloppy. For that matter, they were not idiots either. They had just never seen war-time as I had. All of these people were raised in peacetime. That sort of thing went a long way in shaping a person. It was not a tall leap to make, this assumption that they were all complacent as a result of having lived generally peaceful lives.

When I was born, the First World War was wrapping up. I had to grow up and see all the hardships that come with the aftermath of warfare. People starving in the streets. Men fighting over bread. Orphaned children wandering the streets, their cheeks wet from tears shed over their deceased parents. It was a horrible sight to behold. I had barely become a man when the Second World War plummeted the entirety of Europe into an even bigger nightmare. Warplanes serenaded the fields with carpet bombs, cavalry blew up peaceful villages in the name of clearing out enemy areas, and brother murdered brother in the name of loyalty.

I had never known rest or peace, not even after I had moved to America. Within a short period of my arrival here, a deranged occultist imprisoned and mutilated me. The only semblance of peace that my life had was the time I had spent with Alexis. Only in those brief moments did I feel like I was just a regular human being, living a normal life, being at peace with who I was.

So, my pack members were not to blame. I was. I had expected more of them than they could deliver. It was about time that I rectified that situation.

I stood at the precipice of the cliff, staring deep into the still ocean water. At this point, scrying was my only resort. I had never tried it before, and it was not recommended to scry after the sun had gone down, but what other choice did I have? If my bond had suddenly turned malevolent and was showing me images of Alexis dead, and all my pack members had turned up empty-handed, my only resort was magic.

Normally, a seasoned witch or someone gifted with an innate sense of magic could scry whenever they wished. As I was neither a practitioner of magic nor gifted with dormant mana, I could only reach out into the beyond with hopes that the beyond would reach back and nudge me in a helpful direction.

I tried hard to stare at the surface of the water, hoping to see something mystical or ethereal, but all I could see was the reflection of the moon on the water. Until that is, I saw something that had no business being there.

Fiddler's Cove was a mile to my left. Fiddler's Green rested silently to my right. From where I stood, I could see all the ships leaving the harbor in Fiddler's Green. Those ships I could account for. But what was this little ferry coming out of Fiddler's Cove? Hadn't all the vampires been driven out? Or, rather, hadn't they fled after their leader died at my hands?

It amazed me how my eyesight had improved since I unlocked the wolf within. Even though I was as far away from that boat as one could possibly be, I could make out the outline of two men wearing long coats. Vampires,

who else? They had crates tied to the ferry. This could only mean one thing. The smuggling operation was still somehow continuing. It was not a difficult deduction to make. With Ralph dead, it was without a doubt Maurice who was still running this operation, and his greed had just made him commit a fatal mistake.

I now knew where he was. It was not clear to me if Alexis was with him or not, but at least this way, I'd get to tie up one more loose end.

After descending from the cliff, I shifted into my wolf form and gradually entered the deepest part of the forest, which led to Fiddler's Cove. Even though I knew the vampires were not there anymore, I couldn't help but be wary. This was, after all, my enemy's territory. The last time I had entered an enemy's territory, I had gotten shot, injected, and ended up dead. This time, I was not going to be so brash.

But it turned out there was nothing to be brash about. The cove was empty from the inside. The vampires had turned this place into a hanging city of sorts, with metal containers serving as makeshift rooms and storage spaces for the drugs and blood shipments that they had been smuggling.

Even though it was abandoned, the place smelled of vampires. The very air reeked of blood and death. With my hand on my nose, I sifted through the mess and tried to uncover any signs that might lead me to Maurice. I had seen the ferry leave from the cove's inner harbor. This meant that the vampires were still using this place in some capacity.

As I walked from one corner of the cove to the other, I couldn't help but feel that there was some unnatural heaviness dwelling in the air, as if the place had been desecrated with dark magic. I could sense that dark magic pressing

on me, causing my head to spin. It was as if the vampires had written sigils on the walls to ward off others from this place.

The vampires were not known to use ancient magic. Their only magical distinction was the corrupted and perverted nature that beckoned them to drink blood. It was their only tether that joined them to the world of the supernatural. This was not prejudice that was making me think along these lines. This was the truth, as had been stated in books and as I had observed firsthand.

If the vampires were using magic, it was because someone had shown it to them.

It did not take me long to uncover the first rune that was etched on the cove wall. I immediately recognized it as belonging to the Elder Futhark, the runic language of the Norse folk and the Vikings. This only served to confirm my suspicions. We, the werewolves, had descended from the Norse folk, who had been the original shapeshifters. Loki, Odin, Freya, and several of the gods and goddesses possessed the power to shapeshift. Through our worship, veneration, and meditation, many of our ancestors unlocked this power. That is how the werewolves had propagated throughout the world. Shapeshifting was, however, not the only ability that had been carried through the generations. Runic magic and divination were two other forms as well.

What I was seeing on the cove walls was runic magic. Inscriptions were made to ward off trespassers and to hide the cove from the outside world. I could read these inscriptions, understand their meaning, and follow their trail throughout the cove. From wall to wall, I continued reading the warding spells till their tracks led me out of the cove. Someone had meticulously carved these runes furtively along the forest path. It was only a matter of

following these runes to see where they ended.

As the night darkened, I found it increasingly difficult to look through the forest and find the runes, so I shifted. With my beastly vision, I could discern the markings much more easily.

Now, I was well out of the jurisdiction of Fiddler's Green. Even the cove was several miles behind me now. Yet the runes were still scattered here and there, written on the rocks, carved into the trees, etched into the forest floor itself.

When my tracking led me down a steep path by the sea, it finally dawned on me. Everything clicked into place at once as I saw the cave entrance and the ship tied to it.

Of course, it was Maurice. Maurice must have given the vampires a book or two from our library, allowing them to use this runic magic to ward the werewolves off. It felt blasphemous, knowing that the vampires had taken our magic and had used it against us.

Now I knew what had been happening. The reason I was not able to connect with Alexis through my bond was etched in front of me in the form of a dissonance spell written in the old Norse tongue. This was a much more recent carving, done haphazardly and in a hurry. Without a doubt, Maurice was in there along with Alexis.

I took a jagged rock and began to scratch away the runes carved in front of the cave entrance. As soon as I did that, my bond with Alexis reawakened with such brute force that I was caught off balance.

Immediately, I could see a much clearer vision of Alexis, a vision that

showed her alive but trapped. She was in a prison of sorts, and it looked like she had been badly bruised. My blood boiled upon seeing her in such a compromised state.

Alexis, I reached out.

Will. I tried to feel you. The bond didn't work, she said.

Are you okay?

I don't know how much longer I can hold on. It's Maurice, Will. He's kept me in here, she said.

And he was shrewd enough to use runic magic to counter our bond. That's why we couldn't get in touch with each other, I said. But I took care of that.

Are you near? She asked hopefully.

I am at the cave's entrance, but I'll need your help. Make some noise so I can track you down, I said.

I realized the very second that I had gotten into the cave that it was an intricate web of smaller caves, all of them joined together in the form of a labyrinth. It was immense and stacked with boxes and crates. I tore open a crate and confirmed my worst suspicion. Maurice was running the smuggling business from here. These crates were filled with drugs and blood.

Before I could dig deeper, a shrill scream rang through the caves. I could recognize that voice anywhere. The scream resounded again, this time in the form of a single word: "Help!"

I raced forward into the cave, trying to locate the source of the sound.

“Quiet down, you fucking bitch,” Maurice yelled from somewhere deep within the caves.

“Will’s going to come to find me, you know,” she said. “He’s probably here.”

“I’d like to see him try. He can’t find us. No one can. I made sure to—” Before Maurice could say something else, I stepped behind him.

“You made sure to place warding runes on the walls,” I said. It gave me immense pleasure to see the look of sheer terror on his face as he turned around to face me. He was a quivering mess of a man as he realized that his plan had been foiled yet another time, possibly for the last time.

“How the fuck are you here?” Maurice gasped.

“Well, I could say that you did a hell of a sloppy job with the runes, leaving them all over the place for anyone with two brain cells to pick up their track. Or I could say something far more fitting. It’s the end of the road for you. Your retribution stares at you. Death is at your doorstep, you son of a fucking bitch,” I said, and before he could respond, I grabbed him by the neck and threw him against the bars of Alexis’s prison.

He clanged so hard against the iron door that the door swung open inwards. Maurice’s blood splattered the cave floor as he lay there unconscious, unmoving.

I stepped inside the prison and came face to face with Alexis, who looked like she had been severely beaten up.

“You came,” she said, slowly approaching me, her face pulled back in surprise and relief. She placed her hands on my shoulders and pulled me closer. “All this time, I thought I was hallucinating. I didn’t think you’d come

for real.”

“When it concerns you, I will cross the threshold of life and death if it meant getting close to you,” I said, holding her by the small of her back and bringing her body against mine.

Instead of saying anything, Alexis, buried her face in my chest, breathing deeply. I hugged her fiercely, feeling relief course through my body as her body came into such close proximity to mine. It felt right and long overdue. But this was not the right time for a reunion.

Not while Maurice still drew breath.

As I let go of her, I saw that Maurice had somehow gotten up and escaped, leaving both of us trapped inside the prison.

“Isn’t that just wonderful?” he said, gleaming from the other side. “I catch the bitch, and the dog follows soon after, doesn’t he?”

“You have an awfully big mouth for someone who has lost everything,” I said calmly, knowing that there was nowhere for Maurice to escape and that the prison he had seemingly captured us in was nothing in the wake of my newfound strength.

“The two of you robbed me of everything. Allow me to repay the favor,” Maurice said, taking out a pistol from behind.

“I’d much rather you paid attention to your head,” I said, retaining my calmness. There was no way he was going to hurt Alexis or me. Not now. Not when fate had deigned us to come together again. “You’re bleeding like a faucet.”

“Enough!” Maurice yelled and pulled the trigger.

I preemptively grabbed Alexis and ducked, not knowing where the bullets would land.

Chapter 17: Alexis

I yelled in shock when Maurice pulled the trigger, but Will held me and ducked sideways.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice tranquil, his face the epitome of peacefulness.

“I am, but in case you didn’t notice, Will, we’re fucking trapped,” I said helplessly as I watched Maurice fiddle with his pistol and aim at us again.

“No, we’re not,” Will said, and before we could discuss a plan of action, he shifted into his new form and turned into a wolf that loomed so large that his presence filled the entire cave. With one single powerful tackle, he brought down the iron bars, clearing the way for us.

I’m going to get even with Maurice, he said, racing after Maurice, who had ditched his pistol and had decided to run away for dear life.

I’ll blow this place up to kingdom come, I said. *No one’s ever going to smuggle so much as a drop of blood out of Fiddler’s Green ever again.*

Good girl, Will said approvingly before breaking into a run and disappearing around the corner. As I looked, I saw the flash of gunshots come from around the corner, followed by the resounding bang that rang across the caves. I was not worried for Will. His new form was powerful enough to withstand close-range gunshots. I was worried about myself. Amid the excitement that had

ensued after Will's sudden appearance, I had forgotten how deplorable my condition was—I was dirty, starved, thirsty, and on the brink of passing out. On top of all that, I had overcommitted by saying that I'd destroy this entire lair.

How would I go about doing that?

I struggled out of the cave and came into the clearing of the central tunnel where Will and Maurice, both of them in their wolf forms, were engaged in a pretty one-sided battle. Will thrashed the hell out of Maurice, threw him around the tunnel, and mauled him brutally every chance he got. Maurice whimpered, howled, and reeled away, trying to escape but failing to. Whenever he attempted to slide away, Will latched on to him and flung him across the tunnel.

I had bigger fish to fry than being a spectator in this battle. The caves had to be brought down upon each other. It was a good thing they were connected; otherwise, bringing down this network would require more explosives than I'd be able to procure. Even now, with what little consciousness I had left in my body, I had to sift through all the hundreds of boxes and find out where, if at all, Maurice had kept the firepower.

I needed dynamite, and I doubted if Maurice had a crate of dynamite just idly lying about. As callous as he had become, he wasn't going to be so careless as to just leave explosives in a series of dangerous caves. I needed something else. Anything that would help me blow this place up.

Behind me, the fight waged on harder than before, with Will beating Maurice into the crates, breaking them open, causing blood to flow from the sealed bags and pool on the floor. It was unclear whether Maurice was dripping with

his blood or the blood from all the smuggled packets that had ripped open.

From where I stood, it seemed unfair that Maurice had to fight Will. Will was easily three times larger in size and stature than Maurice. Compared to him, Maurice looked like a small dog. But then I remembered how Maurice was about to have all the werewolves killed, and the punishment did not seem so unfair then.

I couldn't just stand and stare now that I had my own mission to get to. This place had been a prison for me for just a day or two, but even so, I felt so much hate for it that I wanted to tear it down. Will had been trapped in Beckett's manor for seventy years. How must that have felt? There were dimensions to Will that I'd never understand, but fate had put me through such wringers that even though I'd never truly understand, I could at least comprehend their gravity.

I moved from one cave to the next, uncovering the boxes and seeing what was inside. Most of them contained blood as I had suspected, but every third or fourth one was filled with cocaine, ketamine, and heroin. None of the boxes contained anything that I needed. Until that is, I came to one particular crate that was tucked away from out of sight. When I slid it out, I saw that it contained around half a dozen remote controls and, underneath them, bricks of remote C4.

Why was Maurice holding a crate of remote detonative C4 in the cave? These were far too many for just one person to use. It did not matter. After today, no one would be able to use anything from these caves again.

I decided to make short work of the otherwise long and tiring task of setting up individual explosives all over the caves. Instead, I just set them up on the

pillars holding the caves up. There were ten big pillars spread throughout the cave network, all of which were bearing the entire weight of the network upon them. I put three C4 on every pillar and all the remaining ones in the boxes so that even if the cave weren't completely destroyed, at least all the smuggling merchandise would be.

With nothing more to do except pull the trigger on the remote control, I returned to the main tunnel where Will was still fighting with Maurice. I held just one controller in my hand, figuring that one explosion would trigger all the rest.

I saw Will shift back into his human form and hold Maurice's limp body in his hands. Maurice, also in his human form, was bleeding profusely. I could see that it was his blood as it was spurting from the deep gashes and injuries on his body.

"You're going to die, Will," Maurice said, spitting out more blood.

"Irony seems to be lost on you, Maurice. It isn't I who will die. At least not right now. Death can have me when I am ready for it. Today, death comes for you. Everything that you built has been destroyed. Your smuggling network, your relations with the vampires, and your power as the mayor and Alpha. It all ends today. Do you have any last words?" Will asked.

I joined Will, standing behind him, looking at Maurice's pathetic face as he tried to summon the courage to utter his final words.

"You think of me as your enemy," Maurice said, looking into Will's eyes. For the first time ever, I could see that there was no malice or spite in Maurice's eyes. Instead, there was just a somber sadness and defeat. "I am just a cog in the great machine that conspires against you. This madness

began long before I was born. I was trained for this my entire life, but by someone who harbored ill will against you from the start. Why else would there be so many elements working against you? Why would someone kidnap you and then imprison you? Have you ever thought of that?"

I could see Will's resolve faltering and his hands loosening their grip on Maurice.

"Who is it?" Will asked.

"Telling you that now, while I'm dying, would ruin all the fun, wouldn't it? If there's one vile thing I can do before I die, it's this. I'll make sure that you don't find out who it was who sold you to Edward Beckett, who struck the original deal with vampires to aid in the smuggling business, and who tried to kill you the moment you escaped from Beckett's manor."

"I call bullshit," I said, finally. I couldn't keep out of it. Maurice's final venomous words were making Will seethe from the inside. He was hurting.

"Why would you call bullshit? Your parents were killed by the same person," Maurice said. "This goes all the way to the top. The best part is, you might kill me, Blair, and Ralph, but the real culprit will still be alive. And you'll never know who they are!"

"Look at me," Will said, holding Maurice by his neck. "I have vanquished demons larger than you and your purported puppet master that you speak of. I have braved through the threshold of life and death. You have no idea what I am capable of doing. You could have done better. You had a son. He looked up to you. You could have been a good father to him. You were made mayor and selected alpha. Your life had so many opportunities to good, yet you availed none!"

“Fuck you and your old-fashioned sense of morality, Will Grimm. Kill me already,” Maurice spat.

I knew that having Maurice’s death on Will’s conscience would be too much for him, given that Will was Vince’s best friend.

“You won’t get the honor of dying at the hands of the Alpha,” I said, putting my hands on Will’s shoulders and making him step back from Maurice.

“Will. Please kill me. I’d rather have my death at the hands of the Alpha. At least, that would be an honorable death. Just don’t have this fucking bitch kill me,” Maurice pleaded, holding his hands out to Will.

Will scoffed, then turned away, saying, “You deserve it.”

I grabbed the pistol that was lying around, aimed it at Maurice’s head, then said, “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to do this.”

The last expression on Maurice’s face before I pulled the trigger was that of raw outrage. He could not perceive that someone like me, someone he had considered insignificant all his life, had the courage to kill him.

I pulled the trigger and watched the bullet lodge into his skull. I saw with satisfaction as his lifeless body fell limply into the puddle of blood. I could not believe it. Maurice was truly dead.

Finally, after all this time, the emotional burden that I had been carrying with me ever since that night at Beckett Tower slid off my shoulders and allowed me to breathe freely. The man who had been responsible for my entire life’s misery was no more. The vile person who had shot Will and had me thrown off a building had ceased to exist. Finally.

Now that he was dead, I could feel my soul and mind reclaiming Will. Now, it did not feel like he was the perpetrator of my mental agony. I no longer wanted to be away from him. With Maurice dead, I could understand that Will had been just as much a victim of Maurice's agenda as I had been.

"No more," I whispered.

"Freeing, isn't it? People who say that revenge is overrated and does not resolve anything truly do not know a thing about revenge," Will said.

"People can be such hypocrites sometimes," I said.

"I have missed you more than you can ever know," Will said, coming close to me, and holding my body, sending that familiar electric surge through my extremities. "The real you."

"Do you mind doing this in a place with no blood, no Maurice, and no smuggled shit?" I asked, breaking into a tired grin.

"I would very much like that," he said, taking my hand.

Now that there was no immediate danger—other than the explosives that I had planted all over the caves—finding my way out of the caves was easier than when I'd first tried to escape.

The second we got out, I breathed deeply and took in the fresh, salty sea air and let it revitalize me. I had never thought how much I would miss the smell of the sea.

"Before we do anything, just witness this," I said, holding out the detonator in my hand. "This ought to be satisfying."

Will's eyes lit up as he realized what I was going to do. We eagerly ran away

from the caves until we were a safe distance away, tucked behind the tree line.

“Press it,” Will said a little too excitedly.

I pressed the detonator.

Nothing happened at first. I came out from behind the tree line, followed by Will. Just as we had both stepped outside, the ground started quaking, followed by a deep rumble that resounded heavily until, all at once, an explosion happened, sending flames billowing out of the cave entrance. At first, the fire was just coming out as if from a furnace, but then another series of explosions took place, and right before our eyes, the cave imploded, falling upon itself.

“Holy shit!” I yelled, unable to hold myself back after witnessing such a spectacle. It was even more fantastic and chaotic than when we’d burned down Beckett manor.

I turned to face Will, who stood looking at me with the most sincere expression on his face.

“I would like to begin by saying how sorry I am for everything that happened,” he said.

I hurriedly went to him, putting my fingers on his lips. “Listen. Fuck the apologies. I am so done with the sorrying and the apologizing. We’re human, after all. Humans err. I do not hold you responsible for whatever it is you did. It wasn’t even anything that big, either. It was just me being a huge drama queen. In that cave, when Maurice had imprisoned me, I had so much time to reflect on my behavior. I was wrong. You love me. You’ve only ever loved

me. I know this now. I love you too. Just...let's just move past the apologies.”

“I never should have called out her name. I never should have died and left you alone. I am your mate, your protector, and I love you so much. You know this. I would move heaven and earth for you,” Will said, holding me in a delicate embrace.

“Come kiss me. I have longed for your touch,” I said, placing my hands on his face. “I...”

I couldn't finish my thought. I didn't even know what I was going to say. At long last, after such trials and tribulations, here was Will, kissing me again. And here I was, relishing the taste of my mate in my mouth, feeling the warmth and wetness of his lips as they plucked my lips, sucked on my tongue, and caressed the inside of my mouth.

I moaned quite loudly as he held me strongly and pinned me against a tree while still kissing me.

“I love you,” I said between the kisses.

“I love you so much,” Will responded, feeling my back and my breasts and planting his hands firmly on my hips as he kissed my neck, licked my chin, and then resumed kissing me with unending fervor.

There we stood, in the aftermath of the madness, amidst the flaming wreckage of the caves and the smoldering carcasses of the smuggled goods.

“Maurice is no more,” Will said after we managed to let go of each other.

“This leaves only Blair.”

“Yeah, but what about all the fucked up shit that Maurice said before he died?” I asked, my heart made uneasy by thinking that if Maurice’s statements had any underlying truth to them, it meant that someone far more ancient and bigger than we had imagined had been toying with our lives all this time. Who could it be?

“I am not worried about such a person,” Will said, and I could tell he had reached into my mind through our bond. “If such a threat exists, it should know by now that we are a force to be reckoned with. We have forever changed the topography of this place. Look around you. The vampires have fled. The evil werewolf who had wreaked havoc on this town is no more. I killed Ralph myself. What good is a puppet master without his puppets?”

“What about Blair?” I asked.

“He has fled as well. There is no sign of him in the city,” Will responded gravely. “As to where he’s fled, that’s unclear.”

What mattered most to me was that I had accepted Will back as my mate and had chosen to let go of the trauma that was serving as a hindrance in our relationship. It did not matter anymore. Not in the face of life and death. Not after what we had been through.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Will said, taking my hands in his and pulling me close. “I have a way of putting your mind at ease once and for all. I open my mind and soul to you. Use the bond and see within. I will hold back no secrets from you. Just access my consciousness and see for yourself whom I love, want, and desire.

It was so sudden, this invitation, that I didn’t fully understand what he was offering me.

“Are you serious?” I asked once the enormity of this commitment dawned on me.

“I will hold back nothing. You may see for yourself,” he said.

And so I did. I closed my eyes and traveled within his psyche using my bond, exploring everything. The violence of the war, the journey from Germany to America, the imprisonment under Beckett, and everything after that. I explored his feelings, just as he had asked me to, and nowhere in them did I find any adoration or love for anyone else other than myself. His entire soul throbbed like a heart, a heart that was in love with me. Now, I could see that he was telling the truth all this time. There was no Ariana in there. I saw the memory of him standing in that afterlife plain, talking to Ariana’s spirit, telling her that he was in love with me.

When it ended, this intimate connection, I felt nothing but love for him, and I knew that he had been telling me the truth all along.

Chapter 18: Will

I should have let her in my mind a long time ago. That would have made things so much easier. But it never occurred to me that it was a real possibility until we stood beside the burning carcass of the caves. It was a stroke of genius, a moment of pure inspiration. Up until then, I didn't even know that it was possible to let someone in your mind and soul like that.

But when it happened, it paved the way for trust and allowed our relationship to bloom again.

“What are you thinking about?” Alexis asked. She was in our bed, lying, completely covered by a blanket.

“I'm just wondering what I'm going to make you for breakfast,” I said, smiling at her. She was exhausted beyond comprehension, having braved imprisonment and torture. I had barely been able to get her back to Fiddler's Green. She had lost consciousness seven times during our journey, and by the end, I had to lift her and take her to my house. She slept for the entire night, and only now did she wake up after a whole twelve hours had passed.

I sat by her side all night, looking at her, worrying about her health, and thinking of all the things we'd do now that we were together again. I hadn't even gotten a chance to go to the pack and tell them I had taken care of Maurice. After all, this was not my news to share. It was someone else's.

“I could eat you for breakfast,” Alexis said, lowering her blanket. “Come

inside. Water's fine." She patted the empty bed beside her.

I wanted nothing more than to join her in bed, make love to her, and then fall asleep in her gentle arms. However, this was not the time for it. My mate was famished and weak. I had to take care of her.

"I'll get in after I've gotten some food in your belly," I said, smiling at her, then leaving for the kitchen. There wasn't much in the kitchen, as I hadn't had the opportunity to run to the market and grab fresh supplies. There were eggs, bread, bacon, orange juice, and cheese.

I hurriedly began frying the eggs and making toast. Then I put orange juice in a flask and put it in the tray. I also made a cup of coffee, knowing that Alexis loved drinking coffee. Once the eggs were fried, I removed them from the pan and put in the bacon. The air inside the kitchen was warm, smelled good. It even stoked my own hunger. I had overlooked how long I had gone without eating a proper meal. Perhaps, after Alexis had eaten breakfast, I would take her out for lunch and shopping.

I arranged the tray and went into the bedroom, placing the tray by her side on the bed.

"Oh, my God. I could eat it all," she said. "Maurice never fed me so much as a piece of stale bread. Didn't even give me a drop of water."

"How did he even capture you in the first place?" I asked, watching her eat the toast and the bacon. She sliced some of the cheese and put it on the toast, then made a sandwich with eggs and bacon and bit down on it.

"I was at the culling field. I saw you beat Ralph and everything. I wanted to come back to the pack, but then I thought that you wouldn't want me there.

You know, classic Alexis overthinking moment. Then I went to the cove and saw that it was abandoned. Maurice blindsided me there. Then he took me to that cave and kept talking about how I was going to be his one shot at revenge and blah-di-blah-blah-blah,” she said.

“He was completely deranged,” I commented. “By the end, he had lost his mind. But even with all of his thinking faculties gone, the greediness in him made him want to continue smuggling. What do you make of that?”

“I guess it means that the man was so attached to the money he was making on the side that he wouldn’t let his defeat come in the way of his smuggling business,” she said.

“I think there’s more to it than that. It wasn’t just about the money. He could have done so many different things and made much more money doing that instead of resorting to a life of crime and risk. There’s not that much money in smuggling anyway. And if there is, where is it? Maurice didn’t live a very luxurious life. Neither were the vampires, for that matter. So if they were not doing it for the money, there must be some other intent. I believe that Maurice was vying for power. He could have all the money he wanted, but what he yearned for was true power. Deep down, he knew that he was not a strong wolf. He also knew that he was not a good mayor at all. When he was elected as the Alpha, he shirked his responsibilities. The only time he came alive was when he was conspiring with Blair and Ralph. I believe that he was telling me the truth about being controlled by someone who had been conspiring against me for more than seventy years. The only freedom that Maurice was getting was through his misadventures with Ralph and Blair. They allowed him to feel like he was free,” I said.

“That would mean that there’s someone out there, someone who’s been

operating in the shadows, someone who's been controlling even Maurice. Who could that be?" she asked, finishing her breakfast and staring at me with wonder and curiosity.

"As much as I have tried to solve that mystery, I come up short of answers. There are other things to worry about for now. Vincent, for one. We have to tell him about his father's death. We have to let him take in the news and then reveal it to the town later. They're going to want to hold elections for the new mayor. Things are now in motion that cannot be stopped. Whoever it was that was controlling Maurice now knows that we are onto them. This is an opportunity for them to strike. They may even try to retaliate on a scale that we aren't prepared for," I said.

"We have to be very delicate when telling Vince," Alexis said, finally getting out of bed. As she got out, she staggered and nearly fell. I immediately shot to her side and held onto her. "I'm weak, Will. What has happened to me?"

"You have been through so much," I said, helping her as she went to the bathroom. "You need all the rest in the world."

"It feels so good to have you taking care of me," she said, patting my cheek as she went into the bathroom.

I did not wait for her to come out. Inside, I could hear her taking a shower. I wanted to give her some me-time so that she'd relax, recover, and then recuperate.

I had another task at hand. I took out my phone and called Vincent.

"Hey, what's up?" Vince said when he picked up the call.

"I found Alexis," I said.

“That’s great news!” Vince was overjoyed. “I’m coming over immediately.”

I waited in the living room for Alexis to get out of the bathroom and for Vince to show up. Vince showed up before Alexis had gotten out of the bathroom. I invited him in and hugged him.

“What’s that hug for, man? Is everything all right?” he asked, hugging me back. “You’re not dying again, are you? I will not tolerate that. We just got you back. Whatever it is, just tell me. I can take it.”

“Vince, sit down,” I said, beckoning to the sofa.

“Why are you being so morbid? Where did you find Alexis? Was she in another town? Did you make a whole day trip of it?” he asked.

I solemnly shook my head and then sat down beside him. I recounted the story to him, during which Alexis came out of the shower, and came to meet Vince in the living room. She sat beside me as we told him together how Maurice had captured Alexis and was continuing the smuggling business from a series of caves outside the city.

“I hate the fact that I am related to him,” Vince whispered during our retelling.

“But still, he was your father,” Alexis said.

“Was?” Vince raised his eyebrow and looked at me.

“Yes. He passed away. After I confronted him, he attacked me. There was no other recourse,” I said, not mentioning that Alexis had pulled the trigger.

“Well...” Vince said, taking a deep breath. “He was my father. But that does not excuse all the atrocities he took part in. He shot you both. He threw you

off a building, Lexie. He tried to kill you, Will. That's unforgivable. Not to mention all the terrible shit he had been doing in town even before all of that. And now he's dead."

I did not expect to see the relief on Vincent's face. I had anticipated him to be sad, depressed, or even conflicted. But Vince's expressions were that of pure relief.

"Aren't you like upset?" Alexis asked, putting her hand on Vince's shoulder.

"Upset? No. Lost? Yes. I no longer have a father figure. You know, all the time, I expected him to turn over a new leaf and become the dad that I had always wanted him to be. He never played catch with me growing up. We never really had a father-son thing going on. He was hurtful toward mom. The man gave me every reason to despise him growing up. Now that he's taken care of, I regret that he never changed himself in time to become the dad that he should have been," Vince said. "But I'm relieved that he's out of the picture. It's like a weight has been lifted off me. As if I am no longer living under the malignant shadow of my father."

"What are you going to do now?" I asked warily.

"Well. I am going to announce the news of his death to the pack and the town. Then I'm going to take some time off and do some introspection. Finally, after all this time, I am free to be the man I want to be. I no longer have to answer my father or question where my allegiance lies. You should know that it lies with you and that I do not hold it against you that you had to kill him. It had to be done. If you hadn't done it, he would have killed Alexis," Vince said.

"Take all the time you need," I said.

“Thanks for telling me in confidence and not in front of the entire pack. I appreciate it,” Vince said, nodding at me. “It had to be done. Don’t feel bad about it. He had many a chance to repent. He never took one. His death was his own mistake, no one else’s. At least now he’s not going to do any more terrible shit in this town.”

“Goodbye, Vincent,” I said, shaking his hand, then letting him go. I watched as he went out the door, then turned to Alexis and said, “He took that rather well, didn’t he?”

“Don’t rush it. It’s going to take him some time to process it all,” she said. “You did the right thing. What other choice did we have?”

“Sometimes, doing the right thing does not feel very right. You know what I mean?” I asked.

“It was either him or me, Will,” Alexis said, finally putting my mind at ease. She was right. He had imprisoned her. Had I not found Alexis, Maurice would have killed her. Could I have been complacent and let it happen? No.

“I’m just glad it’s not you,” I said, hugging Alexis again.

She hugged me back, then said, “I know that breakfast was amazing and everything, but I am still starving.”

“I have to go out for groceries. Promise me you’re going to rest for a long while. Don’t go out of the house. Just recover. Go lie in bed and maybe sleep for a while. When I come back, I’ll have the makings for an excellent lunch. Do you like steak? I’m going to make you the meanest steak that’s ever been made in Fiddler’s Green.”

“And some of that potato salad. You do know how to make potato salad,

don't you?" Alexis grinned.

"Of course. Just take potatoes, chop them up uncooked, and serve them with tomatoes and carrots." I started laughing, and then Alexis joined in. "It's all right. I know that you have to mash them up, then add the veggies. I used to make an excellent potato salad with apples, pomegranates, lettuce, kale, and turnips back in Germany. My mother had taught it to me and had told me this was a family recipe tracing its lineage back to Scandinavia."

"Does kale really go with potato salad?" Alexis asked uncertainly.

"It does when I make it. You'll thank me, I promise," I said. It just felt so good to have her back. I took one last look at her before leaving the house, content in the knowledge that all was right between us, hopeful that all would continue to be right.

Outside, the environment was grim. People were gathered around Vincent as he told them of his father's passing. They were confused as to what to say. They couldn't just offer their condolences, as Maurice had been a terrible man. Yet, they could not say bad things about him, as it was considered a dishonorable act to say negative things about someone who had passed away. So, they whispered their sentiments to him, telling him that it would all be okay in the long run and that he should not despair.

I wanted to give Vincent his space. Also, I did not want to go into a long explanation with the pack members as to how I had killed Maurice. When the time came, I would tell them within the right context. Right now, I had pressing concerns of my own. Alexis was hungry, and we were all out of groceries.

Hurriedly, I went to the commune's only quick mart. Even though he never

sold the best stuff, it saved me half an hour shopping from him rather than going down to Fiddler's Green and shopping from there.

"Everything all right there, Will?" the grocer asked me.

"Everything seems to be all right, John," I said, taking a cart and going down the aisle.

"Heard through the grapevine that Maurice bit the dust," John said, following me around the mart.

"I was the one who spread the news," I said, putting vegetables in the cart, taking out steaks from the fridge, and getting juices and soft drinks from the racks. "I killed him."

"Served him right. The man was a blight on this town," John said.

"I would prefer not to talk ill of the dead," I said.

John took the cue and went back to behind the counter, where he resumed solving the crossword in the newspaper. I could sense his vision boring into me, but I chose to ignore it. He could pry all he wanted. I was not going to spill the beans to him.

Once I had all the groceries I wanted, I went back to the counter, where John began bagging up all the items. I reached for my wallet and fished it out of my jeans.

"Oh, come on now. You're not expected to pay," John said.

"I may be the Alpha, John, but no one is above the law of economics. If I just started taking things and not paying for them, the pack would suffer," I said.

John went into a monologue, telling me how Maurice never paid for anything and that I was different from all the Alphas that he had seen in his lifetime. I could not focus on what he was saying. While I'd been standing across the counter, a deep pain rose into my chest and constricted my entire body. I did not know what it was.

I tried to fight it, but the more I struggled, the more this pain crippled me till I could not stand anymore. I fell on my back and began convulsing. Foam dripped out of my mouth, my limbs locked into place, and my vision began darkening.

“Will! Will!” John screamed, but I could not even open my mouth to respond to him. It had been so sudden, this attack, that I was not prepared to deal with it. My vision began darkening, and my mind reached into its deepest and darkest part, playing a harrowing memory before my eyes.

I was back on the rooftop where Blair had injected Wolf's Bane in me. I was lying in Alexis's arms, my mouth frothing, my body petrified. The pain that I was feeling now was at par with the pain I had felt back then. It felt like I was dying all over again.

It was not fair, I thought as my consciousness started to slip. It was not fair that I'd gotten everything in order, and instead of enjoying the fruits of my labor, I was dying yet again.

Alexis! I called out, using my bond before I fainted.

Chapter 19: Alexis

Dr. Morris stared at me gravely, the stethoscope hanging from his neck. He took off his glasses, then rubbed them with a tissue before opening his mouth. I held onto Will's hands. They were cold and unmoving.

"The good news is," Dr. Morris said slowly. "He is stable."

"Could you be a little faster?" I asked vexedly. "I see you're deliberately taking longer than usual!"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I do not know how to tell you this without it coming off as extremely difficult. I am trying to find the right words. As I said, the good news is that he's stable. The bad news is that he's stable in a condition that we would not like him to be stable in. He's unconscious, and it's been several hours, and he's not woken up. A few more, and we'll have to consider him comatose. Every time Mr. Will Grimm comes in, his body is in worse shape than it was before. I just did the blood test, and there is an altogether new compound in his body wreaking absolute havoc. That's why he's in this state," Dr. Morris said, sitting down beside Will. "Is there something that you have to tell me?"

"What is this new compound doing to him?" I asked, afraid to know the answer to this question.

"Consider his body a battlefield, if you will. The experimentations that Edward Beckett did to him are army number one. Now, this new compound

that has entered into his system, let's call it army number two. Will's white blood cells and his body's immune system are army number three. There's yet another compound in his system that's working with the antibodies in fighting off the poisons. Let's call that army number four. I think I know where the last compound came from. Vincent procured it for him, didn't he?" Dr. Morris asked.

"Yes. Vince came with a potion many weeks ago. They nurtured Will to health," I said.

"I'm afraid that potion's effect has run its course. Right now, army number one and two are winning the war against army number three and four. If this keeps up, Will's body is going to disintegrate under the duress of this constant battle," Dr. Morris said.

"What can we do?" I asked nervously, holding Will's hands tighter.

"Why don't you begin telling me about how he got this new poisonous compound into his body? Then we'll discuss a course of action," Dr. Morris said.

So I told him, as bluntly as I could, how Blair and Maurice and Ralph had prepared Wolf's Bane and had injected Will with it. I shared with Dr. Morris how I had initially thought Will to be dead as a result of Wolf's Bane's effects. Dr. Morris listened intently, taking several notes, then looked up at me quite seriously, shaking his head.

"No one, not even Will, can stand so many changes in his body. As I said before, this is beyond my ability to heal," Dr. Morris said.

"Why am I not surprised?" I said sarcastically. "Is there anything that you

can do at all?”

“Well, yes. I can administer some adrenaline and bring him back to consciousness, but that’s not really a solution,” Dr. Morris said.

“I’ll take it. Just wake him up. I’ll do something on my own,” I said fiercely.

The doctor nodded, then disappeared in the back and appeared with a huge syringe filled with clear liquid. He injected it in Will’s chest, then stood back.

At first, Will did not budge, but then he immediately rose, his eyes wide awake. He panted at first, then looked all around, aghast.

“What happened to me?” he asked, covered in sweat.

“Wolf’s Bane. It’s poisoning you,” I said, trying to keep myself together.

“That’s not good,” Will said, still panting heavily. He fell on the bed and covered his face. “Did you get the groceries?”

My voice broke slightly as I could not hold myself back any longer. “Yes. John delivered the groceries to the house. Are you worried about groceries right now? You’re not well! The doctor says you’re dying.”

“Ah, well, tell the doctor I have already died once, and it didn’t stick,” Will said.

Dr. Morris just stood there, shaking his head gravely, then said, “Perhaps it would be better for you to rest and recover at home. We must not forget that you’ve put your body through so much in the past few days. It could just as well be the toll of all the hectic activity. People are known to collapse from exhaustion.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it, doctor,” I said.

“I won’t,” he said. “If the chemicals in his body aren’t neutralized, we’re looking at renal and liver failure. Without his vital organs working for him, Will won’t have a shot at surviving. There. I didn’t sugarcoat it. Our only medical recourse is blood purification. I can get him started on a drip tomorrow, then see how the bloodwork tests against immunogens. If it’s a positive change, then we can continue that treatment while also administering basic drugs that can take care of the pain and the inflammation.”

“No,” Will said, taking away his hands from his face and staring at the doctor. “There won’t be any need for that.”

“You can’t just give up!” I pleaded.

“No one’s giving up. I have another recourse if you are willing,” Will said.

“If it’s a non-medical fix, I best not be here; otherwise, I’ll risk putting my medical license in jeopardy,” Dr. Morris said.

“Why’s that, doc? They don’t teach magic as an elective course at Johns Hopkins?” Will asked and laughed.

“Laugh all you want, but trust me when I say that as a werewolf and a man of medicine, I have seldom seen magic and medicine work together. Whatever you’ll end up doing is going to be purely risky,” Dr. Morris said.

“I trust Alexis. I know she won’t fail,” Will said, looking at me and smiling weakly.

Will was still conscious when I took him back home. He was weak, but at least he was able to talk to me and discuss what he'd had in mind back at the clinic. I took the liberty of taking one of the clinic's wheelchairs to escort Will back to his house.

"Will, Vince is gone. We can't expect him to return to wherever he went to get you another potion," I said. "So unless you have something truly tangible, we're lost in the woods."

"I do have something truly tangible. The last time I was in the clinic, I was unconscious, remember? I didn't have a say in what was happening to me and what types of treatment I was being given. Vince had a stroke of genius, but that was all it was. We need something else. And tonight, at the clinic, I saw it with my own eyes. Dr. Morris forgets that he's part of a tradition of werewolves. He's more medically inclined. In his clinic, there are books that the original healer who came with us from Germany brought to America. Books of ancient medicine that werewolves had been using for centuries to cure illnesses. I can bet my life on those books. There's something in them that's going to help me," he said. "I can promise you that."

"Then I'll break into the clinic and just get the books," I said, getting up.

"Sit down," Will said, smiling at me. "I am the Alpha. So long as it falls under the jurisdiction of this commune, you won't have to break into any place. You can just go into the clinic and get the books. They're mine, after all."

"But your illness is so novel. Do you think they had poisons such as the ones running through your body back in those days? Are there any antidotes for such modern illnesses in those books?"

Will struggled to sit up in bed and only barely managed to prop his body up by his elbows. He looked at me intensely, then said, “The wisdom in those books predates and transcends anything we know today. The potions and treatments stated in those books are more potent than anything modern medicine has been capable of doing.”

“Then why haven’t people used them? Why not use them for cuts, bruises, lesions, cancer?” I asked.

“Because the price is too high. The ingredients written within those books are hard to come by. They require a pilgrimage to find. Not to mention the method of preparing those potions. Back in the old days, the Norse folk practiced this magic and perfected it into a craft. After hundreds of years, those who practiced this craft formed their circle, separate from the werewolves, separate from the Norse. They are whom we today call the witches and wizards. Potions are their domain. Magic is their bread and butter,” Will responded, but with much difficulty. His breath was shallowing, and it was getting difficult for him to stay up. Already, his face was straining. He winced a couple of times.

“Are you going to be okay while I’m gone?” I asked him nervously, coming back to him and holding his hand. He didn’t look well. His face had gone pale. His body felt cold to the touch.

“I am afraid you are on your own on this one, Alexis. It seems fate has played a terrible joke on us that it’s separating us so soon after we just came back into each other’s lives. It appears that, yet again, my life is in your hands. Please do save me. I desire to live many years with you by my side,” Will said, his words stuttering, getting slurred and jumbled.

“I’ll save you, I promise,” I said, kissing him on his forehead.

When he did not respond, I broke the kiss and looked at him. He had gone unconscious again. I immediately checked his pulse and breathed a sigh of relief to see that it was still there.

There was no more time to waste.

I immediately left the house and raced back to the clinic, hoping that it would still be open at this time.

I caught Dr. Morris just as he was about to shut the clinic up. He turned to face me and then sighed in resignation. “You simply will not relent, will you?”

“Doctor, I have to go to the clinic. There are books...books that I need,” I said.

“I can assure you that none of the books in there are going to help you in this venture,” he said, shaking his head. At that moment, I wanted to punch him in the head to stop him from shaking it.

“Just open the fucking door!” I snapped.

He clicked his tongue, then turned around and opened the clinic’s door.

I barged in and headed for the bookshelf.

“Let me make it easier for you,” Dr. Morris said. “If it’s Old Age wisdom you’re looking for, the books that the original Grimm pack brought with it to America are on the top shelf, gathering dust.”

I looked at the top of the shelf and saw the old leather-bound books.

“There are many that do not concern you,” Dr. Morris said. “I’m assuming you’ve come here for the ones dealing with life-saving potions?”

“Can you be any less snide about this?” I said angrily, frowning at him.

“It’s not that I do not have faith in the books.... Well, I’ll be honest with you. As someone who went to medical school and then pursued a specialization, I believe that everything that is stated in those books contradicts everything that modern medicine has taught us,” Dr. Morris said.

“And what about when you shift into a wolf, Dr. Morris? Is there anything in your medical books about lycanthropy?” I asked, taking one of the books from the shelf.

“I see you’re the one being snide now,” Dr. Morris said. “In any case, the book that you hold in your hands contains a vast array of potions. It’s called the *Liquid Mana and other Concoctions*. My dubiousness about the matter aside, if there’s something that can help Will, it’s in that.”

Fate seemed to be guiding me, it seemed. Why else had I grabbed the one book out of the dozens of leather-bound volumes that lay atop the top shelf? I opened the book carefully, then placed it on Dr. Morris’s desk. The table of contents had several sub-sections dealing with crithomancy, love potions, sleeping concoctions, tinctures for insanity, decoctions for everyday maladies, stronger mixes for serious illnesses, and then, at the very last, there was a section that said: For when nothing else works.

Not knowing what that entailed, I immediately sifted to the end of the book and came across arcane texts written in Old English about potions that could cure blindness, heal leprosy, reanimate the dead, and perform a revitalization on the terminally ill.

“The Full Moon,” I read aloud, reading from one of the potions listed in the book. “A potion made from a coalescence of ingredients that serve one dire purpose. They bring a fallen wolf back to life. In times both normal and chaotic, sometimes, a wolf might get affected by the guile of their foes, whether they be warlocks, vampires, sirens, the undead, or other manner of cunning creatures capable of cruel crafts. The Full Moon can serve as an antidote to all contagions, maladies, ailments, and lurgies save for death itself. So long as a wolf is still breathing and alive, the Full Moon can serve its primary purpose, that is, to bring about the wolf in full health.”

I looked up at Dr. Morris, who, instead of sharing in my discovery, simply shook his head again.

“That right there is a fable, if anything,” he said. “I doubt if it’s of any credibility.”

“You lack faith, doctor. You’re a disbeliever,” I said. “These are the words of our ancestors. How can they misguide us?”

“Have you, by any chance, looked at the ingredients? That’s why I say it’s a fable. Look. It says that the ingredients needed for creating such a potion include moon dew, frost from a mountain, pink-flowered common yarrow, and stellarum. Do you even know what stellarum is? Such a thing does not exist! And you have the gall to call me a disbeliever. Where are you going to find moon dew and frost from a mountain? How are you going to get stellarum, whatever the hell that is?”

I ignored him. Instead, I took out my phone and looked at what stellarum meant. It was Latin for starlight and was a term often used for bioluminescent mushrooms that grew in the mountains. At night, when they glowed, it

looked like starlight had landed on the mountains. It did not take me long to locate where stellarum grew in America. As it happened, the wiki-guide stated that it grew in the mountains north of Maine. One such mountain was visible from Fiddler's Green. It was a single mountain called Greyback Mountain. The locals used to call it the lonely mountain. I figured that I'd get frost from a mountain and stellarum from there. What else remained? Any flower shop in the vicinity would be able to provide me with moon dew and pink-flowered common yarrow.

"When Will's all healthy and walking and talking again, I'll come back here and make you eat crow," I said to the doctor. "And I'm taking this with me!" I pointed at the book.

"If your potion can truly heal him, I'll hang up my coat and take up making potions full-time. Happy?" Dr. Morris said. "For Will's sake, though, I truly hope your venture succeeds."

The task that lay ahead of me was not easy by any means. The added restriction of the time made it an almost impossible feat. Will was slipping. As of right now, he was just unconscious, being monitored by Dr. Morris himself, who had assured me that he'd oversee Will and make sure that he was kept in a stable condition while I went off to find the ingredients for the potion.

A single road led to the foot of the mountains. I stood at the end of that road, staring up at the winding path that twisted along the length of the mountain. In my hand, I held a jar, hoping to catch the frost of the mountain in it. In my pocket, I had a pouch in which I'd put the stellarum.

“You’ve got this,” I whispered to myself, daunted by the task that lay ahead of me. But the fear of anticipation was nothing compared to the terror that prevailed in the knowledge that if I failed, Will would most certainly die.

I would not let my mate die.

And so I trekked and hiked up to the mountain as surefootedly as I could, occasionally slipping, frequently stopping myself from falling down its steep steps. I did not know for how long I climbed. All I could focus on was the step ahead of me. Luckily, I did not have to climb to the top of the mountain, which would have been impossible without the right gear and training, to find a batch of stellarum growing along the mountainside. I plucked them out and bagged them, then hiked further till the first frost appeared ahead of me. I put fistfuls of it in the jar, then began my descent.

On the way back to the commune, I stopped at the flower shop and bought the yarrow and the moon dew.

But my real trial began when I sat down alone in my house to prepare the potion. The instructions were exceedingly difficult. A single misstep, a slight miscalculation, would result in failure.

I could not risk failure.

Chapter 20: Will

I did not know where I was, for this was no place to be. This was a space within my mind. It took me a short time to realize that I was deeply unconscious and was wandering about the uncharted lands of my subconscious. Right in front of me was my old home, the one I had grown up in. The German farmlands spread beyond in the background. Cows mooed, and roosters crowed. The grass blades blew with the wind. I stared at my reflection and found a boy staring back. I had forgotten what I had looked like when I was a kid—Meek little Wilhelm Grimm with muddy brown hair and freckles across his nose. I was wearing shorts and a plaid shirt with suspenders and a little bow. My boots were black, and so were my socks that went up to my knees. I was crying. Ah. This was a memory I had hidden deep within my mind. It was not a pleasant memory. I only had to turn around to be reminded why. Behind me, the village burned. All the cottages were smoldering wreckages, the dirt paths charred by the bombs that had fallen from above.

There were no people around.

“Mama!” I called out. It was twice as painful, knowing the fate that had befallen my parents at the end of the First World War. Even still, I could not weather the sorrow that befell my dream child self as I walked up to my cottage, hoping to find my mother inside. On Sundays, she baked the most perfect pies and served them with cream and syrup. Today was a Sunday. It did not matter that our village had been bombed. She’d make the pies, and I’d

eat them with Fred and dad.

I opened the door, and instead of stepping into my childhood home, I stepped into the basement where I had been imprisoned for decades without ever seeing sunlight. Yet another glimpse at my reflection in a mirror surface showed me that this time around, I was not a child anymore but a grown man in his late twenties. I bore on my face and my body the signs of the torture that Edward had inflicted. The second I thought of the man, he appeared from the shadows, sneering at me, holding a syringe in his hand.

“How fares your life now that you’ve escaped from me, Will? Are you any better off than when you were when I found you?” He asked.

Enraged, I reached out to attack him, but the moment my fist touched his body, his body turned into smoke, causing me to topple and lose my balance.

I fell face-first and landed in a pool of water that had accumulated on the deck of my ship. I saw my face in the water. It was the face of a young man who was fleeing war. Around me were my pack members, all of them tending to the ship as we traveled across the sea to America. I was soaking wet. I had to get below deck and dry myself, naturally.

When I went below deck, Ariana sat there calmly, completely unperturbed by the fact that there was a storm in the sea and the ship was on the verge of sinking.

“Ariana,” I said, realizing that this was more than just a vision this time around. It was a revelation. In real life, when we had traveled from Germany to America, Ariana had hidden in the cupboard under the deck when the storm had come. She had been way too young back then too.

This Ariana, the one in my vision, was a middle-aged woman who looked quite tranquil and at peace with the life she had lived. I blinked, and suddenly we were not under the deck of the ship but standing in the afterlife plain, in pristine whiteness, just her and I.

“You look well, Will,” she said.

“And you look happy. Is that how you were after I disappeared?” I asked.

“The entire pack mourned and thought you dead,” Ariana said. “But after a while, all of us went back to living our lives, including me. I bonded with my actual mate, Will. I lived a life of love and plenty. We had a child. I was satisfied. And you know what I wasn’t? Do not take this the wrong way, but I was never in love with you, just as you were never in love with me. It was circumstantial infatuation on your end, an illusion, nothing more.”

“I see that now. Every day, I realize it more so. I fell in love with Alexis, and the things that I have felt with her, I never felt for you or anyone else. She is my true love, the woman I desire, my fated mate. You and I were never in love, and it took me a long time to understand that. And that is okay. I was young, ambitious, and foolish. The man that I am now is not the man I was back then,” I said.

“You talk with maturity now, Will. There is depth to your words and your perception. Know that all of us, your pack members, loved you like a family member. What you felt for me was not love but kinship. It was a different sort of bond, a familial bond. And I will always cherish you for it. But your true place lies with Alexis. Treat her well. She is my family, after all,” she said.

“As she is mine,” I said, and let the scene dissolve all around me, not

knowing what was happening. Ariana disappeared from view, as did the afterlife plain, and now I was just standing in total darkness, thrashing against the blind waves that bound my body.

“Alexis!” I called out loudly. Now, I was not in any vision any longer. I was on the brink of life and death. In front of me, there was the light at the end of the tunnel, beckoning. Behind me, there was the world that I was going to leave.

If I left now, I would never be able to forgive myself.

I blinked, and there I was back again, in front of my childhood home, calling out for my mama, a little boy once again.

“Mama!”

This time, however, my mother came out of the house, wearing her apron, smiling at me, and holding a pie in her hand.

“Wilhelm, my darling boy. Oh, how you have grown,” she said, smiling at me, placing her hand on my cheek and squeezing me. “Not a day goes by that I do not miss you. Me and your papa. We look over you from above, know this. Even though we are not with you, we are always in your heart, my son.”

I spoke as my normal self, “Mother, I have missed your voice.”

“And I have missed your presence around me, my child. Your laughter, your innocence, and your brightness. You were the best thing that happened to us, even in that time of war and despair. You helped us see the light. And now, I will help you too. Understand that there is someone in your midst who seeks to harm you, someone whom you think is close to you. When you moved from Germany, some of the pack members were against you moving. That ill

will is still harbored against you in the hearts of those who live on. Some of them mean to harm you, my son. Some of them have already harmed you,” she said.

“Maurice, you mean? I killed him,” I said. “He tried to end my life with Wolf’s Bane, but I...”

“Shh, my son. We have little time. One day, you and I will sit side by side in these plains with nothing but time on our side when you will have lived your life. Here, we will talk and reflect on our lives and continue living our afterlives. But right now, I have to warn you about staying cautious. You aren’t out of the woods yet,” she said, then kissed me on the forehead. “My darling boy. I love you.”

“Mama!” I yelled in despair as she disappeared, taking the cottage, the countryside, the apron, and the pie with her, leaving me in the darkness once more.

“What do you want from me?!” I yelled in the darkness.

A giant wolf came into view, its spectral eyes red, its mouth big enough to swallow the sun. I knew then that I was not staring at some ordinary wolf but the god-child Fenrir himself, the spawn of Loki.

Immediately, I bent my knee and bowed in reverence to the god of the werewolves, and my head stooped low in awe.

Fenrir touched the tip of my head with the tip of his nose and nudged me. I looked up and saw that he was pointing at the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Now is not my time, Fenrir,” I said. “Please send me back.”

The wolf shook his head and pointed again.

“Please, Lord. There is much that I have to do. I do not want to die in vain. When my time comes, I want to die in an honorable way so that I can join my ancestors in the great halls. Let me live so I can serve a greater purpose.”

Fenrir snorted through his nose, then pushed me. I fell back and kept falling and screaming.

Until I stopped falling and came out on the other side, alive, awake, drenched in sweat, my body burning.

“Will?” It was Alexis calling out my name, holding me in her lap.

“Am I dead?” I asked, breathing heavily.

“No, my love. You’re okay. You’re going to be all right,” she said.

My mouth felt bitter and hot. The taste of some effervescent liquid still lingered on my lips and tongue. I tried to swallow it, but the bitterness was too much.

“What happened?” I asked, staring around. In one corner of the room, Dr. Morris stood looking completely stunned. Alexis sat beside me in bed, holding an empty vial. She looked exhausted, with dark rings under her eyes and lines all over her otherwise smooth face.

“I just cannot believe it,” Dr. Morris said. “I refuse to accept this. Not until I’ve done a few tests of my own, at least.”

“Test all you want, Dr. Morris. I wanted you to witness the power of belief, and tonight you saw it with your own eyes,” Alexis said.

“Will you tell me what’s happening?” I asked Alexis, sitting up in bed. Surprisingly, moving did not hurt me any longer. I could feel my old strength returning to me gradually.

“You told me before passing out that I should seek the wisdom of the books you’d brought with you. I did exactly that. For the first time in my life, I made a potion. A potion to save your life,” she said, smiling at me, waving the empty vial in front of me.

“Which one did you make?” I asked.

“The Full Moon,” she said, catching me by surprise. I had never expected her to devise such a concoction, at least not all by herself.

“How...how did you manage to make it?” I asked in disbelief, my mouth hanging open.

And then, I was told a tale that I had just as hard a time believing as Dr. Morris, who kept shaking his head while Alexis recounted how she hiked up the mountain to get the ingredients, then spent the entire night making the potion relentlessly, and then finally administered it to me.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she said.

“Oh no. I didn’t say something terrible this time around, did I?” I asked, worriedly.

Alexis laughed and shook her head, and hugged me.

“Nothing terrible. Just that you loved me and a whole lot of other cute stuff,

too,” she said, holding my head in her embrace.

Dr. Morris coughed loudly from behind. I shot him a look and asked, “Why are you here, doctor?”

“You may not call me a doctor anymore, Will. I have just lost a bet, it seems, and I shall now be hanging up my coat. It is time I go back to being a healer and not turn my back on the wisdom of our ancestors,” he said, trying to muster up a smile.

“What is happening here?” I asked Alexis.

“The doctor was being super cynical about how the potion could not save your life, so I made a bet with him. If I won, he’d hang up his coat and revert to being a healer, using our methods of healing. If I lost, well...I didn’t lose, so it doesn’t matter,” she said. “Thank you, Healer Morris, for staying by my mate’s side all night. It truly means the world to us.”

“I shall be taking my leave now,” he said, then went out the door, whispering to himself. I caught just a bit of it. He was saying, “Potions work, and medicine doesn’t. What a world I live in.”

I looked back at Alexis, who was beaming at me. I held her hand in my hand, staring at her with love, affection, and appreciation. “How can I ever repay what you have done for me?”

“You can start thanking me by promising me you’re not going to die ever again. At least not in my lifetime,” she said. “Also, I forbid you from ever falling ill ever again!”

I pulled her in my arms and hugged her once more. “For as long as I live, I shall live in full health as your mate. That is a promise. I shall my life in your

name and cherish the relationship we have.”

Alexis kissed me on my lips, then said, “I love you.”

“I love you so much, too,” I responded in kind, kissing her back.

“Uh...look at me, hogging you all to myself when you’ve just come back from illness. I’m going to go and get you something to eat. You must be starving,” she said. As she was about to leave, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back, making her fall on me.

“I am starving, but not for food,” I whispered in her ear and pulled her under the sheet.

She panted as I inclined upon her, kissing her neck, licking away at her cheek, and pressing my lips to hers. Whatever the contents of the potion were, they had imbued me with much vigor. I held onto Alexis tightly, feeling her tongue in my mouth as I took off her shirt.

I held on to her soft, supple breasts, squeezing them lightly as I worked on getting her out of her pants. My cock throbbed stiffly in my pants, yearning for release.

“Is it safe? Are you sure? You just recovered....” Alexis protested, but I would tell her that I was okay by way of moving love, not with my words.

Gently, I slipped inside her as I stared into her eyes and felt the warm, tight wetness envelop my dick as I thrust deep into her. Such intense pleasure coursed through the entirety of my body that I could not hold myself back. I grabbed her by the back and lifted her in my arms, her breasts touching my chest, her lips smothering my mouth, and her pussy straddling my penis.

She moaned as she felt my hardness going deep inside her. Alexis dug her nails into my back as she rode me, both of us moving in unison, moving towards that revered crest of climax. I could feel myself becoming even harder inside of her, something that I had thought impossible.

Now, I was lying on my back, and she was on top of me, moving her hips smoothly, letting me feel sensuality all along the length of my dick as she rose and fell. Her breasts lobbed against my face, soft, juicy, and warm. I took them in my mouth and sucked on her nipples, making her moan even louder.

The sight of her stretched above me in all her raw nakedness, moving her body, moaning, her face covered by her hair, her body drenching in sweat, it was enough to make me cum. But I held on. I had to make my woman cum with me.

I moved her and made her lie on her back as I climbed on top of her, parting her legs and thrusting deep inside of her. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth hung open as I made love to her, reaching deep into her.

“I love you,” I whispered, knowing that saying it at the right time, at the end of the right stroke, would make her come for me. “I love you.”

“Oh, Will,” Alexis moaned, holding me in her arms as I came inside her, “Oh, I love you too.” I could feel her pulsating down there as she orgasmed with me, and together, the two of us rode that wave of pleasure until it was blinding.

My head spun from the sheer gratification. I fell by her side, panting heavily, and then hugged her from the side as I stared at her sexy, naked body.

“Where did that come from?” she asked me surprised.

“I don’t know; you tell me,” I said, pulling her hair off her forehead and tucking them behind her ear. “Did you add some secret ingredient, perhaps an aphrodisiac, in the potion?”

“Just all the love that I had for you,” she said, smiling at me and kissing me on my shoulder.

“Well, that explains it. Now, your love courses in my veins,” I said, rubbing my hand on her naked torso. “I do not doubt this potion will bring me to full health.”

“I should hope so too, Will,” Alexis said. I turned to look at her and found her sleeping in my arms. I kissed her on the forehead one last time before falling asleep with her, feeling safe, healthy, and happy.

Chapter 21: Alexis

I hadn't anticipated such a sudden change in the town after Maurice's death. The air was not that of mourning, as I had expected, given that their mayor had passed away under mysterious conditions. Instead, the atmosphere was competitive, to say the very least. Five different candidates had risen within a matter of hours, announcing their candidacy for the position of mayor.

It had barely been a few days since Maurice's death had been made public news, and already the city was smattered with flyers, stickers, and flags of different colors, all of them urging the citizens to vote for this person or that.

Truth had a very sickening way of dawning on me as I stood outside Fiddler's Green and looked at the posters. I did not know any of these people. All my life, I had lived in this place, and yet I was a complete alien to the goings-on.

Who was Wendy Wilshire, running for mayor from the business district? Did Fiddler's Green even have a business district? I did not know who Jeremy Clarkson was either, and he was running from downtown. Weren't the business district and downtown one and the same? Rodrick James, whose poster claimed he was a two times war veteran and had won the Medal of Honor, was running from the Grimm Abode district. At least I knew that district. What I was surprised to learn was that there were other colonies in the area besides the commune. Tony Hawkins, a relatively older member of City Hall, had also announced his candidacy.

“Vultures,” a complete stranger standing next to me said. I turned around and saw a very haggard-looking woman holding a bagged-up bottle of rum in her hands, her eyes bloodshot, her face looking haunted.

“I beg your pardon?” I cleared my throat, further alerting the woman to my presence. Given her inebriated stance, it did not appear that she knew that I was standing beside her.

“Vultures, each and every one of them. Our beloved mayor hasn’t been dead for less than a week, and there’s already a call for a new election!” the drunk, homeless woman yelled. “They’re feasting on his corpse, aren’t they?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that they’re feasting on his corpse,” I said, shaking my head. They were only following procedure. A town had to have a mayor.

“You’re just as terrible as the rest of them,” the woman said, her speech slurred to the point of incoherence, her arms dangling dangerously, and her eyes crossed.

“If you can tell me what Maurice did as the mayor, I’ll concede,” I said, but the woman was in no shape to respond. She was sprawled on the floor, cradling her bottle of rum in her arms, snoring loudly already.

“Don’t you mind her,” the bartender said, coming out of the bar I was standing in front of. “Her mind goes more and more each day, and she refuses to give up drinking. At this point, it’s more of a mercy to let her have a drink, so she does not have to bear the terrors of sobriety.”

“Was Maurice related to her in some way?” I asked.

“No. And he wasn’t related to half the people in the town who are all of a

sudden finding sympathy for their departed mayor in their hearts. If there's one thing you have to know about Fiddler's Green, it's that the people who live here love to be obstinate. Maurice was mayor for a long time. Thousands of people are finding it impossible to just move on and get on with their lives with a new mayor at the helm of this city."

"Maybe I'll run for mayor," Will said suddenly, emerging from the lab on the right of the bar. He was holding a file in his hands, and his face bore a cheery look. He broke into a grin as he saw me standing outside the bar. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"Not just anyone can run for mayor," the bartender said to Will.

"Well, I'm not just about anyone. I'm a Grimm. My family helped build this town," he said.

"Maurice was a Grimm too, and look what good he did to this city!" the bartender said, then receded back into the shop, shaking his head.

"My, my, the tempers are running so high in this city. The doctor in the lab was all red in the face about this mayoral campaign business," Will said as he approached me and wrapped his arms around me. Then he kissed me on the lips lightly.

"But what did he say?" I asked, taking his file from him. I opened it and saw the results of all the tests. They were all negative, but even still, I wanted to hear it from him.

"The doctor said that there was nothing wrong with my blood, at least not that he could find through all the tests he conducted. He didn't even find any trace of Wolf's Bane or all the chemicals that Edward had been injecting into

me. Believe it or not, your potion worked wonders. The doctor declared that I was in perfect health, all thanks to you,” he said. The moment he uttered those words, relief swept through my body, and my mind became peaceful.

“So, it was a good decision, right? Getting a second opinion from a doctor outside the commune?” I asked.

“It was the best decision. Now that we know that there’s nothing wrong with me, I can finally put the past behind me and look forward,” Will said.

“If you’re really serious about running for the mayor,” I said, smiling. “There are some things that you ought to get started with.”

“Oh, I was just kidding. Being an Alpha is already quite huge of a commitment. I do not need politics on my plate right now or ever,” Will said.

“Never say never,” I said, taking his arm and walking toward downtown. “Now, how about you take me shopping as a thank you for me saving your life?”

“At once, my lady,” Will said, bowing courteously, his arm waving at a Jeep—a brand new Jeep with the plastic still on the seats.

“Will, what kind of surprise is this?” I was unnerved by seeing such an expensive vehicle parked there. Knowing what I knew about Will’s current financial situation, I knew there was no way he could afford a truck worth thirty-thousand dollars. It made me apprehensive to think what Will must have been thinking of while buying such an exorbitantly expensive thing. But instead of replying to me, he kept laughing till tears started dripping from his eyes. “Is this some sort of a joke?”

“You tell me!” Will continued howling with laughter, now holding his

stomach. In all the time I had spent with him, I had never seen him laugh so fully. This must indeed be the working of the potion. It didn't just feel like he was a changed man. It exhibited itself in so many tiny mannerisms and behaviors, all of which were a testament to the fact that the poisons and chemicals had left his body, and he was completely healed.

"I don't understand. You bought this?" I asked, scratching my head. "Are we going somewhere? Is this one of your surprises?"

"I found the car parked in front of the house early in the morning with a note saying that it was from Vincent. He wrote in the note that he hadn't ditched Lawrence's car as I had asked him to. Instead, he had fenced it somewhere in Ohio. He bought a Jeep registered in my name with that money. How thoughtful of him, isn't it?" Will explained.

Now that I was in on the joke, I found laughter coming much easier. What a stroke of genius on Vincent's part. If we'd kept Lawrence's car, that would have aroused suspicion, and soon the police would have meddled. But he fenced it and used it to buy Will a truck that he could actually ride in.

"We had Jeeps back in Germany, if you believe it. The Americans brought them along during the war. I fell in love with the Jeeps back then. That love still holds in my heart after all this time," he said.

"I was under the assumption that you just loved me," I said, crossing my arms and raising my eyebrows.

"Of course, my love, you are the only living breathing human being I'm in love with," Will said, coming to me, holding my hand, and puckering it with playful kisses.

“I hope you’re taking me somewhere. It *is* Valentine’s Day, you know. People the world over are doing romantic things with their partners. What are we doing?” There was a bit of nagging and complaint in my voice, but it was benign at best. I didn’t mean to pester him. Not after what he’d been through. But it was necessary for the health of the relationship that I voiced my wants.

“Ah. I have the perfect day planned out. You know, back in the day, there wasn’t so much hoopla around Valentine’s Day. It just seems like a modern creation of American capitalism. Who here truly gives a damn about what Saint Valentine actually did? I don’t think there are many people who even know the real story. The day’s been reduced to chocolates, roses, and teddy bears. What a shame,” Will said.

“Will! Come on! I don’t want a history lesson right now. I’m your mate. You have to do these things with me,” I said. This time there was legitimate nagging in my tone. Nagging that Will noticed immediately.

“Well, my dear mate, as it happens, I do have something planned for you. For us, actually. To commemorate and celebrate our rekindled relationship, I’m going to take you to this secret bed and breakfast north of here. It’s just past Lonely Mountain, right on the border of Vermont. There’s actually a bit of a story tied to the place, but I’ll save it for later. Right now, we’re going to take a nice long drive through the woods and head over to the Last Inn,” he said.

“Is that the name of the bed and breakfast?” I asked.

“Yes, the Last Inn. It was built by the Spanish in the late 17th century. Once, it used to be a sprawling mansion, but after the rest of the country came to know about the Spanish tucked away in North East America, they tore down the mansion and drove the Spanish back to Spain. Now, however, there are

some kindred spirits who've taken it upon themselves to rebuild old heritage sites across America. And the Last Inn is one of their endeavors. If you've ever wanted to live in a Spanish mansion, you're going to have an excellent time," Will said.

"You promised you wouldn't get into the story right now," I said, getting in the Jeep.

"I believe I did something that your friend Maliha would call 'nerding out.'" Will sat beside me and turned the engine on. The Jeep roared to life, immediately drawing the attention of everyone in the street.

"You've gotten quite the grip on your slang," I said.

"I had some excellent teachers," Will said, looking at me.

"I missed you; you know that?" I finally confessed. It was hard not to become vulnerable when looking into his eyes. They drew out sincerity from deep within me. The way he looked at me made me feel like I was his entire world.

"I missed you so much, too," Will said. "And I am feeling great right now. I just want to go on a long drive and not stop till we reach Vermont."

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" I said, putting my hand on his hand and pushing the Jeep into first gear.

The mansion was indeed, as resplendent as Will had described. A red banner hung from the front, serving both as a tapestry and an awning for the entrance. There were great terraces on all four sides of the mansion. At the

center, there was a massive fountain with bubbling blue water. The entire place was covered in ivy, vines, and flowers. Treetops served as a canopy for the mansion, creating a green mirage everywhere I looked.

I hadn't even noticed that my mouth hung open in the face of this spectacle. It was truly mesmerizing. What was more mesmerizing was how Will had managed to find such a place in such a short time.

While we were not alone—as there were almost half a dozen cars parked in the driveway—the aura and the atmosphere complemented the natural beauty of the place in such a way that I did not mind the couples walking around the gardens hand in hand. For the first time in my life, I was not envious of seeing other couples celebrate their relationship publicly. There was no bitterness this time around now that I had Will by my side.

We walked arm in arm through the main entrance and checked ourselves in at the reception. A bellboy helped with our luggage and took us to our suite.

“Sweet lord!” I exclaimed as I saw the balcony outside our bedroom. It was entirely made of marble and overlooked a lake. Lonely Mountain loomed mysteriously in the back. “Look at this view, Will. It's like...”

“Maddeningly beautiful, isn't it?” Will asked, coming behind me, holding me from the back.

“Not more beautiful than you,” I said, turning around and looking at my mate. The potion had done something to his physique and appearance. Before, Will had a permanently strained look on his face, as if he was subconsciously battling all the dangers within him. Now, his face was brighter, his expressions were much more relaxed, and he looked altogether a much more handsome man than before, not that I didn't like how he looked

prior to this. “You actually look like a twenty-something.”

“All thanks to you,” Will said, then leaned in and kissed me on my lips. Even his kiss had more joy to it. I could feel the carefreeness on his lips as he puckered and sucked my lips. I could taste the sweetness on his tongue as he lolled it around in my mouth. He was more virile too. It hadn’t been more than a few seconds since we’d started kissing, and he was already hard and throbbing against my thigh.

I moaned as he began kissing and sucking my neck and let myself go in his arms. He held me softly, kissing me on my breasts, licking the nipples, and kneading them gently.

“Will,” I whispered. “Oh, Will.”

“You are everything I ever wanted,” Will said, and with that, his head disappeared between my thighs, and I was lost in a world of swirling pleasure as he licked me, kissed me, and played with me under my skirt. His tongue rolled down my pussy as his lips cradled my clit and drove me to an unexpectedly quick orgasm. Perhaps it was the ambiance of the place, or perhaps it was the romance of it all, but I was already in a horny mood the second we’d stepped through the room.

Now, he was on top of me as I lay on my back, kissing my belly, rubbing his hands on my boobs, and letting me hold him by his head. Will entered me with great passion, which didn’t hurt as I was already quite wet. Just as all aspects of him had changed for the better ever since the potion, so too had his lovemaking. I could feel more force in his thrusts and more vigor in his cock as he pounded me. This was a pleasure, as I had never felt before.

I closed my eyes and let my moans echo in the room, cradled in Will’s arms

as he fucked me. This was more than just lovemaking. This was something on a transcendental level. It felt like he was having sex with more than just my body. It was as if our souls were mating together.

He pulled and held me aloft, prodding his cock deeper in me while staring into my eyes deeply. It was all there, the relief, the ease, and the joy. I straddled him smoothly, allowing myself to ride his thick, hard cock all the way to a second orgasm.

And as I came, so did he. His frothing warm liquid gushed into me, filling me up from within. Panting, we both fell into each other's arms and onto the bed, staring intently into each other's eyes, letting our gazes speak on our behalf.

"I love you. Know that, forever and always," I said.

"I love you too," Will said, kissing my nose and then playfully rubbing his nose in mine.

It wasn't before long that we fell asleep in each other's embrace, only to wake up by the incessant knocking on our door. It was the bellboy telling us that evening tea was being served in the living room.

"Evening tea?" I confusingly asked Will.

"An English and Spanish tradition, one lost in American culture. I have a suspicion that the tea won't just be tea. There will be scones and croissants and all sorts of baked goods waiting for us down there. Can't you smell it?" He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. "It smells wonderful."

Just as he had said, there was a grand table in the living room along which six different couples sat, drinking the tea that the butler was pouring them, helping themselves to the cakes, pastries, and biscuits on the table.

“Please welcome. We have been waiting for you,” an elderly lady with white hair in a bun waved at us with one hand while fanning herself with the other. “Why don’t you come and enjoy some tea?”

I looked at Will, who winked at me and said, “When in Rome...”

Chapter 22: Will

If that lavish evening tea was an indication of what was to come, it was an accurate one. At night, when dinner was served, it wasn't done in the dining room as we had expected. It was done out in the open, on the back lawn by a well-lit pool as a violinist serenaded us. The meals were something out of a dream.

The lamb stew was exquisite enough that I had to get another helping. It paired well with the red mulled wine I was drinking. Alexis chose a clear white wine instead of red. It made sense, given that she was eating fettuccine alfredo. I had a little bit of a taste of the fettuccine. It was thick, creamy, and had delicious chunks of mushrooms in it. A true gourmet dinner, indeed. It was a rather long event, spanning over an hour and containing several dishes. The stew and the fettuccine were just two of eight courses, not counting dessert.

We tried the meatballs with gravy, the mutton kebabs, the fried fish, and the vegetable and fruit salad. It was all so wonderfully made that not at any point did we feel like we had overstuffed ourselves.

This entire dinner affair was not a silent one as I had expected. The six other couples who were seated along with the matron of this place happened to be very chatty individuals. Once the wine flowed freely across the table, their tongues loosened, and they started chatting with each other and us as they ate and drank through the night.

I learned that Jacob was a software engineer at Google's New York office. He'd come here with his wife to celebrate their fifth anniversary. Another couple, Andrew and Bella, were tourists from Italy. They had finished their month-long tour across America and were celebrating their final night in America in this bed and breakfast. Sidra and Amir were two Indians who had just sold their first startup in Silicon Valley and were now relaxing for a few weeks before going back to that town and starting their second venture.

But by far, the most interesting couple was the one sitting to our immediate right. Jason and Brandy were two war veterans who retired from the British Army and decided to become adventure bloggers. They showed me their YouTube page and website, where they uploaded videos of their adventures in Egypt, Morocco, China, Japan, and Indonesia. I was entranced by their tales of courage and adventure, of how they'd braved the harsh climates, eaten the strangest cuisines, spent nights in dangerous places, and survived through it all to tell the tale.

"You must come with us the next time we're going on an adventure. After this American leg of our trip is over, we're going to Germany," Brandy said.

"Will's actually from Germany," Alexis answered on my behalf.

"Oh, God, that's so fascinating," Jason said, squeezing my forearm.

"I used to be a maritime engineer," I said, helping myself to dessert. It was the strangest tart that was both bitter and sweet. I couldn't have enough of it. I poured some strawberry syrup on top of it and started simultaneously eating and telling my tale. "Of course, then I retired and came with my family to America."

"To live the great American dream," Brandy said, raising her cup.

Someone across the table said, “Hear, hear!” Everyone clinked their glasses in response.

“Dreams don’t have nationalities,” I said, raising my fork at Brandy. “Tell me. An astronaut sleeps in the space station, and a sailor sleeps deep in a submarine in the sea. What country do their dreams belong to?”

“Oh, it was just...I was just making a point,” Brandy said.

“As am I,” I said, smiling at her. “I mean you no hostility. We have all tied ourselves to this concept of land and country, and nationality. It’s rather unbecoming of someone as boundless as a human, am I right? You two should have an even better idea of it than I do. You’re originally British, yet you have traveled and spent more time in the rest of the world than you’ve done in Britain. I mean, here you are in America, dining with these fine folk. Would you say that you are British?”

Brandy looked at me strangely for a second, then started laughing loudly. “You’re such a funny man!”

I quizzically shot a look at Alexis, who whispered, “Just go with it.”

I nodded, then said. “Ah, yes. My famous German sense of humor.”

Now Jason was laughing alongside Brandy, and soon after, Alexis and I joined in too. We were all so drunk that none of us knew what exactly we were laughing about. It just felt so freeing and joyous to laugh.

And so we did.

And so did everyone at the table as we finished our desserts and had one last cup of tea before retiring to bed.

“I don’t want to sleep!” Alexis said as we left the dinner table and headed back to the mansion. “Look at the night. It’s so beautiful. The moon shining across the surface of the lake. The leaves whispering in the wind. We’re not going to sleep, Will.”

“I agree,” I said. “I didn’t bring you here for sleeping. Quite the contrary. The Vermont countryside and forests are especially beautiful this time of the year. All the colors come in full bloom, especially at night. We’re going to shift into our wolf forms.

“Yay!” Alexis jumped up and down with glee.

“Careful. We don’t want anyone following us. Just let them all go to bed, and then we’re going to have our fun,” I said.

In the meantime, we walked along the pond, then tracked our way to the lake, holding each other’s hand. While we stood at the lake, watching our reflection on the surface of the clear water, Alexis squeezed my hand and said, “Isn’t it completely strange?”

“What is?” I asked. The night was quiet and calm, sending waves of peace within me. I could feel myself healing emotionally from all the scars on my soul.

“Like...just a few days ago, you were on the brink of death. Go a few days further, and we’re both not even on speaking terms. A few more days further, I was sure you were dead. We were always surrounded by danger until very recently. So many uncanny things have happened in such a short amount of time that it’s getting hard to keep track of everything. Did I get kidnapped at one point? All that chaos, all that madness, and now we’re here, in this peaceful corner of the world, our bellies stuffed with delicious food, our

moods rendered pleasant by this night walk, and our troubles were forgotten in the throes of rekindled love. Isn't that strange? How the crests and troughs seem to continue on this sinusoidal wave that we know as life?"

Wine made some people very introspective while rendering others too lax to string together two coherent words. Alexis, it turned out, was the former. She had managed to unlock the wordy part of her consciousness, a part that I was pleasantly surprised to notice. I, on the other hand, turned out to be the latter type, the type turned lax by too much wine. And so, I struggled to keep up with her stream of consciousness.

"It is the very nature of fate," I said after mustering some sobriety. "Someone out there is mourning the death of their loved ones while at the same time, a mother is celebrating the birth of her child in a hospital ward somewhere. There's a war going on in the same world where peace is being brokered between two countries. It's like a dance of destiny," I said.

"But why? Why can't you and I have just a long spell of peace and prosperity? Why does destiny put us through the wringer now and then?" Alexis asked, looking at me ruefully. "I just want you and I to live happily ever after, celebrating our life together, creating our moments of happiness. Is that too much to ask of fate?"

It wasn't too much to ask of fate. But I did not want to spoil my surprise right now. There was a reason why I had brought her here of all places. I had intended to propose to her. Now that I had found her, I did not ever want to be separated from her. The only surefire way of doing that—at least in such a way as to lessen the restlessness in my heart—was to propose to her and get married to her. I wanted to make her truly mine, and what better place than this to initiate this engagement?

“Will? You’re too drunk. Come on. Let’s go back to the room. We can talk in the morning,” Alexis said, pulling me by my arm.

Instead of going back with her, I jumped into the bushes ahead of me and disappeared on the other side.

“Will! What games are you playing?” Alexis called from the other side.

I shifted into my wolf form and howled.

“Oh, is that what you want, is it? Alexis laughed, then jumped across the hedge and joined me by shifting in mid-air.

Now that we were both in our true forms, the drunkenness brought on by alcohol was quickly leaving our system, thanks to the faster metabolism of our wolf bodies. I raced ahead, leaving Alexis behind as I traversed across the forest, feeling the cool air on my body.

Alexis did not want to accept her defeat so easily. She sprinted past me and jumped ahead, leaving me alone in the clearing where I stood. It was time to stop holding back. I had to make use of my wolf within form and show her my true power. Instead of racing after her, I leaped into the air, well above the trees, and hurtled myself forward, landing right in front of her.

Alexis was shocked, a story that her widely blinking eyes told clearly. Then she purred and lowered her head playfully. I chased her tail in a circle until we both became tired and fell on top of each other. There we lay, two wolves basking in the light of the moon, licking each other’s fur, purring and gently whistling in the wind.

This is a beautiful place.

It's all in the eyes of the beholder, I said.

Do you want to race up to that big elm tree? See who's faster once and for all? Alexis asked.

On the count of three.... two....

Before I even had a chance to say one, Alexis broke into a sprint for the elm tree. Even though I knew I could cover that distance within less than a second, I let her have this victory. I wanted her to feel powerful, strong, and fast. She'd need her strength for the surprise I had waiting for her.

At midnight, we shifted back into our human forms and went back to the bed and breakfast. All the lights were turned off, which made finding our way to our bedroom tricky.

"Why is it so dark?" Alexis whispered, bumping her foot into me.

"House rules, I guess," I said, lying through my teeth. I'd already given explicit instructions to the matron and the staff. Everything had to be absolutely perfect. It was just a happy coincidence that all the guests had retired to their rooms and were probably either asleep or busy in their bedroom affairs.

"Will. Something doesn't feel right. What is happening?" Alexis asked.

"It's all okay. Let's just sleep it off in our room," I said. It had been one hell of an impossible task to keep this secret from Alexis. We were bonded together. Whatever I thought, she could intercept, and whatever crossed her mind, I could read. While we had agreed not to snoop about each other's minds unnecessarily, I had to remain extremely cautious as I pulled off this surprise.

“If you say so,” Alexis said tiredly, then pushed the doors to our room.

As the doors flung open, dozens of warm yellow and orange lights lit up in the room in the form of lamps, the chandelier, and those fairy lights that hung from the curtains. The room came alive with the sight of more than a hundred roses sprawled on the bed, sprouting from vases, covering the floor and just about any other surface.

Alexis gasped as she stepped into the room. I stepped in behind her, feeling overwhelmed by the smell of the roses, the cozy warmth coming from the fireplace, and the gentle wind coming through the window. The curtains lightly blew as Alexis came to a halt at the center of the room.

There were roses, there were chocolates, and there were teddy bears just as she had asked.

But those were just decorations on a set meant for a much larger thing. A lifelong commitment.

As she turned, she found me bent on one knee, holding a ring in my hand.

A second gasp followed the first one as she held her face in her hands. I could see that her legs were shaking. If only she could see the state of my heart right now.

“Alexis Richards,” I began, but she lifted her finger and shook it.

“Stop. Just stop. I have to take it in. Otherwise, I’m going to regret it for the rest of my life. Oh my God, I’m feeling so overwhelmed. The tears...the t-” Her eyes were just beginning to get wet. I couldn’t let her cry on this sanctimonious occasion.

I stood up and held her, hugging her, kissing her, and comforting her as she steadied herself.

“Okay, you may resume,” she said, drying the two tears that had leaked from the corners of her eyes. “These are tears of joy,” she said, smiling at me.

I went back to my knee, then took out the ring again, holding it in front of her.

“Alexis Richards, from the moment I met you, you have been making me undergo a journey—a journey filled with growth, delight, joy, understanding, and compassion. I am not the man I once was when I came from Germany. You have performed a miracle by changing this obstinate fool into someone who’s capable of understanding what true love really is. It humbles me how much I love you. It moves me, this great force that exists invisibly between us, drawing us closer to each other every day. I am truly blessed to have found you in this world. I thank the gods, all the gods that ever were or ever will be, that you found me that day in the forest. I am grateful to you for sticking around with me, for not leaving me when I was a pain in the ass, and for saving my life not once but so many times that I’ve lost count. You are truly my mate in every sense of the word. I would love to make you my wife and see that nothing can drive us apart from this point onward. And for that, I promise that I will do everything within my power to ensure that we live together harmoniously, in love and peace. So, Alexis, love of my life, will you marry me?”

It was the longest silence in the history of the universe as I kneeled in front of her and watched the reflection of the fireplace’s fire dance in her eyes. I could try to reach into her mind to see what she was thinking, but I did not. I needed to not know so that the answer would incite a genuine reaction.

This was one of the times when I could not use my bond with her.

Alexis's lips quivered as she tried to speak. Her fingers shook as she held out her hand.

"You are a difficult man, Will Grimm," she said, her voice not quite breaking but just about to. "Loving you has been a challenge, and it has not been easy for me at times. You are intense in everything you do. But I know one thing. I love you. And I would trade all the ease in the world for just a moment with you. I choose you. I need you. And just as I have changed you, you have changed me into a better version of myself. A much more mature and stable person. So, yes. I'll marry you!"

I slid the ring onto her finger, and then, without waiting another moment, I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. I needed to feel her body next to mine, not in a sensual or sexual manner but in a familial one. Moving forth, she would be my wife. An extension of me. A part of me just as much as I'd be a part of her.

For the first time ever in my life, I was holding my fiancé in my arms. Not just my mate, not my girlfriend, my fiancé.

"I promise I'm going to make things easier from now on," I whispered in her ear. "And no more surprises."

"Some surprises," Alexis said. "I kinda loved this one."

"I love you," I said.

"Well, I love you too, fiancée," she said, kissing my lips.

"So...do you like the ring?" I asked.

“Never really got a chance to examine it,” she said, then held up her ring in front of her eyes. “My God, Will. That’s about the biggest diamond I’ve ever seen.”

“This ring belonged to my mother. It was one of the few things that I’d brought with me to America in the hopes that when I found my mate, I’d give her this ring. And today, after almost seventy years, I have fulfilled that promise to myself,” I said, holding her in my arms and feeling fulfilled in ways I didn’t even know were possible.

Chapter 23: Alexis

I was still swept up in Will's embrace, and the night was just as magical as it was when I entered the room to the surprising sight of roses, chocolates, and teddy bears. I had just nagged him, and he had gone the extra length of delivering everything I had asked for and so much more.

Never in my life would I have imagined that he would propose to me this soon and with this much pomp and show. Could this also be the effect of the potion? Had it changed his personality as well?

"I know what you're thinking," Will said. "And don't you worry. The potion has just enhanced what was already inside me. I am not a changed man, at least not in the ways that matter. I'm still very much the same person that you fell in love with, minus all the toxicity."

"But what does it say about me that I was drawn to the toxicity too?" It was just a genuine fear that I was sharing with Will. I didn't mean anything by it. We were engaged, after all. I could say these things to my fiancée.

"You will get used to this cheery new demeanor of mine," Will said, stroking my hair.

"Where on earth did you get all these chocolates from? And why so many?" I asked, finally breaking the hug and paying attention to the details of the decoration in the room. The flowers weren't just hanging from the curtains; they were woven into the fabric along with the fairy lights. It created a

magical look that I was sure was just as expensive to pull off. The chocolates were all imported from Belgium, France, and Turkey. The kind that would put a dent in anyone's pocket.

"Seriously, Will, where did you get all this from?" I asked, completely perplexed.

"I only had to pay the matron in advance. She and I went over different decorations till I found one that I liked. She's the real brains of this operation," Will said.

"You're being modest," I said, rubbing my hand on his cheek.

"I try," Will smiled at me.

"So what's the plan now, my dear fiancée?"

"The plan, dear fiancé, is to marry you. A big yet simple ceremony that will have the entire pack as well as some friends from the city. We'll host it in the commune, on the training grounds. Or we can get creative and go for a theme wedding. Totally your call. And then we're going on a long honeymoon. We can even go out of the country if that's what you want." Then, Will held me by my shoulders and took me to the bed, laying me down on the rose petals.

"It's just that I have this new lease on life, and I do not want to waste this chance," he said, taking off my shirt as he lay by my side. Then he unbuckled my bra and slipped it off my breasts. "For the first time in my entire life, I truly feel grateful to be alive. There's nothing holding me back. No war, no enemies, no poisons in my body, and nothing haunting me in the back of my mind. All that exists right now is love. Does that make sense?"

"It makes sense," I said, covering my breasts with my hands. "But I fear that

I've done something terribly wrong when I was making your potion. You're a little bit too cheery."

Will threw his head back and laughed freely. Then, almost immediately, he was upon me and kissing me on my lips. Between his kisses, he said, "The potion worked perfectly. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm trying to tell you that this version of me is the real me, and you're responsible for restoring me back to my full health."

That was a good enough explanation, and so I uncovered my breasts and let him play with them. He was in a jolly mood. Me? I was still fathoming the fact that he'd proposed to me and that I had accepted it. Of course, I was happy and content. But Will seemed to be on a level of delight that seemed a little too good to be true. Or perhaps, could it be that I was being defensive? I had to let go of the fears of the past and accept that this man, my mate, was a healed and changed man.

I kissed him back and made him lie down on the bed with me on top. I slowly unbuckled his belt and then took off his pants. His cock sprang out of his underwear. I took it in my hand and stroked it.

In all my life, I had never heard Will moan such as he was moaning right now. Those were carefree moans of sheer pleasure that were coming from his mouth, motivating me to stroke faster, tighter, and harder. His penis grew in my hand as I quickened my strokes, and when it felt like he was about to cum, I stopped.

Then, I took off my panties and sat on his erect dick, taking it in all at once. I slowly rode him, letting him be the vocal one this time around, relishing the sounds coming from his mouth, enjoying him whispering my name over and

over again as I rode him. His cock filled me up deep inside, sending forth waves of erotic pleasure surging through my pelvis up to my breasts and onto my neck.

When I was tired and covered in sweat, I let him go on top and then held him by his neck, directing his gaze into my eyes as he made love to me. He was ever so gentle as he thrust and prodded. There was a familiarity to our sex. We both knew what the other wanted, and we gave it to each other without reserve.

He gushed into me, and the sensation of him coming inside me triggered a primal orgasm deep within me, making me moan loudly. I felt the strength give away in my legs and arms as Will lay on top of me, panting and sweating.

“We’re on track to beat some sort of sex record, aren’t we?” I asked as he slid off me and lay on the rose petals.

“It’s like I said when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” Will said. “I don’t know about you, but I am absolutely famished. I’m going to go down into the kitchen and see if the chef can’t fix us something to eat right now.”

“It’s past midnight!” I protested. “Why don’t you just lie down and go to sleep? Given how gastronomic this place is, I can assure you that they have a seven-course breakfast laid out for us in the morning.”

“If you insist, dear fiancée,” Will said, and then, almost without any notice, fell asleep.

Shortly thereafter, I fell asleep too, but not for long.

It turned out that Will was indeed hiding something from me. I had barely slept for an hour or so when I woke up to the sound of the door opening. It was Will, coming from outside, holding a cup of coffee in his hands.

“You went to the kitchen without me?” I asked as I sat up and rubbed my eyes. “What time is it?”

“Go back to sleep, Lexie,” Will said. His mood was completely different from how it had been before we’d fallen asleep. “I’m going to join you soon.”

“Will. What’s wrong? You’re worried. What is it?” I asked. “You have to confide these things in me.”

“Fine,” Will said, only this time, there was no jubilation in his voice. It was a grave voice, a haunting reminder of how his voice used to be before the potion. “There I was, fast asleep, when Maurice visited me in my dream. Well, more precisely, his words. Do you remember what he said? He’d said something about someone being against me for more than seventy years. I had forgotten about that. Fate seems to have reminded me that one of my foes, other than Blair, is still alive and out there, potentially plotting something against me. No matter how much I think about it, I end up drawing a blank. You’re my mate. What do you think it is? Who is out there?”

This version of Will was a much more natural version compared to how he was just a few hours ago. I realized how stupid I had been in thinking that there was something wrong with him. There had been nothing wrong with him. He had only drunk too much wine. That’s why he was being so over the

top earlier. Now that he was drinking his coffee, he was sober, and with such sobriety came the realization of sobriety.

“The puppeteer,” I said.

“Why would you say that?” Will asked, frowning.

“There is someone in the shadows, operating from behind curtains of darkness, pulling the strings of the people that we came to know as our foes. Blair, Maurice, Ralph—those were all puppets,” I said.

“It couldn’t be Edward. I killed him with my hands,” Will sighed. “And the only other person who still lives from seventy years ago is Fred. But he is my brother, and look at his state. He’s old, withered, and can’t even move without his walker or his wheelchair. Do you really think that Fred is capable of creating such a fine syndicate of crime and horrors?”

“Fred is senile,” I agreed. “Even when I was a kid, he was senile. He cannot talk properly. Most of the time, he’s not even thinking straight. If you walk past him in the town square, you’ll find him mumbling nonsense. Most pack members just respect him because he’s one of the original Grimms. He cannot be the puppeteer.”

“Is it me?” Will asked.

“What?!” I rose from my bed, utterly perplexed at his question.

“You know, like how in those movies and TV shows that you showed me, the main character develops a split personality disorder where one personality is the hero, and the other is a villain. Like *Mr. Robot* or *Fight Club*,” Will said.

“Okay, putting aside the fact that I’m more than impressed that you’ve

somehow retained the plots of *Mr. Robot* and *Fight Club*, that kind of thing only happens in movies. Besides, you spend countless hours by my side. We're always in front of each other. Don't you think if you had a secret split personality, I would be the first to know of it?"

"You're right. I'm just thinking around in circles and getting nowhere," Will said, shaking his hand. "Hey, do you want some of this coffee? I don't want anymore. I'm as sober as one can be."

"Fine. Give it," I said, reaching out. He handed me the cup. I drank from it to clear my head, then went to the window and sat by him on the sofa, both of us staring out into the darkness.

"Was Maurice lying?" Will asked. "You know, he might be lying just to fuck with my head so that even in death, he would have the last laugh."

"Come to think of it, that could be it. Just look at the town yourself. It's all so calm now that Maurice and Ralph aren't there anymore. Even Blair has left the city and has holed up god knows where. If there were a true villain plotting things against you for seventy-plus years, wouldn't they be out there trying to bring you down? Instead, you're enjoying a nice mini-vacation with your mate out here in Vermont," I said. "Now come back to bed, and let's go to sleep. We do have to go back to Fiddler's Green tomorrow."

I held Will's hand and beckoned him to come back to bed. He did not struggle.

"Paranoia does not suit you, Will," I said, holding his head in my arms as I cradled him to sleep.

“Oh, my Lord, that is one big fat ring!” Vincent gasped as I held my hand to him. “Tell me all the details. How did he propose? What was that place like?”

“Calm down, now, young Vincent,” Will said, coming from behind me. We had just entered the Grimm Abode after hours of traveling. I was overcome with joy upon seeing Vincent back in the commune and couldn’t wait to show him the ring.

“Will! Buddy, so good to see you!” Vince said and gave Will a deep hug. “Congratulations are in order—an engaged man. Soon you’ll be a married man. God, this calls for celebrations. I’m going to alert the entire commune!”

“Before you do any of that, tell me about yourself,” I said, holding Vincent’s hand and taking him to the side. Will followed us with his hand resting on Vincent’s shoulder.

“I had to go away for a while to clear my head. You know? With dad dying and everything, it changed things for me. Now, I’m the head of my family. Grandpa Fred is there, but he’s not really all there, is he? Every day he grows older and more senile than before. I have to take care of all the land that we own, the resources, and so much bureaucratic stuff that dad had lying around in his mayoral office. But that’s just business. I traveled quite a bit just to compute what had happened and process it all. What I came to realize at the end of my travels was that my father was his own man, just as I am my own man. He was responsible for his choices. I get to make my choices. And that makes all the difference,” Vincent said. “With that said, I’m back, and I’m going to take charge of things, starting with an engagement celebration!”

Will hugged him, and so did I. Vincent was in quite a positive spirit, and it reflected in the spirit of everyone in the commune. People were happy,

walking around with smiles on their faces. Vincent kept running from person to person, telling them that Will had proposed to me.

And then it began, the deluge of people coming to me one by one, congratulating me on landing such a fine young man and wishing me the best of luck in my future life. Even though I was tired as hell, I stayed outside and greeted everyone who came to me, bearing congratulations.

Once it was all done, two hours had passed. It had never taken me two hours to interact with my pack members before. This was the first time they had greeted and treated me with such fondness, making me truly feel like a part of the pack instead of just an outsider.

I held Will's hand and took him to our home, eager to get out of the sight of all the people. We were tired, and we needed to rest. More importantly, we had to get ready for whatever shindig Vincent was going to throw in light of the news of our engagement.

Or we can run away yet again, Will whispered in my mind.

We can't always run away from our people, Will. Our happiness is their happiness. Never in my life would I have imagined I'd say such a thing. But now, it felt genuine. The pack was not a band of strangers to me anymore. They were family.

"I am glad that you are becoming accepting of the people around you," Will said.

"Okay. We can rest for a few hours. Knowing Vincent, his whole celebrating thing isn't going to start until the night," I said, taking Will inside the house.

We barely had the chance to shower, change our clothes, and drink a cup of

tea when Vincent knocked on our door and invited us outside. The sun had gone down, and the lights were up. Bulbs hung from posts, illuminating the commune, and the people were being their mirthful selves, cooking, dancing, singing, and talking to each other.

I went around the commune, meeting them yet again for the second time on the same day. This time, though, I was less overwhelmed, and the pressure to mingle was off my shoulders. The people were already doing that on their own. In the past couple of days, I discovered that alcohol had a way of making people's inhibitions go down, including mine. Even now, there was a glass of wine in my hands that I clung tightly to. Any time it was nearing emptiness, I filled it up and went around making rounds of the commune, taking part in the celebrations with much more enthusiasm than before.

In all this, Will kept sitting with Vincent in one corner of the commune. The two men were barbecuing some tikkas, or so it appeared. From across the commune, I called out to Will and asked him if everything was all right.

I'm just making sure that Vincent's okay. I have to spend time with him to ascertain that he has truly recovered from his father's death, Will told me.

It was a commendable thing that Will was doing. I wished I was doing something similar. But there was nothing to do except celebrate, drink, eat, and be merry.

Quietly, I snuck back into our home and pulled the curtains in the bedroom. Then I shut down the lights and pulled the blanket over me. Who knew how long these festivities might go on? I was tired beyond comprehension. Besides, what I had planned for tomorrow required a good night's sleep.

Chapter 24: Will

“Yesterday, you weren’t there at the celebration,” I said.

Fred’s tiny house was like walking back in time. Everything was decades old and retained its original newness, a fact that amazed me. With Fred sitting by the fireplace in his wheelchair, stoking the fire with a poker, the room seemed like a museum exhibit.

“There was once a time when fathers who lost their sons would mourn them for years. It has not been a week since Maurice’s death was made official. How can I celebrate anything when my only son died?” Fred said. Unlike what I had been led to believe, Fred was able to put together more than just a sentence. He was completely cognizant and coherent.

“You mourn him even though you know of all the things that he did? He kidnapped my mate. He killed people, Fred. And in case you missed it, he was running an illegal, dangerous, and downright unnatural business with the vampires. Even still, you mourn him?” I hadn’t come here looking for a fight. I had come here to seek my brother’s counsel. However, the tone of Fred’s voice suggested otherwise. He seemed to be in no mood to entertain me or my thoughts.

“He was my son, dammit. You killed my son, Will. No matter what his sins were, he was born of my seed. I know that you haven’t had the chance to father a child, but the day you do, and if I am alive that day, I will ask you

how it will feel if someone takes that child away from you. Until that day, I am afraid I have nothing more to say to you on the matter. You simply won't be able to understand," Fred said, turning his back to me.

It enraged me how obstinate he was being, even though he was my younger brother. I strode across the room and pushed his wheelchair so that he was facing me again.

"I am the Alpha of this pack, Fred. I lead the people. Each one of them is like my family. I know the pain of loss. Do not ever dare to say that I do not know that sorrow. I lost my entire pack. I lost Ariana. I have lost more than you know. While you were out in the world, living your life, marrying, and fathering your child, I was in chains, tied in the darkness. So if it is sorrow and loss we are comparing, let us not begin, for you stand no chance against the sea of anguish that I have braved through!"

It was the first time my anger had resurfaced ever since I had taken the potion. However, there was a difference between the two fits of anger. The one before was almost catalyzed by the smallest of triggers. This one, though, was righteous anger. I was holding my ground and standing up for myself. This anger was not unjust. And since it was a natural anger, I controlled it just as naturally.

"There you go again, going on and on about your woes. There must be a point even for you when that whole bitching tends to get tiring. Aren't you tired of whining about the past? There's more to life than what happened to you. Could you be any more selfish?" Fred spat.

Were he not so old and fragile and on the brink of demise, I would have grabbed him by the throat for his insolence. But age demanded respect, and it

was this respect that was stopping me from turning this verbal altercation into a physical one.

“Are you saying that you know what Maurice was doing all along and chose to do nothing?” I asked.

“What I know matters not. I have been immobilized for the last twenty-five years as a result of a series of strokes that have left me paralyzed from below the waist. You were in chains, but at least you were free to move your limbs whenever you desired. When I wish to move my legs, I have to make peace with the knowledge that as long as I live, I shall never walk again,” Fred said, the bitterness gone from his voice. It was replaced with genuine sadness.

It disarmed me enough to say, “My brother, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to hound you.”

“And I didn’t mean to skip out on your engagement celebration either. It is okay. I am just coping with loss in my own way. Sadly, for me, it’s the cripple’s way. I can’t go anywhere, so these walls hold my sorrow,” Fred said, tears streaming from his eyes.

“I never intended to kill your son. Had he repented or turned to our side, I’d have spared him. But even after he had taken everyone to the culling field, he didn’t stop. He continued smuggling with the vampires, and he kidnapped my mate. If I hadn’t made him pay for all those crimes with his life, what good an Alpha would I have been?” I asked.

“If I were in your position, I would have done the same,” Fred said. “But when it comes to family, rationality goes out the window. How am I ever going to get another son at my age? A man only has one thing at the end of the day. His legacy. What about my legacy?”

“Your legacy lives on in the form of your grandson. He’s twice the man your son was, and he is loyal, brave, pure, and strong. Vincent is your legacy. You should rest assured of that,” I said, holding Fred’s hand.

“I suppose you are right. Now tell me why you came here in the first place. It wasn’t to scold me for not showing up to your engagement party, was it? You are troubled. Tell me what’s wrong,” Fred said.

“Before your son died, he said something that has been troubling me. He told me that someone has been working against me for the past seventy years, ever since I left Germany. Do you have any clue of an idea as to who that could be?”

Fred’s eyes glared with rage. Color flushed to his cheeks as his hands quivered on the handles of his wheelchair. He snarled at me, furling his brows. “You dare mention him again after what I just said to you? Do you have no honor? I am still mourning his loss, and yet you choose to come here, insult me, taunt me, and then inquire about some matter my son spoke of at the time of his death? How heartless are you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I am sorry,” I said, struggling to keep this conversation civil, but it seemed that Fred did not want to keep it civil any longer. “I just wanted to make some sense of it.”

“And so you thought that the best person to ask would be the deceased’s father?” Fred spat. “Have you lost your mind?”

“That does it, Fred. I have been trying to remain calm with you, and you keep pushing me and pushing me. Enough. What did Maurice mean by what he said? Answer me or answer the pack for obstructing the course of justice!” Now it was my turn to be angry. Fred was doing this on purpose. Such had

always been his way from the beginning.

“I will give you nothing,” Fred said.

“Fred. Really? Are you really going to do this? Mother used to spank you on the butt when you used to pull such shenanigans when we were little. Come off it,” I said, trying to appease us both with the memory of our mother. She was, after all, the link that joined us as brothers. We had fond memories of her, to say the least.

“You had to invoke mom, didn’t you?” Fred said, chuckling dryly. “And you have the memory of a hawk.”

“That I do,” I said, nodding. “Now. Could you please give me something so that we may end this tense exchange? I feel terrible as it is.”

“If something or someone has been conspiring against you for the past seventy years, it must be because they didn’t want you to be Alpha. They must have, let’s say, disagreed with some of your decisions. When you suddenly decided to migrate from Germany to America, you forsook acres of our ancestral lands, lands that the Grimms had owned for centuries. Maybe, someone bids you ill will because they lost claim to those lands because you decided to move from Germany to America. Or maybe someone was in love with the person you thought you were in love with. It is Ariana I speak of. Loves and their jealousies have a track record of forging strong enmities. Or it could be someone who was not a werewolf but of another species: a vampire, a hunter, or an occultist. Maybe Edward Beckett somehow lives. There are so many meanings to that one sentence. Who knows what Maurice might have meant?” Fred said and then took a deep breath from his oxygen cylinder.

“You are strained. I will leave you to it, brother. And for all its worth, I am sorry for everything. For killing your son, for disturbing your peace just now, and for not being a perfect leader,” I said, leaving his room.

“I may forgive you, but there are those whose forgiveness you’d wish to seek who are dead now. What of them? Who is to say that Maurice was speaking of the living exclusively? Possibly, someone from the dead may have been conspiring against you, setting up failsafe plans to ensure your doom. It could be that, couldn’t it?” Fred asked.

“You have given me a lot to think about,” I said. Truth was, I just needed to get out of his home. The tense verbal fight had drawn a lot out of me, leaving me vulnerable. I had never expected my brother to be so cold toward me. It made me wonder if the bond of our brotherhood had been permanently severed by my actions.

When I went home, I searched for Alexis everywhere but found no sign of her. She had mentioned something to me in the morning about going into the city. Perhaps she was off meeting her friend Maliha, or maybe she was doing some shopping. I just needed to see her and feel normal once more. She had that effect on me. It was one of the bounties of true love; seeing her made all the troubles flee from my mind.

While I waited for her, I sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee, mulling over the memories that I’d retained over the years, racking hard in those archives of my thoughts to see who the enemy could be.

The answer seemed to be too simple, and yet it eluded me. I had no enemies outside the ones that I’d made in the course of my revenge against Edward. I’d never even met Edward before he had decided to kidnap me and use me

for his experiments.

What Fred had said about someone from the pack bearing me ill will resonated with me. But that resonance did me no good. For now, this knot appeared to have no solution. I did not like it when problems had no solutions. For almost seventy years, I had looked at the padlock on my cage, wondering how I'd be able to open it. If it hadn't been for luck, I'd still have been stuck in that cage, withering away.

Who would have stood to gain from my imprisonment?

Later that afternoon, after I had gotten tired of waiting for Alexis, I decided to take out my old documents from the cabinet. I hadn't opened these documents in more than seventy years. These were diaries that I had written over the course of my travel from Germany to America. There were pictures of the Grimm pack from the 1940s. Some of the pack members had written journals and had entrusted them to me to make sure that I'd safeguard them in case something happened to the pack members.

If there was an answer, it was somewhere in these documents.

As I sat there, perusing each document carefully, I realized that this endeavor was going to be too tedious and time-taking. So, I called Vincent, and together the two of us started going through the documents one by one. Even then, it took us more than three hours to completely sort through all the documents, and we found nothing.

"What did your father mean by that?" I asked, telling Vincent what Maurice

had said, hoping that Vincent's reaction would be different than Fred's.

"My dad never told anyone this, but I knew. He didn't know that I knew. We shared a house growing up. I sometimes heard things that I wasn't meant to hear. Way before there was Blair or Ralph, there was someone else my father talked to on the phone. I never knew who they were. All I knew was at nine every night, the phone would ring, and my father would lock the study door. Sometimes I'd listen and try to make sense of what he was talking about. I was so little back then I didn't even understand most of it. Once or twice, I told mom that I had heard him saying bad words. For a kid of five or six years, words like fuck and shit are bad words. And I had heard him using those. After that, mom started spying on him," Vincent said. I could see that this was straining him, having to deal with so much trauma and unresolved emotions. These were his parents that he was talking about. It was always difficult to talk about one's parents, especially after they'd died. It was one of the reasons I never talked about mine or Alexis ever talked about hers.

"She would snoop whenever he'd get the calls and try to make sense of things. She never told me what she found out. One night, while I was in bed, trying to sleep, there was a huge argument between mom and dad. I heard a loud thud and the sound of a muffled scream. I was too scared to get out of bed, so I slept, even though that was the hardest thing to do that night. The next morning, dad told me that mom had suddenly gone somewhere and that she would never return. It took me twenty years to understand that my father had killed my mother that night because she had learned his secret. I never prodded into the matter, what with my life being dear to me. I didn't want to end up like my mom. And so, I never came to know whom he talked to on the landline every day at nine at night," Vincent said.

"That is a lot to unpack. How come you never told me this before?" I asked.

“Because I had to process it all retroactively. Sometimes, the trauma that shapes us can only be tackled after the fact. When I went away after dad’s death, I did meet some therapists in Ohio who helped me unmask the trauma and make me see the truth. It helped me a lot. I learned to differentiate between the person who was Maurice, the corrupt mayor, and the Maurice who was my dad. You didn’t kill my dad. You killed the corrupt mayor. My dad had already died the day he chose to value his illegal business over his family. He was lost to me the day he killed my mom.”

“It only creates more questions for me,” I said. “Now I am left wondering as to who this mysterious person was who called your father every night at nine.”

“I believe I do have one tiny bit of information that may be able to help you regarding that,” Vincent said, his eyes aglow.

“What’s that?”

“I only heard the man’s voice on the other end of the line one time, and that was by mistake. Back in the day, landlines used to have two or three connections in one house, so if you picked up one phone, you could hear what the other person was saying on the line. I was little, so I didn’t know I was doing something wrong. I was just trying to call mom, thinking that if I dialed some magical combination of numbers, it would dial her number, and she’d answer my call and tell me that she’d come back and that she loved me. That never happened. Of course, it couldn’t happen. My mom was dead. But when I picked up the phone, my dad was talking to that same person. It was a man’s voice, Will. And the man was speaking in a German accent,” Vincent said.

“A German accent? How would you know what a German accent sounds like? You were so little back then,” I said, but even as Vince said it, my mind began unraveling with thoughts focusing on who this mysterious German-accented man could be.

“Because growing up, PBS used to air those documentaries about Hitler and World War II all the time. Not to mention all the Call of Duty games had German Nazi villains in them. That’s how I knew,” Vincent said.

“And do you remember what that voice had said?” I asked.

“I am afraid I don’t remember what he said. Just that it was a man’s voice, and his accent was too Germanic,” Vincent said.

At least now I had some direction in which to search for this mysterious enemy. Thanks to Vincent, I knew two things—it was a man, and he spoke German.

Unluckily, it didn’t come close to narrowing down who it could be in real life. Certainly, it was no one that I knew.

Perhaps Alexis would be able to help.

Vincent had just finished talking when the door opened, and Alexis came inside, her face pale, her eyes wide. Her lower lip was quivering, and her hands were shaking. She was holding a cassette in one hand and a crowbar in the other.

“I have something to share with you, Will, and you’re not going to like it,” Alexis said.

My heart skipped a beat. Somehow, I already knew what she was going to

share with me. I just did not want to accept it. Understanding dawned on me a little too late.

Chapter 25: Alexis

Knowing Will and having a functional understanding of Alphas in general, I knew he'd never agree to revisit the site where he was defeated. It was simply against the Alpha code to go to the battleground where they had been beaten. Not that it was just about shame and loss. There was more nuance to it. An Alpha could only return to the site of their defeat if they meant to reclaim that place by winning in a new fight.

From what I could tell, Blair's tower had been abandoned for quite some now. As for precisely when it was abandoned, I wasn't sure. My guess was it was ditched somewhere between Ralph's and Maurice's deaths. With two of his most loyal compadres no longer working with him, Blair knew he was backed into a corner with wolves surrounding him from all sides. Even if there were someone who was a level higher on the hierarchy of chaos, Blair wouldn't bet his safety against the entire pack of Grimms. It made sense for him to run, thus, he ran.

And that's why Will would never visit this place. It would be against the Alpha's code. Since there was no adversary to fight in this abandoned tower, coming here would be moot for him. He'd never be able to reclaim this place as his own. An Alpha wolf could only claim a space if he won it from someone in a fight. He could never go to a place and designate it as his. If my knowledge of history served me right, when the Grimms had initially come to America, they had to fight for this land from another pack of wolves. It was only after the wolves were defeated that the Grimms claimed the Grimm

Abode as theirs.

I, on the other hand, was a slave to no such conditions and premises. I could come here freely and roam around while looking for some critical piece of evidence. Evidence that required a finer eye than Will possessed. As intelligent as he was, Will was far from being fluent in computers. Here, in this desolate building, the only things that had survived the process of Blair's migration were leftover stacks of computers and servers. Other things included paperwork, lab equipment, and corporate paraphernalia, all of which were useless to me. If there was any evidence of this secret mastermind's existence, it had to be in those computers.

But which computers, exactly? There were more than thirty floors in this building, and all of them had sub-sections. I didn't have the time to sort through every single floor, hoping to find something tangible.

Then it occurred to me that I wasn't as fluent in computers as I'd thought I'd be. This was strictly Maliha's domain, but calling on Maliha to aid me in this fool's errand to find the world's smallest needle in the world's biggest haystack would only result in me unknowingly spilling the beans to Maliha about werewolves, vampires, and perverted occultists preying on the innocent. As bizarre and far-out as Maliha was, she'd never be able to grasp the fact that a secret universe thrived under her very nose. She'd go insane.

I did not want my best friend to go insane. Not unless it was extremely necessary. If there'd ever come a time when I had to tell her about my real identity, I would ensure that I'd do it in such a way as to soften the blow. But given that it was such a hard blow, it'd require me a lot of mental gymnastics to be able to pull something like this off.

Getting into the vacated building was not hard at all. Now that Blair wasn't there himself, he also didn't have any of his guards and mercenaries guarding the place. There was just one big caution tape wrapped around the entrance of the building with a couple of police patrolmen roaming around the perimeter, drinking coffee and eating donuts while talking about the big game last night. They never saw me as I slipped past them and through the cracked glass door that led into the building.

As I had presumed, this was a case of "What Will doesn't know won't hurt him." He'd never have to find out that I had to visit the place where he had both suffered such an embarrassing loss. I'd bear the bad memories for him. It was traumatic enough, being in here, on my own. I could see from where I'd fallen off the window, see where Will's cold body had frothed from the mouth as he'd said Ariana's name, and witness our collective demise as Blair had injected him with Wolf's Bane. It was as if all of that had just happened yesterday.

All of it was utterly painful. Will did not deserve to come here to revisit the pain. That's what mates were for. They helped one bear the burden and ease one's pain. I wanted to believe that that was what I was doing for him. At least, I hoped that that's what I was doing for him. He had been so nice to me lately, ever since we'd come back from our getaway in Vermont. Will had been nothing but the most perfect gentleman ever since our engagement.

Speaking of our engagement, the ring on my finger, with its massive diamond, felt too heavy and sturdy, reminding me at every step that I was now bound to my mate in more than one way. It beckoned me to be careful, a tangible reminder of our relationship in the form of gold and diamonds.

It was going to be too humongous of a task, going from floor to floor,

wondering which computer held the right information. Most of the computers, just like most of the equipment and stuff left over, had been destroyed, making my already difficult task harder.

I took out my phone, feeling restricted in my abilities that I had to depend on Maliha even though I didn't want to.

"Sup, home girl," Maliha's chirpy voice came from the phone half a second after I'd dialed her number. That woman was as quick on the draw when it came to her phone as a cowboy was back in the old West days. "Been a long time, hasn't it?"

"I've been meaning to meet you, but I was out of the city," I said. There. That was a half-truth. And for now, it would have to suffice.

"Out of the city? I've never known you to step out of Fiddler's Green. Where were you?" Maliha asked.

"First Bangor, then Vermont, and now I'm back home. Anyways, I've got this question. Can you help me out with a computer problem I'm having?"

"Sure. Shoot. What is it?"

"Say you're somewhere where there are more than a hundred computers. How can you go about searching a group of computers in such a way that you can access all the information on all of them at the same time? Is such a thing even possible at all?"

"That's not a tall order by any means," Maliha said, filling me with relief. "If said computers are in an office, they're all joined by the company's intranet. And most of these connections are wired, so even if the internet is not functional, the intranet always is. All you have to do is gain root access to the

admin. Can you do that?”

“I don’t even know what root access or admin means,” I said, feeling like a fool. Why hadn’t I taken the computer competency courses in community college when I had the chance? Oh, wait, I remember. It’s because our community colleges had decades-old Pentium PCs in the lab, and the only competency I could learn on them was how to operate Windows XP. In this office, on the other hand, all the computers were iMacs and Macbooks. I doubted if my computer competency classes from a community college would have helped me with this particular problem.

“It’s fine. I’ll help you. All you have to do is find a computer. Any computer, as long as it is connected to the intranet. Can you do that?” Maliha asked.

“I can. Anyways, what are you doing? Are you still waitressing for the diner?” I asked as I looked at the array of computers in the bullpen ahead of me, hoping that at least one of them would be working.

“Ah, yes. About that. I’m not waitressing anymore. There comes a time in a person’s life when they understand that they cannot skate about life doing menial chores and call it living. I’m a reformed person now. I’ve decided to teach computing to underprivileged kids at the community college. I’m there these days all the time. They’re paying good money, and they do need the help, help which I am very eager to provide. It’s fulfilling work. You should come by the campus sometime, relive some of the old memories from back in the day.”

“I’ll make sure to do so. Will wants to see the local community college. I’ve been meaning to take him some time. It’s good that you’re there. Now I have two reasons to come by,” I said. “Aha!” I exclaimed as I came across one

computer whose screen hadn't been completely battered. There were lines on the screen, but at least I could see what was written on it.

"You found a computer?" Maliha asked.

"Oh, yes!"

"Good, then login through the admin panel. Here's the trick with corporations. Most of their admin usernames are admin, and their passwords are the word password. No one ever bothers to change them. It's stupid, but it's true. Why don't you try that?" Maliha laughed.

As stupid as that suggestion was, it miraculously worked, and now I was logged into the computer. I could see the tiny internet icon on the top right, meaning the computer was connected to the intranet.

"If you want root access, boot the computer in safe mode," Maliha said.

"I don't think that's necessary," I said. "The computer is already connected to the servers. I can see the tiny server icons in the network section."

"You cannot access them just like that. As I said, you need root access as an admin. Now, that is trickier to get than logging in," Maliha said.

"How do I do that?"

"Search for the terminal and then do exactly as I say," she said.

I did exactly as she asked and opened the terminal. She gave me a string of letters, numbers, and words to type in, which I did without questioning her. Maliha was a magician in her domain. There was no denying it. After I pressed the Enter key, a window popped up in front of me, displaying everything on the servers.

“How did you do that?” I asked Maliha, unable to believe that she’d helped me access the servers from so far away. “I’m sure it’ll all go over my head, but how did you do that?”

“I just did a localized DDoS attack using all the intranet’s computers on the server, disabling the server’s primary encryption, and making the data in the servers public to the intranet. Does that make sense to you?”

“It doesn’t. But one of these days, you’re going to have to teach me all this. You have to. It’s like wizardry,” I said, my mouth hanging open as I perused all the folders in the servers.

“It’s very simple, my friend,” Maliha said. “Humans built computers to be fallible so that they could extort the corporations through black hat hacking. It’s one of the worst kept secrets of all time?”

“I see you’re back to being your conspiracy theorist self,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ll catch up with you soon. You take care.”

“Catch you later,” Maliha said, hanging up. Conspiracy theories or not, she had helped me with a big problem.

From folder to folder, I searched until I found one that contained Blair’s files on them. If Maliha hadn’t helped me with this, I’d never have been able to access Blair’s files.

Hundreds of call logs, recordings, documents, images, and videos. I did not know where to begin.

I randomly clicked on one of the recordings and played it in the background as I looked through the rest of the folder. The conversation being played in the audio immediately hooked me, making me converge all my attention to

the voices. Three of them were identifiable right away. I'd recognize those voices anywhere. The fourth one, on the other hand, was a voice speaking in a German accent, making it hard for me to recognize it at first.

This audio file was from a few months ago before Will had been injected with Wolf's Bane.

"Beckett. How fares the alchemy?" the mystery man asked. "Are you still stuck in the same rut as your father?"

"I may be working for you, but mind how you talk about my dad," Blair scoffed.

"Yeah, he's really sensitive when it comes to his father," Maurice said.

"Aren't you as well, considering who we're speaking to?" the mystery man snapped.

"I am sorry," Maurice said in a tone that was so subservient that it was hard for me to believe that it was Maurice.

"And how much are you aiding in the process, Ralph?" the mystery man asked. "Did you manage to smuggle the chemicals required for the prototype? I heard they had to be imported from Romania. How do you fare on that front?"

"I had the batch shipped to Blair. All the balls are in his court right now, Master Fredrich," Ralph said. "I just want to know how someone can do this to their brother?"

"Family can be a pain in the ass, Ralph, as I am sure you will one day understand. When my brother threatened the Grimm legacy, I had to make

sure that he was destroyed. But before he was destroyed, I had to see to it that he was crippled emotionally and physically. Now that Blair's father has failed in this regard, it falls on you three to make sure that Wilhelm and his broodmare are vanquished. If it weren't for him, I would still be a lord of the lands in Germany, tending to our estate and enjoying the luxuries of wealth. Instead, here I rot in the squalor of this infested hamlet."

Never in a thousand years would I have guessed that it was Fred who had been conspiring against Will all this time. How was I ever going to show Will this and have him believe that his brother had been his biggest enemy for the past seventy-something years? It would break Will's heart.

How did he do it? How did Fred manage to come across as kindly, meek, old, decrepit, and weak while living a completely different life in the shadows all this time? How fierce was his hate against his brother that he was capable of doing something so vile to him?

"But even though you're his brother, sometimes I feel pity for what the man has been through," Blair said.

"I do not pay you to pity your foes," Fred said. "Remember the fact that he killed your father. Does that not move you to seek revenge?"

"I understand that my father was a big old cunt who couldn't get enough of torture and parlor tricks that he liked to call magic. If I were to torture someone for seventy years, I'd understand if they'd want to kill me in return. While I do harbor hate in my heart for your brother, I'm just saying that I do understand his point of view.

"The next time you empathize with my enemy will be your last, Blair Beckett. You keep reminding yourself of that, and you may yet live," Fred

said.

So many recordings just like this one, with Fred giving out commands to Blair, Ralph, and Maurice and them obeying him completely. The more Fred talked in these recordings, the more I understood why he was so bent on destroying Will.

I had to show these recordings to him immediately. His life was in danger.

While I did not know exactly how to work computers like a whizz, as Maliha could do, I did know the fundamentals of copying and pasting documents. I even had a flash drive for that purpose with me. I put it into the computer and copied the contents of Blair's server folder into it.

I entered the building at around seven in the morning. By the time I left, it was two in the afternoon. The town looked completely different than how it had looked in the morning. There were ribbons, flags, and banners all over the streets, covering the skyline. The town square was being carpeted red, and a tent was being hung over the roster at the center of the erected stage. It took me a second to realize that tonight the results of the mayoral election were going to be announced.

That would explain the frills, the balloons, and the people walking around holding cotton candy in their hands and smeared paints on their faces. It was as if the mayoral election had been turned into a big carnival of sorts—nothing strange; it was just how these things worked in America.

What it did do was create a lot of trouble for me. With the streets packed with

people eager to find out the results of the election, there was such a crowd everywhere that I wasn't able to find my way out of downtown as quickly as I had wanted. With Will being back there in the commune with Fred right there beside him, my heart panicked, knowing full well that something terrible was going to happen very soon if I didn't stop it in time.

Chapter 26: Will

My mouth was dry. What Alexis had just shown me beggared belief, defiled all logic, and hurt me deeply. My brother? So what my own story came down to was as simple as the biblical tale of Cain and Abel? Perhaps fate was feeling lazy the day it decided to write my destiny, plagiarizing from the commonest of tropes out there.

When I came to think of it, all that had happened to me so far in my life—the war, the hunger, the famine, the migration from one continent to the other, the unrequited love, the kidnapping, and torture, all of it proved to be such a derivative tale that the gods had written for me.

“Will? Will you speak something? You’re scaring me,” Alexis said. My mind was so far away that I did not notice that her face was strained and she was holding my hand. I was thinking as far back as I could, realizing in the biggest of all hindsight epiphanies that Fred had been conspiring against me all along. When we were about to set out for America, the only person in the pack who had vocalized his disdain at my decision had been Fred. When we came ashore in America, he despised my decision to settle in Fiddler’s Green. At every turn, my brother tried to resist my decisions. What a fool I had been to believe that he was just displaying the spirit of brotherly rebellion. Had I known that Fred had been so vile as to conspire against me, to lock me away and throw away the key, and to destroy the life that I had built for my pack, I would have taken the necessary steps back then.

But what steps were those, precisely?

“Will!” Alexis tugged at my arm.

“You went without telling me,” I said. It wasn’t a matter of her betraying my trust. I was not angry. I was just shocked at finding out that she had done this all on her own without even letting me know what she had intended to do. “And you managed to find out that Fred had been covertly doing all these misdoings all the while. I bet that somewhere in those call logs, there’s something about him having your parents killed.”

“I did what I had to. I knew that you’d never choose to willingly go to Beckett Pharma’s building,” Alexis said defensively. I raised my hand to let her know that I wasn’t planning on reprimanding her. If I weren’t reeling from the heartbreak that my brother had been deceiving me, I’d be impressed at Alexis’s resourcefulness.

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s against the code of the alpha. I do not blame you for choosing to keep me in the dark. You did an excellent job, and I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

“I understand how hard this must be. I do not pretend to know what it feels like, because I do not know how something like this would feel. I don’t have any siblings. I was never betrayed in the way that you are. My heart weeps for you,” Alexis said.

“Mine doesn’t. I’m not sad about Fred. I’m angry. He took away years of my life, all for what? He was my brother, goddammit. We came from the same womb. All my life, I blamed fate for weaving this web of horrors that’s my life. Edward, Blair, Ralph, Maurice—they all mean nothing now. It’s always been, Fred. I should have known. How foolish could I have been?” With my

hands holding my head, I let myself be consumed by all the many emotions that were surging through me as I remembered the events of another lifetime.

“I have to tell you something,” I said, looking up at Alexis. “A truth I never shared with anyone before.”

This was around 1941, when Hitler’s forces were in full swing, and the war was seemingly going in his favor. We were just young brothers back then, brothers with two different ideologies about the world. There was Fred, ever the pragmatist, looking for the best in the worst situation. And then there was me, who knew that evil was evil and that there was nothing subjective about it. Hitler, the Nazis, and the SS were all abhorrent. The hunting of the Jewish folk, the gas chambers, the concentration camps, and the destruction of Germany from within. It was all downright abysmal.

Fred did not see it like that.

Fred, younger than me, believed that Hitler was a prophet, a manifestation of divinity sent to wipe the earth free from all evil. Fred wanted to join the Nazis. For a while, he was working for them as a part-timer, spreading their propaganda in the streets, recruiting soldiers to the cause, and even hunting down those that the Nazi party dubbed reprehensible. There was no stopping Fred. With our mother and father both dead, I was the head of a family comprised of just two people, and there was no way Fred would ever listen to me.

Even though I was the Alpha.

I had explicitly prohibited the Grimm pack from taking part in any of the Nazi activities. While all the pack had agreed, Fred had chosen to rebel. He strutted about, doing as much as he could without ever formally signing up for the Nazis. This was his way of mocking my authority. He was showing me that he could always get away with whatever he wanted to do.

At first, the damage he was doing was not serious. It wasn't so bad that the pack deemed him an outcast. But when on a few occasions, he nearly murdered some poor villagers who were in the way of the Nazis, we, as the pack, called for a tribunal and judged Fred for his crimes.

He asked for one last chance. I, being his elder brother, saw the good in him and hoped that he'd turn right from then.

Fred quit working for the Nazis and even helped in rebuilding our village as best as he could. But by then, the war had waged so terribly that there was no chance of repairing the village back to its old splendor. The war crept closer and closer till the bullets were flying over our heads and our village was being used as a battleground in a fight against the British.

That's when I made the move.

No one initially knew where we were going. Not even Fred. It was only after we had traveled several leagues that I disclosed that we weren't heading to some reclusive part of Germany to escape the war, instead, we were headed to America, the land of opportunity and freedom.

There had been a terrible argument between Fred and me on the ship. He even threatened to question my leadership, but the other pack members calmed him down. He was never the same as me after that.

Once we reached America, Fred and I pretended that he'd never lashed out at me. That he hadn't worked for the Nazis. For a while, I even forgot that Fred had an evil streak in him.

If only I had known then what I know now, I'd have saved myself.

I'd have lived another life entirely.

“You pardoned his war crimes?” Alexis asked, inquisitively looking at me, her eyebrows cocked speculatively. “Everything that Fred did, the pack just forgot?”

“No one forgot. We just pretended to forget. You weren't there. You don't know how it was back then. So many Germans moved from Germany and came to America after the war, many of them being Nazis who wanted a second shot at life and wanted people to forget who they were. I gave Fred one last chance to prove himself, to see if my brother wanted to redeem himself or not. It turned out that he did not. Back in those days, before political correctness and the distinction between the right and left wings, it was easy for someone to hide. This was before the era of computers and phones. People could take on another identity. I just hoped that Fred would change, be better,” I said.

“And for the most part, he has been an exemplary citizen, hasn't he? I mean, if no one found out about his ruse, he'd have fooled everyone into believing that he was a redeemed man,” Alexis said.

“It boggles my mind. And to think that the man is sitting there, just a few feet

away, in his cottage. I cannot kill him in cold blood, knowing very well that he's so sickly and old. Yet I also want revenge. No. More than revenge, I need justice," I said, battering my closed fist on the coffee table, making everything on it shake.

"Vincent needs to know this before anyone else. He'll be able to help us," Alexis said.

"You go and look for Vincent. Tell him everything while I go confront my brother," I said, heading out of my home.

As I took the steps to Fred's house, I saw the lights were out. It could be another ruse. He could be hiding in there for all I knew. There was no point knocking. I kicked the door open and went inside, not caring that whoever saw me do such a thing. The pack members would be made aware of Fred's treachery sooner or later, and we'd have a trial for him. A proper tribunal, in which we'd punish him for his crimes. For all of his crimes, past and present.

But Fred was not in his home. I scoured the entire house and looked into every room, but there was no sign of where he was or where he had gone.

I stormed out of his home, unclear as to what I was going to do next, when suddenly Alexis and Vincent came rushing to me.

"I heard everything," Vincent said. "But there's something that you have to know too."

"What is it?" I asked, heading back into my house.

"Tonight is the election's result call," Vincent said. "All of the towns are going to be assembled in the town square. Already, there's a huge procession going on with people parading in the streets and everything. It's fucking

mayhem out there, and we can't just sit idly by. The pack needs to be mobilized into the town. Anything can happen."

"What is going to happen that hasn't happened already?" I asked grimly as I sat down on the couch, racking my brain about Fred's whereabouts.

"Will, my love, now is not the time to feel morose. We need you. The town needs you. Vincent just means that the entire population of the town's assembled in one place, and anyone, such as the vampires or even Blair, might attack them. Both the vampires and Blair have ample reason to do such a thing. Blair might retaliate with some chemical agent. The vampires might want revenge for us having killed Ralph. We did strike them pretty hard, what with killing their leader and ending their smuggling operation," Alexis said.

What she said made sense. Nights like this didn't come by often. This would be the first time in a long while that the town would be gathered in a single place, making the people vulnerable.

"What are we to do?" Vincent asked.

"I'll tell you what you two are going to do," I said, rising again. "Alexis, you and Vincent will go to the town square with the pack and blend in with the rest of the people. Just look out for anything suspicious. Set up a perimeter around the town square and search the empty buildings. This could be anything. A shooter holed up in some building wanting to kill the mayor, a series of bombs planted to cause mass murder, or even some chemical agent like tear gas. Both of you are right. This is indeed a call for urgency and caution. I depend on both of you. Make sure that it's all sorted out."

"And where are you going to go?" Alexis asked, holding me by my arm.

“I’m going to have a tete-a-tete with my brother,” I said. “I’m going to find him, sit him down, and have him confess word for word for everything that he did. This I swear upon my title as the Alpha of the Grimm pack. This I swear upon my name.”

I couldn’t help but feel that there was an air of finality around everything right now. I could see it in the faces of my mate and my friend. I could feel it in every breath I took. I could sense it on my fingertips. After today, things would never be the same again, for better or worse.

“I can’t let you go alone,” Alexis said, not letting go of my arm. “This entire thing started with both of us. I found you in the forest on that day. Ever since then, our fates have been intertwined. Everything that has happened since then has revolved around you and me. If you must confront Fred, you will do it with me by your side.”

I held her hands in my hands and squeezed them, drawing her closer to me till I could feel her breathe on my face and see myself reflected in her eyes. Vincent coughed uncomfortably and shifted to the side, understanding that this intimate moment required him to shift away for a while.

“I love you dearly, and there is no denying that. Every day my bond with you strengthens to the point that I feel like we’re inseparable in our souls now. That is the truth of it all. However, this thing with Fred concerns me and me alone. Fred may be dangerous. He may have something planned for me. This sudden absconding on his part might be a trap he has laid out for me. I have to do this alone,” I said, now hugging her tightly.

“If this is indeed a trap, wouldn’t it be better for both of us to go together?” Alexis asked, her voice breaking a little.

“I trust you more than I trust myself. I need you on the lookout in the town. If there’s something dangerous cooking up in the square, you will have to deal with it. I trust you will be able to do so, with or without my help. You are the brightest woman I know, and it has been nothing but a privilege to love you and to live with you. The people rely upon you today, even though they do not know it. You have to be there for them. As for me, I will deal with the man who has turned my life into a living nightmare.” I had more planned out for what I’d do to Fred, but it wasn’t something that I was ready to discuss with Alexis. I knew what she was going to say to me if I divulged my plan to her. She would tell me to practice restraint. To calm down.

There was no way I was going to calm down, at least not when the true culprit was finally revealed to me. It wasn’t Edward Beckett. Edward Beckett hadn’t found me on his own. It was all Fred’s doing.

“Will. The pack will need you today,” Alexis said, running her fingers through my hair.

“I have trained the pack well. I trust every one of them to do their part. Vincent,” I said, turning my attention to Vince, who was looking out the window. “You have to delegate the task of protecting the commune to someone as well. Have ten members from the pack stay behind and protect the Grimm Abode. There’s no telling what anyone can do tonight. Neither of you has to worry about me doing something irrational. I am as sane as I’ve ever been,” I said.

“Well, see, that was just what I was about to say. If my father was any indication of the evil that runs in my family, imagine how truly cruel my grandfather would be. You can be sane all you want, but what I want you to be more than sane is careful. Promise me you’ll be careful,” Vince said,

shaking my hand firmly as I embarked on my quest to find Fred and bring him to justice.

“Careful, cautious, restrained, and sane. I shall be all of that and more,” I said. “But where would I find Fred at this time?”

“Back when he could still walk, he used to go over to the cliffs and sit there, looking at the sea longingly. It was his favorite spot. Who knows, he might even be faking the fact that he cannot walk or breathe. Perhaps he’s there, at the cliffs,” Vincent said.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps he has run away finally. Maybe he got wise to the fact that we were onto him. I don’t know who tipped him off, but maybe that’s what happened,” Alexis said.

“The time for speculation is at an end,” I said firmly, knowing that we had no window of time to stand around and discuss possibilities and probabilities. “This needs to happen now. I will track Fred while you two secure the town square. With any luck, we will meet in the evening when all is said and done. Hopefully, all of us will still be alive by then.”

I cast one last look at Alexis as I left and saw the worry in her eyes.

Don’t worry, my love. I will come back to you yet. We have to marry each other, don’t we? I said in her mind.

Alexis rushed out the door and flung herself at me, kissing me deeply, unwilling to let go.

Chapter 27: Alexis

For the second time on the same day, I found myself standing disdainfully downtown amidst the claustrophobic crowd of anticipating people waiting to see who'd be elected as the mayor. The City Hall's government officials, distinguishable from the rest of the crowd in their black suits, were roaming around, making sure that the perimeter was well guarded. But they seemed to be doing a rather superficial job of it. Or so Vince had pointed out once we'd gotten to the town square.

The five or six mayoral candidates who had miraculously all stayed in the running even until the end were waiting with bated breath in the frontmost row of spectators in the town square. I both pitied them and envied them at the same time.

The pity, for the most part, was because they were going to have to take office after Maurice, and who knew how much Maurice had fucked the office in his tenure as mayor? What of the books that balanced the town's budget? What of regulations, zoning laws, codes, conduct, and municipal development? The past few years when Maurice had been the mayor were some of the worst years the town had seen—trash on the roads, a dirty beach, and no management of the roads and buildings. The town had become a third-world slum. Whoever of these people would end up becoming mayor would have to deal with the mess that Maurice left.

Envy because these people were innocent, regular people who didn't know

about the world of vampires and werewolves. Their lives were banal and boring, bordering on uneventful. I wished for a life like that for most of my life. If I could have some shred of normalcy in my life, I'd jump at the first chance for it. Instead, I was being made to serve as the town's silent guardian, its secret protector.

"Lexie, why are there so many people here? I am sure this is more than the population of Fiddler's Green," Vince whispered in my ear.

"It's because people from other smaller towns and counties have come to see this procession. This makes it even more dangerous and raises the stakes to an all-time high," I said, combing through the crowd to make my way to the front, where the stage and the dais were placed. There was a big rope separating the people from the stage. From the front vantage point, I saw the cameras that were located all around the square. All of the cameras were focused on the square, and none were pointed in the alleys, streets, and roads diverging from the square, creating an opening from eight directions that could be used in case of an attack. There were no guards stationed at the roofs either. The only guards and police officers stationed in the square were around the stage and at its entrance. "This simply won't do."

"And what are we supposed to do in all this?" Vince was just as clueless as I was, and neither of us had a game plan or a contingency for when everything would go wrong, assuming that everything would indeed go wrong.

"Let's set up our perimeter. The wolves have to go into each of the buildings around the square and see if they're vacated and secure. Anything suspicious gets reported to me. Tell everyone to spread into the buildings. You can go behind the stage and see if everything's in order there. I'm going to the radio tower on the building behind the stage and use it as my vantage point," I said.

“From there, I’ll have an eagle-eye view of everything.”

The truth was, given how packed this place was, the cell phone signals were exceptionally weak in the crowd. If I could be there, right under the radio tower, I’d have better coverage and would be able to get in touch with Will if he were to call me. My heart and mind were tied to him, concerned about what he was doing at this very moment. Even then, I chose not to use our bond. It would be a violation of his privacy, especially after he had insisted that this was a personal matter between him and his brother.

But I knew that my plan to use the radio tower was not going to jeopardize my job. I could do both at once. And, my being so high above would allow me to scout for any vampires or soldiers coming our way. I could warn the wolves.

Now that I thought about it, there was a good chance that Blair was going to march in here with his mercenaries. Whatever his intentions may be, it was dubious that he had disappeared so suddenly. A man only disappears like this if he’s planning a temporary retreat only to come back with more force. Blair wasn’t the sort to just disappear without a trace. He wasn’t that kind of person. While he still had his vendetta, he’d lurk around somewhere near, hoping to catch us off-guard. Perhaps, he thought that tonight would be an off-guard night for us. What he didn’t know was that the full force of the Grimm werewolves was here in town, ready to defend the people against any calamity.

I watched as the wolves dispersed in the buildings, scouting them for anything suspicious. I headed to the radio tower and began my ascent to its top. While I was midway, it occurred to me that such a crowd would be a perfect target for a mass shooting. Or a mass hunting by the vampires. So

many humans in such a close vicinity could just as easily attract the reeling vampires and prompt them to retaliate against both the town and the wolves in one fell swoop. From their point of view, it would be a move that'd help them take the entire town instead of just the commune.

All of these possibilities were likely, but which one was more likely? I had no idea. When I was lost, all I knew was that I had to trust my immediate senses. I'd have to use my eyes and ears to weed out the dangers.

This was a rare sight and one to behold. On most days, the town was the dictionary definition of desolate, with seldom to no people in the streets, barely any interactions taking place downtown, and the entire place felt like it was lost in time and space. A pocket dimension of depression. But today, what with the bustle and the crowd and the celebratory atmosphere, for the first time, Fiddler's Green looked and felt like the proverbial paradise it was named after. What mattered more than all the greenery in the world, than all the skyscrapers in the tallest metropolises, and all the wealth in the banks were the smiles on the faces of the people gathered below, the lightness in their laughter, the liveliness in their voices, the hope in their eyes, and the promise in their stride. Everyone who had gathered here had done so to see a new day dawn on Fiddler's Green.

I also hoped for a similar new day to dawn on my life.

My life with Will.

We'd get married and then move to another city.

Our children would have his eyes and my hair.

Somehow, we would save enough money to get a house.

Our children would grow old and go to college.

One day, we would sit old and content in our backyard, arm in arm, reading novels and drinking tea.

Now that was the kind of day that I wanted to dawn. It would be a well-deserved day after all that I had been through. Not to mention the literal hell that Will had been through.

My phone rang. I looked at the screen, hoping it was Will's number, but it was just Vincent.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling disappointed. Will should have gotten in touch with me and told me what was happening with him. Why hadn't he called me yet?

"So, you're comfortable up there? Can you see me down here, waving?" Vince asked.

I looked at the crowd below and saw Vincent waving at me from almost a mile away. I waved back, unsure if he'd be able to see me from behind the sea of humans.

"I'll ask again, Vince. What is it?"

"A couple of our guys found some anarchists holed up in the building with pistols and masks. When asked if they were part of a larger organization, they laughed and said that they were anarchists and, as such, held no regard for any organization. We handed them over to the police. Upon detaining them and interrogating them, it turns out that they were some far-right nutjobs who wanted to assassinate the would-be mayor. They're taken care of. We dodged a big one," Vince said.

“Holy shit,” I said. “Be that as it may, this was not the reason we were sent here by Will. These anarchists were townspeople. Ordinary townsfolk. Not werewolves, not vampires, and not Blair’s men. Everyone must keep their ears perked up, and their eyes focused and be on the lookout more now than before. You know, these anarchists could be just a decoy distraction to divert us from something bigger. Ask the wolves to keep scouting the buildings. I have a feeling the evening has more surprises in store for us.”

“Roger that,” Vince said, then hung up, leaving me to stare at the police procession in the back, taking the anarchists to the cop cars and stowing them away. What I felt at that moment was reassurance in Will. If he hadn’t sent us here, these anarchists would have attempted to assassinate the mayor. Will knew what he was doing. He operated with wisdom that eluded us all, given how old he was and how experienced his years and his trials had made him. I had to trust him to know what he was doing when it came to Fred because the only other person alive to have almost as much experience as Will was Fred. They were an even match, even if one of them had aged normally while the other hadn’t. Will lacked the evil necessary for beguiling people, something that Fred seemed to have in large reserves.

As the proceedings of the evening went on, with television vans appearing on the scene with reporters, the sky darkened to a deep black with no moon on the horizon. In the absence of the moon, the stars came out by the hundreds, shining like tiny slivers of glass in the sky. If it had been any other night, Will and I would have been immersed in some romance. I made a mental reminder to myself to take Will out on a nice nighttime date the next time such a night would come. A moonless night lit with stars.

My phone rang for the second time. I picked it up immediately, hoping this time around, it would be Will, telling me that all was well and that he had

captured Fred without a problem. But it was yet again just Vince.

“I thought this line was just for emergencies,” I said impatiently. “What is it this time around?”

“Oh, I think you’re going to want to see this,” Vince said. For the first time, there was genuine fear in his voice. He was breathing heavily. I had never known him to lose his composure like that.

“Tell me what you found.”

“Lexie. It’s bad. It’s way worse than any of us imagined it would be. Sixteen of the wolves who scouted the buildings on the right and twenty who scouted the buildings on the left found bombs planted in the basements of the building, perfectly placed to bring down all of the buildings in the square, killing everyone standing there. I’m backstage, and I’ve found one myself, right under the stage. They’re nondescript, so it’s very difficult to say if they’re bombs or not. But Gunther, he’s an ex-Marine in the pack, recognized them immediately. Told us that these bombs were used back in Afghanistan by the terrorists. So far, we have found fifty bombs, all of them geared for remote detonation. There’s no timer on them,” Vince said.

I felt the life give away from my legs, but I held onto the railing of the tower and clasped my phone tighter in my hand.

“Can we disarm them?” I asked.

“Gunther says that even if we manually disarm them all, there’s no telling how many there are in the square. One of them could blow up at any time when someone pushes the detonation button. We have to jam the signals somehow,” Vince said.

I looked up at the radio tower, thinking how easy it would be for me to end this by just disabling the tower and killing the signals in the vicinity.

“I know what you’re thinking, Lexie, but these remote detonation bombs don’t work on the same frequency. Disabling the tower won’t do a thing,” Vince said.

“I have to try,” I said, climbing the stairs that led to the top of the tower. I could already see a control panel at the top with wires coming out of it that were going into the antennas. But when I climbed to the top and came to the control panel, I stopped in shock.

The control panel was taped with black duct tape, and right there, on top of it, there was a black bricklike bomb attached with a green light blinking rhythmically.

“Vince, there’s one hell of a big one right where I’m standing,” I said. If whoever had planted the bombs pushed the button right now, I would be blown to bits. “I’m coming down right now.”

“You have to stay there. All of us have to stay where the bombs are planted. If not for nothing, we can at least get a jump start on manually disabling the ones we have discovered,” Vince said. “How did Will know something like this would happen?”

“I don’t think that’s what we ought to worry about for now. Tell me how we can disarm them,” I said, trying to keep myself calm. The height of the tower, my vicinity to the bomb, and the uncertainty about what Will was doing right now were all pushing me to panic right now, but I maintained my calmness in the face of all the chaos and inspected the bomb from up close.

“More wolves around the square have reported finding more bombs placed in buildings. I think right now, it’s beyond our ability to locate any more of them,” Vince said.

“We have to locate all of them. They might have an internal timer on them to set off automatically in case the culprit doesn’t push the detonator,” I said.

“You’re right. We’ll get right on it,” Vince said.

Now that I wasn’t on the phone any longer, I could use both my hands to dismantle the bomb and see what was inside. The only person who could help me right now was Maliha. She’d know how to deal with these things. But telling her that there were bombs planted all over the square would result in mayhem that I could not control.

Below, the people started cheering loudly as the commentator came on stage and started rousing the crowd by telling them that the results would be announced within an hour. Then, some local band from town came onstage and started singing a terrible cover of Linkin Park songs. At least the crowd was distracted by it.

I dialed Will’s number. This couldn’t wait. I had to tell him what was going on in the square.

“Are you okay, Alexis?”

I told Will everything that had happened, including the anarchists and the bombs. When I mentioned to him that there were more than fifty or so bombs that the pack had discovered all over the square, Will gasped audibly. I had never known him to gasp like this.

“You all have to get out of there,” Will said immediately.

“We cannot just leave the people,” I said.

“If those bombs are triggered, everyone will die. What good is an Alpha without his pack, a mate without his partner? We have to evacuate the town square,” Will said.

“I believe it was you who taught me to stand up and fight my troubles instead of running away from them. How is this any different? We’re going to save these people, Will,” I said, feeling resolute.

“Save the people by having them abandon the square,” Will said. “That’s the only way, isn’t it?”

“If we tell these people to flee right now, they’re always going to live in fear. How is that any different from the lives they’ve been living up till now? Tonight, things have to change. We have to take a stand for ourselves. It doesn’t matter who planted the bombs and why. What matters is that we disarm them and make this town safe for the people, and you’re going to help us,” I said.

“I will insist that it’s still safer for everyone to evacuate the square. The town can announce the mayor in another way. Without the people, who will the mayor govern?” Will was being cautious, as was his right to be. But he wasn’t here. He couldn’t feel the spirit that people were in tonight. They were hopeful. It would be one of the worst thefts in the world to rob them of hope tonight.

“We’re going to disarm the bombs. What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Well, I looked for Fred everywhere in the commune and the forest, even in the abandoned Beckett mansion, but I found no sign of him. I am just as lost

as ever. I'm going to go to the cliffs and see if he's there like Vince said, then I'm coming back to the town to help you," Will said.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too. Please stay safe," Will replied.

I hung up on him, not wanting to tell him that I'd just taken the lid off the bomb and was looking at the timer inside.

The bomb was rigged to blow up in half an hour.

Chapter 28: Will

There I stood, rooted to my spot in the forest, uncertain as to where to go. Continue my hunt for Fred and potentially endanger the lives of the thousands of people gathered in the town square, or ditch my search for Fred in favor of the townsfolk?

Once upon a long time ago, when I was Edward's prisoner, he had injected me with a paralyzing agent that didn't stop me from breathing or looking around with my eyes but jammed my arms and limbs, making it impossible for me to move. Then he took me out of the house, tied me in chains, and made me lay down on the lawn. This was yet one of his ways to torture me. The lawn was built in a shady place, with trees providing a canopy over it. Even though it was daytime and I craved sunlight, I never so much as saw a single ray of it.

Meanwhile, Edward walked around the lawn, smoking a cigar, talking idly as if he was talking to an old friend. He was enjoying watching me in my helpless state. Then he took me back in and threw me in the cage in the basement. It didn't help me, going out in the day and feeling the grass under my body for the first time in decades. It only made me more desperate for escape. But the bitter irony of it was I could not move.

Just like right now.

In one far corner, my mate and all my pack members were assembled in the

town square-rigged with bombs. On yet another unknown corner of this county, Fred hid from me somewhere, hoping to avoid the confrontation that was long past due. I kept asking myself where I should go, but even with this constant questioning I lacked the will to move in either direction.

Having just talked to Alexis did not help. It only made me feel more worried for her that she was there with the entire pack, without me.

I made up my mind. I'd go to Alexis. Fred could live another day as a free man. Right now, my pack needed my help. I shifted into my wolf form and raced through the forest in quick strides, eager to reach Fiddler's Green as fast as I could. At the very least, I'd be able to help them defuse the bombs.

While I ran to the town, I wondered who it could be. Was it Blair who had planted all these bombs? Was it Fred? It could be either of them. This much I knew for sure that it was one of these two. Who else would gain to benefit from blowing up the town square on election night?

If this was Fred, it was most likely vengeance for killing his son and for anointing a new mayor for the town.

As far as Blair's motives were concerned, I drew a blank. The man had become an enigma ever since his disappearance. No one knew where he went and what his next move was. If this is what he had been cooking up all this while, then, as horrendous a plan as it was, I had to give it to him; it was meticulously crafted. By destroying the town, he'd be able to regain his stronghold here. A city gripped by terror would be ripe for the taking. Perhaps he'd make himself the new mayor after all this was over.

Alexis, I'm coming to you, I called out, using my bond, hoping she'd understand why I had chosen to do this.

What about Fred? She asked.

Fred cannot escape our punishment and judgment. He will answer for his crimes. But right now, the town needs us. All of us.

Will these bombs have timers on them. The timers haven't gone off right now, but they're set for half an hour. I don't know how many bombs there are or what will happen when the timer automatically sets off. We may stop some of them, but there's no telling which ones we didn't detect. The ones that are undetected as of yet can cause just as much harm, Alexis said.

But they're all controlled through a detonator, aren't they? I asked.

Correct. But the timer is a failsafe in case the detonator does not go off, she replied.

I would like to think we wolves are more honed in our senses than bomb-sniffing dogs, I said. Why cannot the pack detect the bombs using their noses? What good are we as werewolves if we cannot use our powers in times of need?

Because the bombs aren't giving off any particular smell, Will. They're tied up in duct tape and have no smell whatsoever. There's one pack member who used to be a marine. He's the one helping us find them. So far, we've found around seventy small charges spread throughout the town square. Individually, their explosions aren't all that strong, but if they're detonated together, they can level the town square, she said.

Hang on I'm coming, I said.

But right as I said it, a wolf howled from behind me. It was a distinctive howl, one that I could recognize almost anywhere. This was Fred's voice,

beckoning me.

He howled again, allowing me to triangulate his position. The sound came from the top of the cliffs. It turned out that Vincent was right all along.

So, Fred had chosen to confront me after all. And he had chosen to meet his fate in his wolf form. So be it. If he wanted a fight, he would get it.

I had to track back the entire route I had traveled so far and head back to the cliffs.

I am afraid I won't be coming. Fred's calling out to me, Alexis, I said.

I understand. The pack and I are going to take care of this problem. Don't worry about it. You go and see to Fred, she said.

I love you, I said.

I love you too, she responded. Be careful.

I began my ascent up the cliffs, keeping an eye out for any potential danger. He might not be there alone. This could be an ambush. Perhaps he and Blair were both there. Maybe Fred had assembled the vampires to get back at me for killing their leader.

When I reached the top of the cliff, I saw that he was alone and not in his wolf form. He was seated at the edge of the cliff in his wheelchair, looking at the sea with his back turned to me.

It hurt me to see him like this. My brother, the architect of my tribulations, a man capable of so much cunning and evil, sitting there in his wheelchair. I wished that he had never betrayed me, but it was too late for such trifling yearnings. I had to be more than his brother right now. I had to be the Alpha

of the Grimm pack.

I shifted back into my human form and approached Fred, trying to figure out what I would say to him after all this time after learning the truth.

Fred wheeled around in his wheelchair and looked at me. This time, there was no acting or faking. I could see the spite in his eyes and the malice on his face as clear as day. Had I not seen this, I'd have had a hard time believing that my brother was working against me this entire time. But I saw how he loathed me, witnessed his hateful glare, his pursed lips, and his furrowed brows, and I knew.

I knew that Fred had been the one all this time.

“Well?” I called out as I walked over to him. “Aren't you going to say anything? What explanation do you have for all of this?”

“For all of what?” Fred asked, his voice sardonic and his manner of speaking very condescending.

“You know what you did, brother,” I said.

“And it took you this long to find out,” Fred said.

“I have just one question. Why?” I asked.

“One man's heaven is another man's hell,” Fred snarled. “And I have been burning in hell ever since you moved the pack to this accursed continent. Is that reason enough for you?”

“You could have left at any time. You could have moved back to Germany after the war was over. Why didn't you? Why choose to relent against me and ruin my life?” It wasn't that I was trying to get a confession out of him; I

genuinely wanted to know what drove him to such an extreme length that he sought such drastic measures against me. It wasn't a small thing when your brother betrayed you. At least, I deserved an explanation.

“How can a wolf leave his pack and still be called a wolf? All my family, the people I grew up with, flocked to you at every command. What good would I have done as a lone wolf back in Germany? You think that you're so wise and intelligent. You're nothing but a fool. You made us all give up hectares of our land in Germany in favor of what? A shoddy commune where we're all piled together like lambs and pigs? Wars come and go, but truly wise men never let go of their heritage, their lands, and their property. You did all of that, and no one ever questioned you,” Fred said. He slowly put his hands on the wheelchair's handles and got up. So he had been faking his crippled condition. He walked over to me quite normally, without even a little shuffle in his steps.

“Did you hate me so fiercely all this time?”

“I loved you, brother,” Fred said. “I looked up to you when we were little. You were the world to me, especially after our parents died. But you never saw me as your brother. You saw me as some helpless, hopeless sap who was too far gone for his good. You never really bonded with me. Never in your life did you ever ask me, your younger brother, for counsel. I had to grow up living in your shadow. Do you realize how humiliating that is?”

“Look at what you did all for the sake of your ego! You had me imprisoned, or do you deny having a role in that?” I yelled at him. Fred scoffed in response and looked over my shoulder at the town in the distance.

“I will not deny anything. I did what I did, knowing what I was doing. And

imagine my surprise to see you come out alive and unscathed from his prison and not even aged a single day. That drove me mad. And all the subsequent times that I tried to end your life, I kept falling short. It was as if fate was itself favoring you over me. Well, after tonight, I'll be known as the wolf who bent fate to his will, and you will have lost everything you held dear," Fred said. He then revealed a remote that he was holding in his hand, solving the mystery of who had planted the bombs in the square.

"I held you dear all my life, brother," I said. "Only for you to have betrayed me like this. And now you want to blow up the town? All for what?"

"I want to make sure that this beloved little town of yours, this so-called Fiddler's Green, gets razed to the ground, and you can see it for the hell it truly is. I want you to lose everything like I lost everything. I will relish seeing you hear your mate's dying scream as the flames envelop her body. It will be enough for me to know that even though I could not kill you, I took everything away from you. Only then will I consider us even," Fred said and put his hand on the remote detonator.

"Don't do it," I said, raising my hand. "By all the gods, do not do it."

"Oh? And you think I'm going to listen?"

"Please, Fred. Whatever you did in the past is another matter entirely. But there's no coming back from committing such a huge crime. You're about to mass murder thousands of innocents. Don't do it."

"I never seemed to get it across to you that you're not my boss. You may be the Alpha of the pack, but you were never my Alpha. I never listened to you back then. What makes you think I'll listen now?" Fred asked, putting his finger dangerously close to the trigger.

“Because I have something to say,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“What could you possibly have to say that would stop me from doing this?” Fred asked and then laughed loudly. I waited for him to quiet down.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry,” I said, looking him in the eyes. “I should have counseled with you. I should have paid heed to your words and decisions. And I wanted to say that I forgive you. For all that you did to me, I forgive you.”

There was a glint in Fred’s eyes that I mistook for tears. His lips moved, but words did not come out. He was taken aback, and now his finger was not on the trigger any longer. The next moment, he suddenly pushed me and snapped, “Your charade fooled me for a second. I thought you’d meant it. And if you had, I would have reconsidered. But you’re not sincere, are you? You never were. You’re just buying time. Pathetic.”

“Before you do it, I want you to confess,” I said, hoping Fred would take the bait.

“Confess what?”

“Confess everything that you did to me. Before you take away the lives of my pack, my mate, and the townspeople, I want you to confess that it was you who threw me to Edward Beckett,” I said.

“Fine,” Fred said, waving his arm. “I confess. It was me. I even helped Blair with concocting Wolf’s Bane. I take all the credit. Now can we please enjoy the best fireworks that you and I will ever get to see?”

Alexis, please tell me that you’ve got the situation in control, I called out desperately. Because I don’t. Fred’s the one who planted the bombs. He has

the detonator. At any second, he can press the button and blow the entire square.

I'm on it. Don't worry; we have the situation under control, she said.

I turned my attention back to Fred and smiled at him. "You never really had any faith, did you, Fred?"

"What does faith have anything to do with any of this?" Fred scoffed.

"You'll see," I said.

Chapter 29: Alexis

I wasn't dying, at least not at this very moment. Then why was my life flashing before my eyes? Why did time feel like it had decided to stand still? The half-hour timer had just shifted from 30 minutes to 28 minutes, and it seemed that an eternity had passed between those two minutes. An eternity comprising snippets of memories. Memories that made up my life.

The pain was the most resounding emotion in all the memories that were playing in front of my eyes as I stood there vapidly looking at the bomb and its timer, not knowing what to do, ignoring Vincent's call, completely frozen by the fear of the very likely possibility that in just a few minutes, this place would blow up and take the lives of thousands of people. I could already picture the flames, those billowing plumes of smoke, and the buildings with their ramparts caught on fire. It was bizarre how both my flashing memories of the past and my foresight of the doomed future were playing simultaneously in the present, jarring my senses and draining my energy.

The levies broke, and the barrage of memories started pouring down as I stared into that LED light that would detonate my doom. Repressed memories from my entire life started flooding through, making me drown in a sea of pain and anguish.

There I was, in one of the memories, standing in the graveyard with my knees grazed and my body cold. It was one of the few times Fiddler's Green had a blizzard warning. Mom and dad had gone to visit their parents' graves, and I

was lost somewhere in the woods around the forest, crying, calling out for mom, surrounded by large trees with blackened barks. When they found me after an hour of searching, I was recoiling in the snow in a fetal position, weeping my little eyes out.

“Alexis!”

It seemed that someone was calling out my name in the present, but what was I to do in the face of this sudden storm of memories? The pain had dug itself underneath my flesh, and there it seethed, burning me from within.

As if to counter my negative thought stream, a new memory came into focus, a memory where Will was holding my hands. This was after the first time we had made love and were lying in each other’s arms. He was staring intently into my eyes. And just as fast as this memory had come, another followed where Will and I were sitting at the skating rink, eating junk food and commenting on the meaning of contemporary graffiti.

And there was Will yet again, saving me from Blair the first time. Will, kissing me after apologizing profusely for being rude to me all those times when he hadn’t been able to control his rage. All these happy memories came to a climax with the latest one, where Will and I were in Vermont, and he was kneeling in front of me, asking for my hand in marriage.

I must live yet, I thought. While there’s Will, and while there’s even a remote chance for us to be happy together. How ungrateful I was to think that all my life had been nothing but sorrow after sorrow. Through my mate, I had come to know such joy as I had never imagined. And with this thought, life came back to my limbs, and I regained consciousness, only to find that Vincent had made his way to the top of the tower where I was standing. He was shaking

me vigorously, calling my name over and over again.

“What happened to you?” Vince asked, still holding me by my arms. “I thought you’d lost your mind just now.”

“It became all too much,” I said, staring at the timer—twenty-five minutes to go. “I became petrified, Vince. All my life, I’d been putting on the bravest front I could, only to become enveloped in my fear when I needed to be courageous.”

“It’s okay. There’s still time. And you’re the bravest person I know. If there’s anyone who can get us out of this, it’s you. Below, all the pack members are disarming the bombs as we speak. I gave the order myself. We’ve isolated as many bombs as we could find. But there’s still work yet cut out for us. We need you!” Vince said, taking a look at the bomb as he took out a pair of scissors from his pocket and began fidgeting with the wires. “Even if I disable it, all the bombs are going to go off remotely. We can’t hold them off forever.”

“How are you disabling them?” I asked, looking at what Vince was doing.

“I’m not really disabling them. I’m just cutting down the wires that control the timer so we have more time on our hands. That’s the best we can do. These bombs will either go off through a remote detonator, or they’ll eventually blow on their own. What I’ve done, what the pack has done, will buy us an hour at best. So we have to hurry!”

I knew what I had to do. First, I had to disable the remote detonator, but there was no way in hell I would be able to do that all by myself. I picked up my phone and dialed Maliha’s number. It was the only thing I could do.

Below, the election countdown had started. At any minute, they'd announce the results, and then the situation would truly be out of our control. The people would go crazy with celebration and rush the streets, dance in the town square, and do what celebrating people all over the world do—celebrate vicariously. That would be the perfect opportunity for the bombs to go off. I needed to make sure that didn't happen.

Not on my watch.

“What the actual fuck? Tell me this isn't one of your jokes,” Maliha exclaimed once I'd finished telling her what was happening. It took ten minutes, but those ten minutes were well invested if Maliha agreed to help us.

“Yeah, you know my famous wit. Since when have I ever joked with you about such matters?” I couldn't afford another ten minutes consoling and calming her. I needed a solution stat.

“But I'm standing right here, waiting for the voting results. I don't want to get blown up into a billion bits,” Maliha said, her voice breaking as she began crying.

“Listen to me. I won't let anything happen to you. But you have to help me first. Tell me how I can disable the detonator. If the perpetrator pushes one button, dozens and dozens of bombs will go off. Is there any way you can disable the detonating mechanism?”

“I can...uh...fuck...Yes. I can help you disable the detonation mechanism, but there's nothing that can be done about the timer,” Maliha said.

“I’ll take it. Now tell me what I have to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything, actually. You’re already there, at the antenna tower. All you have to do is take down the antenna. It’s responsible for all the cellular signals in town. Remote detonation also utilizes cellular signals. No signals mean no detonation,” Maliha said. “And with this, I’m leaving. I can’t be anywhere near the blast radius when shit hits the fan. It was nice knowing you, Lexie. See you on the other side.”

“Wait!” I yelled. “How do I disable the antenna?”

“You see a control panel up there? There’s a kill switch in there. It should be the big red lever in the panel. Pull it, and you’ll kill the signals. But you have to understand that doing this is highly illegal,” Maliha said.

“Right. Like I’m worried about breaking the law right now,” I said as I pried open the control panel and looked into it. There were many buttons, switches, and levers, but only one of them was red. Praying to all the gods that would hear me, I pulled the lever and saw that the lights in the panel and on top of the antenna abruptly blinked shut. To confirm that the move had worked, I saw that my phone had lost all signals.

Hopefully, this would buy us some time.

Below, I saw Maliha waving at me. I waved back at her to let her know that her tip had worked out. I saw her run into a straight line back to where her car was parked. I didn’t blame her. She was always a brainiac. People like her went into professions such as computing and hacking because they weren’t well-equipped to deal with the stresses of real life. It made sense that she’d run for her life. This wasn’t her war, after all.

“Lexie, I’m going to go down there, and I suggest you do the same. We still have many bombs to find. There’s something we can do about them. We have to dispose of all of them within the hour. Let’s not forget that they’re going to blow up either way,” Vincent said, but before he could finish thinking out loud, the lever that I had just pulled reverted to its original position, turning the antenna back on.

“What the fuck,” I gasped as I stared at the lever.

“Oh, no,” Vince joined in, combing a frantic hand through his hair. “It’s a failsafe. The kill switch turns back on every few minutes so that the cellular service isn’t disrupted. We can’t just pull the lever and expect our work to be done,” he said.

I didn’t respond immediately. My eyes were tracking the wires that came down from the antenna and went into the control panel. I traced their path down to the floor and, from there, watched as they coiled further down the alley, through the square, and into a generator on the other side of the square.

“It’s getting backup power,” I said. “They must have attached it to that generator so that the signals stay on no matter what. It makes sense. Tonight is the biggest night the town has ever seen. They don’t want to lose cell coverage.”

“Game plan?” Vince asked. I could see the panic in his eyes, causing them to dart about, looking in every direction.

“You go back down and assemble the pack. Sniff out the rest of the bombs and take them as discretely as you can to the dock behind the square. Find a motorboat, a small one, and ditch the bombs in there. It’s going to take some time, I know, but in the meantime, I’m going to make my way down to the

generator and turn it off, killing the signal for good. This is our only hope right now, Vince. Otherwise...well, I don't want to dwell on what happens otherwise."

"Agreed," Vince said, then, without any further delay, slid down the ladders and landed on his feet. "It'd be one hell of a miracle if we all made it out alive, wouldn't it?"

Somehow, of all the things that I had done, covering that last mile felt like the longest of them all. I didn't know how to slide down the ladders as Vince had done just now. Now, zip lining, on the other hand, seemed not so difficult. But first, I had to do something about the big black brick of the bomb that was still attached to the tower. I yanked it free from the tape tethering it and stowed it in my jacket's pocket.

As I stood there staring at the grounding wire going in a steep diagonal down to the ground, I reconsidered zip lining. I would be no good to anyone if I crashed to the ground and broke both legs.

It took more time, but I went down the ladder. By the time I'd gotten down, there was already a crowd assembled at the base of the tower. These people wanted to get a better view of the election proceedings. They were using the tower's base as their vantage point for taking pictures and live-streaming on their social media.

"Why are all y'all standing here?" I asked one of them, hoping to confirm my suspicion.

"The signals are weak. We thought that if we stood here, right under the cell tower, we'd be able to get better signals," some girl said. She was holding streamers in her hands and had her face painted in the colors of her favorite

mayoral candidate.

Good. At least the signals had been weakened. Hopefully, that would create some trouble for the bomber. But that still didn't put us out of danger. While the tower was powered, there was a chance that the bombs would blow up whenever the bomber felt like it.

My only hindrance, besides the distance between me and the generator, was the crowd that was not showing any signs of thinning. In the crowd, I could see my brethren, the pack members, moving to the docks. I assumed this meant that they'd somehow gotten the bombs and were taking them to the docks for disposal. They would have to get the bombs into a boat and set the boat to sail out into the sea. Only then would the people be safe.

But that came later. Right now, I had to manage not to get crushed by the crowd. Already, they were trampling my feet and tackling me, startling me with the constant bumping, eventually causing me to lose my direction.

It occurred to me at the last second that I could just as easily climb on the roofs of the buildings and get to the generator faster. I wouldn't draw much attention given that the most exciting thing was happening down there at the stage where the mayoral candidates were coming to the rostrum and giving speeches on how they'd improve Fiddler's Green.

I bumped my way past the crowd and came to the right of the square where the height of the buildings was lowest. I looked around, and when I saw that no one was focusing on me, I climbed the side of the building and reached the roof. I was never one for jumping and climbing, but given the situation, it was the only solution.

On the roofs, I could let my inner wolf out. I didn't shift, but that didn't stop

me from harnessing my feral force to jump across the gaps between the buildings. Five minutes later, I was out of breath and had reached the last building. The generator was just a few feet away below.

I jumped down and rolled on my back as I reached the generator.

There was still the fence between the generator and me. At the fence's entrance, a guard was standing, but I could see from his posture that he was focused on the speech of the last candidate, just like the rest of the people.

I rolled over the fence and fell next to the generator's exhaust pipe. It blew hot air in my face as I crawled near it, hoping no one would see me dismantle the generator's back hatch.

“And now, for the moment you have all been waiting for. Tonight was an amazing night, one of the best in the history of this esteemed town, but it's time to call a wrap to these proceedings and declare who won the campaign. And the winner, after a neck-to-neck competition, is...”

Time stood still as everyone quietened down to hear what the commentator was about to say, creating the perfect opportunity for me to pull the socket from the generator. This was my last resort. There was no coming back if this didn't work. I pulled the plug from the generator and yanked its key. It sputtered to a halt, a thing that, surprisingly, no one noticed. It wouldn't matter if they had; I had the key to the generator, and no one would be able to turn it on.

Unlike how I had anticipated this to turn out, the lights to the entire square did not go out. But the antenna's green blipping light was not blipping anymore.

Had I done it? Did it happen?

Was the antenna disabled for good?

I couldn't wait around to find out. I had to head to where the rest of the pack was assembled at the docks and add my bomb to the pile and make sure that they'd be carried out into the sea.

As I'd just gotten out of the generator cage, something happened that I was not anticipating.

All the lights of the town square went off. I didn't know if this was my doing or something pre-planned to declare the results of the election. Just as the darkness became uniform throughout the square, the crowd erupted into screams and laughter.

How was I supposed to make my way through a crowd to the docks in pitch-black darkness?

Chapter 30: Will

There was no point standing so far away from Fred. If he had intended to shoot me, he would have shot me from that far away. Back when he was young, he was pretty handy with a firearm, and I didn't think that aging would take away his muscle memory of aiming and pulling the trigger at a target.

But this didn't seem to be what Fred wanted to do. He wanted an audience. He needed me to listen. Fred had planned everything down to a tee. He had anticipated that I would turn up. I had to give him credit where credit was due. As sick and perverted as he was in the head, he was a mastermind when it came to committing to his schemes. It had only dawned on me now when he had revealed that he had been the architect of my misery, all the while, how malevolently brilliant my brother was.

"You cannot stall me forever. This night, like all nights, must end, and before it does, I intend to see everything you hold dear razed to the ground," Fred said, fiddling with the button but not pressing it.

"I held you dear once," I said.

"And I remain true to my statement. Before your very eyes, you see your beloved brother turn into a monster you never thought he could be. You were always such a pragmatist, thinking that there would be some way you could redeem me. There is no point in redeeming me, Will. I was already redeemed

back in Germany when you rooted me out with the rest of the pack and brought me to this shithole. In a way, all that terrible stuff that happened to you, you are to blame for it,” Fred said.

“I will not deny it,” I said. “I made mistakes. I have never been the perfect Alpha. I was thrust into leadership at a very young age. Making mistakes is the domain of all men who are put in charge of something. But that doesn’t mean that I am a villain. Everything that I did, I did for the better of the pack. For you.”

“Spare me the melodrama. You did things because you wanted to. Admit it and relieve yourself of the lie you’ve been telling all of us all this time. You had always wanted to come to America, even before the war. The land of opportunity, you called it. You just saw an opportunity and took it, never minding once how the rest of the pack must have felt. There were others in the pack who voiced discontent against your decisions, but only I was the one who was capable enough to do something about it. I thought that by taking you out of the equation, I would get control of the pack and help them go back to Germany or, at the very least, allow them to build the lives they wanted in this new place,” Fred said. “But they always saw you as a hero after you disappeared. A legend who saved the pack. They forgot that they were discontented to begin with. Only I remembered that.”

“You sought my doom. How long did you plan that for?” I knew the only way to stop him from pressing that button was to engage him in this conversation long enough for Alexis and the rest of the pack to do something. I also understood that I couldn’t stall him forever. But I was playing into his egocentric desire to show off, to reveal his master plan, and to have an audience. He had been waiting for this for a long time, and in his heart, he needed me to know why he had done it. It was the only reason he hadn’t

pressed the button and was still talking to me. Fred was vain.

“When you first landed us in this miserable pit of horrors that you so loved, I made it my job to find out about all the people who lived here so that I could get started implementing a strategy that would eliminate you from our lives. You had already done so much damage, removing us from our hometown, forcing us to build a new commune from the ground up, and robbing us of our ancestral wealth. If we had stayed in Germany, stayed put after the war, that country would have been ours to rule. We would have regained our lands, and we would have been millionaires. But that was nothing compared to your principles, was it? You couldn’t risk staying there for a little while longer. How utterly pathetic was that? Imagine, if you will if we had stayed there once the war was over. Do you know what would have happened?” Fred asked.

I could see that he had grown tired of sitting on his chair, a lifetime of feigning lameness hadn’t taken away the impulse to get out of his wheelchair and move around a little bit. Now that his jig was up, he got out of the chair without hesitation and walked around. He took a packet of cigarettes out from his pocket and lit one.

“I can tell you what would have happened. We would have died when the Allies rushed Germany and took away control from the Nazis. When everyone was thrown into prison after the Second World War, we would have rotted in some jail while the new government figured out what they’d do to the country. You never knew this, but they reallocated all land back to the masses. We wouldn’t have gotten back our ancestral land. Never. They distributed it to the people equally to reduce post-war poverty,” I said. I knew this to be true, having read accounts of what happened to Germany after the war.

“If we had stayed put, they would have never taken our lands from us. There were hundreds of us. We would have laid claim to our property. But you didn’t want to wait. You wanted a fresh start for the pack,” Fred said. “I loathed that.”

“So you sicced Edward on me?”

“Edward and I were each other’s solutions to longstanding problems that we were both facing. I wanted you out, and he wanted to research werewolves, what with him being a crazy occultist. We made a deal. I would give him a werewolf, and in return, he would leave the rest of us alone.”

“And how did that deal work out for you?”

“Oh, we prospered for those seventy years. I gained control of the town by investing myself in its politics. I planted my son as the mayor. There were other avenues of business to explore, which I did as well. Knowing what I knew about the sea, ships, and the merchant navy, I propositioned the vampires to work with me so they could smuggle their goods through the sea instead of whatever primitive way they were resorting to back then. I brokered peace between two species that had always been at each other’s throats for as far back as any of us can remember,” Fred said. I could see that he was feeling proud of himself, the way his chest was popping out, and his eyes were glinting. He saw himself as the hero of this tale, even after all that he had done.

“You never brokered peace. The vampires encroached on the town and made life miserable for every single person living there. They ruled through fear. The wolves were compromised by your actions,” I said. Even though there was little hope for him, I had to make him see how things were instead of

how he was assuming them to be. “You were no hero for these people either. You had their Alpha kidnapped, you went behind their backs to deal with the vampires, and you used corruption to plant your son as the mayor.”

“I was there for them. That’s what mattered. Where were you?” Fred scoffed, then burst into maniacal laughter.

“You knew where I was. I suspect you knew that I was alive all that time. Maybe you and Edward Beckett were friends by then, and he showed you what he had been doing to me,” I said, grasping for straws. I didn’t know if this part was true, but if it were, Fred would bite and give me a few more minutes before pushing the button.

“Ah, I knew Edward. He and I became quite close after some time. He would request things from me, and I’d provide him. I was, after all, operating a smuggling ring in the town, wasn’t I? He’d give me updates on what he was doing to you. His experiments...I knew what they were. I begged him not to let you live. I implored him to kill you, and I’d provide him with a newer wolf to experiment upon, but he had grown attached to you all the way until his death,” Fred said.

“Is that all? Are you done? Don’t you want to push that button and blow the town to hell?” I asked, trying to stall him some more.

“Now, now, patience is a virtue.”

“You do realize that I’m going to take you to trial for all of this in front of the tribunal.”

“If there is no tribunal left alive, there won’t be a trial. I am afraid, brother, you and I will have to end this here and now. Only one of us is leaving this

place alive, and even that is not a guarantee.”

Alexis. Please tell me some good news, I called out to her.

“You cannot do that right now. That would be cheating. I know what you’re doing. You’re reaching out to your mate. Tsk. Tsk. I thought we were airing our dirty laundry. Or are you bored already?” Fred smirked.

“You never told me how you and Blair started working together,” I said, feeling resigned when Alexis did not respond. I hoped that she was doing all right. I had given her a monumental task. It would be miraculous if she’d achieve it. I needed to have some faith.

“Blair came to me after his father’s death, informing me that you had killed his father. He wanted revenge. I set him out on a warpath, told him of Wolf’s Bane, and even nudged him in the right direction quite a few times. I made him work with Ralph and Maurice so that he’d have some backing in the city. People never suspect the old and withered guy to be capable of doing such things. They never knew that everything happening in the city only happened because I deemed it to happen. For the first time in my life, I had control. And then you came and took it back in a second, and things were back to being how they were,” Fred said.

“You sought to reduce my name to ashes, to kill me, but in doing so, you only made me stronger. It was because of you that I was imprisoned by Edward. He experimented on my body and morphed me into a stronger version of myself. My lifespan increased, my body retained its vigor, and thankfully I look every bit as young as I did seventy years ago while you look like, well, death. I found my mate thanks to you. I fell in love. Life suddenly became very colorful for me. So, in trying to take me down, you gave me

everything that I had ever wanted. If you weren't about to blow all these people up, I'd consider forgiving you and thanking you for what you've done," I said.

And there it was. I could see in his eyes that he had fallen into the trap I had laid for him. His grip on the button loosened as his facial expressions became vacant. He struggled to get words out of his mouth. Two tears rolled down his eyes and streamed down his cheeks.

"You would forgive me after all I've done to you?" he asked.

I wouldn't. Of course, I wouldn't. But he didn't need to know that. "I would. You made my life better, even though you never intended for that to happen. I have a new lease on life. I'm young and thriving in the twenty-first century. I may end up getting married. I can let bygones be bygones if you can just put down that button and stop this madness."

His face reverted to being a canvas for vileness. He scowled at me and gripped the detonator tightly. "You were leading me on. Very clever. You think that I crave your forgiveness? Fuck that. You should be on your knees in front of me instead, begging me for forgiveness," Fred snapped.

"I am never going to beg someone like you for forgiveness. Not when I know that I did nothing wrong. And I can tell you that this night is not going to go the way you planned. You take me for some fool. You do not know how powerful I am. I took down your son. Murdered him in cold blood. I killed the leader of the vampires. And after tonight, I will hunt down Blair and rip apart his limbs from his lifeless body. Tonight, I will end your life. Fuck the trial, fuck the jury, fuck the tribunal. You think you can draw breath after you threatened my family? I will end your existence and make sure that you are

nothing but a black blot in the history books. Forget that. I will make sure that everyone forgets who you ever were to begin with,” I said, seething with rage.

“Big words from a man who stands to lose everything,” Fred said, coming close to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I do not want to be remembered. All that legacy bullshit I was spewing earlier, I never meant it. I don’t want to go down in history. I have lived my life and have made peace with the decisions that I made. I didn’t do the things I did out of love. I did them out of duty. Without you, the pack lived on under my supervision, didn’t it? I fulfilled my duty.”

“You aren’t some selfless leader. You wanted glory for yourself. You wanted to rule the pack in my place. That’s why you did everything. Admit it!” I shouted.

“Fine! I admit it. I needed the same worship from the pack that you got all your life. They venerated you. Everyone thought you were a manifestation of some god! I never got that in my life. Never once. Even after you disappeared, the pack remembered you and told tales of your bravery. How that burned me from the inside!”

“The madness fueled by hatred has no end,” I said, pushing Fred back. I didn’t want him to stand so close to me. He might have been my brother a lifetime ago, but the man standing in front of me was every bit my enemy as Ralph or Maurice, or Blair were.

“You started it,” Fred said. “I’m just ending it.”

“Before you end it, tell me where Blair has gone. What good is it going to do me, after all? You’re going to kill the pack and me. So, what’s the harm in

letting me know?” I coaxed an answer out of him.

“Blair is operating on his own now. You think that he planted those bombs? I did. Well, I had some help from some enterprising vampires that wanted revenge, but mostly this was my plan. Blair has departed from the city, and I don’t know where he is. Even if I knew, I would never tell you,” Fred said.

“You’re a disappointment, little brother,” I said, taking a few steps back. “And you are going to get disappointed.”

“Oh, how is that?” Fred asked, raising his eyebrows.

“You never had any faith, to begin with. You have always lacked it. If you had only had some faith in me when I brought us to America, you would have seen what I had planned. But you didn’t. You’ve never been a faithful person. Tonight, it’s not about who wins or loses. It’s about faith. You have none. I have all the faith in the world,” I said.

“Let’s put your faith to the test, then,” Fred said, raising his hand in front of me, holding the detonator.

“Do it,” I said. “Let’s put my faith to the test.”

Without saying a word, Fred pushed the button. My heart skipped a beat. To my right, I could see the town. The town, with its many lights, all flickering in the night. Suddenly, all the lights went out. Fear gripped my throat as I realized that Fred had probably succeeded. But when nothing happened for the next few seconds, I looked back at him and smiled.

“What is it? Things did not work out for you as you thought they would?” I asked.

“This cannot be,” Fred said, pushing the button over and over again. “It’s impossible—a hundred bombs. I planted almost a hundred of them. It’s impossible that the pack got them all in time.”

“Or they just disabled the signals that control the detonator,” I said, feeling relieved. In the far corner to my right, fireworks were shooting into the sky, and the lights were coming back into town. I could hear the people cheering. From the looks of it, the new mayor had been voted.

“Tonight heralds new beginnings not just for the town but for the pack as well,” I said. “Sadly, this is as far as you go. By the power bestowed to me by the Grimm pack, I take you my prisoner and order you to stand trial before the tribunal.”

“I will not go quietly into the night,” Fred said, throwing the detonator at me. “The bombs will blow up anyway. They’re rigged to explode with a timer.”

As I advanced toward Fred to subdue him, I hoped that Alexis had done something about the timers.

Chapter 31: Alexis

A surprise ringer candidate, who had only entered the mayoral campaign at the last leg of the mayoral campaign, had won. Her name was Maria Straub, and from what I could gather from her acceptance speech on the stage, she was the daughter of a wharfman. She had put herself through college by working two jobs, earning a scholarship, and taking care of her father's business all at the same time. She had managed to do all that while staying in Fiddler's Green.

Amidst the fireworks, the cheers of the crowd, and the music blaring from the stage, I had forgotten for a few seconds that I had potentially just stopped. The electricity running through the crowd induced me to become a part of it, if only for a few seconds. I knew the girl, Maria. She and I had been in college together. Maria was my senior back then and was one of the only few people in the college to ever be kind to me. Once, I asked her to tutor me in economics, and she obliged. I'd gotten a B on that exam. She was a good person, one of the few pure souls that this town had.

She was giving a speech on the stage now. I could listen to it for a few seconds. I'd just disabled the antenna. I deserved a reprieve for a while.

"I was a part of this town growing up, and I grew up in the shadow of poverty, crime, and depravity. What could have been a flourishing seaside metropolis was turned into a den of drugs, disease, and debauchery. I am part of the new generation, the generation that wishes that things would be

different. Now, we're going to enact the things that we always wanted to see!"

And with this, the crowd erupted into a tirade of loud cheers that rang in my ears. Apart from a penchant for alliteration, Maria was a good orator. I expected that without any further ado, she would do what she said instead of making false promises like Maurice.

But that was the extent of the window of attention I could give to her. I had surmised that the crowd loved her, that she was honest and passionate, and that she would be a good change for Fiddler's Green.

Now I had to save Fiddler's Green so there would be a town left for her to be mayor of.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder from behind. Thinking it was Vincent, I wheeled around only to find Maliha standing there. "I couldn't just run, not while I knew you were in danger."

"Good of you to come back, but I disabled the antenna," I said, racing past the crowd as Maliha struggled to keep up with me. There was hardly any time.

"I'm sorry. You know I get afraid easily," Maliha said.

"Right now is not about you, Maliha. I need to be able to escort the bombs away," I said. "Somehow, we have to take the bombs and send them out into the sea. Better a few fish dead than thousands of people, right?"

"Can I do anything to help?" Maliha asked.

I stopped pacing and stood there, staring at her. It just so happened that I did

have something for her to do.

“When I sail out into the sea, you can go back and turn the generator back on. Make sure the antenna comes back online. If not, there will be a new kind of riot where people will go into a frenzy if they can’t get their cell signals,” I said. Truth was, it was not something that needed to be done immediately; it was just busy work to make Maliha feel like she was contributing. I needed her away from me and the bomb I was carrying. This was for her safety.

“I got you,” she said, then turned around and headed to the generator. She looked back over her shoulder a bit morosely, then waved at me as if she thought that this was our final goodbye.

“Don’t be like this. We’ll see each other again,” I said, waving back at her.

When she finally turned around for good, I headed to the docks, where I could see the pack members assembled. From the looks on their faces, I could tell that they were still holding on to the bombs.

There were plenty of ships moored at the docks, most of them with motors and engines, but I couldn’t use any of them. They belonged to other people, and most importantly, I didn’t know how to operate them. The only ship that I knew how to operate was Will’s, and it was moored at the far end of the dock. I even knew where he hid the key.

“Follow me!” I waved at the pack members. I took out the bomb from my jacket and looked at the timer. The bomb was going to explode in fifteen minutes. The pack members ran after me as I headed down the docks, away from the crowd. At this time of night, there was no one at the docks apart from the pack.

“What’s the plan, Lexie?” Vince asked, running to keep up with me. He was holding three bombs in his hands, barely able to keep them balanced.

“Will’s ship. We’re getting all the bombs on it, and then we’ll turn it on and send it out to sail in the sea. Hopefully, after fifteen minutes, the bombs will be far away into the sea, and they won’t be able to hurt anyone.”

“Lexie, I don’t know if you know this, but that’s not how things work. That stuff only happens in the movies,” Vince said.

“I don’t have a lot of stuff to draw from, do I? This is a fucked up situation,” I said, hopping into Will’s ship.

One by one, the pack members began throwing the bricks of bombs onto the ship’s deck. They stepped away and ran as far back as they could to the other end of the docks as if they were expecting the bombs to blow up any second. I looked at the timer on the bomb I had in my hand—still, thirteen minutes to go.

I took the key out of the tiny potted plant he’d hung by the wheel. I put it in the ignition and turned it. The ship’s engine roared to life. Will had shown me how to operate the ship time and time again, and I hoped that I remembered what he had taught me.

I looked at the settings on the big board by the wheel. None of them had any autopilot stickers next to them.

I went back outside and looked at Vince. He could already read from my facial expressions what I was about to say.

“There’s no autopilot option,” I said.

“I know,” Vince nodded gravely.

“We can’t just blow up the ship in the docks.” Both of us knew what had to be done. It was just very difficult for me to put it into words.

“You should get out of the boat. If anyone has to take it out of the harbor, it has to be me. Face it, what do I have to live for? My dad’s dead. My grandfather’s an evil cunt. I don’t have any other relatives left. If I can be a hero at this moment, let me be one. For the pack.”

I shook my head. “No. You’re wrong. You have so much to live for. You are young. You have Will. The entire pack is your family. I cannot ask you to sacrifice yourself.”

“Come down from there. We’ll push the boat, and it will sail into the sea by itself,” Vince said. I could see that he was invested in this idea. It was just that I knew better; this wouldn’t work.

“Okay, I’m coming down,” I said, faking and moving away from the ship. When Vince turned away to go back to the ship, I went back behind the wheel before he could jump onboard, turned the engine on, and wheeled the ship around. I accelerated it to move away from the docks.

Behind me, I could hear the pack yelling, especially Vince, saying, “Lexie don’t! Come back, please!”

There was no coming back from this. Even if I put some weight on the accelerator and tied the wheel to aim for the sea, the ship wouldn’t just go there by itself. The wheel would come free, and the ship would rear towards town. I couldn’t afford that risk. Someone needed to be behind the wheel at all times.

It wasn't some sacrifice that I had pre-planned. It came to me while I was standing on the ship. Saving the pack and the town would ensure a new start, the turning of a new leaf, for everyone.

I didn't want Will to know about this. He would do everything in his power to stop me. Even if he were to jump from the cliff and swim toward me, there wouldn't be any time. The bombs were about to blow in ten minutes. Hundreds of bricks of C4 strapped together sat on the deck behind me, all of them blipping and bleeping. I wondered how extreme the explosion would be, then realized it wouldn't matter.

I'd be dead the minute the first bomb went off. There wouldn't be much pain—only a little bit of remorse. I wanted to spend my life with my mate. But at least when I'd go to the afterlife, I'd have my parents and grandparents with me. I would wait for Will there patiently.

I looked back and saw that the docks were a safe distance behind. Below, the sea was deep, and the waves were still. It was a good night, as far as nights went. All the hundreds of stars in the quiet sky reflected on the surface of the ocean. Fireworks above the town in celebration of the new mayor. Distant music blaring from the town square.

A promise of a new life for the townsfolk. Tomorrow, a new day would dawn, and things would be better. I just won't be there to see it.

As I accelerated the boat and headed deeper into the sea, I wondered what would happen to Will. Would he live despite the pain of losing his mate? Did he deserve such a fate? I felt terrible for all the times in the recent past that I had rejected him and shunned him, and all for what? Because he had said Ariana's name. If I could go back in time, I would accept him the moment he

came to me in Bangor. It would give us some more moments of love and joy, if not an entire lifetime.

As the bombs' timer reached five minutes, my body froze, and the memories from my past started playing again.

This time, however, the most prominent memory that stood out from the rest was when Will and I were driving in his new Jeep back from Vermont. We had been holding hands the entire way home. He kissed me deeply every chance he could get. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel those kisses on my lips.

We talked a lot on the way back. Mostly about what we'd do when we finally got married.

"I could take you on a worldwide honeymoon," Will had said.

"Why does it have to be worldwide?" I'd asked.

"Well, I reckon you'd want to visit the more exotic places like India, Turkey, and Persia. You always said that you wanted to visit the East," Will said.

We were on the last leg of our journey by then, with Fiddler's Green just a few miles away. The weather, for once, was clear, cool, and calm—no stormy skies. Just the blue canopy of the world dotted with tiny clouds.

"Do you always remember everything that I say?" I'd asked.

"Always," Will responded. "I know how you once said you'd love to ride an elephant in India. Of all the animals in the world, you mentioned elephants. Did you know that I had a chronic fear of elephants?"

"How could you fear such cute creatures? Look at their tiny little tusks and

their squiggly ears!” I’d protested.

“Do you know they can crush a human’s skull just by stepping on it?” Will had asked. He had looked so genuinely concerned for his safety in the vicinity of elephants that I’d burst out laughing.

“Okay, you can look from afar as I ride one,” I had said once I’d stopped laughing.

It was such a clear and spontaneous memory that sprung from the reserves of my mind. I smiled as I recalled it, no longer scared for my life at all. It would all be all right. Somehow, things would find a way to be A-Okay.

Now, the timer on the bombs said two minutes. In two minutes, a massive explosion would rock the surface of the sea, and the entire town would know that their lives had been saved. I would die a hero.

I pulled my foot away from the accelerator and killed the engine, stepping away from the controls and onto the deck. Even if I started throwing all the bombs overboard, I’d never make it in time.

“Mother, father, I’m coming to you,” I whispered as I closed my eyes and waited for it all to be over soon.

Alexis? Will called out.

I wanted to wrap my arms around him and never let go. If he were here, I’d plant a thousand kisses on his face and hold onto him forever. But since he wasn’t here and since he was dealing with Fred, it was better that I didn’t respond to him. If he didn’t know, he’d be spared the pain.

I took out my phone and looked at Will’s picture on my wallpaper, staring at

his kind eyes and his handsome face, feeling lulled into a sense of comfort by his image staring back at me.

The timer on the bombs said one minute.

In less than sixty seconds, I would cease to exist, and the town would be safer for it.

This was how it had to be.

I love you, Will. Now and forever, I called out.

In that final moment, my bond with Will tugged at me with such brute force that I nearly toppled off the boat. It beckoned me to survive while there were still a few seconds to reconsider.

Chapter 32: Will

Amid Fred's rant, I heard Alexis's voice calling out to me, telling me that she loved me now and forever. I concluded that this was her way of telling me that she had successfully found all of the bombs and that they were not going to be a threat any longer.

"How is it possible that the bombs have not exploded?" Fred glared at me, his eyes fiery red with rage.

"Perhaps people have gotten wiser to your plans after all this time," I said, feeling relieved that the bombs had not exploded. Now I could capture Fred and take him back to the commune to answer for his many crimes.

"What did you do?" Fred was curious, genuinely so. Even his tone had turned from angry to inquisitive. "I had always assumed you to be a dumb leader, incapable of contrivance, planning, and masterminding situations. This is not your doing. There's someone else behind it."

"I will admit that I have never been one to showcase my intelligence. I prefer wisdom over cleverness. Wisdom is deeper, slower, and long-lasting. Being clever gets a person in trouble. But yes, on that front, you are right. This was not my doing. The entire Grimm pack did it with Alexis's help. This was her idea," I said, giving credit where credit was due.

"I should have known," Fred said. "I had a chance to get her killed along with her parents. It seems foolish that I let her live back then. Look what pitying a

kid gets me.”

“That was probably the only good decision you ever made. You spared her life and gave me a mate in return. Other than that, Fred, your track record of mistakes, errors, and malicious mischief has not a single good deed in them. How can someone related to me be so evil?” Now that the bomb wasn’t a matter of urgency, I stepped up to Fred. He saw me coming towards him and reclined in his wheelchair.

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing does. I had placed a failsafe in case the bombs didn’t go off using the detonator. They’re all rigged to blow with a timer. You cannot stop the chaos that will happen tonight. That’s the thing about chaos. One way or the other, it always prevails,” Fred said.

I shook my head as I approached him. “You’re wrong about chaos. When the world was nothing but a sea of chaos, humans gave it order. With tools and community, and education, we learned that we were more than mere brutes capable of speech. We learned that we could ascend to divinity through order. Sadly, that’s a lesson you never learned, and it’s too late for you to start learning. What is it that they say? You cannot teach an old dog new tricks,” I said. “Now come, I’m taking you to the commune.”

Fred slapped away my hand and reversed his wheelchair till it was just by the cliff’s edge.

“I am not going down there without a fight. It’s kill or be killed. Either I’ll fulfill my lifelong dream of smiting you tonight, or I’ll go down fighting. If you think you can simply order me to come quietly, you’re a bigger fool than I took you for,” Fred said.

“I don’t want to fight you, Fred. It’s over. Look around. No bombs are

blowing up in the night, and no one is coming to save you. It's for the best that you come with me," I said, holding out my hand. He refused to take it again.

"And what precious future awaits me if I do decide to come with you? It's not like they are waiting for me with garlands in their hands. I will be tried, and then I'll be hung by the neck until I die. There is no redemption for me, Will. Do not presume to fool me," he said.

"Most of your crimes are against me. I won't be forgiving you anytime soon, but I will see to it that you get a reduced sentence," I said. As bad as things were, I needed to save my brother. There was no off-switch for such feelings. He was my brother. Our parents had raised us together. He was my last living relative. I could not just have him killed.

"Imprisonment, then," Fred said. "I am well over my nineties. Do you think I'll let them leave me to rot in prison for the last part of my life?"

"You will have to pay for your crimes somehow." Fred was being obstinate as he had always been. Sometimes, I wondered if he enjoyed bickering with me and did it for the sole purpose of triggering me.

"As I said, I will not go without a fight. Be a man and fight with me. It's the least you can do. If there's some punishment that you wish to dole out, dole it out here and now. Fuck the tribunal. We end this now. Like men," Fred said.

"Your right to call yourself a man got revoked the minute you started conspiring against the pack and me. You're not a man. You're a coward. People like to try to usurp things from others, thinking that the world belongs to them. It doesn't. If you don't come with me, I will drag you back to the Grimm Abode by force. Would you like that?"

“Fuck you!” Fred said and flung himself out of his chair, charging at me with as much speed as his old body could muster. I had no heart to fight him, so I just stepped aside as he came near me. Instead of stopping, Fred slipped and fell forward.

It happened so fast that I did not have any time to react. Fred’s foot caught on the cliff’s edge as he slipped, and he looked back at me with terror in his eyes as he realized that he had made a fatal error. His hand reached out in the air, but I was too far away.

Fred tumbled back and fell down the cliff.

“No!” I yelled helplessly as I raced over to the cliff and looked down.

Fred was freefalling, his arms flailing, his body writhing.

I latched onto his hand at the last second, holding him by his fingers. I pulled him up, hoping that he’d assist me with some of his body weight, but instead of helping me, Fred slashed at my hand with his other hand, cutting deeply into my skin. I winced with pain and retracted my arm, letting go of Fred.

He fell for five straight seconds, colliding with the cliff’s jagged edges as he fell. When he reached the end, his body smashed against the rocks. Maroon blood leaked from his body as waves crashed against his corpse, taking him away into the sea.

My brother had just died. I had reached out to save him, and he had deliberately cut my hand to end his life. I stood there, looking at where his body had collided with the rocks, feeling hollow from the inside.

It was a sadness of a different sort, a bitter sadness that dwelled deep in my heart. I was angry at him, and needed to bring him to justice, but at the same

time, he was my brother who had, in his last moments, chosen to lash out at me and choose death over life.

Here I stood, mourning a man who had betrayed me all my life. The man because of whom I had spent seventy years in a lightless prison, tortured and tormented. The man who had stood against me every step of the way. The worst part about this betrayal was that I had never suspected until the last moment that it had been Fred all along. If I hadn't known, I would have loved my brother all the same, talked with him on the weekends, and drank tea with him while reminiscing about the old life we used to live in Germany.

That would never happen again. My only living link to my family had passed away.

Before I could wallow much more in my sorrow, I saw my ship sailing out into the sea. The only person who knew where I hid the key beside me was Alexis. What was she doing out in the sea at this time of night? What had she done with the bombs?

Alexis? I called out, but I got no response in return. I took out my phone from my pocket and dialed her number, but the signals were down. The pieces of the puzzles clicked all at once, and I realized what was happening.

I love you, Will. Now and forever, she called out.

“No! No! Tell me you're not doing that!” I yelled as I raced down the cliff and headed into the forest. Before I could even finish my descent down the cliff slopes, I saw a huge explosion burst from the sea, forming a mushroom cloud of smoke in the air. My ship was burning, flames enveloping it from every side.

Before I could think about what had happened, I had to go down there and hear it from the pack members myself. Maybe it wasn't Alexis. Maybe someone else had chosen to sacrifice themselves. Maybe they had figured out how to operate the ship without a captain. I just could not imagine the possibility that it was Alexis who had taken all the bombs out to the sea and had sacrificed herself to save the lives of the townsfolk.

I shifted into my wolf form and stampeded down the slopes and into the forest, my heart racing like a jackhammer all the while. Whenever I called out to Alexis, she did not respond, which deepened my worry and made me think that something terrible had happened to her. When I reached the Grimm Abode, I shifted back into my human form and went to my garage, where the Jeep was parked. I reversed it out of the garage and raced it down the road, heading for Fiddler's Green. I raced past the parked cars and headed down the main road, honking my horn so the bystanders and pedestrians would get out of my way.

When I reached the crowded town square, I got out of the Jeep and raced down to the docks, colliding with several of the crowd members and almost falling over as I struggled to keep up with my feet.

Standing at the docks were all the pack members with their faces looking morose. At the end of the dock, Vincent stood with his face in his hands. I looked around the crowd that had gathered there to see any signs of Alexis. She wasn't here.

I went to Vince and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Tell me this isn't true!" I yelled.

"I tried to stop her. She didn't listen," Vince cried. "She took all the bombs

onto the ship and steered it to the sea.”

It had all been for nothing. All the promises that I had made her. Pangs of regret throbbed in my chest as I remembered all the times she had asked me to take her away from this town. I had always promised that I would, and now it was too late. Perhaps some part of her knew that if she didn't leave this town, she would meet her end here. And now, all thanks to my false promises, that had happened. Now I would never be able to take her on a world tour honeymoon. We'd never get married.

The worst part was that there wasn't even a body to bury, given how huge that explosion had been.

“At least the town is safe. Not a single bomb went off in the town square. We got them all,” Vince said, sobbing.

I turned around to face him and then hugged him. He needed to be consoled as much as I did. Bitter pain accumulated behind my eyes, causing tears to flow down my cheeks.

Everything that we did, it meant nothing. My coming back alive from the dead, our reunion, our trip to Vermont, and our attempts to save this town—now, with Alexis gone, none of it meant a thing to me.

Who was an Alpha without his mate?

What would I do now?

There was no place for me to go, no one to go to, and nothing to do now that she was not here anymore.

“Maybe she flung herself off the ship. We need to swim out and see for

ourselves,” I said, attempting to jump down the docks. Vincent held me back, and the rest of the pack joined in, each of them holding me back no matter how hard I tried to break free.

“The water is ice-cold, Will! You’ll die in that water!” Vince yelled.

“Then let me die in the same water where my mate met her fate!” I yelled back. “Let me go. I need to see it. I have to make sure that she’s not there in the water!”

Eventually, they all let go, but at the same time that they let go, my strength also left me. I fell on my knees, unable to move, and just looked desolately at the surface of the water and the flames burning away on the horizon. Black smoke rose from my ship’s burning carcass.

I got up and faced the members of the pack.

“She gave her life for all of us. Not just the wolves, but every single soul that lived in that town,” I said, my voice shaking. I could see in the periphery that the cops had gathered on the beach to see what was happening. People from the square had come down the steps and were crowding the docks, all of them commenting on what could have happened out there in the sea.

They didn’t know. None of them knew their lives were saved by the girl who had been treated like crap in this town all her life. They would never find out that the person who wished to break free from this cursed city came back to sacrifice her life for the people who lived in it.

“Will, there’s a crowd gathering. We have to leave,” Vince said as he wiped away the tears from his eyes.

“I will not leave. I’m never leaving this spot,” I said, looking out at the sea. “I

will wait for an eternity if I have to, hoping for her return. One day, she will return to me.”

The pack members attempted to drag me back from the docks, but I broke free from their holds. I walked over to the edge of the docks and looked at the sea, my tears falling into the water below me.

Chapter 33: Alexis

It wasn't a possibility that had occurred to me until there remained only fifteen seconds before the bombs would explode.

Without thinking much about it, I shifted into my wolf form and dove into the icy water. My wolf body smoothly dove into the water, and I swam as far below as I could to save myself from the explosion, all the while keeping a count inside my head as to how many seconds were left.

Not only did I dive deep, but I also swam forward. But when the explosion happened, the water around me turned boiling, and if it hadn't been for my speed, I would have burned in that water. Had this not occurred to me, I would still have been on the ship, and those exploding bombs would have torn my body asunder.

It was the bond that propelled me to save my life. It kept tugging at the last minute, not allowing me to resign myself to a fate of death. As I swam, the explosion caused underwater waves to lurch me forward, breaking my swimming stride as I was pushed forward in the dark water, losing all sense of direction.

My breath was giving out, and the surface was too far away for me to make my way to the top and breathe again. I could see the flames of the ship's wreckage on the surface. If I were to go above the surface now, the flying debris that caught on fire could just as easily end the life I had saved in the

nick of time.

So, despite facing a shortage of oxygen, I swam some more till I was out of the radius of the explosion, and then I broke past the surface, drawing deep breaths.

I could not believe that I had saved my life in such a short time. It didn't need to end in fire and flames for me. I was safe. Safe to go back to shore and rejoin my mate. I could only assume that he was down there at the docks by now, mourning me.

There was a long way to swim, and even though I was in my wolf form, I doubted if I'd be able to make it back there against the cold and the sheer length that was between me and the docks.

I didn't know how I was doing it—other than sheer will—but I swam and swam until my limbs gave away, and it was only when I had exhausted my body in its entirety that I turned myself on my back and floated toward the dock. My wolf body provided excellent buoyancy, allowing me to swim toward the shore without much effort. Now that I was out of immediate danger, I didn't need to swim faster than required.

Ten minutes of fighting the waves and struggling to breathe passed, and I found myself under the docks. I could see that the pack members had all assembled there. I could even see Will standing there at the edge, looking sullenly down at the water with tears dripping down his face.

I rose out of the water and shifted back into my human form at just the right time to catch onto the dock. I latched onto it and pulled myself up, panting and shivering.

“Alexis?” Will’s voice was ever so soft and marked by disbelief.

“Will!” I gasped as I lay there on the docks, my body cold and breathless.

He immediately took off his jacket and threw it on my body, covering me, then knelt and hugged me tightly. Against the cold of my body, his hot tears pressing against my cheeks provided me some comfort. His body was warm, and mine became warm in his embrace, reducing my shivering. I could not see clearly, what with there being so much saltwater in my eyes.

“I thought you had died!” Will gasped. Behind him, the pack suddenly came forward, surrounding me from all sides. I was grateful that they decided to do that, to shield me from the eyes of the rest of the townsfolk that had gathered around the docks, all of them witnessing the still burning wreckage of the ship.

“I’m sorry about your ship,” I said, smiling at him. I could see him much more now that the saltwater was out of my eyes.

“Never mind my ship! I was so lost. I thought you were gone. You don’t even know what was going through my mind. I am just glad that you are alive. Oh, Alexis,” Will said and hugged me even tighter.

“Did we save them all? Are the townsfolk safe?” I asked, getting up on my feet. My clothes were drenched. The sooner we’d get back to the commune, the better.

“Yes,” Vince said, coming forward and hugging me tightly. “We saved them all. No bombs went off in the town. We were lucky enough to collect them all and dump them onto the ship. Speaking of that, you’re never allowed to deceive me like that! I thought you were going to help me push the ship into

the sea, and the next second you decided to just start it and sail in the opposite direction.”

Will first looked at me and then at Vincent, completely boggled.

“Will, Vince, that would have never worked. Don’t you see how big that explosion was? It’s still burning. People would have died if we had done that,” I said. “And speaking of dying, I’m going to die if I stand here any longer in my wet and cold clothes!”

“How did you even survive?” Will asked as he wrapped his jacket around my body and picked me up in his arms.

“I jumped at the last moment. I wasn’t feeling any suicidal impulse to end my life. That’s why I jumped. Also, our bond took control of my body at the last minute. I needed to be alive. I realized that it was a better option than just sacrificing myself,” I said.

“Please, for as long as you live, never scare me like that again. For those brief moments when I saw the explosion, my entire world shattered around me. I didn’t even know who I was anymore. Without you, I am nothing,” Will said, holding my body close to him. I wrapped my arms around him tightly, getting as much heat from his body as I could. Who knew the sea would be so cold?

While the rest of the pack dispersed, each of them going to their cars, bikes, and trucks, Will and I stood by his Jeep. He helped me get in, then closed the door. I immediately turned the heater on and turned the knob to maximum. Once the hot air started coming from the ducts, I felt myself returning to normal. Well, as close to normal as I could get. I was severely tired.

Will got inside the car. He was troubled, I could tell.

“What happened, my love?” I asked.

“Fred’s dead,” he said.

Somehow, I knew that this would happen. That Fred and Will would confront each other, and only one of them would make it. It was inevitable.

“I don’t know what to say. Do I say I’m sorry for your loss? Do I celebrate? It’s all so complicated,” I said.

He looked at me with relief in his eyes. “I was afraid I was the only one thinking this. I am so glad you said this. I am so conflicted right now. On the one hand, he was my brother, my only living relative. And on the other hand, he was possibly the biggest villain this town has ever seen. Do I mourn him, or do I cherish the fact that I ended his reign of terror?”

“It’s always complicated when it’s family. I am not at liberty to say that I understand what you’re going through. Do you know who can tell you how that feels? Vincent. His father was the epitome of evil. He somehow coped with it. He can tell you how that feels.”

“I don’t want to hear it from him. I’d rather hear it from my mate. What do you think I should do?”

“I think that you should mourn your brother. Whatever he was, whatever he did, at the end of the day, he was your brother, your blood. We can talk later about how vanquishing him was the right thing to do. Right now, you have to mourn him,” I said.

“It was so unbelievable, seeing his body fall on the cliffs like that,” Will said. Then he told me everything that had happened, including Fred revealing his motives for being against Will from the start and how Fred had tried to attack

him but failed.

I placed my hand on his hand. “I think the right thing to do would be to recover his body and bury it.”

“Aren’t you cold? I thought we were headed straight home,” Will asked.

“No, Will. This is more important. Besides, the car’s heater has done plenty for me. I’m all right. Do you know where Fred’s body might be?”

“The last I saw of it was down by the rocks at the base of the cliff. We can make it to the rocks through Fiddler’s Cove. Do you think it’s a good idea to go and get his body?”

I could tell that Will really wanted to retrieve Fred’s body and bury it. We could hold off going back to the commune for a little while longer.

“Yes, Will. I think we should do that,” I said, kissing him on the cheek.

I did not let him go into the cove alone. Not after what had happened to me the last time I was here. Maurice had kidnapped me and imprisoned me for days.

Will followed me as I led him down the other end of the cove and down to the rocks. He needed me right now. I knew that he wouldn’t have been able to come here and retrieve the body by himself. It would have been too emotional for him to do so.

“Look,” I pointed at the far edge of the rocks.

Fred's body, severely battered, was trapped between the rocks.

"Oh, god," Will called. "My brother."

"Don't go feeling too sorry for him. Remember what he did. We're only coming here to bury him as a courtesy because he's your brother. Other than that, he's been an entirely chaotic person. Or do you disagree?"

"It's not about what's right or wrong. It's just...overwhelming to see the last of the Grimms there in the water, dead," Will said.

"But he's not the last of the Grimms. You are. And you won't be for long. We'll start a family, we'll have kids, and they'll carry on the Grimm line. Don't you despair for one second, my love. This is not the end of the line for the Grimm family. I'm your family. I love you," I said, holding him tightly and kissing him on his lips.

After I was done consoling him, Will bravely climbed down the rocks and came back with Fred's dead body flung over his shoulder.

"I think it's best if we buried him here by the sea," I said.

"Why's that?"

"Because his actions haven't earned him the right to be buried in the commune's graveyard," I said.

"That's fair," he said. "Besides, he was always going on about how he wanted to go back to Germany. Given that this is the sea, it's the closest to Germany he'll ever get."

We quietly dug Fred's grave using jagged rocks from the cove. It was a shallow grave, but it served the purpose well. Will laid Fred's body in there,

then covered it with sand and added a headstone at the edge.

“Goodbye, brother,” Will said.

“Goodbye indeed,” I said. “Would you like to say a few words?”

“Only that I wished things had been different between him and me. If we had truly been brothers, we would have been unstoppable. I would have wished that he loved me as I loved him. There’s no redemption after death. But I hope that Vincent, his grandson, carries on a good legacy on Fred’s behalf. Hopefully, that would bring some peace to Fred’s soul.”

“Amen,” I said.

Now we were standing outside the commune. The journey back in the Jeep from the coves to the commune had been a quiet one. Will hadn’t talked because he had just buried his brother. I was too exhausted and had fallen asleep on the drive back.

Will parked the car in the garage and helped me get out of the car. The commune looked strange. There was no one there besides the two of us. All the lights were shut off, pitching the entire place into darkness.

“What’s with the darkness?” I asked.

“I’m as clueless as you are. Come, let’s go inside the house,” he said, taking my arm and taking me inside his home.

“Do you know what’s strange?” I asked. “It’s how someone like him, so old and weak, could manage to plant all those bombs in the city on such short

notice. I mean, some of the locations where the bombs were planted were hard to get to. There was a bomb planted on the top of the antenna tower.”

“It’s like....” Will struggled to remember something. “He said something about the vampires helping him plant the bombs. But I doubt if he was telling the truth at that moment. He also said that he didn’t know where Blair was. Even when he was so near to death, he didn’t reveal his secrets.”

“Well, if it wasn’t Blair, who do you think it was?” I asked. I didn’t really need an answer. I was just trying to hold a conversation with Will. Otherwise, he’d become occupied with thoughts of his dead brother. I couldn’t let that happen to my mate. Tonight was supposed to be a night of joy and celebration. Not morosity.

“I think someone was working with him until the very last moment. It’s not clear who. What do you think we’ll do?” he asked, sitting on the lounge sofa and taking off his shoes.

I went to the kitchen and took out a bottle of whiskey from the shelf. I placed one glass in front of Will and the other in front of me and poured us shots.

“Don’t you worry about what we’ll do. We’ve handled worse odds than this. I think we can take on whatever challenge lies ahead. Besides, with all these people dead, it’s just Blair. With the pack at its strongest and with you and I by each other’s side, I don’t think that there’s going to be any trouble dealing with Blair either.”

“To Fred,” I said, raising my glass.

“To Fred,” Will replied. “He was a terrible brother, but he was my brother. And now I have none.”

While we sat there, tired, drenched, and drinking, some commotion came from outside. It looked like the rest of the pack had finally arrived back at the commune. I could see the lights from the window—a lot more lights than there usually were.

“Why don’t you go check that out? I’m going to get changed,” I said.

“I’ll check it out,” Will said.

I went into the bedroom and took some loose and warm clothes that I could throw on without having to iron them. I put on a sweatshirt and pajama pants and then went after Will.

But Will wasn’t there at the door. He was standing outside with only his silhouette showing. From the other side of the door, a lot of glimmering lights shone into the rectangular door-shaped shadow on the floor.

I went outside and stood by Will’s side, anticipating something strange.

Instead, the entire pack had gathered around our house, holding streamers, a huge cake, and wearing party paraphernalia.

“Surprise!” They all yelled at the same time, with Vince standing at the front holding a huge banner that said: *Thanks For Saving the Town and Happy Engagement Part 2.*

Will laughed out loudly as he read the banner.

“Did you guys have it all planned out beforehand?” Will asked as he chuckled and came forward.

“That’s how much faith we had in you to begin with. We knew that you’d somehow save us all, you and Alexis both. And also, we felt like the last

surprise engagement party didn't hit it big. We wanted a do-over. There's plenty of cause to celebrate. We have a new mayor, we saved the town from being blown up, and tomorrow is going to be a new day for the pack. Also, we're super amped that Alexis is alive and well!" Vince said, and as soon as he finished saying it, the rest of the crowd cheered him on.

Will looked at me with amusement. "What do you say?"

"There's only one thing I'd like to say," I said. "Let's party!"

As the pack members broke into song and dance, Will came up to me. I placed my hand on his neck and pulled his face closer to mine. "The pack needs this. They're right. There are plenty of causes to celebrate. Tonight, be their Alpha. Celebrate with them. I understand that you're feeling conflicted with Fred dying and all, but look at the scope of our achievements. We've done something big. Why not celebrate it?"

After a long time deliberating, Will held my face in his hands and kissed me, saying, "And celebrate we shall!"

Chapter 34: Will

She was right, of course. There was nothing to gain by being sad. Before I joined the festivities, I reminded myself that the man I was being sad over had conspired to keep me imprisoned, had tried to have me murdered, and had attempted to blow the entire town square with bombs.

Not really a good person to become depressed over.

When the first of the drinks was in my hand, I immediately forgot why I was being so sullen. The people who mattered were still alive and well and dancing around me. Vincent had pulled the stops on this celebration. A DJ booth was blaring party music, and a giant strobe light was flashing multi-colors in the night sky. People were drunk, festive, laughing, and dancing.

Alexis was also dancing with a few of her friends, talking to them, and laughing without reservation as they told each other jokes.

As the Alpha, it was customary to make rounds around the party and meet with everyone. I went to Vincent, who was manning the DJ booth, and took him aside. I told him about Fred and how he had died.

“You know what? I was really depressed when dad died. It doesn’t matter as much to me that grandpa bit the dust too. I mean, he was the entire reason you were captured by Edward Beckett, right? So why mourn some bitter asshole who died in vain? Tonight is not for the dead. Tonight is for the living! We celebrate! A new mayor has been elected. Within a few months,

this town will actually change for the better. We made this possible. You, me, Alexis, and all the members of the Grimm pack. Now put your party face on and celebrate with all of us!”

When Vince spoke those words to me, I felt them in my heart and let go of the pain I was carrying around. After all, Fred had been a relative to him just as much as he had been a relative to me. If Vince wasn't feeling upset, why should I?

I wasn't feeling hungry at all, even though the food being arranged in the courtyard was ravishing to look at. There were mutton chops, beef steaks, barbeque, shrimp on a stick, and so many different salads and veggies arranged in a neat array on tables that I almost reconsidered wanting to eat. But when I saw Alexis dancing there under the strobe light, I felt like joining her and dancing to the tune of whatever pop song was playing in the background.

I grabbed another drink and downed it in one before heading back to the dance floor.

“Hi!” I said to Alexis, feeling much more lightheaded now that I was somewhat inebriated.

“Hi there yourself,” Alexis said, wrapping her arm around me as she danced around and swung me with her. We danced for many minutes, holding each other close, letting song after song play as we swung and moved and jumped and danced along with the rest of the younger members of the pack.

Seeing Alexis like this, especially with the engagement ring on her finger, made me feel quite turned on. I whispered into her year, “Do you wanna get out of here?”

“In a little bit. The night is still young, and the crowd expects us to be here with them,” she said, then kissed me. “But don’t think I’m not going to do the hottest things to you when we go into our bedroom. I’m going to rock your world.”

“Not if I rock yours first!” I said, planting a kiss on her lips before leaving the dance floor.

By now, after dancing so much, I was practically ravenous. I headed to the tables where the food platters were placed and helped myself to a little bit of everything, piling up everything on my plate and sitting in a corner with Vince as both of us solemnly ate and talked and drank while watching the celebrations all around us.

“You should think about pursuing event planning as a proper profession,” I said to Vince. “You have a knack for these things.”

“Thanks,” Vince said. “It just comes naturally to me.”

“What about sorrow? Isn’t that coming naturally to you right now? Your grandfather died. Doesn’t the juxtaposition of the festivities going around you with the news that Fred’s dead confuse you? Like, he was always there. He was a fixture around this place. This is the first celebration we’re doing without him.”

“Will. I’ll tell you what’s happening with me right now. Just a few hours ago, I thought we were all goners. The entire pack was taking bombs, disabling their timers, and throwing them onto the ship. We didn’t know if we’d survive. It was either us or the town. We couldn’t leave Fiddler’s Green alone to deal with such a calamity. We prevailed. Fred did not. We succeeded. Fred, on the other hand, died. You lost a brother but saved a pack and a city.

Now, weigh those feelings. Does sorrow feel like it's the right emotion to feel right now?"

"You're right," I said. "But a party seems too premature, don't you think?"

"No. I don't think that. Neither should you. We're all alive, well, and in one piece. The town is safe. The new mayor is working on changing Fiddler's Green for the better. This means good things for you and Alexis too. With the vampires gone, Blair in the wind, and my dad and granddad dead, there's no more danger to the town. You can retire, you know. You can get married to Alexis and move away from here. Live your life. That's what's important. Consider this a celebration of that. Every single person here dancing and singing and eating and drinking has a legitimate reason why they're celebrating. And so do you. Alexis is alive. You are alive. That's all that matters. Now, go to your woman. She's looking at you from across the crowd," Vince said.

I saw Alexis staring at me and waving from the other side of the dance floor, beckoning me to join her.

I placed my empty plates back on the table, cleaned my hands, and went back to her.

"What's up?" I asked, holding her hands.

"I'm taking you up on your offer to get out of here," she whispered in my ear, biting it lightly.

I looked into her eyes and smiled. She smiled back. I held onto her hand and gently guided her back to our home. "It feels like *déjà vu*, doesn't it?"

"Shh. Save your French for the bed," Alexis said as she headed into the house

and closed the door behind us.

“But I don’t know any French other than that two words, and I doubt you want to be seduced in the least romantic language of all time, German,” I said.

Alexis burst into laughter. “How do people seduce each other in Germany?”

“Well, they do it by mostly staying quiet. They know if they speak something, they’re going to kill the mood. Or they borrow from English,” I said.

“Let’s not discuss that anymore,” Alexis said, gently kissing my face as she took me to the bedroom.

“I was wondering,” I began, but Alexis placed her finger on my lips and shook her head.

“Don’t wonder. Just feel the pleasure,” she said, taking off my pants and yanking down my underpants.

I closed my eyes as her hand closed around my dick. She stroked softly at first, letting me become hard down there, and then when it was hard enough, she licked it under the tip. She had barely touched it with the tip of her tongue, and I was already as hard as I could be.

Then she kissed the tip before enveloping her lips around it, sucking it gently at first, then taking it all inside her mouth. The warmth of her mouth and the wet slipperiness of her throat and tongue cradled me into pleasure, causing me to moan audibly as she sucked and licked my cock.

I expected her to stop after the first minute, but instead, she kept going,

slobbering my penis with her warm saliva and then taking it deep into her throat. When my member hit the back of her throat, I felt a long wave of pleasure emanating from the tip reaching to my testicles. My legs felt weak as she sucked harder. I wanted to sit down.

But before I could adjust my position, I felt like I was about to climax.

She could sense it. She took my cock out of her mouth and stroked it with her hands before taking off her clothes and lying naked on the bed, waiting for me to climb on top of her.

I didn't just want to climb on top of her. I was a gentleman, and gentlemen repaid the favor. I parted her legs open and looked at her wet pussy. She tried to cover it with her hands, but I placed them aside and kissed her on her clit. Alexis moaned loudly and then even louder when I put my lips on her vulva. Then, my tongue found purchase in the soft grooves of her vagina, and I began licking her down there.

With each movement that my tongue made, she moaned louder and louder. I didn't stop until she was whimpering with pleasure. Then I climbed on top of her and took off my shirt. I slid my cock into her wet pussy and thrust deeply, enjoying her changing facial expressions as I made deep, passionate love to her.

I moved on top of her slowly and deeply at first, stroking rhythmically to keep her pleased while also building myself up toward an orgasm. I wanted this to last longer, so I stopped before I could cum and put her on her belly. I entered her from behind, running my fingers down her naked, slender back. She panted and moaned my name loudly as I drilled into her. I was not concerned about the noise. There was a whole party happening out there. No

one would be able to hear our throes of pleasure.

I saw her supple ass jiggling as I pounded her from behind, and observing her from this angle drove me wild. I quickened the pace of my thrusts, hitting her deep inside and feeling the walls of her vagina contracting around my dick, squeezing it.

Then, I lay under her and let her climb on top of me. She slid my dick into her pussy using her hand, then lay on top of me, my face between her breasts as she moved up and down in a slow and steady movement.

Seeing her like that, her lips open while she moaned, her breasts flinging in my face, and her naked body writhing on top of me, I could not hold it back any longer. I came very hard into her, my entire body trembling with pleasure as I released myself into her.

This was pleasure at its purest and finest.

At this moment, I did not want anything more from the world. It had given me all that it could give me.

Alexis lay on top of me, her hair scattered all over my chest as she heaved her breasts, taking deep breaths.

“I love you so much,” I said between breaths.

“Oh, I love you too!” Alexis said, then got off my chest and lay down beside me in my arms. “You are the only person who matters to me. The only one who understands me. I was so afraid when I was on that ship. I thought I’d lose you forever.”

“We’ll never lose each other,” I said. “That’s a promise.”

Even though I was tired, I did not feel like sleeping. I was still recovering from the waves of pleasure that were traveling up and down my body. Instead, I turned to Alexis and looked at her.

She smiled at me while she looked back into my eyes, full of love.

Chapter 35: Alexis

It felt surreal that just a few hours ago, I had placed my life on the line and was about to die, and now I was here, swathed in bed, wrapped in my mate's arms, and drifting gently to sleep.

Will's heartbeat softly in his chest as he lay beside me, my breasts touching his body, his hands in my hair, and his lips so close to mine. All I could feel for this man was undying, unconditional, true love.

"Hey, don't you go falling asleep on me," I said, holding him in my arms.

"You blew my mind just now. That sex...I can safely say it was the best sex we've ever had," Will said.

"You know why that is? There's actually a name for that sex," I said, smiling at him as I stroked his hair.

"What? Do they really have a term for this?" Will's surprise was genuine, his awe real.

"Yeah. They call this the thank-god-we're-alive-sex. The name fits, don't you think?" I said, giggling.

"I bet there's some chemical correlation between the amount of dopamine released depending on the amount of adrenaline already coursing in our system," Will said.

“Since when did you become such an expert in biology?” Now it was my turn to be surprised.

“Since I found out that in the past seventy years, while I was imprisoned, the world had unlocked the secrets of the DNA, managed to clone a sheep, and cure some diseases that were incurable a hundred years ago. Humanity has come a long way,” Will said. “It terrifies me and amazes me at the same time. I do not presume to know everything, nor do I think that there will ever come a time when I can truly fathom how far we’ve come, but I’m trying. I sometimes go down to Fiddler’s Green Library and study the books at random. Biology’s easy and so are chemistry and physics. It’s computer science that confuses me.”

“For all it’s worth, it confuses everyone who’s not already a computer scientist. I could never understand how servers and programming languages and all that magical AI crap works. That sort of stuff is reserved for the Maliha’s of this world. She has a gift for this computing stuff,” I said.

“Sometimes I wonder if all those geniuses who know so much about computing are aliens. Like they’ve been sent from some other planet to teach us mortals how to harness the powers of computers. When I first learned what a computer was, and it wasn’t that long ago that I learned about it, I thought it was some arcane sorcery that had been unearthed by some ancient magicians. Now, thanks to a little studying, I know it’s all just ones and zeroes,” Will said.

“May I ask what you were really doing down at the library?” I asked, wondering why he had kept this a secret from me.

“Okay, this is embarrassing, and I don’t want you to make fun of me or think

I'm being crazy," Will said, blushing a bit.

"I promise I will never make fun of you," I said as solemnly as I could. I just never expected what he'd say next.

"Well, it's like this..." Will was stuttering. "Er...so I went down to the library because I thought my knowledge was old-fashioned, and what if one day I had kids, how would I teach them? How would I be able to help them with their homework? I just wanted to get with the times so that if my son or daughter came to me one day and said they were confused about their biology homework, I'd be able to pitch in and tell them what was what. I know it's super embarrassing, and I forbid you from making fun of it."

My heart melted at the sentiment. I hugged him while he was still in bed and pressed him close to my body. "There's nothing funny about that! It is the sincerest, kindest, and cutest thing ever. I think that you're going to be a wonderful father. You don't have to worry about a thing. You'll teach your kids how to play with a baseball, how to throw a pitch, and how to dunk a basketball. You'll tell them all about your life and how you saved this town so many times. Your kids will love you. Our kids will love you," I said, kissing his cheek.

"You think so?" Will asked apprehensively.

"Every child loves their father. Didn't you love your dad? I sure as heck loved mine," I said.

"I loved my father, but he was a very stern man. I am never going to be stern with my kids. I'll never hit them or scold them. I'll teach them with love," Will said.

“Well, in that case, how about we go for round two?” I asked, running my hand down his chest and touching below his navel. His cock was already stirring from its slumber.

“You wanna try for a baby right now?” Will asked, his eyes wide.

“What’s stopping us? We’re about to get married shortly. A kid on the way will only speed things up. And we can get a jump start on being good parents,” I said, now holding his cock in my hand and stroking it. It became hard again in my hand. “My, my, someone’s a little eager.”

Will grabbed me by my waist and hopped on top of me, pinning my hands to the side of the bed. Then he reached down and kissed me on my lips, sucking them into his mouth and licking them with his tongue. Then he yanked off the blanket from on top of me till my breasts were naked. He stared at them vacantly for a second before reaching down and holding them. Then he lowered his mouth and sucked on my nipples, drawing deep pleasure in my chest.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I was already feeling quite horny, and his spontaneity had made me wet all over again.

Now, Will was nuzzling my breasts as he rubbed his dick against my clit, sending sparks of pure ecstasy shooting up my pelvis. My clit felt like a glowing light bulb as he rubbed the tip of his hard cock against it. I was never one for clitoral orgasms, but at that moment, as he rubbed harder and harder, I had my very first clitoral orgasm. My heartbeat became fast, and my legs started trembling as Will parted my legs open yet again and entered me for the second time that night.

This time, I moved under him, thrusting my hips up to take more of his dick

in. He thrust just as deep till his balls were brushing against my butt cheeks. He straddled me from the top, still keeping my arms pinned down. I was entirely in his control as he moved and pounded and stroked. We were both sweating. His sweat dripped down from his forehead onto my chest. We still did not stop. Even though it was chilly outside, this room, this bed, and both of us were blistering hot. I'd forgotten entirely that a short while ago, I had emerged from the sea, feeling cold as ice.

Will was pounding me so deeply that I could feel his bulging penis touch my cervix. I moaned loudly, "Oh, Will!" as he quickened his strokes. My vaginal walls constricted against the hardness of his cock, latching on tightly to his entire length as he controlled me, pushed into me, and drove me into a pasture of maddening pleasure.

I came before him, my ears ringing, my eyes watering, and my body shaking with the raw power of the orgasm, my third one tonight. Then Will came in me again. Panting, he fell on top of me, covering my already sweaty body in more sweat.

We lay there for a long time, not talking, just panting.

When he regained his composure, and I mine, we looked into each other's eyes and shared a tender, long, post-coital kiss.

"I am so tired right now," I said. It felt like more of a confession than me sharing my current state with my mate.

"All the muscles in my body are sore," Will responded.

"Do you think that the party outside will quieten down anytime soon?" I asked, still reeling from the post-orgasmic waves rushing through my body.

“I’m afraid not. We’re going to have to fall asleep in this din,” Will said, falling beside me and pulling the blanket over his face.

“Sleep well, my love. Tomorrow is a new day for all of us,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Will said drowsily, and before long, he was already snoring. I found the sound of his snores comforting. They lulled me to sleep.

A long, gentle, and deep sleep.

Perhaps it was the talk that we’d had before we had slept, but in my dream, I saw two children, both their hair just like Will’s and mine. One was a girl, the other a boy. They were playing in the sand beside the beach, making a sandcastle with their plastic toys.

“Look, mommy!” the young boy said. “This is Cinderella’s castle.”

“No. This isn’t Cinderella’s castle. Mine is!” The young girl said, stomping her foot on the ground.

“Hey, kids,” Will said, coming into view. He lifted both children in his arms and said, “Cinderella’s married to a very rich prince. They can have two castles. So, how about we don’t fight?”

“Okay, but she lives in my castle more!” the boy said.

In this dream, I was laughing freely, with not a worry in the world. My body was not as young as it was in real life. There were stretch marks on my stomach and tan lines on my face. But I was happy. The first of the grey hairs had started to appear on Will’s head, but just like me, he was happy.

He came to me in the dream and sat down on the picnic sheet we’d spread on

the beach.

“I told you moving to LA would be the best thing for us,” I said to him as I kissed him on the cheek.

“Note to self, never doubt what Alexis says. She always has the best suggestions. Like that place with the habanero pizzas the other day. I was skeptical, but you said that we have to try it. You were right. Those pizzas were delicious, even though little Brian’s tummy got upset in the evening,” Will said, lying beside me. His body was quite ripped, covered in thick, bulging muscles.

“Emma enjoyed the paninis they served,” I said. “And I loved their mayo sauce.”

“I liked their mayo sauce, too,” Will said. “We never had such places back in Fiddler’s Green.”

“Do you still miss the place?” I asked.

“After all these years? No. Wherever I am with you and the kids, that’s my home. Last month it was Boulder, Colorado. This month it’s Los Angeles. Next year we might be in New York. All that matters is that I’m with you.”

“And Brian and Emma,” I said, completing his thought.

“Of course, Brian and Emma Grimm,” Will said, nodding lightly as he kissed me on the cheek.

“Hush now, not in front of the kids,” I said, gently patting Will on the chest.

“You kissed me first!” Will said, then we both started laughing.

And this is how the dream ended.

I didn't know what time it was, but when I woke up at night, a lot of commotion was still coming from outside. It was what had woken me up from my sweet dream.

Will was fast asleep by my side. I shook him awake.

"Will," I said, shaking his sleeping body.

"What is it?" he grumbled.

"It's four in the morning, and the party is still going on outside," I said.

"I'll tell them to wrap it up," he said, getting out of bed while rubbing his eyes. "This isn't fair."

"I wonder whose idea this was," I said, getting out of bed and following him.

"It was probably Vince after he drank one too many whiskeys," Will said. "Seriously, this is way too loud."

"I had a dream, you know," I said.

"Was it as good as the one I was having?" Will asked as we headed to the door.

We never got to discuss our dreams. The moment we stepped into the living room, it was clear that the sounds coming from outside were not from the revelers at the party. Those were screams. People were panicking outside.

Will hurriedly opened the door and gasped.

Outside, in the night sky, dozens of vampires were airborne, all of them flying over the commune. The screams were coming from the pack members who were trying to fend the vampires off. But the vampires were far too many for all the pack members to tackle.

“Tell me we’re still dreaming,” I said, staring at the sight of airborne vampires descending upon Fiddler’s Green.

“This isn’t a dream,” Will said, stepping outside with me by his side. “This is a nightmare.”

Thank you for reading Her Reborn Mate! Want to know the end of Alexis and Will’s story? Find out in the next book [Her Eternal Mate!](#)